

Operation Collage

Host – introduction

The Australian Federal Police – or AFP for short – is Australia’s national policing agency. Its aim? To – outsmart serious crime with intelligent action. Officers from the AFP work with local, national, and international agencies to combat serious criminal threats. Their work includes counter terrorism, serious organised crime, human trafficking, cybercrime, fraud, and child exploitation. The AFP exists to disrupt major criminal operations. In 2020-21, they did that over 400 times. They seized 38 tonnes of illicit drugs and precursors, and assisted overseas police services in seizing 19 tonnes of drugs. The AFP charged 235 people with child exploitation, and charged 25 people following terrorism investigations.

The Australian Federal Police is opening its doors to give you a glimpse of how their officers investigate the most serious of crimes and stay one step ahead, to keep Australia safe.

Host

Law enforcement agencies around the world share intelligence with their international partners. In the case of Operation Collage, the AFP received intel about a huge shipment of drugs headed to Australian shores from Ecuador. In South America, Ecuador borders Columbia which produces over 40% of the world’s cocaine. Cocaine produced at \$1,500 per kilo in jungle labs can be sold on the streets of the US for as much as \$50,000 a kilo. These profits are large enough for its producers to take big risks in sending it to other countries.

What cocaine users probably don’t realise is its production has a huge environmental impact with deforestation, carbon emissions, and the release of toxins into local water supplies. AFP Detective Inspector Luke Wilson wonders if cocaine users take that into consideration.

Luke Wilson

I think one of the untold and unthought of aspects of the drug trade is the environmental harm that comes with it. These source countries in South America where cocaine is produced. The damage to the environment through chemical waste dumping and land clearing, and pollution of waterways is quite staggering. I sometimes think the drug user in Australia just conveniently ignores that their cocaine is not organically manufactured and safe to the environment and I find that quite concerning. If no other threat, no other harm you consider from it, there is a very severe environmental harm associated with this trade.

Host

Detective Inspector Dave Craft at the AFP agrees.

Dave Craft

Even if you were to go and Google the cocaine manufacturing process and look at some of the remote jungle labs and locations where the product is made from coca. There’s a vast array of

chemicals and everything else that go into that process to break it down to get it to that final brick powder product. Gasoline for instance is used in that process. Because of the remote locations, because of the sanitary conditions of literally working in the jungle, you can imagine some of the things that would, get mixed up in any manufacturing process.

Host

The importation of drugs to Australian shores is not surprising since there is a strong demand. Dave has watched this demand change over the years.

Dave Craft

Gone are the days of cocaine being an affluent drug. It was often really displayed that way in movies and television shows as an elitist drug, but those days are definitely gone. Cocaine is now more of a mainstream drug that is utilised by people in all walks of life, all demographics, all ages. That's really come about because of the prevalence of the drug, mainly, but also because of our high disposable income, particularly throughout the last ten years. It's been influenced by the building industry boom, the mining industry, with tradies, plumbers, your builders, all those kinds of mainstream people that have high disposable income are now exposed to that opportunity to utilise that drug if they so choose.

Host

The cocaine user is removed from the processes the drugs they buy go through.

Dave Craft

Each step along the way, if a kilo of cocaine was to come into Australia, the recipient of that cocaine would cut it down, with another product. It could be anything as far as creatine, aspirin, or even laxatives. It's something that is purely driven by profit. So they want to make more money. They want to make more product out of what they get, so the purity levels will drop obviously the more the substances are cut and mixed. It really shows the dangers that are involved for users; they don't know what the purity level is, and they don't know what it's been cut with. They then potentially are exposed to substances that they're not knowingly taking. And ultimately, the higher the purity, the more risk there is of death. It's no secret that a high purity of cocaine can lead to a heart attack or cardiac arrest.

Host

The AFP will always try and protect Australia from serious and organised crime. Drugs are a big part of this. For Luke, Operation Collage began when intel was received that a boatload of cocaine was headed for Australian shores.

Luke Wilson

It was the 7th of October 2010. I was a fairly junior investigator and I remember receiving a piece of information from a foreign law enforcement agency that there was a vessel on its way from South America en route to the Australian east coast. And that vessel, although it wasn't identified, was said to be carrying a large amount of border-controlled drugs. And it was estimated that it was going to arrive on the Australian east coast about the 8th of October 2010.

So we effectively received the information a day before it was due to arrive within close vicinity of the Australian coastline.

Host

Intelligence suggested the vessel could be carrying up to half a tonne of cocaine. If this was true, and the Australian team could intercept it, the seizure would be one of the largest to date.

Luke Wilson

It was a bit of a Herculean task really for our colleagues in the Australian Customs Service or the Border Protection Service back in those days to basically take this very raw information we received and conduct a very systematic approach of scanning the Australian coastline, looking for vessels that match the criteria. We knew that there would be a mother vessel travelling across the Pacific towards the Australian coastline. And we understood that a daughter vessel would leave the Australian coastline to rendezvous at sea. But effectively that was the extent of the information. So for them to be able to deploy all of their maritime and aerial surveillance capabilities and to narrow what is effectively an entire ocean worth of vessels down to two vessels of interest was quite remarkable and quite a testament to their capabilities.

Host

When all the agencies were called on board for Operation Collage, the team had to predict where the transfer of drugs would take place. There's a myth that if it takes place in international waters, Australian law enforcement can't intervene.

Luke Wilson

The Australian Economic Exclusion Zone extends from the coastline of Australia to 200 nautical miles out from the coast. And that's effectively Australia's territorial waters out to that distance. There's a view by transnational organised crime groups that if they were to conduct their operations and their handover of drugs beyond that 200 nautical mile limit, that they're outside the Australian government's ability to interdict or stop that offence from occurring. It's quite clear in international maritime law, that the Australian government and all governments for that matter have the ability to prosecute and chase vessels into what is effectively international waters where they've contravened an Australian law. And in the case of a mother daughter ship arrangement where the drugs are transferred from the mother ship to the daughter ship, then that mother ship is effectively able to be chased and brought back to Australia and the crew prosecuted for an offence against Australian law, despite the fact that they committed their offence in international waters.

Host

Even though the mid-ocean transfer of drugs from one vessel to another is hard to pinpoint, certain conclusions can be made when a vessel sails so far out in treacherous conditions.

Luke Wilson

It's certainly difficult to conduct surveillance in the maritime domain because effectively you've got two vessels in the middle of the ocean, and it's difficult to be able to maintain an

aerial platform surveilling that. To be able to monitor that sort of exchange at sea and we are relying on monitoring the movements of those vessels and certainly it would be suspicious for a vessel to sail that far out of the Australian coastline in terrible weather as it was at that time, to immediately turn around and return. Assumptions can be made from that path or that route that it's taken out at sea.

Host

Once the interception point was identified, Leigh Forsyth, Manager of Enforcement Operations with Australian Customs and Border Protection, was asked to run the Customs side of it.

Leigh Forsyth

I was in Canberra at the time and I was just called in and advised that there was a mother vessel on its way, carrying a large quantity of cocaine and that there was a daughter vessel, which is the vessel heading out from Australian waters. The information was that that they believed, had already left. And it was believed to have possibly left from Port Macquarie. The other information that was to hand was a rough rendezvous location about 400 mile off the beach. Clearly, the time we got the information it was pretty time-critical to get moving because that daughter vessel had already left port and was on its way out. The fact that it was that far off the coast did give us plenty of lead-in time, but we still had to get moving pretty well straight away.

Host

Because the daughter vessel had left from Port Macquarie, Leigh and the team expected it would return to Port Macquarie after the rendezvous at sea to collect the cocaine from the mother vessel.

Leigh Forsyth

With the information that the daughter vessel had left Port Macquarie, there was no information to suggest that it would return to any other coastal location. So we were of the view that we would be aiming to set up at Port Macquarie for its return. One thing that we're very mindful of with these sorts of operations is you need that maritime presence virtually circling the wagon. So we needed a boat to the north and a boat to the south that could hopefully cut off any escapes from the vessel. If it was heading north or going south, we'd have it pretty well covered. We had two boats that were at that time stationed in Cairns, both of which were deployed to the operation. One was the Ocean Protector, which was a large vessel that was primarily used for southern ocean work. That was the vessel that we used to deploy out to where the mother vessel was, maintain a watch on that. And the other one was a Customs vessel, which was the Botany Bay. When we advised then that the daughter vessel would probably come back to Port Macquarie, the time and space worked out that had it deployed straight away, it probably wouldn't get to Port Macquarie in time to cut the daughter vessel off. So we deployed it anyway and just said, 'Get down there in case the situation changes.' But what it did do then was it left us a vessel shy of the southern aspects of the job.

Host

With the Ocean Protector watching the mother vessel and the Botany Bay heading down from the north, Leigh needed to organise a vessel to come up from the south.

Leigh Forsyth

Straight away I thought of Joe. Joe and I had worked together on a lot of exercises, boarding commercial and small craft vessels at sea. And so he was a logical choice to go to. So I gave him a ring. Yeah, it was probably about 10 o'clock that night. He's the type of operator, he's just so keen for the fight. I didn't have to give him much of a briefing, just simply to say that it was a live job, not an exercise. We needed a boat with a capability. And he said, 'When do you need it by?'

Host

Superintendent Joe McNulty is the Commander of the New South Wales Police Marine Area Command. He has spent most of his career policing on the water and has a Masters in Maritime Law and Policy. When Joe got the call from Leigh late that Friday night, he knew the job would be big.

Joe McNulty

It was quite strange because I received a call at about 10pm on a Friday night and I never received those type of calls unless there was something going on. And I answered the phone and I said, 'Oh, Leigh, this is going to be good, isn't it?' and he said, 'Yes, it is.' And he dove straight into the details of the job. He told me that there'd been two vessels come together approximately 400 nautical miles off the coast and done a type of exchange, which we assumed at the time was a importation of illegal, drugs or illegal commodities. Now at the time it had been confirmed that the exchange had taken place. They had some aircraft in the location and got some further intel to share with that.

Host

The best option was to utilise the NSW Police Marine Area Command boat.

Joe McNulty

There were no other suitable vessels in that zone, so they reached out to New South Wales police to request the use of the police launch Nemesis. And Nemesis is our 32-metre patrol boat, a very capable vessel for those offshore ocean patrols.

Host

With a low-pressure system moving into the East Tasman Sea, Joe knew the Southwest Pacific was about to get hit really hard. He had to put together a crew suited to what could be days at sea in severe weather conditions.

Joe McNulty

I had to select some of the best crew that were used to these harsh sea conditions. And we do have a lot of officers that respond to our search and rescue conditions because we have to respond, as you would expect, to a vessel in distress off our coastline. So a number of our

officers handle the sea conditions really well. Or what we call, you've got good sea legs, and you can put up with the rolling, pitching, longevity of those bad seas off the coast. So I did select two sergeants to lead the mission that would provide not only the leadership to the crew, but also had the sea legs to be able to withstand the long days, nights, stress, fatigue, seasickness, and keep the Nemesis on track as efficiently as we could, and hold her there to, what I expect it would be a significant surveillance period.

Host

It wasn't only his crew that Joe needed to think about. There were others joining them on the Nemesis.

Joe McNulty

Leigh requested if he could put some Australian Customs officers on board, as well as Australian Federal Police as it was a joint agency job, I had no issue with that. And by the next morning about 6am we were back in Balmain. I briefed the New South Wales Police, crew, Australian Federal Police and Australian Customs officers on what we knew, the intelligence at hand at that time about this job. So it was critical for me to get that boat going north.

Host

Given the weather headed their way, Leigh was able to send Customs members who were maritime trained.

Leigh Forsyth

We've got a small element of our enforcement operations at the time were marine trained. We've done a lot of jobs with Joe using their boats and ours. And he kindly trained probably three or four of our guys on his boat, with his staff, so that the interaction between them was pretty good. They knew each other and how each other operated, to the extent that our guys were able to stand a watch at some stage when rest was required by the other officers on board.

Host

The police launch Nemesis set sail early that morning.

Joe McNulty

The vessel had to get north because of this southern low-pressure system, so they got away shortly around 7am after the briefing on the Saturday morning, which was the 8th of October. They made good time to get as far north as they could before the weather really set in. It did take them a day to move up there. The vessel does travel at about 28 knots, so it'll cover 28 nautical miles every hour. So it was tracking to northeast of Brisbane. It also had to balance its fuel as well. It does hold 25,000 litres of diesel. But for a prolonged operation, we like to have plenty of fuel up our sleeve. In case the vessel takes off, we go into a hot pursuit type of situation. In the case the vessel might have headed back towards New Caledonia or east towards New Zealand, we had to be in a position where we had enough fuel to respond to that as well.

Host

And as soon as the Nemesis was launched, the chase was on. They knew the daughter vessel had met the mother vessel and assumed the transference of drugs had taken place. They just had to figure out where the boat was headed.

Joe McNulty

The location of the intercept was 400 nautical miles off our coast. Now that is a significant distance. That's nearly 700 kilometres. And if we're looking at Brisbane to New Caledonia, it was out in the middle of that zone. So we knew the drugs were coming to the east coast of Australia, we didn't know if it was Queensland, New South Wales, but later on that day, one of the yachts moved away and started tracking southwest. So we knew that vessel was heading towards the east coast of New South Wales.

Host

For Luke Wilson, who was tracking the movement of the daughter vessel from the command post in Sydney, its movement forward in such bad weather spoke to the determination of the drug smugglers.

Luke Wilson

It certainly was quite horrendous weather conditions and we obtained evidence from the Bureau of Meteorology about just how bad those weather conditions were. There was sea warnings off the east coast of Australia, gale force winds up to 40 knots, and seas up to six meters and then certainly evidence from the police launch captain or the master of that vessel indicated that it was truly horrendous weather and no sailors should be out there, unless they were out there for a work purpose like the police launch was, which was to stop this drug importation from occurring. So, that in and of itself, I think is, is fairly indicative of their determination to commit this offence. The fact that they were willing to leave knowing the sea conditions that they would be facing.

Host

Members of the multi-agency law enforcement team of Operation Collage were constantly aware that the pursuit could turn in the blink of an eye.

Luke Wilson

They suffered while out there and I think throughout the whole thing, we were a bit concerned that we'd have to pivot across from being a drug importation investigation into a maritime search and rescue operation because it was just that perilous to be out there.

Host

Joe shared the same concerns and monitored the conditions closely.

Joe McNulty

I held strong concerns for my crew because I knew what they were going through. The fatigue, the lack of sleep, the seasickness, the dehydration. And I could only think what the crew of the yacht was going through as well. We do have some care for all mariners at sea. Yes, they had

half a tonne of cocaine in there, but human lives were at stake as well. And the conditions were so horrendous, I wondered how they were surviving on that yacht. They were still sailing the vessel, they were still doing their own navigation, and I was thinking their fatigue levels; were they in danger of losing their own lives. And at one stage I thought, is this importation going to turn into a search and rescue mission, where we change our whole focus from surveillance of a major organised crime syndicate, to surveillance for searching for people in the water or searching for loss of life at sea or man overboard. So I had these two factors running through my head. But at the end of the day, we're there to protect all the community. We're there to protect life at sea. So if we can still get our man who's importing the drugs but keep him alive, we'll still investigate that as well. And whether we threw ourselves at the surveillance or whether we then turn it into a search and rescue mission, they were factors in my thinking at the time.

Host

Once the police launch Nemesis got closer to the target vessel, the poor weather conditions reduced visibility. Luckily, the Nemesis had equipment to combat this.

Joe McNulty

The police launch Nemesis has a very high-level thermal camera. The beauty of having this technology is we can use it to monitor the vessels that obviously we don't want to be seen from, from afar. So it gives us advanced surveillance range. The sea conditions and the weather conditions were tragic, were absolutely horrendous during this operation. We had 92 kilometres of wind, we had high sea stakes of up to six meters. We had low driving rain. There was even sea fogs rolling in. The operation was so complicated because of the environment that this camera was worth its weight in gold. The camera, we could actually see through some of the rain squalls and the fog to keep our eyes on the vessel, which was so critical to the surveillance. These weather conditions also hampered aviation assets as well. So the Nemesis was the key vessel in the whole operation, tracking what we believed to be a yacht full of cocaine.

Host

It had taken a day for the Nemesis to locate the daughter vessel. The yacht was around 320 nautical miles east of Brisbane. It had slowed down in the squall which meant the Nemesis had to slow down too.

Joe McNulty

At that stage the weather had set in. The yacht was tracking in a southwest direction, and we kind of put it towards the mid-north coast, so Coffs Harbour, Port Macquarie that kind of location. So the Nemesis came into position to monitor her, but because the yacht was tracking at a low speed, because of the driving horrendous conditions, the Nemesis was also going at a very low speed. It was going in a worst case that you could put that vessel on. And I say that because the seas were coming from the east and they were coming in a direction that would come into contact with the left-hand side of the boat, so what we call that the beam. It was a beam-on sea, a six-metre sea, and it was rolling the Nemesis right over. She is a very substantial vessel, but the crew got absolutely smashed. Because the vessel was going slow, the stabilising

system on the vessel was working overtime, trying to keep the vessel upright. So it was doing everything it could do, but the vessel was moving that slow, that the stabilisers through the hydraulics were starting to overheat. And what actually occurred then is the crew lost their steering system because it was running on the hydraulic engine pumps that were supplying the fluid to the stabilisers. Also, the same pumps were supplying hydraulic oil to the rudder system. And it was complicated and stressful because of those six to eight metre seas. So what actually happened, we had a significant failure on the vessel at the time. And we had to go on to one of our backup systems, which is a battery powered rudder system. So the crew for the next 18 hours following this vessel with the importance of not taking their eyes off the prize because they knew there was drugs on board, and any failure in fatigue or further failure of the vessel, we would have lost the vessel and those drugs would have hit the east coast of Australia somewhere. I don't know how they did it, but it was through sheer guts and determination, extremely good leadership, and for the next 18 hours, the crew were steering the vessel manually on a button system which supplies battery power to the rudders.

Host

The conditions at sea were so bad, most of those on board the Nemesis suffered severe seasickness.

Joe McNulty

The sea sickness was horrendous at that stage. Eighty percent of the crew went down because they were focusing, they were looking down at the controls, they were trying to look out. The radar was just a blanket of white because the seas were so huge that we couldn't use that too efficiently. And someone at the same time was monitoring the camera, keeping eyes on the vessel through the camera, holding on while they were getting pitched and rolled and thrown. So it was a horrendous course they had to hold, and I'm just glad they were able to hold that course because the yacht couldn't hold the course either, and it had to turn and run and it ran. It ran north, so their crew would have been getting absolutely smashed as well in those conditions.

Host

It's difficult to imagine how hard it would be for the police crew to manoeuvre through such treacherous waters without any break from the constant pummelling. They couldn't rest because the rolling waves would fling them from their bunks. They couldn't eat because the constant pitching made it nearly impossible to keep food down. And they also suffered dehydration because keeping water down was no easier.

Joe McNulty

The toll it takes on the crew, and once you get to a point where the crew are fatigued, they can't respond, they can't make decisions, they can't problem solve small problems. And this is also a concern of mine from the command post, of the crew on board being able to hold the course, have leadership over the vessel, have surveillance over the yacht, not losing the drugs on board and protecting the Australian community.

Host

Initially, all signs pointed to the daughter vessel heading back to Port Macquarie where it had set sail from. But that soon became impossible.

Joe McNulty

The yacht did turn at a point and then started going north, so we identified Port Macquarie as the location that it would enter. Now Port Macquarie was washed out. There was no chance of getting any vessel in or out of the river there. So, they may have had intel coming from the shore via satellite phones to let them know that it was going to be impossible sailing into Port Macquarie. And the ports further south, like Newcastle, Barr, was washed out as well, so they would have had to come right down to the Hawkesbury or into Sydney Harbour to be successful. But the yacht turned and started tracking towards Queensland, and the Nemesis had to alter her course accordingly to maintain a distance off it.

Host

The change of direction worked well for the Nemesis crew. The weather was still wild, but it was hitting the boat from a different direction.

Joe McNulty

It gave the Nemesis crew some reprieve. Yes, we're still getting the high seas, but the alteration of course, Nemesis was able to position herself where she got more sea on the quarter or the stern and lifted her stern rather than rolled her from the side. So this was a great relief for the crew and allowed them to at least get some rest, a little bit of sleep in between, shifts on the bridge and their surveillance duties as well. I don't think anyone was really eating at the time because whatever went down came straight back up.

Host

Even with the slight reprieve, the crew of the Nemesis were doing it tough. The only consolation was that the two-man crew of the daughter vessel they were following would have been doing it tough too. Moving into the third day, the Nemesis and its quarry continued tracking north.

Joe McNulty

So this is day three of the operation. The Nemesis crew had 48 hours of fatiguing sea conditions. Very challenging to maintain a maritime course on it, run the ship, run the surveillance, and they were fatigued. Eighty percent of the crew were seasick. But the fatigue was a concern. They couldn't sleep, the boat was rolling that much that any sleep they were thrown out of their bunks continually and it was actually quite dangerous to go below decks, to get into a bunk, to be thrown out of the bunk. So they slept by propping themselves up in different locations of the vessel, strapping themselves into a bunk to try and maintain some type of sleep pattern. And it was concerning. It was really concerning. And that change of course on day three to the north, to track back towards the Queensland coast, was a big relief. The master on board could start to rest his crew a little bit better. They got some longer periods of sleep and downtime which eased the fatigue, and allowed them to maintain the working

conditions on the boat. And fatigue is dangerous at sea; it's a concern for any mariner. When you're running a vessel that's 120 tonne with crew on board, you've got to understand that you're managing ten people as well and looking after their safety of those mariners at sea chasing that. And we were concerned for our Customs and our AFP officers on board because this wasn't their bread-and-butter conditions. This is something out of their comfort zone. They worked extremely well but they were also extremely ill, so we had to manage their health as well on this operation. But again, everyone pulled together because they knew how significantly important this was to the Australian Federal Police, Australian Customs, and getting these crooks and getting the drugs and having a big win for Australia.

Host

As the Nemesis tracked the daughter vessel up the east coast of Australia, each member of its crew had an important function, not just on the boat, but with the powers they brought to the investigation.

Joe McNulty

The crew consisted of 10 law enforcement officers, six from New South Wales Police, and those six had the maritime qualifications for the master, the engineering, the boarding team, the tactical rib driver, and it was also supported by two Australian customs offices and two Australian Federal Police officers. So it gave the team some really multi-jurisdictional punch. We had all the jurisdiction covered with the Commonwealth agencies and the state's capabilities. The Customs officers and the AFP officers gave that extension out to the Australian Economic Zone, that 200 nautical mile zone. But they're also an important part of the crew for when we got back closer to the east coast of Australia.

Host

While the daughter vessel had continued moving north, the land-based investigators of Operation Collage had to move with them. AFP Detective Inspector Luke Wilson had monitored the dramatic sea chase from the major incident room. While that was happening, he was helping coordinate the land-based assets. Wherever the yacht landed, his team needed to be there.

Luke Wilson

Any investigation that involves the maritime domain is immediately more complicated than it would be if it was land based. You're dealing with weather conditions, you're dealing with variables in terms of the location where the boat may land, and one of the difficulties with these types of investigations is a vessel of that size can literally pull up at any number of port locations along the east coast. So you're trying to coordinate teams in the field and make sure they're getting adequate rest and breaks but also positioned in a correct or a timely location and to be able to intervene when that vessel arrives. It's a complicated aspect of the operation and perhaps a little bit more complicated than just a traditional land-based investigation.

Host

Luke needed to keep his ground support team on the move.

Luke Wilson

When we do these type of operations, we would normally deploy a police forward command post and we certainly had deployed one up to northern New South Wales coast, just to be in the area ready to coordinate land-based activities when the vessel arrived. When it started to change route and head towards Moreton Bay, obviously, we had to take out entire template of the four command post investigators, surveillance teams, tactical units, and effectively send them north. And so we're playing a bit of a guessing game and trying to predict where it may or may not land and deploy our resources in that area. We had investigators waking up in the middle of the night to jump in cars and drive north to Queensland from their location where they were staged and they're basically, driving through the night. Stopping, waiting again. So it's this on again, off again tempo that that adds to the to the fatigue of the members. So, yeah, anytime you add water it becomes infinitely more complicated.

Host

With the changing of direction, and the sea hitting the police launch Nemesis at a less dangerous angle, the engineer on board was able to make some much-needed repairs.

Joe McNulty

On day three, when the Nemesis turned to the north, we had some reprieve in the sea conditions, and it allowed the stabilisers to stop working as hard as they were to balance the vessel. And with the thinning oil, it became less of a problem because we were able to cool the oil, and then we got our hydraulics back, we got our steerage back. The rudders started working again, and then we could engage the autopilot. Once we could engage the autopilot, we didn't have police physically driving the vessel on the wheel, and on the remote control, so automatically we defaulted to the automatic pilotage system. We allowed the satellite system to run the vessel, so it decreased our fatigue again. And the engineer was very happy that he didn't have to keep managing the vessel in that state. So we got our systems back online because of the change of course, and it allowed us to rest more crew at the time, because the computers and the satellites were running the navigation side of the vessel.

Host

The chase continued, but as the daughter vessel got closer to the coast, that presented a whole new problem.

Joe McNulty

As we got closer to the coast, there was more traffic, even though the weather conditions were horrendous. We didn't want the yacht to get too close to the east coast and then get mixed up with maybe other vessels or small fishing boats and the like. So the Nemesis moved into a closer position, so we actually had a close radar picture on her. We've got two radar systems that were tracking her at the one time.

Host

The yacht's next course put both it and the police launch Nemesis in great danger.

Joe McNulty

The vessel went in, up into Brisbane and tried to take a shortcut in between the islands there off Stradbroke and it's a very small passage. So the yacht went through this passage and the seas were breaking on the reefs around this small passage. So we've got these six-metre seas. The east coast is shallowing up. It's a very narrow passage and these six-metre seas were just dumping on the reefs either side of it. The yacht went through it. The master of the vessel had a very difficult decision to make to go through such a dangerous passage with breaking waves either side to keep the eyes on the vessel itself, the eyes on the prize with the cocaine on board. And he did. He made a decision to follow it through. And they got a very short period of reprieve from the sea conditions. A swell had opened up, and as they started to enter the passage, a set of big ocean swells had come from behind them, and they realised that the swirl was going to actually break over the stern of the vessel, so he pulled out. He did a very sharp turn to starboard at the time because he was in danger of losing control of the vessel. And it was described to me as an emergency starboard turn where the helm of the vessel, the wheel is thrown hard over to the starboard side. The rudders are heavily engaged to throw 120 tonne round to the right. The port engine, 1,500 horsepower, is thrown ahead to speed to spin it as fast as they can. At the same time, reverse propulsion is applied to the starboard motor to twist the vessel around, and the electric bow thruster was thrown to provide more steerage and push the bow round so it could get over the top of this horrendous wave that was bearing down on it. And the master was just able to get the boat round to the right where it was able to just limp over the top of this monstrous wave and get through it. Now this monstrous wave did damage the vessel; it turned it right on its side. And at one of those stages, the props of the rudders came into contact with the reef. But it maintained propulsion; it got clear of, clear of the passage. And, they regrouped. There was a few minor injuries on board. The vessel was still safe, but at that stage they thought they'd lost the yacht.

Host

The Nemesis moved out further, to see what they could do now from a surveillance point of view. To their surprise, the yacht reappeared.

Joe McNulty

The yacht couldn't get through that passage either and actually came back around, in the direction of the Nemesis and, in close proximity, one of the radar alarms started sounding. And, the crew jumped back to attention and realised, oh, they're back in the game. The yacht couldn't make it through that passage either and I believe it got rolled over and got turned on its side, close to capsizing but the deep keel on the vessel was able to right it. So, the game was still on. The Nemesis was still in position. Yeah, we'd had some damage to a prop and a rudder, but we still had steerage, we still had propulsion and the yacht continued tracking north.

Host

As hard as conditions were aboard the Nemesis, the police crew marvelled at the skills of the two men aboard the daughter vessel as they followed it north into Morton Bay.

Joe McNulty

We took up position again and the vessel was now entering Caloundra. Now this is day four and a half of the operation. The wind was still driving hard at 50 knots and there was no vision of the vessel because of the driving rains which actually allowed the Nemesis to move into some of the rain squalls and keep a closer position of the yacht. The yacht tracked through the Brisbane shipping channels, as it entered through that missing a few tugs and some outbound ships.

Host

Monitoring from the command post, Leigh Forsyth heard one last drama play out.

Leigh Forsyth

The daughter vessel, when it rounded Moreton Bay, I don't know if they had enough local knowledge, but they actually cut the corner and there was shallow water. And they went across a sandbank where they should have gone around it and almost ran aground and so they were potentially in a bit of difficulty then, and the Nemesis virtually came right up over the top of it, and the guys on the daughter vessel actually radioed out on Channel 16, just if there was some assistance, and the Nemesis was a bit concerned with, we had to to-and-fro quickly: were we going to answer and potentially, give ourselves away or just ignore it? But by the time we decided, nah, we'll just call them back and find out if they need any help, they'd actually got themselves out of trouble and were in the lee of the island then.

Host

With the daughter vessel finally safe and anchored, the police moved into place.

Luke Wilson

On the evening of the 11th, the daughter ship arrived in Morton Bay, and it made its way into an area called the Scarborough Marina and Harbour. It's a small sort of marina. Typically people using recreational vessels and those sort of things moored there. And they stayed there overnight and I believe that was because they were resting having been on this quite perilous journey.

Host

As soon as the yacht set anchor, law enforcement on sea and land moved in to surround it.

Joe McNulty

The Nemesis moved into position to have surveillance overnight and was joined by an Australian Customs patrol boat as well with probably similar, characteristics of camera systems, and we watched and monitored that all night. Now, the wind was still up but there was no sea so the crew were able to get a bit of sleep, a bit of rest, and a bit of food. Until first light and that's when there was movement on the yacht. The AFP had moved in and surrounded the marina and the location. So between the Customs patrol boat and the police launch Nemesis, we were maintaining that maritime corridor, so nothing could get through that corridor, and the AFP were on land, looking at the movements from there.

Host

For Leigh and the Customs team, as well as surrounding the daughter vessel, they also had to monitor the mother vessel, further out at sea, so it too could be intercepted.

Leigh Forsyth

The Customs vessel Botany Bay, to actually get down to the area of operation around Moreton Bay, and it arrived only a matter of two, two or three hours after the daughter vessel had gone into Moreton Bay, so we got there pretty well right on time. The Ocean Protector, that was fine, that was already out and had the mothership under control. And then we had our tactical response vessels, which are small inshore boats, Customs ones there. We had them set up. We had one on the Botany Bay tender, and that was to the south of the channels in Moreton Bay. We had one out just off Tangalooma. So that was sort of covering the eastern side, and then there was another one at a marina at Caloundra. So if this boat, the daughter ship, had been spooked and decided to make a run for it, we would have had it covered basically in all directions.

Host

After the fatiguing days on the move for the land and sea crews, a night of rest was just what everyone needed. But the surveillance teams still had the daughter vessel in their sights. For all the police knew, the yacht might have been met overnight by another vessel.

Joe McNulty

It was 1am in the morning both the police vessel Nemesis moved into position and the Australian Customs vessel moved in position as well to provide that maritime corridor protection of the drugs and of the criminal network. We didn't know if there were other vessels up there in the syndicate, that were going to go and pick up the drugs from the yacht, and then take off in a high-speed runabout, or anything like that, so we had to be mindful of that. Yes, it was still blowing 50 knots, and it was driving rain. But criminals with a prize like that of nearly half a tonne of cocaine on board will do anything to protect that cargo. That cargo is highly valuable. So we were maintaining, we were using all our equipment on board to protect the vessel and the cargo from an interception. And also while the AFP was on land, covering the land side, we were pretty confident that the drugs were secure, the criminals were still on board, and it was as safe as it could be for an investigation. In the early hours of the morning around first light, there was movement from the yacht and two of the suspects into the marina there.

Host

The movement of the men to the marina suggested the drugs would be transferred to the shore rather than picked up by another boat. From the command post, Luke was monitoring the movements.

Luke Wilson

The next morning about 7.40, our surveillance officers observed the two males from the boat coming ashore in a tender, and they attended the office of the Scarborough Marina. They inquired at the marina about booking a night of berthing for their vessel, and they also made mention about having to perform some repairs to the vessel. We think that those repairs were as a result of the storm damage they sustained. They also asked the staff at the marina about a nearby shopping centre in the suburb of Kippering. And they asked whether it was busy and how far away it was from the Scarborough Marina. The staff gave them a map, showing them the location of the shopping centre and there were also some inquiries made by the two males from the boat about the amount of time it would take to travel to the Gold Coast. They then got back in their tender and sailed back out to the daughter vessel and they were there for a period of about half an hour or so.

Host

To prove importation charges, the drugs have to land in Australia. So even though the investigators of Operation Collage had the two men and a yacht loaded with cocaine in their sights, that wasn't enough.

Luke Wilson

One of the complications with importation investigations is that we have to show there is an intention for the drugs to enter into Australia. It's not merely enough to detect the vessel in Australian waters and say that that was the intention, unless we have other evidence to show that was their intention to land it in Australia. And at that point we didn't know who was on the vessel, and we couldn't point to any particular evidence that would establish that to the standard required. So, there was a decision made in consultation with our legal team to allow the vessel to land and to demonstrate their intention to offload the drugs into the Australian community. With that comes an additional element of risk because we have to maintain control of that vessel and the people on board and ensure that the drugs aren't lost into the community or that we don't lose coverage of the boat and those suspected drugs on board. But what it does also allow us the opportunity to do is by letting it run a little bit further is to identify other parties that may be involved in the criminality and to trace it through a little bit further than just those initially involved in the importation.

Host

Once the drugs hit the shore, there is also the potential to arrest shore-side offenders.

Luke Wilson

We were pretty confident there would be a shore party. To move a large amount of drugs off the boat into the community, you'd need a fairly decent sort of vehicle or some other help from other people. So it was forefront in our mind that there would be another party helping with this importation, but up until the stages where the boat had arrived, we hadn't identified anyone who we particularly thought was involved.

Host

Soon, the two men on the daughter vessel were on the move again.

Luke Wilson

They then brought the daughter ship alongside at the marina and berthed it. They got off the boat and they were observed carrying two duffle bags in total. And then they hired a taxi and took that taxi to the shopping centre. Once they were there, they attended a cafe and a short time later they were met by two other males who, subsequently, we determined one of those males was the shore party that they were intending to meet. There was a short conversation there about lunchtime that day. And then shortly after they jumped into two vehicles and departed the area. So in one of the vehicles was one of the crew members and the shore party. And the second vehicle was another male.

Host

Working on the assumption that the two men had taken drugs to the shore in the duffle bags, and that they had indeed met with their land-based contacts, the operation could come into its arrest – or interdiction – phase.

Luke Wilson

About that time, we decided that that had obviously reached the safe limits of the investigation and so the investigation supervisor called the job to resolution and at that point, the two vehicles were stopped and the occupants were arrested.

Host

Luke and the team in the Sydney command post, waited to hear the results of the search.

Luke Wilson

It goes for some period of time while you're waiting to hear whether the vehicle search has been commenced and what's been located. And up until that point, you're not really sure whether anything illegal has been found and so there is that sort of nervousness in the command post while you're waiting to hear the outcome of that. We were advised shortly after the arrest that they opened the two bags and they'd found a large quantity of cocaine. One bag contained 25 one-kilogram blocks and the second bag contained 20 one-kilogram blocks. So it was approximately 45 kilos of cocaine found within the vehicle with one of the crew members in the shore party. So, that was a pretty significant find and I guess at that point you can breathe a bit easier knowing that you have actually located some of the drugs. A short time later, our tactical teams boarded the boat at the Scarborough Marina and that's where they located the remainder of the drugs. So, roughly 350 something kilos of cocaine.

Host

In more recent years, much bigger seizures have taken place, but back then, the amount of cocaine the police found in Operation Collage was one of the larger drugs seizures they had seen.

Luke Wilson

I think we're all a bit surprised really that it was 400 odd kilos of cocaine. That's at that time was a very, very large importation and would have accounted for a fairly substantial amount of the yearly consumption of cocaine in Australia. So to have found that much cocaine and to seize that safely without any other person being injured, it was such a successful outcome

Host

With the shore team arresting the two yachtsmen, the crew aboard the Nemesis were officially off duty.

Joe McNulty

The crew and the New South Wales Police vessel Nemesis were absolutely fatigued. They were at the end of their working limits. They'd done their job well. They'd kept their eyes on the cargo and the criminals for five days at sea. So they were done. They were spent. They needed to be relieved. They've done it successfully through some of the most challenging sea conditions that they've ever experienced in their careers. And now they're happy to hand it over to the Australian Federal Police and the Australian Customs Service for the investigation to be continued and then move into that arrest phase. I said to go up north, into Brisbane River, arranged a berth for them, refuel and I said just sleep, sleep as long as you want and we'll reconvene. Their job was done, the cargo is in Brisbane, the AFP were there to take that handover from the Nemesis crew. The drugs were intact, no one had died. We hadn't lost anyone at sea. I was very confident the next phase would just run smoothly and that's exactly what happened when the AFP took over.

Host

The crew of the Nemesis headed off for some well-deserved rest. They made some minor repairs to their boat, and most importantly, slept. But it turned out their job wasn't quite done yet. At the command post in Sydney, the people from Customs had noticed that the mother vessel hadn't moved from its position off the coast. They asked Joe if the New South Wales police launch would investigate.

Joe McNulty

I spoke to the master of the vessel and checked in on him first and the crew and see how they were, if they were sleeping, getting some good rest and, and then I asked him, I said, 'Oh, we've got another job for you. I want you to consider going back out and having another crack and taking out the other vessel, the mothership.' He said, 'We're pretty fatigued.' And I said, 'Yeah, I know, I know.' But this sergeant I knew had the leadership that would motivate the crew. They were still enthusiastic, and there was still a job to be done. So the seas had abated, the winds had abated, they'd had a bit of rest and sleep, and they went back out. They got another 20,000 litres of fuel, because the Nemesis was right down on fuel. And they started heading east towards the vessel. They left the part of Brisbane, the shipping channel. They were on a good course, doing about 20 knots heading east. They got about 100 miles off the coast, and then the Customs Maritime Border Command had another vessel placed for an interdiction, and then they relieved the Nemesis, and we handed back to Australian Customs Service. The crew were quite happy. While they were motivated and enthusiastic to have another go, they

were still fatigued so they were happy to set a course south back to Sydney, where I met them a day later.

Host

When the Customs vessel approached the mother vessel, they radioed back to the command post. Something strange was happening. Leigh remembers getting the message.

Leigh Forsyth

That information was relayed to us from the vessel as it was approaching. They said, 'They're throwing stuff over the side.' So they quickly netted that stuff up and picked up. The first thought that goes through you is that they've probably got more narcotics on board and they see this big boat, they're just going to heave it over the side. But, as it turned out, it was, just papers and milk cartons and those sorts of things; something that you would think is pretty innocuous, bit strange to be throwing it over then, you would think, but one of the strong points of the AFP is their investigation techniques. Later, that stuff that was thrown overboard that was retrieved ended up being vital in being able to link the crew on the mother vessel with the shore siders, in that there was a receipt that was found on their vessel pertaining to a fruit or a delicatessen shop somewhere in inner Sydney.

Host

That receipt tied the two vessels together. Luke and the AFP team followed up on the lead.

Luke Wilson

One of the things that we did during the search of the daughter ship, we located a receipt for a fruit and vegetable shop in the Sutherland Shire of Sydney. And on that receipt was listed a number of food items, including oranges and lemons and other food, that was grown or only available in Australia. Interestingly, when we searched the mother ship, we also found the particular food items or some of those food items that had been described on that receipt from the Sutherland Shire fruit shop. I was a somewhat junior investigator, so I was tasked to go out and see this fruit shop and see what evidence could be retrieved. And as it turned out, they had a very good digital CCTV system, and I was able to retrieve the CCTV of the crew of the daughter ship attending that fruit shop and purchasing those particular items. And in fact, the quality was so good that you could see each food item being placed on the conveyor belt and paid for in the same order on which it was available on the receipt. So it was very good evidence that they had purchased this food with the intention of transferring it to the mothership. And the importance, I guess, of that evidence is, is that there is a hypothesis that could be argued that these two vessels just happened to be in the same vicinity around the time of the handover and that it wasn't in fact the mothership that had transferred the drugs. But that transfer of food items that were only available in Australia and were very perishable was good evidence to show that circumstantially that those vessels had in fact met at sea and that items had been transferred across.

Host

The AFP investigators were lucky. A day later and the fruit shop CCTV would have been erased.

Luke Wilson

When I was downloading the CCTV, I looked across into the bottom corner and realised that it was almost at the 14-day limit of the CCTV storage. And it was actually in the process of about to be written over as you know CCTV systems do when they reach the maximum time frame. It was lucky that we happened to get there in time and were able to save the CCTV before it was lost. Normally what would happen is, is we would have tasked a digital forensics unit to go and retrieve that CCTV, and because of the timeframes and the fact that was leaving the system as I was there, I basically just got a USB drive and downloaded it myself because I had no other option and luckily we were able to secure it before it got overwritten.

Host

For Detective Inspector Dave Craft working with the team in Canberra, they were able to get a head-start on identifying the offenders on the boat using surveillance photographs even before the men were arrested. We will refer to the men as the first and second offender.

Dave Craft

We were able to identify one of the people on board that vessel from photographs that were obtained. So we had a fair idea of who was involved in this, so then we start looking at the wider picture: okay, well, where is that person from? What is their network? Where do they reside? What's their financial status? Do they have links to organised crime? Are they the intended recipients or are they just purely doing the importation on behalf of someone else?

Host

Dave and the team gathered as much information as they could around the offenders.

Dave Craft

I had more of an idea about the second offender and that was purely based off of photographs. So we were able to sit here in headquarters and look at the image from that vessel and literally go through AFP indices and match that person. So we were confident that that that was the second offender. In regards to the first offender, it really became evident once we explored those linkages to that vessel. So, we had a fair idea of who was involved from there and we could start looking at that intelligence picture of, okay, well, who are these people and what have they been involved in in the past? And obviously with that first offender, he had quite an interesting history himself, particularly in the maritime industry and some of the alleged incidents that he'd been involved in in the past.

Host

When the offenders were arrested, Dave was involved in a search of the second offender's property. It turned out to hold potential dangers to law enforcement personnel.

Dave Craft

When we did arrive, I think it was about 10 or 11 o'clock that night. The premises appeared derelict. There was no power switched on. We initially approached the premises, entered it. It was unsecured. There was a detached garage as part of that house also, which had a speedboat, a large amount of other personal equipment, yard equipment, etc. There were containers in there that we inspected, which ultimately led to the identification of equipment that was used in clandestine labs for the production of methamphetamine. And that obviously threw a spanner in the works for us given the health risks and the dangers associated with any chemicals and equipment that's used in that process. So at that point, you can imagine at 11pm at night and finding that, we literally just had to say tools down, notify our New South Wales Police counterparts who kindly assisted in having their Hazmat teams from Sydney come down the following day to process that equipment and render it safe before we could even continue looking in that detached garage.

Host

Given the week-long ocean pursuit of the drug importers, what were Dave's impressions about the house one of them had purchased?

Dave Craft

It was clear that someone had put a lot of money into that house, but it was clear that someone also potentially had run out of money. And that was the picture that we certainly gained from New South Wales Police locally that, that second subject was known to have engaged with contractors in the area that he would readily pay cash, but that that cash had run out. So when you look at that and the alleged conduct that he's involved in, it certainly makes a lot of sense as to what his motivation was. But the house itself was on the side of a hill, overlooking the water, beautiful gum trees around it. I can remember standing out on his deck at sunrise that first morning, thinking, what a beautiful spot, if someone could finish this house and really turn it into something special, but unfortunately it wasn't to be for him.

Host

And that's the reality of those caught up in the drug trade. It may bring you riches temporarily, but the minute you're caught, you can't enjoy your house on the waterfront from a prison cell. The offenders in Operation Collage were each sentenced to twenty years in prison. The street value of the cocaine was estimated to be \$240 million dollars. After the seizure, the cocaine was sent to a secure facility where it was documented, analysed, and weighed. In the end, it was destroyed as hazardous waste.

Host

If you are interested in learning more about how the AFP and its partners work to protect Australians against drug importation and how Luke, Dave, Leigh and Joe investigated this case, visit a-f-p-dot-gov-dot-a-u

Host (AFP outro)

And that's a wrap on Season 2 of Crime Interrupted – an AFP and Casefile Presents podcast written by Vikki Petraitis. We hope that like us, you have learnt a lot about how the AFP investigates and interrupts the most serious of crimes.