

Search Among The Sunflowers: Episode 2 – Mapping A Tragedy

Narrator: Before we start, a word of warning that this podcast contains content some people may find distressing. It contains depictions of real-life traumatic events, including commentary around significant injuries and death. This episode also contains language that may be offensive for some people and is not suitable for children. Listener discretion is advised.

On July 17, 2014, Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 – en route from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur – came apart at 33,000 feet and crashed to the ground below, near the small village of Hrabove in Eastern Ukraine. 298 passengers and crew were on board. None would survive.

Half a world away, Australians began waking to media reports that a commercial passenger plane had been shot out of the sky. As relatives of those on board were having their worst fears confirmed, elsewhere, Australian agencies – including the AFP – were being swiftly mobilised. Their mission was to access the crash site to help recover the bodies of the victims.

But this was no ordinary mission. In an unprecedented move, unarmed AFP officers – alongside their international counterparts – would be entering an active conflict and faced with a logistical puzzle the likes of which many had never seen before.

Simon Walsh: I remember sitting straight up in bed and flicking the light on, just going, holy shit.

Hilda Sirec: We were just watching it on TV and all of a sudden my phone rang and I remember taking the phone call saying, yep you're deploying over to Ukraine.

Brian McDonald: He said you're gonna need to get back to Canberra and we need to get you over there as soon as we possibly can. So that was sort of my first exposure to what was coming.

Narrator: This is Search Among the Sunflowers, looking for truth in the world's biggest crime scene. It's a story of courage, determination and humanity, and the lifelong connections that can come from tragedy. It's also a story about the unwavering dedication of the Australian Federal Police in the pursuit of justice for victims of crime and the families left behind.

Episode 2.

Sir Angus Houston: We're just about to sit down for the first beer of the evening when the phone rang. And I looked at the, uh, mobile phone, Tony Abbott. I thought, oh yes, I think I know what's coming next. And he said, Angus, I want you to go to Kiev and I want you to lead the Australian efforts to recover our victims and also do a number of other things. And I said, yes Prime Minister, and I was on the first flight out of San Antonio the next morning to go into Kiev, or Kyiv, as they call it now.

Narrator: That's retired Air Chief Marshal Sir Angus Houston. In his unique role as the Prime Minister's Special Envoy in Ukraine, he became one of the key drivers of Australia's MH17 investigation.

A former head of the Australian Defence Force, Sir Angus would later describe the tragedy as an absolutely outrageous criminal act. Sir Angus's role in the investigation was complex – by turns a diplomatic minefield, logistically fraught, and utterly devastating. It was a role that required impeccable planning.

Sir Angus Houston: The first thing was to lead Australia's efforts in Ukraine to help recover, identify and repatriate the Australians killed in the crash. Once the site could be accessed, coordinate Australia's consular, diplomatic, disaster and crash site investigation response. And then work with international authorities on consular support for the Australian families, the disaster victim identification people from the AFP, and the crash investigators. And then, in close cooperation with the Ukraine government, ICAO, the International Civil Aviation Organisation, and international partners, work to ensure a comprehensive investigation into MH17 and make sure that it was done swiftly. The last thing that was emphasised was that the first priority was to recover the remains and secure a safe and sustained access to the crash site.

Narrator: In Canberra, AFP Commander Brian McDonald was working in counterterrorism. A veteran police officer with decades of international knowledge and experience, he'd heard the news that MH17 had crashed with a number of Australians on board. But it was unclear exactly what had caused the crash.

Brian McDonald: Where did it fit? Is it terrorism? Was it an act of war? Those sorts of conversations. But during the day on Friday, I had a heap of things to do. I was going away on the weekend with my family. So at the end of Friday, it had sort of diminished my thinking about MH17. That changed on the Sunday.

Narrator: Within 48 hours of MH17 coming down, the AFP were being called on to assist with the victim recovery mission. AFP Assistant Commissioner at the time, Neil Gaughan, was tasked with gathering the necessary expertise to lead the mission. He immediately contacted Brian McDonald.

Brian McDonald: I was due to go the following week to Jordan and I was due to travel over there as a representative of the AFP. It was a Sunday morning, I went down the coast with my family, uh, and I remember Neil Gaughan ringing me. And he said, I've got good news and bad news. He goes, the good news is you're not going to Jordan. The bad news is you're going to Ukraine for the MH17 crash.

Narrator: Brian was quickly deployed from Australia to lead the AFP's Forward Command Post in Ukraine. He would effectively head up the AFP's recovery and investigative operation, which became known as Operation Arew. To assist him, he also needed the best possible team.

Hilda Sirec was one of the first AFP officers to access the crash site and she brought with her a critical skillset.

Hilda Sirec: So I'd been a bomb technician then for about 10 to 11 years and had been able to make assessments on post-blast scenarios and fragmentation and the like, so across my skills the fact that I had worked in complex investigations, everything from sexual assault and child abuse, uh, drug matters and homicide, was factored in what Brian at the time was hoping to be able to put together a bit of a, a Tetris team to be able to cover every, uh, facet that might be required in that environment.

Brian McDonald: When I was initially deploying, I was deploying to lead the AFP and set up the AFP's investigation in relation to MH17. So my initial thought and the resources that I was putting in behind me was about the investigation and how we were gonna work that with the Dutch and with the Ukrainians.

So we'd selected a small team. There was some support people that were going with us and an investigation team. I remember Commissioner was Tony Negus and Tony was very keen for us to get there as soon as we possibly could. So we scurried and managed to get on a plane. And at that point, yeah, we believed we were going into London to sort of forward plan and forward run what was going to be the AFP's assistance to whatever international investigation was gonna take place.

Narrator: But it wouldn't be London. Nor would it be the Netherlands, as Brian McDonald was next told. The AFP's investigation – which was fast gaining traction in Australia and at outposts around the world – would now be based out of Kyiv, in Ukraine. It quickly became clear that the AFP had a crucial role to play.

The team the AFP was assembling comprised some of the organisation's most experienced investigators, forensic scientists, and disaster victim identification experts. It was a crack team, the best in their fields. But they were heading into an armed

conflict, and gaining access to the crash site would be a whole other issue. For that, the AFP required additional support.

Alexander Hug: We found a Ukrainian private helicopter company that agreed to fly us as close as possible, and as soon as possible, to the crash site. So we then geared up early morning from Kyiv with that chopper. We flew to Izyum and landed in some open field where colleagues of ours from our team in Kharkiv and from the teams in Donetsk and Luhansk, we were picked up in vehicles and then driven further south towards the crash site. We passed the last Ukrainian checkpoint on the way there. And I have to say that, at that time, there was no agreed frontline so it was at that time difficult to know who is in control of which area, but we knew from the Ukrainians that that was their last checkpoint because they would tell us that beyond that there would be a stretch where no one really had control.

Narrator: That's Alexander Hug, Deputy Chief Monitor for the OSCE – the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

In 2014, Alexander was heading up a Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine. Following Russia's annexation of Crimea earlier in the year, military tensions were building rapidly in the eastern part of Ukraine around Donbas. On one side, the Ukrainian military. On the other, Russia-backed separatists trying to assert their independence. The OSCE was tasked with being the diplomatic go-between.

Alexander Hug: The mandate was on the one hand side to monitor and report about the situation in, in Ukraine, including the security situation, but also the adherence to the OSCE principles and commitment, that is diplomatic language for human rights standards across Ukraine. And on the other hand, the mandate also tasked that mission to facilitate dialogue to ease tension.

Narrator: Alexander was no stranger to conflict. A lawyer who became a Swiss Army soldier, he'd been on the ground in Kosovo, Hebron, and been a commander in war-torn Bosnia. It was his negotiation and conflict resolution skills, often under threat from armed rebel forces, that paved the way for the AFP to gain access to the crash site.

Alexander Hug: We tried to understand the needs of the Australian police in order to be sure that we could trim our assistance and our dialogue facilitation properly for them. But that daily exchange was quite intensive, and it first was of course, always what task was at hand. So it was necessary to understand who would come, how many would come, what they would be doing to where they would need to go, how long they would stay, what equipment they would take with them. I also recall that there was the use of drones, for instance, that I think the Australian police wanted to use to survey the area.

There was also a risk in those fields of unexploded ordnance or mines. So you could not just simply stroll into it, that was an additional obstacle. I remember then that in that specific instance, there was also a need to talk to those armed men so that they would not be surprised at all that suddenly a drone would be up in the air, that they would know from where it would come and would open fire.

Brian McDonald: It's a massive crash site. You've got a lot of work to do. You know, putting up a drone is just something that you would normally do. And we took a drone operator with us because that's just to be able to map the site. So we were there and we were preparing to get the drone up, and all of a sudden I get an urgent message from Angus and he goes, "Are you guys gonna put a drone up?" I said, yeah, of course we are, you know, this is gonna make it far easier for us to be able to map and identify the priority areas. And he goes, "Don't. Stop it, right now." And that just struck me that there was some stuff taking place around where we were operating that we weren't aware of that, yeah, if we put a drone up, it was just gonna be too threatening for people.

Narrator: The MH17 crash site was, without doubt, a dangerous place. Riddled with unexploded mines and artillery, it was under constant surveillance by rebel forces. As strange as it sounds to send the AFP into a conflict like this and not the military, Sir Angus Houston believes that decision was critical.

Sir Angus Houston: Because it was a police-led force that deployed in there, it was much easier to negotiate access to the crash site. And of course, a non-military option was much less threatening than a military task force had that option been chosen.

Narrator: The remains of MH17 continued to cast haunting images amid the heat of a northern hemisphere summer. In field after field of sunflowers lay smoking debris, and bodies strewn across open areas, while some were hidden in the undergrowth. Children's toys rested alongside shattered wreckage. Documents and clothes had fluttered from the sky like leaves, then scattered across an area of 50 square kilometres. Potential evidence was everywhere but reaching it would be a challenge.

Alexander Hug: My first concern was the security and safety of my colleagues. So that was the dominant theme, to make sure that, uh, the team's integrity is maintained, uh, that the intimidation would be controlled to the degree that it would be possible, because of course, not all of my colleagues had been previously in a situation where they would be looking down the barrel of a gun while at work.

Narrator: These were extraordinary circumstances. The faster the AFP and their international counterparts could reach the crash site, the sooner they could recover the bodies of the victims. But for the AFP team led by Commander Brian McDonald, just getting to the crash site was a difficult task in itself.

Brian McDonald: Travel to and from the crash site was slow and delicate. We were travelling on a commercial bus, a bus driver that we'd hired from somewhere in the vicinity of Soledar who's taking us on a 45-seater bus across blown out bridges that have got temporary planks across them. I remember going across this blown out bridge and he's driving across just two planks this wide. This could end very, very badly. But that's how we got to and from. You had to go through numerous checkpoints on a daily basis. Now I seem to recall it was something like an hour, hour and a half just to get on the crash site. We would search for as long as we possibly could and then come back later that afternoon.

Narrator: Accessing the crash site involved daily negotiations facilitated by the OSCE.

Alexander Hug: So we had a request, for instance, for a team to come in. We would then take that request ourselves, go to this armed group, would explain what the plan is, who would come, where they would come, what time they would come, how many they would be, what they would be doing, and that we would then require that access for them is given. If need be, to ensure that they would do it, we would accompany that group that would come in. We would walk or drive with them towards the crash site, then the armed men would recognise us being with them. Then be let on the site, they could do their work as agreed previously and would also then depart in an orderly fashion. And that included authorities from Australia that would come and work and do their job on what then, of course, became also clear, not just one crash site, but several crash sites, in a rather large area.

The decision whether to go or not was always up to the respective contingent. We would not make that decision for them. That was their own decision, but we provided our own view and assessment as to how we see it and what we would be able to do on a given day.

Brian McDonald: The OSCE I equate to being like a European UN. If we didn't have the OSCE and the really great work that they did, we would have been in a great deal more danger. They negotiated our way through those checkpoints and got us into Donetsk. Without Alexander and his team, that just wouldn't have occurred. He handled his job so absolutely well and the success of the operation was in no small part to him and his team.

Narrator: Further adding to the complexity facing AFP investigators was the fact that debris from MH17 was scattered across vast expanses of Ukrainian countryside.

Brian McDonald: The crash site was huge. We knew that we were going to have very limited time on the crash site, that become obvious early. And also the ability to get resources into the crash site was going to be really difficult for us, and the fact that we

didn't have free access wherever we were because the reality soon hit us that where the crash site was was the centre of the conflict. Um, so everything just became extremely difficult and sensitive and required, you know, a lot of diplomatic communications just to allow us to be present, to allow us to move.

Narrator: For AFP Commander Brian McDonald, nothing in his extensive policing career could have prepared him for when he finally encountered the crash site.

Brian McDonald: We'd come up over this dirt track and I come from the country, so you're used to traveling and that sort of, and here's this dirty, great big plane wing just sitting sort of diagonally in this farm dam. And it's just sitting there. And it's like... you know, you just don't forget something like that because it's just so out of place. It's just so, how in the hell does that happen? I still remember it to this day and it was stark because as we come over the hill, it was just there. It wasn't like it was a soft landing into the crash site. It was, this is just the first exposure to it. Um, so the reality and the stark reality of seeing it was quite confronting. Yeah, and so still to this day, yeah, it's pretty emotional.

It was just devastating.

We came, from memory, around a corner and here's the main part of the crash site and there's fuselage and I remember there's luggage, there's children's toys, just strewn for, I, I dunno, probably more than a kilometre and where, we got out, and that was one place that we could get out. And we're walking through and we're having a look and it, it's just very confronting and you know, you're there to do a job, but it's one of those things and you're trained for, you know, I've been in the cops for 30 years at that point, and you're trained to do your job, but you still remember just the sadness of, of what it was that you were walking through. And at one point, um, I picked up some paperwork and by coincidence, um, it was the paperwork of one of the Australian families. And again, that's near some kids stuffed toys and luggage and other things and it's just, yeah, it strikes you as just the horror that the people on the, on the plane must have gone through.

Narrator: While what these AFP officers found at the site was overwhelming, it was imperative they kept the mission front of mind – recover the bodies, look for evidence. In every sense, it was a complex mission, and for AFP Detective Sergeant Hilda Sirec, the crime scene was as challenging as they come.

Hilda Sirec: My initial impression was the scale. This is a ridiculously large crime scene. I then had the panicked notion of, "it's an unsecured crime scene". So for us, in terms of investigation doctrine, it's... you control the crime scene and then you can control what goes in and out. And then, you know, that the evidence captured within

would have a certain standard of proof towards court. And here, it was just the chaos and the fact that I couldn't put tape around this whole almost 50 square kilometre scene. It was a race to identify what's evidence, where our main points of search need to be across the crime scene.

For an investigator, when you go to an incident and you want to preserve that crime scene so that you can find the truth and the evidence and the information, um, that was an uncomfortable proposition that we had to get over pretty quickly. We had to just accept that we've got what we've got, and we've gotta do the best that we can, and under time pressures, every hour that we had in there could have been our last hour. So we had to really maximize and prioritise everything that we thought that we could achieve in there.

My other reflection was just how sad it was in there. It was large, there was a job to do with evidence to capture and, you know, truth to find in terms of how did this plane come down. But there's just this sense of sadness that ensued everywhere. And I saw belongings everywhere. I saw, you know, bone fragments and body pieces across the whole crime scene. And it just made me realise what the last moments would've been like, how did this scatter around the whole place? And what's happened there until I got there? So, who's disturbed things? Has it been done properly? Have we honoured the victims in what we're doing there at the moment? All of these kind of competing emotions, with the whole thing at the back of my head going, just find the truth, find the truth, get it done.

Narrator: Getting it done proved difficult. AFP investigators were working in harrowing conditions, against the odds, and at breakneck speed. Despite the challenges, their investigative expertise and professionalism, along with that of their international counterparts, ensured the integrity of critical evidence was maintained, and that it was gathered and secured in line with the highest international standards.

For AFP Assistant Commissioner Peter Crozier, who led the AFP teams investigating MH17, getting it done right was the only option for the families of those who lost loved ones on board.

Peter Crozier: The key thing here is understanding why we're doing it. So never losing sight of what the mission is. And once you understand the mission, then you can start working out what the parameters for how you go about that investigation, how you go about that evidence collection. So you want to make sure that the way you're going to do it, the integrity of that process is protected. So whilst we're absolutely focused on the risk to people personally, we're also considering the risk to the investigation and what integrity mechanisms were put in place at that time. There's absolute faith and

confidence that evidence was collected in a way that it could be actually utilised in a judicial procedure.

Narrator: The MH17 crash was a tragedy, but it wasn't due to mechanical failure or any other onboard event. Evidence uncovered by the AFP on the ground in Ukraine would significantly change the course of the investigation.

Hilda Sirec: We had a hypothesis that this fragmentation, these little bow tie things, weren't indigenous to the planes, that they were probably introduced. You could clearly see that these fragments had caused the fuselage to peel from the outside in.

Brian McDonald: We were on a humanitarian mission to try and collect body parts or other, uh, human identification factors to be able to ensure that we could identify all the victims of the crash site. What also became very obvious was that the crash site was strewn with fuselage and I think it was Hilda that showed me that there was a bit of fuselage that made it quite obvious that the plane had been shot down.

Narrator: If the content in this podcast has caused you to experience any mental health concerns, a range of support is available.

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You can also call Lifeline on 13 11 14 – 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Australian Police Officers and other emergency workers can also seek assistance from support services available within their organisation, or from the National Emergency Worker Support Service.

You can learn more about this service at blackdoginstitute.org.au.

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