

LIFE IN THE NEWCASTLE OFFICE

THE answer may have been different a year ago, but ask any of our Newcastle office staff now and they would say that they don't want to leave the place.

Life in Newcastle, Australia's sixth largest city, has a lot to offer. For an AFP officer it's also an interesting place to work.

The office, which comes under the control of Detective Sergeant Kevin McTavish of the Fraud and General Crime Branch, Sydney, is tasked from Sydney but local referrals also generate a lot of work. Overall, about one million people live in the region.

According to the staff, the variety of work in Newcastle makes the job interesting. The full ambit of federal offences is investigated by the office though fraud matters are in the majority, particularly of late as the economic downturn and unemployment have hit industrialised Newcastle harder than most cities.

But if you are lucky enough to have a job, then Newcastle offers an attractive lifestyle. It has a temperate climate and all the amenities and facilities of any large city. Housing is about half of Sydney's prices and two-thirds of Melbourne's, and transport and commuting in Newcastle are not really a problem. There are literally miles of beaches and acres of bush. The overall pace of living in Newcastle is more relaxed than in the capital cities, and not to be forgotten is that the Newcastle Knights did very well in this year's rugby league competition. What more could you want?

The Newcastle office has also done its job well in the past, being the recipient of the Commissioner's Commendation Certificate from former Commissioner Grey, in February 1988, for "outstanding and dedicated performance".

And it continues to perform well. With only six staff, the office has had some recent notable successes.

In June last year, after an operation involving surveillance and search warrants, a 35-year-old Newcastle man was arrested for a \$40,000 Social Security fraud in which he had claimed unemployment benefits in two names over

several years. He has pleaded guilty and is awaiting sentence. Early in 1990 the Newcastle staff charged a Telecom employee with the theft of \$21,000 worth of computer equip-

the man in a hotel and discuss the deal.

At the meeting, Detective Sergeant Wayne Warwick, who has no previous flying experience, posed as the



L to R Jean Brown, Mike Smith, Wayne Warwick, Terry Muir and Helen Davey.

ment from the Rutherford telephone exchange, and in May, a 40-year-old postal officer from Charlestown was charged with allegedly stealing more than \$220,000 from Australia Post.

But perhaps the most interesting of the Newcastle office's recent investigations involves an undercover pilot and an alleged cargo of gold, money, and cannabis from Papua New Guinea.

It is alleged that late in 1988, two men, Craig Shepherd, aged 32, and James Norman, aged 42, conspired to import 230kg of cannabis into Australia from Papua New Guinea by aircraft. In early December 1988, Shepherd, who was the organiser, contacted a Cessnock air charter service seeking a pilot to fly from Papua New Guinea to Australia with a cargo of gold. The suspicious proprietor then contacted NSW police, who in turn contacted the AFP's Newcastle office. During a second contact the proprietor, through police, arranged for a "pilot" to meet

pilot. He was told by Shepherd that he would receive \$50,000 to collect gold, money and cannabis from Papua New Guinea. At a further meeting arranged on New Year's Eve in a Newcastle hotel, Norman, who was the financier of the importation, offered Detective Sergeant Warwick 9kg of cannabis supposedly worth \$80,000 to fly the plane. At this point Norman was arrested, and his accomplice, Shepherd, was subsequently arrested on 20 January at Horn Island, on his return to Australia.

Both men were charged with conspiring to import cannabis. Norman pleaded guilty and received a minimum five year sentence in return for assisting police. Shepherd was found guilty after a trial and will shortly be sentenced.

Life is now pretty much back to normal for our Newcastle staff though some of them still look for where the exit signs are located when they enter a building. Who could blame them? •