

Making waves on Canberra's waterways

From rescuing stranded yachties to detailed, hand-over-hand searches in the sediment-thick depths of Canberra's Lake Burley Griffin, the AFP's Water Operations team has developed into a highly skilled and specialised unit.

Since the very early days, Canberrans flocked to the nearby Murrumbidgee and Molonglo rivers during the hot, dry summer months to relax and escape the roasting heat.

Just as reliably, every summer there were distress calls to police from over-zealous Canberrans who found themselves in trouble and out of their depth. And the waters were not always so inviting. During floods, the region's police officers, first from New South Wales and later ACT Policing, were the first called when an unpredictable river threatened lives.

There were also less urgent problems to deal with. When Lake Burley Griffin was created in the heart of Canberra in the early 1960s, police were towing out the bogged vehicles of locals who had ventured too far onto the muddy lake bottom for a look during construction.

By this time, Canberra's police had already been providing a well-developed rescue capacity in and around the city's waterways and shores for many years. In 1963 then ACT Police Commissioner Edward Richards drafted a formal request to the Department of the Interior to formalise the role.

"At present, we have police boats and equipment, a number of members have experience at skin diving, but they have not undergone a course of skin diving training," Commissioner Richards wrote.

He proposed a team of six members, with a former dairy cottage on the lake shore at Yarralumla Bay to be the residence of the most senior member. The ACT Water Police was born.

As the lake began to fill, the ACT Water Police started the hunt for their first dedicated vessel. The final choice was a 24-foot cruiser

previously owned by the NSW Department of Customs.

In a well-chosen bond with Australia's naval history, the vessel was named the 'Platypus'. It bore the nameplate of former Royal Australian Navy submarine repair ship, HMAS Platypus, which was badly damaged during the raids on Darwin Harbour in 1942.

In 1984, the same nameplate was transferred to a more modern Water Police vessel — a seven-metre alloy-hulled cabin cruiser. But demands on the Water Police increased, and soon after they switched to a V8 fibreglass-reinforced craft.

When the ACT Water Police were placed under the wing of AFP Special Response and Security (SRS) Water Operations, two twin-engined craft were added to the fleet. More recently, these vessels have been supplemented by a powerful multi-seat 'rib', with





the capability to transport an SRS tactical police team across the lake in seconds.

Last year, two powerful jet skis were added to the fleet. They soon proved their worth when a cold and distressed canoeist needed rescuing from the Molonglo River.

The role of an ACT Water Police officer is a rewarding one, requiring dedication, a high standard of fitness, and constant revision and reinvigoration of skills. It also involves callouts to miserable locations for hours of water searches, and mid-winter dives into the inky-black depths of Lake Burley Griffin.

Sergeant Allen Le Lievre is a former member of the ACT Water Police,

and says the bitter winter water temperature was always daunting.

“You get in the water and you’re cold — you get out and you’re cold,” he said.

“These days the water police use dry suits rather than wet suits, so it’s a lot more comfortable than it used to be.

“The other thing, of course, is that when you’re working around the bottom of the lake there’s almost no visibility. Close your eyes, it makes no difference.”

Despite this, the gruelling underwater searches often turn up tiny and crucial pieces of evidence.

“Some years back during an investigation into the murder of

two Bega girls, two offenders threw the murder weapon off the Commonwealth Avenue Bridge into Lake Burley Griffin,” Sergeant Le Lievre said.

“The weapon was a tiny spider knife you could fit into the palm of your hand — but we found it.”

01: An AFP Water Police diver searches in Canberra’s Lake Burley Griffin. **02:** ACT Water Police mascot ‘Blue Dog’ worked alongside team members from 1978 to 1983. **03:** Water Police boats on Lake Burley Griffin. **04:** Water Police emerge covered in weeds after a search. **05:** The SRS tactical police team speeds across the water during an exercise.

