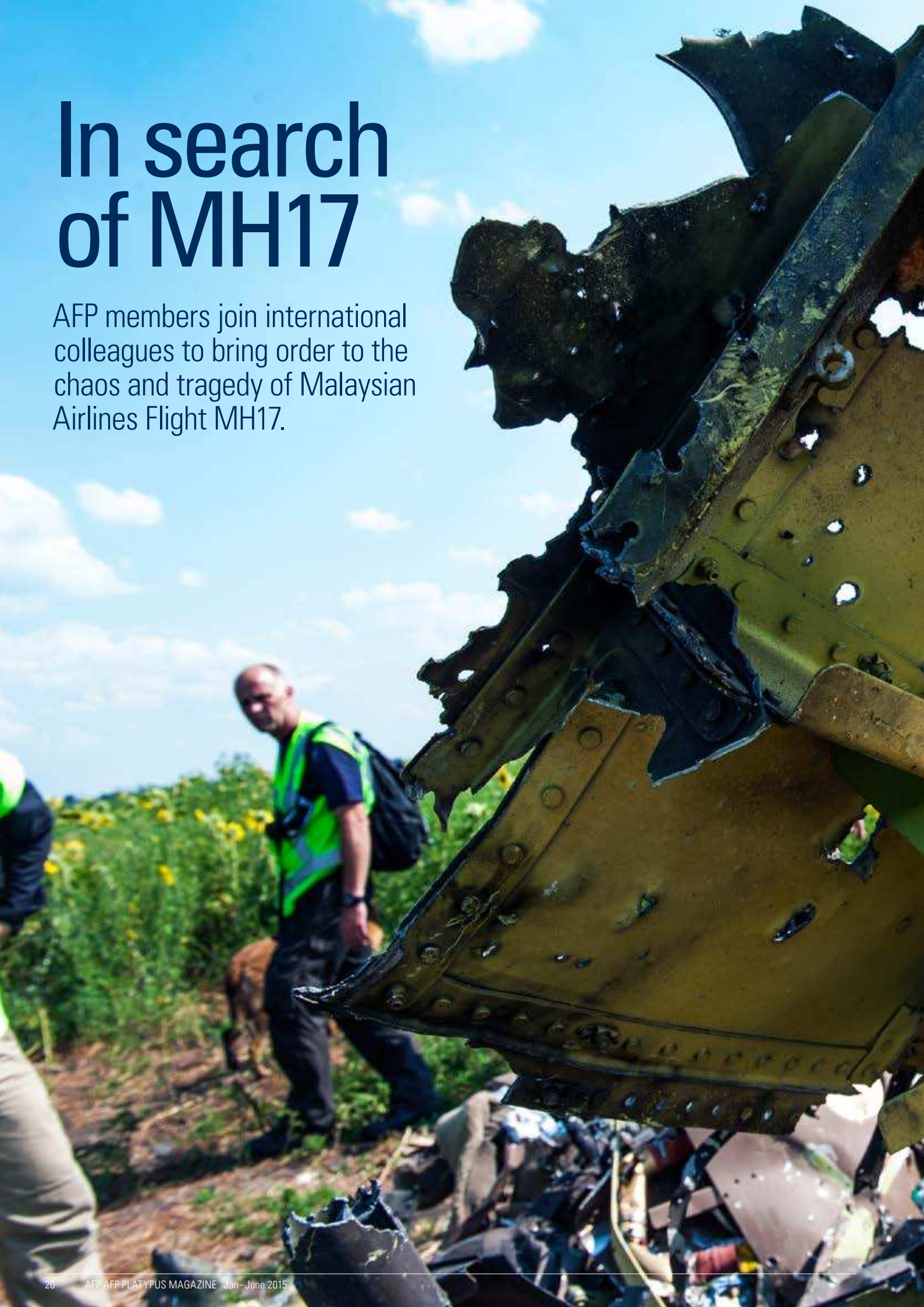
In search of MH17

AFP members join international colleagues to bring order to the chaos and tragedy of Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17.



"I've had numerous experiences being responsible for crime scenes. I've had numerous experiences being responsible for large scale, complex investigations. I've had numerous experiences of working with international partners in investigative work – but never within the backdrop of the Ukraine, in a war zone."

A text message woke AFP Disaster Victim Identification (DVI) specialist Dr Simon Walsh from his sleep on the morning of 17 July 2014. It had happened before, many times in fact – and he was used to it – but this time was different. In a half-waken state he stared at the screen.

'Passenger plane shot down with a missile in Ukraine. Over 200 deceased.'

"You have got to be kidding me," the AFP's Chief Scientist said to himself.

"There's been a fair few occasions I've taken calls at odd hours and some sort of disaster's occurred," he said. "But I won't forget this particular one.

"I remember reading this about MH17 and just thinking 'wow'. Despite these things always being a bit unexpected, you couldn't have seen that one coming."

Looking back, Dr Walsh and his AFP colleagues, including Commanders Brian McDonald and Mark Harrison rated the search, recovery and DVI exercise during AFP Operation Arew as one of the toughest policing assignments of their collective careers.

What had started as a 'regular' investigation soon turned out to be a detailed mission.

AFP expertise was vital in recovering 298 passengers and crew from local fields in eastern Ukraine, after MH17 - following air traffic control instructions about weather and traffic in the area - diverted slightly in unrestricted airspace en route from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur.

Where to begin?

On landing in the Netherlands – and then making the 2500 kilometre trip south-west to the Ukraine city of Donetsk, near the Russian border – it was clear to AFP members involved in Operation Arew that this would be far from your average air crash investigation.

Unlike the 1988 terrorist downing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, access to the MH17 crash site was minimal, time limited and extremely hazardous. And it was in a war zone.

On the way into the crash site.

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Pro-Russian separatists and Ukrainian forces, who had already been involved in months of sporadic fighting, were causing access problems to the crash site. The crash sites and debris extended across approximately 30 square kilometres of separatist-held territory.

Farms and sizeable fields of tall sunflowers made searching difficult. Local emergency services had commenced gathering deceased victims and had begun to move them to nearby trains to be repatriated to the Netherlands.

As an adjunct professor in geo-forensics – 'the science of search' – and expert in undertaking large-scale searches, AFP Manager Investigations Standards and Practices Mark Harrison wasted little time devising a method to search the large area of the wreck of MH17.

"Because of the way this aircraft was downed it actually broke up in the air and then started falling in sections," Commander Harrison said.

"The aircraft was falling out of the sky as it was still moving forward – until the last bits came down. So it's quite unusual, almost unique to have the debris field widely dispersed."

The plan that Commander Harrison devised – which had the support of the Dutch and Malaysian authorities – was to use techniques borrowed from the sport of 'geocaching', where small containers are hidden, given a GPS reference, and recovered by participants.

Using the principle, Commander Harrison obtained satellite images from the AFP's partners and assigned GPS coordinates for every piece of aircraft debris, marking each on search maps with a yellow dot.

The speed at which AFP members would be able to get to exact pieces of wreckage and human remains was to be crucial. And no-one had ever used this technique before.

"After the GPS process I was able to say 'well, I know where everything is – and I've got the exact position of those,'" he said.

"The next phase was to say 'OK, the mission is a humanitarian one first and foremost to recover the remains of persons. Is this area where is it most likely that human remains will be recovered from?'"

Successfully searching large areas with the fewest people in the shortest amount of time gave investigators confidence that the geocached references were accurate. It was then a question of using normal police searching techniques and distributing these into zones.

"The benefit of doing that was before we even conducted the search we knew exactly how much was in any zone – and we knew exactly where we were going," Commander Harrison said.

"That was important for two reasons: we needed to know where people were going to keep them safe and had to explain to the pro-Russian separatists

Commander Mark Harrison and AFP colleagues prepare to search.

where we were proposing to go and what we were proposing to do.

"So we planned it and I envisaged that it would take five days – that's effectively what it did."

Delicate negotiations

Security of the AFP contingent accessing the MH17 crash site was a day-by-day proposal.

"The first day we didn't even get out of the carpark," recalls Mission Commander Brian McDonald.

"The advice came back from [Europe's 'UN'] Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) 'you're not going to go anywhere – it's just not safe to be able to move'.

"I remember the next day we tried to take what was called 'the southern route' – the most direct route out of Donetsk onto the crash site. And that again landed us right in the middle of the conflict zone."

Negotiations were a repetitive but essential daily ritual. The OSCE negotiated with the Ukrainian Government and they negotiated with the pro-Russian rebels.

"We worked hand-in-glove with the OSCE. They facilitated access, provided logistical support, and they provided expert advice on the environment and the security aspects – how to get in and out of the location."

"But the real guts of what was happening was with the rebels and what they were going to acquiesce to," Commander McDonald said.

"Those negotiations would take place late at night. It could be one or two in the morning before we set the agenda for the next day.

"That type of activity went on for a couple of days before we changed the route we were going to take into the MH17 crash site.

"One night we were sitting there talking to the OSCE guys. We had to decide if we would just drive into what is virtually a no-mans' land. At that point we said 'this is not going to work'.

"The next day we tried it with a far smaller contingent of only two to three vehicles containing myself, Commander Harrison, a couple of our Dutch colleagues, and some of the OSCE guys. We did actually manage to get through 'the northern route' to the crash site.

Negotiations and access seesawed.

"You'd go through various checkpoints and other aspects. We'd move from rebel-controlled into Government-controlled territory, back into rebel-controlled territory. That's pretty hairy – I mean these guys are fighting. You could hear shells falling but the advice that was they were going outwards and not really a threat to us at the time."

As conditions worsened in Donetsk and following negotiations with the Ukraine Government the

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Searching the wreckage.

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decision was made to move the Police Forward Command Post to the town of Soledar.

For the next three to four days they travelled from that point into the site, searched it, and came back out again. Commander McDonald, Air Chief Marshal (ret) Angus Houston – who led Australia's recovery efforts in the Ukraine – and military colleagues continued to monitor the safety of those moving onto and off the site.

It turned out to be one of Commander McDonald's most challenging missions of his extensive police career.

"I've had numerous experiences as being responsible for crime scenes. I've had numerous experiences being responsible for large scale, complex investigations. I've had numerous experiences of working with international partners in investigative work – but never within the backdrop of the Ukraine, in a war zone. It was absolutely unique.

"Searching a crime scene, and undertaking a multi-jurisdictional, complex investigation is difficult in itself. Overlay that with the difficulty of getting on to the crime scene – which is a given normally – and add the complexity of getting there, the security of our people, and their safety."

But despite the hurdles, the dedication of AFP members was obvious.

"I remember the first time I needed to gather volunteers to get people to leave Soledar [in Donetsk] to go back out and be relieved. I didn't get a volunteer.

"So we actually had to select people. That was the dedication of the people there to want to get the task done."

Bringing them home

Early in the investigation, media reports put the number of victims recovered at 219, however these reports varied. On arriving in Amsterdam – where he would soon set up base with DVI experts from around the world – AFP Chief Scientist Dr Simon Walsh said the conflicting reports were an obstacle, but not unusual.

"It's often the case in these sorts of matters where the tally that you see doesn't reconcile with the number of victims and there can be a range of reasons for that," said Dr Walsh.

Given the little information that he had about the crash and the crash site, Dr Walsh prepared to identify bodies – including the 28 Australians.

The decision to base the DVI specialists in Amsterdam came as Dr Walsh was part way from Australia to the Ukraine. Two AFP DVI-trained members had already deployed to that area but in the meantime the Dutch had secured an agreement that the bodies would come out to the Netherlands.

The job of the DVI team at the Netherlands Forensic Institute.

"As it turned out that became the operating base from then on."

At its peak at the Dutch military base at Hilversum, where the DVI work took place, more than 300 people from 15 different countries took part in what was a solid international operation. The AFP would also work closely with the National Police of the Netherlands.

The AFP – and DVI and forensic experts from other Australian states and territories – ensured that the mission rapidly built much needed capacity.

During similar mass casualty events overseas, Dr Walsh is the AFP's National DVI and forensic commander – pulling together Australian DVI capability should the Australian Government offer that sort of assistance.

Successfully identifying all of the MH17 victims was a priority – but a big ask of all of the specialists working on the remains.

"We needed to work our way through that process and make the identifications, and ultimately get the victims of the incident back to their families." It was a day-by-day prospect, but all of the Australian victims were identified.

"[Doing that] was obviously very pleasing – you don't want to be in the circumstance where you're left with unidentified victims. Given the sorts of issues that we knew we were going to face I think we went into this incident anticipating that that might be the case.

"I guess any disaster, by definition of the term, is something pretty unexpected and usually in its own way is unprecedented. But there were obviously some features with this job that we hadn't really come across before.

"The intensity of that period from an operational perspective was also something that I'd never experienced before."

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Ongoing assistance

The AFP contribution to Operation Arew continues.

To this day, the AFP has more than 20 personnel deployed to the Netherlands and Ukraine to support ongoing forensic and investigative activity. This is further supported by a number of AFP personnel domestically.

The criminal investigation, led by the Dutch Public Prosecution Service, is facilitated through a joint investigation team (JIT) arrangement, involving the Netherlands, Australia, Belgium, Ukraine and Malaysia. This is a highly complex and challenging investigation.

The AFP is committed to seeking justice for all of those who perished on-board MH17 and the arduous task of investigating this incident continues with the support of our international JIT partners. The AFP will continue to provide support for as long as is required.


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