

ACT Policing: Wheeling through the territory

In 30 years of policing the territory, there has only ever been two practical ways for officers to get from the southern-most township of Tharwa to Mulligan's Flat in the far north in a hurry, and that's either by car or motorcycle.

In fact, during the early years of ACT Policing, motorcycles were the most common form of transport for the Traffic Squad and during the mid-70s, there were more than 45 bikes – mostly Honda 750s fitted with special "police packs" – cruising the highways and byways of the ACT.

Many of the AFP's most senior officers – including former Commissioner Mick Keelty (who spent some time in the accident investigation team attached to the Traffic Squad) and recently appointed Commissioner Tony Negus (a former pursuit motorcyclist) – have had their time "on the road" in all weathers.

Sergeant Steve Kirby, now retired, said that motorcycles were an efficient way of getting around the territory as they got to jobs more quickly than a car. He joined the traffic squad in 1974 just as the old, less reliable Triumphs were being phased out in favour of the more reliable and user-friendly Hondas.

"Traffic was one of the busiest jobs you could do in the ACT; before the introduction of compulsory seat belts, the .08 blood alcohol limit or random breath testing, collisions were more frequent and often serious," Sergeant Kirby recalled.

ACT Policing's Traffic Operations cars are today sourced from a selection of Australian-produced models mostly because these have proved well-capable of enduring the rigours of pursuit work. A number of high-profile imported cars have been trialled as alternatives but the combination of roominess, performance, affordability and reliability make models like the Holden Commodore SS and the Ford Falcon XR6 Turbo the team's logical choices. Specialist areas of Traffic Operations have their own particular needs, with the Collision Investigation and Reconstruction Team attending crash scenes in VW Transporter vans racked high with high-tech equipment.

Through the late 70s, through to the 1990s, ACT Policing used a variety of motorcycles from big four-cylinder Kawasaki 1000s through to, more recently, BMWs which arrived as a fully-prepared police package. Only this year has a decision been made to switch to using the latest Yamaha FJR 1300, with its integrated police pack and superior features.

ACT officers have driven some unusual cars down through the years, from Ford Zephyrs to Cortinas, Daimlers, Studebakers, Valiants, Humber Super Snipes and even the famous Mini Cooper S. The introduction of a policy to support Australian-made cars occasionally had its pitfalls; for a period during the mid-1970s, the patrol car for General Duties was the forgettable, lamentable Leyland P76.