

Cyprus 2003 – a very different tour of duty



Anzac Day commemorations continue to be a strong tradition with Australian police on Cyprus since the mission began in 1964.

By Superintendent Geoff Hazel, Commander, 74th-77th AFP Cyprus Contingent

Even before leaving Australia in January 2003, AFP members joining UNFICYP knew this tour of duty would be different. Apart from minor changes like the Irish contingent replacing the Swedish contingent and the integration of Australian and Irish forces in 1999, the only significant change to routine duties had been the size and intensity of the crowds at annual demonstrations.

Pre-embarkation briefings included references to the peace plan being negotiated between the two sides and the possibility of Cyprus, at least its southern region, joining the European Union. Implementation of either or both these proposals would require a substantial change to the work, location and practices of police in the mission area.

The contingent departed Australia just after the January bushfires and arrived in a remarkably green Cyprus a few hours before severe storms caused substantial damage to the cities on the southern coast.

The winter had been very wet leaving the area far greener than any could remember. The wet weather was to continue for the next two-and-a-half months; a very good situation for the farmers, but a problem for police patrolling on the buffer zone tracks.

In the past six years major developments had occurred on the highways with tourist hotels on both sides of the buffer zone. Other obvious changes were the increased numbers of Greek Cypriots living in villages in the buffer zone and the rise in the local cost of living.

On the political scene, with neither side prepared to sign the UN proposed reunification plan, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan visited Cyprus in February 2003 to advance negotiations. UNCIVPOL had the responsibility of managing the media and providing visible security to the Secretary General during his two-day visit, with many other routine activities postponed.

The Secretary General's tour went off smoothly thanks to the good relationships that exist between UN personnel and the local police forces. However, it is now a matter of history that the political outcome was not what the UN had hoped to achieve.

With the subsequent breakdown in March of discussions between the UN, Greek Cypriot leader Tassos Papadopoulos and Turkish Cypriot leader Rauf Denktaş in The Hague, a return to the status quo was envisaged.

In early April information was received that the north was to open crossing points which could be used by both communities to visit each other. On the evening of 22 April public announcements in the north said the crossing points would be open at 11am the next day with thousands gathering at the Ledra crossing point from early the next morning.

No-one on the mission will forget the long hours and heat, nor the sight of senior officers standing shoulder-to-shoulder with soldiers and police controlling the thousands of people wanting to cross, the traffic build up in Pyla, and the constant changing of plans to meet the changing situation.

Particularly remarkable were the efforts of the Force Engineers and Public Works Departments of both sides which made it possible for so many people to access the border crossings. It was a period in Cyprus history that AFP contingent members were proud to be part of.

Typically, no-one expected the situation to last. Those who crossed were determined to do so as soon as possible with many expecting it to be a short-term situation. Others, including the UN, expected the crossing points to close as quickly as they opened.

However, the crossing points are still open with as many as 16,000 people crossing every day. Two



weeks after the first opening, an additional crossing point to the west of the city was opened for vehicles after a magnificent effort by all parties to create a four-lane divided road, with all the essential administrative buildings, in an area that had been blocked by barbed wire and anti-tank barriers.

One impact of the greater ease of movement across the borders was an indication that the annual "nationalist" demonstrations would be poorly attended. In an effort to rekindle enthusiasm, organisers changed their approach. Most of the demonstrations were rescheduled to be held on the same Sunday in an effort to maximise crowd numbers.

Had the demonstrations turned out to be as well attended as previous years this arrangement could have proved a challenge for UNFICYP. However, good police work provided sufficient information for proper planning and those demonstrations that did take place presented few problems.

For many years bi-communal social, academic and sports events held on UN premises have been a feature of peacekeeping efforts. With the opening of the crossing points it was expected that demand for these events would reduce. However, the opposite has been the case. In November 2002, five bi-communal events were held; in November 2003 the number jumped to 38. December 2003 saw this trend continue with 31 events held in a month traditionally the quietest of the year.

In 2003 Cyprus changed, and as 2004 rolls on more changes are possible. An election in the north, the European Union and international influences have created a situation where it is possible that negotiations between the two communities will recommence. Whether negotiations are successful and what their outcome will be is something only time will tell. One thing that can be guaranteed is that UN Civilian Police will be at the forefront of any change implementation.

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