Crime Interrupted
An AFP and Casefile Presents podcast.
Episode 3, Operation Avalon

Host – introduction
The Australian Federal Police is Australia's national policing agency. It's aim? To defend and protect Australia and Australia's future from domestic and global security threats. The AFP works with Australian, regional and global partners to keep Australia and our region safe.

The AFP has strong international partnerships across the Pacific to disrupt and target transnational organised crime in the region. With over a hundred members located across the Pacific, the AFP works directly with local law enforcement to combat crime and provide specialist policing training, equipment and education. Across 2024–25 the AFP charged 164 offenders with 309 transnational serious and organised crime offences.

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

Host
Operation Avalon began with a clandestine handover of four million dollars in a suburban Sydney street. What followed was a strong hunch, months of close surveillance, and an international boat race where one boat had added hundreds of kilos of cocaine to its usual cargo heading for Australian shores. It was up to the AFP to stop this.

Back when Detective Superintendent Grace Calma was still in high school, she had an interest in forensic science. When she joined the AFP, she began studying forensics right before a TV show went to air that changed everything.

Grace Calma
I was still in school, very interested at the time in studying forensics. And at that point in time, forensics wasn't a very popular type of thing. The year I started studying forensics, my class that we started with was about thirty people; maybe got down to about fifteen, sixteen by the end of the first year. And that particular summer was the first year that the TV show CSI was broadcast. And so the following year, I think they had a starting class for the first years of about 200 to 300 students.

Host
Grace joined AFP Forensics under a cadet system for First Nations people, but even though Grace loved working in forensics, for her, there was something missing.

Grace Calma
The particular program I came in on was First Nations focused, so getting in I guess a cohort of indigenous members into the AFP through different pathways. We had a manager of forensics who wanted to try and move forensics away from teaching cops to be scientists and

actually teaching scientists to be cops. And so there was an appetite to engage with universities and with students of forensics to try to bring them into that discipline, I guess. I wanted to see more of the picture about how investigations worked. We would have opportunities to do work in the labs that supported investigations. We'd go out to crime scenes, but we wouldn't always see the end product if a matter didn't go to court, or if a matter did go to court but there wasn't necessarily forensic evidence led in that you'd kind of lose sight of what the outcome was. And I think I just really liked the idea of a big picture and seeing it from beginning to end, but also how all of the different roles play a part in that whole picture.

Host
When an opportunity arose to become a sworn officer, Grace joined the recruit training program and soon moved to the role of investigator.

Grace Calma
Post recruit training, I was deployed to AFP's office in Sydney. Within that office, we cover all crime types. And at that point in time, I'd settled into a team that was largely focused on money laundering but trying to take different angles on how we investigated money laundering. And in particular, I guess the beginning of this job was about following the money backwards. So, conducting investigations into instances or intelligence we would have around money being laundered and then trying to work out not just where it was going, but who it came from and why they had that money in the first place.

Host
Also working on the same team was Detective Superintendent Matthew Byles, who was, back then, a constable like Grace learning about the complex world of money laundering.

Matthew Byles
Prior to this investigation, probably a couple of years prior, there'd been a lot of work in the AFP to put in place some money laundering strategies to try and impact organised crime more broadly. The mantra was: *follow the money;* if you follow the money, you will identify the criminality, and potentially higher up the food chain of that criminality – noting they all want to get paid.

Host
Operation Avalon began with a piece of intelligence about a money handover on the streets of Sydney in early 2011. The man receiving the money had been on the radar of the AFP.

Grace Calma
We had intelligence that suggested there had been a significant cash handover that had occurred. We had the location of where it occurred, and the time and date as a starting point. What stood out to us in this particular instance, was that the cash that was handed over, we believed was approximately four million dollars, which seemed to be an excessive amount of money in any context. And really, there's not much you're handing over four million dollars for that isn't illegal.

Host
Detective Superintendent Chris Sheehan was the National Coordinator for Organised Crime in the AFP when the handover of cash occurred.

Chris Sheehan
We didn't just stumble upon this transaction occurring in Granville. We definitely had some insight that something was happening, and that there'd been some conversations around moving a large sum of money. And then it gets to that next part around tracing who this person was and then using the suite of powers that are available to us to firm up the information around the value of the funds that were being moved.

Host
In the spirit of following the money flow, it was up to Grace and her team to work backwards.

Grace Calma
So we decided to chase that particular line of intelligence down. What that looked like for us was a very traditional investigation at the start, which was working backwards from the time and location that we knew that particular handover of cash occurred in Western Sydney. And over the course of a week and a half, we meticulously worked through collecting CCTV and other things to try and identify first the handover, then follow the person that had handed over that cash. Ultimately, we were able to reconstruct a backwards path back to a location in Bondi Junction in Sydney, and that led to us identifying the Sydney guy who started this investigation for us.

Host
The work was laborious and Chris listened with great interest to every briefing he got from the team.

Chris Sheehan
It's easy just to sort of say it was just good old-fashioned police work, but what that good old-fashioned police work looks like is literally retracing every step that our target took. Finding shops, homes, street posts with CCTV, finding out who owns that CCTV, capturing it, and being able to retrace from Granville all the way to the eastern suburbs of Sydney where this chap landed; where the person went, whether they met with anyone else along the way, and were there any other handoffs. And then putting them to an address that you could then start to target through other investigative capabilities to find out more about what's going on. That's not easy.

Host
Once the AFP got the man's address, the next step for the team was to find out who he was. They hoped this might help them find out why he had just handed over four million dollars.

Grace Calma
We were able to quickly get an ID on him. We were able to establish that he had been living there for a little bit of time, not a significant amount of time; was a student at a local language college but came from Spain to come and study. We started looking at pattern of life activities,

and he seemed like a very regular, normal international student, not excessively social. He was a bit older than your standard sort of international student. But yeah, kept a pretty routine life with nothing that really was significant, other than the fact that we had linked him to a very significant cash handover.

Host
Grace's team kept an eye on the man in Sydney and also monitored his associates. Clearly, there was some kind of illegal activity attached to the street handover of four million dollars, and the AFP needed to find out what it was.

Grace Calma
We were able to start to piece together some associations, some historic or people that had been associated with him that had also spent time in Sydney. And we started to build a little bit of a profile on the demographic that we were looking at – so early thirties, Spanish males, that really weren't standing out at all in the crowd. But again, came back to that question of what is their link to the four million dollars?

Host
While investigators had to keep an open mind about the huge amount of cash handed over in the street, Chris says they certainly had their suspicions.

Chris Sheehan
I think we'd all be kidding ourselves if we didn't assume that it probably was related to drugs. But the question is: was it a payment for drugs that had already been delivered to Australia, and that has to be moved overseas – or was it a payment for drugs that were to come to Australia? Depending on which it is, it means you're looking for different things. And start to build up, I guess, a pattern of life and a network of associates around that person and a network of events around that person that can start to point you in a direction in terms of what this might actually be about.

Host
The art of building a list of associations and travel, then adding all the information into a timeline profile was relatively new to Grace.

Grace Calma
A lot of our investigation started to focus on looking backwards in time and building out timelines of ultimately up to, I think, five or six years prior, and filling in those gaps and using the things we knew to work out the gaps we knew that there was something happening, but we didn't know what it was. And using that to help guide our ongoing investigation while still monitoring and assessing what was to come.

Host
Monitoring the Sydney man closely, Grace and the team learnt of his daily conversations with a man on the Gold Coast.

Grace Calma
Over the first few months of the investigation, we started to identify he only really had one key person that he was talking to frequently: like: *why are these guys talking every day*? They live in different cities. Ultimately, we were able to identify the Gold Coast guy. He was also a Spanish national. And that also built that idea of a closer association that could just be that they're from the same part of the world and are old friends that both find themselves in Australia – or could be that they had other associations and that is how they were linked.

Host
Four million dollars aside, the Sydney man was just an average guy doing average things. Chris says this is very deliberate.

Chris Sheehan
These are very sophisticated, organised criminal groups who conduct these commercial scale importations. The people that they select to come out to Australia and essentially sit here to act as coordinators and what we call shore party for drug importations – they're well briefed on the way they should behave and the things that they should do. And right at the top of that list is: don't do anything that's going to draw attention of law enforcement in particular, but of people in general. Behave normally. Keep a low profile and wait until we contact you and we'll give you instructions in terms of what we want you to do. And so Grace is correct. Apart from the four million dollars, there probably would've been nothing, absent some sort of inside information that could have tipped someone off or police or anyone off that these people were up to no good.

Host
The AFP team spent months monitoring conversations between their Sydney suspect and those he was talking too. An added complication was that the conversations were not in English.

Grace Calma
All of their conversations were always in Spanish, and so there's always a lag between the conversation happening and our ability to interpret it after we have it translated. You can infer so much through tone sometimes in conversations, which can be a lot more challenging when you don't understand the language that they're speaking. So I was very reliant on the use of trained professional translators. And they produce a word for word translation of what is said. And how we interpret that is often no different to how we would interpret a conversation in a language that we speak, where you bring in your broader knowledge of what's happening around the way you consider tone and things like that. At the beginning, there was nothing that really stood out. And then every now and then, they would have a conversation where they would use words a little bit out of context. One that really stood out to me, was sometimes they would refer to 'the mosquito'– not when they're talking about being bitten by a mosquito, but they'd say things like, 'Oh, he's been in the mosquito,' and referring to it almost as a location. Ultimately, we started to look at codes like that as referring to places or events. Another code is they would talk about people using nicknames that, again, were out of context. And so in a day-to-day normal conversation, when you're not using codes, to start throwing in nicknames and codes into conversation, stands out.

Host
So while the man in Sydney was in constant communication with the man on the Gold Coast, both men were also connected to another man in Brazil. And then, all three were connected to a place in the South Pacific.

Grace Calma
Constructing that reverse timeline, we started to look at where both the Sydney guy, the Gold Coast guy, and another person who came into play later, the Brazil guy. One point of travel that they all had in common over the years prior to when our investigation started was Vanuatu. And in the context of when they were talking about the mosquito, we started to think, well, that might actually be referring to Vanuatu, noting it's a tropical island where there's lots of mosquitoes. And that's not an unreasonable kind of interpretation of that code given the commonality of that travel. And it was around that point in time as well, we were able to start looking at who else had travelled to Vanuatu. The commonality between the three people we had already identified being their age, the fact that there were Spanish passport holders and that they'd travelled between Vanuatu and Australia. And so we were able to then start looking at who else might fit that description. And through that, we also identified the skipper who comes into play a little bit later in the investigation. That was a point in time where we started to think we've gotta start looking at what's happening in Vanuatu and why they're all associated with Vanuatu.

Host
Because the AFP has members internationally working with local law enforcement, Grace was able to reach out to their police liaison officer based in Port Vila in Vanuatu.

Grace Calma
So, we started to brief and share with our liaison officer and the local police team what we were starting to see. And they're on the ground; they see it as well. They were able to enrich some of our intelligence but also start to progress other inquiries that helped us fill in that timeline around movements and other things.

Host
Months went by while the AFP watched to see what chain of events the four-million-dollar handover in February would set off.

Grace Calma
At this point in time, we were sort of sitting around September 2011, noting the cash handover occurred around February. So, we'd had a very long extended period of looking at this group, continuously assessing whether we thought they may be involved in illicit activity. And around this time, we had consolidated that link to Vanuatu. We had a notification that the skipper, one of the people that had become of interest to us, had put in paperwork signalling his intention to sail a boat from Vanuatu to Australia.

Host
Chris says there had been a long history of boats sailing into Australian waters with drugs.

Chris Sheehan
It's a really well-known, well-established, tried and tested importation methodology from South America for cocaine into Australia. Small boats, typically what you'll see is cocaine coming out of South America, Columbia, Ecuador, places like that. It will be taken offshore by the drug syndicates in fast motorboats, and then it'll be placed into sailing boats, and those boats will make their way across the Pacific stopping at different, island ports along the way. We would often see a convergence between those small maritime boat importation ventures, and ocean sailing races that were occurring around the same time. Obviously, the plan there for the criminals is to fit in with the larger number of sailing boats that are out on the ocean participating in these ocean races. And moving larger quantities of cocaine into places in the Pacific Island region, Vanuatu, Fiji, other places, and stockpiling large quantities of cocaine there to reduce the risk for them of taking those big, either lots of smaller boats or one large boat all the way from South America to Australia. If you can stockpile in the South Pacific, it's a much shorter journey to go out and back, to replenish supplies in Australia than it is to try and do the same thing out of South America. They're criminals. They're also economists in their own way, and they look to the most effective and efficient way to move their product from point A to point B. But small maritime importations has been a longstanding challenge for Australia. We've got a massive coastline, and it's very, very difficult to police that coastline a hundred percent of the time.

Host
Not long after the four million dollars was handed over, a vessel called the Friday Freedom was purchased by people associated with the man in Sydney. This was the vessel entered into the regatta from Vanuatu to Bundaberg in Queensland.

Grace Calma
We had the notification from our team in Port Vila that on the 13th of October, the Friday Freedom with both the skipper and his girlfriend on it departed Port Vila, Vanuatu at the start of the regatta, along with a number of other vessels. In completely perfect conditions, we were anticipating that journey would take approximately six or seven days. However, at that time of the year, there were a number of storms which actually saw a number of vessels start to take safe harbor along the way due to the fact that the seas were incredibly difficult.

Host
With the vessel on the way to Australian shores, the AFP team had to be ready.

Grace Calma
What this looked like for us was actually sending someone to Bundaberg ahead of the vessel's arrival to start scoping out what the environment looked like, what the access to the port was like, so that we could start planning the logistics of a deployment of a number of AFP offices and partner agencies to be ready for the arrival of the vessel.

Host
Detective Superintendent Brad Kirwan was working in Sydney when he got the call to head up to Bundaberg as the field commander for Operation Avalon.

Bradley Kirwan
I was the team leader of the Criminal Assets Confiscation Task Force in Sydney. Because we were a Sydney based team, and I was part of a broader organised crime area, they needed someone to go north and they asked me. I'm a Queenslander, so it doesn't take much to convince me.

Host
Before joining the AFP, Brad had worked for the Queensland police and was familiar with Bundaberg. Part of his job was to find a place to set the team up.

Bradley Kirwan
Bundaberg is more on the river and then you have Bundaberg port, which is really closer to probably Bargara. The port is just inside the mouth of the river where it comes out to the east coast. So we actually focused ourselves around Bargara rather than in Bundaberg to allow for any lead time to respond to any matters.

Host
Brad thought there would be more time to scope out the area.

Bradley Kirwan
We thought we were heading up there early on the day that we deployed to do that type of scoping activity because we did understand that the weather conditions between Vanuatu and Bundaberg were to be quite treacherous. So there was a speculation that they may not be as fast coming across the open ocean, but it turned out they just ploughed through the bad weather and turned up. So that scoping turned out to be very quick. We did have previous knowledge of where they were likely to come in because there is limitations of where foreign vessels can be first brought into port. And then we also knew that the actual race that they were participating in had a start and a finish line. So that enabled us to identify the most likely locations that they would come in and then position ourselves in the location as discreetly as possible.

Host
With the Australian Border Force monitoring the progress of the vessel towards Bundaberg, the surveillance logistics grew larger.

Grace Calma
When it comes to the planning, it was really a lot of unknowns. The knowns that we had were that we had the Friday Freedom a vessel that contained two people, the skipper and his girlfriend, so at a bare minimum, logistically we would have to look at how we would staff monitoring and then any type of activity such as a search warrant or an arrest that may follow, if that's how the investigation played out. In addition to that, we had both the Sydney guy and the Gold Coast guy in two different locations, that we had formed the suspicion were closely associated with any activity with the boat. And we had a need to support any resolution activity at those two locations as well. So, from a planning and logistics perspective, it was quite significant. We still didn't have any confirmation that there were drugs on the boat. We still didn't have any confirmation that the Sydney guy or the Gold Coast guy would be approaching

the boat. So, we had to plan for the most extreme circumstance being that all three locations needed to have police officers available. And then also once the vessel arrived in Australia, the ability to have 24-hour monitoring on that, which includes having people ready and available to do search warrants, to make arrests, and to do those types of activities. So ultimately what that footprint looked like for us was around about a hundred members being deployed into Bundaberg, Gold Coast and Sydney in a way that we could sustain monitoring and readiness for the arrival of the boat.

Host
The reason for the quick approach to Australian waters was that the skipper ignored the weather conditions that made other vessels in the race find safe harbour in the nearest ports. Matthew was part of the team getting ready for the arrival.

Matthew Byles
ABF and their maritime command was certainly doing a lot of the heavy lifting in terms of monitoring the vessels coming over. Those of us who had pre-deployed to Bundaberg, we were just waiting for indicators. We were getting updates from ABF and from Sydney about: *they're looking like they're a couple of days out*. And then we heard there's a storm. The vessels are either put into port or anchoring and trying to stay out of trouble. They'll probably be delayed by a little bit. And then we started to hear, 'It looks like our vessel's still pushing through. They'll probably be here in the next 24 hours or so.' So, it probably happened on schedule, but we thought we'd bought a bit more time with the storm. But he was obviously a very good sailor and travelled through the storm.

Host
Because the skipper ignored the weather conditions and pressed on, the investigators wondered if he had a deadline he needed to meet.

Grace Calma
When all other vessels as a part of the regatta took safe harbor and didn't risk the dangerous seas, this vessel did come through, which made us start to question: *was the skipper on a timeline*? Communications are limited when you're at sea. Was there a reason that he took the risks that he did in the sea conditions that existed at the time, to not take safe harbor and to continue to push through to Bundaberg? So ultimately arriving seven days after leaving Vanuatu.

Host
When a vessel lands in Australian waters, it needs to be cleared by the Australian Border Force. Matthew accompanied the ABF agents to get a closer look at the boat.

Matthew Byles
They did arrive a little bit earlier than what we thought. When they first arrived as with all international arrivals, they have to go into a little area where they landed, and ABF do a Customs clearance and potentially quarantine as well. As part of that, a couple of ABF members go on board. It's the maritime equivalent of filling out your PAX card and going through the primary line at an airport. I went on also at that time just to understand what the

vessel looked like, and from our perspective, to see if there was any red flags, anything that could assist us in building our case.

Host
With the influx of AFP operatives into Bundaberg, Brad's job was to manage the logistics.

Bradley Kirwan
If you ever look at the actual port of Bundaberg, it's probably, I think about four or five fingers of boat moorings that only hold so many boats. We very quickly learnt that a boating community is very insular. They're their own Neighbourhood Watch effectively. So even our activities around the Friday Freedom we had to be very conscious of you can't just send someone in every hour to walk around and not be noticed. You have to be able to blend into that environment. And then that expands across not only the port, but we also have to do it across wherever we're staying. So everyone has to be conscious 24/7 that any activities they undertake, we don't want to be highlighting to anyone that there's up to sixty or seventy police in the region, because you never know whether or not the syndicate has a local representative that then goes, 'Oh, hold on, there's a whole lot of cops in town.' We could blow the whole operation because the real possibility was that the Friday Freedom just unties itself and takes back off out to sea and sails away.

Host
With the vessel safely in port, the seizure of the possible drugs on board the Friday Freedom had to wait. To get a successful arrest, criteria has to be met.

Bradley Kirwan
The technicalities of the offence of importation, it is required to effectively not just be sailed in or flown in, it has to actually breach the borders of Australia, and those borders are described as land borders. So, it requires that technical element of being able to prove those offences, which is why patience is often needed in our game because we want to make sure that the criminals bring it over. There's also the other side of it that we want to make sure that we are drawing all of the participants in the organised crime group out, and not necessarily missing somebody by going too soon or too early, and therefore missing the person that was going to pick up the drugs, because it's about disrupting the whole syndicate, not necessarily just stopping the drugs, because often the stopping of the drugs, it does not completely disrupt the syndicate. It's a major step in disrupting the syndicate, but sometimes these syndicate have multiple operations underway at any one time. So, it's being able to provide the best evidence, but also being able to ensure we get the most number of criminals involved.

Host
And that wasn't the only reason for the delay. Even if the AFP team searched the vessel, the types of concealments used were very sophisticated. Matthew had been on board and had seen no sign of any drugs.

Matthew Byles
Vessels are pretty complicated things to search. They can all be built in very particular ways, in custom ways with false hides, so it's often very difficult to necessarily identify a

consignment of drugs as well just by a search as we would normally do it, it may require potentially tearing a boat apart, which if you're not a hundred percent sure there is drugs inside, can be a very expensive exercise.

Host
While the skipper and his girlfriend enjoyed social engagements around the regatta in Bundaberg, Grace was monitoring the man in Sydney who'd made the initial four million dollar drop, and the man on the Gold Coast who he was in regular contact with. Suddenly, there was movement in Sydney.

Grace Calma
Once the vessel arrived, we were very much in an unknown about whether we might see action the next day, whether there might be a few days delay. And so our focus, while maintaining visibility and interest in the vessel and the skipper and his activities, we focused on seeing what reactions might come about from the Sydney and the Gold Coast guy. What we then saw, which again sort of got everyone on the starting line and ready to go was two days after the vessel arrived in Bundaberg, we saw the Sydney guy fly up to the Gold Coast and meet up with the Gold Coast guy. The following day, they then started driving in the direction of Bundaberg. They drove all the way from the Gold Coast to Bundaberg and got to the final roundabout just before you entered the marina where the vessel was, and went around the roundabout and then drove back to the Gold Coast. The Sydney guy then returned to Sydney and things went quiet again.

Host
So, just when it looked like there might be some movement of the suspected shipment of drugs, nothing happened. Surveillance kept a close eye on the skipper and his girlfriend, but in the early days, their behaviour was not suspicious.

Grace Calma
We started to see some activity about ten days after the Friday Freedom had arrived in Port Bundaberg. Up until then, the skipper and his girlfriend had been involved in a lot of the day-to-day activities of the marina. As a part of a regatta, there's a real party vibe to that, and that included things like barbecues in the evenings, fancy dress parties even. So they were very much a part of that regatta sailing community.

Host
As the days stretched into weeks, Chris was kept updated as he controlled the logistics from Sydney or Canberra, and he in turn kept the AFP command updated.

Chris Sheehan
With that many law enforcement people in a town like Bundaberg, the risk of the investigation being inadvertently compromised just by some third party overhearing a conversation, someone recognising someone and asking questions. All of those things are certainly playing through my mind. And I know they were definitely going through the investigator's mind. At the end of the day though, we just needed to be patient. And they were obviously operating to instructions, and they would get instruction at some time, and then we'd be ready to go.

Host
As one day stretched into the next, the team remained hopeful because of the small things that were pointing strongly towards their being drugs on the boat.

Bradley Kirwan
There was quite a number of instances throughout it that kept us pretty confident that there was something on that boat. We didn't obviously know quantities, but given the direction, we had a fairly good idea it was gonna be some sort of South American drug, which would have to be cocaine. But there was the fact that they ploughed through the weather, they attended shops to buy cutting equipment. So, I mean, yes, we wane sometimes, and we question our own suspicion, but each time you sit down and review it, there is something else pops up and you go, oh no, there's still enough activity here to keep us going.

Host
But again, the days stretched on. Having so many people on the job with no resolution in sight, was stressful.

Grace Calma
It's certainly a very nerve-racking time. It's exciting from the perspective of we're right on the edge of potentially having an excellent outcome for the investigation. But in the back of your mind, you're also really second guessing a lot of things sometimes, because what if you've interpreted that wrong and there's nothing to it? One of the highlights of this investigation for me was the sergeant that led our team. He was a very experienced detective who was really supportive and encouraging of us, trusting our instinct as well as helping us in articulating the why we thought things meant. Such as why we thought it was significant that the purchase of a tool that could be used to make modifications to the boat was for that purpose and not just for the purpose of scraping barnacles off the boat. It was incredibly tense day to day. We had hundreds of people working on this job. People were getting quite tired. People are working remotely away from their families, and in pretty restricted conditions. When you weren't on shift, if you were in Bundaberg, you weren't playing tourists; you were just trying to keep a low profile and be discreet. So I imagine for a number of the members that deployed, it wasn't like a holiday. They were there to work. And that plays in the back of your mind about the investigation that you were keeping them away from their family. And you're just hoping the whole time that it's because your instinct is right.

Host
It was when all the main players talked about buying bags and suitcases that the team hoped a resolution couldn't be far away.

Grace Calma
The clock had ticked over into November now, so we were almost twenty odd days since the vessel had arrived in Australia, and we had had these small instances of activities that could support the theory that they were importing drugs. We then had observations of the skipper and his girlfriend going and buying ~~,~~ a number of different trolley bags and sports bags. And around the same time, we also observed the Gold Coast guy purchasing smaller bags on the Gold

Coast. There had been some discussion between the Gold Coast guy and the Sydney guy that described the bags that the Gold Coast guy had purchased. And ultimately, that description of the bags became critical evidence for demonstrating that intention and knowledge for the Gold Coast guy.

Host
Then, suddenly, there were two more really hopeful signs.

Grace Calma
We saw the Sydney guy travel up to the Gold Coast. That one caught us a little bit by surprise, because he drove from Sydney to the Gold Coast and left at about 7pm. As the day's winding down and everyone's sort of thinking, *oh no, another day's done and we haven't actually seen something significant occur*, we see him get in the vehicle and start driving. He drove up to the Gold Coast and stayed with the Gold Coast guy. And the following morning, together, they commenced a journey towards Bundaberg.

Host
As head of the forward command, Brad needed to get ready for a possible resolution.

Bradley Kirwan
Certainly, the two of them driving up a second time gave us better clarity that this was potentially the opportunity that they were gonna undertake it You sometimes hear the stories, *oh, they knew something,* or *they saw something*, the second time they came up we were more comfortable that something was gonna occur this time.

Host
We can only imagine the tension as the team waited for the vehicle to get to the roundabout. There was a collective sigh of relief when the two men sailed through it and continued their journey, heading toward the marina.

Grace Calma
That journey from the Gold Coast to Bundaberg, saw the Sydney guy and the Gold Coast guy pulling into Bundaberg around sundown or dusk. What we then saw was the Sydney guy and Gold Coast guy pull up at the marina and meet with the skipper before all of them went below deck on the Friday Freedom. I think at that point, it was game on and that we were going to see significant activity.

Host
Once the two men reached the Friday Freedom, the team had to wait for the shipment of the drugs they suspected were on board, to leave the vessel.

Grace Calma
That shifting our thinking to: at what point do we intercept? Sometime after their arrival, we started to see all three parties emerge from the vessel carrying and wheeling bags that looked quite heavy. We then allowed them to load those bags into their vehicle and then were able to safely execute a vehicle stop.

Host
From his command post nearby, Brad monitored the movements of all the players involved. One of the four did not leave the boat.

Bradley Kirwan
The girlfriend, she remained on the boat, but the others, they got into two cars and, and drove down the road. So it then became a matter to intercept the two cars.

Host
From that point, it became about the best logistics to intercept the vehicles.

Bradley Kirwan
It's about finding the safest place to enable the activity to ensure the safety of people involved, but also to ensure the security of any evidence that may be in the vehicle. If you come out of the port of Bundaberg, you can either go left towards Bargara or you can go right towards Bundaberg. They went right, towards Bundaberg, which put them into a bit of a windy road to get out onto an open road. At that point though, the call would be provided to the physical surveillance involved to ensure that they were able to identify the best point because they are the best trained for that type of environment. We certainly did not want them to get back towards Bundaberg or in towards built up areas or to give an opportunity that someone could escape which of course it's pitch dark because these aren't city roads with light poles every hundred meters. These are dark rural roads with no real lighting other than that from the vehicle lights.

Host
Matthew was part of the team that moved in once the vehicles had been stopped.

Matthew Byles
Our surveillance teams are very well trained in vehicle stops. The two vehicles that they were in were in convoy, and then our surveillance team undertook a vehicle stop, so they turn their lights and sirens on, which would've been a bit of surprise because they would've been covert vehicles. They pull them over, get them out of the vehicles, ensure everyone's safe. So when I pulled up, a minute or so later, the skipper was sitting on the side of the road in handcuffs.

Host
The bags were removed from the two vehicles, and it was then the team got the answer they had waited many months to get: did those bags contain drugs?

Grace Calma
It wasn't until we actually opened the bags inside the vehicle that we were able to confirm that we actually had a drug import. It wasn't until we had that visual that there were drugs, that we were able to kind of breathe a sigh of relief after twenty-two days of waiting in readiness to get that confirmation.

Host
The team had to monitor the cars and the Friday Freedom because in that first move, the three men only took enough suitcases to fit in the vehicles. The AFP suspected if the hull was full of drugs, they hadn't moved them all.

Matthew Byles
There was potentially eighty to ninety kilograms of drugs in the vehicles, so there was certainly still a significant amount on the vessel.

Host
Because the wait in Bundaberg had been so long, Grace found herself with a clash between work and family.

Grace Calma
This particular day, the 11th of November 2011, was probably my first day off in about forty days of activity. And I had left Sydney for the day to travel to the Northern Territory to celebrate my grandmother's birthday. Murphy's Law has, that is the day that the job… the job goes down and we get the outcome we did. And so, I was able to stay in close contact with the investigators in Bundaberg and the forward command post, as well as our main coordination centre in Sydney, and was able to actually hear the arrest take place over the phone from one of our members that were in Bundaberg at the time. And then I went back to celebrating my grandmother's birthday.

Host
Not only were there search warrants carried out in Bundaberg, a co-ordinated plan came into play on the Gold Coast and in Sydney.

Grace Calma
After the arrest of the skipper, the Gold Coast guy and the Sydney guy, as well as the skipper's girlfriend in Bundaberg, we had a very long evening of activity, including a number of search warrants in Bundaberg on the vessel, in Sydney, on the Gold Coast as our sort of main areas of focus where we were able to collect a significant amount of additional evidence supporting the involvement of the Gold Coast guy and the Sydney guy, as well as a fair bit of cash It was just shy of another four million dollars in cash located in our subsequent search warrants associated with these four.

Host
It would take some days for all of the drugs to be removed from the Friday Freedom, then weighed and tested.

Grace Calma
About 270 kilos of cocaine was ultimately recovered from the Friday Freedom and a concealment that was built into the vessel, and ultimately accessed by the skipper. At the time that was a really significant seizure of cocaine and one of the bigger ones we'd had in Australia with a estimated value of $78 million.

Host
So what began as a theory to follow the money, ended up in a significant seizure of drugs.

Grace Calma
Being able to seize that amount of drugs was, in addition to being a relief that we hadn't spent a lot of effort, time, money, wrongly investigating someone, there is a really strong sense of achievement in stopping that amount of drugs entering the streets. This group of people in this investigation was very much a logistics cell whose job was to import the drugs into Australia. Where those drugs go once they enter Australia, could be many, many different directions, but ultimately they're consumed by members of the public, often have a very disastrous consequence for our communities and for our society. So there was a very strong sense of achievement and pride in our ability to take those drugs out of the hands of criminals and ultimately stop them from going into the community.

Host
Chris was jubilant at the news, but also relieved.

Chris Sheehan
It feels really good because you know you were right but until you actually see the drugs coming off the boat, you don't know for sure that you've been right along the way. And like it's easy for us to talk about it now with the benefit of hindsight because we know how the story ends, but if you put yourself in the position in Bundaberg in October until you actually see drugs coming off the boat you don't know. You're making a lot of good evidence-based assumptions, but you don't know until you've actually seen the drugs. And so it's very, very satisfying. And it vindicates the strategy which is I still think the best strategy for tackling these criminals is to follow the money.

Host
When the case went to trial, Grace was able to present her long and complex brief of evidence.

Grace Calma
When we printed out the timeline as we were heading towards the resolution of the investigation, we printed it on a extra-large printer called a plotter. And when it was printed in its entirety, it ended up being approximately thirty meters long. We had, by the end of the investigation, multiple lines of inquiry around different individuals with intersecting histories that were all relevant to our investigation. After almost 10 months of investigation, we pulled together a brief of evidence against the Sydney guy, the skipper, the Gold Coast guy, and had also charged the girlfriend. The girlfriend elected to go to trial and was subsequently acquitted of having involvement with the importation and the trafficking of the drugs into Australia. However, the skipper, the Sydney guy and the Gold Coast guy all pled guilty, and ultimately faced some pretty long sentences in jail for their part in that importation.

Host
The maximum sentence for importing the quantities of drugs that the trio brought into Australia is life in prison. With guilty pleas all round, the man from Sydney was sentenced to 18 years

jail with a 10-year non-parole period. The man from the Gold Coast received a 17-year sentence with the chance of parole after nine years. And the skipper who sailed into Bundaberg with a hull full of 270 kilograms of cocaine got a 25-year sentence with a non-parole period of 13 years.

Host
The great result from Operation Avalon didn't stop with the arrests. The intelligence the team gathered would be used for years to come.

Chris Sheehan
We got a result from this investigation. I mean, 270 plus kilos of cocaine. But we also collected a tonne of really valuable intelligence that gets shared with our international law enforcement partners. So for example, the Drug Enforcement Administration in the United States, Europol and police forces in Europe. And what we get back from that is, so that intelligence goes out to those agencies, they run it through their systems, and they make connections and then they share those connections back with us.

Host
With around a tonne of cocaine seized globally in these operations, the people working on Operation Avalon all knew the true cost of keeping that amount of drugs off the streets of Australia. Chris has seen firsthand the catastrophic effects of drugs.

Chris Sheehan
I started my career in ACT Policing, and I spent ten years working there. First to start off as a uniform general duties police officer, but then as a detective, and I've watched a person die in front of me from a heroin overdose. I've seen people who've been absolutely wasted on methamphetamine, speed, wrap their cars around telegraph poles, kill innocent kids on bicycles. So the human side of the drug issue has always been very, very real to me. And I've always taken a lot of enjoyment out of getting people further up the food chain in these drug networks and taking them out of circulation. So yeah, it was certainly not personal but I understand the human side of it very, very well because I've seen it with my own eyes. And putting aside the impact on the drug addict, it's the impact on the community. It's the health dollars that get wasted dealing with that problem that can't be invested in helping the person with breast cancer or lung cancer. It's the schools that don't get built because we've got to spend money doing this enforcement stuff. It's all of that sort of thing. That's the piece that motivated me. It's about protecting the community. It's not just about the drug user, because honestly whilst I do have some sympathy for the drug user, it's the harm that they caused to others that for me is the worst thing

Host
After nearly 28 years with the AFP including postings overseas in Washington DC and Jakarta, Chris was approached by National Australia Bank and offered an opportunity he couldn't refuse: the Executive in charge of Group Investigations.

Chris Sheehan
NAB was in the market at that point for someone to come in and run their investigations and fraud business, their function. My expertise is investigations. I've worked in investigations almost my entire policing career at a local, national and international level. I've been involved in them, I've run them. I help coordinate multi-jurisdictional investigations, so I understand what makes an effective and efficient investigation. I also have a really good understanding of what law enforcement need to be able to do their job. And I had some ideas in my head around how banks might be able to make a contribution to that beyond what they were perhaps making at the time when I joined NAB back in 2018.

Host
Back when Operation Avalon happened, Grace was in the early stages of her career. Fifteen years later, she is a detective superintendent. One of her career highlights was helping in a famous international rescue when twelve young soccer players and their coach were rescued from a flooded cave in Thailand after being trapped for 18 days.

Grace Calma
I was deployed offshore at the time in a neighbouring country within the region to Thailand and the AFP were able to play a role in the recovery and rescue of a young soccer team and their coach had become trapped in a cave in northern Thailand. I found myself working at the forward command post along with the small team of AFP members as a part of the Australian government deployment to support that, and was involved in the rescue operation, which utilised AFP members who are cave divers, as well as a number of other countries contributing to it. The Australian doctors that were able to play a key role in helping facilitate the successful recovery and ultimately lifesaving actions that saw all of those boys and their coach get out of the cave system. We just spent weeks upon weeks of high tension and expecting the worst. But certainly it was incredible to be able to be a part of what was such a significant lifesaving event that also saw the best in so many people with so many countries coming together to help tackle the problem. And ultimately to have that success was a really overwhelming, but incredibly proud thing to be a part of, particularly just the fact that all of the boys and their coach got out alive and are now all doing very well.

Host
Given that Operation Avalon was in Grace's early career, it sparked something within her as an investigator, especially the roles played by liaison officers overseas.

Grace Calma
A significant part of that was probably influenced by seeing how impactful the work of our LO in Vanuatu through this investigation was to making our investigation the success that it was. And that really gave me a hunger to want to pursue that as a career option so that I could then play that role for another investigation in the future. I've also had a great opportunity to move between different crime types, which along the way gives you a really big diversity of skills, as well as just amazing opportunities to do things that you would never even think was something you would do when you look at a recruiting pamphlet.

Outro

Host

If you are interested in learning more about how the AFP works to protect Australians against international drug trafficking and how Grace, Brad, Matthew, and Chris investigated this case, visit a-f-p-dot-gov-dot-a-u