

# The largest US seizure of methylamphetamine that almost never was...

By Dominic Lavers, AFP National Media

It took eight hours for a joint taskforce of United States authorities to cut through a shipping container's-worth of car audio capacitors at the request of the Victorian Joint Organised Crime Taskforce (JOCTF), looking for a veritable motherlode of narcotics.

With industrial metal-cutting equipment borrowed from the US Coast Guard, they systematically examined

cargo that Australian authorities believed to contain a large and complex concealment of illicit drugs.

The team found nothing.

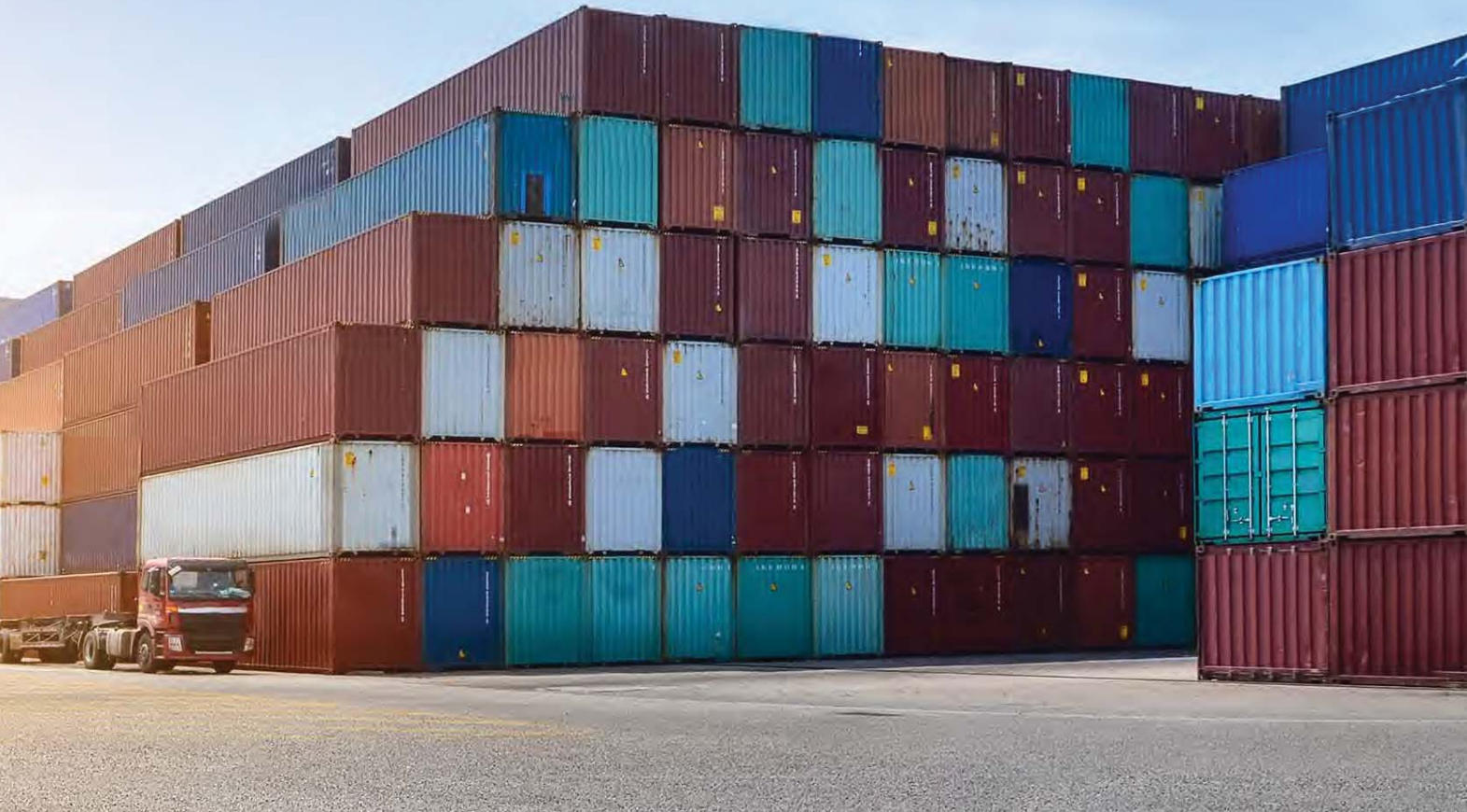
It was 9 January 2019 – halfway through the longest US government shutdown in history – and they went on working without pay and necessary resources.

Victorian JOCTF investigator and AFP Federal Agent Mandy Sutherland said she wouldn't have blamed her American counterparts for giving up on 'Operation Hoth'.

"They could have said 'nah, we're done. We've spent a whole day going through a shipping container and it's empty. Your intel is wrong'.

"But," she said with both relief and admiration, "they didn't."

The US authorities moved onto the second of three shipping containers identified by JOCTF investigators and, shortly after, Federal Agent Sutherland received a message confirming that a suspicious package had been found in one of the car audio capacitors. Then they found another, and another.



It was a sleepless night for her and fellow case officer Detective Senior Constable Dave Nolan (Victoria Police) — and the beginning of a seemingly endless series of updates from California over the next 24 hours to confirm drug types and estimated weights.

It was the largest-ever methylamphetamine (ice) seizure on US soil, and the largest-ever shipment bound for Australia. The authorities discovered 1.7 tonnes of ice, 25 kilograms of cocaine and 5 kilograms of heroin.

Federal Agent Sutherland recalled coming into work and telling the rest of the team what US authorities had discovered in the two remaining shipping containers.

“It was amazing briefing the team. This had been a 24/7 job for the Victorian JOCTF Team 3’s seven members for the previous six months — in addition to previous work undertaken by Victoria Police’s Echo Taskforce and the National Anti-Gangs Squad — so the outcome was recognition for many long hours on the job.”

The Victorian JOCTF comprises members of the AFP, Victoria Police, The Australian Border Force, the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission (ACIC) and the Department of Home Affairs.

“The seizure was about six times larger than what we had anticipated, an amount equating to what ACIC reporting estimates is more than 80 per cent of about Victoria’s yearly consumption of ice. When you consider the impact this would have had on the community, it makes the time we spent away from our families, particularly around Christmas, worth it.”



Above: US authorities spent days cutting through three shipping container's-worth of car audio capacitors looking for a veritable motherlode of narcotics.

Following the removal of the drugs, the US authorities allowed the containers to be shipped to Australia, where the JOCTF investigation continued.

On 7-8 February 2019, the AFP and Victoria Police executed search warrants in Victoria and NSW, targeting people allegedly involved in the California-based organised crime syndicate believed to be behind the shipment. Five people were charged with numerous offences.

These arrests also coincided with operational activity in Canada and Los Angeles.

In Canada the Royal Canadian Mounted Police's Federal Serious and Organised Crime Unit executed five search warrants in Burnaby, British Columbia, on 7 February. These search warrants resulted in the seizure of \$3.5 million of suspected proceeds of crime.

The Canadian authorities had to wait for the JOCTF activity in Australia to be safely underway before giving Canadian investigators the green light to move in. Ensuring the integrity of the operational activity in each country reduced the likelihood of evidence being destroyed or any suspects slipping through a drag net that literally spanned the globe.

Canadian investigators waited in their cars on a day when temperatures hit -6° celsius for their colleagues in Australia to give them the all-

clear. It was another example of the commitment of partner agencies to the investigation.

In Los Angeles, the Los Angeles Border Enforcement Security Taskforce (LA BEST) executed a search warrant at a warehouse in Anaheim, which resulted in the seizure of three unregistered firearms.

While Federal Agent Sutherland said the Victorian JOCTF is a tight-knit and well-oiled machine, she admitted the international component of operations can pose challenges around communication, working styles and timing. However, she believes this type of international collaboration is formidable in combatting organised crime.

"This operation is the perfect example of how law enforcement can achieve results across borders. It shows that international syndicates can't win when we all work together," she said.

Federal Agent Sutherland highlighted that trust is the most important element when it comes to such investigations.

"In this instance our work with US authorities came down to about 90 per cent trust and 10 per cent reliance on the intelligence. For our American counterparts to continue with what seemed a fruitless task — and in the middle of the government shutdown — it can only be due to the trust they had in us.

"The foundations built by our AFP liaison officer in Los Angeles were critical and we have been able to make his relationships stronger."

But the success of this operation extends far beyond the 17 million drug deals that will never occur in Australia because of this seizure.

"The US authorities have now been able to justify the purchase of additional equipment that will no

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AFP members guard a small exhibit of seized drugs and cash during a media conference in Melbourne.



Outstanding result: AFP Assistant Commissioner Bruce Hill leads a joint media conference in Melbourne announcing the seizure of the drugs.

doubt result in many more seizures in the coming years,” Federal Agent Sutherland said. “This operation has also given our agencies a chance to learn from each other and better understand the collective impact we can make.”

In the media, it quickly spread across the world that authorities had avoided a ‘tidal wave of ice’ coming to Australia, and that our country’s insatiable appetite for drugs was emboldening drug cartels to target our community with bigger shipments and more complex concealment methods. But Australian authorities and our international partners are getting better all the time too.

As a Victorian JOCTF member — someone who lived and breathed this investigation — Federal Agent Sutherland said she was thrilled to see the strong message being sent to organised crime syndicates about international police collaboration and the risks they are taking.

“The world’s getting pretty small, and we will catch you in the end.”

## Cooperation always the key

US authorities involved in Operation Hoth included those comprising the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement — HSI BEST. These are the US Drug Enforcement Administration, US Customs and Border Protection Los Angeles Field Office, US Coast Guard, Los Angeles Police Department, Long Beach Police Department, Los Angeles Port Police, Los Angeles Sheriff’s Department and the Orange County Sheriff’s Department.

The Victorian Joint Organised Crime Taskforce (JOCTF) investigation was commenced as a result of Victoria Police’s Taskforce Echo seizing 25 kilograms of ice during a vehicle

search in May 2018. This resulted in the National Anti-Gangs Squad (NAGS) Victoria conducting two search warrants in Wollongong, NSW which resulted in seizing two tonnes of precursors.

This led to further NAGS investigative work that identified people and locations — both in Australian and overseas — with alleged links to the drug syndicate operating out of California.

The Victorian JOCTF took management of the matter in July 2018, commencing Operation Hoth. This involved further investigations in Australia, engaging with international law enforcement agencies to locate and seize the record consignment of ice, and making the 7 February 2019 arrests in NSW and Victoria.



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