

Search Among The Sunflowers: Episode 1 – Heart Break

Narrator: Before we start, a word of warning that this podcast contains content some people may find distressing. It contains depictions of real-life traumatic events, including commentary around significant injuries and death. This episode also contains language that may be offensive for some people and is not suitable for children. Listener discretion is advised.

Meryn O'Brien: I'm Meryn O'Brien and I'm Jack O'Brien's mum.

Jon O'Brien: I'm Jon O'Brien and I'm Jack's dad.

Narrator: In an agricultural field in eastern Ukraine, 50 kilometres from the Russian border, golden sunflowers bob their heads languidly towards the light. 5-foot tall and growing close together as a community, a universal symbol of hope. The area is silent, bar a gentle wind wafting from the north. Little remains to hint at its deadly, smouldering past.

On July 17, 2014, a Boeing 777 departed Gate 3 at Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport at 12:13pm Dutch local time, headed for Kuala Lumpur. Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 was 13 minutes behind schedule. On board were 15 crew and 283 passengers, including 80 children. Among them were 38 people who called Australia home.

Approximately three hours after take-off, air traffic control lost all contact with the plane.

Soon afterwards, villagers near the eastern Ukrainian town of Donetsk reported seeing masses of fiery wreckage falling from the sky like an apocalyptic hailstorm. Among the debris were a plane's cockpit, fuselage, wings, seats, suitcases ... and bodies. MH17 was now in pieces, spread across six different areas of eastern Ukraine.

No one on board survived.

Among those lost was a young man on the trip of a lifetime, who – realising he was at risk of missing his flight – had raced through Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport to catch his plane home, eager to regale his family with stories from his adventure. The young man was Jack O'Brien.

Meryn O'Brien: So Jack was 25. He was our first child, um, our only son. A few years later we had a daughter.

The opportunity to go came up really quickly. It was with his longest mate and he just jumped at it and said, I'm, I'm going. It was seven weeks and they did adjust the itinerary once Jack was going to include some things that he wanted to do. Like he, you

know, he was a Barcelona fan and he wanted to go and tour the stadium and stuff like that. But they went to Iceland and hired a little car and drove around just camping in this tiny like, little tent thing that Jack absolutely loved. And he was sending us like Viber messages and photos and things, and said, oh, you'd really love this, you've got to come camping here. And I replied, oh. Like, it's a long way to go to go camping <laugh>. And he said, oh, you just don't get it.

Jon O'Brien: He said, yeah, you don't get it. You really have to come.

Meryn O'Brien: And they went to Germany and they went to Russia, went to Moscow and Petersburg, and I remember saying what was, what was it like? And he said, oh, the people were friendly. And I think I often think about that now, huh. They started and ended in Amsterdam, then they went back to Amsterdam and they went to the airport together. Jack's flight was leaving a few hours before his friend's and they said goodbye and like, see you tomorrow. And... that's it.

Narrator: Locating the remains of Jack O'Brien and those of the 297 others on board MH17 that day would become an unprecedented recovery operation for the Australian Federal Police, their international counterparts, and other agencies such as the Australian Defence Force and DFAT – the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

It would also become a complex mission to uncover the truth about exactly what happened to Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17.

This is Search Among the Sunflowers, looking for truth in the world's biggest crime scene. Episode 1.

In early 2014, an armed conflict had broken out in Ukraine's Donbas region over territory seized by Russia-backed separatists. Some airlines were already avoiding Ukrainian airspace, though they weren't forced or obliged to.

Surface-to-air missile systems had been observed or claimed by Russian forces, and several aircraft from the Ukrainian Air Force had previously been shot down.

That April, the International Civil Aviation Organization had warned governments of a risk to commercial passenger flights in south-eastern Ukrainian airspace ... and the US Federal Aviation Administration had warned that flights over other parts of Ukraine should exercise extreme caution. The airspace MH17 was flying in was not included in these warnings. Other commercial aircraft had also been using the same flight path that day.

Word of the incident travelled fast, and AFP personnel were among the first to be mobilised.

Hilda Sirec: I got the call at about sort of 7 or 8pm the night before, and in the morning straight to the airport to head over to Ukraine, so it was like a overnight proposition.

Narrator: In 2014, Hilda Sirec was an AFP Detective Sergeant, stationed in Canberra.

Hilda Sirec: I just remember seeing it all on the news. And all of a sudden my phone rang and it was Brian McDonald. He called me direct, and I remember working with him in counter terrorism for a few years previously. Um, and he, yeah, called me up and I remember taking the phone call saying, yep, you're deploying over to Ukraine, that's amazing. You know, really important work. And he said, and you're coming. And he said, he's pulling together a team of 10 people, are really keen on, um, getting a breadth of experience and skills, and we were to essentially deploy immediately. And, um, my boyfriend, now husband, at the time, I got off the phone and he goes, who was that? And I said, oh, just one of my bosses and I'm going to that. And my boyfriend thought I was absolutely kidding. He just thought, oh, you're a police officer in the ACT and you're going offshore? Had no idea really what the AFP does and how broad our remit and our involvement would be on things. And I just went straight into deployment mode. I got my bag ready, made sure I had my official passport and headed off to the airport and started to get my head in the game.

Narrator: At the same time, Federal Agent Ian Nelson was working in the Netherlands as an AFP Liaison Officer, based out of The Hague. Nelson would ultimately go on to play a leading role in Operation Arew, the AFP's computer-generated codename for the MH17 investigation.

As it did for many that day, Ian's MH17 story began with a headline.

Ian Nelson: I was at a, an official police function that afternoon and evening. And I distinctly recall one of my counterparts saying to me, you should come inside and have a look on the television because there's some breaking news in relation to a Malaysian Airlines flight. And in that room, I saw the television, clearly a downed aircraft with flames and the breaking news and the ticker across the bottom of the TVs said that it was a Malaysian Airlines flight that had crashed in eastern Ukraine. And my heart sank when I saw it and I thought, there will be a lot of Australians on that flight.

Narrator: Specifics were elusive at first. The plane had come down, but it wasn't immediately clear how... or why. No one knew exactly how many Australian casualties to expect... or how they'd died. As an international incident affecting Australians, it was a given that one of those tasked with finding answers would be the Australian Foreign Minister.

Julie Bishop: I became Foreign Minister in September of 2013, and this was the 17th of July 2014. I remember it 'cause it was my birthday.

Narrator: Shortly after midnight, Friday morning Australian time, Julie Bishop was shaken to her core by a phone call that pierced the silence.

Julie Bishop: I was asleep. It was in the very early hours of the morning, and I received a call from my media advisor. And my media advisor told me that we'd had reports that a commercial plane had been shot down over Ukraine. And the identification of the people on board was not clear at that stage, although she said that there was an understanding there were Australians on board, for the plane was heading from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur and then onto Australia. And I was to do media as soon as I could get up and get out to the airport.

I remember going to the airport, speaking to the Prime Minister. We discussed the need to get UN Security Council backing for whatever steps we were to take to get access to the site and to commence an investigation. And so very early on, within the first few hours, we were talking about a strategy on how to access the site. I agreed that we would move as quickly as possible because Australia happened to be on the Security Council as a temporary member at that time. So we got our team in the United Nations to begin the process of getting before the Security Council with an urgent resolution to get international backing for what we believed we needed to do.

Narrator: As Australia woke to the news, media outlets began to report what they knew – a Malaysia Airlines plane had crashed in Ukraine with numerous Australians on board.

Jon O'Brien: I mean, we were both excited about seeing Jack. I'd taken the day off. We were gonna go in that evening and pick him up from the airport. I was planning to clean his car which I'd been borrowing and taking to work. You know, I'd polished it once and I was gonna polish it again. Woke up at about maybe quarter to, 10 to 7. And my habit, go and put the kettle on and make a cup of tea. Also in the habit of just putting the radio on at that time as soon as I put the kettle on. And I think it was the very first thing talked about - a Malaysian Airlines flight crashing, on the way from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur.

Meryn O'Brien: There were no survivors.

Jon O'Brien: And no survivors. And I think I instantly cried out, yelled, that's Jack's plane. And I didn't know Meryn had the radio on in the bedroom and had heard the same thing. So pretty much that was the end of our life as we'd known it. And, then started, you know, a mad scramble to try and get more information and we were thinking about who we contact.

Narrator: While the O'Briens and other families were coming to grips with what they were hearing, Julie Bishop was in the air and on her way to Washington via Tokyo. Over the coming days, she and her Dutch counterpart, Frans Timmermans, would attend briefings with US intelligence agencies. And, at the UN Security Council in New York, they would launch their crusade for investigators to gain access to the conflict-stricken crash site, to recover the bodies of the victims, and begin the search for answers.

It was during that brief stopover in Tokyo that Bishop faced the unenviable task of contacting those whose loved ones were on board MH17.

Julie Bishop: I had DFAT officers with me and we commenced making phone calls. And each family had a consular official attached to them and each family had designated a representative to deal with all the procedures. So I commenced calling the designated representative of each family. Was some of the most difficult phone calls I've ever had to make. I recall speaking to the Maslins on that occasion because they were from my electorate and their grief was profound and deep and they were in shock.

Narrator: Three members of the Maslin family – 12-year-old Mo, 10-year-old Evie, and eight-year-old Otis – along with their grandfather Nick Norris, were among the Australians who died on board MH17 that day.

Nothing can prepare someone for a situation like this. As tough as they were to make, receiving these phone calls would be a gut-wrenching, life-altering moment for families and next of kin.

Still dealing with the shock of what they'd heard on the radio, Jon and Meryn O'Brien, together with their daughter Bronwyn, were desperately looking for any information that might confirm, or, miraculously, deny their worst fears.

Meryn O'Brien: In some ways time went slowly, but it was probably only a process of not that long that we had to confirm that was Jack's plane 'cause he made all his own bookings and, you know, we were looking down on his desk to try and find little bits of paper, and, um, you know, you have those numbers that come up, DFAT numbers and stuff, and so that you can call and that I've never paid attention to. So all of a sudden then we're calling it. Um, and you know, like a, just someone handled the call. And then, I can't remember if we said Jack's name and then said, um, just hold on a moment, I'll put you through to someone.

I was sitting at the end of the table and Jon was there. I think Jon's brother had arrived by then. And I'd called my brother, and Bronny was here. And then a DFAT person called Louise, I said who I was and said Jack's name. And then she said, do you have someone with you? And that's when I knew what she was about to say.

I said yes. And then she just, we can confirm that Jack checked into the flight. Um, that was it. That's how we found out. That's it.

Narrator: There were so many questions and the answers would eventually come. But to get those answers, the AFP and DFAT would have to undertake the sensitive collection of evidence and information including from the families themselves, still navigating the blurriness of grief.

Meryn O'Brien: A few of our very close friends took the day off and we went to another friend's place just to go for a walk and stuff like that. And it was then that our friend said something about, I don't know if you've seen any footage of the sunflowers, the fields of sunflowers, um, that a lot of the wreckage and the bodies were lying in the field of sunflowers. And I said, are there bodies? Like when I think back now, but this just to me shows what, like a zone we, and, and I was in. So that was from Friday morning, I didn't even know that there was bodies lying on the ground, and ... yeah, I don't know. I thought stuff had disintegrated in the air. I just like, I just like, this cone just came down.

Jon O'Brien: Yeah. I mean, I think we were in shock and it was just a blur. And I, you know, it's hard to even remember what it was like, but I think we just didn't know what had happened. I can't even remember when we learned that it was a missile and that things happened in this way.

Meryn O'Brien: We still had a landline on the wall in the kitchen. I answered the phone, the phone rang a lot. Um, but anyway, and it was Narelle Mitchell from the AFP. And she just introduced herself very calmly and just said she needed to arrange to come here to meet with us. And I knew that it was just something that had to happen. There was five of them that came. So there was Narelle and I think it was actually a superior for her from the Federal Police. And then there was two New South Wales State Police. And then there was someone like from the Coroner's Office or something...

Jon O'Brien: Yeah, there was a forensic...

Meryn O'Brien: Who sat over there.

Jon O'Brien: Person.

Meryn O'Brien: Yeah. And then like, we don't have a big house...

Jon O'Brien: Psychologist.

Meryn O'Brien: The New South Wales Police were taking like, um, like swabs for DNA.

Jon O'Brien: So it was a process of identification.

Meryn O'Brien: It was all about the identification.

Jon O'Brien: Trying to identify Jack.

Meryn O'Brien: Obviously we'd never done anything like that before. But Narelle was the constant person. The other people I wouldn't have even a clue what their names were.

Jon O'Brien: It was then that I think Narelle was established as the regular family liaison person for the AFP.

Jon O'Brien: So then we'd met Louise, who was from DFAT who became the constant with DFAT and Narelle became the constant with the AFP.

Meryn O'Brien: It was really important that I just knew those two people. I just had Louise. And then she backed out eventually with the DFAT stuff dropped off. And then Narelle. And it was also really important, I think for, for Bronwyn as well, that it wasn't just like the nameless AFP. It was like there...

Jon O'Brien: There was this person that we knew.

Meryn O'Brien: Oh, we'll ask Narelle that. You know, oh, we'll email Narelle or Narelle will let us know that <laugh>. And so she was the funnel for, uh, everything, to us for years.

Narrator: AFP Family Investigative Liaison Officers, or FILOs, are crucial in investigations like this, gathering vital information such as DNA for identifying victims and collaborating with international law enforcement and partner agencies for information they can pass on to families.

For the O'Briens, their assigned FILO Narelle Mitchell was an unwavering source of strength, keeping them updated and offering emotional and practical support, even as they mourned the loss of their son and the future he never got to embrace.

Jon O'Brien: I mean, every parent loves, you know, we love our kids, but he was obviously very incredibly special to us.

Meryn O'Brien: Mm-hmm.

Jon O'Brien: He was on that point of moving out and blossoming and, you know, embracing his life.

Meryn O'Brien: Mm-hmm.

Jon O'Brien: And I guess that's some of the hardest aspects that that right to embrace his life was taken away from him.

Narrator: The investigation into the downing of MH17 would continue for eight and a half years. During that entire time, the AFP supported the next of kin of all Australian victims' however they could. At times, that support was both comforting and bittersweet.

In July 2018, still grief-stricken over the loss of their son, Jon and Meryn O'Brien got word that CCTV footage from inside Schiphol Airport on July 17, 2014, had become available ... and that it may contain some of Jack's final moments. The AFP gave them the option to fly to the Netherlands to view it.

Meryn O'Brien: So we knew that the Dutch families had gone through quite a long process, which involved their parliament, I think, changing some laws so that security footage from right through the airport precinct could be released. So just all the shops in the airport, like, that they have of people walking past, as well as the airport ones of the walkways and stuff like that. And we knew that they had had the chance if they wanted to to sift through and find the last footage of their family members. And, um, we knew eventually that we would get the chance to do that. I don't actually think we hesitated too much 'cause Jack had been ripped from our lives and if there was a chance to find even a few seconds of footage of him from his last steps on Earth, then I would look for it. And Jon felt the same.

Narrator: Meryn and Jon boarded the long-haul flight to Amsterdam, arriving after more than 30 hours in transit and were greeted by a number of Dutch Family Liaison Officers. But, after their long and emotionally-fraught journey from the other side of the world, Jon says there was one person in particular they were surprised and relieved to see – AFP Detective Superintendent David Nelson.

Jon O'Brien: I mean, we were just so pleased to see him. To hear an Australian voice and then to see him, and then not only that, he wasn't just kind of saying hello and then ducking off to all the work that he had to do. He then proceeded to sit with us...

Meryn O'Brien: Mm-Hmm.

Jon O'Brien: For the next three, might've been four hours, sifting through footage and looking for images of Jack.

Narrator: At that time, Detective Superintendent Nelson was Australia's Senior Investigating Officer on the JIT – the MH17 Joint Investigation Team comprising authorities from the Netherlands, Australia, Malaysia, Belgium and Ukraine.

Nelson had been working behind the scenes with his Dutch counterparts to find CCTV footage, captured from inside Schiphol Airport on July 17, 2014. From hours and hours of recordings, he'd carefully found and pieced together the narrative of some of Jack's last moments.

For the O'Briens, it made for tough viewing.

Jon O'Brien: David, you know, found this footage of him near the point where he's putting his bags in to be processed. But David sat with us through that whole time and helped us identify that footage.

Meryn O'Brien: It was just like hours, looking at people moving through an airport and trying to find him. And I mean, in the end, we ended up with 11 segments, which some were just a few seconds. And then some were like up to 15 or 20 seconds of Jack progressively making his way through the airport, the check-in and then through to where the plane was boarding. But what we hadn't realised until that point was how he actually came, like, quite close to missing the plane. And we knew from his friend that they were late but he was progressively, um, moving more quickly, and then like doing a little skip to sort of run along. The last shot was this like walkway thing. And there was no like queuing 'cause everybody had boarded and it was just like this empty walkway,

Jon O'Brien: Dark tunnel.

Meryn O'Brien: With Jack from behind, just running by that stage to get on the plane. Yeah. And I just thought, oh, why didn't you fall over? Like, you know, like it, why didn't you break your leg or something? I mean, if we'd got a phone call from Amsterdam to say, I've broken my leg, we would've thought, oh, that's terrible. You know? But now, knowing what's happened, I just thought, ah, that was terrible.

Jon O'Brien: It was probably one of the most piercing and excruciating things we've ever done.

Narrator: The O'Briens are one of so many families whose lives were forever changed as a result of the MH17 tragedy.

As more and more families received confirmation that their loved ones had been on board the flight, moves were already in place to commence the treacherous mission of retrieving their bodies from the crash site.

A crash site that stretched for more than 50 square kilometres through rural villages and towns, caught up in an active conflict. Across field after field of sunflowers, strewn with smoking debris, human remains and personal effects. Somewhere, within this chaos, would lie the answers authorities and the families were so desperately seeking.

For the AFP, the investigation into the downing of MH17 would become one of the agency's most complex global missions. Undertaken half a world away, battling misinformation, time constraints, and pressure from all sides, it was a mission requiring unprecedented local and international teamwork and diplomatic negotiations.

In the coming episodes, we'll hear from people who would become central to the search for truth ... and the fight for justice. Disaster Victim Identification experts, FILOs, forensic specialists, and investigators. Each with their own story.

Brian McDonald: We came, from memory, around a corner and here's the main part of the crash site. And there's fuselage and I remember, there's luggage, there's children's toys, just strewn for, I, I dunno, probably more than a kilometre and where, um, at one point, I picked up some paperwork and by coincidence, it was the paperwork of one of the Australian families. And again, that's near some kids stuffed toys and luggage and other things and it's just, yeah, it strikes you, just the horror that the people on the plane must have gone through.

Narrator: The investigation into the world's deadliest plane shoot-down incident had just begun.

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Australian Police Officers and other emergency workers can also seek assistance from support services available within their organisation, or from the National Emergency Worker Support Service.

You can learn more about this service at blackdoginstitute.org.au.

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