

Maintaining the peace – the AFP in Cyprus



A member of the 58th Contingent (1998-99) Robin Wheeler assists with food delivery to a Maronite community in the northern Cyprus. Monitoring the welfare of a small number of Greek Cypriots who chose to remain in the north is part of the duties of UN civilian police. Conversely they monitor the welfare of Turkish Cypriots living in the south ensuring they have fair and equal access to services.

Since people first learned to sail the Mediterranean, Cyprus has witnessed and experienced the rise and fall of great civilisations. While largely on the periphery of the world stage, Cypriots found themselves part of the passing empires of the Persians, Greeks, Muslims, the Crusaders, the Venetians, Ottoman Turks and the British.

The island, about four times the size of the Australian Capital Territory, is in places arid, mountainous with limited tracts of farming land. It has many magnificent sites and locations of historical significance; it is the reputed birth place of Aphrodite; King Richard the Lionheart married there; it is where the fabled Lazarus died years after being resurrected by Jesus; and it is where Britain marshalled its forces for the 1956 invasion of the Suez Canal.

Unfortunately Cyprus is more widely known today for its internal racial trouble which has split the island in two to form the Greek Cypriot south and Turkish Cypriot north. Still technically at war, the two sides are separated by a thin strip of land patrolled by the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP). First formed in 1964, UNFICYP consists of people from more than 15 nations; one of the few nations to have been involved since UNFICYP's early days is Australia.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of Australian police wearing the UN blue beret in Cyprus. This article provides an overview of the history of UNFICYP and the role the AFP and other Australian police have played in it.

By Federal Agent Jason Byrnes, International Police Operations

In 1960 Great Britain reluctantly and somewhat hastily granted independence to Cyprus. The decision came after an exceptionally bloody period of warfare between British forces and Cypriots fighting not for independence, but for *enosis* – a political union with Greece. The majority of Cyprus' population is of Greek descent and *enosis* had widespread support at the time, yet it was a political objective based on racial grounds.

The violence against British occupation spread to include attacks on Turkish Cypriots (a minority of around 13 per cent). Perhaps inevitably, retributions followed and the Turkish Cypriot community, with the support of Turkey, lobbied strongly against *enosis*.

Britain implemented a power-sharing arrangement among the Greek and Turkish Cypriots, however, political and bureaucratic structures proved unable to contain the aspirations of both sides. The thin semblance of order and cooperation soon imploded, tensions developed throughout the country to the point that widespread rioting and killings began in December 1963, sparked by an incident between Greek Cypriot police and a group of Turkish Cypriots in the capital of Nicosia. After a call for help from the Cypriot President, British soldiers were deployed and temporarily restored calm until May 1964 when the UN established UNFICYP. Significantly, the UN recognised that as the problem was in part a law and order issue, civilian police (UNCIVPOL) were required in addition to military combat units. A call for assistance went around the world.

The Australian Government then headed by Sir Robert Menzies was preoccupied with the increasing tensions in South-East Asia so, unable to spare combat troops, decided in April to deploy 40 civilian police. Less than a month later, on 26 May, Australian police arrived in Cyprus.

The Australians were assigned to the west of the country and found themselves working in small villages and towns, monitoring Cypriot police in their dealings with local residents. While general crime rates were low (and still are), serious racially-motivated crime was alarmingly high. While some villages and towns had mixed populations, many didn't and it was not uncommon to see racially-motivated acts of violence poorly investigated or not investigated at all. With limited powers, the Australians could only report any human rights or procedural breaches to UN command.



Despite the efforts of the UN, the political and social situation in Cyprus did not improve over the following decade. UNFICYP's presence undoubtedly prevented many serious crimes, however underlying racial and political tensions remained.

Adding complexity to the situation was the emergence of a power struggle within the Greek Cypriots between those who continued to favour *enosis* and those (led by President Archbishop Makarios) who insisted on maintaining independence. This power struggle culminated in a failed coup on 15 July 1974 against Archbishop Makarios which did little more than unleash a further series of political and racial attacks against Turkish Cypriots.

On 20 July 1974, Turkey announced it would "intervene" in Cyprus to protect Turkish Cypriots. More than 40,000 troops invaded the country's north and in a series of successful military manoeuvres, pushed the divided Greek forces south, and by 14 August had occupied 40 per cent of the island. Immediately more than 200,000 Cypriots – out of a population of less than one million – found themselves fleeing to 'their' side of a newly established buffer zone. Within the space of a month the entire nature of the UNFICYP mission had changed.

UN peacekeepers were caught in the middle of the fighting and a handful paid the ultimate price, including Australian policeman Ian Ward who died when his jeep drove over a landmine. At the time of the incident Officer Ward was driving a Turkish

Pictured above:
From 1964 to 1976 all Australian police forces contributed volunteer personnel to the UN Force in Cyprus. From 1976 the Commonwealth Police took over the role and until 1979 when the duty passed to the newly created AFP. Pictured here from right are the 8th Contingent Commander Superintendent Andrew Fry (Victoria Police), UN Force Commander, Major-General D. Prem Chand and Chief Superintendent R. (Peter) McAulay (South Australia Police) who at the time was police advisor to the UN. The 8th Contingent was in Cyprus during 1971-72. Peter McAulay became the Northern Territory Police Commissioner in 1978 and then the AFP Commissioner from 1988 to 1994.

Cypriot family to a Turkish controlled area. He had been deployed to the island for less than a week and was the third member to die on duty in Cyprus; the other two dying in motor vehicle accidents – Lew Thomas in 1969 and Patrick Hackett in 1971.

The large scale redistribution of population in Cyprus (Greek Cypriots to the south, Turkish Cypriots to the north) and the creation of the buffer zone between the two armies (still technically at war but in a state of ceasefire) meant that UNFICYP could downsize and focus its energies along the buffer zone. Australian police were redeployed to Nicosia, which itself had become divided, and to areas to the west along the buffer zone; Swedish police were stationed along the buffer zone to the east.

UNFICYP's duties expanded to include patrolling the buffer zone to detect and expel intruders and to monitor the welfare of the enclaves of minorities who chose to remain in their villages. Emphasis was also put into developing community events where people from both sides could meet under UN supervision with a view to building trust and cooperation.

Alongside these was a change in the staffing of the Australian police contingents. The first mission comprised then Commonwealth Police along with members from other Australian police agencies. Over time the number of officers required for each mission reduced to the point where in 1976 the Commonwealth Police was able to take over sole provision of personnel. The AFP took over responsibility when it was created in October 1979.

AFP personnel continued to undertake UNCIVPOL duties throughout the '80s and '90s, consolidating earlier Australian reputations for "getting the job done". They became known for building effective networks through social events which became popular among UN and Cypriot circles, largely revolving around the famous Kangaroo Club at the main UN base at the abandoned Nicosia Airport.

Key Australian events that have become an institutional part of the UNFICYP calendar include Australia Day and Anzac Day. The latter is a particularly moving ceremony with an annual dawn service held in a small Commonwealth military cemetery inside the buffer zone, adjacent to Turkish trenches. In recent years Police Remembrance Day has been commemorated with a simple service at the memorial to Officer Ian Ward, which is near the remains of his jeep, still lying in an active minefield.

Though technically still at war, the north has provided water to the south, and the south provided electricity to the north. Ambulances from the north are allowed to take patients to

southern hospitals under close police escort with ambulances having their number plates and large red crescent symbols covered.

Openly contemptuous of the existence of the buffer zone, many Greek Cypriots choose to enter "no mans land" to hunt wildlife or pick wild asparagus as the buffer zone has proven to be the ideal sanctuary for flora and fauna.

UNCIVPOL members are often called to negotiate with intruders and convince them to return to the south. The power of negotiation and persuasion is a critical tool for UNCIVPOL members as they are unarmed and have no powers of arrest. A complication can often be that the "intruder" has UN permission to be in the buffer zone in order to farm, but many have forgotten or refuse to carry an official pass.

Other UNCIVPOL duties include travelling to various minority villages in northern Cyprus to check on the welfare of the handfuls of Greek Cypriots who have chosen to remain. UNCIVPOL also monitors the welfare of those Turkish Cypriots living in the south, to ensure that they have fair and equal access to services.

UNCIVPOL are given basic fire-fighting training because during summer months, the countryside is as dry as Australia and bushfires within the buffer zone are a possibility; UNCIVPOL members assist in extinguishing fires and then investigate their cause.

On occasion UNCIVPOL members will also undertake special investigations assisting UNFICYP military police, who have nominal responsibility for policing all UNFICYP personnel.

There have been a number of dramatic events for Australian police in Cyprus. One of the more notable was the 1979 rescue by Chief Inspector Jack Thurgar of a Cypriot farmer who drove his tractor over a landmine. Without concern for his own safety, he entered the live minefield to rescue the badly injured farmer. For this courageous act he was awarded the Star of Courage by the Australian Government.

There is the potential at any moment for UNCIVPOL members to find themselves in great danger. During two days of protests in 1996 two Greek Cypriot men died in separate events. The first man was beaten to death by a group from the Turkish Cypriot side despite desperate attempts by Irish police to intervene. The second man was shot dead when he attempted to climb a Turkish flagpole. Two Australian police at the base of the pole attempting to extract the protester narrowly escaped injury in the hail of bullets.

In 1999 an Australian police officer and others were present when a farmer's excavator detonated a mine in a field inside the buffer zone. Fortunately the mine misfired and it was subsequently discovered the land was an abandoned minefield.

Fortunately such incidents have proven relatively rare and Australian police have had to deal mostly with routine business through boiling summers and freezing winters.

In 1983 the AFP phased in six-month tours of duty, with this being seen as more manageable from an organisational perspective, and meant that personnel would spend less time away from Australia and their families. In the early '90s the contingents were staggered to a system whereby every three months, half the contingent is replaced. The members deploying in May 2004 will be the 79th Australian Civilian Police Contingent to UNFICYP.

Key political developments and events which have marked the last 20 years have included the self-declaration by the north of a republic in 1983 (an action only recognised by Turkey) and a series of failed "confidence building measures" in the '90s aimed at trying to bring both sides closer together.

Considerable effort has been made by the UN in the last four years to arrive at an acceptable solution for both sides, including plans to change UNFICYP from a predominantly military force to a quasi-policing agency that would assist the two sides, assuming they were to fully reopen their borders and enter into a political federation. These initiatives have similarly failed.

Uncertainty is widespread on both sides and the influence of Greece and Turkey is prominently displayed throughout the island; no school for example displays a Cypriot flag without it being flown alongside either the Greek or Turkish flag. Compulsory military service still exists on both sides of the buffer zone; the Greek Cypriot army flag is the Greek national flag. Throughout the north statues of Attaturk, the "father" of modern Turkey promote the virtues of being Turkish; there has been large-scale migration and settlement of mainland Turkish citizens to northern Cyprus. What is known as the "Cyprus problem" is not just a political and military issue; it is a complex cultural issue striking at the heart of the question of identity for all the island's occupants.

Some critics have sighted factors hindering progress as largely relating to the continued involvement in politics of people who had prominent roles in the worst of the troubles during the 1960s and 1970s. A generational change is starting to occur on

both sides, and ironically, economics may prove the key for finding a solution.

A desire to join the European Union (EU) has forced the Greek south to modernise bureaucratic practices and governmental philosophies, many of which were formulated during the ethnic tensions before 1964. The Turkish north also wants to join the EU because of the great advances it would bring to standards of living, which is markedly lower than that of the south.

Membership to the EU can only come by way of a united Cyprus, which has forced many on both sides to rethink long-held arguments against reunification. One sign of progress was the April 2003 opening of the borders, enabling most Cypriots to visit the other side for the first time since 1974. Indeed, a whole generation of Cypriots are seeing the other part of their country for the first time.

In 2004 the size of the AFP contingent to UNFICYP is 15, serving alongside 20 police from the republic of Ireland (who replaced the Swedish police in 1993), four Netherlands police and eight from India, the latter two groups deployed for the first time in late 2003. Since 1999 UNCIVPOL staffing has been on an integrated basis with stations comprising police from the various national contingents.

An important and, to this time, constant part of AFP history has been the UNFICYP mission. The achievements of successive contingents have attracted considerable praise from the international community, and from Cypriots themselves. Many strong friendships have resulted from the mission, and there have even been a number of marriages. It can only be hoped that a peaceful resolution is not too far away – vindicating the efforts of 1400 Australian police over the past four decades.

Pictured below:
Member of 19th
Contingent (1982-83)
Ross O'Connor talks to
locals while on patrol
in the buffer zone. A
trademark of Australian
police service in UN
peacekeeping has been
a willingness to engage
with local communities.

