

A career of a lifetime



After 30 years of policing I owe the AFP a debt of gratitude. Why? Because those years have been challenging, interesting, exciting and rewarding and I have had the opportunity to be part of the evolution of women in policing.

Hopefully my story will give you a light-hearted and candid look into years gone by.

As I write this I am privileged to be part of the United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT), an opportunity I am grateful the AFP has provided.

As an inexperienced 19-year-old, I moved from the western suburbs of Sydney to Canberra to join the ACT Police Force in 1979.

In December 1979, I graduated with the last recruit class of the ACT Police Force. In October of that year, the small community police service had amalgamated with the expanding Commonwealth Police, and my class, 1/79, was the first to graduate as AFP Officers.

I have a very strong commitment to policing and have dedicated myself to uniformed community policing in the ACT and overseas peacekeeping in Cyprus, the Solomon Islands and Sudan.

In the early stages of my career, there were three distinctive features about policing. It was male-dominated, women were treated unfairly and yet, despite such an exigent work environment, it was one big happy family where every police officer knew every other police officer.

Belconnen Police Station in Canberra's northern suburbs was my first posting and, over the years, has remained my favourite. Thirty-four years after it was built, it is still very original and exudes the personality of the 1970s.

The standard issue for policewomen in the 1970s was a skirt with matching matinee jacket and high heels. Of course, this attire was

not conducive to exercising police powers while chasing criminals, jumping fences and wrestling with offenders. There was also a handbag containing a Walther pp22 pistol, handcuffs and baton. Women were not permitted to carry the standard issue Smith and Wesson .38 because it didn't fit in the handbag.

I recall wrestling with a big man on the front lawn of a house while attending a domestic dispute one night, and wondering where my handbag was for the duration of the tussle. Thankfully I won, and my handbag was safely recovered, with all its contents intact.

That moment made me realise conditions for women in policing were somewhat antiquated. I felt an overwhelming need to improve our work environment and so began my adventure into making changes and transforming the thoughts of others about policewomen.

In the days before computers, policing thrived on paperwork, and I realised early on that if I wanted anything changed I would have to become adept at report writing. My first report argued for pants rather than skirts, my second outlined the numerous times I had tripped over in my high heels and made a case for the issue of flat shoes. My third report requested a standard issue gun worn on the hip like the men, and my fourth was an application to be a part-time search and rescue police officer. I soon lost count of all the rejection letters I received.

Instead of waiting for change to happen, I decided to take matters into my own hands. I had a nice black pouch custom-made to hold

my little Walther, and wore my pistol on my belt. After refusing requests by the Chief Inspector to put my gun back in my handbag and quoting equal rights for women, I was soon ear-marked as one of those women who complained just because she was female.

That didn't particularly concern me, as I wanted to be treated equitably. Although I knew my many reports were ignored, I felt proud and I was determined that I could do something to improve the status of women in policing. I threw away my handbag, bought and wore my own flat shoes and continued to carry my gun on my hip.

In 1981, I visited Cyprus to meet a friend who was working with the AFP and United Nations (UN) and I fell in love with the country and its people. I was excited by the prospect of the unique experience provided by working overseas. Thus began my next adventure. If men were allowed to work overseas, then I should be allowed to as well.





01: Sergeant Melita Zielonko **02:** Kathy Burdett in 1988 **03:** Melita Zielonko with former Commissioner Mick Keelty **04:** 1987 - Senior Constable Joanne Prince (left) in the new summer uniform with First Constable Gillian Albiez in the old uniform.

Over the years, I applied and re-applied, was deemed suitable, had medical fitness tests, was placed on reserve lists and was always told I couldn't go because I was a female. In 1986 when my husband of 25 years, Charles, was accepted to go to Cyprus and I wasn't granted the honour, I decided it was time for serious action.

I again holidayed in Cyprus, still loved the island and spoke to the local community who assured me that if I came as an Australian Police officer with the UN, they would welcome me. I went to the Police Association, met with legal representatives and lodged a complaint with the Equal Opportunities and Sex Discrimination Board.

In the meantime, the 1980s did bring about some change. Culottes replaced skirts and some time later pants became the norm. Policewomen were given a choice of shoe type and were issued with gun belts, the .22 pistol was replaced by the .38, and the handbag was relegated to the back of the locker. Finally we looked and felt good, and were more efficient with our equipment.

Time passed, the AFP and the Police Association continued to go before the Equal Opportunities and Sex Discrimination Board with regards to the Cyprus issue. I was vocal in discussing the rights of policewomen with many different people and then the decision was made. AFP women would be treated equally and allowed to work overseas.

My joy at having won soon faded when I met a senior policeman who pointed out to me that I might have won the battle for females to

work overseas, but I would never be the first. So in 1988, when Kathy Burdett was selected as the first female police officer to perform administrative duties for the AFP with the UN in Cyprus, I was proud but also a little disappointed. That was the beginning of AFP women working overseas.

Kathy was selected by UN force in Cyprus to travel to Oslo, Norway on behalf of the mission as part of the uniformed party accompanying UN Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar, who received the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to the Peacekeeping Forces in 1988. The fact that a female AFP officer was given that honour is true history.

I did eventually make it overseas. In December 1989, with just two weeks notice, I packed my bags and joined my husband in Cyprus as the first AFP female officer selected to work operationally with the UN. I went out on patrol in the buffer zone, attended to humanitarian duties, conducted investigations and mixed with the community and international staff of the UN. The experience was incredibly humbling and rewarding, and now that I had a taste of working overseas, I wasn't going to stop trying to improve conditions for female police officers.

I was one of the first females selected as a member of the Operations Support Group in 1982, which was used for crowd control during the many demonstrations of the 1980s, and I continued in this role part-time for the next 17 years.

In 1991, I was selected as the first female to work as Watch House Sergeant, formerly a male bastion.

In 2000, I was the only female selected with the first AFP group on the International Police Monitoring Team in the Solomon Islands. I returned in 2003 with the first deployment of the Regional Assistance Mission in Solomon Islands (RAMSI), then in 2007 I travelled to Sudan as part of the UN mission.

Over the years, I have seen many other women work overseas in Cyprus, Mozambique, Haiti, Jordan, East Timor and other AFP liaison posts. I am sure that these women, like me, are truly grateful for the opportunity they have been afforded by a policing organisation which now accepts women for their capabilities and recognises quality attributes.

Who would have thought that while writing this I would be in a remote location in Timor-Leste, living and working alongside two other policewomen and reflecting on my career? While the small enclave district of Oecussi has seen a number of UN Police women over the years, we are the first women to serve here under UNMIT.

As I reflect on the past 30 years, I feel proud knowing that I have contributed to making significant improvements to standards for women in policing. I have had many extraordinary and unique experiences and have collected memories that will last a lifetime.

I thank the AFP from the bottom of my heart for the career of a lifetime.

Sergeant Melita Zielonko