

Kopiaste: Come, sit down, share my meal – let us talk

As a photographer Theona Poteris has captured many AFP daily activities with her camera. While in Cyprus for her wedding last year, she took the opportunity to catch up with the members of the AFP peacekeeping contingent and record a snapshot of their daily lives.



Photography by Theona Poteris, AFP Forensic Imaging

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Cyprus is a warm, welcoming place and I fell in love with this inspiring country when my husband and I first walked through the streets of Nicosia in June last year. The people were friendly and our first delicious Cypriot meal in Laiki Geitonia – the traditional tourist district – was served with hospitality and a warm welcome to two strangers.

Our main reason for visiting Cyprus was to get married. The other, particularly for my husband Peter, was to re-connect with his birthplace and with the relatives he left behind as a young teenager 36 years ago.

Turkish military action in 1974 ultimately divided the country – resulting in a southern Greek side, a northern Turkish side, and a buffer zone in between.

Later that first day in Nicosia we came face to face with evidence of Cyprus' violent past and the scars it left behind. Peter and I were overwhelmed with feelings of sadness and grief when we saw the checkpoint on the buffer zone at the end of Ledra



Street. At this point you can look to the Turkish side and realise you are in the world's only divided capital city. There is also a haunting photographic display highlighting the effects on families during the hostilities. The photos of these children require no explanation.

While swimming in the warm water at Agias Trias beach one afternoon, I met an old gentleman named Mr Savvas. He told me that at the time of the invasion people fled with their families to save their lives. They believed they would be returning to their homes within a few days so did not take any of their personal possessions with them. They never returned to their homes, and consequently lost all their possessions.

On 8 August 2003 we visited the AFP and Irish Contingents at UNCIVPOL headquarters in the UN protected area in Nicosia. It was a unique experience and everyone made us feel very welcome. There is a special feeling of respect and camaraderie among the many nationalities working together; they have grown to love Cyprus and enjoy the lifestyle and the local people. The people here feel they are doing something worthwhile and have excellent working relationships, job satisfaction and a true sense of achievement.

A very significant day in the history of Cyprus was 23 April, 2003. On that day the borders were opened at a few specific points, allowing Greek Cypriots to return to the land they fled in 1974, and Turkish Cypriots to visit the Greek side.

One personal story that filtered back was of a Greek woman who went to the northern side to revisit her home, abandoned 40 years ago. In that time it had been occupied by a Turkish family. The Turkish woman had packed up the Greek woman's wedding photos, knowing someone would come looking for them one day. When the Greek woman arrived at the house, her photos were returned.

As a new bride myself I was touched by the humanity of this story; others have gone back north to find nothing of their former lives.

During her posting, AFP Sergeant Kate Straker was involved in various community projects and feels there is good bi-communal industry and commerce now that people are adapting to crossing the borders more freely. The Cypriots are proud people and have a holistic approach to the European Union. There are signs going up in Turkish, Greek and English, making everyone feel welcome.

The "mug out"

Peter and I were invited to a "mug out", a ceremony that takes place at each contingent changeover. This particular ceremony marked the departure of the AFP's 74th contingent (6 members), and an Irish contingent (11 members). All those in attendance were treated to a delicious Cypriot feast.

The ceremony is called a "mug out" because everyone receives a beer mug as a goodbye present. It was a simple ceremony, but one that obviously had significant meaning to the contingent members.

"This is my first contingent and I have loved every minute of it," AFP Sergeant Bob Muir said. "It has been most enriching learning the customs and living in a different country and understanding the problems people face." He also said that he experienced no conflict at the crossings, no animosity and no anger among the locals.

This was Federal Agent Frank Priest's fourth UN mission and his second to Cyprus. An important moment in Cyprus history, it was an emotional time with people going home for the first time in 29 years.

Peter and I were in Cyprus for only 28 days. In that time we saw ample evidence of the turmoil that led to intervention by UN forces. We came away a little saddened about the division that has existed in Cyprus for so long, but aware of the possible consequences had the UN not taken action. It is clear that the skill of UN police officers like those we had just met had played a significant role in keeping the peace between the two communities over the years. It can only be hoped that skill will eventually make it possible that some day there will be no need for a buffer zone between the north and south.