

Operation Kastelholm

Host – introduction

The Australian Federal Police – or AFP – is Australia’s national policing agency. Its role is to outsmart serious crime with intelligent action. The AFP is opening their case vault to give us detailed insight into their investigations, tactics, and most importantly, perseverance through this Crime Interrupted podcast. As the national law enforcement agency with international reach, the AFP investigates and disrupts crime, aiming to minimise the damage inflicted on victims while maximising the damage to the criminal environment. Some of these cases may surprise you with the extent criminals are prepared to go to, and that these crimes do in fact occur – or are planned – in our own backyard. Once you get a glimpse into the AFP and what it does to protect our way of life, you will be glad the AFP has your back.

Just a reminder that the operation that follows is true crime and may affect some listeners. Listener discretion is advised.

Host

The AFP teams up with local police to form Joint Counter Terrorism Teams in each capital city. The purpose of these teams is to detect and prevent terrorist attacks. They also monitor the activities of groups who support terrorist ideologies. Their goal is prevention, which is why governments all over the world make provision for law enforcement officers to arrest offenders *before* they commit a terrorist attack. The law in Australia is called Acts in Preparation. It means that the moment federal law enforcement officers have evidence that a person or a group is preparing to act, they can arrest them immediately. These kinds of arrests often follow months – and sometimes years – of investigation. But a case arose in 2016 where the Victorian Joint Counter Terrorism Team had only days to avert a major terrorist threat in the heart of Melbourne’s CBD.

Detective Leading Senior Constable Lindsay Hall has been with the AFP for over two decades. He joined the Joint Counter Terrorism Team in 2015, amidst a period of multiple threats of terrorist activity on Australian shores. Just the year before, on the 20th of September 2014, the spiritual leader of Islamic State issued a fatwa – a ruling on a point of Islamic law – calling followers in Australia to target the government or the public, and kill in any way they could. Three days later, 18-year-old Numan Haider stabbed two counter-terrorism officers outside the police station in Endeavour Hills, a south-eastern suburb of Melbourne. Three months later in December, Man Monis, a lone gunman with allegiance to Islamic State, held ten customers and eight employees hostage in the Lindt café in Sydney’s Martin Place, resulting in the tragic deaths of Tori Johnson and Katrina Dawson. Lindsay Hall stepped into the counter-terrorism space at the height of this threat.

Lindsay Hall

I had been in the AFP for about 20 years by that stage. Counter-terrorism had been clearly identified by the AFP Commissioner and the government as being a priority and a point of exposure to risk for policing agencies and for the government. Not everyone sees themselves in

a counterterrorism role, but personally I thought I could bring an element of levelheadedness. I thought my temperament might be well suited to counterterrorism.

Host

Like most of us, Lindsay was largely unaware of the terrorist threats on Australian soil.

Lindsay Hall

My awareness was pretty limited. I had been aware of a few investigations that had happened in Victoria where threats had been averted. But I didn't know about those in detail. I didn't know a great deal about terrorism as a concept and as a threat to the community, sort of developed that once I got in there with the training that the AFP provides, and just seeing it all unfold through experience on the job.

Host

Around 2014-2015, the rising threat that Lindsay and the Joint Counter Terrorism Team faced had much to do with targeted propaganda coming from Islamic State in Syria.

Lindsay Hall

Islamic State had become established in Syria, and they were starting to have success in a battlefield context over there. They had started to become effective with their marketing and social media publications. And it was really getting a foothold, especially with young men in Australia and around the world as it turned out.

Host

The Islamic State directives to their followers were clear.

Lindsay Hall

To encourage people to go and join them and fight in the Middle East. And if that wasn't possible, to carry out terrorist acts in their home countries.

Host

While most of us find it hard to fathom the logic, in the end, the message from Islamic State was pretty simple.

Lindsay Hall

A lot of the information that Islamic State put out, spoke of atrocities being committed to Islamic people in various places around the world. And a lot of people that I've seen were open to the idea that if their co-religionists overseas was subject to mistreatment by their governments or by Western governments operating in those locations, then it was open to them to either conduct terrorist acts here as retribution or to teach our western governments a lesson or to travel to wherever else Islamic State were active and, and join them and, and fight for them.

Host

In the detection and prevention of acts of terror on Australian soil, the Joint Counter Terrorism Team often play the long game.

Lindsay Hall

Typically, it can take months of observing a group of people or one or two people, and over that time you see the extent of their radicalisation. You see an elevation in things like their religious practice, their alienation from family. Alienation from their regular mosque. They're seeking out a more extremist group of people to pray with and to be taught by. You see an acceleration in their access to social media. You see them searching for specific types of accounts that are continually feeding this radicalisation process. Often that happens over a period of months and it's a very gradual process. You'll see a group of people encouraging each other and building each other up to start making acts in preparation for a terrorist act or try and try and get offshore, try and get overseas and join Islamic State.

Host

With Operation Kastelholm, the Joint Counter Terrorism Team did not have the luxury of time. When the men involved came to the attention of the team, they had to be ready to act and stop the threat straight away.

Lindsay Hall

The main difference with this investigation was it all happened within days. I think it was about four days between us starting to work on it and actually going overt and executing warrants and making arrests.

Host

Operation Kastelholm began with an interagency briefing. At this first meeting, there was nothing to indicate the men involved were any different to the many others the Joint Counter Terrorism Team kept an eye on.

Lindsay Hall

We took a briefing from another agency, and it was like many others that we'd had before. A group of people, one in particular, were exhibiting behaviors that were a bit out of the ordinary, and they were known to be part of the extremist community in Melbourne, but their behaviors indicated an escalation in their level of radicalisation. It indicated a move towards actually preparing for a terrorist act, but at the same time, it was like a number of other briefings that we'd had over the preceding 18 months or so where sometimes they don't go anywhere.

Host

But Operation Kastelholm was different.

Lindsay Hall

But in this case, within a few days, it was apparent that it was very real. And we had to get cracking.

Host

In the beginning, a man in his 20s had come onto the radar when he was linked with attempts to set fire to a mosque.

Lindsay Hall

Ahmed had been identified as a suspect in a fire at a mosque in Fawkner. There had been two attempts to initiate a fire at a Shia mosque over the previous few weeks, and he had been identified as someone who was a suspect in that. So, investigations started around that time as to what his movements had been in relation to those events. That was what started it all.

Host

The Joint Counter Terrorism Team is made up of officers from the AFP and Victoria Police or VicPol. Peter is a Detective Senior Sergeant with VicPol.

Peter

I undertook training relation to counter-terrorism because the opportunity arose and, it was something I pursued from there. And I became a detective sergeant at the joint counter-terrorism team.

Host

Originally, the mosque fires were investigated by Victoria Police. Local detectives passed the information on. There had been two minor fires and then one that gutted the mosque completely.

Peter

There was one in May of 2016, an attempt. Another one in November of 2016, another attempt, and then there was the final one in December of 2016 which destroyed the mosque. The initial investigations were conducted by the local criminal investigation unit, and the information at the time suggested that there was a rift amongst the board, I guess, of control of the mosque about ownership. And there was a Supreme Court action underway; civil action about who owned the property and who controlled the mosque essentially. So, I think the main focus of the investigations by the divisional detectives related to the various factions on that board, and that was perceived as the motive for the, the arson attacks.

Host

Megan was a detective with VicPol working in local Criminal Investigation Units when she decided on a different career path and joined the Joint Counter Terrorism Team – or JCTT for short.

Megan

I'd been a detective for about five or six years at a divisional CIU. So I'd been a divisional detective working on burglaries and assaults and deceptions type thing. And I was just ready to do something completely different. And at that stage, the JCTT was totally different to what I'd already done.

Host

After the final mosque fire on the 16th of December, Ahmed's name was put front row, centre, and the investigation was given the name Operation Kastelholm.

Megan

16th of December, 2016 is when I started working on it. When it came to us at the JCTT, that was kind of the date Kastelholm started. And so that was the date we all started working on the two aspects, being Kastelholm, which was an imminent threat attack, or suspicion of an imminent threat, threat attack, job, and then the fires that had occurred.

Host

Whether the arsonists realised it or not, the mosque was covered by CCTV. While much of the camera system was destroyed in the fire, investigators were able to examine what was left.

Megan

We've identified that there's a, a burnt CCTV drive that was damaged in the arson on the 11th of December. So we immediately searched for this damaged hard drive to see what could be recovered, cause now that it's possibly linked to a destruction of a mosque, there might be other things that are occurring. Once we had that footage, it really gave us a clear indication that we had three suspects, an exact time that it was destroyed, a method of how it was destroyed. So that was our first, I guess, big breakthrough that this was the exact time. We definitely had three suspects, and we had a bit of a method of how they'd got into the building and how exactly it occurred.

Host

While the CCTV images weren't clear enough for an immediate identification, they contained vital clues for the trained investigators.

Megan

It wasn't crystal clear, but you could start to get an idea of what build they were, the way they walked. Obviously one was, quite two of them were carrying, appeared to be carrying quite heavy tyres. You could tell they were a strong build. And then you had the appearance of the person and you could also see them do the graffiti. And that became quite critical as well.

Host

In the days immediately after the fire, the police were unsure if the Islamic State graffiti left on the one remaining wall of the ruined mosque was a declaration of a terrorist attack. Peter says the investigators had to find out if it was a red herring.

Peter

So even though the graffiti was on there, it was potentially perceived to be a bit of a ploy as part of the warring factions of the ownership. But it wasn't until the following Monday when we received that information to suggest that Ahmed was likely involved in the attack that we commenced our investigation into the matter and treated as being an act of terrorism.

Host

Investigators from Operation Kastelholm examined the graffiti closely. The CCTV clearly showed one of the arsonists spray painting the wall during the attack. Megan had the message deciphered.

Megan

On the graffiti, they'd written something interesting. When we started to look into it more. We'd seen, obviously the Islamic State had been written in English and an attempt to write it in Arabic had been made. But instead of saying the Islamic State it said the State of Islam, and they'd also put in Arabic, 'Remaining' and that was believed to be a reference to 'Remaining and Expanding', which was the motto being used by Islamic State and had featured in a lot of their publications and had been the title of one of their publications as well.

Host

Another VicPol member, Tim, joined the JCTT back in 2014 after working on the night 18-year-old Numan Haider stabbed the two police members in Endeavor Hills in a vicious knife attack.

Tim

I'd been a detective for a number of years, primarily working the Crime Command at Victoria Police. And I was actually on call on the night that there was an incident in Endeavor Hills where two police members were stabbed and ended up shooting a male. It was a terrorism related offence. It was very much a shock that that would happen in Victoria and particularly to people that you work with or know. And, as a result, I made the decision that I'd wanted to work in that space.

Host

Tim worked Operation Kastelholm when Ahmed became a suspect in the mosque fires.

Tim

Ahmed becomes a person of interest in it once an analysis of his movements and contacts is reviewed, that he's potentially got some involvement in the fire.

Host

When Ahmed was put under close surveillance, other troubling behaviour quickly came to light when he began making troubling purchases.

Tim

It was identified that Ahmed had been involved in some suspicious activity, including the purchase of some chemicals which could be used to make explosives.

Host

When someone is identified as a potential terror threat, there is no limit to the resources available to the Joint Counter Terrorism Team to ensure acts of terror on Australian soil are averted.

Tim

As soon as it was identified that he was potentially trying to purchase materials that could be made into explosives, the JCTT needed to put as many resources as possible into watching him and identifying if he was intending to commit any offences.

Host

And then the case against Ahmed began to build. Not only was he a suspect in the mosque fires and had made suspicious purchases, but he and several other men were tracked making middle-of-the-night trips to King Lake.

Tim

A review of his movements is conducted and some suspicious activity up around the King Lake area is identified as well. So one of the tasks that we had at that point was, okay: why are they going up to this area at one, two in the morning? What are they doing up there? Are they testing different materials? Are they firing firearms? Are they blowing up explosives? Obviously, it's highly unusual for someone to be going to that area for short periods of time in the middle of the night. So we sent a team up there to conduct, a search of the area and some suspicious sort of locations were identified, but the testing that we did at that point was inconclusive because it was an open air environment. We weren't able to a hundred percent determine if they had conducted any test explosions at that point. But all these things started to build a picture that these people were a real concern and we needed to be monitoring them as closely as possible.

Host

When members from the Joint Counter Terrorism Team put Ahmed under close observation, three other men were seen with him.

Lindsay Hall

We had our capabilities in place to ensure we had good coverage of him. And from there, we noted that there were three people that he was particularly close with, that he was in regular contact with.

Host

The police identified the three men, all in their early 20s. They too came under the surveillance of the Joint Counter Terrorism Team.

As the senior investigating officer, Tim was in charge of a multi-faceted approach to the investigation of Ahmed and the three other men. He had to take into account managing the risk they posed, managing the investigation, and also looking back to gather evidence of what the men had already done.

Tim

I was the senior investigating officer so I was trying to identify different avenues inquiry in consultation with my management. Managing the risk is probably the primary consideration. This individual or the syndicate of people are potentially planning an act of terrorism. So, we have to put significant resources into making sure that they can't do that. We've got a team investigating things that have already occurred, such as the fire at the mosque and seeing if we can identify any avenues of inquiry in any way to disrupt the syndicate by arresting them for something that we've already done. And we're also looking at things like: How many other materials have this group purchased? In early December, I think it was Islamic State actually had some propaganda published where they talked about how easy it is to make TATP, which is a highly volatile explosive. But we needed to actually work out how much material have they got? Therefore, how big an explosive device could they potentially make? And then we've

also gotta try to have a team working, on the investigation moving forward and looking at getting warrants for telephone intercepts, listening devices, tracking devices, optical devices, whatever we can to monitor these people closely to make sure they can't do anything.

Host

During their close monitoring of the four men, the Joint Counter Terrorism Team intercepted a phone call between Ahmed and one of the other men, telling him they were going into the city.

Tim

Ahmed had said to him, 'I don't care what you've got on. You need to cancel it. This is more important than anything else.' For us that was really concerning because the assessment was the most important thing for these people is their religious beliefs. And their religious beliefs were very extreme and potentially involved hurting people that didn't hold the same beliefs as them. So, at that point we had very close surveillance coverage on them. We had tactical teams briefed and, within very close proximity. And we also utilised a number of cameras in other means to monitor Ahmed and his associates when they travelled into the city.

Host

A major incident room had been set up so the team could monitor the movements of the four men remotely as they arrived in the city and headed straight to Melbourne's Federation Square. For AFP detective Lindsay Hall, it was concerning to see the men pointing at some of Melbourne's most iconic landmarks.

Lindsay Hall

It was really worrying to us to see them basically sitting on the steps at Federation Square, motioning towards the cathedral that's just across the road from there, and Flinders Street Station, Young and Jackson's Hotel on the other corner, and then they're talking in a group and moving around, walking around Federation Square.

Host

The Joint Counter Terrorism Team monitored the movements of the men from the CCTV cameras overlooking Federation Square. As the four men moved around, Lindsay was conscious of all the other people going about their regular activities.

Lindsay Hal

And what we were able to watch more or less live was the CCTV from Federation Square. And it was the 20th of December when they went there, it was sort of a, a warm summer's night. There were kids and families everywhere that night.

Host

And then one of the men did something to move Operation Kastelholm from surveillance to something much more; it suggested these men posed a clear threat to the safety of people in the CBD.

Lindsay Hall

And then quite clearly, one of them, made a chopping motion that could only have been like a demonstration of hitting someone with a large knife or a machete. So, the way they moved, it became clear to us that it was a reconnaissance exercise in preparation for a terrorist act. It really couldn't have been anything else. So that, taken with everything else we knew about them, really heightened things for us and, and made us realise that we were facing a real threat of an act of terrorism in Melbourne.

Host

Tim from VicPol was also in the surveillance room. He too witnessed the chilling chopping motion.

Tim

It was quite obvious that with his right hand, a swinging or a chopping sort of motion to the neck of one of the other members of the group. There was four of them at that point, standing around in a fairly tight circle talking, and it was a slashing or a chopping sort of motion with his right hand to the neck of one of the other people that he was talking to, which we obviously interpreted that would be some that they were discussing a knife attack.

Host

The footage of the four men, milling about in the crowds of Christmas shoppers in Federation Square was confronting. When he was watching, Lindsay had one predominant reaction.

Lindsay Hall

I think the main feeling for me was dread. And you start to wonder, how far along they are in terms of their planning. The assumption was that there would be a process of obtaining weapons, potentially making explosives – because that was the indication that we got, that there would be explosive devices used. And there would be a build up to that, but then you consider that it was almost Christmas and that would be a prime time to move towards a terrorist act if they were ready to proceed that way.

Host

These men were planning a Christmas attack in the heart of Melbourne's CBD, and a conversation picked up by investigators confirmed this. Tim says it also suggested the men planned to make a suicide vest as part of their attack.

Tim

One of them had said, 'We need to hurry up. Christmas is this Friday,' or words to that effect. And the conversation revolved around if they wanted to make an explosive vest. They needed to hurry up and do it and get going. And there was a mention about pooling their money and just going and getting as much as they could.

Host

Once the four men had done their reconnaissance of Federation Square, the Joint Counter Terrorism Team had to be in a position to intervene should the group go back into the city. The problem of course was that the law enforcement officers didn't know how far the men were in their planning. They didn't seem to have a huge store of weapons, but experience had taught

Lindsay and the team that you didn't need much to perform an act of terrorism because unsophisticated attacks were becoming more common around the world.

Lindsay Hall

All that you needed for a terrorist attack was basically a knife of some sort and a mobile phone, so you could form the idea in your head to do something and be doing it within minutes once you'd formed the commitment to the exercise. They may not have had much, but they wouldn't have needed much to carry out a really effective terrorist act. Remembering that the effectiveness is not necessarily in the scale – and this could have been quite large scale – but it's more the effect that it has in terrorising the community. That's what terrorism is.

Host

Even though the four young men stood out in Federation Square with their long beards and pointing at landmarks and their chopping motions, no one reported them to the authorities. Tim said it was obvious from the surveillance footage that people around them were uncomfortable.

Tim

They were clearly getting some attention from other people that looked either curious or even concerned around potentially what they were discussing, but no one actually ever contacted the police or Crime Stoppers or the National Security Hotline, but it was quite obvious from the camera footage, that people were curious or concerned about what they were saying.

Host

The day after the Federation Square reconnaissance, Ahmed continued shopping for things he needed for the terrorist act.

Lindsay Hall

The following day, the 21st of December, Ahmed was seen going to the Bunnings store. And he purchased a fairly large supply of detonators for nail guns. These things are kept in a locked safe at the store. They're not out on the shelves or anything like that so the staff know that there's an element of danger attached to them. So, Ahmed went in and bought a large number, larger than you would normally buy in one go. And the staff there recognised that that was out of the ordinary and before the purchase was complete, one of the staff members had made their way out to the car park to follow him back to his car to make a note of the registration number and report it to police because they could see that it was out of the ordinary and potentially dangerous.

Host

Because Ahmed was under close surveillance, as soon as he cleared the store, officers approached the two employees who served him, to ask what they'd observed. Tim was impressed with their astute reading of what had just occurred.

Tim

The staff at Bunnings actually recognised that his behaviour was suspicious to the point where one of them went out and got his registration and when we approached them, their intention was to obviously report this activity because they were so concerned by his behaviour and they didn't believe that what he was buying was for the legitimate purposes. So, fantastic

observation skills, but also they were trusting their instincts, and were prepared to do something about it when they suspected that something was not right.

Host

Just a couple of days into Operation Kastelholm, there came a point where Joint Counter Terrorism officers felt they couldn't guarantee the safety of the community while the four men were on the streets.

Lindsay Hall

When Ahmed was observed going to Bunnings and buying the cartridges for the nail guns, that was the point where any doubt about their intentions to create explosive devices of some sort was completely gone. Taken with what we considered to be the reconnaissance mission the night before into Federation Square, from there we just went as quickly as we could. We just couldn't guarantee the safety of the community for more than a few days without taking action.

Host

With Christmas just days away, Operation Kastelholm officers were running out of time. Tim explains that the police command were keen for the overt – or arrest – phase to begin.

Tim

Christmas was only a number of days away. At that point, we were told, 'You've got 36 hours to go into resolution. And then the following day, after Ahmed purchased some more materials, that timeline was brought forward and we went into resolution 12 hours earlier than that. So I think effectively 24 hours earlier.

Host

It is not enough for the Joint Counter Terrorism Team to avert an act of terror. They also have to gather enough evidence to charge their suspects with Acts in Preparation and make a case so that those who do this in Australia face a hefty jail sentence. The combined weight of evidence in Operation Kastelholm along with the chilling video of the men pointing to landmarks in Federation Square meant it was time to call in the troops.

Lindsay Hall

Once it was reported up that Ahmed had had made that purchase at Bunnings, that they'd clearly done a reconnaissance of Federation Square, then it was that call that as soon as possible, we would roll out and it end up being the next day. There would've been about 500 people deployed on the resolution phase of that investigation.

Host

Those 500 people were from across the AFP and Victoria Police and included personnel from the Special Operations Group and the Critical Incident Response Team. When there was evidence that the suspects were making explosive devices, these tactical experts were sent in first.

Lindsay Hall

We had forensics members from all over the country. We had Victoria Police members from pretty much all of the inner-city commands. A really large majority of the people that work here were deployed on this job for the resolution phase.

Host

Special Operations Group tactical members captured Ahmed and two of the men in a box manoeuvre while their car was stopped at traffic lights. Surveillance footage showed the car waiting at traffic lights, then suddenly other cars raced into the sides, front and back, trapping the young men. The fourth man was arrested in a separate raid on his home. Once all the men were taken into custody, the investigation began in earnest. All their homes were searched and even more evidence was found, showing the extent of their Acts in Preparation to commit an act of terrorism in Melbourne.

One of the many aspects that made Operation Kastelholm so unusual was that because of the urgent nature of the arrests, a lot of information came to light after the four men were safely behind bars. It wasn't just explosives, which were bad enough. They had also purchased machetes in preparation for the attack on Federation Square.

Lindsay Hall

We didn't know about the machetes until afterwards, after the arrest had been made. So they bought one each. They cost about \$50 each, \$40, \$50 each, I think.

Host

The place where one of the men lived had CCTV out the front of it. Peter was able to use the evidence on the camera for the fire investigation too.

Peter

He was renting a bungalow at the rear of a house and the owner had CCTV cameras, so him coming and going on the night of the fire, collecting a spray can, which was depicted on footage of him going to a stash of paint, picking up a spray can, and then walking back down the driveway and getting in his car. These were ultimately little pieces of the puzzle. So that was really key evidence because it showed him walking up and down his driveways and, you know, we were able to time and date stamp, when it was that he was doing that. And on the night of the fire, where the graffiti was painted, there's footage of him retrieving a spray can essentially from his driveway and then getting back in his car and driving off. And then shortly thereafter, the mosque gets destroyed and there's a male depicted graffitiing in the footage from the mosque. One occasion, he was carrying a machete.

Host

When the Joint Counter Terrorism officers watched footage of one of the men carrying the dangerous looking machetes inside from his car, it was another reminder for Lindsay that these could have been used to attack the citizens of Melbourne in Federation Square.

Lindsay Hall

It was visible on the CCTV the packaging which was in the shape of a really big knife, he's taking that out of the car and walking up the driveway with it to put it in the bin. So, yeah, terrifying looking things, and they were recovered and luckily weren't used.

Host

Peter used the same CCTV source to match with the footage retrieved from the mosque arson attack.

Peter

The CCTV of them walking into the mosque to destroy it, one of the males was carry a large jerry can, and when we did the search warrant at Ahmed house on the 23rd of December, we found a jerry can, in his front yard essentially, which was further evidence to link him to being the one that was the one that was carrying the jerry can.

Host

Among so many other worrying pieces of evidence, Lindsay and the JCTT also found out that two of the men had made attempts to get firearms licences. But there were too many hoops to jump through, and they couldn't do it in time.

Lindsay Hall

Fortunately, there's a fairly rigorous process to go through to, to get to that stage, but both of them had, downloaded from the internet, the application forms, and moved to the next step, which was contacting the police to get on a firearms handling course. They had made definite steps towards trying to obtain firearms licenses and Ahmed had searched on the internet, different types of firearms as well for potential purchases.

Host

The kinds of 'acts in preparation' that the four young men made were in line with the videos that Islamic State posted on encrypted platforms. The videos encouraged followers to use weapons such as knives and explosive devices, and to record the attack and share the video.

Lindsay Hall

We'd sort of gotten across Facebook and Twitter and the larger social media platforms and been able to inform those companies that their platforms were being used to disseminate this propaganda. They were taking it down as soon as it would go up.

Host

Members of Operation Kastelholm were allocated suspects to interview. Lindsay interviewed one of the men.

Lindsay Hall

I spent quite a few hours with him that night and into the next morning. So, he was again, just a normal guy. He was employed as a painter at the time, so, he'd been able to maintain regular employment at that. I have no doubt that if the group had progressed to a terrorist attack, he would've, he would've been involved. He would've joined them.

Host

Detective Leading Senior Constable Andie Butler was allocated one of the men to charge and interview. With thirty years of policing under her belt, at both state and federal levels, the interview with Ibbey, as she calls him, was like nothing she had ever experienced.

Andie Butler

I knew on the day that I would be arresting and interviewing Ibby. It would be a technical arrest coz he would've been arrested by SOG and somebody else out at the scene.

Host

Even though terror suspects are arrested by tactical teams, as the official arresting officer, Andie travelled from the arrest location with him in the back seat of the car. The 22-year-old young man was personable.

Andie Butler

When I met him and obviously I'd spent a fair bit of time prior to interview coz I was with him, we were driving in and things like that. He was a really affable guy who, family, his wife had just had a baby, he loved his baby, he loved his wife, he was going to school. It's just the incongruity of what an average guy that he seemed to be, sort of knowing in your head that he was part of this possible planning for these terrible things that we thought, that were gonna happen.

Host

At the AFP offices, Ibby was put into an interview room. While he had been affable on the car ride into town, Andie had no idea whether he would open up in the interview or 'no comment' his way through. It could go either way. Once they all settled into their places, Andie and her partner had to begin by getting a baseline for his degree of honesty. They started with questions about his family. Right from the start of the interview, Andie felt he wasn't giving a full and frank account.

Andie Butler

I didn't think he was telling us everything. I certainly believed he was lying at the start of that because obviously we had an amount of knowledge about what had gone on and what his sort of beliefs were.

Host

Andie wanted to understand the origins of Ibby's radicalisation.

Andie Butler

He obviously had an idea of the evidence that we would have, and he just essentially said, 'These are my beliefs.' He seemed quite proud about telling us about these beliefs and, you know, and how he felt about it and how he felt about what was going on, and how his people were being treated in the Islamic State.

Host

Andie had a lot of theoretical knowledge of radicalisation but still found it fascinating to see a fervent young man embody the process. Even though he was Melbourne born and bred, his reference to what was being done to 'his' people demonstrated he had re-aligned his affinities so that the people he grew up with were now 'the enemy'.

Andie Butler

And you're sitting and you're thinking, what makes people become radicalised? It was very interesting in a lot of ways to know exactly what his thought process was and exactly what they did. Because we do a lot of reading about it and a lot of learning about it in counter terrorism, but to sort of be sitting there in an interview doing a real-life experience was sort of huge when you think about it after. It's sort of life changing really.

Host

He believed that Sharia law should be instituted in Australia, so that all the people would fall under a contract to live among Muslims in peace. It was his belief that whoever did not sign the contract should leave the country or be executed.

The AFP team were granted an extension to carry the interview over to the next day. It wasn't long before Ibbby told them that he didn't want them to ask him any more questions; rather, he wanted to tell the story himself.

He talked about wanting to make his mark. Andie was interested that he had decided to make his mark on Australian soil rather than in becoming a fighter overseas.

Andie Butler

They didn't have passports, so they had not done that. I suppose you can't even really say he was frustrated by not being able to travel because he'd never tried to get a passport or certainly didn't have a passport to travel out. And he'd decided that instead of going to fight with Islamic State that he was gonna do something on Australian soil, and certainly wanted it to be big and a lot of people dying so that Australians would learn their lesson.

Host

It was disturbing for Andie to hear the casual way Ibbby talked about blowing up Australians, and killing police officers, including her. The interview required all of her concentration; it wasn't until afterwards that the chilling discussion hit home.

Andie Butler

And he was laughing about that while he was telling us all about it And he was gonna kill police officers and get their guns so that they could kill as many people as possible. Just no remorse in terms of the taking of life or certainly the talking about the taking of life, I didn't feel it at the time. I didn't feel really disturbed at the time, but certainly after the interview I felt very disturbed, you know, it was quite emotional.

Host

What does Andie think of their motivation?

Andie Butler

They just wanted people to fear Islamic State, didn't they? I think that they were aware that people were certainly frightened of them, but that's the point of terrorism is to make people as frightened as possible, isn't it?

Host

After the arrests, digital forensics officers discovered violent Islamic State propaganda. While ultimately, the trial judge would decide what could be shown in court and what wouldn't be shown, Lindsay wanted the jury to at least see some of it because its incredible violence showed how the men were desensitising themselves to perform similar acts of violence.

Lindsay Hall

When we made the arrests and executed search warrants, the propaganda that they had, it often is intense violence and we wanted to play it in the prosecution at court, some of it at least, to give the jury a taste of what these people had deliberately exposed themselves to. And it has the purpose of desensitising themselves to the violence. And it comes with the message from Islamic State that you might find it unpleasant, it might not be what you'd normally do, but it's the obligation of the supporters of Islamic State around the world to carry out acts of terrorism.

Host

There were other disturbing materials that the AFP found. There were Islamic State videos that suggested places to target around Melbourne.

Lindsay Hall

That was something else that we learned afterwards. It was a publication from Islamic State was the usual messages about coming to Syria and joining, or if you weren't able to, carry out attacks at home. And it specifically mentioned and had photos of, Melbourne Airport and St Paul's Cathedral, which is, when you trace it back to what these guys were actually intending to do, they were reading from that material.

Host

Jobs like Operation Kastelholm give the Joint Counter Terrorism officers a chance to see how young men like Ahmed and his three co-conspirators were radicalised. An examination of the propaganda showed it was designed to appeal to a broad range of young men.

Lindsay Hall

The propaganda at that time had a broad focus. Some of it was about, going to Islamic State and living under their conditions, living as a community with families and so forth, with the purest Islamic jurisprudence, I guess, that you could have in the world at that time. Other aspects of it were about the suffering that Muslims were undergoing in other places. Another aspect was the actual battlefield, trying to draw people to go as fighters and get involved in that side of things. So in that way they attracted a broad range of people. And we're aware of some people that have gone overseas and worked in the medical field, in places under Islamic State control. A reasonable number of women have gone and raised families over there, married fighters, and a number of men have gone over as fighters themselves, and become married since they've been over there or taken their families over, with the hope of forming this community under Islamic State control. And I think a lot of that sort of propaganda glossed over the atrocities that were committed in the name of Islamic State.

Host

Both Lindsay and Megan were surprised at the quality and reach of the propaganda materials and its effect on people born in Australia.

Lindsay Hall

We used to see these incredibly high-quality videos. It looked like it was, professionally produced. They were their own sort of command within the Islamic State governance structure that was responsible for producing this stuff.

Megan

They were producing some really high-quality, high-level publications, which they were translating into all languages. They appeared to have a wide reach, and that they had essentially managed to reach out to people who had been, some of them had been born here in Melbourne, or born here in Australia, and influenced them to carry out attacks in Australia, if not travel. So just their ability to put forward high-level publications and high-level propaganda that convinced Australian-born residents that that was a good idea. In hindsight, it's a little bit unbelievable that it happened, but that's what they were doing. Melbourne featured in one of their videos. They are high quality, incredibly disturbing, distressing, but they're high-quality publications.

Host

It was clear to the investigators that the propaganda had the desired effect on Ibbotson – he used it to justify the actions he'd been planning to take.

Lindsay Hall

In his mind that the Australian government was participating in military action in Islamic countries that were resulting in the deaths of Muslims. So therefore, he was justified in carrying out acts of murder here. That was perfectly acceptable to him in his mind at that time. That was what he was, uh, entitled to do. And in fact obligated to do.

Host

When it came to trial, Ibbotson pleaded guilty. It was no surprise to the officers of Operation Kastelholm. From the time he was arrested, he had been willing to talk about what he had done.

Lindsay Hall

I think he formed in his mind that we had a very good knowledge of what they'd been up to. We did know a fair bit, but he thought we knew everything. So his strategy was basically that if he told us everything, it would make it easier on him and his co-offenders. So that's what he did, and he told us that, he had established himself as the leader of the group, gathered the others around him to carry out a terrorist attack in the centre of Melbourne to bring as much terror to the community as he could.

Host

Lindsay spoke to Ibbotson in jail. It was haunting to see the polite young man describe the acts of terror he had wanted to commit.

Lindsay Hall

It was in the middle of the court process, probably 18 months or longer down the track. So we visited him in, prison, and we got him to go through his version of events again. He's quite

well spoken. He was polite. It was something I think of often is, we had to stop for him to have his lunch at one stage, and when he came back, he might have eaten too quickly or whatever, and he sort of belched a bit and excused himself, like, but then before that, he'd been telling us about his plans to get a group together and carry out a mass casualty event in Federation Square at Christmas.

Host

When it came time for the men to go to trial, Iby was the only one to enter a plea of guilty. Detective Leading Senior Constable Andie Butler saw this as his way of following his beliefs to the end.

Andie Butler

At the end of the day, Iby was someone who had his beliefs and was prepared to follow through with those beliefs. And then did an interview where he said he believed in those beliefs and then, and that's why he was gonna do it. And then he plead guilty at court saying he was gonna do it.

Host

Iby's guilty plea couldn't be reported in the media because it may have affected the outcome of the other three on trial.

Lindsay Hall

He pleaded guilty and the other three contested the charges, so they went to a full trial. So, his plea of guilty, meant that because he hadn't been sentenced yet, and a judge was gonna have to preside over that. The fact of his guilty plea couldn't be communicated to the jury in the trial of the other three. Cause that might influence them to think: *well, if he's guilty, the rest of them are too*. In the end, he gave evidence in the trial.

Host

With Iby pleading guilty, along with the wealth of evidence found by the JCTT, the case against the others was strong. When the evidence proves you make acts in preparation of a terror attack, the full force of the law will come down on you. All four men were found guilty for their involvement in the Federation Square terror plot, and for Ahmed and one of the others, 'engaging in a terrorist act' for the Mosque arson. The court was filled with friends and relatives of the men. Their reaction was like nothing detectives Megan and Peter had ever seen before.

Megan and Peter

Megan: The only thing that I'd never ever seen before that happened with this trial was the verdict. When the jury came back with a guilty verdict, the accused and some family members had an enormous outburst in the courts. I'd never seen anything like it.

Peter: It was a confronting experience even for us as police. You're sitting in a very confined Supreme Court courtroom with pretty much minimal security between the lawyers and the accused and the police and the jurors. Their families were very angry; screaming and wailing and that, that sort of stuff.

Megan: One of them accused the jury of destroying their life and separating them from their parents and all that kind of stuff. The outburst was something I'd never seen before and I'd never actually seen the jury have to be removed either for possible safety reasons. That was quite an unusual and yeah, confronting thing to see jury members who do this because they're obligated to do it. And then for them to, I guess, have that experience, it would've been incredibly distressing for them, I'd imagine. And you could see some of them were very distressed by it.

Host

The sentencing hearing would be held the following year, in 2019. After the outbursts in the court following the guilty verdict, Peter remembers a different courtroom set up for the sentencing.

Peter

The sentencing and the plea was at a later date I feel like potentially they kept the main floor of the court where the accused were to a bare minimum, and then everyone else sort of had to be up in their gallery, which meant you couldn't access the jurors or the police or the lawyers that were down in the courtroom.

Host

The entire legal process put several years between the four men and their planning a terrorist attack in the heart of Melbourne. Lindsay remembers them saying it had given them time to reflect.

Lindsay Hall

Their evidence in their sentencing hearing was the first chance we got to really hear them speak about their motivations and what their intentions were, that sort of thing. So, they admitted to the charges after they'd been found guilty by the jury. And part of their evidence was that, despite the fact that they'd pleaded guilty to acts in preparation for this terrorist act that was, motivated by support for Islamic State, their position some years down the track was that they had renounced that support for Islamic State, and they no longer agreed that a terrorist attack was something that their ideology supported. So, they hadn't undergone any formal de-radicalisation processes, but that was their evidence, that they were no longer subject to that ideology or were no longer of that belief.

Host

At the sentencing hearing, Ahmed and his co-accused were forthcoming about their trips to the King Lake area which the JCTT always suspected were for testing improvised explosive devices.

Lindsay Hall

We were aware of the trips that they'd made, and they confirmed that in their sentencing hearings, that they'd gone up there to test explosive devices. So again, while we suspected that was what they were doing, constructing and testing, that that was the process that they were on, we didn't really know how far advanced they were, but I guess every time you test an

explosive device and it doesn't work, then you know something more for the next time you try and you're bound to be closer to being successful.

Host

For the attack on the mosque and their acts in preparation of an attack on Federation Square, Ahmed and one of his co-accused, both received 38 years with a non-parole period of 28 and a half years. One of the other men was sentenced to 22 years imprisonment with a non-parole period of 16 years for his acts in preparation of the attack on Federation Square. Ibbby was sentenced to 24 years imprisonment with a non-parole period of 20 years for the same charge.

For Megan, who had personally charged one of the offenders, it was the biggest sentence of anyone she'd ever charged.

Megan

That's absolutely the biggest sentence I've ever received for any of my charges. It was unbelievable. It was higher than I was anticipating. It was such a good way to resolve all the work, because this was 2019 that all this got finalised and we'd been working on this since 16th of December 2016, pretty much nonstop. So, it'd been a huge amount of work and a huge amount of resources going to this, so it was really satisfying that it all came together.

Host

For Lindsay Hall, the sentences reflect the seriousness of the attack that would have been carried out, had the Joint Counter Terrorism Team not stopped it.

Lindsay Hall

The sentences that were handed down reflect the evidence that they were close, potentially within days of carrying out a terrorist attack that had the potential to have multiple people killed if they went through with it. A development of the legal system in Victoria over time that the community doesn't have any appetite for that sort of act to be carried out. It acknowledges the extent of the threat from external influences like Islamic State on the community here and how insidious that can be. So those sentences reflect all of those things. It was one of those times where you think this adequately reflects what was potentially going to happen, what we saw, and it feels like the work that we put into it was vindicated.

Host

So what lessons can we learn from Operation Kastelholm? When Ahmed went into the Bunnings store, the two employees serving him became suspicious, both with the way he was acting and the items he purchased. They followed him out to his car and took down his registration so they could report him. Their information was important to police. But while some bystanders in Federation Square were clearly uncomfortable with the men pointing and making chopping motions, no one reported the behaviour to police. If you witness behaviour like this that makes you uncomfortable, Tim says the best thing you can do is report it.

Tim

If you see something that you suspect isn't right, there's a reason for that, and you can report that via the National Security Hotline or Crime Stoppers. It's completely anonymous, and that information will be provided to the relevant agencies, and they will investigate it.

Host

In the aftermath of the court hearings and sentencing, Tim regards Operation Kastelholm as one of his most satisfying cases.

Tim

It's probably the most satisfying area I've worked in because I think everyone in the community actually appreciates the fact that you're just trying to keep them safe. So, it's a very rewarding place to work.

Host

After the fast arrest, and then the years it took from trial to conviction to sentencing, Lindsay and the Joint Counter Terrorism Team were pleased with the success of Operation Kastelholm.

Lindsay Hall

It's not something you can express at court. You have to be obviously respectful there and respectful of these people's families and so forth and the community. But yeah, behind closed doors, there was a great atmosphere. Great to be part of.

Host

But along with the joy of a good sentence and the community being protected by those who wanted to cause it harm, Lindsay is always conscious of the toll this took on the families of the young men. Despite their outburst in court, the families were deeply affected by what happened.

Lindsay Hall

We saw quite a few of their, family members come to court throughout the, throughout the trial and so forth. and yeah, it was obvious that, those families will never been the same again. There were children growing up with their parents in prison now. Marriages that, have been broken up by it. Elderly people who relied on these people for a certain amount of care, no longer have that. It's a terrible shame for the families involved. Some of them would've had some idea about the level of their radicalisation. But the sum of it is that the families that have really been pulled apart by what happened.

Host

Despite the excellent result in Operation Kastelholm, Detective Leading Senior Constable Andie Butler knows that there are still things to worry about.

Andie Butler

At the end of the day, we got a good result in terms of court, saving the Victorian people and locking up four bad guys coz I think that, especially in in counter-terrorism, you go home every night thinking, have you done enough? Have you done enough?

Host

Rest assured, Andie; with stopping an attack on the heart of Melbourne's CBD, and the locking up of the four men who intended to do this, you and the officers of Operation Kastelholm had certainly done enough.

If you are interested in learning more about the AFP's counter terrorism capability, including how Lindsay and Andie played their part in foiling this Melbourne CBD terror plot, visit a-f-p-dot-gov-dot-a-u

Host (outro)

The AFP is all about protecting Australians and Australia's way of life.

Stay tuned for our next instalment of Crime Interrupted as we take you behind the scenes of how the AFP took down a childcare fraud network costing Australian taxpayers millions of dollars.