

Our longest mission

The AFP and Australian law enforcement organisations commemorated 50 years of service to the United Nations Force in Cyprus in May 2014.

Cyprus has seen its fair share of trouble. It is the third largest and the third most populated island in the Mediterranean Sea. With just 100 kilometres of sea separating the island's city of Kyrenia from mainland Turkey, Cyprus is at a crossroad between the Middle East and Europe. Cyprus always has been a strategic landfall and this alone has brought invading armies to its comparatively small land surface over the centuries. Certainly, the 20th century has been no less turbulent for Cyprus. After being declared a Crown colony in

1925, the Cypriots began a period of rebellion against British control, which continued until their eventual independence in 1960. During that time there were two communities living in Cyprus – Greek and Turkish Cypriots.

As the surge for independence burgeoned in post-World War II Cyprus, the nationalist urge largely took the form of the Enosis movement – meaning a desire (by some Greek Cypriots) to be incorporated into the Greek state. Ultimately, integration with Greece was



Evacuees arriving in Nicosia in 1974 are embraced by relatives and friends.
Photo courtesy UN Photo by Yutaka Nagata.



Australian police arrive in Cyprus.

politically untenable due to a large Turkish Cypriot population. Even so, Cyprus did achieve independence in its own right on 16 August 1960, for the first time in 3500 years.

The Cypriot Constitution articulated a power-sharing arrangement between the Greek majority (estimated at about 80 per cent of the population) and Turkish Cypriots. To this end, Greek Cypriot Archbishop Mikhaïl Makarios became the first President of the Republic of Cyprus. Turkish Cypriot Dr Fazıl Küçük became the new nation's first Vice President at the same time.

However, proposed changes to the Cypriot Constitution in November 1963 subsequently brought conflict between Greek and Turkish Cypriots. As the international community tried in vain to resolve the situation, tensions worsened significantly in the following months.

As a result, the Cypriot Government requested international assistance. Inevitably, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 186 (UNSCR186) on 4 March 1964 recommending "the creation, with consent of the Government of Cyprus, of a United Nations (UN) peacekeeping force in Cyprus". Thus, the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) was established.



Australian police officers Sergeant John Connelly, left, and Senior Constable Reginald Vandenberg depart Canberra as the advance party for the first contingent deployed to Cyprus.

Australia contributes

A total of 1600 Australian police officers have served in Cyprus since the beginning of the UN mission in April 1964. Of these, over 1,000 have been AFP members since its formation in 1979. However, Australia's initial involvement in Cyprus was by no means certain.

The British Government had approached its Australian counterpart informally in February 1964 to scope a military contribution should a Commonwealth peacekeeping force be deployed. Australia declined due to commitments in South East Asia. The Australian Government had also informed then UN Secretary-General U Thant of its decision and Australia was never formally asked to contribute military forces.

Even so, a later request by U Thant for a contribution to staff a UN Civilian Police (UNCIVPOL) force of up to 200 law enforcement members was accepted by Australia. An advance party of two officers was deployed in mid-May, followed by 38 officers arriving in Cyprus on 26 May 1964, for the first 12-month deployment. Deploying to Cyprus was a culture shock to the Australian officers. "We had no idea what we were going into," says retired AFP member (but then ACT Police – as it was known – Constable) Mick Richards. Pre-AFP, the Australian contingent was drawn from the Commonwealth Police and all state and territory police forces.

In 1964, he says, the Australians were mostly inexperienced 20-somethings. The main duties of the UNCIVPOL were to liaise with and assist the Cypriot police. UN police also worked closely with UNFICYP's



Australian police hold a parade in Cyprus



Commonwealth Police Officer Ian Hill on duty with Contingent 11.

military personnel. Joint patrols were conducted and the UNCIVPOL officers would also staff joint checkpoints. They conducted specialist investigations for which general UNFICYP staff did not have the training.

National contingents were deployed on a rotation basis to separate sectors dotted throughout the country. Australian Civilian Police (AUSCIVPOL) officers were initially deployed to Famagusta on the north-east coast of Cyprus. At that time the country was not yet separated into north and south but the Turkish Cypriot police had withdrawn from the joint Cypriot police force. "Our main function was to visit both Greek and Turkish villages, check their welfare and when necessary inform UN headquarters of any matter that required attention," Mr Richards said.

"We were very isolated, having no contact with the outside world, apart from radio contact with a UN Irish Army contingent stationed out of town. There were no newspapers or English speaking radio. The power came on from 6pm to 9pm," he says.

The Cypriot society was very agricultural at the time. "You would see donkeys blindfolded going round and round all day pumping water from wells. Men with their flocks of sheep would be out all day with a staff and they would pretty much sleep with their sheep in corrals at night. So it was a very primitive culture in the villages."

Turkish invasion

An attempted military coup d'état against President Makarios on 15 July 1974 by the Greek Cypriot pro-Enosis group, EOKA-B, altered the situation in Cyprus to this day. Not only did the coup anger the Turkish Government, but it divided the Greek Cypriot population as well.

Claiming its right to defend Turkish Cypriots, on 20 July 1974, the Turkish military invaded Cyprus. A later Turkish offensive on 14 August seized about 40 per cent of northern Cyprus. The initial demarcation line between the military forces of both



Australian police officers search for the bodies of United Nations military personnel.



A UN police officer chats with a farmer in the Buffer Zone between Greek and Turkish Cyprus.

sides was drawn on the map at UN headquarters in green china graph pencil. This buffer zone between north and south has been known colloquially as the Green Line ever since.

Former police officer Ian Hill was deployed to Paphos station with AUSCIVPOL Contingent 11 at the time of the invasion. It was through Paphos that ousted President Makarios made his escape with the aid of the British. Mr Hill, now retired, was actually away from the station when the coup was conducted.

"I got back the next day," Mr Hill says. "The situation was quite tense. The Greek Cypriots were taking sides politically among themselves after the coup. They had two sides – pro-Enosis and anti-Enosis – so they were fighting among themselves.

"Greek Cypriots were disappearing at road blocks because they happened to be on the wrong side. So it was a really volatile situation. The Turkish Cypriots were quite concerned because they were the ham in the sandwich. That sort of carried on until the morning of the Turkish invasion."

During the invasion, an estimated 10,000 people were killed. A mass migration followed the invasion.



Kangaroo Hotel, Nicosia: Australian police are well regarded by the local population.

It is estimated that about one quarter of the Greek population was expelled or relocated from northern Cyprus. Within the year, about 60,000 Turkish Cypriots moved from south to north.

It was during this time that New South Wales policeman (and Vietnam veteran) Sergeant Ian Ward was killed when the vehicle he was traveling in hit a landmine. Sergeant Ward had arrived with the second half of Contingent 11 in November 1974 and had been posted to Paphos Station.

Less than a week later, he and fellow Australian policeman Sergeant John Woolcott were tasked to take a Turkish Cypriot family to the Turkish controlled area in the north of the island. It was on this drive when the vehicle they were travelling in detonated a landmine. Mr Hill says frantic enquiries were made to confirm it was a Paphos vehicle manned by Sergeant Woolcott and Sergeant Ward.

“A terrible feeling of loss enveloped the members when it was confirmed that Ian had been killed and John seriously wounded,” Mr Hill says.

Post 1974

In the absence of a political settlement to the Cyprus problem, UNFICYP has remained on the island to supervise ceasefire lines, maintain a buffer zone, undertake humanitarian activities and support the good offices mission of the UN Secretary-General.

Retired AFP Commander Graham Taylor brings a unique perspective to Australia’s 50-year deployment to Cyprus and the changes before and after the 1974 division. He was the third ACT Police officer to deploy as a young constable in 1966. In 1999, on his second deployment, he had the added perspective of being the police commander of the combined Australian and Irish civilian police contingents.

Much had changed in the 33 years since his first deployment. He says Turkish Cyprus was then not as economically strong as the Greek side “no doubt reflecting the then economic differences between Greece and Turkey”.

By 1999 Greek south of Cyprus had become much more modern and Greek Nicosia bustled with activity and late-model cars. There were still 35,500 Turkish forces in the north and 14,500 Greek Cypriot national guards in the south. In terms of policing duties, in 1999 the international civilian police contingents now

assisted local Cypriot police and military peacekeepers in patrolling the Green Line between north and south.

“During my first tour, Australian police were located at Nicosia, Paphos and Kakopetria (south of the island). Now, police are located at various towns along the 180 kilometre distance of the buffer zone,” Mr Taylor says.

He adds there were also significant changes by 1999 that shaped how Australian law enforcement approached its overseas commitments. Chief among these was the formation of the AFP on 19 October 1979. By then the Commonwealth Police had assumed responsibility for providing all the personnel to UNFICYP, and they were all sworn into the AFP.

Another major change was the establishment of the AFP’s International Deployment Group (IDG) in 2004. The professionalism of IDG and the quality of the AFP has led to an international reputation for the organisation as a leading authority in preparing and staffing international missions.

The division of Cyprus remains and six AFP members deployed on 10 November 2013 as the Australian 105th contingent, making a total of 15 officers deployed at any one time. While they will quietly celebrate Australia’s 50-year anniversary in Cyprus – the AFP and former members deployed to UNFICYP will hold

celebrations and formal commemorations in Australia. The 106th contingent is due to deploy in May this year.

A weekend of events has been organised by the United Nations and Overseas Policing Association of Australia (UNOPAA) with support from the AFP on 23-25 May, 2014, and will include members of the ‘fighting first’ UNFICYP AUSCIVPOL contingent, and the AFP’s 15th and 16th UNPOL contingents. A commemorative dinner will be held in the Great Hall at Parliament House on 24 May which will formally recognise the 50 years of the Australian law enforcement involvement with the UNFICYP mission.

A UN Peacekeeper Commemoration Service will be held at the site of the Australian Peacekeeper Memorial in Canberra. Significantly, it will honour the commitment of police officers sergeant Llewellyn Thomas (South Australia Police Force), and New South Wales Police Force members Inspector Patrick Hackett and Sergeant Ward who paid the supreme price in their service to Australia in our longest peacekeeping mission, and who were posthumously awarded the Dag Hammarskjöld Medal. The Dag Hammarskjöld Medal is the award given by the UN to military personnel, police, or civilians who lose their lives while serving in a United Nations peacekeeping operation.

An observation post in Cyprus.

