

# **Crime Interrupted**

## **An AFP and Casefile Presents podcast.**

### **Episode 1, Operation Castrum**

#### **Host – introduction**

The Australian Federal Police is Australia's national policing agency. Its aim? To protect Australians and Australia's way of life. The AFP works with Australian and international partners to combat cybercrime, online child sexual exploitation, transnational serious organised crime, fraud and corruption, and terrorism, espionage and foreign interference.

The AFP is part of the NSW Joint Counter Terrorism Team, which also includes the NSW Police Force, ASIO and the NSW Crime Commission. The JCTT – is able to act quickly and achieve a resolution before threats to the public can be carried out.

The team works together to reduce Australia's vulnerability, attractiveness and likelihood of being targeted for terrorism activity.

In 2023-24, the AFP charged 13 people as a result of terrorism-related operations by the AFP and their JCTT partners.

These are the real stories of the AFP. Everyday people, doing legendary work.

#### **Host**

The AFP joins with state police to form Joint Counter Terrorism Teams in each capital city. The purpose of these teams is to detect and prevent terrorist attacks. They also monitor the activities of groups who support terrorist ideologies. Their goal is prevention, which is why governments all over the world make provision for law enforcement officers to arrest offenders *before* they commit a terrorist attack. In Australia these offences are referred to as 'acts in preparation'. It means that as soon as federal law enforcement officers have evidence that a person or a group is preparing to act, and thresholds and a required state of mind is met, they can arrest them immediately. These kinds of arrests often follow months – and sometimes years – of investigation. But a case arose in early 2015 where the New South Wales Joint Counter Terrorism Team had only days to avert a terrorist threat against police and citizens in Fairfield in Sydney's outer west.

What defines an act of terror? The legal definition is complex but, in essence, terrorism is when someone causes serious harm or damage to people, property, or the public with the intention of advancing a political, religious, or ideological cause. Their acts are designed to coerce or intimidate the government or the public. This specific intention is what makes terrorism different from other crimes. The important thing for public safety, is that the Commonwealth Criminal Code states that offenders are to be punished for the conspiracy to commit the offence as if the offence had been committed. So, if terrorists plan the act and are caught before they commit it, they will be punished as if they did commit it.

**Host**

AFP Assistant Commissioner Peter Crozier had an extensive history in operational CT roles – or counter terrorism – when Operation Castrum began.

**Peter Crozier**

I first started in CT with Bali at that time. And across a range of different things that I dealt with through a number of both domestic and international investigations, a secondment to the MET, Metropolitan Police, which at that time was SO-15, their CT Command, some time in Singapore. And then I came to be what was called the coordinator of the Joint Counter Terrorism Team Sydney. So the Detective Superintendent of our Sydney team.

**Host**

The Bali bombings had changed things in the counter terrorism space. In the late evening of Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> of October 2002, three bombs were detonated in Bali – two in Kuta Beach nightspots and one in front of the American consulate in Denpasar. The explosions killed 202 people including 88 Australians. It was the largest single loss of Australian lives due to an act of terror.

**Peter Crozier**

So CT at that space and what we were dealing with out of Bali was to understand: *what does this mean?* Internationally, obviously suicide bombing was not a new phenomena; in many places, including places like Sri Lanka and that, suicide bombing was not a new phenomena, but in terms of what happened with Bali, it certainly was for the Indonesians.

**Host**

With each new development in crime types, the AFP has to stay a step ahead. The Bali bombings taught law enforcement some important lessons.

**Peter Crozier**

The key thing was, of course, this was a new phenomena as far as the crime type goes. And probably one of the points that's really different now in the CT space – at that time, we had a list of suspects that came from Bali. We didn't have any holdings intelligence on those individuals. That just wasn't the case. But what we deal with now in the CT space is not only are we likely to have intelligence and law enforcement holdings on individuals, there's a good possibility that we may have done quite extensive investigative activity against them.

**Host**

With extensive investigative experience in the counter terrorism space, Peter and his CT colleagues were on high alert in 2014. There had been a rise in radicalisation and on the 20th of September 2014, the spiritual leader of Islamic State issued a fatwa – a ruling on a point of Islamic law – calling followers in Australia to target the government or the public – and kill in any way they could. Three days later, the Endeavour Hills police stabbing had happened. Then, in December, Sydney was rocked by the tragic Lindt Café siege.

**Peter Crozier**

What we were seeing in 2014 as a result of the fatwa, Australians were named civilian or military targets, those sort of things, that was something we hadn't experienced before. There were a range of publications, a range of things they were doing in the space to say, this is how you could undertake or enact offending. You could do a range of things from bushfires to use of edge weapons, all that sort of thing. It was there, but this is where you had specific things being called out and a specific jurisdiction being Australia. The fatwa in 2014 was really a bit of a moment.

**Host**

At the time of Operation Castrum, Tim Jolly was a detective sergeant with the AFP in the NSW JCTT.

**Tim Jolly**

2015 around about the time of Operation Castrum, it was a high tempo, high volume period of time working within the CT investigations area. You had a lot of people that were looking to travel overseas to be foreign terrorist fighters. You had a lot of plots that were happening that were mainly stopped, but certainly it was a really busy time so much so that you had to sort of be by your mobile phone at all times because you just never knew who was going to call and what it was going to be about and whether you needed to rush off to the airport to try and talk to someone before they made the decision to travel overseas to fight in those conflict areas, or whether it was intelligence coming through from partners around investigations that were onshore. So, a really busy period, and working in that task force, you get to utilise the best skills from each different agency. So, it was fatiguing but rewarding for those that work in the national security space. I guess you do it to keep the public safe. But it's always motivating to do your job and try and stop those people that are doing nefarious acts because the results can be catastrophic.

**Host**

Operation Castrum came onto the JCTT radar through an intelligence partner. They received information that two men in their 20s, Omar and Mohammad had been liaising with an overseas ISIS supporter and were planning terrorist attacks in Sydney.

**Tim Jolly**

There was certainly some concern from the JCTT at the time. Investigations are underway to try and find out more information, find out where they lived, those sorts of things. What we know now is investigations had revealed that they had been in contact with someone overseas. Now whether that person was an Islamic state recruiter or an advisor or connected in some way, but it was our understanding that there was instructions and communication between Omar and Mohammad with his overseas person where a message had been sent which sort of outlined some rules or some acts that they were to sort of undertake; noting that their initial plan, we understand, was to target a prayer hall. But then they moved to a different phase where they were looking to target a police station with a fairly narrow time frame. It was our understanding through investigations that they were instructed almost like a four-point plan. So at this point when we were receiving this information, certainly the police are getting absolutely you know, very, very prioritised around this because we're seeing that people are not only talking about acts, but are starting to undertake preparations in order to actually do

those acts. So the four-point plan that we saw during these investigations, I can certainly outline it. Step one was to wear gloves on your hands. Step two was: the first hit is the lethal one. Step three was keep calm during execution. Step four: the operation should not take more than one minute. So in terms of that targeting of police or members of the public, we've got some information here that absolutely rises the priority of this investigation to a point where we need to identify who they are, that they are under surveillance, and go through and arrest these people to stop them. undertaking this plan that they've been discussing with this person from overseas.

**Host**

The information from Operation Castrum came from a source who was aware of what Omar and Mohammad were saying to the ISIS supporter, and became really concerned.

**Tim Jolly**

There's all sorts of ways that we can find out about things in the Joint Counter Terrorism Team. It can be intelligence from partner agencies, there can be people calling in the national security hotline to say, 'Hey, I've seen something that looks a bit weird and we think you should look at it.' And this particular circumstance in mid-February 2015, one of our partner agencies provided some information suggesting that there were two people, Omar and Mohammad, that were doing things that were out of the ordinary, and there was some concern. And when a partner agency comes with that sort of intelligence, it certainly is the JCTT's job to look at it and try and unpack it to see if there's a public safety threat here, if there's people that are looking to commit illegal acts, whether they be terrorism or other offences. And so your information came in to say these people are communicating with people online and there's a concern around their behaviours and what their aims are and what they're looking to do.

**Host**

NSW Police Force Detective Inspector Darren Sly was a part of the JCTT when the intelligence came in about Omar and Mohammad in February 2015.

**Darren Sly**

On Monday the 9th, we received information from one of our partners in the JCTT that there was two males that had been planning an attack on a Shia prayer hall in southwestern Sydney and that attack was to be by an incendiary device. They were going to put fuel into a container and throw it and try to set it on fire. Now we don't know why, but we think they may have been disturbed, but that attack didn't take place. So our partners had some vision of these two men looking to undertake some type of attack. And then that information evolved to say that then they had changed and were now planning a second attack which was going to be directed at a police station or a police officer, and that was going to be scheduled in the coming days. So we were taking the information that was passed on and start to see whether we needed to deploy police to monitor, and just find out the background of these people. So we would then formalise a plan on how to monitor and to see what was to happen. So it was all I guess, run of the mill type situation for the JCTT at that time.

**Host**

Working alongside Darren was AFP Detective Sergeant Hilda Sirec.

**Hilda Sirec**

I only joined the Sydney Joint Counter Terrorism Team a month before, literally just after the Lindt Cafe siege, and everything was heightened. The terror level was as high as it's ever been. Every day there was discussions and briefings on what's happening overseas in terms of Islamic State, what are the influences that are happening to create this environment of fear within the community. And our jobs were really making sure that every single day we were painstakingly going through any information piece, every online piece making sure that we could keep people safe. And then Monday afternoon, 9th of February, it was later in the afternoon, and the briefing just come in to say that two guys are going to commit a terrorist attack in Australia specifically in New South Wales and we were on.

### **Host**

In the initial briefing, the JCTT were told the two terror suspects, Omar and Mohammad, planned to target police.

### **Hilda Sirec**

So the intel came to us at a briefing. All we got was there's going to be an attack in four days. They want to target a police station. They obviously want to do a terrorist attack and a mass casualty event. Get to work. Find ways to corroborate the information. Look at all the individuals that we were currently had on our persons of interest list. What are they doing? What are they saying online? All the other investigations that are happening around the country. Is there any chatter on the individuals – because you have to validate it. People might say a whole host of things. And we needed to make an assessment on: *is this a realistic threat?* And particularly around threat, you have to have a couple of things. You have to have intent and capability. So, no doubt the intent was there, but what capability did they have? What was their intention? Were they going to use a bomb? Were they going to use knives? Were they going to use guns? So all that information is prudent for us to work through. Well, what risk level are we here in terms of that information? And I can say not a lot to go on, but some surety of the information, enough so that people like Darren Sly, who was the senior investigating officer and the other leaders that were in the Joint Counter Terrorism Team, this was legitimate. And we knew we weren't going to go home for days. We were going to be in play and working pretty hard around the clock.

### **Host**

The first task for the JCTT and its partners was to gather as much information as they could on the two men. Omar was an Iraqi refugee and Mohammad was a Kuwaiti student. Both men worked as removalists, and shared a granny flat in western Sydney.

### **Hilda Sirec**

The boxes that need to be ticked are their ideology, what their pattern of behaviour is. What are the things that they're doing to prove their intent? In terms of wanting to do people harm, police harm; proving what capability they have. Like, are they registered for firearms? Do they have access to firearms? What have they purchased recently that might indicate that they are close to having some capability to do an incident or an attack. All those little jigsaw pieces need to come together. It's really important that we don't typecast individuals either, making sure that people might say, 'Oh yeah, they're of a Muslim background,' and so all of a sudden



they're individuals for us to target. Nothing could be further from the truth. The individuals have to possess some intent and capability for us to want to get some additional information about what they were up to.

**Host**

And this is where the JCTT can call on other areas of law enforcement to help out.

**Hilda Sirec**

I was a detective sergeant at the time and Darren's deputy. I mean, he's getting the information in, making critical decisions, identifying investigative strategies and pathways for us to deliver. I, as a detective sergeant, have a team that goes and delivers the effect of what the senior investigative officer needs. My role as the sergeant was to make sure that the taskings were allocated, that the feedback loop of what the information that they deliver and find, comes back to me. And then that all gets fed up to Darren who can make sense of the information and what that means for us moving forward.

**Host**

In the beginning, the team thought they had four days to track down the terror suspects, assess the threat, then take steps to stop them, but by the next day, Darren received word that things had escalated.

**Darren Sly**

I was about to have my lunch on Tuesday the 10th, and I get the call from our partner agency to say things have now moved. These two men are now planning to do the attack this afternoon in the next couple of hours. So, obviously things started to happen pretty quick with that sort of information. So, whilst we knew who they were, the immediate for me was to have coverage of them to know exactly what they were doing and where they were doing it. So first course of action was to put people in and around them so we could see what they were doing. So that was happening. That was my immediate thing on that day.

**Host**

While Darren and Hilda began the race for information, Assistant Commissioner Peter Crozier liaised with the AFP's partner agencies.

**Peter Crozier**

In this space, it was all about how we were working with our NSW counterparts and our intelligence counterparts, and a range of other partners that are trying to understand this, trying to get some action, trying to get some coverage around it. What we're doing is providing levels of coverage to the team. So, they're briefing up to us, we're making decisions on different action, on different investigations. You're trying to ensure that they've got a full range of capability and resources available. So, securing that sort of stuff, providing through me, my briefings into my senior leadership and this is it has gone all the way to the top, this stuff.

**Host**

When working counter terrorism cases, there is one very clear priority for everyone on the team.

**Peter Crozier**

The determining factor for us in this space is not evidence collection and it's not evidence thresholds. It's public safety and being able to manage that. So that sits very clearly with us in terms of our decision making. Can we control it? Do we have proper coverage? Do we know what's going on in strongholds? Do we know what's going on in locations? Have we got these people under technical or physical surveillance? All those things are happening. What does that mean? What's the risk factors that we've got here? How are we managing all those issues? So that's happening at a leadership level and it's collaborative. I'm not leading this. I'm working in joint management with my counterparts from New South Wales and our security agencies.

**Host**

Operation Castrum moved very quickly. Tim explains how each new piece of information gave the investigators more cause for concern.

**Tim Jolly**

As the investigation progressed, and it was it was a really quick one. It was a really quick investigation. Information came in, observations were made of these people in the real world by surveillance, and there was concern by the investigators that these people were going down a pathway, that was going to require police intervention and very quickly.

**Host**

Much of the early information on Omar and Mohammad came from a source who had heard about their activities online. The two men were communicating with an overseas supporter and advocate of ISIS who was encouraging them to commit an act of terror in Australia. They had been thwarted in a planned firebomb attack on a prayer hall, and the source was worried about what they were planning next. Up until then, they hadn't been on the JCTT's radar.

**Hilda Sirec**

We got names early on. The informant was able to provide us some names for us to try and track and identify. And Mohammad and Omar, essentially nobodies. Not individuals that we would think were running around with the usual persons of interest that we were concerned about. Not much in terms of criminal history, if at all. So there wasn't a lot to start off with. We knew one was an Australian citizen. The other one came from Kuwait. Beyond that, there wasn't a lot to go on with. So we needed to find different ways to validate information. We knew that they were potentially living together, that they probably knew each other. Beyond that, there wasn't much more. And we had to make sure that the informant, whoever this person was, wasn't just trying to stir up information, or stir up a scenario to either divert our attention and they're the ones that were someone that we should be looking at, or had some really dodgy information and was trying to get this information to us for an alternative reason. So all of that has to be considered in it. Whilst you're treating it at its highest, that it's a legitimate threat.

**Host**

For Darren and his team, the most important thing was to closely monitor the two suspects and – and when they did, they saw something that made the threat even more imminent.

**Darren Sly**

We found them. We put surveillance on them. So within about two hours of receiving that initial call to say they're going to do something, we observed them attending a camping store out at Smithfield, in the west of Sydney, where they went in and purchased a large hunting knife. When police later went in and spoke to the owner of that camping store, they'd actually told the person they bought the knife from that they were from the Camden area, which is again southwest of Sydney, and were going down with mates to Melbourne to do some deer hunting. That was the purpose of purchasing the knife. So after they purchased the knife, obviously, certainly from my perspective was very concerning. That information was that they were planning on doing something that afternoon and were now going out purchasing a very large hunting knife.

**Host**

After Omar and Mohammad left the camping store, the team were able to track them back to their residence in Fairfield.

**Darren Sly**

We actually tracked them back to their home in the Fairfield area, which is not far from Smithfield, and were able to have them, or place them back inside their home.

**Host**

With the purchase of the hunting knife, the police had no time to lose. Public safety was paramount. This is where special powers related to terrorism acts came into play because the purchase of a knife, in itself, is not a criminal act, yet the threat of what the men planned to do with it was very real. Stopping that threat is supported by legislation. For Peter Crozier, the balance between collecting evidence and public safety, is always in the favour of public safety.

**Peter Crozier**

The legislation enables us to do many things that years ago we wouldn't. Being able to have Acts in Preparation for a terrorist offence, it's a great piece of legislation because it enables that disruptive, preventative action. It doesn't necessarily mean you're going to get to an evidential threshold, but you can do something in this space. And it gives you the grounds to be able to put forward a range of options. But at the time, you will take disruptive activity that will work to the detriment of an evidential investigation and prosecution. It's just the nature of it. It's about how do we make sure we just protect public safety.

**Host**

With the two offenders and their newly purchased knife back safely in their granny flat in Fairfield, the JCTT had to make some swift decisions. Under the direction and support of the command team, Darren was about to test the special powers that had been enacted in the wake of the Lindt Café siege two months earlier.

**Darren Sly**

At that point, which is really interesting, is that we didn't have any evidence – apart from the knife – which itself became evidence, but at that time, someone purchasing a knife based on the information we had, doesn't give us any offence to act upon. Each state has what we call



special powers. So every state and territory in Australia has special powers given to their state police to give police the powers to act. Each Commissioner of Police has the power to invoke those powers. So we sought special powers from our Commissioner in relation to those two men, to search them, to search the vehicle that they were in, and their house. So, that gives us the powers to do that because we didn't have enough evidence to try and swear out a search warrant, but those powers give us the ability to search persons, vehicles and premises, and if we needed to in relation to particular areas if we wanted to, but that wasn't required. So that's a fantastic power that we have. What were unique was this: we'd never use those powers to actually search premises. So that was new to us.

### **Host**

Not only were they justified under legislation, Tim says the call to arrest was the next logical step in keeping the public safe.

### **Tim Jolly**

In the suburbs of Sydney where they were seen to purchase a knife and during that purchase information from the person who worked in the store was that both Omar and Mohammad had said that we're going with mates to Melbourne to do some deer hunting. So you've already got them putting out a story in which to try and cover their actual intentions. They make that purchase. And as you can understand from a policing perspective, you've got people that are talking some really bad things online about their plans. They've stated their plan is to go and hurt someone, possibly from the police or a member of the public. You've then got them going into a camping goods store and purchasing a knife. So, when you put those things together, it doesn't take a genius, of which I'm not, but to say that these people need to be stopped, as in right now, they need to be stopped. Because you've got people, one, with capability, and also with the narrative and the thought process and decision making that they're going to go and do a terrorist act, and they've now got a knife which to do it. So police were sent out. We utilised emergency state legislation in order to access their premises, their residence. Tactical policing units were used and they were arrested and stopped from undertaking those acts that they were talking about online and purchasing the knife for.

### **Host**

The use of tactical operatives in the arrest phase was necessary, particularly as Omar and Mohammad had made it known online that they planned to target police. The tactical team surrounded the property.

### **Hilda Sirec**

We're sitting in the major incident room, knowing that we've only had like a couple of hours, seeing all this play out. When you've got the tactical people waiting to go into the house at the right time to make sure it's done safely, you could hear a pin drop in the major incident room and we're just on bated breath going, 'What's going to happen? What's going to happen?'

### **Host**

The arrest was textbook.

### **Tim Jolly**

So tactical units did the initial entry, and then the investigators from the AFP and New South Wales Police then undertook the search and processed the arrest of Omar and Mohammad, and ultimately the collective effort stopped a terrorist attack from occurring in Australia.

**Host**

Hilda wasn't part of the entry team, but back in the office, she received regular updates.

**Hilda Sirec**

I stayed in the office to work with Darren in cataloguing the information that was coming in and the material. So when the search occurred some really pertinent evidential pieces were found. Found a flag that had particular writing on it that was meant to be or look like Islamic State flag. There was a note that was tried to be flushed down the toilet that we were able to retrieve, and there was the machete, and there was a video. And the video that was created was a martyrdom video, and we knew that from that, both Mohammad and Omar were setting themselves up in a manifesto video about to commit a terrorist attack. And I would suggest that moments away, if not for surveillance, if not for the additional information from that informant that we only had a couple of hours to go, if not for letting Mohammad and Omar get to their home to make that video, because that video was made when they got home after they purchased the machete, all those aspects and, you know, we started off with a jigsaw piece of 5,000 pieces, where none of these pieces actually belong with each other, to all the pieces coming together, and it painted it out exactly as we suspected and believed, tragically, that these two individuals were about to do whatever they can to kill someone. Whether it was a police officer or not. If it was a police officer, I have no doubt in my mind that they would have killed them, taken their gun and go commit further attacks. Or just go use a machete and start killing random people as much as they can. All in the ideology of ISIS.

**Host**

The half hour between Omar and Mohammad returning home and the tactical team making the arrest proved important.

**Darren Sly**

Omar and Mohammad actually went back to their house and in that half an hour or so, that is when they made their martyr video. Now, that is the best piece of evidence we could ever have.

**Host**

In the martyrdom video, Omar is kneeling on the floor holding the knife he'd bought at the camping store. Behind him is a homemade Islamic State flag put together with cloth and poster paper the men had purchased. In front of him is a machete that had holes drilled along its blade.

**Darren Sly**

We found the machete. Of interest there, they also drilled holes into the machete, a number of holes, and we found the cordless drill and drill bits that they used, and there was a, for want of a better word, a wives' tale which we established that by drilling holes into the machete, and when you stab someone, the holes make the blood flow quicker and make you die quicker. It's

not true, but again, it's that belief in their mind of what they're doing. Obviously, we found the hunting knife and the receipt that they'd got from the camping store.

#### **Host**

ISIS encouraged martyrdom videos to be created and shared before an attack. Having terrorists make a video that is in essence a taped confession can prove helpful in court.

#### **Hilda Sirec**

It's absolutely helpful for evidence, but the tragic thing about that is that individuals that commit terrorist attacks are there also to inspire other people that want to do terrorist attacks. Islamic State encouraged this because they want to create martyrs, they want to create heroes, they want to highlight the bravery and the heroism that these individuals create. I mean it's not lost on me that one of their publications was called *Inspire*, and they really wanted to be able to promote their cause to like-minded people. Yes, excellent for evidence, but tragic for community and tragic for people that are persuaded and easily radicalised by these videos.

#### **Host**

The granny flat shared by Omar and Mohammad turned out to be a treasure trove of evidence. Among other things, authorities found evidence of Omar and Mohammad communicating with the overseas ISIS supporter, who had become a kind of mentor or leader for them.

#### **Darren Sly**

We found a homemade Islamic flag which they used in the martyr video, but just little things that I guess corroborate what they're doing. And we found pieces of the black cloth which they used. We found a stencil which they had printed off of the Islamic flag to then paint white. We found Bunnings receipts where they'd gone to purchase those particular items. We found other iPhones. We found their phones, which obviously had the communication back to the ISIS leader. We found bottles or tins of petrol and other cloth and other burnable substances, and empty glass jars which were the materials they were going to use for that initial attack on the prayer hall. We found a large stencil. In their communication, one of the most important bits in the communication, they had written out a phrase: *We are the soldiers of the Islamic State. We are lions of the Jung al Kafir. We are here to cut off your heads.* That was a statement they'd written out and then taken a photo of. And I guess it was important, we actually found that they had actually ripped it up and had tried to flush it down the toilet.

#### **Host**

When the two men were brought in for questioning, Hilda conducted Omar's interview.

#### **Hilda Sirec**

I was the lead interviewer for Omar. I was there hoping that he would talk to me about what he was attempting to do and why he was doing it. I had my preparation. I had about 1,500 questions that I wanted to ask and I thought, naively, I'm going to get all these questions answered, and he just didn't want to talk. And notwithstanding that he asked for an interpreter as well, so I knew that nothing that I got from him was going to be in English or direct. It was always going to be through an intermediary in the room. But there was no willingness of him

to talk. But I got to sit in front of him, like I'm sitting in front of you, asking a person that's now in custody why he wanted to commit a terrorist attack. I was a police officer. I was his target. I could have been his target, and I got nothing.

#### **Host**

The interview could have gone several ways. Omar could remain silent or deny the offences, or he could have used it as his platform to boast about his intentions to kill police.

#### **Hilda Sirec**

I was expecting that as an answer. I didn't get it from him, but certainly expecting that from an answer. I think I was prepared to go in, and I knew what face I needed to put on. I knew what persona I needed to have, and that was of a counter terrorism investigator. That was my job. You have to compartmentalise sometimes, because you've got a job to do. You have to build rapport, and then you have to get the information from the person in front of you. And, you know, that didn't come, but that's okay. I gave it everything every opportunity for him to tell me what it was that he did and why, and I asked him, and if he doesn't decide to come back and provide answers then that's up to him but I put it all out there.

#### **Host**

In the end, it didn't matter that Omar made no admissions to Hilda. The evidence of their videos and their communications online with someone supporting ISIS who was encouraging the attack, made a compelling case to put before a jury. The next priority for Hilda and Darren was to talk to the man who had initially come forward with the information about Omar and Mohammad. His actions had averted the planned attack.

#### **Darren Sly**

The investigation had an overseas informant. That informant without going into the ins and outs of it, was receiving some of the communications between the ISIS leader that was directing Omar and Mohammad. And the informant was passing that information on to our partner agency that had got the investigation rolling in the first place. And obviously, part of our investigation was we needed that direct evidence from him and we wanted to make him a witness for the investigation because he had crucial evidence. Now, that can play out a number of different ways whether people are prepared to come on board and assist police, sometimes and most occasion they may wish to stay anonymous. However, this particular person was very upfront in the fact that he wanted to assist police. He was of Syrian background. He had lived in Syria. And my belief was that his homeland was still number one in his mind. It was his homeland. He wanted Syria back to the way it was, and I believe that if possible, he wanted to go home at some point and resume the life he once had. So he was putting his own personal safety above everything else for his own home, for his own country, which is, you know, you've got to give great credit for that. So, he was supportive of us, of the police, of law enforcement. Myself and Hilda travelled to the country he was living in and, and met him. I guess for me in all my years in policing, to meet someone with that passion for his country; his security or secrecy was secondary to helping his country, and you could tell the great pride he got from helping, you know, doing that because by assisting us, catching these two men, it was one way of him fighting ISIS and fighting the people that had taken over his country.

**Host**

Once they established the man's reasons for coming forward, they could see his actions were admirable.

**Hilda Sirec**

For me, after speaking to the informant, and I got to take the statement from him, really starting to understand that whilst he could understand the ideology, there was parts of it that I think that he felt was okay to understand, this whole notion of creating a caliphate or creating a world that subscribes to Islam, even though Islamic State is very extremist, Islam and probably misappropriately presented, I know for him, he just knew that doing things or attacks in the name of Islam or in the name of the religion that he loved was just wrong. And he knew that this was going to probably cause more harm particularly to Islam than good. so I think, I still believe that he did it out of goodness. He did it to protect people. He couldn't sit with it, knowing that if he had the information and an attack happened, he would probably feel responsible, or know that he had the opportunity to stop something and didn't. So I think something in his humanity propelled him forward to provide that information. I mean, he asked for absolutely nothing in return, was able to give us a really good statement, offered up his phone so that we could get the corroboration of the information that he was providing, and only asked for a phone replacement so he could still call his family. So just a really decent human being that should truly be thanked for, for his role in stopping what would have been, undeniably, a terrorist attack in Australia.

**Host**

Peter Crozier cannot underestimate the importance of this type of heroic bystander.

**Peter Crozier**

So, really fundamentally important in the CT space, but actually very fundamentally important across law enforcement and national security; the fact that people come forward because it's the right thing to do. You just got to say huge congratulations to those people because they know the potential impact. They've thought about the consequences, but I'm going to come forward and I'm going to speak to the police or I'm going to tell it. So yes, whatever form those people who are bringing forward information is a really important thing. Some people might be concerned that this could potentially place them in harm's way; that's even more a situation where you have to applaud them. You hope people, where they're seeing things and they're concerned, they come forward and just talk. They might not be aware of what that information is. It might be just something they're seeing that's a bit odd. It doesn't seem right or there's a change in behaviour of a family member or someone they're close to or a friend and they just, you know, 'Look, I'm just concerned about this,' and they bring it forward to us. The engagement with community is fundamental.

**Host**

And once the police acted on the information and the offenders were in custody, it is always of interest to law enforcement officers working in the counter terrorism space to find out how their offenders became radicalised. Darren says a couple of really big steps need to happen.



**Darren Sly**

Omar and Mohammad weren't what I would consider our normal textbook people who wanted to carry out a terrorist attack. They both appeared to come from fairly I'll say normal or regular backgrounds. Omar travelled from Germany originally. He came from Iraq and he was given protection here and finally in the end of 2009 was given a permanent protection visa. Mohammad was a little bit different. He came to Australia on a temporary spouse visa. So he had an Islamic wife and finally was granted permanent residence, although that marriage or partnership, had broken up. What became of them then? You certainly find people who become very entrenched in their religion and passionate about it, but moving from that to want to undertake an attack or an act on behalf of it is thankfully, a very few, but it's a big transition to take. And in relation to these two people, I think it happened quite quickly.

**Host**

Omar and Mohammad were sent to trial and entered a guilty plea, admitting that they had made acts in preparation to committing an act of terror. Peter Crozier says that in the face of the evidence police had, the guilty plea was not surprising.

**Peter Crozier**

They pleaded guilty to Acts in Preparation for a terrorist offence. You know, that's what they pleaded guilty to. They're real key moments when people start pleading guilty to terrorism offences because they're potentially talking about pleading guilty to the most catastrophic crimes you can undertake and really callous, absolute lack of concern for human decency, all those sort of things. But it's highly advantageous to be able to use that in messaging because you can take away the scepticism, the people going, *Well, they really weren't going to do it.* They pleaded guilty to preparing to do something, and that should be something that is communicated very broadly to sceptics within the community say, *you don't really need these legislations and these powers.* They pleaded guilty to it. They've actually said: *this is what my intention was. This is what I was looking to do.* And it's the basis of a very good investigation as well. You don't get pleas of guilty unless, you know, it's been a very strong, professionally undertaken, really done in partnership, really committed. And my hat's off to all the people who were involved in it because they presented the evidence in such a way as a result of doing the investigation in such a professional way, ensuring public safety at that point and still were able to secure sufficient evidence to get the conviction.

**Host**

By the end of 2016, Omar and Mohammad were sentenced to twenty years in prison with a minimum of fifteen years to serve before they would become eligible for parole. In 2023, the two men appealed against their sentences and the Appeals Court quashed the original sentence and instead, gave them both a maximum sentence of 16 years, with a non-parole period of twelve years.

With each operation, every member of the team learns something more about the counter terrorism space. For Hilda, Operation Castrum taught her some important lessons.

**Hilda Sirec**

For me, it was the speed of radicalisation. I, again, yes, a newbie into counter terrorism, was really the first big job that I was a part of when I started in the Joint Counter Terrorism Team. The speed of radicalisation of individuals and how quickly that can go from being community members, contributing to our society, having a job and out there and engaging with the multiculturalism that we have, and all of a sudden in less than weeks, something can happen and someone can turn around and want to harm us – that really struck me, and I had to, I don't know, reinvigorate my faith in community, just to make sure that not everyone out there has the intent and capability to do us harm, or get ideology to do us harm so quickly. So I had to remind myself of the good that was out there, particularly because after this job, there were numerous jobs. We were just starting the height of the counter terrorism environment in Australia for years after that and the growth of Islamic State. So I think this one was really to prepare me to strap in, that the next few years was going to be something that we were gonna have to combat extensively for quite a number of years. The other thing that it really forged was the team environment that we had; the way that everyone just comes together and gets the work done. We really created a crucible moment in this job for a family that we had in the team, and it was just wonderful to see each other back each other up on some tough days, long tough days, pressure days. You can only imagine the head-spinning across community and seniors of organisations and government that we're in a stage where we're trying to stop a terrorist attack that's meant to occur in a number of days. So the pressure that that builds on teams and trying to protect teams from that pressure, I certainly learnt how to manage that and manage the information.

#### **Host**

For Darren, he was full of admiration for the man who came forward with the information in the first place.

#### **Darren Sly**

I think, it's clear for me to say that if he hadn't have passed that information on, this attack would have happened before we knew it. It would have happened, you know, we would have been responding to, unfortunately, potentially a police officer or other members of the community had been stabbed or injured.

#### **Host**

The things Detective Superintendent Tim Jolly learnt from Operation Castrum, he can now use in his new position as the senior police attaché representing all law enforcement engagement between Australia and France, working from the Australian Embassy in Paris.

#### **Tim Jolly**

What we learnt from Castrum is when there is an absolute high priority threat to the public, our organisation and our state colleagues through the mechanism of the Joint Counter Terrorism Teams or current task forces that are in the news at the moment, they come together and gel like nothing else in order to investigate resolve and stop a threat to the public through investigative means. So it just showed that when we need to, we can go from sitting at our desks processing paperwork to coiled springs and out into the field and stopping those threats, absolutely, when we have to. So, I guess it just showed that the community should maintain their confidence in law enforcement, that we all work together to stop threats to the public.

## **Outro**

### **Host**

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