



Rising to the occasion

AFP members reflect on rising to the challenge of Operation Arew two years after the tragedy of MH17.

Detective Superintendent Anthony Fox exited his taxi, grabbed his bag and walked toward the Schiphol airport, destination Dubai. He joined the throng of people making their way to someplace else. Head down and lost in his own thoughts, he gently nudged into the person who had stopped in front of him. He looked up and there at the entrance of Amsterdam's main airport was a sea of flowers 10 metres deep and 50 metres long.

It was only then that the full reality of the MH17 tragedy hit home. He had watched the news coverage of Malaysia Airlines flight on 17 July from his position as Senior Liaison

Officer in Dubai – never thinking he would be deployed. But in one of those strange twists, he was to be the first AFP member to deploy to the crash site in Ukraine.

Anthony got the call to deploy at 11am Dubai time on 20 July. As far removed as Dubai may be from Ukraine, Anthony was one of the closest AFP members that could deploy as soon as possible. Less than 24 hours later he was in Kiev at 7.40am on 21 July. It was the beginning of two weeks of little sleep; a fluid operational, military and political situation that could change at any time, and frustrating attempts accessing the crash site.



Detective Superintendent Anthony Fox, at left, was the first AFP member to access the crash site.

“I just got on the ground – what I wanted to do and perceived my role being was to understand the situation in Kiev and Donetsk and to get down to the crash site as soon as we could,” Detective Superintendent Fox says.

“Essentially, it was a reconnaissance to assess what equipment, people and resources we would need, understanding the security situation and who we would need to build relationships with to complete the task and then reporting this back to AFP Kiev and Headquarters.”

Surreal

It was to be an experience quite unlike anything the AFP had yet encountered. At one time, shelling and automatic rifle fire would be just a kilometre away, and shelling could be heard and felt at the accommodation at night. Then there was the uncertainty and frustration gaining access to the crash site or how much time in each of the

five main crash sites he would have. Delays often would prevent gaining access to the sites when ceasefire timings were missed.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) was negotiating access to the crash site with the Ukraine and pro-Russian forces in the conflict zone. The OSCE also was to provide logistic support for the AFP, whilst Donetsk People’s Republic militia provided security.

“There’s all that going on in the background,” Anthony says. “If you had run this situation as a [Management of Serious Crime course] scenario no one would believe you.

“That you are going into a conflict zone, you are going to have to negotiate between government forces and rebels, you have to identify a crash site that is 50km² across five main sites – you have to go in there and identify what you need and how you’re going to do it – people would think you’re mad.”

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On 24 July, Anthony was one of three Australians permitted to enter the crash zone. The small group was escorted through the check points by the OSCE to Donetsk. At the last check point on the Ukrainian side they waited in the vehicle line to cross to the pro-Russian side and onto the crash site. The vehicle in front was being checked for identification.

“There were a lot of Ukrainian military and militia walking around with Soviet-style weapons. This guy came and looked in the window and checked our identification. We were in dedicated OSCE vehicles – so we were okay.

“The guy that checked our ID looks out across this field. I could see him looking at something. He was right beside my window. Then he brought up his AK47 and started shooting off into the paddock. We weren’t quite sure what he was shooting at – whether it was a rebel, rabbit, who knows?”

The first day at the five crash sites was a blur of activity and photography. Anthony had been briefed on what shrapnel from a warhead looked like and that was what he was looking for in particular. With a GPS enabled camera, he captured photographs and video images of the landscape of the scenes, specific items of aircraft wreckage and human remains. The group was instructed, however, that they were not to remove anything from the sites.

“It was pretty surreal,” Anthony says. “The countryside is beautiful, these beautiful big country fields of sunflowers. As I found out later Ukraine produces 60 per cent of the world’s sunflower oil.

“But then the first crash site we arrived at was where the tail and part of the fuselage were. Seeing that lying on the ground when you know it should be up in the air, that it should form part of a plane in one piece – it was quite surreal.”

Site 5 contained an engine and wing section of the aircraft. Just 50 metres away at a crossroad lived “the world’s luckiest Ukrainian farmer”. He and his wife were having a meal when they heard an explosion. He rushed outside

with her and saw debris falling from the sky. “He saw the flaming wings coming down like a pendulum and it came down literally 50 metres from his house,” Anthony says. “It is unreal how nothing hit him.”

Adaptable

On 25 July, five Australian representatives were allowed access to the site. Federal Agent Hilda Sirec joined Anthony at the crash sites. Like Anthony, less than 24 hours after watching the coverage on television she found herself in Kiev.

As law enforcement officers, each AFP investigator had to adapt to the professional frustrations of an extremely unorthodox crime scene. Not only was it spread over a large distance, but there was no security in place to maintain the integrity of the evidence. Pieces of the fuselage had been moved into a central area and people could roam freely among the sites.

She says the magnitude of the task was huge and came with a heavy responsibility to the task and to the families of those who lost loved ones. “We all just wanted to do the best job we could,” Hilda says.

“It was a surreal experience for those people departing Australia, London and Dubai who had seen the wall-to-wall news saturation and then land in rural Ukraine.

“You try and look at it clinically as well as a law enforcement officer. There’s an investigation to be done and that is probably the best way to achieve those immense responsibilities you feel—get there and do the job. Identify the possibilities and opportunities and address that.

“We looked at all the belongings and we know that they belonged to someone who has died on that plane but equally that helps to identify an individual and give solace to other families who are working with a lot less information and only dealing with what they see on television and that would be far more harrowing.”

Federal Agent Hilda Sirec photographs impact evidence on a section of the MH17.



One of the first opportunities came at 12.45pm on 25 July at Site 1. Anthony located a piece of what appeared to be aircraft fuselage and noticed what appeared to be olive-green coloured metal fragments embedded in the fuselage. He took photographs of the item in situ and collected three pieces of the metal fragments, placing them in a clear plastic bag. He showed the fragments to Hilda, who at the time of deployment was a part-time AFP bomb technician.

At a small village near crash site 2, an important part of the cockpit fuselage was located. Hilda says this particular piece of the fuselage was to be one of the most contentious pieces of the destroyed aircraft.

“That piece of fuselage had signature markings that would be consistent with fragmentation damage, which somewhat

corroborates the allegation that the plane was brought down by a missile. So I was obviously taking photos and taking some measurements that I could from that.”

Hilda says that despite the challenges it was about supporting the mission. “I know it sounds clichéd – but it really was a Team Australia effort,” she says.

“I just feel extremely privileged to be part of Op Arew. I don’t think I will do anything else quite like this. It was clearly one of the most standout things in my career. I just hope that we get some gains with the final investigation and it gives [the families of victims] some peace and solace from the efforts made to get those answers.”

Ukraine emergency services remove bodies from the debris of MH17.







“We hope we don’t have to go into a situation like that ever again – deploy to the middle of a conflict zone. But it may happen again,” Anthony says. “If it does I am confident the AFP is well prepared and well positioned to do Australia proud.”

Just the beginning

More than 500 members were deployed to Operation Arew at the height of the AFP’s involvement. The AFP still has 13 members deployed to the Netherlands.

For Anthony, he began his exit from Operation Arew on 30 July 2014 and made his way from Kharkiv to Kiev. His first task was to brief Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and Sir Angus Houston who headed up the Australian response.

In The Hague on 2 August there were further briefings with Australian Ambassador to the Netherlands Neil Mules and to Dutch and Australian police and military personnel.

On 3 August 2014, Anthony made his way past the sea of flowers at Schiphol Airport and back to Dubai. Now two years on, Anthony is proud of his involvement but also highlights the professionalism of the AFP and its members who met the immense challenges of the MH17 investigation.

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Hilda also reflects on the magnitude of the task and the AFP’s ability to meet the challenges of an extremely difficult operation.

“It was really amazing,” Hilda says. “From the way I see it no matter what role someone played in it – be it investigation or the command post or supporting us so our credit cards worked or we had sufficient money on us to purchase items, or doing up the rosters to have our welfare needs addressed. All those elements from the AFP were just amazing and everyone should feel really proud.”

A sea of flowers at Schiphol Airport commemorates those killed in the MH17 tragedy.