

Crime Interrupted

An AFP and Casefile Presents podcast.

Episode 6, Operation Amorgos

Host – introduction

The Australian Federal Police – or AFP for short – 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.

AFP members do not always work alone. They are often working with domestic and international partners, including in the Pacific.

In 2023-24, the AFP seized over 30 tonnes of drugs in Australia and supported international partners to seize another 40 tonnes around the world.

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

Host

Right from the start, investigators from the AFP knew Operation Amorgos was going to be big. When 1.28 tonnes of cocaine turned up in a shipping container unloaded onto the docks of Sydney, they knew there had to be a big drug syndicate involved because there weren’t a lot of people who had the resources to move drugs in such huge quantities. Stephen Dametto is currently the Assistant Commissioner of Eastern Command. At the time, it was his job to oversee a team of AFP investigators who were tasked with a rather unorthodox investigative brief. Their goal wasn’t just to arrest those receiving the drugs; they wanted to dismantle the syndicate sending them to Australian shores.

Stephen Dametto

Certainly, a highlight of my career and I don’t know if I’m allowed to say this, but it was a lot of fun as well. We were very clear. We want to dismantle this syndicate. Okay. What can we do?

Host

When the huge shipment was found in a container imported into Australia in 2017, Stephen’s first job was to assemble a team.

Stephen Dametto

Within the organised crime unit at the time, we look at members with the right skills. I was very lucky at the time I had a number of very excellent sergeants and certainly Stuart was one of those sergeants. So this was a perfect fit for his team.

Host

Detective Inspector Stuart Millen headed up a team in the Organised Crime Unit. He had worked for the AFP for twenty years and had a lot of experience under his belt to tackle the intricacies of the investigation that was named Operation Amorgos.

Stuart Millen

I was running an organised crime team at the time. So it was just a small team of six investigators, and we're doing lots of other jobs at the time, but this one clearly was a priority coming in just with a huge amount and the important criminals that were involved. At the end of March 2017, Border Force identified a container full of steel and inside that steel was blocks of cocaine totalling 1.28 tonnes, which is just a huge amount. And it was really good quality cocaine as well. So yeah, a huge, absolutely huge amount of cocaine – the street price for that is like well over a billion dollars, I think, at the time. So just, yeah. Huge. One of the biggest ever cocaine seizures in Australia.

Host

From the moment the cocaine was discovered, the team had to work quickly. Kirsten Sperling was one of Stuart's investigators.

Kirsten Sperling

Australian Border Force were checking consignments that were coming in, and all of a sudden they conducted a search on a particular consignment and located the drug import. So it is all very, very quick. And from there, because the investigation was in its infancy, it made it really tricky to then try and backtrack to establish sufficient evidence to include the whole syndicate.

Host

As soon as the team was established, Stuart reached out to a woman called Jacqui. We won't reveal her full name. Jacqui works in the intelligence field. It was her job to collect information, analyse it, then provide what is called 'actionable intelligence' which is then used to influence decision makers on how to tackle the crime and the criminal.

Jacqui

The boss came to me and said, 'Stuart's got a one tonne importation of cocaine into Australia.' And at that time one tonne was phenomenal. I'd worked on numerous jobs where we'd have maybe up to five hundred kilos but to go one tonne, I knew it was going to be a huge job. So I happily said, 'No problem,' and went up to the operations floor where Stuart was based, and had the meeting with him and the case officer and they provided me the information

Host

Jacqui took the information from the meeting and began to use all of the considerable intelligence resources available to the AFP to see what kind of offenders they were dealing with. The first one was a big name in organised crime. We will call him the Governor or the Gov for short.

Jacqui

One name in particular stood out to me, one of the alleged offenders. Over the years with my experience in the transnational and organised crime, I knew this individual was the head of an international organised crime network, and he was based overseas. So I knew he had the capability to bring such a large importation into this country. He was renowned for drug importation, drug trafficking, drug supply, and drug distribution

Host

The second name was one that Jacqui hadn't heard of before. We are going to refer to him as the Kingpin. When she did a research deep-dive on him, she discovered he too was a big player in the drug game.

Jacqui

The second alleged offender, I hadn't heard of before. I didn't know who he was, and so that's where I come in and I do that research trying to identify who he is exactly. So that's what I started to do. I started to research and soon identified that he was a senior member of this organised crime network. He was based out of the ACT and the head of the network was also previously based in the ACT. So they have been associates for many years.

Host

And this is an important part of Jacqui's intelligence job – not only did she look at the alleged offenders, she also looked at their associates.

Jacqui

Further research, I established that the Kingpin had a syndicate based here in Australia, who were very trusted members of his syndicate. And they were well positioned here in Australia to be able to facilitate the importation.

Host

Jacqui looked into the steel company run by a man we are going to call the Businessman who would have received the shipment had the drugs not been found.

Jacqui

They were operating steel companies that had regular import history. So, given that, nothing would be alerted to bring in a shipment of steel again, concealing the cocaine; it wouldn't draw any attention because they regularly import containers of steel.

Host

But luck was not on their side when the Australian Border Force found their importation. In taking a close look at the steel company, Jacqui found a fourth offender. We are going to call him The Importer.

Jacqui

Looking at that import history and who owns these steel companies is when I identified that one was owned and operated by the Importer. Looking at the specific importation history of what containers he's brought in previously, which was all steel, a number of them were

delivered to an address out in Western Sydney. So, pulling together that intelligence, I briefed Stuart and the case officer with this actionable intelligence that I've identified, which then influenced his decision on how we're going to tackle this particular investigation.

Host

Assistant Commissioner Stephen Dametto who was the Superintendent overseeing the operation at the time, agreed with the team that the goal should be bigger than just arresting whoever collected the container.

Stephen Dametto

We've got no doubt that there's organised crime behind this. We know where the drugs are going to be transported to in Sydney. We've got a company name, and we've got a director of that company and a contact point, but we want to really get more of the people involved in this importation, not just the person that this is being delivered to. And so that's where we started thinking about a strategy behind that about what can we do to really dismantle this syndicate rather than just arrest one individual at the end of this. If we arrest just the person receiving it, we know the syndicate would then send another one tonne load of drugs, soon after, but by taking the people that are more involved in the organising, then we can actually stop future importations into Australia.

Host

Armed with the information from Jacqui, Stuart and the team had to quickly develop a plan for the container on the docks of Sydney filled with over a tonne of cocaine.

Stuart Millen

We knew that the two heads of the syndicate were overseas. And really seizing the drugs is one thing, but really the whole point of the AFP is to try and take the battle against crime offshore, to stop the imports coming in. So it's no point just taking the drugs out unless you actually make an indent into the syndicate. So I suppose for us it was trying to come up with some kind of game plan which would allow us to potentially target the syndicate leaders overseas.

Host

Being offshore, those overseas syndicate leaders are much harder to catch.

Stephen Dametto

A large percentage of the organised crime figures that target Australia with the importation of drugs actually live overseas. And so, to deliver the drugs to the intended recipient or a substitution as such would not necessarily lead to arrest of members overseas or lead to arrest of other individuals involved. Certainly, we knew that potential members of this syndicate had done this before. They were very hard to capture. And so we needed to think of something different here. And how do we capture them as part of this investigation. I think what needs to be clear is that we need evidence if we're going to take this to court.

Host

One of the many challenges Stuart and the team faced was that organised crime figures knew the kinds of methods police used and could spot them a mile off. Methods used in two recent jobs would be too obvious.

Stuart Millen

We just had two really, really big jobs had gone down called Operation Astatine and Operation Veydader and they were trusted insider jobs. So we knew we couldn't use that because that had just broken across the news across Australia and they were really successful and criminal syndicates knew that that was how the AFP were operating at the time. So we had to come up with a different strategy.

Host

This meant right from the start, the AFP had to try something different. Stuart appointed a case officer for Operation Amorgos. We are going to call her Rach to protect her identity due to the nature of the work she does. She had been away on a course and when she got back, Amorgos was waiting for her.

Rach

So I got back from my course in Canberra, and I was told, 'Rach, there's a job about to hit your desk. You're going to be the case officer.' And I've gone, 'Okay, no worries. I knew nothing about what the job was. There were a couple of boys on the team who started working the job up and looking at potentially who the people of interest were going to be. So, that was nearly finalised by the time I got back to work to then start investigating and seeing what avenues we needed to look at for the investigation.

Host

The investigation team had to come up with ways to disrupt this international syndicate by doing things differently. What usually happened when a huge drug shipment was discovered, the AFP announced it, and footage of the find appeared on the evening news.

Rach

By the time we do our media conference saying, 'Look at us, we've seized, you know, half a tonne of coke or 200 kilos of heroin,' they've already got their next shipment coming to Australia. Yes, it's great for the community that that doesn't hit the streets, hundred percent, but does it fix the problem? No. And that was really a consideration of the strategy. We needed to identify people, particularly when they're offshore bringing drugs into Australia. There's no point just getting the importer, because they'll get another importer to bring it in next time for them.

Host

Stuart initiated daily brainstorming meetings where no idea was too outlandish to consider. In the spirit of thinking outside the box, someone in the team suggested something radical. They would make the container filled with 1.28 tonnes of cocaine disappear. Here's how Jacqui and Kirsten Sperling reacted to the plan.

Jacqui

When that idea was thrown out there, I'm just like, it's absolutely unheard of. It's never been done in my career. And at that time, I'd had more than 10 years' experience. It was just a brand-new strategy. And I thought to myself, this is going to take a lot of work to be able to make a container disappear. You'd have to work with many of our partner agencies and even private companies to make this happen. So that's what I said to Stuart and I said, 'It's just never been done before.' And he goes, 'Well let's try. Let's be the first.' And so that's what we did.

Kirsten Sperling

I think a lot of us didn't know whether it would be supported by management. Then it was kind of like everyone was throwing everything into it to try and make it successful. It was really infectious actually.

Host

The idea to have the container vanish was approved by Stephen Dametto who could see its potential to flush out other offenders.

Stephen Dametto

To tell the target that, 'Hey, the container's been lost,' and let's see what falls out of that, that is something very much new. It was a great idea at the time, but we really wanted to see how the person that was going to receive the drugs here reacts.

Host

Officers from Stuart's team worked with the Australian Border Force – or ABF – to process the huge shipment in preparation for making it vanish.

Stuart Millen

The cocaine was identified by ABF. And we sent out investigators out there to see what the concealment was. And in this case, the cocaine were in blocks concealed within steel beams and the cocaine had been compressed in such a manner as it fit perfectly inside those steel beams. So it was an excellent concealment. So once we've identified it, then we've got to remove it, which took days to remove the cocaine from the steel. We've got investigators out there working with ABF at a secure facility. So once we've removed the cocaine, then we put it in evidence bags and then transport it back to a secure location. And then our forensics people go in and they'll take samples. So they'll go through quite a significant sampling process, especially for 1.28 tonnes. It takes a long time. So you get a representative sample. We then know exactly how much there was and the purity of the cocaine because that's important for us. And I think this cocaine was 80 percent pure, which is really good quality cocaine. So once all of that's sampled and we take the sampling for court, then we've got to destroy the remaining bulk cocaine and clearly destroying 1.28 tonnes is quite an undertaking.

Host

Once the container was made to vanish, Stuart and the team watched the action unfold. It began with the Importer's frantic calls to Customs.

Stuart Millen

He would be contacting the freight forwarder once or twice a day, trying to identify where the container was, because it's incredibly unusual for it to go missing. And that's what everyone's saying, well, it's very rare. But it does happen; sometimes the container will fall off a ship or potentially go missing. So basically he wasn't being told exactly what happened because no one really knew. They were coming up with some hypotheses which may have happened, and they were just stringing him along basically, because they didn't know what to tell him. It got to a point where they just said, 'Look, we've tried everything, we've searched everywhere. You can just put in your insurance claim.' And I think they put in a minimal amount of money worth of steel, and they would have got, I don't know, \$20,000 worth of back for their container. But clearly, he wasn't happy with that because that wasn't going to help him get him out of his billion dollars' worth of cocaine. So he was really pushing to find out where this container was.

Host

With the syndicate members frantically searching for the shipping container of cocaine, the team decided to try and draw them out by moving the action off-shore.

Stephen Dametto

We were looking for a partner agency that we could work with in regard to this and no better friend than New Zealand. And so we thought, to make it seem realistic that we bring New Zealand on board and they were fantastic in supporting us. And that's where we came up with the idea of the container's being found in New Zealand.

Host

An undercover operative contacted the syndicate with the great news – their container had turned up.

Stuart Millen

So, we ended up letting the syndicate know that the container had been miraculously discovered in New Zealand. So clearly the Importer was ecstatic. He got his container. So, he was very jubilant. So, he was happy to go over to New Zealand.

Host

The ruse was fairly simple – if the syndicate were prepared to pay three million dollars.

Stuart Millen

We basically said, 'Hey, we found your container. We've examined it. We know what's in it. We don't want it, but we're happy to give it back to you, but we want a finder's fee.' So we were going to charge them to give them their cocaine back. He seemed quite interested in that, the Importer. We wanted to string him along, but we also wanted to get that international nexus as well, the other guys. So it was no point in us again dealing with the Importer. The hope for us as investigators was that the international principles – the Kingpin or the Gov – would go over to New Zealand because they wouldn't trust the Importer to do it all.

Host

Six months had gone by between the container disappearing and the contact from New Zealand about the container being found.

Jacqui

So the container's disappeared. We worked with our counterparts in the New Zealand Police. So they made that initial phone call to the Importer. The Importer cut him off pretty quickly and just said, 'I need to come and see you. I will be there tomorrow.' So the Importer organised a flight immediately out of Australia to New Zealand. So, he had arrived and had organised an encrypted phone to be taken over to New Zealand.

Host

The ruse had to be believable, but by this time, anxious members of the syndicate were very willing to believe they could get their drugs back. For Rach, this was why their story worked.

Rach

I keep saying it's a lot of money. It's a lot of drugs. And I think because it was so much money, they genuinely believed and needed to believe, I guess, from their perspective that they could get it back. Certainly, there are occasions where shipping containers have been lost. Absolutely, it's something that happens, and in his own mind, and I'm only making a summation, the Importer, thought it was absolutely plausible that that could be the case.

Host

The AFP had to provide evidence that would make the Importer believe they had the cocaine.

Rach (

Importer went over and was provided some photographs so that he could verify that the person he was dealing with appeared to be legitimate, and he could go back to the syndicate and say, 'Look, I think this is genuine. I think we need to get on board and that will result us getting our drugs back.' So he took the photos and he reported back, and as a result of that, he was really insistent that conversations needed to be held with other syndicate members and the only way that that could happen was through encrypted devices.

Host

Helpfully, the Importer provided an encrypted device to the undercover operative to facilitate this communication – which of course gave Stuart and the team a way in.

Stuart Millen

We ended up discussing the plans on encrypted devices. So everyone had a handle. The Importer was calling himself the Importer. The overseas principal was calling himself the Gov. The Businessman in Australia, they all had their different handles and they're all communicating on these chat groups, which is really great for us, because we start getting not just the conversations with the Australians, but we're getting these overseas syndicates now communicating online. So, we know we're moving in the right direction, but we still haven't got that physical connection.

Host

With an asking price of three million dollars for the cocaine exchange, Jacqui in Intelligence immediately began monitoring how the syndicate would organise the payment. This was crucial evidence gathering to link syndicate members with the cocaine.

Jacqui

And so we started seeing in the syndicate persons that we knew controlled the finances here in Australia. They were starting to meet, talk, and gather up the funds for payment to us eventually. So, we started seeing it all unfold. And it's like, they're taking the bait.

Host

Every step of the way, the team had to gather evidence for an eventual successful prosecution of as many in the syndicate as they could identify. Evidence has to be specific not just circumstantial.

Rach

Which is why we couldn't stop at just our surveillance detection observations. It's too easily explained. There's too many reasons for why the Importer was meeting with the Businessman in Canberra. They were linked as business partners anyway, so it wouldn't be unusual that they would be meeting. So for us to take that piece of evidence to court to say, 'Well, we know these two people were involved because they were meeting,' – that would just be shut down. We wouldn't have got a prosecution brief up on just that initial overt action. So we knew right from the beginning that this sort of investigation was going to require direct conversations with members involved and certainly if we wanted to prosecute all the members that we suspected were involved, we needed identification and we needed them sitting with us telling us what their roles were.

Host

Of course, that was easier said than done. And while the vanishing of the container of drugs set the job in motion, the team of investigators had to be very mindful of the amount of pressure they put on the syndicate.

Rach

There's never a sense of us having to ramp anything up. It's 1.28 tonnes. We don't need to put pressure on anybody. The pressure's already there just by the fact that law enforcement hadn't declared the seizure, that was, we believed, enough pressure to have Importer and his syndicate associations engaged enough for us. Our strategy wasn't to turn up any pressure. We were really mindful about that type of criminal environment as well. It's a lot of money and a lot of drugs and sometimes syndicates will take matters into their own hands when they don't get the answers they want. So we certainly didn't want to turn the heat up on the investigation. We really just wanted to let it unfold and then us respond or collect the evidence that we needed from the responses that we were seeing.

Host

In an attempt to gather evidence on the overseas syndicate members, the next step was to organise another meeting out of Australia in the hope they would turn up. This time, the destination was Thailand. Even though the Thai authorities were happy to assist the AFP, the syndicate sent someone incapable of negotiating, so it became clear from the start, the negotiation wouldn't go anywhere. With the failure of the meeting in Thailand to draw out senior members of the syndicate, the next step was to try and set up another meeting. This time, the AFP investigators changed tack because they sensed the syndicate doubting that the cocaine was in New Zealand.

Stuart Millen

So the syndicate pretty much didn't believe that we'd just found the container in New Zealand. After they just didn't seem to see that that was plausible. So we agreed with them and said, 'Yep, actually we're stringing you on. That was never the case. Your drugs are actually in WA. We've got them buried.' So we showed photos of fake blocks of cocaine, which we had buried. And by this stage, the Importer was out of the picture a bit more and the Businessman had taken over all negotiations because he thought that he would be more successful. And he thought he was like the calm member of the syndicate. And he was used to getting things done and getting things done his way. So he agreed to meet. We're also hoping that one of the international syndicate members would come across too. And so we agreed to do a drug handover in WA and a money handover at the same time in Sydney.

Host

The good thing about the Perth meeting was it was attended by the Businessman which put him squarely in the frame. Here's how it went. The AFP team arranged for a meeting in Perth and a money transfer in Sydney as a safeguard, but when no overseas major players arrived, Stuart and the AFP team had to call a halt to it.

Stuart Millen

The Businessman met our undercover officer in a cafe in Perth and everyone was agreed that this was going to be the way. The undercover officer said, 'Yep, I've actually got the cocaine sitting in my car boot,' which freaked the Businessmen out, because they didn't think that was how it was going to go. But we've gone, 'No, we're really keen to get this transaction done. Let's do it.' But of course, for our purposes, again, it didn't help because the overseas syndicate principals hadn't arrived in Australia. So we're about to do a drug handover in Perth, a money handover in Sydney.

Host

Stephen explains that the team had to make some quick decisions.

Stephen Dametto

The meeting in Perth was to keep things safe, but also realistic is that the drugs would be handed over in Perth, but there was going to be a money transfer in Sydney. So we had to come up with a story whilst it was happening, why we wouldn't do the handover. One of the offenders now arrived in Perth. We already had evidence against him. We were seeking others.

Host

We can't go into detail here, but ultimately the handover of drugs in Perth and the money transfer in Sydney did not go ahead. With this latest foiled plan to gather evidence on the overseas members of the syndicate, the AFP team had to carefully navigate the next steps. Luckily, they still had a channel of communication because of the encrypted device the syndicate had given them in New Zealand.

Rach

Things had become pretty strained by that time in the communications, and I guess it was either a sense of frustration, or potentially a flag for them to try and draw us out as law enforcement. Because the investigation had gone for, at that point I think it was November, so six months, so we had a really good understanding of the environment at the syndicate. And there was a number of things that happened in the encrypted communication, so there were some text messages where people were creating a narrative in a text and they would send that to another party of the syndicate. A couple of the syndicate members slipped up and put it on the main chat that we were in. So we could see that behind the scenes they were structuring a communication strategy with us quite similar to what we were doing with them. And that allowed us to monitor the security and safety risks a little bit better. Clearly, as an organisation, we don't want anyone harmed during our investigations. So we were really careful with some other things we put in place to make sure that people were safe.

Host

The pulling out of the Perth/Sydney job had a ripple effect. Stuart was lucky he had a strong team.

Stuart Millen

So we managed to pull the drug handover, which caused the syndicate just to absolutely melt down because they're all blaming each other. There's a lot of recriminations. They were going, 'Well, of course it wasn't us,' but we were saying, 'Well, of course it was. You're trying to rip us off.' We're making life very difficult for these people. But at the same time wanting them to trust us. So just a really, really difficult time and an incredible job by the undercover.

Host

With the meetings in New Zealand, Thailand, and Perth failing to draw out the major players in the drug syndicate, the AFP team had to come up with a country they felt was more likely for syndicate members to travel to.

Stuart Millen

After this, I think all parties just wanted something to happen. So around December, there was an agreement there would be a transaction in Serbia. There would be a money hand over in Serbia and then the syndicate would be told where the drugs were in Australia.

Host

So, why Serbia in particular?

Rach

I think we might have, after Thailand, sent them a message, just an off-the-cuff comment saying: *if you guys are serious about this and if you really do want to get your cocaine back, I'll be in Serbia*. And they then structured some communication back to us saying that they were comfortable with meeting us in Serbia.

Host

For Stuart, the added bonus was that syndicate members didn't think the AFP had reach in Serbia. But as Australia's international law enforcement agency, the AFP has reach across the world, with people on the ground in over thirty countries.

Stuart Millen

So, like Serbia. And the syndicate seemed to be coming around to that as a place to operate, because they knew, or they thought they knew, that the AFP couldn't work in Serbia – especially the Kingpin, he was very confident, he was very confident; he had connections into Serbia, and he was very confident that the Australian police could never work there.

Host

Which made Serbia the perfect for a meeting.

Rach

We wanted them to be comfortable to come to the country that we wanted to meet in as well. I guess in my mind as the investigator, Serbia was unlikely to be thought of by them as a vulnerable position for them to be in. Certainly when we identified, other syndicate members, such as the Kingpin, we knew that, that he had ties in Serbia.

Host

One of the main considerations for Rach was finding out how the gathering of evidence in Serbia could be used for the future prosecutions in Australian courts.

Rach

Because there's no point going to Serbia if it then can't progress the prosecution's side of the investigation. So we needed to know in taking them to Serbia, are we going to be able to collect the evidence? And the evidence that's collected, are we going to be able to present it into a Australian court? So there was a lot of conversations around just that aspect, and the Australian Federal Police are amazing with our international connections, and in fact, we have AFP offices posted throughout the world, and so we had a post positioned in Serbia already and that liaison person did all of our communication and evidence collection conversations with Serbian authorities and the Serbian authorities actually put a separate investigation team together to support ours.

Host

Once Serbia became the most likely destination for a successful meeting, Assistant Commissioner Steve Dametto, who was working as the superintendent overseeing the operation at the time, had to give the okay.

Rach

There was a conversation with Steve at one point where he said to me, 'Why do we need to go to Serbia? Why do we need to do this?' And I said, 'Because if we don't, we won't get the evidence to prosecute.' And he looked at me and said, 'Okay, let's go to Serbia.'

Host

One of the first people the team reached out to was AFP Commander Allison Buck.

Allison Buck

I was senior officer of Belgrade, with responsibility for East, Central and Southern Europe. I was brought into the operation fairly early. I had a conversation with the case officer who made some requests of me to ascertain whether or not a number of countries within my area of responsibility had the capabilities and the willingness to assist us in implementing the international strategy for resolution of the operation.

Host

There were a set of protocols Allison had to follow.

Allison Buck

What I need to do in that situation was effectively contact the Ministry of Interior in Serbia to get permission to talk to some of their specialised capabilities and to engage with them directly as a police officer. We don't have jurisdiction Serbia in this instance, so I need to get permission of the government effectively to enable me to talk directly with their police officers. So I had meetings with a number of different areas within the Serbian Ministry of Interior. For example, specialist capabilities around undercover operations, as well as a serious and organised crime squad. Because Serbia has a different judicial system to Australia, I also needed the authority of the Chief Prosecutor for the organised crime branch of the prosecution authority in Serbia as well to undertake any activity.

Host

Contrary to the beliefs of the international drug syndicate that the AFP couldn't operate in Serbia, quite the opposite was true.

Allison Buck

The Serbian authorities are absolutely first class in coming to the table to collaborate with us on this investigation.

Host

The team hoped that this fourth attempt at a meeting would finally draw out the elusive Kingpin.

Stephen Dametto

So we then planned that we would go to some sort of resolution in Serbia, that we would make arrests if the other person came out. We knew they were higher up the food chain, so to speak,

within the syndicate. So we thought if that person came out, this would be a good result for us. Also, they were supposedly going to bring the cash as well, so there would be a seizure of a fair amount of cash at the time. So the meeting was organised in Serbia at the Metropole. What was great of that meeting was that the person that came out who ended up being one of the offenders, said he felt very safe there because there's no way the Australian government would ever work with the Serbian government and no way the Australian police would ever work with the Serbian police. So he felt very comfortable that our undercover was not a police operative that made us felt pretty good because, we work with a whole bunch of different countries overseas. I mean, that's what we do and we work with countries that I think a lot of the criminal syndicates would not be aware that we work with.

Host

And then it was a matter of getting the team ready. Kirsten was chosen to be on-site for the arrest phase.

Kirsten Sperling

I was really, really fortunate enough to then go to Serbia, in order to do the final resolution. As soon as we realised that the Kingpin had felt safe enough to be part of the meet, and was openly discussing certain aspects, which was ticking off our list of the evidence that we needed to help prove that he was part of the conspiracy to import.

Host

Travel for the major players was monitored as the AFP waited on tenterhooks to see who would arrive in Serbia.

Stuart Millen

We saw that the Importer had inserted himself back in and he flew out of Australia mid-January to go to Serbia. So we were a bit disheartened. It's like, not again; the Importer's going to be the main person. But then the Businessman also flew out the next day. So at least we're getting the right people. But again, we're still not sure if we're going to get one of the syndicate heads. But finally, through our foreign law enforcement, we see that the Kingpin has entered into Serbia. So then we're really confident that's going to go ahead. So we had the Serbian team prepared. We had their tactical people prepared.

Host

For Rach as the case officer, as soon as the Kingpin arrived in Serbia, she could breathe a sigh of relief.

Rach

I was super confident as soon as we knew the Kingpin was in Serbia, I thought we were good. And then it was just a matter of things needed to play out in a way in which we could collect the evidence for prosecution. Once Serbian surveillance had picked up Kingpin in country, in Serbia, I thought we were super close to having everything we needed. And all that was missing was the actual conversation. So Importer, and the Businessmen, as soon as we had that

combination in Serbia, I was pretty confident we were going to get the conversation around everybody's roles that we could then use as evidence to prosecute

Host

Aside from Kirsten who was on site, the rest of the team who had spent most of the year working on Operation Amorgos waited anxiously back in Australia. They were in constant contact with Serbia as the events played out.

Rach

So there was a liaison point, Kirsten, as far as the investigations team, was over there feeding information back to us and she was there for the purpose of if the investigation needed to pivot to actually implement something to collect the evidence, we could do that pretty quickly. We knew that the meeting was occurring in a hotel that Kingpin and the Businessman was staying at. So we were pretty confident at that point that the Kingpin would come with the Businessman to the meeting, albeit we weren't told that. And then surveillance detected Kingpin coming to the meeting with the Businessman, and I was pretty confident at that point that we were in the right direction.

Host

Back in Australia, Jacqui, Steve and Stuart were all listening in.

Jacqui

I was getting right into the conversation that the Kingpin was having with our undercover operative. He was giving him his life story. And they actually really liked the undercover operative, not knowing that he was, but you could hear that there was a bit of a bond forming, a trust. I was amazed at how well the undercover operative had done to earn their trust like he did. They were just sort of talking general chit chat and at that point went to get the money to hand over to us.

Host

The money handover was vital for a couple of reasons. Most importantly it was concrete evidence that the syndicate members present were there to exchange money for their lost drugs.

Stuart Millen

They had purchased a suitcase and they brought with them a large amount of currency. I think it was 690,000 euros worth of currency. But it was quite strange actually. Clearly the syndicate had been lying to us about the whole time about how much money they had because the money they turned up with was in about 12 different currencies. They had Thai baht, they had Canadian dollars, Japanese yen, East Caribbean dollars, which I've never even heard of before, money from all over the world in this suitcase ready to hand over. And the Serbians were fantastic. They sent their tactical team in. The entire hotel was full of Serbian police officers.

Host

With the Serbian police in place, the law enforcement personnel involved all knew the signs that would signal the right time to arrest. Kirsten was fully involved from a nearby location.

Kirsten Sperling

There's certain things that happen that indicate to members of our team that they feel they've got sufficient evidence, and that it's all gonna then get wrapped up. And we obviously knew that there was a lot of Serbian law enforcement officers involved at the meeting, like surrounding the meeting as well as about to storm into the meeting. And so it was really exciting to be able to listen to what was going on whilst it was happening at the time that it was.

Host

Across the world, Stuart and Steve were also listening.

Stephen Dametto

So we're sitting there in our headquarters in Goulburn Street. We've got a radio; we're in contact with the controller who's in Serbia. He's sitting in a Serbian police car there, and we're listening to it live.

Stuart Millen

Being able to listen in real time, yeah, it was exciting, but you're still not quite sure exactly what's going on. The one benefit, I think, is the Serbians videotaped the whole arrest phase. And it wasn't long after that we actually got to see exactly what happened, which is quite unusual. You don't normally see that necessarily. But they did a fantastic job with the Serbian police. Yeah, so it's a funny feeling being a long way away from the action, but yeah, a great culmination to a long investigation.

Host

The video shows half a dozen armed Serbian police surging into the building, surprising the men sitting on couches in the nice hotel. Seconds later, they're lying on the floor handcuffed, and the camera zooms in on a small black case next to the couch. One of the police members opens the zipper on the bag and reveals large blocks of cash.

Stephen Dametto

You're not there, you haven't got eyes on it, so it's a little bit nerve-racking about what's occurring, and then when you get the message back they'd all been arrested. It was a great feeling because going for eight months. It was a job that we were involved day in, day out, just with the twists and turns, just dealing with undercovers, pretending to be a criminal syndicate ourselves, which was very exciting, but of course, very strenuous and stressful for the team as well. So, it was good to get that result.

Host

For the AFP, the resolution phase is only halfway; the next step is a successful prosecution.

Stephen Dametto

I mean, the whole plan of this was to dismantle a criminal syndicate and arresting is great. And that is a disruption, but to dismantle, we need them to go to jail and we need them to get long sentences.

Host

The arrest was a bonus for Jacqui and the intelligence team.

Jacqui

The Serbian police also started taking identification from persons sitting nearby to where the Kingpin and the undercover were having their meeting. And they sent us back some, copies of Australian passports from two persons that were sitting in the foyer and it turned out that they were part of the Governor's transnational serious and organised crime network. And we had no idea that they were sitting there watching the whole time. I knew who these two persons were as well. And one of them was a bodyguard of the Governor. So he has actually sent his own bodyguard to that meeting in Serbia. We were hoping the Governor would come, but he sent his own personal bodyguard. So that was good because then we knew exactly where they were in the world.

Host

In the end, the Governor proved elusive, but the police arrested the Kingpin, the Businessman and the Importer. After the arrest, Rach and Kirsten had some interactions with the men. They spent time pondering the biggest question: *why did these men choose to import drugs?*

Kirsten Sperling

They certainly were very successful business people and they had the world to lose. They were so successful in their own rights, that they did not need to be involved in any unlawful activity, but yet they still chose to do so. It was quite astounding. And they were all incredibly surprised because it appears as if they felt incredibly safe conducting their business overseas in Serbia, which is why Kingpin was drawn in.

Rach

As an investigator, that just reiterates to me that these are real people in the community. They are just normal people in the community that, quite likely, their friends and business partners had no idea what they were doing. No idea whatsoever. They are normal businessmen.

Host

In the end, Rach imagines, it all boils down to money.

Rach

I would have to say the key factor would be money. I couldn't even round off the billions that this seizure was worth. We had a professional drug valuer create a statement for us for the purpose of prosecution. And the number is so long, I can't even say it, of the value of this cocaine. So that draws people to commit the offence, but the actual value to the community and the negative impact on the community that 1.28 tonnes of cocaine has, that's mind blowing. That's mind blowing.

Host

After the arrests and the extraditions took place to get the syndicate members back to Australia, Rach and Kirsten had the task of putting together the massive brief of evidence to present in court.

Rach

We had a billion considerations, post arrest. We had to make sure that we were able to extradite them. We needed to make sure that the evidence that we believed existed, we had collected in a format that we could present as evidence. We also needed to present it in a way in which it was understandable because we're talking encrypted devices and we're talking 2018, we went to resolution. Encrypted devices were really only coming to surface then in a larger community. So our jury's made up of our community members so we needed to make sure that they understood what encrypted devices were, which was the predominant amount of our evidence. So the considerations were lengthy and continual.

Host

After a long series of trials, the final result was hefty sentences for the three syndicate members. The Kingpin was sentenced to 20 years in prison. The Importer received an 18-year sentence, and the Businessman was sentenced to 27 years.

Rach

These guys have families. They are normal people in the community. They have loved ones, they have children, right? So, certainly, if you're looking to commit a criminal offence, when you're considering your options, and your options are about, 30 years of imprisonment and the impacts on your family and seeing your children grow up and your children become adults and, all of those special occasions your daughter's wedding and not walking her down the aisle, their graduations from college, all of those really special occasions, you're going to miss them from prison. For us as a law enforcement agency, we're always about making sure there's a reason why people don't want to get involved in organised crime syndicates, and don't want to be importing or don't want to be breaking our national laws, and certainly that sentence was a real positive deterrent for other people. Enough of a sentence for someone to sit there and say, well hang on a second, what, what happens if I'm caught?

Host

Stuart felt a similar sentiment.

Stuart Millen

And it is a real deterrent for those people who want to import drugs into Australia that there are significant sentences, that they're really going to spend a large chunk of their lives away from their friends and family.

Host

For Allison Buck, Operation Amorgos marked her last big international case.

Allison Buck

This operation for me, one being one of the last ones that I did in the international space, before I left Belgrade, was an absolutely incredible, innovative strategy in that undercover space, in how we would engage with the criminals involved in the operation. The cooperation was absolutely gold standard, and being part of the international network, that happened in the other countries as well, in which we moved through from various points of the operation.

Host

It would take years for the court cases all to be over. What is it like looking back on Operation Amorgos?

Rach

I've run a lot of investigations. This was certainly by far the largest. We utilised a lot of amazing support specialists in the organisation. And so one of the brilliant things about the AFP is that, we're a national capability that works internationally. So we have really talented specialist units available, so we're constantly engaging with the smartest and the most enthusiastic members of the organisation, but not just our organisation because we work on the international platform. People want to work with us as well, so they bring a whole another kind of level of capability and enthusiasm to our investigations.

Host

For Kirsten, the job satisfaction from Operation Amorgos came from not settling for those lower down the chain.

Kirsten Sperling

I feel it was our ability to not just go with the first person that came to collect the consignment, the Importer, but the excitement to keep growing and growing and let's see who else we can pull into this investigation, because our efforts were always focused on those higher ranking members to make it an incredibly successful investigation, to actually do some serious damage to at least one criminal syndicate in Australia.

Host

Operation Amorgos was never just about getting one shipment off the street; it was about disrupting future large-scale drug importations.

Stuart Millen

Seizing the drugs is clearly important but actually trying to disrupt the syndicate and making Australia a really hard place for people to operate. And we've seen, that's why a lot of the syndicate heads have left Australia and they're living and working all over the world. But the more that we can make it really hard for them to operate in Australia, and they understand that they're not safe all over the world and that's why having those relationships with foreign law enforcement is so important because, there are no boundaries for criminals so we have to make sure that we are using all the tools available for policing and that's really our relationships around the world and that's why the AFP's international network is so important.

Host

For Assistant Commissioner Stephen Dametto, it was a satisfying end to a long investigation.

Stephen Dametto

This has no doubt been the highlight of my career personally. It was just great working with Stuart and Rach, Jacqui and the team, great people who I still work with today. This was the second largest import of cocaine at the time. We knew a major criminal group were behind it. And just for the team to come up with ideas to do something different, let's try something different, and also support of our management in Canberra as well to go ahead and do that. It was fantastic and it just really brought out the best, I think, in my view, of our capability. I think it did teach us that we can be innovative. I think it's important that we allow ideas to flow, let the team have ideas. They are the best at what they do.

Host

And even though the AFP did not get the Governor at the top of the syndicate, Jacqui and the Intelligence team could see they caused considerable damage to his activities.

Jacqui

Yes, we got a better understanding of his international activities, who he's connected to offshore. And as well, it would have absolutely hurt his network by us dismantling what we call the logistics arm for his network into Australia because the Kingpin controlled that. And so we dismantled it. We took Kingpin out and his trusted Importer, which cut off that arm into Australia. So that would have really hurt him. And we did see that for a very long time.

Host

If you are interested in learning more about how the AFP works to protect Australians against international drug importation and how Stephen, Stuart, Rach, Kirsten and Jacqui investigated this case, visit a-f-p-dot-gov-dot-a-u

The AFP. Everyday people doing legendary work.

