



Sergeant Ian Whyte (centre) at his ACT Police Graduation Parade in November 1974.

Perspective

By Sergeant Ian Whyte, Team Leader,
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The important things never change

I joined the ACT Police as a 19-year-old recruit on 3 June 1974. That was a while ago. How long ago? Well, long enough ago that petrol was around 13 cents a litre, my annual salary was about \$5200 and you could buy a house in most inner Canberra suburbs for under \$20,000.

So much has changed in that time. There were no computers back in those days with all paperwork completed on typewriters. Public telephones dotted the suburbs and local community centers and have now almost disappeared.

The ACT Police at that time was small, effective enough and tightly knit with policing methodology, standards and attitudes typical of the times. The two police stations in the ACT at the time were City Station, known as No. 1 Division, which served as HQ and consisted of the Watch house, Traffic, GDs, Communications, Criminal Records and a host of other smaller sections. No. 2 Division was located out at Woden Station in Phillip, which comprised GDs, Crime and Recruit Training.

There were no formal professional standards maintaining the integrity over watch we abide by today. All that business was the job of the station sergeants, who pretty much ran everything and everybody. The fleet of patrol cars consisted mostly of standard XA Falcons with an entertainment system consisting of a dodgy little transistor radio wedged between the dash and windscreen, generally tuned into 2CA.

Traffic Branch motorcyclists were riding Honda CB750s and at one stage in 1975/6, we were all driving around in Leyland P76 sedans! My accoutrements consisted of a .38 S&W revolver in a flap holster, rubber 'Billy club' baton (optional, as no-one seriously carried them but they made a great fishing accessory ... so I was told) and a set of handcuffs. That's all that was required then and perhaps, on reflection, indicative of a simpler Australian society long past and in stark contrast to the modern era and its demands on our members now.

I don't recall much formal 'mentoring' went on when you first joined a team fresh out of training. You were generally put with a senior constable who treated you like his own

A diverse career led
Sergeant Ian Whyte into
the Rescue Squad.



Sergeant Ian Whyte says the “commitment and dedication” of AFP members has not changed in 42 years.

personal admin slave, told to “keep your mouth shut and do as you’re told”. Despite the apparent harshness of that introduction, it was good advice that enabled you to survive those first few months on the road. The muster rooms resembled typing pools with multi-coloured bottles of typing correction fluid all over the place. These were used primarily to correct the typos on the six-paged Criminal Offence Reports (CORs) when writing off jobs.

A great prank often played on the ‘new comers’ was to remove one or two sheets of carbon paper from a half completed COR when the member left the typewriter and went to the toilet for example. Some recipients saw the hilarity; however, the majority didn’t.

In 1979 we farewelled the ACT Police and I swapped one badge number for another. The AFP was formed and everyone had to work through the difficult early years following the amalgamation. Things finally settled down and the AFP gradually matured, established its own identity and with the vision and drive of good commissioners, supportive governments and all the members, went on to achieve great things. The rest is history.

During the late 70s and 80s, I worked in Traffic as a motorcyclist, had a few years in Accident Squad, affectionately known as ‘Prang Gang’, followed then by some years full time with the Rescue Squad.

That role coupled with bush search and rescue, evidence searches and cliff rescue kept the squad very busy. We had the best gear and were a tight knit, loyal bunch. Some notable events that I was involved in during those years included the opening of Parliament House (the new one ... thankyou!), Operation Peat and the Thredbo landslide disaster. I still maintain that my days with Traffic Branch and later in Rescue Squad were some of my best.

My first taste of working off shore came in June 1999 with my deployment into East Timor with the UNAMET mission during the lead up to the vote for Timorese independence from Indonesia. I ended up down south in a town called Forohem in the Covalima District.

Together with my two civilian electoral officers, we travelled about delivering information and pamphlets to all the surrounding villages in the area. We weren’t that bothered with the militias and they tended to leave us alone for the most part. That is, until we all tried to leave Suai a few days later following the vote.

They bailed up our convoy on the way out of town, took all our vehicles with most of our luggage and we had to then leave by helicopter. I recall landing in Dili and being driven to the UN Compound in a HiAce by an UNPOL officer wearing a bullet proof vest and blue helmet.

It became apparent to me very quickly that the situation in Dili had deteriorated to a significantly dangerous level than when I left there three months previous to travel to Suai. It would be another 11 stressful days stuck inside the UN Compound before I flew out to Darwin by RAAF C-130 Hercules. In 2001, the AFP members who participated with UNAMET were all recognised with the awarding of a Group Bravery Citation for their role in East Timor.

A few years later I had the opportunity to live and work on Christmas Island. It was a great experience for my young family and me. The Casino had just opened and there was a flight from Jakarta five days a week with hotel guests and gamblers. The AFP had responsibility for performing the regulatory functions of Immigration and Customs, which required a minimum of five officers at the Airport each flight. Consequently, Christmas Island policing had a strength of eight sworn officers, including up to six locally engaged 'Special Members'. The refugee boats from China had started arriving as well so all in all, it was a busy time there for such a small place.

On my return to the ACT three years later and after stints back at Woden and Tuggeranong patrols, another opportunity arose to work off shore. This time it was to the Solomon Islands as part of the newly created International Peace Monitoring Team (IPMT).

A small group of us were sent to monitor the cease fire, receive and record surrendered weapons and generally provide a visible sign of change following the cessation of conflict. IPMT identified the Guadalcanal Beach Resort (GBR) as a base and so we all got in and started cleaning the place up and it gradually developed from then on. The current dining room was once the operations room and I vividly recall the swimming pool was full of dead toads floating in ranky brown water.

After that short three-month deployment it was back to ACT Policing and a few years later, another posting to Christmas Island followed by two UN deployments to Sudan and Timor Leste. Next was the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands and finally Cocos (Keeling) Islands. I encourage everyone, especially those with a young family, to have a go at getting posted to the External Territories. The work is interestingly varied and so suited, I found, to family life.

Despite all the tragedies, the conflicts, the drunks, villains, the roadside lawyers, all the 'nufties' and 'warbs', near misses, wins and losses, the work and role remains as relevant to me now as it always has been. It has provided me with the stability to adapt and cope with all the changes these past years.

The AFP has given me and my colleagues amazing opportunities. If you persevere and stick around long enough, it will do the same for you. As I reflect back across 42 years of policing and the AFP's amazing international reputation – the thing I find that has never really changed is the commitment and dedication of the AFP's people.

Finally, I owe so much to my beautiful, strong and supportive wife of 36 years and to my kids, all of whom make me proud every day.



Riding high: Sergeant Ian Whyte was a Traffic Branch motorcyclist in 1975-76.