

Future linked to the preservation of ideals

In 1999 the then Deputy Commissioner Adrien Whiddett wrote in an article for Platypus Magazine No 64:

"I believe a favourable future is inextricably linked to the preservation of the original ideals of policing and these will be in jeopardy if the AFP ever becomes just another job."

Five years on his observations are worth revisiting in this edited reprint.



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Sir Colin Woods, the AFP's first commissioner, addresses senior officers of the newly-formed Australian Federal Police.

For most Australians 19 October 1979 was like any other day, but the AFP came to life on that day with the infusion of people from organisations that were about to slip into history.

To think back to 1979 is to be jolted into the realisation that some 80 per cent [as at 1999] of the present membership were not with us then. For those of us who do indeed remember 'The Beginning', our feelings will be mixed. Many will remember their past organisations with nostalgia.

Quite a few will reflect on the first ill-fated attempt at a similar merger four years earlier. And most will recall the early soothing merger mantra "no-one will be disadvantaged". Of course, the author(s) of, and adherents to, that arrant fiction probably believed it, despite

history demonstrating time and again that no human system yet devised is free of disadvantages. And Enterprise AFP proved to be no different.

The early years of the AFP were undeniably difficult. The merger was likened to “cobbling an ill-fitting 19th century boot”, as the British architect of the AFP [Sir Robert Mark] lamented.

Much energy more usefully expended elsewhere was lent to arguing that the Australian Coat of Arms on the AFP shoulder flash ought to be adorned richly with golden wattle. The more useful contributions were on melding a single, cohesive national organisation in which all parts had an important but no greater or lesser place than the rest.

Back then, the AFP was segregated practically, and indeed sociologically, between the General Police Component and the Protective Service Component.

In 1984 we bade farewell to the Protective Service Component and it began a new life as the Australian Protective Service, the badge of which, incidentally, was amply filigreed with golden wattle much to the chagrin of those who wanted it for the AFP.

Even though we gratefully gave up the guarding aspects of protection work, we continued to protect certain Australian and foreign VIPs and Internationally Protected Persons, the rationale being that this particular burden was onerous and demanded ready access to the wider range of conventional police powers and competencies and to our national and international colleagues.

An additional similar task, that of administering the specially legislated national witness protection program, fell to us following the revelations of the 1980s regarding the very nasty habits of very pitiless criminals. Being a prosecution witness in proceedings against such predators was a dangerous and even lethal pastime, therefore the State felt obliged to keep endangered witnesses alive both during their testimony and for as long as necessary thereafter.

For a few years after 1979, we continued to suffer from an identity crisis. This was not helped by a number of prominent people, who should have known better, persisting in referring to us as the Commonwealth Police.

Meanwhile, we were gaining a tentative footing, nationally and internationally. Between 1981 and 1985, we opened shop in Los Angeles, Washington, Hong Kong, Manila, Islamabad and Singapore. And from our inception, we have continued to distinguish Australia and ourselves in United Nations' missions in Cyprus, Cambodia, Namibia, Somalia, Mozambique and East Timor; as part of a multi-national force in Haiti; as advisers and trainers elsewhere on the globe; and, in recent years, as investigators of international war crimes. In peacekeeping, armed only with the force of will, men and women of the AFP brought the rule of law with courage, initiative, and quiet determination of the



Terrified local residents force their children under the razor wire of the UN compound in Dili, East Timor, hoping to escape marauding militia.

highest order to the task. Nowhere have these qualities been more evident than in East Timor where, in fraught circumstances and against impossible odds, the AFP stood between the murderous and unpredictable ‘militia’ and local residents.

In East Timor, as in other missions, we undertook impressively what we were sent to do. We also began to make serious inroads into organised crime, and a number of prominent and hitherto miraculously unscathed whole-of-life criminals bit the dust at the hands of the AFP.

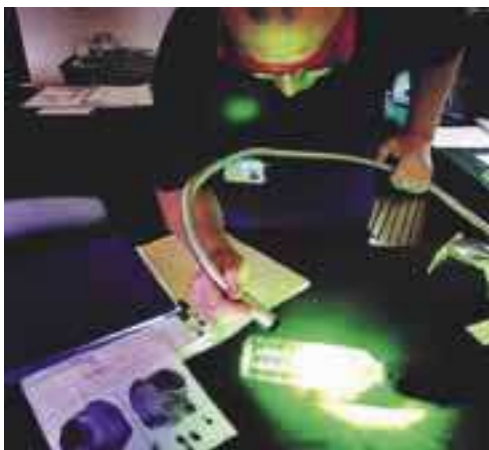
The 1980s was also the era of several interesting commissions of inquiry in Australia, out of which organised crime came to be recognised as a genuine and present grave threat and new laws, such as proceeds of crime legislation, were introduced in an attempt to inconvenience the seriously wicked. During this period those who needed to be convinced finally were, that it would not constitute the end of civilisation as we know it if law enforcement were to be legislatively permitted to overhear the more anti-social conversations of these same crooks. We even tested a few early partnership arrangements with other agencies, with results that ranged from the successful through to the colourful and the plain awful. Operations with names like Scroll, Lavender, Neon, Rock, Postscript and Toggle achieved notable results. We were, however, troubled even then by the utter inadequacy of surveillance in the remote north of Australia,

well before boat people were topical and perceived as worrisome.

Back then the drug debate, such as it was, centred on the steadily increasing availability of cannabis, and seizures of harder drugs were few and certainly far between and, in any event, were measured in the low grams not in kilos.

The advent of self government in the ACT reopened a mild debate over whether the Territory's community again ought to have its own police force, but commonsense prevailed then and the debate lapsed. However, just to prove that history can be viewed as cyclical as well as lineal, in recent times we have witnessed renewed stirrings over whether we should return to how it was in 1979. To unravel the huge gains in both Federal and ACT law enforcement over the past 20 years would, in my view, be stupendous folly, but I have long ceased to be surprised by folly. The ancients, at least back to Petronious, knew a thing or two about the exasperatingly cyclical nature of disruptive and purposeless change, but it seems to be the lot of the outgoing generation of every age to endure the rehashing of old ideas, as if they were new, by the rising generation as the time carousel completes yet another revolution.

Before leaving change, I was asked recently how many 'reviews' leading to real change the AFP has had over the past two decades. An off the cuff estimate was at least one a year, every year. In fact, I was wrong: it is more



The AFP has pioneered its own unique forensic, technical and information technologies.



Operation Lavender was a coordinated investigation across all AFP regions. It culminated in August 1985 in the arrest of 20 offenders and the dismantling of a major criminal enterprise involved in drug trafficking. Almost one tonne of cannabis resin was found at Malabar Rubbish Tip in Sydney and \$226,000 worth of vessels and motor vehicles and \$66,000 in cash were seized.

like twice as many over the period. And for the information of those students of masochism, we inflicted most of them on ourselves!

In the mid-1980s, forensic technologies and techniques were on the move, with identikits becoming photofits, then computer generated likenesses, and soon the AFP began pioneering and marketing its own unique forensic, technical and information technologies both in Australia and abroad.

We also began to take very seriously our ethical condition, putting in place measures, unique at the time, to bring to bear when necessary the arsenal and techniques we use on shrewd criminals against our own relatively few but equally crooked. Nothing could be more humiliating than to have some external scrutineer surprise us with something very unpleasant about the AFP that we have a clear duty to the public and ourselves to prevent or uncover. To lose sight of this utterly elementary truth is to undo years of internal vigilance and, of course, to undo our credibility and standing as individuals and as an organisation.

The more important reforms in those early years caused the AFP to re order the organisation, shed inhibiting functions, overhaul terms and conditions and, ultimately, in 1988, to 'flatten' the rank structure and push authority and accountability downwards, where they belong. In fact, for those who are troubled by the extent of change today, that significant deterioration on that front was set to occur. As a society, we also continued to ignore the numerous and growing social inequalities which have contributed to fanning the flames of the illicit drugs conflagration.

The march of time leads naturally to comment generally on the

phenomenon of change. We in the AFP have been entangled in change for the whole of the past 20 years. But how surprising is that? You may preface change with a suitable expletive, yet it is sobering to consider where we would be now if in 1979 the AFP had slipped magically into a parallel universe where time stood still, but all else around us rushed inexorably onwards as has been the case since humankind walked upright. If we had stood still we would be an organisation of little consequence, certainly not how we have evolved over 20 years. Change, occasionally ill considered or imperfectly crafted and often badly explained and implemented, has nevertheless transformed the AFP into an agency recognised and respected in Australia and abroad.

Change made us forge a unique Identity. We began to question who and what we were and what we needed to become, and these are questions without ultimate answers if we are to adapt and remain relevant.



Operation Bud was an investigation into the theft of fossils from remote sites in South Australia and Western Australia. It ended in April 1997 when three men were found guilty of charges connected to the illegal export of fossils by the Perth District Court.

I mentioned earlier that 'empowerment' is simply an old idea that has had a makeover. What I mean is that Australian policing conforms to the British model conceived 170 years ago. It is fashioned along military lines, which was, in my view, a mistake. A perfectly understandable mistake given the era, but a mistake nonetheless. This is not to criticise the military, but in the military, authority or superior orders emanates from the top and passes downwards for obedient execution at the appropriate levels. Police officers, on the other hand, are independent office holders with original powers and authority, the exercise of which does not rely on superior orders. A military structure for civil police is also arguably inconsistent with the very principles expounded in 1829 by which the so called New Police were to function.

Of course, a body of police demands some form of structure, organisation and management and inevitable rules and regulations, but police in Australia, as individuals, were well and truly 'empowered' well before it became fashionable to wonder and worry over it.

Even though our identity crisis was fading, events such as the creation of the National Crime Authority (1984) and the real or imagined machinations of people in the wider bureaucracy said to have malevolent designs on us, caused a few alarmists to warn of takeovers and even our demise.

As we entered the second decade of existence, a new culture began to emerge: it was dawning on a growing body of people that their rank or position actually imposed obligations and responsibilities on them, not merely authority and merit began to dominate in selections and the promotions system became less clogged by wishful thinkers.

Between 1990 and 1994 we opened up in Rome, Jakarta and Port Moresby, and operations with the names of Probe, Bigboy, Kaftan, Coat, Spiral, Tapir, Bastion, Newton, Rustic, Teacup, Flare, Windmill, Lilac, Civic, Isobar, Silkworm, Bud, Carousel, Leo, Nepean, Camber, Bangle and Geronimo, raised our sense of achievement and our profile.

In the early 1990s we again critically re-examined our professed status as the 'Commonwealth's primary law enforcement body', or variations of that sentiment, to see if we were perhaps deluded. Further industrial and structural reforms were undertaken and we participated in two defining external reviews, one of which, the Commonwealth Law Enforcement Review (1994), further stressed to Government that it needed to take a closer interest in the organisational and operational evolution of the AFP in order to protect adequately the Commonwealth from present and emerging criminal threats.

In the mid-1990s, in reviewing where we had arrived over some 15 years and where possibly we may be in the future, it was felt that we needed to move further away from the 1829 policing model. We began to consider new titles and position descriptions. The decision to adopt federal agent for those below Deputy Commissioner in the federal sphere, was not taken without much vigorous, and sometimes heated, debate. There was an understandable view that we had unimaginatively imitated American titles; in fact, it was quite impossible to conjure up refreshingly new and novel alternatives which would not leave people guessing vainly as to who we were. For a time we bore the brunt of a new round of derisive jokes, yet there is no question this particular change has significantly improved our public image and standing nationally and occurred at a time when, fortuitously, our own in house media people were marketing us better and turning out first class publications (*Platypus Magazine* being one of them) for both internal and external consumption.

This decade has seen more organisational change, of course, and some exceptional results in operations. Having watched our progress in this area, it is clear we have become more confident,

competent and innovative. Operations such as Papertiger, Caribou, Extra, Wand, Calgary, Norse/Oden and Wafer, proved the dexterity of the AFP to undertake successfully a very dissimilar range of work. And in the ACT, the zeroing in on the movements and preparations of career criminals, rather than on their repetitious crimes after the event, was yielding good results. We are also using techniques and technologies either unavailable or drastically scarce in the past, and much of this is due to the resourcefulness of our scientists, technicians and forensic specialists who ran their programs and research and development on shoestring budgets for years, yet have developed world class technologies and solutions for application in increasingly complex and convoluted operations, and also in corporate support.

As we near the end of the second half of the decade, the future looks relatively promising. We are still fine tuning the move from inflexible to more supple workplace structures, capable of adapting to both foreseen and unforeseen events and maximising the capabilities and energies of individuals in contributing together to achieve results. Our intelligence capability has improved markedly, and quite learned and informative papers on a wide variety of crime topics are being read and accepted beyond the mainstream law enforcement community; and tactical intelligence, through technical and operational performance means, has sharpened our edge in undertaking operations. The introduction of mobile strike teams, putting aside the promise of immediate real battle the words evoke, has opened up new possibilities for tackling work generally without the constraints of past fixed formulae for the 'permanent' staffing of regions or other entities.

The major external resources review in 1998, the ensuing reform program of the Government and other funding, are revitalising the AFP after a long enforced period on starvation rations. Our climb up is being made much more promising by new and improved information management systems and a quantum leap in the sophistication of our financial management.



On 5 August 1994 Operation Caribou resulted in five tonnes of cannabis resin being seized by the AFP at Queensland's Hervey Bay and another 10 tonnes found dumped at sea. Authorities from PNG and French Noumea assisted the AFP in bringing 20 men to justice. The vessel MV Paulsun was confiscated. The mother ship, Gemini, was seized in the Papua New Guinean port of Alotau on 26 August with the help of the PNG Police.

It is important that we do improve our capabilities markedly, as a significant contemporary development has been the rethink in influential external quarters as to what constitutes a threat to national security, with transnational crime and the drug traffic finally being understood to be leading, manifest external as well as internal threats to Australia's sovereignty, stability and the economic and personal well being of its citizens. This change in attitude is attributable in large measure to the intelligent, patient perseverance of our people in convincingly pressing home the message in several national and international fora.



Operation Linnet was a land and sea operation off Port Macquarie that on 14 October 1998 resulted in 390kg of heroin being seized, 18 arrests and the confiscation of a 40-metre freighter, the Belize-registered, Uniana.

And in this last half of the decade operations such as Brawlings, Avoca, Brogue, Spanner, Pentium, Puritan, Sudan, Nitric, Molotov/Calculus, Anthem, Chowder, Redgum, Cyclops, Abilene, Ritz, Caspian, Pita, Tamarind, Platypus, Varnish, Cablet, Chandelier, Stockman, Linnet, Gentle, Novella, Magnetic, Toboggan, Aquatic, Bronte and Bluebird/Avian have written a new chapter on the nefariousness and artfulness of criminals and proved the AFP was more than their match. And while there will always be people who will judge morale as being at an all time low at any time for all time, we continue to grow in ability and strength of purpose. Oh, and this year we put up our shingle in Hanoi and Beijing.

The third millennium is when any sequel to this necessarily brief and selective history will be written, perhaps in 2029 AD, our 50th anniversary, when there will be so much more to be revealed.

In reviewing our comparatively short life, I have been struck by two things in particular: the depth and breadth of our progress over 20 years and the remarkable dedication, resilience and patience, which are so often taken for granted, of AFP personnel all in forging the AFP's achievements.

It is a quality which has been commented on, routinely and usually with surprise, by most in the extended column of consultants and other explorers who, over the years, have overturned and peered and poked knowingly under numerous of our corporate stones. The more forthright of their number have confided they are hard pressed to find this commendable attribute in their own organisations.

The endeavours of the AFP membership over the past two decades have made anything possible for us. We are now positioned to be regarded genuinely as the pre-eminent body to which the Australian Government would naturally turn for professional expertise in law

enforcement operations and law enforcement advice. It has been hard won, not without pain, and it would not take much for us to be, once again, at the uncertain cross roads of our future. I believe a favourable future is inextricably linked to the preservation of the original ideals of policing and these will be in jeopardy if the AFP ever becomes 'just another job'. Whatever its origins, our vocation has come to be known as 'The Job', a phrase which nevertheless understates idealism and the triumphs and frustrations that attach to something more lofty than the individual, the collective or organisational structures and symbols.

While change, too, can be important, even essential, perhaps irresistible, any change which erodes or weakens the fundamental liberal ideals on which policing is founded ought to be determinedly repulsed.

Let us trust, then, that in another 20, or even 100 years, the idealism that is ours, and of which we are the guardians, endures and is eternally distinguishable from the greater anonymous grey mass of paid toil from which duty and service purely in the public interest can never be expected or extracted.

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