

The AFP bomb response capability has greatly expanded since the creation of the Specialist Response Group.



Bomb response explodes in potential

The AFP's Bomb Response Team has greatly expanded its role since the formation of the Specialist Response Group.

Formation of the AFP's Specialist Response Group (SRG) in July 2012 created Australia's largest specialist policing capability. The amalgamation consolidated resources and created new specialisations in the process. The creation of the SRG also enhanced existing capabilities. The AFP's Bomb Response Team is a perfect example of where the unified entity is now greater than the sum of its former parts.

The SRG was created from combining the AFP's two specialist response capabilities – the Operational Response Group and ACT Policing's Specialist Response and Security Team. Similarly, the national Aviation Bomb Appraisal Officer capability and the ACT's Bomb Response Team joined forces on amalgamation. The unified AFP model was created on 1 July, 2012, and named collectively as the SRG Bomb Response Team.

One team

The creation of the SRG streamlined the two former entities into one team. Pre-SRG, the Bomb Appraisal Officers (BAOs) and the Bomb Response Technicians were different disciplines with different missions. While they had many complementary skills, they

had been developed and deployed to achieve different outcomes.

The BAOs deploy at the AFP national level as first responders to suspect bomb situations. Essentially, their core role is to search, locate, identify and confirm the existence of a bomb or improvised explosive device (IED).

They are employed in Aviation at airports, in Protection to support high-level visits and in ACT Policing in the first-responder role. Typically, a BAO might respond to analyse a discarded bag at an airport to determine if it's a threat. The BAO's role ends when an assessment is made. If the assessment determines there is a real threat then the state-based Bomb Response Technicians from the relevant law enforcement jurisdiction are called in to disarm or disassemble the threat.

The Bomb Response Technicians have expertise in commercial, military and home-made explosives. They provide a chemical, biological and radiological response capacity where explosives or the threat of explosion is present. Bomb Response Technicians also have a strong understanding of the techniques and methods used by terrorists.

“Straight away we knew the guy had the means ...”

The primary role of the Bomb Response Technicians after the creation of the SRG is to continue providing community policing services in ACT Policing. A major benefit with amalgamation into the national entity for the AFP Bomb Response Technicians is to support broader national roles and international missions.

A third component of the SRG Bomb Response Team is its Bomb Search Team. This part-time component from the ACT Policing pool of operations is called on to provide extra capacity for special search activities. The Bomb Search Team may contribute to search activities for major regional events, provide search capacity for visiting dignitaries as required and be deployed in a support capacity for bomb response operations.

The SRG's Bomb Response Technicians and Bomb Appraisal Officers are located in Canberra on a full-time basis. Additional Bomb Appraisal Officers are situated with their primary business areas in the AFP, Defence and other government agencies at the national level. They will remain in place to provide the specialist first-responder role. The significant difference after the creation of the SRG is that the collective AFP bomb response capability is now coordinated, managed, directed and developed from within the SRG.

Central coordination of training for all bomb response capabilities is now conducted by the SRG. Acting Officer in Charge of SRG Specialist Response Disciplines Mark Holmes says both disciplines are now cross training in the fundamentals of each specialisation through a common curriculum.

“Under the new structure, all prospective applicants seeking to become an AFP Bomb Response Technician attend a seven-week Basic Bomb Technician Course,” Sergeant Holmes says. “The curriculum will be identical to the Bomb Appraisal Officer course in terms of ‘search-appraisal and first-response’ of a bomb scene. They will also receive the same base training in X-ray radiography.

“This new capacity also includes the training capability we can offer externally. This has been greatly enhanced by the amalgamation of the Bomb Appraisal Officer program with the Bomb Response Technician discipline,” Sergeant Holmes says.

After a further four years of on-the-job training, Police Bomb Technician members may then be granted



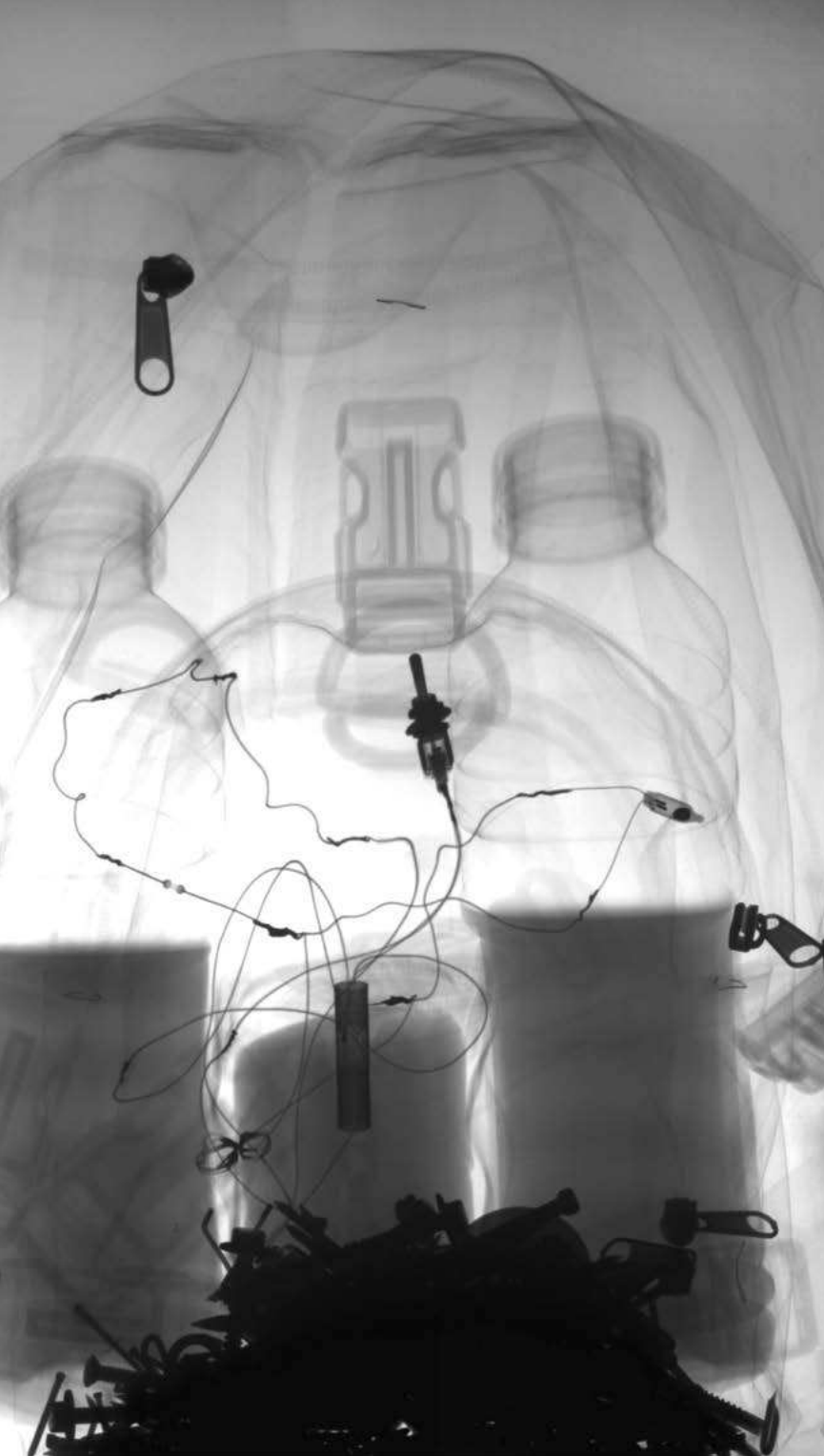
A Bomb Appraisal Officer conducts an airport search.

senior technician status. This allows them to make decisions inside the inner cordon of real-time tasks.

Operational

The formation of the SRG Bomb Response Team has greatly expanded the operational opportunities for members. Before amalgamation, the AFP Bomb Response Technicians were employed specifically to service ACT Policing, as state and territory jurisdictions have their own bomb response capabilities. Similarly, the Bomb Appraisal Officers were employed to service very specific functions in their first-response role. This has changed since the creation of the SRG Bomb Response Team with its national and international roles.

“We have the localised role in the ACT and a great deal of our work comes from there. We also have



An X-ray image reveals a bomb in a backpack. All AFP Bomb Response Team members now receive common training in bomb-response technologies.

a national and international aspect to the role to deploy with the SRG in support of AFP operations,” Sergeant Holmes says.

Still, the primary mission of the SRG Bomb Response Team is the identification and removal of explosive ordnance. Even so, that mission is always increasing in its complexity due to the changing methods and sophistication of terrorists and criminals. The result is a multi-faceted mission that requires continued innovation in personnel, training and equipment.

In the ACT, tasks include the recovery or disposal of World War II ordnance and commercial explosives from rural properties that may have been sitting in place for 25 years and are now unstable.

“There is a lot of 1950s era military ordnance from training exercises,” Sergeant Holmes says.

A more insidious modern presence is IEDs. The teams train for a variety of scenarios, from person-borne IEDs to vehicle-borne IEDs. The training for vehicle-borne IEDs includes the contingency where an operator “gets hands on to disarm or disassemble the IED when it’s outside of the capabilities of the robot”.

Additionally, the SRG Bomb Response Team has a national and international counter-terrorism role. This includes dealing with chemical, biological and radiological threats anywhere in Australia.

The BRT has also adapted its operations since amalgamation to better support other key law enforcement capabilities in the AFP. This includes providing support to other specialist discipline teams, investigative areas, learning-and-development programs and delivering training to external agencies domestically and overseas.

Real-time

An operational response on Norfolk Island provides a perfect example of the Bomb Response Team’s operations and the danger explosive ordnance poses to the community. From 16–31 March, 2011, the Bomb Response Team in company with a support element of AFP Protective Service Officers and AFP Forensic Chemists deployed to Norfolk Island to assist in the recovery and destruction of 505 kilograms of commercial explosives including 1000 explosive detonators.

The explosives were discovered by the Norfolk Island Police Force (NIPF) in a storage room within Norfolk Island’s central business district of Burnt Pine. With assistance from the NIPF, the explosives were removed by Bomb Response Team personnel and taken to an identified area of the island to be disposed of by controlled demolition, which consisted of more than 100 detonations.

The controlled detonations presented a number of challenges, notably the small size of the island, ecological and environmental considerations, logistical issues and community expectations.

While the Bomb Response Team was conducting demolitions of the initial explosives store, an additional 3.7 tonnes of the explosive agent, Nitropril, was also found to be in storage on the island.

The unsafe storage of this product, its deteriorating state and proximity to the central business district were a major concern to the Bomb Response Team and the NIPF. The cache remained under guard until controlled explosive operations were complete with regard to the first find.

The Nitropril was then inspected and relocated to a secure compound adjacent to the Norfolk Island Police Station where it remained under guard of the PSO detachment until it was disposed of by a commercial venture.

The exacting nature of the work is also evident with an operational response in Canberra. In 2012, a 12-hour multi-agency response to a home-made explosives laboratory illustrates the complexity of dealing with explosive ordnance threats. An ACT Policing patrol identified suspicious items at a Canberra residence, which suggested there might be dangerous materials located there. These included 'recipe books' on explosives, suggesting the person also had some level of knowledge on explosives.

SRG Bomb Response Team first responders entered the premises and concluded there was a very real threat. Along with the recipe books, there were a number of materials inside jars. An IED was also readily evident under a bed.

An 'immediate risk' assessment was progressed to the police forward commander, who ordered cordons to be established. An evacuation of the immediate area was also initiated to secure and contain the area and to assist in the preservation of evidence.

"The Bomb Response Team aided forensic chemists in the recovery of samples inside the scene for test and trace analysis. This way we know exactly what we are dealing with before the bomb technicians enter the inner cordon," Sergeant Holmes says.

Each discovery of a new item at the residence provided more cause for concern. Inside was a variety of homemade explosive chemicals and commercial compound explosives. These explosives included black powder. There was also a form of organic peroxide explosives, which are highly sensitive to heat, shock and friction.

"Straight away we knew the guy had the means, his documentation told us that he had the knowledge, and then we find he had the materials present as well as hazardous material in the form of an IED."

As bomb technicians enter the scene they conduct a rapid assessment as part of normal standard operating



Bomb-making implements seized during the 'search-appraisal first-response' by the SRG Bomb Response Team.

procedures. Each action taken is reported back to the command centre and plans are formulated. Bomb technicians work on the premise that where there is one bomb there will be two and the assessment is conducted thoroughly and methodically. In this instance a pipe bomb was subsequently found in a drawer.

Sergeant Holmes says every step is planned but there is always risk to the operator. Some explosive materials are extremely sensitive to variables, such as static electricity. This could simply be the electrical charge in the ambient environment. All these factors contribute to the planning process to remove the threat.

Once a course of action was decided in this instance the bomb technicians began blast mitigation and render-safe operations. Sergeant Holmes says only the two bomb technicians were used inside the inner cordon to limit potential casualties. Meanwhile, support elements were outside of the cordon area ready to assist. Every step taken is planned, says Sergeant Holmes, and every action is communicated to the police forward commander.

"We use robotics wherever we can," he says. "However, in circumstances like a home-made explosive lab in confined spaces robotics is not always an option. In this case, a technician has to dress up in the explosive ordnance disposal suit and go forward to conduct the task manually.

"All the training we do is designed to meet and enhance the response to these types of threats – while planning for tomorrows."