

# How it all Began

**"The citizens of Australia can now be proud that effective, federal policing is the order of the day."**

This is how former AFP Assistant Commissioner J.D. (Don) Davies, QPM, sums up 80 years of efforts to establish national policing in Australia.

Mr Davies retired in October 1980 after 26 years in federal police work.

His opening comment is prompted by an uncertain beginning for the various organisations which, over the years, periodically took up the role of federal law enforcement. This uncertainty came to an end with the formation of the AFP in 1979.

In the 70 years before the AFP decision, Mr Davies argues, successive Commonwealth governments had from time to time created a number of organisations which might have blossomed into an effective Australia-wide enforcement agency, but which, in the final analysis, didn't quite embrace genuine federal policing.

It was, he suggests, the late Lionel Murphy, as Attorney-General, who rallied government support for what he believed would be a truly effective system of

federal policing in the shape of the 'Australia Police'.

"It involved amalgamating the Commonwealth, Australian Capital Territory and Northern Territory police forces (Mr Murphy did not like the word 'force' associated with police and omitted it from his chosen title) and the Federal Narcotics Bureau, then under the control of the Department of Police and Customs," Mr Davies says.

## Investigation Bureau

"The Australia Police organisational structure would have included commissioners of the ACT, NT and the Narcotics Bureau, responsible to a Chief Commissioner, the late Jack Davis, whose appointment was actually gazetted, and to a Deputy Chief Commissioner. The latter was to have been charged with creating and controlling an 'Australian Bureau of Investigation' incorporating the detective groups of ACT, NT, the Commonwealth, and investigators of the Narcotics Bureau, as well as certain investigative functions performed by various Commonwealth departments," he says.

The concept was abandoned with the



demise of the Whitlam Government in 1975.

However, in October 1979, the then Liberal Government resurrected much of the framework of the Australia Police, amalgamating Commonwealth and ACT police forces, and later including the Federal Narcotics Bureau.

"Thus was created what has become our most effective and efficient national and international policing body — the Australian Federal Police," Mr Davies says.

But it hadn't been easy. The beginnings of federal policing in this country were hardly encouraging.

In about 1908, the Attorney-General of the day appointed several members of his public service staff to investigate offences under Commonwealth law. They carried out their work for the benefit of Government departments, policing such things as tax evasion and offences under electoral law, and investigating the background of people seeking old-age pensions.

Having been recruited from various departments, they had little investigative training.

"They made few arrests and normally produced reports for the respective Deputy Crown Solicitors to decide whether an offence was revealed," Mr Davies says. "A warrant or summons would then be issued against the alleged offender."

Things took a new turn in November, 1917, amidst the divisive debate over conscription. The then Prime Minister, William Morris Hughes, while addressing a crowd during a train stop at Warwick,



Day One of a new police force.... the media covers the historic event as senior officers of the newly-formed Australian Federal Police are addressed by the Commissioner, Sir Colin Woods. The photograph was used as the cover picture of the first Platypus, Vol. 1 No.1 in November 1979.

in Queensland, was hit by an egg thrown by a bystander.

The local police sergeant, requested by the Prime Minister to take action, pointed out that he worked for the Queensland Government, not the Commonwealth.

### Plainclothes body

The incident incensed the Prime Minister and he promptly created a 'Commonwealth Police Force' to protect him and his Ministers against such abuses in the future. The new force operated mainly in Queensland to 'carry out the law of the Commonwealth in the State of Queensland', and historically became known as the Commonwealth Police (1917-19).

"I understand it ceased to exist in about 1919," Mr Davies says. "A plainclothes body known as the Investigation Branch was formed that year to take over the work of the Public Service investigators."

Then followed a succession of federal agencies formed for both investigative and guarding purposes.

A seamen's strike in 1925 led to the creation of yet another ill-defined body. When the NSW government refused to allow NSW Police to serve process on the president and the secretary of the Seamen's Union, the Commonwealth created a body of Peace Officers to carry out the duty.

After the strike ended, the Peace Officers continued to serve Commonwealth process, carry out minor investigations and perform police functions for the Investigation Branch. They helped the Branch to check the backgrounds of people seeking old-age pensions.

### Guarding role

In 1927 the Commonwealth Police title resurfaced when eight NSW Police Sergeants and Constables serving at Acton were seconded to the Federal Government for the inauguration of Federal Parliament and were joined by 10 members of the Peace Officers in carrying out local policing. They took over the policing of the Federal Capital Territory from the NSW Police and became the Commonwealth Police (Federal Capital Territory).

During the early 1930s, with unrest growing, guards at Commonwealth departments such as Trade and Customs were sworn in as Special Peace Officers.

## The first federal police force based outside Canberra was created when South Australia gave over administration and policing of the Northern Territory to the Australian Government in 1911.

The South Australians finished their five-year contracts and most of them went home. However, seven stayed on and became the nucleus of the Northern Territory Mounted Police.

Their resources were stretched severely in policing such a vast area at a time when Darwin was a frontier town. Fortune hunters and wanderers from more than 40 nations made up the population.

In 1929, a big crowd of unemployed rioted and locked the Territory Administrator in his office in Government House. Sixteen arrests were made.

In an incident the year before, a mounted constable and a local man killed 31 Wararamulla tribesmen at Coniston. They had been investigating the murder of another man by the tribesmen when they, too, were attacked. A Board of Inquiry found the two men had acted in self-defence.

Aboriginals also killed five Japanese trepanning gatherers in 1932 and later killed an investigating constable before disappearing into the wilds of Arnhem Land. The NT Administrator requested funds from Canberra to finance an expedition into the bush to catch the killers but the funding was refused.

Blacktrackers became an integral part of NT policing. A tracker named Neighbour was awarded the Albert Medal 'for gallantry in saving life on land' after rescuing an unconscious member of the NT Police, W.F. Johns, from a crocodile-infested river. Mr Johns later became Commissioner of the South Australia Police.

### Huge payout

Conditions were difficult for the members. In 1912, the Commonwealth even forgot to pay some of them for several months. However, when one policeman retired in 1925 after 33 years' service, he received a retirement benefit payment of 25 pounds —

A strike by civil watchmen at the Maribyrnong munitions factory in 1935 prompted the formation of the Defence Establishments Guard to protect Commonwealth munitions factories and Commonwealth buildings in Sydney and Melbourne.

In a move to rationalise the situation, the Peace Officers and the Defence Guards were merged in 1940 to form the Peace Officer Guard (POG).

Throughout the war, its numbers swelled to more than 2000 and its

# OUTBACK FEDERAL POLICE

was a huge sum at the time. The average payout was less than five pounds.

When a member managed to take infrequent holidays, others had to be re-shuffled to cover his districts as well as their own.

The hopelessly unsuitable blue and silver SA Police uniform was not replaced by a khaki one until 1930.

During the 1930s, the 'Mounted' disappeared from the title of the force, but horses, mules and camels remained the chief means of transport.

By 1937, only Darwin and Alice Springs had motor transport; it didn't become widespread throughout the NT until after World War II.

Life was most primitive in the Outback. Some police and their wives lived in tents and were totally isolated until pedal wireless arrived in 1937.

The Territory in its time has been the scene of both tragedy and joy. Darwin was evacuated after the Japanese bombing in 1942 and police remained to guard premises and stop looting.

The NT Police also played a significant part in the Petrov affair, rescuing Mrs Petrov from Soviet guards at Darwin airport in 1956.

The devastation of Darwin after Cyclone Tracy struck on Christmas Day 1974 provided both local and interstate police with a major situation none had faced before. However, they came through with commendation for their devotion to duty and thoroughness.

The granting by the Commonwealth of self-government to the Territory in 1978 saw the responsibility for NT policing pass from Canberra into local hands, ending a most colourful era of federal policing. ■

members were principally concerned with protecting sensitive military targets such as ammunition factories.

"This was a role which translated into the functions of the latter day Commonwealth Police Force," Mr Davies says.

In 1946, the Investigation Branch merged with the wartime military Security Service to become the Commonwealth Investigation Service (CIS) with offices in all States.

During the post-war years, the CIS and the Peace Officer Guard found the going