Ready to listen

Police negotiators most often turn out to be a welcome sight for people "having the worst day of their life".

As the Mumbai terrorists stalked the corridors of the Taj Mahal Palace & Tower Body, terrified Australian citizens hid in cupboards. Their only solace was the voices of Australian police negotiators deployed from the AFP to support them.

There was no chance of reasoning with the attackers who wreaked a three-day path of carnage in which 166 people were killed. Yet, into this nightmare scenario a voice of reason could bring some semblance of calm. Some chance of at least making even this terrible situation better.

The simple fact is that it's never going to be a good situation if the AFP's Police Negotiation Team (PNT) is needed. The people that PNTs are called to respond to and, more often than not, support and assist, are generally at a low emotional point in their lives. It's an extreme action to take someone hostage or to threaten suicide or any other circumstance where a desperate act is seen as a last, viable option.

It might surprise some that AFP negotiators deploy on average about 50 times each year. Most of those deployments are in the PNT's role in servicing domestic ACT Policing operations. These tasks range from suicide intervention and mental health issues to kidnapping and delivering high-risk search warrants.

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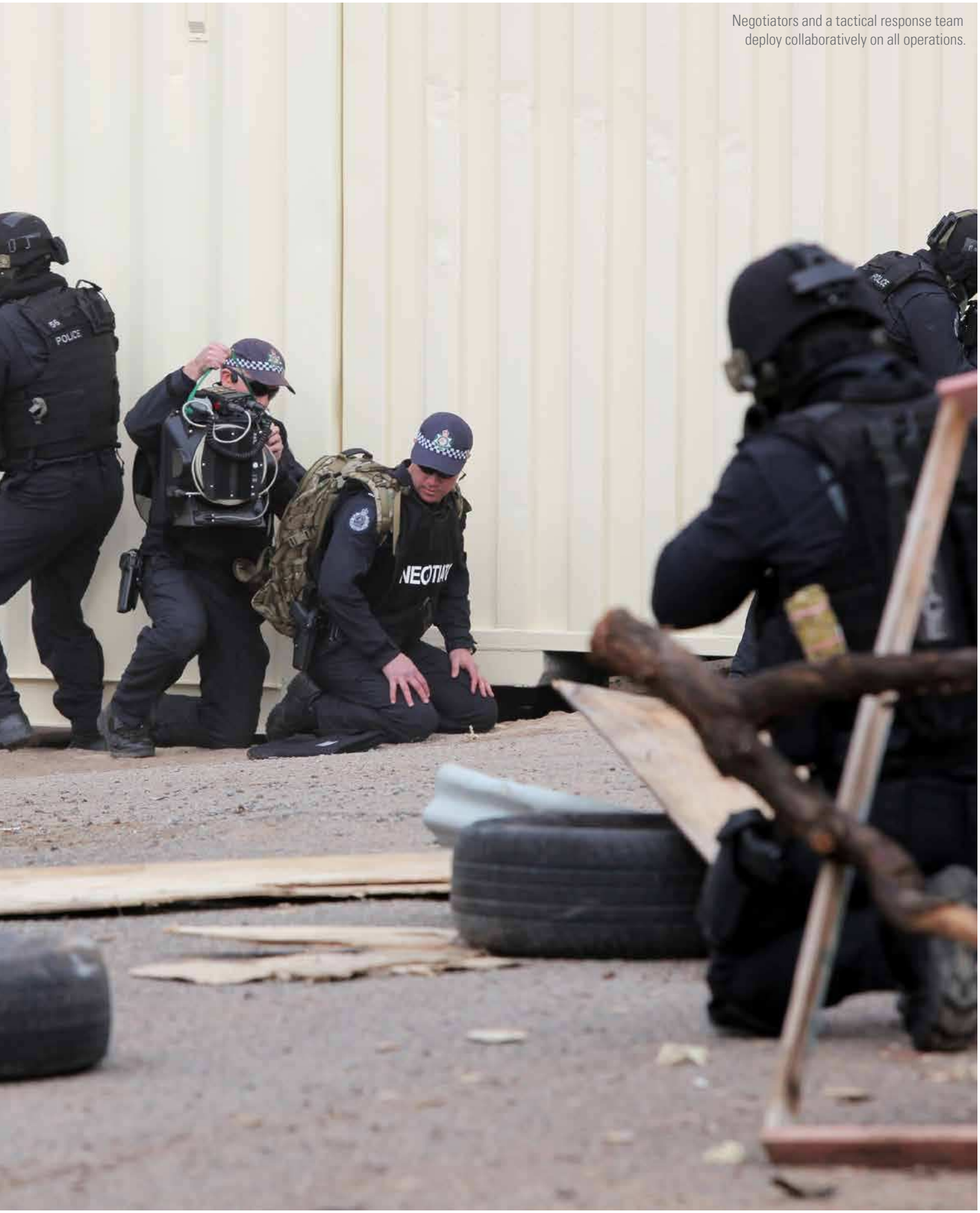
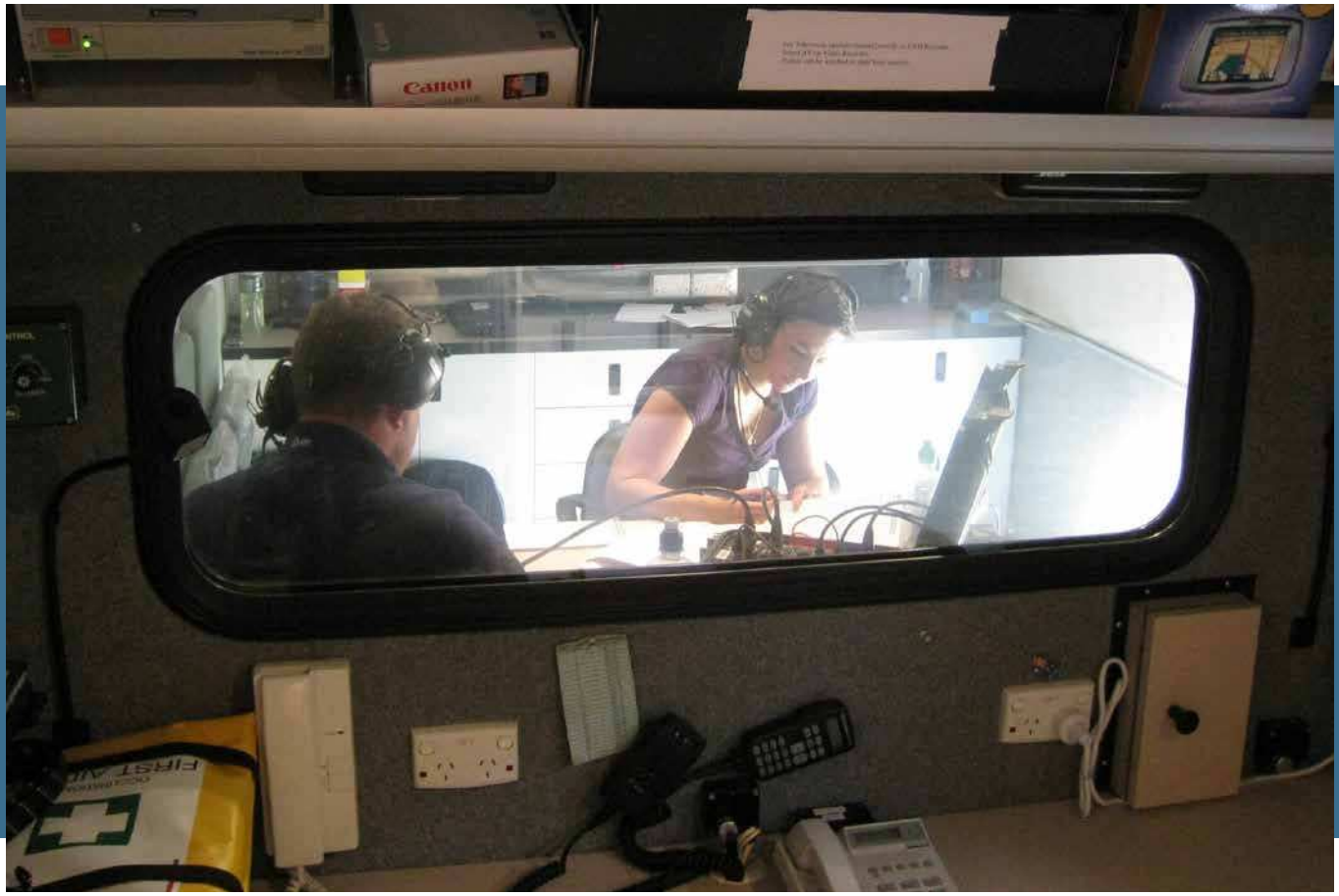


Negotiators and a tactical response team deploy collaboratively on all operations.



Students take part in a training scenario during their Basic Negotiators Course.

in some years as well. Tasks included emergencies such as the Douglas Wood kidnapping in Iraq, the MH17 deployment to Ukraine this year – and the Mumbai terrorist attack in 2008.

This is the world of a police negotiator. In these highly charged emotional circumstances it's a delicate operation to defuse the situation. There are high stakes involved. Lives are at risk. Negotiators say there is not one type of person or personality that makes a good operator. But clearly it takes a certain person to take on the onerous responsibilities of the job and its possible consequences.

Federal Agent Luke trained as a psychologist before joining the AFP in 1999. He did his Basic Negotiators Course in 2002 and says he was "quite lucky" in becoming one of the AFP's six fulltime negotiators two years ago, to which he attributes his psychology background in clinical counselling. He is now a Negotiator team leader with the PNT at the AFP's Majura Complex in Canberra.

"Often when we are dealing with someone that has reached a degree of dysfunction and crisis," Federal Agent Luke says. "There could be a number of variables. Some we are going to be able to control and some we are not."

"So it depends on what those variables are – which may be substance, alcohol and other drugs. It might be mental illness; we might have a long-running history of personal dysfunction in the subject. Or we may have a person who is just experiencing the worst day of their life."

Finding the right people for the job is critical in any trade. In finding and recruiting negotiators it is paramount. Federal Agent Luke says a key ingredient is problem solving skills. Listening skills are hugely important. He says a negotiator should only do about 10 per cent of the talking. The other 90 per cent is listening, observing and attending.

He highlights temperance as another key quality. A negotiator needs to be non-judgmental. He says police biases need to be left behind. "I think we look for people that are good at what we call novelty – the ability to walk into a new situation, an unfamiliar situation, and make sense of it quickly and then become functional and capable of influencing an outcome in that environment."

"Often we get people that are highly intelligent," he says. "In the initial phases of training they demonstrate all the attributes we are looking for. But often they are people that are used to achieving."

"So when they meet failure – like we all do during the training phases – it is an unfamiliar and unpleasant experience for them. They tend to, for whatever reason, fail to perform after that. They have trouble regrouping and often they are very hard on themselves and they find themselves winding up in a bit of a negative spin."

"So often it is just those people that are resilient and forgiving of themselves. When they perceive themselves to have failed they are able to pick that all up, put it behind them, regroup, refocus, adapt and move forward."

One of Federal Agent Luke's very first jobs as a negotiator in 2002 highlights the very subtle nature of police negotiations. Specialist response teams was called to a house in suburban Canberra where a young male, experiencing drug induced psychosis had forced his family to barricade themselves from him inside the house, while he positioned himself on the verandah, between his family and police.

The male was armed with a bush knife, was psychotic and continued to ingest drugs throughout the incident. He presented a real threat to his family, himself and Police. Agent Luke spoke with the male for a couple of hours while he continued to behave unpredictably, but had missed some key issues or "hooks", partially due to the subject's incoherence and partially due to the Negotiators inexperience.

Eventually, it became apparent the subject was scared of needles and hospitals as a result of past treatment. He knew he needed medication, but couldn't articulate that he needed a different method of administration. The lesson was that no matter how disorganised or irrational a person may appear, they may still be trying to communicate, and be capable of being receptive if an officer is paying the right attention.

The science of negotiation

Former New York Police Department (NYPD) officer Harvey Schlossberg is considered the father of police negotiation doctrine. The NYPD in the early 1970s was concerned about the rising number of deaths in police responses to critical incidents. The Attica prison riots in 1971 left more than 30 people dead, including corrections officers. It was a hostage crisis that would propel Schlossberg to form a specialist field of police negotiations.

He had recently graduated with a PhD in psychology, when he observed NYPD officers in the bizarre hostage siege in 1972. Bank robber John Wojtowicz, and his co-accomplice and male partner Sal Naturale, held 10 people hostage in a Brooklyn bank. Wojtowicz demanded money for his lover's sex change operation. The case would later spawn the movie, Dog Day Afternoon.

Schlossberg was convinced that there was a methodology in the way that the NYPD officers dealt with Wojtowicz who was later arrested and the hostages were freed. Sal Naturale was killed in the resolution. Ultimately, the world's first hostage negotiation team graduated in 1974 under Schlossberg's direction. That team has been emulated and developed the world over.

The AFP PNT has evolved away from a strict Schlossberg/US model. The AFP adapts the six principles developed by marketing guru Dr Robert Cialdini, author of what is considered a seminal work in *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*. Even so, there are general principles that underpin what Federal Agent Luke calls the science of how we are persuaded.

PNTs deploy jointly with a strategic-response capability. The two teams work collaboratively but report independently to the Police Forward

Commander, who ultimately decides on the direction of the operation based on their reports.

The first step is containment. The PNTs focus on the containment of the hostage situation as the tactical response contains the physical geographical environment. The objective here is to contain the situation geographically and stabilise the situation when emotions are initially high.

The next step is to de-escalate the situation. Emotions run high in those initial stages. "Our job is to create a vacuum of emotions" Federal Agent Luke says. "We are immediately going to try and de-escalate the situation and remove all the emotion out of it – distil the emotion, calm everything and slow everything down."

As the initial panic of the situation subsides, the often lengthy period of the negotiation process follows. PNTs work in teams of up to five people. The primary negotiator takes the lead in establishing contact with the hostage taker. Meanwhile, team members work in the background supporting the lead negotiator.

The team's role is to begin gathering information. Important information is most often gleaned from the family on health issues and history and present situations. "The team should immediately be looking into the subject, and attending to them completely – listening, watching and smelling if they have to." It is

Negotiators at height during a suburban operation