

STATION FAVOURITE RETIRES

by Brian Minards



Mrs Nancy Polombi with one of her favourite customers, Assistant Commissioner (ACT Region) Col Winchester.

I'VE always felt a little sorry for coffee drinkers because they can never lay claim to having their very own special "lady."

I mean you can have a "coffee lady", but I've never heard of one, and anyway, a "tea lady" sounds much more . . . refined.

Nancy Polombi was the tea lady at the AFP's City Station in Canberra for almost 20 years before her recent retirement.

Jesting aside, when Nancy left she took an enormous amount of respect and affection with her from tea and coffee drinkers alike.

She was some tea lady, a refined lady who is still missed very much, and as one who was at the station for only a brief time before her departure, I certainly miss the homely sound of her trolley rattling down the corridors with Nancy dispensing the cup that cheers and the snack that challenges

the waistline.

It all started on March 31, 1969, when Nancy succeeded her sister-in-law who'd had a baby.

It must have been a daunting prospect for a young Italian woman with little English, who'd spent a cloistered existence looking after a husband and five children for 14 years, to suddenly find herself in the midst of the big burly fellows who made up the ACT Police Force, plus three policewomen (the sum total in those days) and the public service support.

Apprehension and nerves was probably the justification for her dropping a tray full of cups on the very first morning.

Nancy said she was miserable: "Every day I wanted to leave but I didn't have the nerve to tell the boss.

"I kept telling myself I would resign next week, but so many weeks went by and other women were leaving for various reasons that I found I was the

only one left who knew the job so I thought I'd better stay."

Nancy said, as it turned out, her reasons for wanting to leave were ill-founded. "I couldn't speak very good English and I thought everyone was laughing at me behind my back, but as time went by I started to talk to more and more people, which gave me confidence, and everybody was very nice, and I realised they had not been laughing at me."


Very little ruffled Nancy, save the lift at the city police station. It may be an exaggeration — perhaps — to suggest that some people on entering this conveyance on the second floor may be eligible for retirement by the time it achieves ground level, but its machinery is lethargic, and too often motionless. On these occasions Nancy had to negotiate the stairs to satisfy the many thirsts, but overall she has no complaints.

By what Nancy told me, I estimate she poured about 1.1 million cups of tea or coffee at city station, but I gave up trying to work out how many kilometres the lady must have walked up and down the corridors while doing so.

Nancy came to Australia in 1955. It was an affair of the heart and the man she loved had arrived in 1952. They had grown up together in a little village half way between Rome and Naples. They married almost immediately and raised three sons and two daughters.

Her first impressions of Australia were a little like the job at the police station; she was unhappy at first and there were some tearful days, but with a loving husband, and given time, things started to change, and Australia today was "a pretty good place."

As I brought our conversation to a close, it occurred to me that I could perhaps take advantage of the situation. Realising full well any tea lady would possibly sooner reveal her age rather than answer my final question I adopted the element of surprise and disguised almost as an after-thought, my question, "Nancy, what is the secret of making a good cup of tea?"

Nancy's eyes narrowed. With a precautionary glance over her shoulder, and from side to side, she beckoned me closer, and in a scarcely audible whisper said: "*Non ti scordare di mettere le foglie del te.*" 

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