

## Drug Operations

# Ingenuity proven part of drug investigators' skill

ACCORDING to Detective Superintendent Karen Beck, OIC of Western Region Drug Operations: "Western Region has some of the most innovative drug investigators that you'd ever come across."

She said that members of her team must be ready to head off to any part of the state at a moment's notice and be prepared to deal with a major drug seizure.

"Such seizures may be infrequent, but the seizures can be extremely large, being measured in tonnes not kilos when it comes to cannabis products," she said.

"Western Australia's unpopulated coastline is ideal for landing illicit drugs, but counter measures are in place. The Australian Customs Service is doing a lot with the *Frontline* program which encourages the public who live or work in strategic locations to report suspicious activities.

"Western Region is trying to educate people to report suspicious activity to the AFP as well. And now that we are placing *resident agents* in major towns along the coast, I would expect that valuable information will start to flow to us," she said.

She said that the security of the coastline lies in the good will of the communities dotted along it. Many of the larger busts over the past few years have come from tip-offs from members of local communities who tend to notice anything out of the ordinary.

## Transshipment to the east

Where the remoteness of the coastline may look inviting to drug traffickers, the lack of road access can pose problems in getting the shipment to the eastern states. Detective Superintendent

Beck said that the east is generally the intended destination as WA's addict population could not justify the size of some of the seizures.

Transshipments have been detected by rail freight and on occasions light aircraft, but Detective Superintendent Beck said that most transshipments would probably go by road, hoping to avoid detection in the volume of traffic.

## Isolation breeds co-operation

The sense of isolation that all government agencies experience in WA tends to encourage rationalisation of resources and foster a sense of co-operation.

Last November Western Region had to get three people to Esperance in five hours and there were no commercial flights, on that occasion Customs hired a light aircraft to get Western Region investigators there.

"It seems easier to generate inter-agency co-operation because the tyranny of distance in WA is common to all agencies. Detective Superintendent Beck said.

"In the eastern states it is quite easy to work independently from other agencies, but in a state larger than Europe, co-operation makes sense."

## Ability to think on their feet

Detective Superintendent Beck returned to the ingeniousness of her investigators and cited *Operation Silkworm* as an example of how investigators have to think on their feet.

"Silkworm saw the seizure of 3.3 tonnes of hash that came into Port Gregory. Port Gregory has a resident population of 50 and has one caravan park and one public phone. Our three investigators shared the same



*Detective Superintendent Karen Beck*

caravan park and the same telephone as the suspect they were sent to observe. They passed themselves off as fishermen in the middle of winter in atrocious weather and did not arouse any suspicions even though they were in daily contact with the suspect. They did a remarkable job."

The current strength of the Western Region Drug Branch is 20, of those six are sergeants. Using a team approach two to three constables work with a sergeant. On a daily basis, a job may start from something provided from Intelligence Branch, from something a drugs team may work up, or from a referral from another agency. A seizure will also generate a lot of follow up work.

Detective Superintendent Beck has been in WA for two years and has asked for a 12-month extension. She said that she has enjoyed her stay.

"Sometimes you get a sense of isolation. Canberra is still home

for me, but I am enjoying working here.” she said.

### Hunter instinct

Detective Sergeant Kim Scantlebury, who recently returned to Drug Operations after two years with Airport Intelligence, said that he has always been attracted by drug investigations. “I suppose it is the hunter instinct,” he said.

“With other crimes, investigations take place after the crime has been committed, but drug investigations often involve prior knowledge of a potential offence and there’s an adrenaline rush involved in making a good drug bust that’s missing in other investigations.”

He said cultivating informants was a routine activity for drug investigators, but one of the hardest things to do is to get an informant who can supply good information that leads to a significant arrest and seizure. Often information on a drug job can come from overseas agencies who make the AFP aware of the movements of known couriers.

Detective Sergeant Scantlebury said that the observation of patterns of arrival can lead to good arrests too.

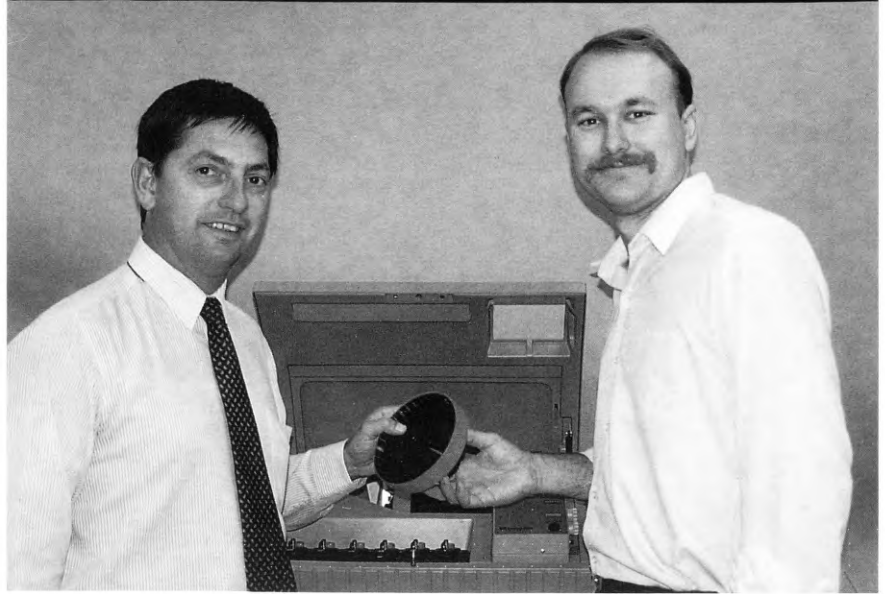
“In the late 80s there was run of Nepalese couriers over a six-month period which suddenly died off – obviously someone got the message that we were onto them. A similar thing happened with couriers travelling on Romanian passports not long after,” he said.

There are five teams in the Western Region Drug Operations and investigations are allocated to best make use of the mix of skills present in each.

Detective Superintendent Beck said that in general Western Region offers a great training ground for investigators due to the diversity of work.

“We don’t have the numbers to have the luxury of specialist investigators. Everyone has to be prepared to take on anything that comes up. This means that Western Region can provide a wide range of experience more quickly than the larger regions might,” she said. □

## Forensic pair give diverse service



*Sergeant Peter Gerritsen (l) and Constable Keith Taylor assembling colour negative processing equipment.*

**S**ERGEANT Peter Gerritsen began his forensic career specialising in fingerprint identification, but as the range of Western Region’s investigations widens, he and his assistant, Constable Keith Taylor find that they have had to broaden their expertise.

Sergeant Gerritsen established a permanent forensic service in Western Region in 1990 and has found no shortage of work since that time. He said that a major operation can provide six months of forensic work aside from the day-to-day requests for photography, fingerprint analysis, firearms testing, document examination and forensic enquiries.

Arriving in Western Region with just a few cameras, a polilight and a fuming cabinet, he has since that time given an emphasis to improving the range of forensic services available to Western Region.

Attracted to forensic investigation mainly through an interest in fingerprints, Sergeant Gerritsen completed his fingerprint studies with WA Police after arriving in the west.

Constable Taylor also arrived in Perth with partial qualifications in the Associate Diploma of Applied Science in Forensic Investigation which he has continued through

the WA TAFE system with periodic returns to Canberra Institute of Technology to complete core units.

Sergeant Gerritsen said that a lot of his work is related to drug busts and that he had been “up north” a few times for a few large drug seizures, photographing the scene, locating fingerprints and other evidence of scientific value.

Where drug investigations can require a variety of forensic services, fraud and general crime is generally straight document work.

Sergeant Gerritsen said that he prefers to analyse a document for all prints present, rather than to know he is looking for a specific individual’s print.

“We have had quite a few cases where a non-suspect’s prints have turned up on a document and that has given investigators a new and sometimes successful line of inquiry,” he said.

“I would hope to think that access to local forensic services has resulted in more prosecutions. It is hard to quantify, but I am aware of a number of cases when a fingerprint has been identified and after the suspect is confronted with the evidence often they will throw their hands up and plead guilty.

“I find that pretty good,” he said. □