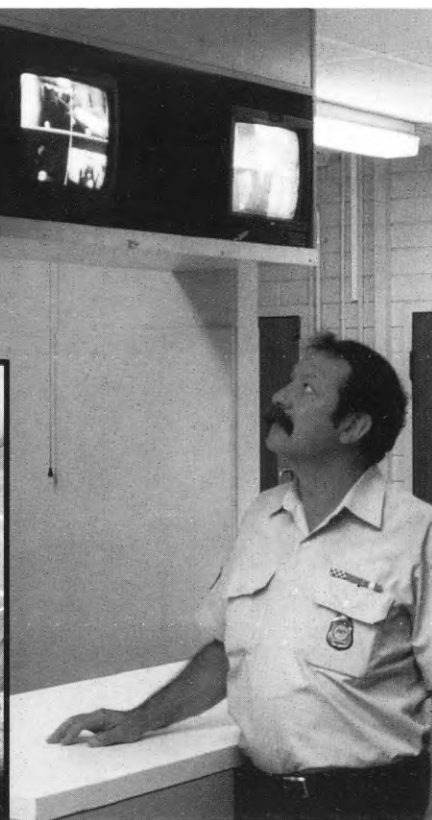


Eye-opening work

By Terry Browne



Sergeant Peter De Britt monitoring the cells from the main desk at City Watch-house

Fingerprinting is part of the procedure before being shown to the cells

LOSS of personal liberty is a traumatic experience for most people - a fact borne out recently at City Watch-house when a young woman vented her frustration by shredding cell padding with her bare hands.

One of the five Watch-house sergeants, Peter De Britt said that it was just one of the eye-opening incidents which makes working at the Watch-house valuable experience for young constables.

He said that in the Watch-house an officer sees the greatest range of human behaviour imaginable. "It's amazing how many drunks, once sober, are stunned when they learn of their actions of the night before."

Where citizens are often at their worst in the Watch-house, he said that it is more common to see police officers at their best. "The Watch-house is a training ground which no constable should miss," he said.

"Each person reacts differently to being locked up and a police officer needs the skills to be able to react appropriately to each situation. Over

the years you learn the best ways to react," Sergeant De Britt said.

"There are occasions when the burliest constables are unable to coax a prisoner out of a van. As Watch-house Sergeant, by reasoning with the prisoner on a one-to-one basis, I've talked quite a few prisoners out of a van and into a cell. But I make sure that a couple of constables aren't too far away," he added.

The Watch-house has been recently renovated. Partly as a routine upgrade and partly as a result of recommendations coming from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.

Operating three eight-hour shifts daily, the Watch-house is designed to hold 10 male prisoners and three female prisoners, but when necessary can hold up to 18 people.

Video monitoring provides an indisputable record of the activity in the Watch-house. "The video camera has proven to be our best friend," Sergeant De Britt said.

The cells are constantly monitored and those prisoners who require it, can have access to an interpreter or an Aboriginal liaison officer. Each cell is fitted with a duress alarm and meals are provided by the catering staff at Barton College.

Sergeant De Britt said that Friday night through to Sunday afternoon is the peak period for arrests, especially during summer with the majority of cases involving protective custody (drunks) or assaults and disturbances. During the week those held are usually awaiting a court appearance.

City Watch-house provides constables for court duty and also provides officers for prisoner escort to and from interstate locations when required. The court has holding cells which are supervised by Watch-house officers who ensure the timely attendance of prisoners at the correct court and also assist with bail procedures.

The Watch-house also provides the policing service to Canberra Airport.