

Crime Interrupted

An AFP and Casefile Presents podcast.

Episode 5, Operation Okesi transcript.

Host – introduction

The Australian Federal Police – or AFP for short – is Australia’s national policing agency. Its aim? To outsmart serious crime with intelligent action. Officers from the AFP work with local, national, and international agencies to combat serious criminal threats. Their work includes counter terrorism, serious organised crime, human trafficking, cybercrime, fraud, and child exploitation. The AFP exists to disrupt major criminal operations. In 2020-21, they did that over 400 times. They seized 38 tonnes of illicit drugs and precursors, and assisted overseas police services in seizing 19 tonnes of drugs. The AFP charged 235 people with child exploitation, and charged 25 people following terrorism investigations.

We’ve got exclusive access to the AFP case vault and personnel to provide you with in-depth insight into how they investigated and interrupted the most serious of crimes to stay a step ahead.

[theme music]

Host

Operation Okesi began in July 2014 and ran for two and a half years. It all began when information was received about a group of men planning a big drug importation.

Detective Sergeant Brett Smith had worked for the AFP for nearly 25 years when he began Operation Okesi. He had the perfect investigative background to run the operation. He had moved between the areas of drug investigation to organised crime to surveillance and back again. Brett was running a team of investigators when Operation Okesi began in July 2014.

Brett Smith (2.30)

When a referral comes in, our management will decide whether they’re going to take it on, and if so, where it’s going to go to. This was accepted by the AFP in July ’14 and referred to the organised crime unit and our team for further investigation.

Host

Job referrals come from all sorts of different places. In this case, someone had contacted the police about information they heard: two men had been discussing bringing large quantities of cocaine into Australia. We are going to refer to them as the Fisherman, who operated a fishing trawler and worked out of the Sydney Fish Markets, and his cousin, the Englishman. When their names were passed on to the AFP, the AFP officers put them under surveillance. Once intel began coming in from covert operations, it became clear that the original suspicion warranted further investigation. They were definitely planning something. Then once the men began meeting with a seasoned crook called the Spaniard, the AFP knew that he was potentially a significant player.

Most crimes are investigated after a crime has occurred. You identify the crime, then you work backwards from there to find out what happened. With an operation like Okesi, and like much of the work the AFP does to stay a step ahead, it's the opposite because the crime was still in the planning stage.

Brett Smith (4.05)

If a murder or an armed robbery or whatever the crime's happened, and police are working back to the event, in a major drug importation like this, it's obviously in the future, sometimes it could be well into the future. So, you're basically investigating in a different direction.

Host

At the point of origin, the crime for Operation Okesi was theoretical. In order to determine whether the job was worth putting resources into, there are a series of questions that need to be answered. The first question is: Is the information legitimate? And the second question is: Do those involved have the capability to do it? In this case, the men involved had the means.

Brett Smith (4.50)

Obviously, they had access to the fishing boats. The Englishman had a lot of priors in the drug trade. And once we became aware that the Spaniard was involved, who was a long-term target of the AFP and a very highly intelligent and good criminal, that gave it a legitimacy that we knew that there was something to it, and allowed us to continue and get resources, towards investigating it further.

Host

Investigations told the AFP that the syndicate of men were planning to import huge quantities of cocaine and heroin into Australia. Surveillance operatives followed members of the syndicate around Sydney as they met in parks and cafes to discuss how they would bring the drugs into the country. Talk usually centred around taking fishing trawlers out into international waters and meeting a drug courier vessel and transferring the drugs at sea. The syndicate members arranged for a practice run to where they would bring 30 kilograms of heroin to be imported from Fiji to Australia, via sea transfer. Part of the test was whether the Fisherman was up to the task.

Brett Smith (6.03)

Because the Fishermen was not a career criminal, and the syndicate was keen to see how he would be able to successfully do it. And so to the other guys that they can do things of this magnitude, and that he's a viable option for future much larger importations.

Host

We aren't going to say too much about police undercover work in order to protect the men and women who do this job, but an undercover operative was used in Operation Okesi. His role would be an important one.

Brett Smith (6.36)

Any undercover that you're trying to insert into a syndicate, obviously it has to just be filling a role that would be filled by someone else. Police aren't able to manipulate the investigation

beyond that. It's looking for a gap and filling a gap that would otherwise be filled by just another criminal if the police undercover operative wasn't there.

Host

With the undercover operative in play, and extensive surveillance watching him, the members of Operation Okesi recorded meetings between the main players. When members of the syndicate began talking about bringing a drug importation in from Fiji, the Fisherman asked the undercover operative to go to Fiji and check things out.

Brett Smith (7.22)

The Fishermen wanted the undercover to go to Fiji, basically meet a contact over there, discuss the importation, also go and have a look at the other fishing vessel and meet the crew, and then report back to the Fishermen that, yes, this was okay, that these guys were good to work with, and basically that was his role in this initial stages.

Host

The men in the syndicate met regularly to discuss the Fiji plan. It gave the AFP the chance to find out how they were planning to bring the drugs into the country.

Brett Smith (7.55)

They had a couple of regular parks and cafes that they would meet. They're very much creatures of habit. So that provided us with an opportunity to get recording devices and record conversations in these places. There was a lot of talk about that it would be transported from the vessel to Fiji, but then met by another vessel out at sea here and brought ashore.

Host

When the undercover operative was asked by the Fisherman to travel to Fiji, the AFP had to quickly put together a team to go over there with him.

Brett Smith (8.28)

All of a sudden in early December, the pace quickened, and it was clear, that it was going ahead, but it came basically within the space of a week, it became apparent that okay, it's a goer, and that there was drugs on the water that would be landing in Fiji in middle of December, and basically picked up pace from that time. And then the undercover operative was given a secure phone, probably a couple of days before he left.

Host

When an unexpected trip comes up just weeks before Christmas, Brett had to organise the AFP's involvement very quickly.

Brett Smith (9.00)

In this situation, you actually had three agencies, all who had a stake. The New South Wales had the undercover. We were having the AFP running the investigation and having the Fiji police come on board. Organisationally, they had to be pulled together very quickly.

Host

When Brett had a new recruit – Angela Majdandzic – join Operation Okesi, he knew that taking her on the Fiji trip would provide her with some great learning experiences.

Brett Smith (9.28)

I saw tremendous potential in her. I thought this would give her a bit of a view into the bigger picture; you so far just saw what happens in Sydney and what we're doing on our little team. But this will give you an idea of how we work with partner agencies and offshore with other countries.

Host

When Brett told her she would need an official passport, Angela was excited to see an overseas drug meeting up close.

Angela Majdandzic (9.54)

When Operation Okesi came to our team, it was a lot for me to process. Given that Brett had seen this time and time again, I was still trying to completely comprehend where does one even begin with an investigation like this?

Host

An added bonus was that Angela was young and she could blend in as a tourist.

Angela Majdandzic (10.17)

Not only did Brett want me to come to Fiji to witness what an investigation would look like, but I did have a role and that role was to assist in identifying things, being able to blend in, be a tourist, essentially not bring any attention to what we were doing. There was a time that one of the targets had gone to the Sofitel and Brett had said to me, 'Could you go in and check where they're situated and where they're seated?' And it was quite funny. Brett, even having to step back and just say to me, just walk through and see where they're situated in the restaurant. I was going to be witness to something that was happening. The crime unfolding in front of you essentially.

Host

When the AFP landed in Fiji, they worked with the local island police force's transnational crime unit. The Fijian law enforcement wanted to use their own surveillance teams which Brett and Angela needed to coordinate.

Brett Smith (11.23)

They said, 'We have our own surveillance team of locals.' We could do that, confident in the knowledge that when they said they'd have a team of locals, it would be a team of local Fijian surveillance police who had all previously been trained by the AFP. So in some countries that might be a concern, but in this case it was absolutely fine. Yeah, it worked out very well.

Host

The undercover operative's tasks were: to get to Fiji, meet connections, and check the boat. He looked at a boat and met a potential crew. One of the contacts the undercover operative had to meet was a man originally from Laos but who was now an Australian citizen. We are going to call him Egan. Fijian surveillance followed Egan after he met with the Australian undercover

operative. With the undercover operative met with Egan, Angela got her first look at big scale drug dealers operating in plain sight.

Angela Majdandzic (12.22)

I remember distinctly I had seen who the target was, Egan at that point. I was quite shocked at how young he was. He was quite young, quite trendy. You wouldn't bat an eyelid at him. So that was what shocked me, but also on the flip side, what also shocked me was having witnessed the UC, was how young, how hip, I guess, how funky they were and how they had blended in. It's something, I guess, you see in the movies, but when you see it unfold in front of you, you're like, 'Oh, wow. It really is what it looks like in the movies.'

Host

Fijian surveillance followed Egan who met with a corrupt local official.

Brett Smith (13.05)

The UCO on about the 12th or 13th of December met Egan, who had flown in from Laos. They had the discussion in relation to the importation. After that, the Fijian police followed Egan, and he went and saw a local Fijian male, who the Fijians ultimately, that was how they identified that that was the person that was their issue in terms of the corrupt local authority.

Host

The corrupt local authority was in possession of the drugs and Egan had led police straight to him. The Fijians moved into the resolution phase. In a surprise move, something spooked Egan and he messaged the undercover that he was leaving Fiji that night and suggested he do the same.

Brett Smith (13.52)

The undercover got a message from Egan saying that he was a bit concerned and he was going to leave the country today. He suggested that the UCO also leave, which the UCO had left in the afternoon. Fortunately, that's before him. When Egan when to leave later that night, after discussions with the Fijian police, it was decided that they would start to go into resolution mode. They stopped Egan at customs. He was charged, had excess currency. He was charged with that as a holding offence. So he was charged with I think, \$15,000 of excess currency. And then that allowed them to keep him out of play over the next three or four days.

Host

The excess currency charge was enough to hold Egan until the locals could find the drugs.

Brett Smith (14.40)

They then focused on the corrupt contact that he'd led them to. And in subsequent three or four days, we located the drugs were in a container at Lautoka Wharf in these quad bikes. And obviously once that had happened, then Egan was charged with that as well.

Host

Hidden in the quad bikes was 30 kilograms of heroin. It was a stroke of luck for the AFP and the New South Wales police undercover operative. Since Egan had advised him to go, it gave

him the chance to legitimately leave Fiji in the eyes of the syndicate and put distance between him and the huge drug seizure.

Brett Smith (15.18)

It allowed him to legitimately leave early cause he'd been instructed by the guy that knew the locals there. I don't know that we knew whether he, Egan really was spooked or whether it was he wanted to get out of the country before the drugs became accessible. But it worked in the police's favour on both parts, from New South Wales to get the undercover back in a legitimate way that it would play the syndicate. And it worked also for us because it could also localise the resolution phase.

Host

Brett and Angela got back to Australia on December 23rd. On the flight home, Angela reflected about her time in Fiji.

Angela Majdandzic (15.57)

I remembered how fortunate I was so early in my career to have this opportunity. And that was something that never left me because I had learnt that that opportunity so early on had actually put me on a really wonderful path moving forward in my career in gaining that understanding of what it took to not only run an investigation, be a part of it, but to also understand all the moving parts of it.

Host

Jobs like Operation Okesi have no respect for the Christmas holiday. As the news of the drug bust in Fiji trickled back to the syndicate, their phones rang hot as they tried to work out what went wrong.

Brett Smith (16.41)

We get back just before Christmas, but there's obviously a huge fallout for the syndicate members here, getting little pieces of information. They're scrambling trying to find out what's happened. Obviously, Egan's phone contact on the secure phone stops. That Christmas period that it just calls back and forth, as well as the investigation side of things. It was very hectic.

Host

After Fiji, the drug dealers lay low for a while. Luckily for Operation Okesi, they decided it looked like a local thing and they didn't make the connection back to Australia with the drug seizures in Fiji.

Brett Smith (17.20)

It would appear that the Fijian police had been following this corrupt member. They'd identified Egan. It wasn't clear to the syndicate, but it did legitimise that all this could be a local thing here and Fijian police could get credit for it. And our importation back in Sydney could hopefully continue along with them being able to write off that was a local matter over there.

Host

By this time, the Englishman was getting desperate. He had sunk money into the drug importation schemes and so far, all attempts to bring drugs into Australia had ended badly.

Schemes like this can become like a gambling addiction. They gamble money and lose, and it seemed their preferred way out was to gamble more, rather than cut their losses.

Brett Smith (18.09)

It became quite chaotic at that time in terms of the syndicate, because the Englishman who was a career criminal, who would probably seen his better days, but he was quite desperate at that time. This was now January, February. So what he'd originally planned in July '14, we're now six months down the track. Not only has he not made any money, they've had one seizure of drugs seized. So he's got nothing for that. Plus they've input the money. He became quite desperate. He would come up with numerous different plans. There'd be talk of a Spanish importation. There'd be talk of a Colombian importation. And just trying to give weight and, and decide what was plausible and what was just um, the Englishman clutching at straws and trying to pull something together, was quite chaotic at that time.

Host

With the undercover operative still in play, the members of Operation Okesi kept the syndicate members under constant surveillance and soon, the next plot emerged. In a trawler called The Eclipse, the Fisherman and a crew would sail out to meet a Columbian boat and bring back 400 kilos of drugs. In May 2015, the Fisherman sailed The Eclipse 200 nautical miles outside Australian waters, to attempt to meet up with the Columbians. The Fisherman had a satellite phone and a number to call the Columbian mothership.

Brett Smith (19.35)

The plan being that he would sail all the way out to, into international waters in The Eclipse, meet with the mothership and offload the drugs in international waters. He would then sail back and meet the family members on the vessel that they were on and transfer the drugs to that for transportation back to Australia. Obviously, it fell apart when he was out there and he just had the Columbia number that he was trying to contact. He could not get through to this number. And basically, in the end, just after two or three days, just abandoned the venture and they all sailed back into Australia.

Host

In one lighter moment of the long drug investigation, the AFP were able to identify a covert phone the Fisherman had.

Brett Smith (20.21)

It's a bit of a funny story, how we located the number of his new covert phone was that after he'd come back, he was quite distressed. He wanted to call the Englishman to basically say what happened. 'I sat out there for three to four days and got nothing. Couldn't get in contact with the number.' Obviously, we're recording his conversation at this time, and there was various listening devices in place. He was sitting in his lounge room basically talking to himself that, 'Where did I put that other phone?' Ends up doing, as we all do on occasions: 'Oh, I'll dial that phone.' You hear another phone ring that's oh, slipped down the back of the couch or whatever. Picked up that phone. And then that's so that, by that way, that's how we identified his covert phone that he'd lost it and needed it gently to ring the Englishman. So from that point, obviously shortly thereafter, that phone was intercepted, and we got further

conversations on. At the time, I think the guys in the office were saying, 'That could be something I do.' And of course it is. We will all do that. So that's how we identified that phone.

Host

Meanwhile, the Englishman was getting more and more desperate. He'd just gotten out of jail and was struggling to find ways to make fast money. His desperation led to cracks in the syndicate.

Brett Smith (21.40)

He was desperate for money. There was at one point, money got so tight, the Englishman and his brother were arguing over... their mother gave one of them \$10 to buy fish and chips or something. And an argument between the two brothers came out over that. They were literally down to bare bones. That was the problem that the Englishman then and his brother would come up with these desperate plans. The Spaniard had a lot of loyalty to the Englishman, but I think he started to lose credibility in the Spaniard's eyes. I believe that's why the Spaniard started to you know, distance himself. I think the person that he dealt with previously, he now thought that he wasn't the crook that he once was. And so he, he started to back away.

Host

It was up to the operatives of Operation Okesi to keep tabs on a growing number of syndicate members. The Spaniard was trying to distance himself from the syndicate and organise other jobs. Meanwhile, the Englishman kept the Fisherman on the hook by promising wildly inaccurate amounts of money once the importation took place.

Brett Smith (22.42)

Because the Fishermen wasn't a career criminal he didn't know exactly what money was available. He would rely on some things of what the Englishman would tell him. One week, you'd hear, 'Oh, there's a million in it for each for us, or, 'We'll make 10 million.' It would change, and he didn't really have the background knowledge. He was relying on his information from someone who was very desperate and would tell him whatever he wanted to hear to keep him in play.

Host

Operations like Okesi can take years of investigation and years more to get through the court system. About a year into the investigation, there was a shuffle of personnel. New recruits like Angela were moved around so they could get a broader picture of the AFP. Coincidentally, officer Joel Rivers was her replacement. Angela and Joel joined the AFP at the same time and had been through recruit college together. Joel would spend five months familiarising himself with Operation Okesi before Brett himself transferred out.

Brett Smith (23.50)

He was incredibly dedicated, had incredible, tremendous knowledge of the job. I'd been doing this job for a year at the time. When you were on an investigation that size, you invest so much time and effort into it. You really do treat it like a kid almost in a sense. You don't want to let go, but because I knew that the person that was coming back from overseas to run the investigation; excellent investigator, long track record of successfully running large scale investigations, and that he would have also Joel, who had an intimate knowledge of the job, and was incredibly dedicated to it and invested in it, it allowed me to feel like okay, I can let

go. And I can transfer knowing that this job's is going to be given the attention and dedication that it deserves. So that made it easy for me to, to transfer.

Host

Joel had been a primary school teacher prior to joining the AFP. While it might seem like an unlikely foundation, what teaching taught Joel was that a lot of it is about planning, collecting data, documenting it, then using it to target effective instruction. Being a stickler for paperwork and organisation, Joel was a great addition to the team particularly as the case progressed to what they thought was resolution phase.

Joel Rivers (25.07)

When I first graduated from police college, I was put in fraud, anti-corruption and most of our jobs were related to fraud. Looking back at it now, it allowed me to understand the importance of the paperwork, and the recording that needs to go into any investigation that you do, how vital that can be when you want to go back and try and find information, or when you're trying to piece together some information.

Host

For Joel, the best way to find out the intricacies of the huge operation that Okesi had become was through the paperwork.

Joel Rivers (25.42)

I think what I also learnt that was a really good lesson was that if you are coming into a job and you need to fully understand what that job is, or you want to work out the narrative of that job and get your head around it, doing the paperwork, whether it writing the affidavits for search warrants or telephone intercepts or listening devices, or even just the statement of facts as you go through, is a really good way to understand what has happened. Who was who? Who were the targets? What have you tried? What evidence do you have and where are the holes in your brief of evidence that you might need to plug, going forward.

Host

Once Brett moved on, and the new team leader came in, Joel took over as case officer.

Joel Rivers (26.26)

Brett was leaving organised crime to move to surveillance and we were getting a new team leader, and I was fortunate enough at that time for Brett to ask me to be the case officer of Operation Okesi. There'd been a lot of work put into it previously and it felt like quite an honour to be asked to do it.

Host

Operation Okesi was playing the long game alongside the syndicate organising the major drug importation. Like Brett before him, Joel found out what it was like to investigate forward rather than back, trying to anticipate what would come next. As the syndicate was trying to work out what went wrong with the Eclipse meet-up in international waters, the AFP was just as curious. To complicate matters, the Englishman was facing state-based drug charges.

Joel Rivers (27.18)

We were able to intercept phone calls between the Fishermen and an unknown person overseas. So we knew that the Eclipse run was a legitimate attempt. We knew that they were talking to people overseas who were saying that the incoming vessel would be there a certain time and date, at a certain location. And that he had to be there that time. So it wasn't that we thought it was made up. It was a legitimate attempt by them that just happened to fail. So, the Fishermen wanted answers. He was trying to get on to the Englishman. As time went by, the same issue came about that the Englishman was facing other state-based drug charges. And I don't think he had answers himself, so he wasn't sure why it hadn't turned up. There'll be, just that there'll be another opportunity for them to do this again. And as we were trying to work out what had happened along with the bits of evidence that we were getting from numerous players, the Englishman, to avoid his state-based drug charges, he went into hiding.

Host

With the Englishman on the run, the operatives working Operation Okesi had to see if the syndicate still had potential.

Joel Rivers (28.41)

The Englishman's brother would take out money out of the account that we knew the Englishman had. And so trying to also find out what the Englishman's brother was doing, which would lead us to the Englishman. So, there's many sort of offshoots at this point in time, this ran over a couple of months of trying to work out what was going on.

Host

The added complication was that while the Englishman had skipped out on state-based drug charges, the AFP had to make it look like the New South Wales police were looking for him, rather than them. If he knew the AFP were after him, he'd know they knew about the bigger importation plans. It was at this time, another man entered the picture. We are going to call him the Sparrow.

Joel Rivers (29.26)

So as that side of the operation was going on, in conjunction with AFP and New South Wales, we were looking for the Englishman. One Saturday, the Englishman's brother turned up, and picked up the Fishermen and said, he's got someone that he wants him to meet. And he said, okay and so they drove to a park in Double Bay. And then they met a third individual. We knew this was unusual for them; this wasn't an area that they would generally go to. And so we had to then work out who the third individual was. We had an idea the Englishman's brother was a go-between for his brother. So, we thought another importation might be on the cards. We later identified the third individual as the Sparrow. The Sparrow had a contact who could bring drugs from overseas. They need someone who could go out and pick up the drugs, pretty much the same as the Eclipse. They need someone who could put a boat and a crew together to go into international waters and do a drug transfer at sea, and then safely and quietly bring those drugs back into a designated point on the east coast.

Host

The more meetings that took place, the more the AFP operatives knew that the syndicate was going to make its third attempt. In the meantime, their surveillance was so wide that they

noticed a contact delivering food to a motel on several occasions. It turned out, he was delivering food to the Englishman who was then arrested. And then it was back to surveillance.

Joel Rivers (31.06)

When drug importations occur, it's not like it runs to a set schedule, so they might be talking about it for months. They might plan for a certain date, but there's so many things from their point of view that are out of their control. When does the boat leave? Does it hit bad weather? Does it actually have as much on it as they have led to believe? And so, it feels like you're waiting for quite a while. You're getting the same information said at meetings that you're able to capture. And we're fortunate that we're able to capture a lot of discussion about what was happening, what was going on, what they planned to do. On one occasion in Double Bay, we captured a conversation which Sparrow described what was going to be on the boat, the type of boat it was, there was going to be 610 kilos. I don't believe he said the actual drug, but we believed it was from where we thought it was coming from, it would be cocaine, but it was 610 kilos, described the types of wrappings that would have, the blocks it was in, so it would be in 20 kilo bags, with one kilo blocks. And it would be wrapped in a very specific kind of way. And, the type of boat that would come across. So we knew at that point that it was legitimate. It's not something that you would make up, 610 is a very specific amount of drugs, the wrappings, a very specific way of doing it, and sort of discussed the general route that the boat would take and whether that was the safest route and what, what was going to happen.

Host

Using their overseas networks and the coordinates discussed by the syndicate, the AFP could pinpoint the boat which turned out to be a yacht. But instead of meeting the Australian boat to transfer the drugs, the yacht was intercepted by the French navy.

Joel Rivers (32.54)

The incoming yacht just had been acting suspicious and went through French territorial waters to the point of the French Navy decided to board that vessel. The vessel's in their waters. That's their decision to make. We believe this is our incoming yacht. And so they did board the vessel. They found 610 kilos of cocaine, pretty much wrapped exactly as the Sparrow had described it.

Host

The boat stopped by the French navy fit the description of the boat the syndicate members intended meeting. Adding weight to the conclusion that it was the target boat, was the fact that when the syndicate got news of its capture, they turned their boat around and returned to Sydney.

Joel Rivers (33.39)

We made a request to French authorities in order to gain access to the evidence that, that boat and the drugs provided for prosecution in Australia.

Host

To build the case, Joel went to Tahiti where the yacht had been taken by French authorities, to meet with law enforcement there and to look at the evidence they had.

Joel Rivers (34.03)

While the evidence and the drugs were in Tahiti, a judge had been appointed from Paris to oversee that investigation. So we had to liaise with the judge in Paris in order to get permission to access the evidence. So once the evidence by the French is put into evidence bags and sealed, no one can give permission to open that evidence or look at that evidence, except the judge that's in charge of that case. So that took a little bit of time, but that was very important that we were able to gain access to that information and that evidence, in a manner that fitted evidential standards for our courts, otherwise we weren't going to be able to prosecute them for this attempted import.

Host

In Tahiti, Joel saw enough evidence in the form of nautical maps and satellite phones to link the yacht with the syndicate. The case was building. Back home, the members of the syndicate were nothing, if not persistent. Even though they lacked success in all of their ideas to date, they began planning the next iteration of their drug importation scheme. Taking over as case officer, meant that Joel became an expert at making decisions, and quickly. He also utilised all the resources available to the team.

Joel Rivers (35.30)

There were times where we would use New South Wales police. We would use their surveillance teams, their technical teams, AFP surveillance teams, AFP technical teams, to try and capture as much evidence as possible, but it got to a point where we had a large number of syndicate members doing things all the time. You would only find out if we intercept a text message saying, 'Do you want to meet for a coffee in an hour?' And we'd just have to drop everything we were doing and run out and do it. There were many times you'd be in the office late in the afternoon, a text would come through. There was no time to get any other support areas in place. We had to take what equipment that we had, what we're able to do and try and beat them. And sometimes you're guessing the location that they were going to. You would send a couple of people to different locations and just see who was right, and really try and get in place before they were there so we could capture a conversation.

Host

After all the failed attempts to import huge quantities of drugs into Australia, and having no idea they were being thwarted along the way by Operation Okesi, the syndicate kept planning for the next big haul. They had already sunk a considerable amount of time and money into the endeavour; too much to cut their losses and run.

Joel Rivers (36.53)

It had all failed as far as they were aware, just through other circumstances and maybe bad luck, but it wasn't because they were being watched, or that the police knew what they were doing. So, over the next couple of weeks or months, they become more comfortable in organising another attempt.

Host

The Sparrow organised a fourth attempt. Even though the Fisherman had proven loyal and capable in the first three attempts, the Sparrow's overseas contact said they would send an inspector out to check his boat. And just to make things more complicated, the Englishman's brother wanted the Fisherman to do another job on the side.

Joel Rivers (37.36)

We were able to work out that Sparrow's contact was the person called Hooper, and so Hooper was liaising with overseas and telling Sparrow and the Fishermen, what they needed. And it was very smooth because they knew that when Hooper said he would have drugs coming across from overseas, that it was legitimate and it would happen. So, while that was going on, the Englishman's brother turned up and asked the Fishermen to go to a meeting. The meeting was in a different park in Double Bay. And they met with a person we identified as Warren. Warren informed that they had a consignment of drugs that was coming from Asia, that it would be 400 kilos of methamphetamines. And could the fishermen help them out, and at that point of time, it wasn't can you do it, but can you help us out where it be a boat or a crew?

Host

We will call the next two phases of Operation Okesi, the fourth attempt and the fifth attempt. With the split between watching the Sparrow and watching Warren, the AFP had to monitor meetings from both jobs.

Joel Rivers (38.50)

Sparrow's contact Hooper had a legitimate job. We knew that it would be coming towards the end of 2016, but also as time went by, they realised because they had to wait so long for Hooper's job, that they could do Warren's job in between, as long as they didn't tell Hopper about it.

Host

Hooper gave the Fisherman \$50,000 as a show of good faith. This was further proof for the long running Operation Okesi that the new import was definitely going ahead.

Joel Rivers (39.23)

They used that \$50,000 to buy a rib boat, which is a rigid hold inflatable boat sort of like the Navy. So they can take it off the fishing boat and go out to the yacht and transport the drugs back and across. The issue that they had with a big fishing boat is you can't get too close to it at sea to a yacht, because if you start smashing together the yacht doesn't have a chance against a big fishing boat. So they needed some way to transport it.

Host

Once the inspector flew in from overseas, the large scale drug importation grew closer. In such a long and complex operation, Okesi had its tense moments. The Fisherman and Sparrow purchased the rib boat but needed to test it locally before using it for the ocean transfer of drugs. They planned a dry run up the Hawksbury River. The men were under surveillance and the AFP operatives watching them knew they only intended the trip to be a short one. But then, they didn't come back.

Joel Rivers (40.30)

They needed to test the rib and Sparrow wasn't a seasoned fishermen, I don't think he'd ever been on a boat in his life but the captain and Sparrow took the rib up to the Hawkesbury Valley and we were fortunate enough to be able to follow them up there with our surveillance team. This was going to be a quick run, just test it out, see how it goes up to a certain property, how quickly they could get there and back. And so we're like, well, that's fine. We'll wait and see what happens here. And we'll just keep watching. And so a couple of hours went past, nothing, nothing happened. Late that night, like many hours went past, we're talking like eight, nine hours went passed, something like that. And late that night, the rib comes putting back in. During that time, we were quite concerned because one, what have we missed? Where have they gone? What have we missed? And so we're trying to scramble to find out what was happening there. We had surveillance on them. They load the rib up and they head back down to the fish markets. We intercepted a call later on that they, during the test, they had forgotten to fill the rib up with petrol and there was no oars or anything in the boat. And not far up the Hawkesbury Valley, they had run out of petrol on the rib and had to just float for a while and then try and make their way somehow, down the river to try and find someone who would help them and tow them back to get petrol. So for all our fussing, it was legitimately, they just had run out of petrol.

Host

The Fisherman agreed to both jobs. In October 2016, he bought a fishing boat from a friend. While the Sparrow couldn't go on this job, the Fisherman used the Sparrow's brother who was down from Queensland. More and more people were brought into the job. The telephone intercepts picked up that the Fisherman needed a captain. He found one to do the job, but the AFP found no indication that the captain and crew knew what the trip was for.

Joel Rivers (42.43)

They were told that it was going to be a fishing survey to check fishing grounds way off Australia, and to do water temperature testing and things like that.

Host

After leaving the east coast of Australia, a couple of things started to make the captain suspicious. That's when he was finally told that the trip was in fact a drug collection.

Joel Rivers (43.06)

And they were offered money to keep going, and to their credit, they said no. He turned the boat around. And so they had a bit of an issue of, they were on a time schedule to get to a certain location, but what do we do? There's six people on the boat. You're going to lose half of them because they don't want anything to do with it. It takes a lot of courage and that particular position to say, 'I'm not doing it.' And lucky for him, he made that decision, because it didn't turn out well for the others.

Host

It was agreed that the three crew members who didn't want to be a part of the drug pick-up would be dropped off on Lord Howe Island and those remaining would captain the ship.

Joel Rivers (43.46)

The problem being that they were already behind schedule. So when they got to the arranged destination, they were already late. They hung around for about a week also, hoping that the boat would come, trying and get in contact with the boat, trying to get in contact with the other side. And after a week, the Fishermen, just told them to turn around. And so for all that effort, that boat came back into the fish markets empty-handed again.

Host

And then it was time for Operation Okesi to move to the resolution stage. Unfortunately for the syndicate, their ultimate success in a huge drug importation would mark the moment they were arrested. A couple of weeks after the last failed meet up, the Fisherman and crew set sail for their final rendezvous.

The incoming yacht hit a storm and broke a mast. There were delays of several days, but finally, the AFP got confirmation that the crew were in sight of the yacht laden with drugs.

Joel Rivers (44.53)

By the 17th of December, it was, 'Yep, we can see the boat.' And that was pretty much it for a couple of hours. And then all we got was, 'We're on our way back.' It hadn't been confirmed whether the drug transfer was successful. So we knew the yacht, which was really beaten up, had turned around and was heading back into Fiji. From our understanding that had no drugs on board. Our fishing vessel had the drugs on board. By the time they got back, it was Christmas day, 2016. We believed that they had cocaine on board and at that point, the investigation was going to get a resolution and it was all going to wrap up.

Host

On Christmas night, they arrived back in Sydney. Even though Christmas had been chaotic for members of Operation Okesi over several years, there were hundreds of volunteers from the AFP, New South Wales Police, and the Australian Border Force to work Christmas Day and Boxing Day for the final resolution stage.

Joel Rivers (46.02)

Yeah, so the rib came into Brooklyn Bay, north of Sydney. That was driven by Sparrow, and waiting at the bay was the Fishermen. When the rib was first caught at the ramp there at Brooklyn Bay, it was uncertain how much drugs were on it. So at this point we didn't know what level the import was. And when we first searched the rib, there was only, 120 kilos that we could find. And it was like, well, it's a lot of effort for 120 kilos. When previous amounts had been 610, had been 400, were talked about. So, Hooper had contacts and the last one was 610. As the evening progressed into the next day though, there's a lot of storage space in that rib, and the investigators up at that location found more and more. So, by the time we found it all, it was 505 kilos of cocaine. There was probably about 35 warrants that were served. There was 15 people or 16 people arrested. There was warrants in New South Wales, in Brisbane, in Tasmania executed. There were search warrants and then we had to obviously seize the drugs, and forensics had to do their job on it. It was a big couple of days. Resolution started on Christmas day and ended four days later.

Host

Sometimes cocaine is called the party drug or the celebrity drug. But from Joel's experience, any arguments for or against the drug, usually stem from its effect. As far as he's concerned, the real issue is the multitude of lives it affects.

Joel Rivers (47.47)

One of the things that we learned from even the captain of the incoming vessel that stopped in Tahiti, is a lot of the people that are involved over there don't have a choice. So they're forced to do the job for the syndicates overseas. And I think that's something that's really important to remember. So while people may think there's no harm to having certain drugs here in Australia, there are many lives that are, that are really affected before it even gets to them. People are forced to do things. People are killed because of it. But even the crime that it creates when it comes to our shores. People are willing to pay for drugs. And there is violence that leads to that. There's crimes that lead to that. And so, when you talk about cocaine, it's the lives that can affect; it's the crime that comes with it, and the agony that comes with something like this.

Host

After two and a half years of investigation and 20 arrests, the court process can take even longer.

Joel Rivers (48.50)

We really put the brief together over a couple of years that was then presented for prosecution. And we were fortunate that a number of them pled guilty early. A number of them pled guilty after reading the brief, and then we had a number go to trial. So we had three Supreme Court trials back to back in end of 2019, I think it was and the start of 2020.

Host

As with any case like this, the gathered data is vast. Operation Okesi intercepted 425,000 phone calls and Joel listened to all of them and transcribed them. Five thousand of them were used in court. And after so many years of investigation and court preparation, the personnel from Operation Okesi waited for the verdicts.

Joel Rivers (49.46)

So, of the 20 that finally charged, 18 were either found guilty or pled guilty, and they were all held with, given prison time. For people who were just out on the boat, once assisting, and probably just being paid a small amount, from five years jail time, right up to like the Fishermen got over 40 years jail time. The Englishman, roughly about 20 years. The Englishman's brother was over 10. Hooper was given over 20. Sparrow was over 20. Warren was over 25 years. So, they were all quite lengthy custodial sentences.

Host

After it was all over, Joel took a well-earned break.

Joel Rivers (50.39)

But you're just relieved that it was done. I think it took a couple of days to understand that it was over. It was so weird after watching them for a couple of years from a distance or sitting next to them in cafes and really making an effort not to be known, to then arrest them and have to go and speak to them face to face and say, this is what we've done. It was really weird cause you knew everything about their lives, but they didn't have any idea who you were and essentially, we could put it to rest. And yes, it was going to affect the family members of those targets for a long period of time, and that's unfortunate, and there are some really good people who were affected by this who were completely unaware of what was going on and you do feel really sorry for them.

Host

For the original case officer, Brett Smith, Operation Okesi was the most complex and demanding investigation he had led during his 30 years of policing. But for Brett and the team, the resulting arrest of 20 drug traffickers and combined sentences of more than 350 years, meant the highest total sentence for a single investigation in Australian history. During the two-and-a-half-year investigation, law enforcement in Australia and around the world seized 30 kilograms of heroin, 4 kilograms of methamphetamine, and over 1.1 tonnes of cocaine. The AFP also seized 1.4 million dollars. It was a great result for the team of dedicated members of Operation Okesi.

Serious crime is getting seriously complex. To stay a step ahead, the AFP is recruiting people with diverse skillsets and backgrounds – just like AFP officers Brett, Angela and Joel, and the roles they played in interrupting over a tonne of cocaine hitting Australian shores and our streets as part of Operation Okesi.

After all, it takes all kinds to solve crime. With more than 200 roles across the organisation, in Australia and across the globe, you could help the AFP stay a step ahead too. Consider a career with the AFP.