

Quiet times are a blast for bomb data centre

In 2008, a number of highly regarded law enforcement agencies around the world are celebrating their beginnings and the Australian Bomb Data Centre joins in as it approaches its 30th anniversary in July. The Director of the Centre also celebrates 10 years with the AFP and *Platypus* spoke to Terry Vincent about his role, the significant changes in the past decade and the challenges that lie ahead for the Centre in the fight against terrorism.

30th Anniversary of Sydney Hilton bombing – an explosive beginning

As early as 1976, the Australian Police Commissioners' conference formally recognised that there was a need to record and collate information on bomb-related incidents. While the idea of establishing a data centre was well underway, the final catalyst came in the form of a bomb that detonated in a garbage bin outside the Hilton Hotel in Sydney on 13 February 1978.

At the time of the explosion the hotel was the venue for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Regional Meeting. Three people including a New South Wales police officer died and seven more police and civilians were wounded as a result of the tragic event. Commonwealth Police officers were on duty at the time but were inside the building when the blast occurred. The NSW police victims had been part of a security detachment posted outside the hotel.

On 1 July 1978, the Australian Bomb



Photo courtesy of AFP Museum

Above: Sydney Hilton Hotel bombing on 13 February 1978

Data Centre (ABDC) was formally established and 30 years later continues to be one of the longest-standing bomb data centres in the world. In recent years, the Centre has gained an additional and significant role in supporting Australia's efforts for regional counter terrorism capacity building.

Domestic beginnings to the international stage

Centre Director Terry Vincent has seen quite a few changes, particularly over the past eight years, where the centre's growth in skills, capacity building and working with South East Asian nations reflect the reputation it has established as being one of the leading experts in its field.

"In 1978, Australia was one of four countries in a hub of data centres which included the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada," Mr Vincent said. "There are now more than 40 bomb

data centres around the world engaged in monitoring, assisting and disrupting terrorist activity."

The ABDC is primarily a repository responsible for collecting, collating, interpreting and disseminating data relating to criminal use of explosives. It also provides information to federal, state and territory police services, the Australian Defence Force, government organisations and international bomb data centres. The preparations for the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games combined with the AFP's relationship building with international law enforcement agencies has proven critical in the centre's ability to provide technical intelligence support both domestically and internationally.

"The Centre's international reputation as a leading expert in bomb-related incidents came to the forefront after the Bali 1 bombing in 2002, the Marriott Hotel bombing in Jakarta in 2003 and the Bali 2 bombing in 2005," he said. "Our quick



approach, ability to work cooperatively in someone else's jurisdiction and overall common sense as bomb subject matter experts attracted law enforcement agencies around the world to seriously look at our approaches."

In particular, key international bombing incidents where the AFP has been invited to assist and send specialised teams together with members from the ABDC include the Australian Embassy in Jakarta in September 2004 and three tourist restaurants in Bali, Indonesia, in October 2005. The AFP was the only international agency invited to send an observer team, including a explosives technical intelligence specialist from the Centre, to the London Underground system bombing in July 2005.

Mr Vincent said these investigations provided ABDC members with an opportunity to gain valuable information concerning the bomb making and substances used, as well as to combine their knowledge with forensic and technical disciplines.

"Over the years, we have been fine-tuning the skills set of an explosive technical intelligence officer and technical intelligence officer to work under one roof," he said. "Our people have a technical and operational approach and, when combined with the AFP's excellent forensic capability, it can produce meaningful results."

An example of this successful teamwork has included the deployment of an ABDC member and Chemical Criminalistics

personnel from AFP Forensic and Technical to the recovery of explosives and weapons from a terrorist cache in Yogyakarta, Indonesia in 2006.

The Centre is also developing mutually supportive skills of an explosives technical intelligence officer with a technical intelligence officer. As Mr Vincent explained, his members are qualified bomb technicians with explosive engineering skills and a sound understanding of intelligence and forensic procedures.

"These skills combined with a member trained in intelligence procedures, explosives and forensics and with a focus on operations and people, will assist to build the connections between our information and the wider AFP," he said.

A member of the International Bomb Data Centre Working Group

A significant achievement in this period has been the formation of the International Bomb Data Centre Working Group (IBDCWG). The formation of the group, of which he is the inaugural chair, indicated how important the explosives technical intelligence work is to the international policing community, Mr Vincent said.

"In mid-2005, 12 countries initially formed the group and, just three years later, it has more than doubled to 24 countries including seven observers," he said. "The group's rapid progress in formalising its processes in a short period is indicative of its success and bodes

well for the future."

The IBDCWG is a collaborative body of international bomb data centres and government agencies which share explosive technical intelligence and information on the unlawful use of explosives. Its membership is expected to exceed 35 countries by December 2008.

Capacity building in South East Asia

Plans to establish the South East Asian bomb data centres began in 2004/2005 with funding from the Australian Government's *Fighting Terrorism at its Source* program. The ABDC has assisted with capacity building of the Philippine National Police, the Royal Malaysian Police and Royal Thai Police bomb data centres which were opened in September 2005, March 2006 and September 2006 respectively.

The ABDC has also assisted with the establishment of a bomb data centre in Indonesia, due to be opened in May this year, as well as working with the Singapore police to progress a formal collaborative program due to begin later this year.

The centre maintains strategic relationships with these regional law enforcement agencies, individually and collectively, and helps facilitate effective and timely exchange of technical intelligence.

In late 2007, the centre achieved a significant outcome when it was able to work cooperatively with the five Asian regions and form the SEA Bomb Data Centre Working Group. The working



group has been since been recognised as a member of the IBDCWG.

Quiet achievers

In late November 2007, the AFP hosted the 16th annual Australian Bomb Data Centre conference in Canberra. Delegates from Australia and around the world gathered for three days as leading experts presented a range of topics from the evolution of improvised explosive devices in Iraq to the degradation of triacetone triperoxide (a white crystalline powder with a distinctive acrid smell).

Conference Secretariat for the ABDC Annette O'Mara said that while the event was a closed affair for a dedicated and defined audience, there was an opportunity for industry firms to showcase the latest technology.

"We had 13 exhibitors in 18 booths last year and were pleased to see an increase in overseas firms wanting to demonstrate their products," she said. "One product which caused quite a bit of interest was the Andros HD-1 bomb disposal robot used to remotely detonate improvised explosive devices."

Mr Vincent said that the purpose of this type of robot and other bomb disposal equipment was to provide safety to bomb disposal personnel by keeping the bomb and the personnel as far apart as possible. Sending a bomb response person to render safe the device should be the very last resort.

"While technology has advanced and assisted law enforcement agencies around the world, it still is important that people that attend this conference have a



Top left: AFP team at Nyoman cafe, Bali; Top middle: Marriott Hotel bombing showing crater, Jakarta; Top right: General Santos meat market, Philippines; Bottom left: Range explosion; Bottom right: Marriott Hotel.

strong explosives technical background. It is necessary to know how to make bombs before you can render them safe," he said. "This bomb making knowledge is also necessary for the technical intelligence exploitation of the device."

Manager for Data Centres, Craig Petrie, said that the first conference only had a small gathering of 12 people and in 1999 the event was opened up to international audiences and the numbers have grown significantly over that time.

"More than 270 delegates attended this conference and that is indicative of how much the world has changed," Mr Petrie said. "For some members in the South East Asian region the operational experience is quite new given the unfortunate series of events some of those countries have experienced in the past few years."

Planning for the 17th annual Australian Bomb Data Centre conference to be held late 2008 has begun.

For more information please contact Annette O'Mara at:

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Significant changes and the future

The Centre has grown significantly from its early days where it operated in a domestic setting and focused on three main functions: intelligence, training and working with Australian Defence Force members. The centre is now focused on: technical intelligence and technical support; established information management systems; and adopting a new role in contributing to counter terrorism investigations including regional counter terrorism capability development. The operational work performed by the centre in the past seven years has also assisted in raising its profile to world-class recognition by its contemporaries.

In 2006, the Centre purchased a world's best practice database system. The database provided increased information storage and exchange for the organisations using it, Mr Vincent said. Those included the ATF, as well as organisations in Britain, Colombia, Hong Kong, Mexico, Northern Ireland, Singapore and Australia.

All photos courtesy of ABDC



Above: Menega Cafe, Bali ; Below: ABDC Director Terry Vincent and Manager for Data Centres Craig Petrie testing Andros HD-1 bomb disposal robot. Bottom: Deputy Commissioner Lawler with RTP General Israphan Snitwongse, senior AFP and RTP staff at the official opening of the Transnational Crime Coordination Centre in Bangkok in 2007.



Photo courtesy of Canberra Times



All other photos courtesy of ABDC

Top: Australian Embassy bombing, Jakarta; Bottom left: Ambassador Australian Embassy in Manila, Tony Hely at the opening of the Philippine Bomb Data Centre on 2 September 2005; Bottom right : Mr Vincent with Chief Inspector Kamaruzzaman bin Basri and Federal Agent Mark Simpson

“This database is a massive leap forward,” he said. “It’s the ultimate interactive library which shares information and intelligence on explosives incidents, and devices and methods.”

The IBDCWG also employs a unique explosives communications portal which was devised by the US Department of Justice and is distinct from the international and multilingual explosives database. The portal provides users with a real-time, Internet-accessible collaboration tool which could also translate documents in five languages. Exchange of encrypted information in live ‘chat’ forums is also possible (Source: ATF Media

release 1 August 2007).

Mr Vincent’s vision is to adapt a streamlined communications model where lessons learned from the IBDCWG portal, ABDC and the Case Management Information System are available to the state and territory police, customs, immigration and transport departments.

“The nature of our business is cyclical and we need to constantly interact and evolve,” Mr Vincent said. “While this war on terrorism continues and the focus is on the unlawful use of explosives – which is happening daily around the world – then this business will thrive.”

Key International deployments by ABDC*

Year	Country	Incident
October 2002	Bali	Bali 1 bombings
August 2003	Jakarta	Marriott Hotel bombing
September 2004	Jakarta	Australian Embassy bombing
October 2005	Bali	Bali 2 bombings
July 2005	London	London Underground bombings
December 2006	Bangkok	New Years Eve bombings
March 2007	Yogyakarta, Indonesia	Weapons and explosives recovery

* A review of major incidents from 1976 to 2001 can be found in the March 2003 edition of *Platypus*