

PETER McDONALD

Peter was born at Colac, Victoria, in 1944. After leaving school he worked at Newmarket saleyards and woolstores for four years. He moved from Melbourne to Canberra when he joined the ACT Police in 1964. (The ACT Police became the Australian Federal Police in 1979.) Constable McDonald was the rural patrol officer in the ACT for some years, including the period of the construction of Corin Dam and the Bendora Gravity Main. Now a superintendent in the AFP, Peter's current project is in relation to security for the 2000 Olympics. Peter married Pam in 1967 and they had one daughter.



Tape 1 Side A

Peter was the ACT rural patrol officer from late 1965 to late 1971. At times during this period when on leave he was relieved by Col Winchester, Bob Koppman and Alan Holland. His predecessor was John Dinham who later became the first ranger at Corin.

Peter went up to Corin 2 or 3 days a week, and less often to the Bendora Gravity Main because the workforce was smaller there. His main reasons for going were to execute warrants and serve summonses, and to inquire into cases of theft and assault. There was never a permanent police presence at Corin. Sometimes detectives would also go to inquire into certain matters.

The warrants and summonses were usually to do with unpaid fines, and child custody issues and unpaid maintenance — there a few men who had run away from wives. Peter drove up to Corin and the men would see him coming and head off into hiding. There were many Snowy workers, 'some pretty rough individuals amongst them, some characters, Irishmen, middle Europeans, who were pretty rough sort of diamonds, but good tradesmen, and knockabout types'.

He had to investigate road accidents. The first on the Corin Road was where a semi was taking up bridge timber and it lost traction on the icy road. The driver got out to chock the wheels, slipped, and was hit by another vehicle. There were numbers of times when people had accidents and ran away from their cars to try to avoid trouble because they'd been drinking.

At Corin the main types of offences occurring at the site were theft from men's rooms and food from the kitchen, a big theft of diamond drills, and some serious assaults. Gambling and SP bookmaking also attracted attention from detectives. As it took an hour to get to Corin the police response time was unavoidably slow. Peter at first drove a police VW beetle and from 1966 a Holden ute. His inspector Horrie Graingel claimed that Peter's predecessor twice removed had died of osteo-arthritis as a result of driving the cold rural areas in a canvas-topped Land Rover, so there was no 4WD for the rural policeman.

Another incident that Peter investigated at Corin was the fire in the camp [this occurred in May 1967]. Either G or H block was burned to the ground one morning. Forty men lost all their gear. Peter disclosed that the fire was started when a Canadian worker had left a plastic rainjacket on a radiator to warm it up, left the room briefly, and came back to find his room alight. The whole block burnt in a half an hour. The Canadian left Corin soon after giving his statement to Peter.

In order to more successfully serve warrants etc, Peter struck up a deal with the Corin paymaster. On pay-days Peter would wait in the back of the pay office and the paymaster, knowing the identity of the people Peter sought that day, would say to the individuals concerned when they arrived for their pay that they should also see the constable.

Only one or twice did Peter have to physically apprehend people in the camp pubs (there were two pubs). He was rostered 9 to 5 so wasn't up at the camp at night when the worst 'antisocial behaviour' occurred. Generally the camp was well run and not very troublesome. Management assisted Peter in his work. One of the Thiess people had told him that the company expected a death on the site for every million pounds of the contract, such was the nature of dam work [as mentioned earlier in this report, the contract was over 8 million dollars, or 4 million pounds; no-one died at Corin].

Of the weather at Corin, Peter says 'it was a freezing cold, unhospitable sort of place. It was either covered in mud up to your ankles, or bulldust in summer. In winter it was freezing, there was ice and snow everywhere'. Peter was issued with gumboots. The camp buildings were well heated.

The only women Peter knew of at Corin, were prostitutes. 'It was a well known fact that on Friday afternoons 2 or 3 prostitutes from Sydney would be flown down and they'd be picked up by a Queanbeyan taxi and taken up there to operate for the weekend. And then return to Sydney on Sunday afternoon. The detectives became aware of that and undertook some operations up there, I think with some success. But it didn't stem the girls coming down from Sydney on a regular basis.' There was an allegation that police were involved in a protection racket relating to [certain criminal offences]. The matter was investigated and a well known detective sergeant was sacked as a result. 'Construction sites are well known for prostitution and illegal gambling.'

Corin did not seem too isolated to Peter, though he came from a country background. The Corin road was the only sealed rural road in the ACT at the time [the road from the Cotter to Tidbinbilla Tracking Station was also sealed. Honeysuckle may have been sealed too, and the road to Orroral Tracking Station].

Regarding the construction aspect itself, Peter had never seen anything like it before. He was struck by the enormity of the area cleared for the reservoir and the height of the top water level. The building of the wall was also impressive, and the site was quite noisy.

Poon Bros were the caterers at the camp and had catered to Snowy camps. The company was from Queensland, and while it may have been run by Chinese men, the staff at Corin were not Chinese. Peter says they were good caterers and the food was enjoyable. Millers beer was available at the camp and it was one of only two places in the ACT where you could get this Sydney beer.

Peter had to drive the haul road between the quarry and the wall. 'Having to wend my way through these monstrous great rock-carting machines — and me in my little Volkswagen car!' His VW had winter tread tyres but financial cuts saw it fitted with recaps. Being rear-engined and having weight over the back wheels, the car handled the snow well. The men were driven to the dam from the camp in a Leyland Hippo truck, which carried 20 or 30 men, via the road running straight down from the camp (not the road used today).

Regarding the Bendora Gravity Main, Peter was 'amazed at how engineers could design a pipeline that went from Bendora Dam to the Cotter and went vertically straight up hills and then down the other side. And how it was going to be gravity fed I didn't know'.

Nat Harrison's machinery looked old, but was operated 'in the most dangerous terrain you'd ever wish to go into...The expertise of those operators was something I was amazed at'. Peter saw one particularly bad accident. He stopped on the pipeline access road at Mineshaft Hill to go to the toilet, and heard a man screaming. Down in the bush was a man pinned under a front end loader which had run off the road. As well as fractures, the man had battery acid dripping on him. He was rescued and saved. There were a couple of other car accidents, and there is a dozer over the edge which has never been recovered.

Tape 1 Side B

A couple of dumptrucks also crashed but were recovered. Some of the inclines were too steep for Peter's car so he had to walk.

In serving summonses here, Peter was able to serve them substitute upon the camp manager and pin a notice on the mess wall marked 'To whom it may concern'. Almost all the men involved contacted Peter rather than avoided the summons.

Axel Nielsen was a worker on the pipeline. He was in administration, based at the office near the Cotter Pumping Station. Later he ran the Cotter Hotel for a time.

The camp was 'pretty basic', smaller than Corin, catering to 40 to 50 men. It was located on the east side of where the Pipeline Road crosses the Cotter. There was a wet canteen but no great problems as a result of alcohol. Peter feels that drink doesn't really exacerbate crime. He also says [apparently referring to Corin as well as the main] 'the police probably didn't hear of about a third of what went on up there. And the workers would sort it out amongst themselves'.

One day at Corin, two detectives [although their names are given on the tape, Peter later advised that these names were incorrect, but the story is still true] went to the workshop to interview a man .. While they were talking, another man appeared from behind a machine and with a big hammer felled the first man right in front of the detectives. Obviously he didn't want the first man to reveal information. 'It was the easiest arrest that [the detectives] ever made.' The victim had a fractured skull.

The gravity main, like Corin, was muddy in winter and dusty in summer. Without protective clothing Peter got pretty dirty. He recalls barriers below the camp to stop runoff into the Cotter River. He is unaware of any health checks on workers as a pollution measure.

Reflecting on his times at Corin and on the main, Peter says 'as a young constable...it was a great experience I think, because I learned to deal with men in a pretty rough environment, and you learn how to talk to people...and to respect their way of life and code of conduct'. He had to take less notice of swearing up there than he would in Civic.

He talks of the Cotter Valley as 'pristine and lovely' and has taken his family there. The construction projects were not regrettable in this regard because the existing dams were unable to meet Canberra's water needs and Corin and the main were necessary. On the other hand, Peter feels that the mooted dam at Naas would be unfortunate as it would mean the loss of 'valuable' land which was producing income for local farmers, farmers with whom he sympathised when investigation drilling was underway there.