

AFP Newcastle remembers the

Quake

It has been just over 12 months since Newcastle was rocked by an earthquake which left parts of the city badly damaged, including the AFP's office within the historic Customs House. Stephen Simpson reports on the staff and the effort required to get the Newcastle office back to full speed.

THURSDAY 28 December 1989 is a day that few people in Newcastle will ever forget. At 10:27 am the city shook from an earthquake that measured 5.5 on the Richter scale.

In a matter of tragic seconds, 13 people were killed, several buildings collapsed and many more were severely damaged.

Just over a year after the event, the retail and commercial sections of the city still show the signs of the earthquake. Huge timber and steel braces still hold up walls; shop awnings are supported by props; and there are several vacant and rubble strewn lots. Retail trading has still not fully recovered, and the city at night is quieter than it used to be.

The scars, physical and emotional, will take time to heal.

At the time of the earthquake the AFP's Newcastle office was located on the second floor of the newly restored Customs House, an elegant 19th century building at the eastern end of the Central Business District. It was close to the Workers Club, the scene of the greatest devastation in Newcastle. Luckily, none of our staff were in the office when the earthquake struck.

But damage to Customs House was serious enough to make it uninhabitable. Major cracks had appeared in its clock tower; a structural beam in the ceiling of the AFP's office was close to collapsing; cornices and plaster had come down and cracks appeared in many walls.

It was a great shame to see this once beautifully restored building had suffered so badly.

Such was the strength of the shock that both the four drawer cabinets in the AFP's office moved more than half a metre. It later needed eight men to remove each cabinet to a new location.

For the next five months the Newcastle office staff worked under difficult conditions, to say the least. For Detective Sergeant Wayne



The AFP Office in the newly restored Customs House took the full force of the earthquake. It left the building uninhabitable.

Warwick, the OIC, and his officers: Detective Constables Helen Davey, Terry Muir, Mike Smith, and Jack Abbott, and staff member Jean Brown, the hard work started as soon as the dust settled.

Although there were initial doubts about the structural safety of Customs House, some of our staff returned soon after the quake to ensure the office equipment and records were secure. It then took three days to shovel debris from the office and clean the thick layer of coal dust that had settled on everything. The next problem was finding an alternative office.

In a case of making do with what you can, a reception room on the ground floor of the Family Court building in Newcastle became the office for the next five months. It was barely big enough to swing a cat in, and the six staff shared one phone, one typewriter and three desks. The conditions were testing as the staff worked without a link to the AFP's computer system, and at various times they borrowed the Court's photocopier, fax and

phones. But the office functioned and the work was done.

This was no mean feat. The investigative area covered by the office is immense, approaching the size of Victoria. It runs north from Wyong up to Coffs Harbour and west to the South Australian border. This includes the heavily populated Hunter Valley region and the coastal strip.

The five months in the Family Court were hectic for the staff, but the new office was worth the wait. Located in the business end of town in Hunter Street, the office is close to the courts, local police, and several of our client departments. There is plenty of room for future expansion, good staff amenities and the office has great district and ocean views.

The office is now fully functioning. When the partitioning is shortly completed, the trial of those months following the earthquake will be a fading memory for the staff, though they will never say the same about those few seconds on 28 December 1989. •