

REQUIEM FOR A COMRADE

by Peter Kowalick

AMID the hushed gathering, the veteran sergeant stands firmly to attention, broad shoulders drawn back, greying head held high, eyes to the front.

Only the discerning would notice the eyelids blinking more than usual.

At his side, a young constable, slim in neat uniform, her young face softly framed by chequered cap, looks about uncertainly.

In fact, very little around them is as usual.

They are two among more than 800 men and women of all ranks gathered outside St Christopher's Cathedral in Canberra to farewell one of their colleagues.

They will tell you they are not here to pay their last respects. For them, there is no last; they will always remember with respect the fellow officer who paid the ultimate price.

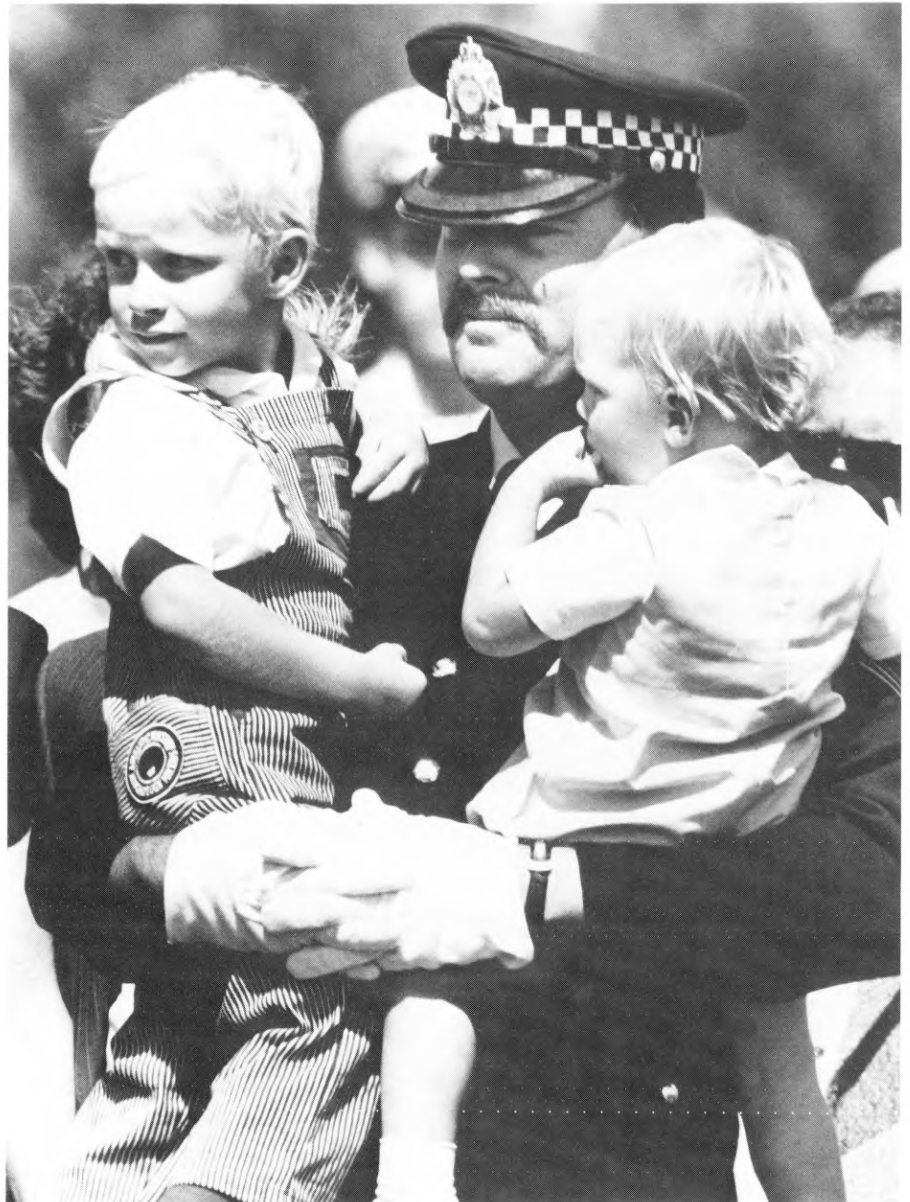
Assistant Commissioner Col Winchester was a good policeman. Some had worked closely with him. A few had barely known him. For each, though, it is enough that he was one of them.

Here, on that Friday, the afternoon sun fleetingly breaks through the clouds to shine warmly on the sombre gathering.

It picks out the shining symbols of rank, the pale blue of summer dress, the grey of civilian suits. It highlights the bright fashions and casual wear of people lining the footpaths nearby.

It settles on groups gathered around the cathedral steps and lawns and hushes still more the soft voices as saddened faces greet others not seen for ages. Uniformed men shake hands or salute as they share the few words that come with difficulty.

It's not the time for talk; each has very personal thoughts to come to terms with. The dread that all, at some time in the job, have secretly thought about and put from their minds, has become reality.



Col Winchester's two grandsons, David and Andrew, in the arms of their father, Sergeant Phil Spence. (Photo: New Ltd.)

The guard of honour moves into position in response to orders delivered quietly but firmly. Each face tells its own story — some hardened by the years in the job, others mirroring deep feelings that hover close to the surface.

A superintendent stands silently alone, his eyes focussed on a point beyond the figures before him. For a full five minutes he remains still, oblivious to the quiet conversation about him, his face registering tired resignation. Death isn't new to him.

In Traffic, or on the beat, he's seen it all too often before. But this is different.

Nearby, a detective is alone amid a group. He stares unseeing at the ground in front of him, the lines at the corners of his mouth sharply etched. In CIB, one sees many tragedies many times, but none like this. He looks up now and then, his eyes clouded. He brightens momentarily at a quiet greeting from a colleague and then returns to his thoughts.