

Crime Interrupted

An AFP and Casefile Presents podcast.

Episode 5, Operation Buxtehude

Host – introduction

The Australian Federal Police is Australia's national policing agency. It's 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.

ACT Policing is the community policing arm of the Australian Federal Police.

The AFP and ACT Policing remain committed and focused on targeting, identifying and disrupting attempts to import harmful illicit substances into our country, and are dedicated to bringing those responsible to justice.

Police see firsthand the impacts illicit drugs can have on family violence, child neglect, road trauma, and community violence. Organised crime groups are indifferent to the harm drugs cause. On average, more than 50 people are admitted to Australian hospitals every day from methamphetamine, opioids, or cocaine use. Every week, on average, 16 Australians die from heroin, amphetamine or cocaine overdose.

In 2023-24, the AFP seized more than 31 tonnes of illicit drugs and precursors in Australia, and assisted police overseas to seize more than 41 tonnes of illicit drugs.

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

Host

Operation Buxtehude began in June 2019 when Australian law enforcement agencies suspected a shipment of cocaine was headed for Australian shores. First, it was flagged by ACT Policing's criminal intelligence team member Jeff Agland and his intelligence colleague, who we are going to call Lorelle.

Jeff Agland (2.11)

In terms of organised crime, there's a lot of different criminal networks that we are looking at and criminal networks don't work just in one jurisdiction or one patch, so they're transnational. So we have to have a fair idea of what criminal networks are out there, who's operating at any one time. We received the initial information that said that there was an import coming. We didn't have much to go on other than that, but I guess between our knowledge of the criminal networks and who was capable of doing something like this, we had a fair idea as to where we could start. So we start making inquiries and looking at various, databases and information and try and piece things together. And that's where you start identifying which network it is linked to. Maybe some new POIs that are linked to that network. It's all go at that point coz there's a timeframe, like if we think this import is coming, we've got to try and piece it together and

provide as much information to the investigators as soon as possible so they can make decisions on what they're going to do with it and how they're going to proceed with the investigation.

Host

For Lorelle, the intelligence member working with Jeff, figuring out connections was the next step.

Lorelle (3.17)

We had a pretty good idea because we had identified some convergences with other jobs, so yes, we had a good idea what syndicate was involved and their strategies of that network.

Host

Intel suggested the cocaine import would be concealed in a second-hand excavator. While the criminal intelligence analysts worked around the clock to get all the information they could about the potential cocaine shipment, officers at Australian Border Force also flagged the import. Jason Regan is now the Commander of the Australian Border Force College but when Operation Buxtehude was running, he led an operational command team in headquarters that looked after national and transnational operations. The role of the Australian Border Force – or ABF – is to protect the Australian border.

Jason Regan (4.14)

It could best be summarised in protecting Australia from anyone or anything that would seek to do our community harm or that doesn't align with our community values or the expectations of our society. Drugs are one element of that, but so are precursor chemicals. So are unauthorised firearms or firearms parts, child exploitation. Any exploitation or trying to circumvent our immigration policies for illegal migrant entry, all the way through to visa compliance, once you do have a visa and once you are lawfully here in Australia, making sure that you maintain compliance against your visa conditions – so quite a lot more diversity than just drugs, but all summarised in protecting the Australian community from those that seek to do them harm or that would provide items within our community that would seek to provide harm through our health systems or the wellbeing of our citizens.

Host

The systems in place at the ABF meant that the importation of a second-hand excavator from South Africa was identified for examination once it hit Australian shores.

Jason Regan (5.22)

The border is supported by an immense amount of data. So passengers have data, cargo has data, all of our actions are informed through data and data analysis. And so it's not just that we have an inclination that something's about to come across the border that's going to do us harm or a piece of information, it's actually about fusing all of that information together to get a comprehensive picture. And we call that 'targeting', and we are constantly updating our threat profiles to ensure that our targeting strategies are keeping ahead of where organised crime are trying to exploit the border. So in this particular instance the excavator was targeted for examination because a number of factors not just information about a drug importation that we would potentially receive on the border, have all come together to highlight that we needed to provide extra scrutiny to that consignment when it came across the border. We needed to pay greater attention to what it looked like, who it was going to, where it had come from, and in

particular, whether there was any trending internationally with our partners on whether there could be a concealment somewhere within that excavator. They all make up the picture, which informs our response when that consignment does arrive in Australia.

Host

As an intelligence officer, Lorelle had many years of experience in analysing the practices of drug cartels.

Lorelle (6.46)

Studying these big operations is really important. A lot of intelligence works backwards. So if you are looking at things like homicide or lots of other crime types, you're working on things that have already happened and you're looking backwards. But with these types of imports, timelines are very important so we've got to try and keep abreast of the movement of the drugs, what's happening, where it's happening, and who's involved, because otherwise we can't sort of guide the investigation. And AFP and ACT Policing are intelligence-led. So it's really important that we use all the tools at our hand to be able to predict and help in that decision making for investigators.

Host

David Fleming began his career in ACT Policing and had many years of field experience as a general duties police officer. He had seen firsthand the devastation that drugs cause.

David Fleming (7.52)

When you're working criminal investigations in ACT Policing, you get called out to deaths of people, from homicides through to drug overdoses. And there can be a bit of a stigma from people in the community about drug overdoses, but when you attend these jobs, you do see the greater impact across the whole community when someone dies from a drug overdose. So you've got the impact to the general duties police that attend the scene, criminal investigations, forensics. You've got the ambulance officers as well. So there's a lot of other services, not just policing that get impacted by it. And then too, when we conduct the investigation, you're dealing with the family and friends and quite devastating for them to lose such a loved person in their life. I can recall when I was working in general response crime area in at City Police Station in the ACT. We had a spate of drug overdose deaths, probably had about six or seven of those over a very short timeframe. It does take a bit of a toll on everyone involved with having to respond to those incidents to investigate them. So when we had an opportunity, we started up a job. And then progress that through to identifying the source of the drugs and then arresting, charging that person which was pretty satisfying because you actually see the impact that that person had over a number of other people. There's nothing we can do to stop people wanting to use illicit drugs. But if we can lessen the impact, prevent people from dying, that's massive, because then you don't have to deal with all the flow-on effects and the impact it has on the families and loved ones of that person.

Host

When Operation Buxtehude began, it was uncommon for ACT Policing to investigate large shipments of drugs.

David Fleming (9.41)

The biggest we'd done before was we found five kilos of cocaine at a residence down in the southern part of Canberra, but you know apart from that, the majority of drug matters that we've been investigated down here have been small amounts, easily under the five-kilo mark.

Host

With the excavator on its way to Australia, Jason at ABF, had the role of coordinating the arrival of the container ship carrying the excavator.

Jason Regan (10.13)

My role was to coordinate national effort across multiple ABF regional offices, and also to support the AFP in being able to execute their end state with their investigation. And so as a central point of contact, I helped draw up that big plan that takes into consideration everybody's efforts and makes sure that that consignment gets to Sydney safely without anybody else interfering with it so that the AFP can affect an operational outcome with the end recipient in mind.

Host

The end recipients in the case of Operation Buxtehude were two men from Bungendore NSW, very close to Canberra. So it made sense for the ACT Policing to handle the case. Their team brought with them a wealth of local knowledge. But even so, they wouldn't be working alone.

Lorelle (11.09)

Collaboration with the other agencies was absolutely paramount for us. ACT is a landlocked territory. So we don't have access to ports or anything like that, so we have to have collaboration with agencies that are at the ports. And then the big vulnerability is transporting that amount of drugs by road into the ACT or the immediate surrounds as it was, because a lot of factors can go wrong there, so that's a big vulnerability. But collaboration with the other agencies helps us with that because they hold information that we may not necessarily have, and so we rely on that collaboration to build our pictures quickly and have that intelligence in a timely manner.

Host

Perth was the first stop for the container ship transporting the excavator. Australian Border Force were able to examine the cargo. Their experts could see signs that the excavator had drugs concealed within.

Jason Regan (12.16)

The only thing that we didn't do in Perth is obviously cut into it. So, we didn't actually know where there would be a concealment on that excavator. We only knew that the excavator was suspicious. So when it arrived, we did use the dogs, and we did use our professionals who noted that there was trace detection elements that were giving further suspicion. But other than that, we had no other indications of what we would find when we looked at it further in Sydney using more sophisticated technology like x-rays.

Host

Detective Laura Howe was monitoring the process for ACT Policing. Working in partnership with the Australian Border Force, meant that Laura received constant updates on the shipment.

Laura Howe (13.04)

I was in regular contact with them and getting people on the ship to be able to confirm that the excavator was there and that no one else had access to it before it managed to reach us. And so I was in daily contact with them probably multiple times a day to try and work out where the ship was at any point, what condition the excavator was in, and also who had access to it in that period of it getting actually to us in New South Wales.

Host

With a huge diversity in the people they hire, the ABF has experts in construction and welding they can use for such jobs.

Jason Regan (13.37)

And so they all come into the organisation and they are able to share their experiences, their lived experiences before they've joined with a number of their colleagues across the service. In addition to that, because we do quite a lot of cargo examination, we do run a number of training programs in how to deconstruct cargo and how to reconstruct cargo, which is all part and parcel of any custom service around the globe. And in this particular scenario, we don't just rely on our intuition or our professional standards, we also knew it was an excavator. So there is a part here where industry helps us. And in this particular instance, industry did help us understand where we should be looking. So it is a combination of everything, and I think that's the unique benefit of the Australian Border Force workforce is that we are diverse, and we do take in all those different experiences, and we work very closely with industry and international partners to get that final view on what really should we be looking at that is an anomaly in this piece of cargo.

Host

When the second-hand 20-tonne excavator finally arrived at the Port Botany container terminal, there was an immediate problem. It was filthy. Dirt in the excavator tyre tracks could contain potentially harmful biohazards. It would need to be cleaned and treated before any examination could take place.

Laura Howe (15.03)

The excavator came in from South Africa, and I was told over the phone quite early on when it had arrived that it wasn't in a state that would normally mean that it was able to remain here in Australia. It was quite dirty. The tracks were filthy with dirt, seeds, all sorts of other contaminants that we wouldn't normally allow into Australia. So fortunately, because of our involvement, we had to get it quite thoroughly cleaned, which did take quite some time before we were then able to access the machine itself. But it did mean that we were able to do it safely but also meant that there was no risk of anything going missing and us losing possibly what was inside or what we believed to be inside at the time.

Host

Laura had spent her law enforcement career in general duties policing and had just transferred over to the Drugs and Organised crime team. She had only been in the role around a month when Operation Buxtehude began. She was given the role of Corroborator and Information Manager.

Laura Howe (15.58)

To be honest, I was really nervous about it. As I said, I'd never done it before, and I didn't want to let the team down. The team was full of a heap of detectives that I'd never worked with before, but I really admired. So I was in a role that I essentially didn't wanna stuff up, but I knew was quite important in that if that information wasn't collated properly, that there was a real likelihood that we would miss something, so I certainly understood the gravity and the importance of the role that I was doing.

Host

In this situation, Laura could rely on the experienced mentors she had within ACT Policing.

Laura Howe (16.29)

The team was full of people who had experience in so many different areas of ACT Policing. So even in terms of collating the information using the software that we needed to, writing the documents that needed to be written, I certainly sought a lot of guidance from the people that I had on the team. And there was probably maybe about six or seven of us on the team at the time all of which had been in criminal investigations for quite a few years before I'd started.

Host

Laura was fascinated to see the team in action at the drug removal site.

Laura Howe (16.58)

I'd never been to the container examination facility, didn't know what to expect when we got there, and I certainly didn't know what to anticipate in terms of the sheer size or scale of what it was that we were going to get out of it again.

Host

Once the excavator had been thoroughly cleaned and cleared for examination, Laura was part of a team sent to witness the excavator being x-rayed. They were expecting to find a significant amount of cocaine in the 20-tonne excavator. Looking at the x-ray monitor, Laura's first thought was: *that is a huge amount*.

Laura Howe (17.34)

Myself and two other colleagues were there when the excavator went through the x-ray machine. I recall it being quite a small room off to one side. It might've even been a small shipping container, and there were two or three screens in the room, and we all huddled around them as the excavator went through. And I recall the image coming up on the screen; one of my colleagues pointing at it and trying to count each of the blocks that were inside, and I do remember looking at each other, having just grins on our faces, and probably all frantically getting on our phones to message back to the team who were in the office to let them know that it was actually more than what we thought it was

Host

After the excitement of seeing the x-ray reveal the sizable quantity of drugs, Laura got to see the excavator itself.

Laura Howe (18.18)

It wasn't until the x-ray had been done on the excavator that it ended up getting wheeled in on a trailer, and it just sat in the middle of this big open warehouse, which is where it remained

whilst we did what we needed to do with it. It was quite high up on a trailer, so it did look quite large in imposing, even in the big warehouse that we were in. But from the naked eye, we knew where the drugs were, given we had done the x-ray. It really wasn't obvious at all where the access points were and where they had actually accessed it to put the things inside.

Host

The x-ray had showed the bricks of cocaine were concealed within the huge hollow steel hydraulic lifting arm of the excavator. But after the initial excitement, the whole team had a huge job ahead of them.

Laura Howe (19.02)

I remember being with two of my team who, we were up on a ladder or on a jack of some sort, and once it had been opened, I vividly remember the bricks. They were rectangular in size. They were quite heavy, and the front ones were sort of facing so that the length of the brick was facing outwards. And when you remove those behind it, they were all stacked up like dominoes behind. So I initially started pulling those out and we had a bit of a system whereby I would hand it to one person. They would then hand it down to a second person who was on the ground, and they would lay them out onto sheets of plastic that we had laid onto the concrete floor. And so that took quite some time.

Host

It wasn't until all of the cocaine had been removed that the investigators knew for certain just how much they had found.

Laura Howe (19.48)

Probably wasn't until we had them all laid out that we knew exactly how many we had. We certainly were counting them as they were coming out and putting them in those rows on the floor which made it easy for us to be able to see how much we had. And I think the realisation was that when one plastic piece on the ground had filled and then we had to get another one out and another one out, that we then realised, obviously we were getting into the hundreds, the two hundreds, three hundreds. But it really wasn't until that very last brick came out that we realised it was 384. And we certainly checked a fair few times after that, putting our heads in, and my colleague got all the way in and only his feet was sticking out the end of the arm to make sure that we hadn't left any behind.

Host

By a longshot, it was the largest amount of drugs Laura had ever seen.

Laura Howe (20.34)

I too had only seen probably about five kilos of drugs by that point. I'd come from general duties policing, where we are dealing with gram bags on a regular basis. I'd certainly never seen that much before. I think way in advance of us knowing that it was 384, we knew we had a lot there.

Host

As the 384 bags were being removed, the team could see that they weren't all in the same type of wrapping.

Laura Howe (21.00)

When we had taken the bricks out, they were all laid on various pieces of large plastic, and there was a tally at the bottom as to how many bricks were there. And they were laid in rows so that each row had the same type of bricks, so colouring or logo assigned to them. When they were on the plastic, our forensics team took photographs of those lying down. And it was at that stage that we documented what it was that we needed to be able to replicate these bricks. So we kept the bricks as they were; we didn't pull those apart at all, and our forensics team substituted them with an inert substance. Brought those bricks with them so that they were the same size and shape, and that's when I wrap them back up again to make them look the same.

Host

The real artistry in removing the drugs from the excavator and substituting them, was making it look like nothing had been touched.

Laura Howe (21.51)

Alongside the investigators, we had a specialist team there with us whose role was to assist in, I guess, accessing the excavator arm in a way that meant that when we wanted to repack it all back up again, they were able to do so and to hide the fact that we had been in there and that we had cut it apart. A lot of time was spent doing that, and there were quite a few sheets of metal in each excavator arm section that they had to cut through in a manner that meant that we had enough room to be able to access things to pull them out, but equally that they could then use those sheets of metal to put back in position, cover up and then repaint to make it look like we'd hadn't been in there at all.

Host

Drawing on the broad range of expertise of the Australian Border Force, the excavator soon looked like it hadn't been touched.

Jason Regan (22.36)

That is part and parcel of the job. And sometimes it requires a bit of innovation to get it back the right way. Sometimes it requires a little bit of creative thinking when it comes to what will we substitute the substances with. So, I can't remember off my top of my head on this one, but I know that there's been many trips to Costco to buy large quantities of sugar or salt, a comparable product. So, there is certainly no limit to the creativity to putting it back together, but the important part is that it goes back together and doesn't draw suspicion when it's being used further afield for the remaining parts of the investigation. And I guess that's the key is that we work in partnership with AFP and other state and territory law enforcement to make sure that our components really don't have any compromise to the end goal of the investigation. And that might be to deliver an excavator somewhere that looks like it's never been touched before, so that the investigation can continue to resolution. And that in itself, it's a unique process and it certainly isn't done alone.

Host

For Dave, back at the office in Canberra, the news from the CEF – or container examination facility – was exciting. The final count of 384 kilograms was the biggest seizure that ACT Policing had ever handled. This also meant that the pressure was on his team to get it right.

David Fleming (24.06)

We were just sitting in the office and got the email through with the x-ray image from the CEF of the excavator and the whole arm or boom of the excavator was chock-a-block full of one-kilo bricks of cocaine. So we were just gobsmacked by the volume. That added some further weight to the responsibility we had to do this job, right, And especially too with the volume of control drugs that were in it, just made it a lot more pressure on us to ensure that we got the result at the end of the day. Because we weren't expecting anything like that. So yeah, it was huge amount.

Host

It was a huge amount indeed. Jeff and Lorelle, the criminal intelligence team members were astonished by the final tally.

Lorelle (24.52)

We were absolutely stunned when that motherlode came in.

Jeff Agland (24.57)

When the investigators went to Sydney and we received word back that they were pulling out a lot more than we expected. And they were pulling out bricks after bricks after bricks. And I think it was getting text messages going: *Oh, we're up to 120 bricks. We're up to 150.* And you're like, *wow*. Like how much is, and you think, well, the arm of this excavator would be huge. God knows how much is in there, and is it just the arm? And we eventually received the x-ray image and just thinking, *wow, that's just unbelievable*. And then we were looking at images. Once they pulled them out, they were all spread across the ground. And you just, yeah, *wow* for the ACT. I mean, I remember doing jobs ten years ago where we were excited about a kilo, and that was a record for ACT Policing to reach a kilo of cocaine. So this amount for us was huge.

Host

When the amount of cocaine ended up being as big as it was, Jeff knew that with its confiscation, a lot of harm to the community had been averted by ACT Policing.

Jeff Agland (26.01)

The cost of the drugs, once they hit the street, the cost is huge in terms of the damage it does to the community. Also too, often not looked at is, I mean, there's millions and millions of dollars' worth of drugs there. So the profits from those drugs get fed into other drug importations as well. So it's not just the damage of that 380 kilos, that's further funding more operations, and more drugs coming into Australia.

Host

As Dave explains, 384 kilos of cocaine increases exponentially once it is cut down along the sales chain.

David Fleming (26.39)

In its raw format, it's very, very high level of purity, and that's how everyone down the line in that network make money is by adding other substances into it to then increase the volume that they actually are able to on-sell. So yeah, you could easily increase the volume by doubling it, because a lot of the cocaine, by the time it hits the street, you're looking at anything from 20 to 30% in purity. So you can see how much other substances get put into it to increase the

volume and the amount of profit that people can make out from selling it. And that's the other factor that people that use the end product aren't over the top of all the other substances that are put into cutting the drugs. And they're always, especially with cocaine, they're looking at substances that are sort of similar to the cocaine in its makeup. And some of those are like worming powder for animals, and that's what people snort up their nose. So when they use it and they're not aware, they're just there for their quick hit but then you obviously, if you get addicted to it and you are using a lot of it, they're the added health impact that's going to cause that person to suffer from a myriad of conditions later on down the track.

Host

When Jason got word from his colleagues at the ABF of the huge amount of drugs, he was relieved to have played a part in protecting the community, regardless of the amount.

Jason Regan (28.02)

It was a lot, I have to say. I would've been equally happy with one or two little packages because any amount of narcotics and border-controlled drugs that are not on our street has an immense amount of impact on the health and wellbeing of our community. But to see that many blocks was both rewarding and scary at the same time that that would be the amount that was destined to hit our streets and destined to cause harm in the community. That many blocks, 384, is not an insignificant amount when you look at the harm that that could have caused. So yeah, an immense amount of pride, but also scary that individuals would seek to cause that much harm to our community.

Host

Once the cocaine was out and replaced, we asked Jason whose responsibility was it to dispose of it?

Jason Regan (28.57)

Our friends at the Australian Federal Police have the responsibility for the destruction of border-controlled drugs such as cocaine. For the Australian Border Force, we have the destruction requirements for things like tobacco and precursor material and other components that are used for either illicit activities or used to make drugs within Australia. There's a shared responsibility depending on what the commodity is that's found. But in the case of cocaine, it certainly rests with law enforcement, and in this case the ACT police. Because there is elements of it that need to be collected for forensics and the relevant law enforcement arrangements.

Host

With the drugs safely substituted and the excavator heading towards the men recruited to take possession of it, the job of the Australian Border Force was largely done.

Jason Regan (29.44)

The ACT police get to reap the rewards of the rest of that operation. There is still quite a lot of administration that goes on in the background to make sure that everything that we have done is appropriately documented and recorded, that we have got all the relevant paperwork squared away to support any pending prosecution or evidence requirements. So, there's certainly is a quality assurance process that would start immediately after our operational components have been completed and that's just as important as the initial examination and detection itself.

Host

Criminal intelligence members Jeff and Lorelle continued to build a profile of the two men who were waiting to receive the excavator. They knew the kinds of people the cartels and syndicates targeted to do this kind of high-risk work.

Lorelle (30.36)

It's an interesting question because there can be a number of attractions to this kind of activity. Money's always a big one, and cocaine is one of the most lucrative drugs, so there's a high profit margin in importing that. But there is an element of some personalities like the excitement. They like the thrill of being selected to be in this network or syndicate. It increases their self-importance, I guess. And that, mixed with maybe financial burdens that they're carrying, does lend to them being recruited more easily. And sometimes it's also a matter of who they know. There might be someone that they know well that tells them they're doing them an immense favour. Like, you've got this opportunity and they really sell it to them and they're gullible. So that type of personality is very easily recruited.

Host

The men set to receive the excavator ran a struggling landscaping business. Their names were Adam and Tim.

Jeff Agland (31.45)

Adam and Tim weren't hard to find, just basic inquiries within databases and whatnot; yeah, they were the easy ones to find. But tracking back and identifying how they were linked to the bigger network was a little bit more difficult. We managed to do that and figure out what was going on. Both Adam and Tim, from my understanding, were fairly new to the network, and were obviously being exploited for their involvement in a business that could provide them the opportunities to import an excavator. But yeah, certainly we see that a lot in terms of these criminal networks and the lower-end criminal activity, whether it be moving cash or drugs across the border or whether it be the receiver of an import such as this, then they're relatively unknown to us at that point. And it's about sort of tracking back and identifying how they're linked to the bigger network. That's a benefit to the network because they want people that are unknown or don't have a criminal history, or people that we're not generally looking at to be involved in that hands-on criminal activity.

Host

But no matter how the drug networks court people like Adam and Tim, they are the ones taking the highest risk, while those running the network remain at a safe distance.

Jeff Agland (32.52)

Being the onshore receiver of a shipment of this size especially is the highest risk role in relation to the operation, and the criminal networks know this. Tim and Adam would certainly be aware of the risk, but they'd be told certain things, whether it be that the shipment's safe, whether it's they've got people on the inside that it's going to protect, there's nothing to worry about. You're not going to be arrested. You'll be taken care of. It's all good. And then there's obviously the promise of whether it be money. We know they'd be promised money, whether they received that at the end or whether they received the amounts they promised, yeah, who knows? But certainly, at that point, they're made to feel very important and boosted with confidence that it's going to come and they've got nothing to worry about.

Host

Watching Tim and Adam and gathering data on them revealed that they seemed blinded by potential gains, and oblivious to what they stood to lose.

Lorelle (33.46)

We do sit back and as we're profiling, you do shake your head and think, *wow, they've got so much to lose, but they're only looking at the gain*. And that's just one thing they don't think about is, okay, they're thinking about the gain and all the profits they'll make and the lifestyle, the dreams that they've got of using all this money. But they never look at the great losses that are going to occur.

Host

But of course, just because the excavator was heading to Tim and Adam's landscaping business, didn't necessarily prove they knew what was in it. Needless to say, surveillance on the two men was comprehensive. The plan was that the arrest would only happen when they tried to remove the drugs, thus proving they knew they were there. Police had installed cameras on the excavator, and it was closely monitored.

Laura Howe (34.46)

I don't recall exactly how many days it was. I do remember it sitting in the back of Bungendore Landscape Supplies for quite some time, sitting in the backyard there, waiting. And we were waiting with anticipation for them to go near it. I do remember it being at least a couple of days before it got moved inside a shed, at which point we obviously knew that they were intending to do something with it. But I don't think that's necessarily unusual.

Host

The team was ready to go in as soon as Tim and Adam began cutting the excavator and the delays were a bit nail-biting.

Laura Howe (35.19)

We had coverage of it so there was no concern in that regard. To be honest, it was more frustrating in terms of having the team and the people available when we needed them to be available for when it did end up getting cut open, to make sure that we were there to be able to do the search warrants.

Host

Every day that Tim and Adam didn't go near the excavator required patience from the police who were monitoring them. For Dave and the team, there was a lot of waiting.

David Fleming (35.47)

Everyone just wants to go out there and knock the door down. But you just got to hold everyone back to make sure that the right call gets made at the end of the day. We were in the office and had things up and running and we're just waiting. So we had everything prepared and started briefing other teams and management because you do need a lot of resources at the resolution or when you're executing search warrants at the arrest phase. But then we identified that, yeah, it wasn't gonna go ahead, but in the back of our minds, we knew that it was definitely gonna be the following weekend. So that's what we started preparing for. Had to just arrange a number

of briefings and to get all the police involved briefed into the job, because they hadn't been aware of everything else that had occurred prior to what their impending involvement was gonna be with the execution of the search warrants and helping us with the arrest phase. On the day there was still a lot of sitting around and waiting until it reached a threshold that we knew that we were right to go and everyone rolled out.

Host

That was the day Tim and Adam finally went out to the shed. The whole team watched to see if they would begin to dismantle the excavator and prove beyond a reasonable doubt that they knew what was inside.

David Fleming (37.10)

Tim started using a grinder to cut through the steel of the boom, and that's quite thick, that steel, so it did take a long time for Tim to actually cut through one section and be able to remove a part of it to gain access into the boom. Fortunately, during the course of the investigation, we had coverage of that aspect of the conduct that they undertook. After they've taken that bit of steel off the arm and able to get inside, they started removing the blocks of 'cocaine' from the excavator. And that's where we captured Tim and Adam high fiving each other. And it was quite ironic because moments later, our tactical police coming through the gate and just the fear that they've been discovered and they just took off and ran and tried to hide in the bathroom.

Host

The heavily armed tactical police moved in and made the arrest in this case.

Laura Howe (38.06)

We don't know the risk going in somewhere as to possibly what someone might do to defend themselves or to protect the value of the drugs that they are in possession of. So from a safety perspective, certainly for us, it's a lot safer to use our specialist teams to do that role than it would be for us to go in there and to seek to do that arrest ourselves.

Host

After the arrests, Dave's team had to get statements from people connected to Tim and Adam. It turned out, one of those people had a very lucky escape.

David Fleming (38.37)

The investigation team went out and spoke to a number of people that we'd identified along the way that we needed to get statements from to assist in covering off aspects of the investigation. And one of them was a person that had been approached by Adam to cut into the excavator once it had been delivered to him. And he was approached by Adam at that time, and it was probably a sliding doors moment for him, and he just had that sixth sense and said, 'No, I think there's something up here. I'm not gonna do it.' Because if he had gone through that process and assisted Adam and Tim with that, then he would've been arrested as part of that process as well, which he would've had big impact and ramifications on his life

Host

While Adam pleaded guilty to his part in the drug importation, Tim did not. Adam received a 12-year, 9-month sentence and Tim got an 11-year, 6-month sentence. For Lorelle, it brought home the importance of the job the team did in stopping the importation.

Lorelle (39.44)

That's part of our driving force with what we do. I mean, our aim is to dismantle the criminal network and stop those drugs from getting on the street because of the amount of damage they do. But we'd never thought we'd see that amount coming into the ACT and surrounds. I think street value was around about 144 million at that time. So that's an amazing amount of money, and a lot for that network to lose

Host

And even though Operation Buxtehude only arrested the two men receiving the importation, there was a wealth of useful intelligence gathered.

Lorelle (40.25)

Well, it contributes a lot because a big part of our analysis is identifying the convergences. So, once we do that, we can look back at previous operations and draw on that knowledge to build a better picture of how the network's working. And networks are very fluid, so if imports are disrupted by police, they will look for other avenues. They will look for other vulnerabilities that they can use for the next time. So, it's less likely that they will be captured. So, for us, it builds on our knowledge, so in the future we can use that knowledge from this operation, previous operations, which has all been built up. The picture is getting bigger, and it's a better understanding of the strategies that these groups might use, the type of recruitment they look at, and discovering the vulnerabilities in these convergences is very useful in predicting what moves they might make next; what sorts of things they're interested in, such as transit routes, or it might be air cargo for some imports, or now they've got submarines going from countries into Australia. It's all these strategies that they're using to avoid law enforcement, but our knowledge, we can build on that to predict what might be coming next. So, it's very important.

Host

We asked Lorelle what her advice would be to the next person like Tim and Adam, approached by members of a drug network to take possession of a shipment. Adam had a wife and four young children. Being locked up for breaking the law would take him away from his family.

Lorelle (42.27)

Don't do it. My advice to people like that would be, stop and think about what you are going to lose before you anticipate what you're going to gain, because they never do. And the loss, it can never be mended, that kind of loss. They can never retrieve their old lifestyle even. It's just gone forever.

Host

Even though they weren't the biggest players in the importation, removing Tim and Adam from the streets is vital. The drug networks wouldn't survive if it weren't for men like them willing to risk everything for a high-stakes reward.

David Fleming (43.10)

It's just the nature of the business that ultimately is that people at the top, they don't care. They're just there to make the maximum amount of money from the business enterprise at the end of the day. So what happens to people down below, it's not their problem. It's just part of the business. They'll get someone else to come and then take over the next one. So, yeah, there's zero sympathy from the people at the top. In this day and age, a lot of your heads of your syndicates are offshore, living in other countries. So, it just makes it increasingly difficult to be able to gather sufficient evidence to target them and put them before the court. They're living the high life, they're travelling the world, got all the bling, the cars, the houses. And they rely a lot, well, totally on people like Adam and Tim being able to undertake the actions that they do to ensure that the product hits the streets so it can be purchased. So, people like Adam and Tim play critical roles in the overall success of those networks to profit from drug activity. And I think that gets lost on certain elements that are involved in the investigation and prosecution of these matters, because they're not just low-lying players, they're essential to the guys at the top making the profit that they do out of it, and ultimately the level of harm that's caused upon the Australian community through these drugs hitting the streets.

Host

We will leave the final message to Jason from Australian Border Force. With five and a half thousand employees dedicated to protecting Australian borders, the chances of getting caught smuggling drugs are high.

Jason Regan (44.59)

It's not worth it. It's not worth it on a number of reasons because no matter how hard it's hidden, no matter how many ways you think you are going to outsmart us to get your illicit commodity into the country, we're gonna find it. And we find tonnes of cocaine in particular every single year. I think in 23-24 financial year we had 2,777 cocaine detections. It was an estimated weight of 1.86 tonnes of cocaine that we stripped off the streets. So we're good at this and we have a continuous improvement mindset where we're going to continue to be better at it every single day. We are motivated to be better at it. And the only thing you have to gain from it is looking at prison time, looking at removal from seeing your family and sharing precious moments throughout your lifetime. It's just simply not worth it, no matter how much money's involved, these are precious moments with your family, precious privileges you have as an Australian to be part of a community that's free and respects values that you'll all throw away just to sit in a cell and see all of those life choices just disappear. So it's just simply not worth it, is what I would say. And the creativity and the innovation of those five and a half thousand people, you don't have the tools at your disposal; you don't have the international partnerships and friendships and relationships that we've built over centuries with some of these other custom services at your disposal. So in every possible aspect, you're out weighted in this cat and mouse game.

Outro

Host

The AFP offers a lifetime of opportunities with over 200 diverse roles across Australia and the world, including community policing in the Australian Capital Territory.

Interested in learning more about how the AFP and its partners works to protect Australians against the importation of illicit drugs? Visit a-f-p-dot-gov-dot-a-u to discover more.

If you have any information on the manufacturing, importation or dealing of illicit drugs contact Crime Stoppers on 1800 333 000 or report via the Crime Stoppers website.

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