



From Hilton to High Tech

Q: What do missing fossils, the murder of an Assistant Police Commissioner, nerve gas experiments on livestock in Western Australia and the biggest seizure of ecstasy in the world have in common?

A: They've all been investigated by the Australian Federal Police (AFP).

For 30 years the AFP has been protecting Australia and Australian interests, and over the years members have scrutinised almost every type of crime imaginable.

In 1991, officers were called on to investigate the theft of significant fossils from remote sites in South Australia. It was the first AFP investigation in relation to the Moveable Cultural Heritage Act, and eventually three men were found guilty on charges relating to illegal exportation of the fossils.

Two years earlier, AFP Assistant Commissioner Colin Winchester had been killed, shot twice in the head at point-blank range. He was the highest-ranking police officer in Australia to be murdered, and his death led to a complex five year investigation. David Harold Eastman is now serving a life sentence for the murder.

In 1995, the Aum Shinrikyo sect released sarin gas into the Tokyo subway, killing 12 people and injuring thousands more. The AFP revealed it had been alerted to the sect in 1993, when members tried to bring chemicals into Australia. Subsequent investigations showed that the sect had used a property in Western Australia to conduct nerve-agent experiments on sheep. Its plans were thwarted when the members involved were refused return visas to Australia, largely as a result of intervention by the AFP and the Australian Customs Service.

For three decades the AFP has identified illegal drugs hidden in a variety of ways and places. But the organisation was stunned at the size of a haul found in 2008 – more than four tonnes of ecstasy was hidden inside a shipping container, concealed in tomato tins. Figures from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime showed that Australia now led the world in seizures of MDMA (ecstasy), accounting for more than a quarter of all global seizures of the drug.

As well as investigating a challenging array of criminal activity, the AFP plays a significant role in capacity development projects around the Asia-Pacific region, and is the primary adviser to the federal government on policing issues. In 30 years it has more than doubled in size, and now has a presence in 34 countries around the globe.

In 2004, the Australian government established the International Deployment Group (IDG) to manage the deployment of Australian and Pacific Island Police overseas. Its role is to contribute to regional stability and security on behalf of the Australian Government through the delivery of offshore law enforcement

initiatives, and to participate in capacity development programs within the law and justice sector.

The longest-running deployment has been to Cyprus, where AFP members are part of the United Nations Force supervising the ceasefire between Greek and Turkish Cypriots. Australia has had representatives on the peacekeeping force since it was established in 1964. In addition to maintaining a buffer zone between the two sides, the force also provides humanitarian aid to residents.

The IDG also has members in Afghanistan and the Sudan, but is probably better known for the work it does as part of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) and in Timor-Leste.

Initially, the RAMSI participating police force was involved in stabilising the troubled country. Success in the initial stages has seen the mission progress to a point where AFP members are now able to help with capacity development projects involving the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force.

Similarly, AFP members working in Timor-Leste are there as part of a bilateral agreement between the governments of Australia and Timor-Leste to provide a policing and training presence.

In many ways, the AFP has come full circle since its inception in 1979.

The catalyst for its formation was the Sydney Hilton hotel bombing of 1978, when the Australian government realised an organisation was needed to deal with issues such as terrorism at a national level. And while there were sporadic incidents affecting national security over the following years, the AFP's priorities gradually shifted away from counter-terrorism. Until September 11, 2001.

Now, countering terrorism is again a key focus for the organisation, and the AFP works closely with its international law enforcement partners to prevent terrorist activities through joint operations, training programs and the sharing of intelligence.

The 2002 Bali bombing was a watershed for the AFP, and one of the most significant operations it has ever been involved in. The experience gained by members who dealt with the devastation has ensured the AFP now has world renowned experts across a range of areas including forensics, investigations and intelligence operations.

It is unlikely that founding members of the AFP could foresee the way in which their profession would change over 30 years. The emergence of computers and the internet gave police a whole new arsenal with which to fight crime, but emerging technologies also give criminals new environments in which to operate.

This has led to a number of developments, not least a change in the way Australia's national security is defined. The AFP's duty to investigate crimes against the Commonwealth has led the organisation to develop specialist expertise in areas such as computer forensics, online investigations and technology-enabled crimes in areas such as money laundering and identity fraud.

The people too, have changed. But in often difficult and trying circumstances, each new generation of AFP members has demonstrated a strong commitment to the organisation's goal of protecting Australia and Australian interests from harm.

It is likely that the next three decades will be as interesting and changeable as the last. The Australian Federal Police is proud of the foundations it has laid to ensure it is well placed to respond to any new challenges which arise.