


AFP Foils Cocaine Gang

Alfred Langer and David Mitchell believed they could help satisfy the demand for cocaine in Australia and make a few thousand dollars for themselves along the way. Working closely with the Bolivian drug trade they settled upon an ingenious method of importation, but as Keith Livingston reports, the result was lengthy gaol terms.

IN FEBRUARY 1988 Australian authorities were advised Langer, a West German citizen, had arranged with his connections in Bolivia to consign a shipment to Melbourne.

The Bolivians bought a travel trunk, removed the walls and lid inside the metal framework and replaced them with a blotting paper-type material saturated with cocaine.

Once reconstructed it would have taken expert and minute examination to detect any change in the trunk's appearance.

Langer arranged for the trunk to be air freighted as unaccompanied baggage from Bolivia to Frankfurt, West Germany.

Langer and Mitchell weren't to know their plan to move the trunk more than half way around the world before having it arrive at its final destination, matched almost perfectly a profile of drug movement established by law enforcement authorities in several countries, including West Germany

Nor were they to know that their plan, unlike their trunk, had long since fallen apart at the seams.

When the consignment landed in Frankfurt, German customs held a field test which convinced them they were on the right trail.

They notified the Australian Customs Service and the Australian Federal Police.

So swift was the preliminary investigation in Frankfurt, there was no delay before the trunk and its contents were placed aboard the aircraft which was to take it to Melbourne.

The Officer-in-Charge of the German Customs Investigation Division, Peter Zimmermann, travelled to Australia aboard the same aircraft.

The West German official and the trunk, which measured about 95cm x 45cm x 55cm arrived in Melbourne on Saturday morning, February 13, 1988.

The Australian Customs Service notified the Federal Police.

Langer and Mitchell would learn to

their dismay Federal Police had just as much expertise as those who had initially replaced the original walls and lid of the trunk to install the cocaine saturated panels.

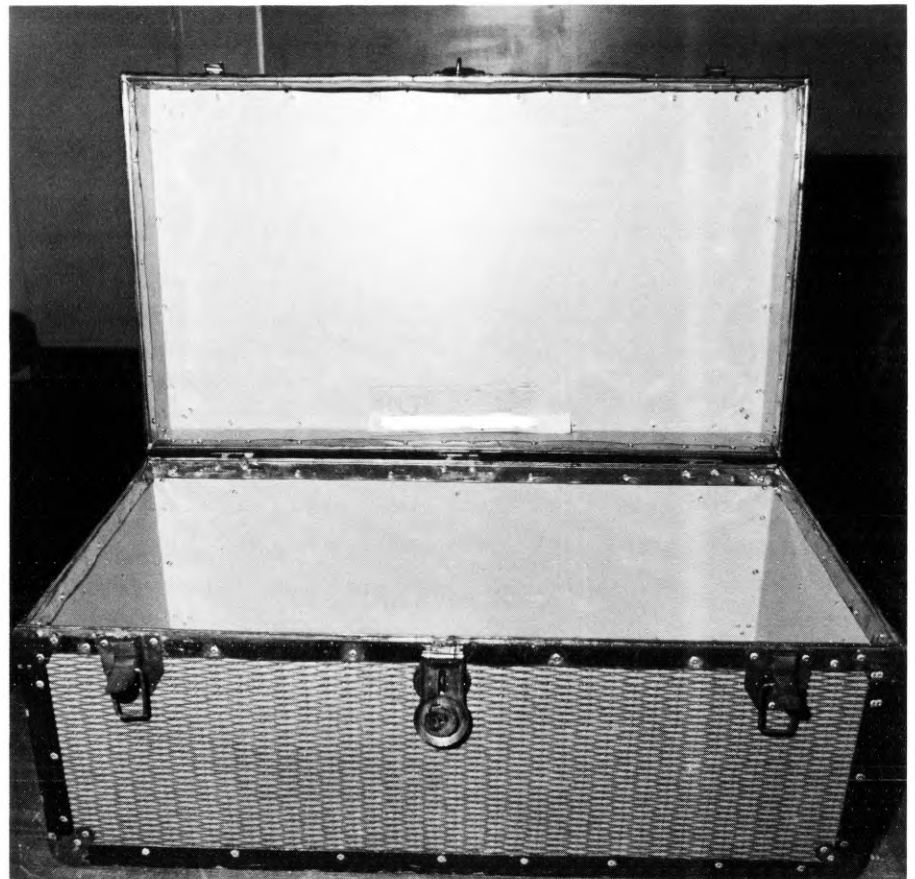
A preliminary scientific analysis by Australian Government scientists found cocaine present and further tests showed the total weight of the drug to be about 7.8 kilograms.

earlier, despite a crucial, fundamental change: It was now minus about 85% of the cocaine which was now safely in the possession of the Federal Police.

All that remained of the internal panels which had been landed in Australia was the lid.

The Scientific Unit was obliged to leave it intact because Australian law specifies a certain weight of the drug must be present when the importers take possession.

The trunk was cleared through Australian Customs shortly afterwards and was ready for collection.



The suitcase used in the smuggling operation.

It was an eye opener for both the local Customs Service and Federal Police because this was the first time they had seen this method of drug concealment.

The next time the trunk saw daylight it was again identical in every way to the "unaccompanied baggage" which had arrived at Melbourne International Airport only hours

Acting upon intelligence reports Federal Police in Melbourne despatched two teams, one from the Drug Investigation Section and the other from the Observation Squad, to Bega where they quickly gathered information about David Grant Mitchell.

The investigators had established that Mitchell, Langer's Australian contact, lived in a mud brick house



on a property at Bunga, a small hamlet near Bermagui, 35 kilometres from Bega on the New South Wales south coast.

The Operational Commander, Detective Sergeant Peter Donaldson, knew that distance — which now separated the operation's nerve centre in Melbourne, the detectives watching the trunk at the airport and the team operating 620 kilometres away in Bega — was to be the major challenge to the investigation's successful outcome.

The suspects continued to stay away from the consignment until under instructions from Manfred Langer, Customs agents in Melbourne were asked to pick up the trunk and deliver it to Bega, where further intelligence reports indicated Langer intended to collect the consignment.

The Customs agents co-operated by facilitating the delivery of the trunk by courier service while at all times allowing it to remain under strict Federal Police control.

On February 25, 1988, Albert Langer took his own bait and arrived at the courier service's depot in Bega to collect.

Federal Police Drug Investigation Division detectives and Observation Squad members looked on as Langer collected the trunk and took it to a nearby caravan park at Picnic Point.

The detectives moved in and arrested Langer.

Meanwhile, the second Federal Police team which had watched the drug being transported from Melbourne, moved onto the property at Bunga, arrested Mitchell and seized equipment that was to be used to extract the narcotic from the walls of the trunk.

Court Appearance

With the co-operation of the New South Wales Police both men were taken to the Bega Police Station for questioning before being brought before the Bega District Court to be formally charged with offences related to drug importation.

Five days later a magistrate in the Bega Court granted their extradition to the Melbourne Magistrates' Court where both were remanded in custody to face trial.

These events in February 1988 culminated in a Melbourne County Court trial lasting three days (2, 4 & 6 February 1989) and on February 14, Mr Justice O'Shea handed down sentence.

Langer Sentenced

Alfred Langer, 30, was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment (with no minimum) after pleading guilty to being knowingly concerned in the importation of a prohibited import, namely a commercial quantity of cocaine.

David Grant, 33, pleaded guilty to attempting to obtain possession of prohibited imports, namely not less than a trafficable quantity of cocaine.

Grant Sentenced

He was convicted and sentenced to 6 years imprisonment and ordered to serve a minimum of 4 years before being eligible for parole.

The Operational Commander, Detective Sergeant Peter Donaldson, said, "The success of the operation, taking into account the complexities that arose with containing the goods and the offenders in contrasting geographic locations, was due to the expertise of Detective Sergeants Brian Graham (Field Commander at Bega) and Noel Scobell (the Field Commander in Melbourne).

High Standard

"The initiatives and practical operational know-how they displayed was indicative of the high standard the AFP is achieving in its national operations.

"The support of the Drug Operations Branch and the Special Projects Branch in Canberra was invaluable in the co-ordination and early response which led to the successful conviction of the offenders," Mr Donaldson said.

AFP — Customs Co-operation

Senior members of the AFP Southern Region Intelligence and Drug Operations Branch and senior officers of the Australian Customs Service recently met in a two day seminar at Southern Region headquarters, in Melbourne.

Also attending were an AFP and ACS officer from Adelaide, an AFP member from Canberra and two officers of the Director of Public Prosecutions office in Melbourne.

The seminar looked at closer co-operation between the two Commonwealth law enforcement agencies with a view to more efficient law enforce-

ment and to bolster what is already a harmonious relationship.

Speakers detailed their area's role and clarified their specific duties.

The agenda permitted both groups to discuss problems openly and provided the opportunity to address the difficulties encountered in their separate but closely related activities, especially with illegal drug imports.

The seminar keynote speaker, Commander Bob McDonald (DIS Southern Region) said the meeting and sharing of ideas proved invaluable.

He said it gave management teams of both organisations a greater insight into the problems facing each other

and opened the way for a greater exchange of vital information for improved successes in the investigation and interdiction of illicit narcotics.

Mr McDonald said many issues which had previously been of concern and caused some degree of frustration to the Federal Police and Customs alike had been discussed. In most instances the problems were either instantly solved or the framework to overcome them was set in place.

As a result of the seminar, follow-up talks will be held to implement proposals accepted by both sides for more effective law enforcement.