

Continuing a thirty-year peacekeeping commitment

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UNITED Nations service in Cyprus is one of the few overseas postings regularly available to AFP members and as such is sought after by many who want to experience a different kind of policing – but it’s not what you might imagine when you look up Cyprus in the atlas.

Cyprus is a tiny island in the north-eastern Mediterranean just 80kms south of Turkey. The Commonwealth Police (a predecessor of the AFP) was sent to Cyprus in 1964 as part of a peacekeeping force to quell intercommunal riots between Greek and Turkish Cypriots. Australian contingents celebrated their 30th continuous year of peacekeeping in May.

So what’s it like to serve with the UN in an ethnically torn European country?

The first thing you notice when you arrive at the United Nations Protected Area (UNPA) in Nicosia is the strictly military environment—military and British. The British built the base after World War 2 and nothing much appears to have changed.

Entrance is through a military checkpoint which at any time may be guarded by a Brit an Argentinian or an Austrian. Those nations form the major military components on Cyprus with small contingents in a supporting role from Canada and Finland. This military presence along with Australian and Irish civilian police make up the United Nations Forces In Cyprus (UNFICYP).

Australian Civilian Police in Cyprus (AUSTCIVPOL) are responsible with the Irish police for



Members of Contingent 40 and 41 at the 30th Anniversary dinner

Back row (l to r): Paul Spiers, Peter Lamont, Mike Bolan, Tony Petherbridge, Allan Le Lievre, Bernie O'Donnell, Dave Ayers, Dean Manning.

Centre Row (l to r): Lyn Drake, Bruce Harris, Brad Johnson, Brett Poole, Grant Schultz, Chris Radley, Dale Brown.

Front Row (l to r) Anne Dellaca, Sandy Peisley, Harry Dales, Bob Gray, Annie Brooks.

maintaining peace inside the 180km-long buffer zone (BZ), created in 1974 after the Turks invaded and occupied the northern third of the island.

I went to Cyprus to cover the AFP’s 30th anniversary for *The Bulletin* magazine. The month I spent on the island gave me a chance to meet and mix with members of AUSTCIVPOL and to have a look at their work from a civilian perspective – it was illuminating.

The 20 members of the 40th and 41st AFP contingents generously showed me around the island. They are a social lot, because they have to be. After the initial cultural adaptation that is required when a

contingent arrives, the routine of the work, and in some cases the frustrations, needs an outlet. That’s where the famous *Aussie Bar* comes in.

Over the years the Australian contingents have built up and added to their mess area so that now the *Aussie Bar* is renowned among UNFICYP for its hospitality. This is where the contingent members gather for a barbecue and a chance to unwind and distance themselves from the military surroundings. AUSTCIVPOL Commander Harry Dales told me the social aspects of the tour served another purpose.

“We work pretty closely with the military and the Irish police, so it is important to foster and maintain

those relationships. Often that can best be done in an informal setting like the mess," he said.

I asked him if the 'social whirl' was draining. "It can be; there seems to be something on almost every night but this is not an island resort, It's not a long holiday, the conditions are pretty primitive," he said.

He's right. AUSTCIVPOL administration area is located at the now disused international airport which incorporates several old British style stone huts.

The buildings are showing their age, they are reminiscent of the buildings former Australian Army personnel know so well at Buckapunyal or Wagga – mostly held together by copious quantities of paint.

Some members of the contingent live there in single rooms, or in the case of married couples in two adjoining rooms.

Others live in downtown Nicosia in the once fashionable and now dilapidated Ledra Palace Hotel.

The AFP also rents a house at Linou in the North east of the island about 100kms from Nicosia or an hour's hair-raising drive.

Usually, three members stay at Linou and patrol the eastern sectors of the buffer zone.



AFP members demonstrate a medical evacuation for visiting UN dignitaries.



Lyn Drake driving the 'hay wagon' assisted by Chris Radley at this years United Nations' fair.

They work seven day shifts starting at 7am and finishing about 9pm but members are on call during the night.

The day shift ends at 1pm because the summer midday temperatures reach into the 40s, so in true Mediterranean style, business including the public sector closes down.

That's when most UN personnel head for the UNPA pool or play volleyball with other UN members.

It's the heat and dust – there is no grass at all on Cyprus which makes the tour gruelling.

That and the constant problems between the Greek and Turkish Cypriots.

AFP members are regularly called on to settle disputes in the buffer zone some minor some fairly serious, with abduction by one side or the other not unusual.

AUSTCIVPOL's job is made more difficult because of political indecision. In June, it seemed likely the UN including the Australians, would pull out because the UN Security Council reported its resources might be better used elsewhere.

At that time Department of Foreign Affairs officials were saying the future of AUSTCIVPOL was in serious doubt, but in a complete about turn just a month later Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali declared positive outcomes were possible if the Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) were fostered.

CBMs are part of the role of the UN humanitarian section where some of the AFP work. Superintendent Bob Gray heads up that section assisted by Dave Ayers. They have been trying to bring

Greek and Turkish Cypriots together with intercommunal activities. When I was there, Dave Ayers was organising the second darts tournament between the two sides.

He says one of the problems is that neither side really knows much about the other.

“In the north, where Turkish Cypriots live they have all sorts of ideas about what the Greek Cypriots are. The more we can free up movement between north and south, the more they can see the other side and come to know them as fellow Cypriots,” he said. He hoped to start up an intercommunal model airplane club and table tennis tournament.

Dave Ayers, like the other AFP members in Cyprus, often gives up what little spare time he has to help out at charity events.

“We want to build up confidence between the UN and Cypriots and between Greek and Turkish Cypriots themselves,” he said.

The annual UN Fair is another event where the AFP members spend their off-duty time organising stalls and activities for the locals.

Paul Spiers ran an Aussie damper stall and Lyn Drake, Chris Radley, Tony Pethebridge, Bruce Harris and Brad Johnston ran hay rides for the kids.

Harry Dales’ wife Val and Superintendent Sandy Peisley helped sell Anzac biscuits on a cake stall.

But the big event of the month was the 30th Anniversary Dinner held on May 25 in the International



On patrol in the buffer zone.



Paul Spiers with Argentinian soldiers at an observation post inside the Buffer Zone. He went there to investigate a bush fire in the BZ.

Mess. The contingent decided to hold a formal dinner and 60 UN personnel including Irish UN Commander Major General Michael Minchane, turned up to congratulate and celebrate with the Australians.

Not surprisingly the Irish police contingent has special ties with the Australians who had helped settle them in when they arrived in Cyprus for the first time earlier in the year.

Operationally, the day-to-day work involves patrols of the buffer zone and investigations into claims of harassment or discrimination of ethnic minorities inside the buffer zone.

A minor bush fire in the BZ means a trip down the track to a small Argentinian observation post to check on damage or injuries .

As this patrol traverses the no-go area where Greek Cypriot observation posts (OPs) overlook Turkish Cypriot OPs, its easy to become complacent about the visual images of two warring armies in a classic stand-off .

Although it’s very much business as usual along the track, the AFP is alert to the possibility of trouble. Like operational police patrols in

Australia, situations can escalate quickly if approaches to OPs are not made with caution.

One example was the day Dale Brown took me down the most eastern track out of Linou.

First there was the weekly meeting inside the BZ at Lefka with the new Argentinian Army contingent where much coffee was drunk and invitations were extended to the *Aussie Bar*.

Later, after a hazardous trek up a mountain on a 4m-wide dirt road, we walked down a narrow bush track mined on either side towards a Turkish OP. Halfway down the track we saw frantic movement at what appeared to be a new Turkish outpost. Clearly in breach of the cease-fire agreement by establishing a new OP, the Turks were agitated at the UN’s arrival.

A controlled withdrawal followed by a report to UN Headquarters ensued no diplomatic incident on that day.

While it is possible that the usual tranquillity of Cyprus may give another impression, the conflict is serious, sensitive and easily ignited.

AFP old hands say don’t go to Cyprus if all you are looking for is a Mediterranean holiday. □