

The long journey home: victims of the MH-17 tragedy arrive at Eindhoven Airfield in the Netherlands.

Photo by Corporal Jake Sims, Department of Defence.



Bringing them home

International partnerships and a shared goal transformed nations into a single team in bringing home the victims of MH17.

AFP Station Sergeant Rod Anderson stood on the old railway siding at 'The Plant' at 1pm as a train with four refrigerated carriages rolled in. "I wasn't aware of the exact location," he says. "But it was about a 30-minute drive from the Kharkiv Palace motel, within the precincts of the Kharkiv city."

He noticed the rope seals, believed to be put in place by pro-Russian separatists. By 4pm the seals were broken and the task of removing the remains of the MH17 victims began.

The Plant was once used to build tanks in the Soviet era. For the next five days it was used for the very different task of categorising and preparing the victims of MH17 for air transfer to the Netherlands – and then home.

It was nothing Rod had imagined he would find himself doing. "Certainly, it was nothing I have experienced before.

But this is where our processes and procedures kicked in. We knew what we had to do, we just had to adapt to the different conditions that were presented to us."

Rod's usual job is Station Sergeant at Gungahlin Police Station in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). He also holds the position of Disaster Victim Identification (DVI) Commander for ACT Policing. So it wasn't a surprise that he was called to support the Australian response to the tragedy.

He was contacted on 18 July by the then AFP Manager Forensics, Dr Simon Walsh. On 19 July he departed Australia for The Hague. They were briefed on arrival in The Hague that a refrigeration train was to arrive in Kharkiv. So it was that Rod found himself on the old, disused rail siding as Forward DVI Commander for the Australian contribution to Operation Arew.



Family Investigation Liaison Officer Kylie Hemiak was tasked with assisting the families of the van den Hende family and Sister Philomene Tiernan, all of whom died in the MH17 tragedy.

Bringing them home

It was a difficult task but Rod had worked with many of the international law enforcement agencies that had volunteered to assist. Many he had trained over the previous 10 years.

“There were many different moving parts. What made it easy were the relationships we had already established with different countries. They also understood how the AFP worked and what we needed to achieve.”

For the next five days, the international contingent at The Plant would categorise and prepare the remains for transfer to the Netherlands. Rod says the positive outcome from that first week was that the vast majority of remains were recovered in that effort.

It was then that the international effort could focus on searching the crash site. AFP Commander Mark Harrison developed a search method using a geospatial search technique devised from the sport of geocaching (see *Platypus* 117, Jan-Jun 2015).

“We discussed the search strategy which would include obtaining geospatial information of human remains, personal property and sections of the plane,” Rod says. “We could sectorise where material was seen and plot those or give them geo-tags so that we could target our search effort rather than a one sweeping search.”

DVI teams used satellite images of the search zone with the location and GPS coordinates of the relevant items. The team then used the GPS units to locate items, which were assessed, recorded and recovered using standard DVI

forensic procedures followed. A radial search around the object was then conducted.

“It has been said before – if we tried to run an exercise with all the different scenarios and conditions that occurred during this incident, people would get up and leave. They simply would not believe it was realistic.”

Rising to the occasion

In the Netherlands, the responsibility of identifying each of the victims began. AFP forensic scientist Sarah Benson was called on to replace Dr Walsh as the Australian DVI Commander. The role had also broadened to support the criminal investigation.

Sarah wasn't a stranger to deploying offshore. She deployed to Bali in her role as an explosive chemist straight out of university in 1992. But this was different. There were personal and professional challenges Sarah was confronted with.

“The role was a leadership position in the DVI space and that was new to me and all the partners that I was going to be working with was new and that was a challenge,” Sarah says.

“There was also the complexity we faced in the MH17 investigation around the security environment in Ukraine and what that meant from a forensic point of view with respect to evidence recovery and the sub-processes from there. The fundamentals of forensics are preservation of evidence in establishing continuity of items in both processes of DVI and criminal investigation.”



The long journey home: victims of the MH17 tragedy arrive at Eindhoven Airfield in the Netherlands. Photo by Corporal Jake Sims, Department of Defence.

There were also personal challenges. From initial reports, they knew this was not like anything the AFP had seen or practised. As a mother, she says at times she had to walk away from the computer and images of the crash site.

Sarah says it did take her a while to settle into the role but it was a matter of rising to the occasion. It was at the first Identification Board Meeting that she realised she needed to step up.

“It was quite a wakeup call,” she says. “I said ‘right, step up and you can do this’. It was a difficult task because of the challenges performing at that level. And the emotion connected to some of the roles. But we were part of a team.

“Everyone was working toward the common goal, specifically in both those spaces of DVI and investigations, to identify the victims and ensure the loved ones’ wishes were met for repatriation.”

Ultimately, Sarah says it was a great personal experience to have been involved. She watched as the disparate nations, agencies, judicial systems and work cultures merged into a single team with a common goal.

The home team

The Family Investigative Liaison Officer (FILO) program was raised in response to the Bali bombings in 2002. Their role is to act as a conduit between the families impacted by a critical incident and the AFP investigation team, to provide a single point of contact for the family to ensure ongoing messaging with regards to the identification of their loved one/s and any ongoing investigation. Operation Arew again

highlighted the vital nature of the role in support of the whole-of-government response.

Within 24 hours of the Incident Coordination Centre (ICC) being established, 26 FILOs (from a deployment capability of 30) were deployed to 23 different family groups. Within the first week, a further four FILOs were deployed offshore to streamline the identification process.

Federal Agent Kylie Hemiak joined the AFP in 1994. Her gravitation toward victim-based crime also inspired her desire to take on the dual duties of a FILO. She was tasked as liaison officer for the van den Hende family from Eynesbury on the western edge of Melbourne. Father Hans, mother Sharliza and their three children Piers, 15, Marnix, 12 and Margaux, 8, all died on MH17.

Another level of complexity was that the van den Hende family were all born overseas. Hans was Dutch, Sharliza was Malaysian and the children were all born in Malaysia. They had made their home in Australia for seven years yet all their relatives were overseas.

“It was unusual, different and difficult,” says Kylie. “In the beginning it was quite confusing and confronting. We had no next of kin, which was unusual. We had a large family home that we needed to access for the purpose of obtaining Ante-Mortem material to assist the identification process. One half of the next of kin was in Malaysia and the other half was in the Netherlands.”

Kylie says the process of liaising with the families commences through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Crisis Response Centre. Initially there was a lot of documenting the many emails and follow-up phone calls



to make sure nothing was lost in the communications. Establishing a rapport with the families in the Netherlands and Malaysia, the DFAT Contact Officer, the Dutch Family Liaison Officers and Malaysian authorities was paramount given the three-way conversation in three different countries.

“I think from the beginning you just need to be very open and honest with them and not make any promises you can’t fulfill. The families quickly realised what they were dealing with and it’s important to inform them of the facts and what you do know. The main thing in those critical early stages is to keep them updated.”

Kylie says it was complex but both families were respectful accepting of the others’ wishes and religious faith. Hans had converted to the Muslim faith to marry Sharliza and the families jointly decided to have the family buried in their chosen Australia with Islamic rituals. The van den Hendes were buried near their home in Eynesbury.

Kylie also was allocated to liaise with the family of Sister Philomene Tiernan, the last Australian identified. Kylie was directly involved in Sister Tiernan’s repatriation and return

to her convent in Sydney. “I’d like to think she made us wait for a reason,” Kylie says and laughs with a considered sense of irony, explaining that it were as though Sister Phil (as she was fondly known) continued to look out for others before herself.

“To witness the comfort that other family members received from knowing that ‘Phil’ was on the flight or seated near their family member has been very comforting to people. I saw that happening at the NSW inquest. I was with the Head Sister of Phil’s order. You could just see the other families being drawn into her and her serenity.”

Comfort

The enormity of Operation Arew has left its mark indelibly in the memory of all who deployed both offshore and domestically to support the AFP response. The responsibility weighed heavy on the shoulders of all. That responsibility continues. There are still 10 AFP members deployed to the investigation, including four members in Ukraine, and there continues to be a dedicated team of investigators and forensics members in Australia, who



AFP members return from Ukraine to the Netherlands aboard a Royal Australian Air Force C-17.

continue to support the offshore investigation and ongoing family liaison.

But there is also comfort in that in the midst of a terrible tragedy that an international team did what they could to bring the victims home and provide their loved ones some closure.

Kylie Hemiak says there is still much to do. "If you look at Lockerbie, the court process wasn't resolved until 13 years later. It is a long-term relationship that you will have with families as a FILO."

For Sarah Benson it was a momentous personal and professional experience in her life to contribute to the global mission. "Obviously the successes that we achieved in the DVI process was a positive outcome for all countries."

Rod Anderson is now back at Gungahlin and reflects on the magnitude of the problem but proud of the results. "I think we achieved what we set out to achieve and continue to in terms of the investigation. 296 of the 298 victims have been identified. That is a tremendous effort by everyone involved."



Maintaining communications

The AFP's Critical Incident Communications Portal (CICP) website was operationally launched in August 2015 as another innovation borne of necessity to maintain communications with the families who lost loved ones in the MH17 tragedy.

Just over a year after the incident, the portal was seen as a way of ensuring ongoing communications with next-of-kin in an easily accessible and password protected web site.

The team leader of the Family Investigative Liaison Officer (FILO) Program Yvonne Crozier says the CICP was motivated by incidents like the 1988 Lockerbie aircraft bombing where communication with families extended for years as the incident progressed through the court and coronial processes.

Detective Sergeant Crozier says the CICP provides a way of families accessing important information in their own time and at a single source as the MH17 investigation progresses. It is also a way for FILOs to refresh their own knowledge.

"Different families have different ways of communication with AFP FILOs. Some families wanted to keep in touch, whilst others initially didn't want all the information," Detective Sergeant Crozier says.

"The portal was created as a basic model to provide a way of uploading information and updates – if the family didn't look at the information initially they could refer back to the website as a consistent source of information."

Next-of-kin are informed of updates through the FILO network as automated alerts were not considered a suitable method of randomly communicating with families.

Detective Sergeant Crozier says the web model is adaptable for new tasks and the technology is readily reproducible if another critical incident occurred.

"Should something happen tomorrow the communication portal can be their first point of contact for information that is being uploaded to the site."

Given today's interconnected world, should something happen tomorrow, the communication portal can be quickly accessed as a reliable, consistent source of information.