

A record of change and achievement

By Commissioner Mick Palmer

The articles published in *Platypus Magazine* over the past fifty editions highlight the dynamic and continually changing environment facing the AFP.

While I understand the concerns felt by many through the inevitable disruptions caused by the current change process, it is important for us to recognise the AFP has been facing continuous challenges throughout its 16-year history.

The impetus for many of the current changes goes back to the early days of the AFP. The AFP's first commissioner, Sir Colin Woods, spoke of the need for industrial relations reform, improved co-operative arrangements with other law-enforcement agencies, and the development of appropriate machinery to investigate complaints against police (see *Platypus Magazine* no.45).

Today these issues are still major items on our reform agenda. Negotiations between the AFP and the AFPA have resulted in an enterprise agreement which provided a new and exciting industrial relations platform to support changes in operational and administrative arrangements within the AFP. The agreement included the adoption of the title 'Federal Agent' at the national level, a title which not only better reflects the national and international investigative nature of the work we do, but provides appropriate status to the many highly-experienced field operatives who have been disadvantaged, sometimes impugned, by reference to previous traditional rank descriptions.

As an example, when giving evidence before the Hanson Inquiry in Queensland last year, I was cross-



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examined as to why, if I saw the Operation Gallon investigation as serious, the main inquiries were conducted by a (mere) sergeant and a constable. It was necessary to explain the officers concerned had 15 and 17 years investigative experience respectively and that in a more traditional hierarchical law-enforcement agency they would have held much higher ranks. In fact, rank is irrelevant. The issue was, and is, the level of experience and skill of investigators.

The move to federal agent removes this continuing 'junior rank' perception, and establishes clearly and unambiguously an identity for the AFP and its people consistent with our charter. Good investigators are the life-blood of this organisation and they deserve to have a title which affords them appropriate status, regardless of the work responsibilities they may be performing at any one time.

Photo by R.W. Crothers

This edition of *Platypus Magazine* also has a major feature on co-operative arrangements, both in terms of the Commonwealth's law-enforcement framework and relations with our state colleagues. As I wrote in a recent publication:

The 21st century will offer an environment of diversity, interaction and partnership (albeit loose conditions) between organised criminal groups; an environment of unprecedented flexibility, unpredictability, mobility and internationality – of unprecedented variety, profitability and potential for power.

If law-enforcement agencies are to remain credible and relevant they must be equal to the challenge. When they talk of co-operation and inter-agency investigative teams their eyes must match their mouths – their actions match their words.

Every effort, every dollar must be directed to improving individual and collective effectiveness. Police must become more flexible, imaginative, clever, patient, resourceful, more collegiate and more influential. Teamwork has always been essential to police work but law enforcement must recognise that the size and structure of the team has changed.

While local knowledge of the patch will remain important, law-enforcement officers must recognise their patch is part of a global patchwork quilt – a quilt of a thousand cultures and languages, of many governments and legal systems. Competition, turf protection, one-upmanship, headline grabbing – call it what you will – must be seen and damned as professional blasphemy. Police must feed off the skills and knowledge of each other.

Interagency and jurisdictional teamwork has never been better, but much more needs to be done. Too often still, in the co-operative process, police agencies do only as much as is needed, rather than as much as is possible. Too often still, police find reasons not to share, or to go alone when 'to share – or go together' is to turn a half chance into a real chance. The environment of the 21st century will demand that law enforcement turns real chances into certainties.¹

Corrupt and inappropriate behaviour by police is now receiving much public attention, and in this

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edition are comments by Justice James Wood following the release of the interim report of the Royal Commission into the NSW Police Service. While police leaders agree on the need for reform, in terms of public perceptions, it is important not to throw the baby out with the bath water. In these worst of times, much good is happening with many people, in and out of policing, who are determined and committed to achieving the highest policing standards and ridding law enforcement of corruption. The message in the AFP has always been loud and clear. *No Place for Corruption in the AFP* was the headline in *Platypus Magazine* No. 27, August 1989 when Deputy Commissioner John Johnson addressed graduates.

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The process could be viewed as a cycle where changes in the law-enforcement environment pose new problems which require new solutions. Changes are then made and what follows is a period of consolidation and evaluation although the speed of change requires commitment to continuous improvement.

In the most recent cycle, the executive met in September 1994 to consider how to re-focus the AFP to meet the challenges identified by the Review of Commonwealth Law-Enforcement Arrangements, and the demands and requirements of the likely environment beyond 2000. The September meeting was the catalyst for our present change program. It led us to redefine the AFP and its charter and to significantly alter the way we

are structured and do business.

I recognised from the outset that, despite the enormous enthusiasm and commitment to the challenges identified, the change process would be difficult; would cause uncertainty, resentment and even active resistance, and that we would stumble through a trough on the way to new ground. But I never doubted for a moment that we would achieve our aims – the quality and intelligence of our people has assured success.

But more needs to be done to build on our moves to create a less bureaucratic, properly empowered, flexible but highly accountable and productive investigative agency.

It is now time to evaluate how things are going, and to assist this process I have scheduled another key personnel conference for April 21-24. For the past 16 years the AFP has been striving to place itself and its people in the best possible position to deal effectively with the diversity and complexity of the challenges facing it. We are continuing this process and we will be successful.

Platypus Magazine is our official record. It documents the challenges that we have faced and how we have dealt with them. And most importantly it profiles the people who are the AFP. I recommend this edition to you, thank you all for your tremendous commitment and perseverance throughout the trying times of the past 18 months, and invite you to play an active role in creating our future. It is ours for the making.

Mick Palmer
Commissioner

1. *Police Leadership in Australasia*. Editors Barbara Etter and Mick Palmer. The Federation Press 1995.