



History resides at Brisbane Avenue

The Australian Federal Police College has been an integral part of the organisation for nearly 30 years, and is steeped in its history.

Spend any time at the Australian Federal Police College in the leafy Canberra suburb of Barton and you quickly realise this institution is the AFP's heart and soul. Walk the halls of the College and you are surrounded by the AFP's future as well as its history.

The College has been part of the lives of almost all AFP recruits since 1979 and, as individual careers have developed, the College has played a significant role in the education and training of both sworn and unsworn members.

Graduation photographs are displayed proudly on the walls in the western wing, and the remainder of the building is decorated with images and objects of significance to the AFP.

The teak-panelled walls have provided a warm and inviting atmosphere for the achievements of 30 years of training as well as countless social and formal functions.

The grand red-carpeted curved staircase that leads upwards from the foyer has been the location of choice for the haunting tones of the AFP's piper on many formal occasions, including the attestation ceremonies of hundreds of recruits.

As it is 60 years old, the College is one of Canberra's older buildings. Originally named Lawley House, it opened in 1949 as part of a network of hostels built to deal with the accommodation shortage for public servants relocating to Canberra from interstate.

Lawley House was one of two government hostels located on Brisbane Avenue. The other, Barton House, was torn down in the early 1980s and replaced by apartment buildings.

Lawley House was reborn as the Commonwealth Police Training Centre in 1978.

The conversion to a police training facility was a fairly brutal process, as former Commonwealth Police training sergeant Barry Boyce recalls.

"When the Commonwealth Police moved in, everything to the east of the main foyer was designated accommodation and everything to the west was training and office space," he said.

"The training rooms were made by knocking down adjoining walls of individual sleeping quarters. If a training room needed to be larger it was just a case of knocking down more walls.

"I recall the early training courses were done to the constant sound of jackhammers, drills and hammers coming from elsewhere in the building."

The accommodation wing remained largely unchanged from the original fit-out and was comprised mostly of single bedrooms with a small desk and wardrobe, a sink, a heater and a window. There were small lounge rooms at the intersection of each hallway with toilet and shower facilities adjacent.

When the AFP was formed in 1979, the name over the front entrance changed and the College courses were revamped.

Conduct in the college was highly disciplined along military lines. So much so that enthusiastic instructors had to tone down the volume of their parade-ground commands during drill sessions because the neighbours adjacent to the parade-ground complained about the noise.

"Recruits were subjected to a strict curfew and code of conduct, and arrivals and departures were noted by the duty officer of the day," Mr Boyce said.

Recently, members of the AFP Former Members' Network were asked to submit their own recollections of life at the College. A common memory for many was the comfort given by the College's central heating. Many recruits had not experienced the severe cold of a Canberra winter before joining the AFP.

Several contributors recalled that it was common practice to leave a designated ground floor window unlocked so those rare curfew breakers would not be left to freeze outside overnight.

Retired Detective Superintendent Terry Button recalled an occasion a few weeks into his recruit course, when a colleague attended the first class of the day dishevelled, unshaven and clutching a coffee cup in his shivering hands. Apparently he had returned after curfew and found the after-hours entry window firmly locked so he just curled up and went to sleep.

"I don't think he was ever late back to the College again," he said.



The entrance foyer of the AFP College

Top: Lawley House circa 1950. Photo courtesy RC Strangman Collection, National Library of Australia.



An aerial view of the college as it is today.

Les Lambert, the College Sergeant from 1980 to 1992 who was responsible for the good conduct and welfare of course participants, recalled that occasionally there would be a spontaneous release of juvenile energy by recruits, particularly after a graduation dinner.

One graduating class saw fit to have a water fight with the fire extinguishers. When they came to their senses they were able mop up most of the mess, but were left with the problem of the empty fire extinguishers.

Luckily, the local fire station was not far away and the empty extinguishers were presented for refilling. They told the attending fire-fighter that they needed to return things to normal to avoid the wrath of the College Sergeant.

At this point Fire-Fighter Dean Lambert spoke up.

“Ah that would be Senior Sergeant Les Lambert, he’s my father,” he said.

The College closed for renovations in May 1994 and reopened in November 1996. From the beginning, the renovations were designed to be sympathetic to the building’s heritage, ensuring the best aesthetic values of the structure were maintained while incorporating modern communications, training and hospitality facilities.

There were countless innovations made inside the building including a revamp of the sleeping quarters to motel-style rooms complete with ensuites.

The most obvious change was the addition of a portico to the front entrance and the construction of the central three-storey axis which housed a much-needed centralised ground floor administrative centre topped by a light and airy two-storey library.

Also much needed was the 80-seat lecture theatre fitted out with the latest audio-visual equipment.

The College has gone from strength to strength in being proactive and innovative in the training courses and techniques it uses, but the College is more than an inventory of bricks and mortar and courses. It is the combined efforts of the teaching and administrative staff mixed in with the experience and achievements of those attending the training courses.

The AFP College will eventually leave the Brisbane Avenue location. Plans are being developed to construct a new college at the AFP’s Majura site.

In the meantime Terry Browne, Team Leader of the AFP’s History Project, is trying to collect from current and former members as many personal memories as possible of life at the AFP College on Brisbane Avenue.

For further information, or to contribute to the History Project, contact Terry Browne on (02) 6293 7861 or by email to terry.browne@afp.gov.au.



The Commissioner’s dining room at the college



College bedroom circa 1980



The informal lounge area