

Building success on professionalism



By Commissioner Mick Keelty

A saying that is commonly expressed in Australian Aboriginal culture goes something like, "To plan for our future, we must first understand the past". As the AFP enters 2003, we are engaged in a number of major activities that draw heavily on policing experience of the past while still presenting problems never before experienced.

The obvious example is the current investigation into the bombings in Bali last October. Terrorism as a form of political violence has unfortunately found its way into our part of the world, but it has not found us totally unprepared.

Over the past decade, the AFP has been deliberately redesigning itself in anticipation of the fact that modern crime is not predictable. At a moments notice, an organisation that polices crime, needs to be flexible enough to react quickly and creatively and with a sense of purpose. Nothing could sum up the AFP's reaction to the Bali bombings more succinctly. While the crime took place outside the AFP's jurisdiction, it was a crime against our people and our friends. Such were our professional links with the Indonesian National Police that we were able to confidently offer assistance and merge into the INP investigation with the minimum of fuss. Relationships like this are not created overnight and are a result of years of inter-agency contact that builds trust and mutual respect between professional law enforcement operatives.

Building a professional history between agencies is what makes such cooperative endeavours possible and this is what makes a professional law enforcement body.

The AFP has the privilege of being the face of Australian policing to the world, it is the face of federal law enforcement throughout Australia and it is the face our police in suburban Canberra. At each level of policing the most important tool an officer has to work with is the relationships created through daily contact with those he or she is empowered to protect. And the most critical aspect of each level is that a history of trust and respect needs to be created in order to make the job work.

This edition of *Platypus* shows how this history of trust has been developed and put into practice in various ways. Overall, the articles relate to how dealing with crime requires a multifaceted approach. Through research, revision, and interaction with the community and allied agencies, levels of cooperation and trust are developed which in the end make the task of law enforcement that much more effective.

In the article *Closing the Circle – the AFP's capacity to fight terrorism*, which I delivered as a speech to a mostly commercial and business audience, I have outlined how, when viewed as a criminal act and not solely a political act, the

established criminal investigation methodologies can become an effective tool in heading off terrorist incidents or an effective way to bring the perpetrators to justice.

The momentum to establish the AFP was created in 1978 with the explosion of a bomb at the Sydney Hilton Hotel during a Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. The explosion killed two council workers and eventually a police officer died from injuries inflicted by the bomb. Terrorism was no longer something that happened on the other side of the world and reviews were put in place to enable Australia to deal with the development.

Fortunately, while those incidents are not common in Australia, the preparedness to be able to deal with them has been growing continually since that time. The reaction of Australian agencies to the bombing in Bali is testimony as to the working relationships that have developed between state and federal agencies. These relationships made it possible to deliver appropriate people and services to the task in a minimum amount of time. At the individual level, I am aware of many instances where relatively junior federal agents cut a swathe through potential red tape by using their own initiative and recognise that all agencies involved abandoned many set procedures because the nature of the incident demanded it.

This type of response is made possible because “the AFP’s longstanding relationship with law enforcement agencies across our region has been the cornerstone of much of our success”.

Quietly and deliberately working away in the background since the Sydney Hilton bombing has been the Australian Bomb Data Centre. Its job of recording and collating copious amounts of bomb-incident data over the past quarter century is applied and made use of regularly in a variety of ways through its relationships with similar agencies around the world.

This accumulated knowledge and skill has easily proved its worth during the investigations in Bali and the article *A Coming of Age – the Australian Bomb Data Centre* gives a good account of the ABDC’s role in fighting terrorism.

Terror of a different kind arrived in the south-western suburbs of Canberra on Saturday 18 January in

the form of a fire front of a size and ferocity never seen before in any Australian city. *The day the thin blue line took on a wall of red* is an article reprinted from the *Canberra Times* and provides accounts of individual AFP officers on the day of fires. It is a stark endorsement of the positive relationships that exist between our police in Canberra and the ACT community. With a strict mission of preserving life, the officers involved had to deal with emotionally charged residents under intolerable stress, in incredibly dangerous conditions. The fact that so many citizens had trust in the police was undoubtedly a contributing factor in minimising the loss of life.

Like all other incidents that occur in policing, there will be lessons to be learned from Bali and from the Canberra fires. Policing is an ongoing procedure of action and review. This is a process illustrated by the remaining articles in this edition which in their own way express how law enforcement procedures, whether they are directed against international terrorism, transnational crime, or crime in the neighbourhood, can only be successful when they are built on professionalism that springs from trust and cooperation.

Finally, the power to police is derived from the community whether it be local, national or international. As an organisation, therefore, we must represent the community we serve. In those areas where we don’t, such as religious minorities, we need to reach out even further in order to reflect and represent the values of the whole community and not just bits and pieces of it — or the bits we like. To do that takes commitment and fair-mindedness.

