

Cambodian contingent settles in

By Terry Browne



Constable Shan Rice negotiates one of the many traffic hazards on the 380 km journey from Phnom Penh to Thma Pok.

ONE item of kit taken to Cambodia with the AFP Contingent was not official issue, incurred no excess baggage charges and didn't show up on any airport security check, yet without it the members of the Contingent would have been ill advised to leave Australia.

Each member of the AFP Contingent took with him a fair share of Aussie resourcefulness.

The AFP Cyprus Contingent is known for its ability to get in and get the job done; now AFP members in Cambodia are rising to the same challenge.

Selected from a field of 130 applicants, 10 AFP officers landed in Phnom Penh on 19 May as part of Australia's police commitment to the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) to be faced with a bureaucratic jungle thicker than the surrounding vegetation.

The members will spend nine months in Cambodia as part of the proposed 3600-strong UN police force recruited from UN member-states. The police task is to supervise and control local police forces and to investigate alleged violations of human rights and to stabilise conditions for the coming elections.

While in Phnom Penh, the AFP Contingent put its resourcefulness to the test and 'acquired' the necessary provisions and transport in record time (and with a minimum of paperwork).

Under the Command of Superintendent Bill Kirk the Contingent headed inland to its designated area of responsibility on Monday 1 June with five German Border Police and six Tunisian Police in tow. Two AFP members remained in Phnom Penh for administrative duties.

Central to the Contingent's area

of responsibility is the small village of Thma Pok in Cambodia's north-west. It is 70m above sea level and located 380km by road from Phnom Penh and about 100km by road from Aranyaprathet in Thailand. It has only a few permanent structures.

Movement to Thma Pok from Phnom Penh is slow with the 265km journey from Phnom Penh to Battambang taking between nine and 11 hours, although a recent claim of a seven hour journey by two members is currently being examined by the Contingent's scrutineers.

Thma Pok and nearby Banteay Chhmar are under the control of the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPRLF). The KPRLF was formed in 1979 following the Vietnamese invasion. The population of the area is close to 59,000 and the civilian volunteer police force of the group numbers 1056

members with offices temporarily located in Thma Pok and Banteay Chhmar.

The Contingent lived in a wooden house in Thma Pok while a new barracks-style dwelling was built next door. A generator has been acquired with the view to outfitting the new building with electric lighting and a refrigerator.

Creature comforts are scarce, but resourcefulness – backed up with a few star pickets, a roll of hessian and a thunderbox – has produced the best latrine in the district; located just a quick trot from the back door.

Resourcefulness goes a long way in the job as well. With bandits active in the area and heavy weapons commonplace, Contingent members are armed only with a broad smile and a firm handshake. The UN policy of not arming its police forces seems incongruous, but because the unarmed police offer no physical threat, the locals come to trust them more quickly.

The Contingent derives some comfort from having a Bangladeshi Infantry Battalion located 700m from their house.

Police duty starts at 7am each day and winds down around 5pm that evening. A day's work might include routine patrolling, escorting Red Cross workers, assisting with a UN investigation into human rights violations, investigating bandit activity and dealing with cattle rustlers. Police work is police



An aerial view of the village of Banteay Chhmar, soon to be the location of a United Nations police station manned by AFP members.

work anywhere in the world.

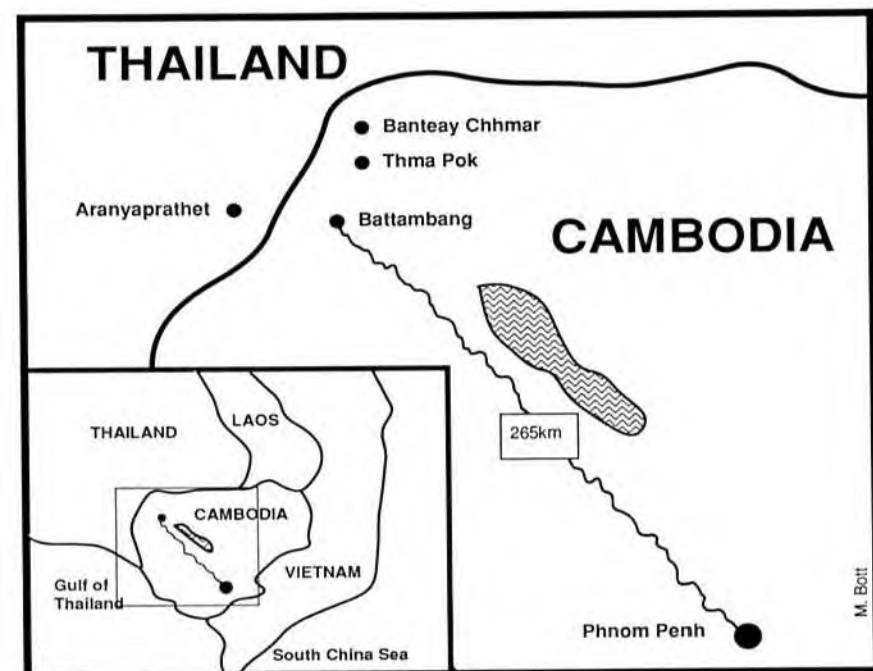
The standard roster is 28 days on with six days off. Fortunately the Thai tourist centre, Aranyaprathet, is just 100km over the border and the reports are that the steaks in many of the hotels compare favourably with those at home and make a welcome change from the routine rice dishes.

Cooking and domestic chores are done for the Contingent by the local Khmer Women's Association, who apply the original stone-wash technique to the members' clothing. Tan-coloured

underwear has become fashionable due to the pigmentation in the local water.

Superintendent Kirk lists the greatest dangers to the Contingent as illness, land mines and the presence of the international media. He assesses any military threat to the Contingent as being low.

According to the Superintendent, the Contingent's welfare seems to be in good hands as each evening the ladies of the village visit to place incense outside the building and pray for the Contingent's continued safety.



Sergeant John Rixon learning new patrol techniques in Phnom Penh