



Mrs Gwen Winchester (centre) and members of her family hold hands as they walk between the guard of honour at Queanbeyan Lawn Cemetery. (Photo: Canberra Times.)

Near the cathedral steps, a constable ponders the carpet of floral tributes. She breathes deeply and her eyes lower to the pale blue booklet in her hand carrying details of the service soon to begin.

A few steps away, a grey-suited man concentrates as his eyes move slowly over the features of people facing him. Nearby, another two men scan faces. Any feelings they may have are submerged in the urgency of their task. Vital information has a habit of revealing itself unexpectedly and nothing can be ignored in the hunt for clues during a murder investigation.

They've had to carry out this task many times before, quietly studying faces, seeking those they remember from other places and putting names to them. In this case, the cause is a doubly urgent one; the lives of any number of their colleagues may now be under threat.

On the mound overlooking the cathedral entrance stands a tall man whose face is drawn. His alert eyes are on a second man speaking softly into a personal radio at the roadside. The answering voice is illegible to most, but the tall man nods briefly to a senior officer nearby and moves off. It's not often that most of the country's State police commissioners gather in one place, along with ministers of the Crown, senior judges, public dignitaries and top diplomatic representatives, as they've done today. When they do, no chances can be taken. In the present circumstances, the threat is even more real.

It's two o'clock and in the cathedral the organ music fills every corner, spilling out to the mourners through an outside speaker. The faint sound of voices singing the opening hymn

is swelled as those standing nearby take up the words.

Heads bow as prayers are said and scriptures read. The Acclamation, the Homily and Prayers for Intercession set each mind to its own thoughts and emotions.

The words of a deputy commissioner speaking of a close colleague no longer present, strike a chord in every heart as commissioner and constable alike come to terms with the loss in their own way.

"O Lord, My God, when I in awesome wonder" rings out as mourners take up the words of the final hymn.

An elderly woman, standing close to the hearse that will carry Col Winchester to his final resting place, gestures emotionally with her hands

as her strong voice takes up the refrain. Few hymns have been written that kindle such strong, heart-felt emotions.

As the last strains fade away, the country's most senior policemen take up position to honour one who is no longer among them in life. Their strained faces mirror the feelings of all.

The casket, preceded by the clergy, is carried from the cathedral. Only a few eyes are averted from what for most is the final link with their colleague.

A commissioner in the honour guard reflects sorrow in his deeply-lined face. Next to him, an assistant commissioner struggles with clenched jaw against a tide of emotions.

All, in their time in the job, have been hardened to many things. Each, at some time or another, has been called on, when alone and the chips were down, to make crucial decisions; perhaps personally to face the ultimate one. Each has been, or will be, called to preside over, with praise or compassion, the most junior constable when he or she, in turn, is first faced with making a crucial decision alone.

They know the agony of things going wrong. That's all part of the job. But the job provides a spirit of close brotherhood to lighten the load.

And when it's time to mourn, it's that same spirit which makes the loss of a brother just that little less difficult to bear.

A Letter to the Commissioner

Dear Peter,

My family and I would like you to convey to all members of the Australian Federal Police our sincere and heartfelt thanks for their strong support, assistance and kind expressions of sympathy in the tragic loss of Colin, our beloved husband and father.

These words seem inadequate to express the gratitude I feel to such a fine body of men and women. I felt very proud and privileged to have their support on that terrible night and on the day of the funeral.

I would hope, in the lonely years to come as an "unofficial" member of the Australian Federal Police, (and believe me I have paid my dues), our ties will remain strong.

Yours sincerely
Gwen Winchester