

CHIEF INSPECTOR JOHANNA WENDLER

by Philip Castle

IT was in 1961, long before women found it easier to move into the traditionally male-dominated police forces, when now Chief Inspector Johanna (Jo) Wendler, of the Australian Federal Police's Northern Region, was one of the first five women to join the Northern Territory Police Force.

She had been working as a purchasing officer for the Utah Construction Company which had applied for a tender in the Northern Territory. Disappointed when it failed to get the contract, she wanted to go to Darwin anyway and so applied for its first intake of police women. She was then 26 and lived in Sydney.

'There were five of us and we were initially treated as a bit of a novelty,' she said recently in Brisbane where she is the region's officer in charge of administration. She is also the AFP's most senior woman commissioned officer. She and her other women NT colleagues worked on attachment in the CIB, communications, and photographic. Within a few months the NT Police Force realised the women needed a senior woman supervising, and temporarily appointed South Australia Police Sergeant Joyce Richardson.

'She spent a year with us — it was tough,' she said. 'We were the first and found ourselves dealing with some quite serious offences with matters like neglected children and sexual offences. After a year Sergeant Richardson was replaced and another South Australian officer came to help out. I was the survivor and became the first acting sergeant. You have to remember it wasn't in the burning-of-the-bras era then and it was proper that we took the progress carefully.'

'The first time I went to a post mortem, the pathologist doctor would not begin while I was there. He said he did not want to perform a p.m. with a woman present. It was a case of a man who had committed suicide with a shotgun to the head. They were very touchy with women being present at p.ms.'

She decided to head south and join the then ACT Police Force in 1967 after her father died. She joined as a recruit, and her qualities as a now seasoned police officer breaking new ground in the NT were recognised. Within a year she was promoted to sergeant. There were three other policewomen in the ACT — Robyn Davidson, Gladys Johnson and Joan Coleman.

'I guess I have been a bit of a pathfinder but I have not found being a police officer has been very much more difficult than it is for a man,' she said. 'It is a tough job anyway and some men find it difficult. I have never felt discriminated against. I think it was realised there were times we were greatly needed. I've just sailed through and maybe not noticed some of the subtle changes.'

'Opportunities now for women are vastly different and much improved, especially in the AFP.'

'I think though it is important for anyone joining the AFP or any police force for that matter that they be exposed to people before joining the job. Police work is an active life and concerns people all the time. It helps to have had a bit of previous experience.'

At 52 she feels she has still got a lot to offer the AFP. While she said she had never expected to reach beyond sergeant she does think she has got to her present rank on ability and sheer hard police work. She likes the work in Northern Region but 'would certainly consider returning to community policing in the ACT'. She had worked in various areas in the ACT during the 1970s including a special women's squad, community relations, communications, and at the time

of the 1979 amalgamation, in general duties at the city station as a senior sergeant. In 1980 she was posted to Brisbane's legal branch and made an inspector. She served also in Eastern Region and after attending various courses was promoted in 1982 to Chief Inspector. Her recent work has mostly been in the administration and personnel services areas.

One highlight of her career was in the ACT when a Canberra girl Pamela Rutherford went missing and the car she was thought to be in was found abandoned in the NT. She was a country girl and Jo spent many weeks trying to find out what had happened. Two years later the girl's mother telephoned to say that her daughter had been in touch from Western Australia and she was safe, married to the chap she had left with, and had two children.

'Even though I did not find her, it was great to hear that she was all right,' she said. 'That gave me more satisfaction than anything else I have ever been involved with.'

She was married a year ago. She had met her husband in her NT Police years but such were the conditions of the job that had she married she would have had to resign. That was a big choice which now has been resolved.

Outside of the job, she was in her youth a keen hockey and water polo player. Now she enjoys gardening and reading.

'There are still quite a few goods years left in me yet,' she said with a grin. 'And one advantage of having come up through the ranks is that I have seen all the lurks and know what is good policing.'

CAIRNS 'FIRST'?

RAY Bedford, author of our December article on the opening of the new Cairns Regional Headquarters, exaggerated just a bit when he said that Cairns was the first deployment of Commonwealth Police outside the mainland capitals.

Ray now believes that Cairns Airport was the first outside the capitals to have a Commonwealth Police-manned station.

We thank Sergeant Alan Barbour, of Diplomatic and Security, ACT Region, for drawing our attention to the error. He says that before June 1973 Commonwealth Police were stationed in Maralinga, Woomera, and Alice Springs, and they may even have been in Exmouth and Port Augusta.

Keep that history coming, folks! •

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