

Thirty years of service by Australians with UNFICYP

By Commander Harry Dales

THIRTY years ago, few Australians knew Cyprus as anything more than an island that offered visitors a taste of Mediterranean culture and holiday living, however, Christmas 1963 saw the island's population on the brink of war: a war over culture and territory.

In view of the crisis, the Cyprus Government appealed to the United Nations for assistance and in March 1964, United Nations Forces In Cyprus (UNFICYP) began military operations to dampen down the fighting between the two communities on the island.

It was soon realised, however, that a United Nations police presence was also considered essential, and as a result, a request was made to several countries, asking them to volunteer police officers for liaison and observer roles.

Australia was one such country, and agreed to provide 40 police to UNFICYP to help in what had become a very tense situation in Cyprus. The urgency of the operation was indicated by the fact that selections were made, passports issued and health formalities completed within four weeks.

Dressed in blue serge uniforms and carrying Commonwealth Police flashes. The group, led by Superintendent Jim Hamilton of the Commonwealth Police flew out of Australia aboard a Qantas 707 on Sunday May 24, 1964. The first Australian Police Contingent arrived in Nicosia early on the morning of Monday May 25 amid an atmosphere of uncertainty and tension. They were closely followed by a Danish Police Contingent. The Austrian, Swedish and New Zealand Contingents had

arrived some days earlier.

The Australians had been allocated the districts of Famagusta and Larnaca almost one-third of the island in all. Finding somewhere to call home for the next 12 months was no mean feat. One compensation was that the area contained some of the island's most modern hotels, and these provided very agreeable accommodation for members. Perhaps today's contingent members will reflect on how things have changed in 30 years.

It is, perhaps, ironic that the Australians, coming from one sunburnt country to another, arrived in the wrong type of uniform! (The error no doubt was made in the heat of the moment...) However, it took some four months before the first contingent were kitted out in uniforms more in keeping with the climate. In the meantime, Australian ingenuity come to the fore and long trousers quickly shrank to become much cooler shorts!

The Australians quickly adapted to their new policing role and made friends with both communities. Turkish Cypriots have long had respect for Australians stemming back to Gallipoli, while most Greek Cypriots have relatives or friends living in Australia, so the bonds were already there and just needed building on.

Since that rather hectic beginning 30 years ago, Australian Civilian Police In Cyprus (AUSTCIVPOL) has served in all sectors and we have seen great changes to the structure of UNFICYP. The civilian police component has over the years been reduced from five contributing countries providing 174 police officer to the present two countries – Australia and Ireland providing a total of 35.



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During this period, close to 1 000 Australian police officers have served with UNFICYP. Ours is a unique story of police officers without traditional police powers, in an unfamiliar and often hostile environment, mediating between historical antagonists. Whether we have served well is not for us to say, but we should remember that the United Nations continues to ask us for more and we do take comfort from that.

Trying to summarise 30 years of Australian contribution to UNFICYP is no easy matter. It is, perhaps not appropriate to even attempt to summarise the contribution, as the UNFICYP mission is not complete yet, and as we have found in recent times, even a week is a long time in international politics. Nobody knows just what the future holds for this troubled island, but Australia is proud of its small contribution towards peace. □

Source of factual information:
Police as Peacekeepers, Gavin Brown, Barry Barker, Terry Burke