



## Winchester and the end of innocence

Nothing much happens in the nation's capital in early January. Residents leave the city for the beach, or stretch out in the placid, dusty sunshine, enjoying a post-Christmas lull that seems as if it will last forever.

As ACT Policing Chief Police Officer Colin Winchester drove to his Deakin home on 10 January 1989, the Canberra suburb was particularly quiet, drowsing in the still, warm, evening air. But as he stepped from his car at 9.15pm, the drone of cicadas was smashed by the sound of bullets.

Assistant Commissioner Winchester was dead, shot twice in the head at point-blank range.

The murder would shatter the peace of that Canberra summer and reverberate across the nation.

Colin Winchester's death sparked one of the most complex criminal investigations in Australian history. It ran for more than five years, with numerous lines of inquiry. There were allegations of mafia involvement, of links to major political parties, of cover-up and corruption.

Later, the AFP Director of National Operations Alan Mills would say that Colin Winchester's death was "the end of the age of innocence for Australia".

Colin Winchester had been a police officer for 27 years, first in the Australian Capital Territory Police Force and then in the AFP. He was enormously popular with his colleagues. Friends described him as being of great strength, courage, integrity and love. They called him tough, hard-working, honest and compassionate. He was a baker's son who'd worked in the mines at Captain's Flat and a good-humoured larrikin.

He was the most senior public official to be assassinated in Australian history, and his murder made headlines around the world. During that summer in Canberra, people were talking of nothing else. Fuelled by media reports, speculation was rife with possible motives for the murder.

There were suggestions that the Assistant Commissioner had been executed by the Mafia when it was revealed he'd been part of a controversial investigation targeting drug financiers and suppliers. The sting involved a marijuana plantation at Bungendore and a Mafia informant who told his bosses that Colin Winchester was corrupt. It was said that the police chief was shot because Mafia bosses thought he'd failed to protect their operation.

Allegations of corruption were also raised, seemingly on the basis of the old adage that where there was smoke, there was fire. It was whispered that honest cops didn't get assassinated. But extensive investigations showed there was no basis to these rumours, and an independent auditor found that with no unexplained wealth to his name, it was unlikely that Colin Winchester had been on the take.

Police were also pursuing another line of inquiry, one that was far less appealing to the media. David Harold Eastman was a public servant facing charges relating to a minor assault. He had argued with the police chief about the matter, and demanded the charges be dropped. The day Colin Winchester was shot was the day David Eastman found out the charges would proceed.

While the rumours about the Assistant Commissioner's death swirled around Canberra, and those who knew him mourned, the police investigating the assassination were coming to grips with the enormity of their task. With few pieces of tangible evidence, the officers realised much of their case would be circumstantial.

The AFP Commissioner Mick Palmer later said that "to successfully prosecute a circumstantial case against the width of public allegations and innuendo which related to the Winchester killing was, I believe, quite exceptional".

The Australian Federal Police was also consolidating its position as a newcomer to Australian law enforcement. Within the first decade of its existence, its members were facing the task of solving one of the most significant crimes in the nation's history. They also had to deal with the impact of losing one of their own.

Gradually though, the threads of the investigation came together.

While there was limited forensic evidence to go on, police were able to identify the murder weapon. Ammunition residue found in the boot of Eastman's car was indistinguishable from that found at the murder scene. A lawyer formerly employed by Eastman alleged he had threatened to kill Colin Winchester and the Commonwealth Ombudsman.

In 1995, Eastman was put on trial for the murder, and found guilty by the unanimous verdict of the jury.

"The Winchester investigation was clearly a test of the AFP's professionalism," Commissioner Palmer said. He praised the officers involved in the investigation for their dedication and commitment to the task, and the work done by surveillance personnel, forensic experts and others involved in supporting the investigation.

The thoroughness of police was also noted by ACT Supreme Court Justice Ken Carruthers during his sentencing remarks. He said the scientific aspect of the case resulted in "one of the most skilled, sophisticated and determined forensic investigations in the history of Australia". Justice Carruthers sentenced Eastman to life imprisonment. In the ACT, this means he can be released only by approval of the Governor-General on advice from the Federal Government and ACT Chief Minister.

The investigation of Colin Winchester's death was in some ways a coming of age for the AFP. Police were working on a high-profile investigation that was complicated by mass media interest, rumour, innuendo and the absence of forensic evidence. The officers were investigating the brutal slaying of one of their own, a stark reminder of the inherent risks of the job.

The case was scrutinised from all angles, pulled apart by the media and subject to several appeals launched by David Eastman. But the jury's verdict has held, a testament to the quality of the original investigation.

Twenty years have passed since Colin Winchester was murdered. Since then, the AFP has almost doubled in size, and taken on numerous cases that can be described as high-profile, complicated or politically-charged. These investigations have been able to draw on the experience gained during the Winchester case, building upon the AFP's determination, dedication and professionalism in bringing the perpetrators of crime to justice.

There is now a sharper edge to summer days in Canberra. It may seem as if nothing much happens during the long days of January, and cicadas still drone in the evening air. But there is no longer the sense that this peace will last, that our lawmakers and defenders are protected by their office. That innocence was shattered by two bullets in the driveway of a Deakin home. Australia has grown up.