

# Under extremes

## AFP negotiators made a significant difference to Australians caught up in the 2008 Mumbai attacks.

Detective Leading Senior Constable Nick Maguire was just about to finish his rostered shift when the phone rang. The AFP negotiator was directed to report to the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFAT) building in Barton, Canberra. For the next three days, the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks became the central focus of his life.

"We got a call saying 'grab your gear, go to DFAT, tell them who you are and you will get briefed from there'," Detective Leading Senior Constable Maguire says.

He and three other AFP negotiators were seconded to contact more than 100 Australians believed to be in Mumbai as the attacks erupted across multiple targets. More than 160 people were killed and more than 300 were injured during the four-day siege.

"We were taken to the DFAT crisis communications centre and given some basic briefings. Then we were given this enormous list of Australian residents; all that stuff from Smart Traveller. They said 'we need you to figure out where these people are and what they are doing'."

The negotiators set about texting people on the list. But first, a strategy was planned as to exactly what they should say. They didn't want to give away too much information if the phone had already been compromised by the terrorist group. But they also wanted a text that would "tick all the boxes".

As texts began to return, the negotiators confirmed if the person was safe and okay and whether it was safe to call them direct. "We didn't want to be ringing someone if they were sitting in their room with hostage takers standing over them."

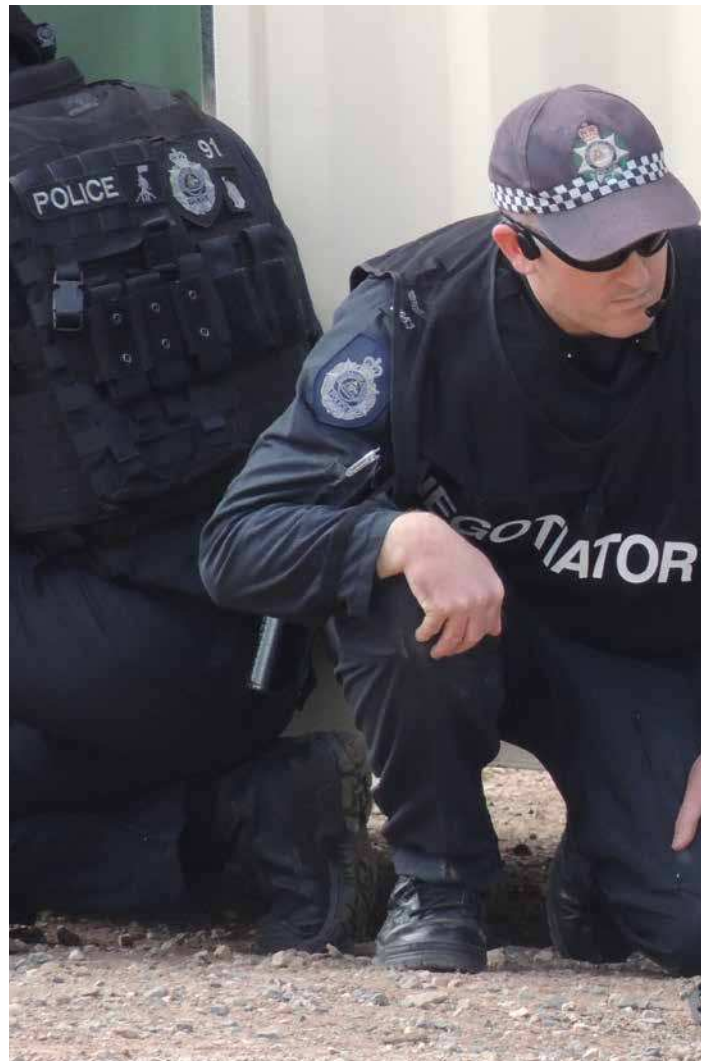
A picture of the situation emerged. DFAT was providing realtime information. Relatives in Australia also were ringing with information and supplementing the information returned by the text messages. The list was soon whittled down to about 40 people in critical areas. Most of those were in the Oberoi hotel – one of the primary targets.

"At one stage we were talking to a group of trade delegates. They were pretty panicky," he says. "We went through the usual protocol with someone who is in a hostage sort of situation; just trying to get

them to take stock of where they were at and settle themselves down and be realistic about what was going on."

The negotiators talked the Australians through the situation and their circumstances. A key question was whether they should try to escape the hotel. At one stage the negotiators received a text saying "please call" from an elderly male who was escaping via the Oberoi restaurant. He was almost free when he encountered dead bodies and began to panic.

"We said 'don't worry about that – there is nothing you can do about it – you just have to keep going straight ahead.'"



"We were giving instructions we would normally give to people in a family violence scenario like 'can you see police? ... yes? ... then walk toward them, keep your hands by your side and be polite'. We were drawing on Western policing and how we respond to these sorts of incidents."

It was decided in Canberra that people who were safe in their rooms would be better off staying there. While escape was an attractive option, venturing outside into unknown situations was risky.

Basic survival advice was provided. Draw the curtains; fill up the bath with water while services were still running; and keep away from the minibar as alcohol was not a good idea at this stage. While the attackers at the Oberoi were on other floors, the

negotiators talked through places that would provide concealment and cover from ballistic attack.

While negotiators are not trained specifically for this situation, they proved to be the perfect solution under extreme circumstances. "There was an enormous need on behalf of the Government," he says. "Our role was to provide that communications link from the crisis stronghold back to Australia. So the team was pretty happy and DFAT was happy with us."

"A few of the people we had been dealing with passed on messages and we got a couple of calls saying 'thanks very much guys – I don't know what we would have been able to do if we hadn't been able to talk to you for the last couple of days.'"

Detective Leading Senior Constable Nick Maguire (right) in training in Canberra.

