

Search Among The Sunflowers: Episode 5 – A Quiet Acceptance

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 contains language that may be offensive for some people and is not suitable for children. Listener discretion is advised.

Brian McDonald: There was a great sense of representing the Australian families. So to give them some level of satisfaction that we've searched the crash site, and we were lucky enough that we actually collected enough material that we were able to identify all of the people that we believed to be on the flight, so all of the victims could be laid to rest. I think that was probably the biggest driving factor, certainly for me, and that just reinforced exactly what it was that we were doing and why we were there. We've actually been able to do what it is that we actually set out to do, for the families.

Hilda Sirec: They had to take a chance that this was gonna be done right, and it was gonna be done in a way that provides them answers and truth and in done in a respectful way. And they just had to trust that that was gonna happen.

Peter Crozier: There were 298 people killed and that's 298 people who have families, who have friends. So, to all those families, that's their person and some of them more, you know. The 298 people who lost their life, absolutely, but tenfold. Every day they're dealing with this.

Narrator: For the Australian Federal Police, the 8-and-a-half-year investigation into the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 was one of the most complex missions they've ever undertaken.

On July 17, 2014, the passenger jet was shot down in the skies over eastern Ukraine, killing all 298 people on board. The investigation would challenge AFP members physically, mentally, and emotionally. What kept them moving forward was an understanding of why they were doing this and who they were doing it for.

Peter Crozier: This is, you know, one of those investigations where it's all about those families 'cause it's all about their loss. You just don't lose sight of that. It never became about the AFP. It never became about our partners. It was always about those who they had lost, and how we could ensure that in just some way, that the family have a quiet acceptance of what had occurred. And hopefully part of the investigation and the findings, and then the outcome of the trial, has given them that quiet acceptance. Mm-hmm.

Narrator: This is Search Among the Sunflowers, looking for truth in the world's biggest crime scene. It's a story of courage, determination and humanity, and the lifelong connections that can come from tragedy. It's also a story about the unwavering dedication of the AFP in the pursuit of justice for victims of crime and the families left behind.

Episode 5.

For the next of kin, the criminal convictions handed down to three men in November 2022 would bring to a close one chapter of their MH17 story. But in 2014, as the wreckage of the passenger jet lay smouldering in rural fields near the Russian-Ukraine border and the search for evidence continued, the families and next of kin of the MH17 victims faced a new reality - a lifetime ahead, without their loved ones, and a painful journey of trying to come to terms with their grief. For Australian families, the AFP would not let them go through it alone.

Peter Crozier: So the Family Investigative Liaison Officer network as it is, we established that post-Bali. And to a certain extent, the AFP and the nature of the investigations that we were undertaking at a national level prior to that hadn't really called for that direct connection between people suffering trauma or tragedy the way it is in a community policing area. We didn't have that direct network as far as being able to reach out to families and say these processes.

Narrator: The FILO network that AFP Assistant Commissioner Peter Crozier is describing is a group of trained AFP personnel who connect families and investigators. When Australians are involved in catastrophic events overseas, FILOs step in and instantly play a dual role - assisting with police inquiries and supporting distressed families.

The FILOs were established around the time of the 2002 Bali bombings. To this day, they continue to support Australian residents and their families affected by major incidents such as aircraft crashes, natural disasters, kidnappings, and terrorist incidents.

MH17 was a large-scale tragedy. Thirty-eight people who called Australia home were killed, each of them with next of kin suddenly forced into a world they never thought they'd have to encounter. It's a world the AFP and their FILO network would help them navigate.

Peter Crozier: There's two really important parts for me about the FILO process. The second most important discussion you have with somebody is when you say to them, if you need us, we'll be there. The most important conversation you have with a person is when they do reach out that you are there and you deliver on that undertaking.

Narrator: The AFP's FILO cohort consists of four full-time officers, and around 160 part-time trained investigators.

Yvonne Crozier: All of those police are detectives and investigators who have a real victim-centric approach to policing and have worked in victim-based crime and possibly child protection or ACT Policing, and just have a really thorough understanding of working with families who might've lost a loved one, um, who was suffering loss and grief. And very senior investigators in that they very much know all the criminal justice processes so that they're in a position to help families navigate the criminal justice system.

Narrator: AFP Detective Superintendent Yvonne Crozier is a career police officer who trained as a FILO following the Bali bombings. She became Team Leader of the AFP FILOs in 2014.

Yvonne Crozier: Ordinarily, when families come across police, they might not have had contact before. I often refer to them as undergoing extraordinary circumstances. And one of our roles is to help them navigate those systems to understand what to expect next and to be a single point of truth through all the white noise that occurs when you are, uh, experiencing extraordinary circumstances.

Narrator: Every Australian MH17 family was assigned an AFP FILO, carefully coordinated to ensure everyone had equal support and information.

Yvonne Crozier: My primary role initially was managing the deployments of FILOs out to families. Families could be located in Albany or Mallacoota or all of those other more remote locations where we don't actually have AFP officers. So, we also worked with the State and Territory police to make that first contact with families.

It's really important for us to ensure that we are trying to deploy out to families at the same time because, of course, family groups start getting to know each other and it's really important they get the same information at the same time with the tyranny of distance.

We deployed with a primary and a secondary FILO so that over time, the families always have someone they've met before, um, when we're meeting with them. And as we've seen with, um, the response to MH17, that could be for a number of years. So, from the start of an incident, you don't necessarily know how long it will go, but we can, um, give families an assurance that over time we'll be with them right through to the end of the verdict and any other process or appeals processes that occur moving forward. Um, and that's really important. Families don't need to retell their story to so many

different people over time. And that trust and what's passed before becomes inherently known, between the FILO and the family.

Narrator: Jon and Meryn O'Brien were connected with Narelle Mitchell, an AFP FILO in 2014 and now a Detective Sergeant. While they mourned their son Jack, Narelle was a constant support to the O'Briens, even when the role involved some heartbreaking discussions.

Jon O'Brien: Narelle was the one who rang us when Jack's body was identified. You know, so we were at a football game. One of the things that gave us solace, like we were football fans, Jack was a big football fan, and we were members of the Western Sydney Wanderers football team that started in Western Sydney only in 2012. So Jack came in, he was a, you know, one of the original members, as were we, and he was in the supporters called the red and black block. We didn't go anywhere else. And it was a Wanderers game and Meryn gets a phone call and we had to go to the back of the stadium where we could hear.

Meryn O'Brien: It was...

Jon O'Brien: Six weeks...

Meryn O'Brien: Six weeks after Jack had been killed. And, um, the phone rang and, um, it was Narelle and I thought, this is unusual. She's ringing like, at this time. And I said, should I be going to get Jon? And she said, yeah, I think you should go and get Jon. And then she told us Jack's body's been identified.

Narrator: What seem like unimaginable conversations to you and I are a necessary part of the job for every AFP FILO.

Yvonne Crozier: It's very traumatic to receive a phone call. Even someone's ringtone over time post the event can be traumatic, um, just to hear the phone ring in itself. But unfortunately, um, we're often the reminder of the worst day of their lives.

There were times where I'd make some difficult phone calls in those initial stages and do so with the FILOs deployed or specialists like Dr Simon Walsh, um, to explain some difficult processes to, to some families. Um, yeah, definitely some calls stay very clearly in my, my mind. And delivering bad news is never easy. The FILOs attending, um, initially is like delivering a, a death message, but over time, as identifications take place, it's like hearing of the death all over again for the families. So the FILOs do that as sensitively as they can with the training that they've been given. Takes a certain sort of person to, um, to be able to do that.

Narrator: The FILO role is not a job for just anyone.

Yvonne Crozier: They've got high levels of empathy, emotional intelligence, they know how to talk to people suffering loss and grief. They know investigative processes and they know how to sit in, in the silence that's sometimes required in some of these conversations.

David Horder:

It took four weeks for the identification process to happen. We had a celebration memorial for my parents on the 15th of August 2014. Neither of them had been identified at that stage. 7 or 800 people turned up, it was beautiful, and Matthew, Adam and I, we really worked hard to celebrate my parents that day. Got home, and the doorbell rang, so this was back at mum and dad's place, and it was the AFP and mum had been identified. So we found out about mum on the night of the memorial that she'd been identified. And that was through DNA. All three of us had been swabbed in the weeks leading up to this. And dad was five days later, and he had been identified with DNA and I think dental records. So that was, that was amazing.

Then we were able to... honestly, I think we were booked on flights all organised through DFAT and FILO and all of that, um, I would say the following week we were on our way and to go to bring mum and dad home and to start to start the process.

Narrator: David Horder lost his parents, Howard and Susan, in the MH17 tragedy. Even as an Australian living overseas, he had the full support of the AFP's FILO network.

David Horder: Because I had lived in London for 13 years, I had to go back to London and pack up my things. And you know, I think it's really easy for, for the public to criticise government and, and AFP or, you know, most people have no idea. I had no idea. But our itinerary was put together by them for me and my brothers to fly to London so that I had support to pack up my things and get everything sent back to Australia. And I will, I'll always be grateful for that. I was not alone. I was not, I didn't have to go back there and do that by myself. And I had the support from the country that I was from.

Narrator: That support offered to the next of kin extended well beyond travel arrangements. Importantly, the FILOs became a 'single point of truth' in what was becoming an increasingly complex investigation.

Yvonne Crozier: With incidents like MH17, there's lots of stakeholders involved. There's unusual reporting in the media. There's a lot of white noise and FILOs really become a, a single point of truth to validate or dismiss information that the family are receiving. They're the conduit for the investigation team. So what families need most is information from the very start and as early as possible. So being able to capture the

truth through the investigation teams and DFAT, who are leading offshore harming, to ensure that the families have access to a point of truth that is built on rapport and trust over time as well. What's really important is that families have a face-to-face point of contact as soon as possible and that person is their point of contact in all of that, that white noise.

Narrator: Establishing that level of trust requires a deep understanding of what each family needs. And it's never a case of one size fits all.

Yvonne Crozier: We try to stack the information and develop a communication plan with the family. Um, every family has a different, uh, have different needs and different ways of being alerted to a phone call. Some communication plans would be to text the families before ringing, for example. For some families, you know, that they're suffering shock, loss, and grief all in one. And confusion. So how we manage each family in those initial stages is really important as well.

Some of the processes that we need to undertake with them to help identify their loved ones are often referred to as inhumane, uh, in those early stages when they're still in shock. Um, so really trying to work with families to understand the importance of some of the, the things that we need to go through with them, whilst also caring for their needs at the same time, uh, is really important, in those initial stages.

In those first couple of weeks, the frequent contact is more likely in that, uh, there's a thirst for information from families. And the communication plan might be that they want information as soon as it's made available to us. If they ask questions of our FILOs, we feed that back into our investigation team, because if one family's asking, no doubt every family's got a similar question. So we make sure we bring those questions in and then filter answers out to all families at once.

Narrator: The scale of human tragedy from the downing of MH17 was immense. 298 people lost their lives that day.

Along with Australia, the victims included people from Belgium, Canada, Germany, Indonesia, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Malaysia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the Philippines, Romania, South Africa, the UK, the USA and Vietnam.

With the largest toll of 196 victims, it made sense that the Dutch would lead the Joint Investigation Team and be the jurisdiction for the ultimate criminal prosecution.

Alwin Dam was part of the Dutch prosecution team, in his role as Prosecutor for the Next of Kin. In an extraordinary show of emotional support, he visited Australia to meet with those who faced a future without those they loved.

Alwin Dam: I had, uh, met all next of kin in the Netherlands, uh, in the period before the trial. And then we discussed, why not meet the next of kin in Australia, because there were big groups of next of kin. Um, and that's why they decided, uh, to go, me and a colleague from victim support Netherlands and two, uh, police officers, to go to Australia.

And what was an emotional moment also for me, uh, just to meet at the other end of the world, uh, so much next of kin, people with questions. Different from the Dutch questions, and also the same questions with their emotions, just to give them a hand, to give them a hug, um, to cry with them a little sometimes, but also to tell them that the whole team, but especially me, I am there for you. We are there for you, and we will do everything to get justice for you.

Narrator: The role of an AFP FILO is unique. At times the bearer of devastating information. At others, a voice of reason amid the chaos of grief. They're a shoulder to cry on and an avenue through which to vent. It's a remarkable skillset to have.

David Horder: Everything came through the FILO team. And just 10 out of 10. Stellar. Uh, I was able to pick up the phone, I was able to be open and, and honest and share how I'm actually feeling about, about a situation or something that they were sharing. And particularly Yvonne Crozier became somebody that I was able to talk to. And there'd be, I'd be, I remember, um, sharing a lot with Yvonne, uh, from a personal level, I just needed someone from the, the AFP and someone that's... these guys were, were involved in MH17 for a long period of time.

And I felt so comfortable being able to talk to them The AFP became people that we could talk to about the, the lack of, uh, justice, the unbelievable nature of, uh, the lies and, uh, Rus-, Russia's campaign of disinformation. And it's a lot to process and it's a lot to get your head around because, oh, it's not the world we've grown up in. So having people like Yvonne and Kim and, and, and all the investigators, Peter Crozier, they were on our side fighting for us and passionate and angry and pissed off in the right way. And I just cannot be any more grateful for that, that genuine support.

Jon O'Brien: I didn't get a sense that AFP people had an unrealistic expectation about grief or, you know, thought it was something that, you know, was terrible for six months or a year, and then you got over it and ... never even used that sort of language.

Meryn O'Brien: No.

Jon O'Brien: They didn't talk about it a lot, we just got a sense that they understood what it was like and, yeah. Understood how difficult everything was and, yeah. That they didn't have any expectations of us behaving in a certain way, um, or not.

Jon O'Brien: That was really helpful to, like, yeah ... they, they knew something of what it was like, and just how hard it was.

Meryn O'Brien: I mean, they may not, may or may not have experienced grief like this, but I guess they're used to being in traumatic situations. We weren't used to being in traumatic situations, but, um, I sort of felt like they got it somehow in the way that we were, were dealt with.

Narrator: The process of identifying and repatriating victims was long and arduous. But for the Australian victims' next of kin, those confirmations would eventually come. So too would the remains of their loved ones ... brought home to Australia on board a series of RAAF aircraft.

David Horder: There was a beautiful, uh, service in a private hangar at Melbourne Airport, and they were taken off the plane and yeah, we, we finally got them home. We still had to get them to Queensland, but I believe every Australian victim came to Melbourne first, for the coroner. And then we finally got them to Brisbane. And then we were able to make plans for, for the funeral.

I think it's very important to say that as dramatic as their exit was, it is important to highlight that they genuinely were best mates, so for them to leave together, there's something beautiful in that.

Jon O'Brien: We were brought beforehand into this massive, you know, military, uh, aircraft hangar and seated in chairs and with all the doors closed. And then the door opened, and this dark green transport plane was backed up. I don't know if that's the right word. And the lower, you know, back of the plane comes down. And then, uh, a single piper and drummer emerge from the back of the plane and come and stand down on the tarmac at the side of the plane at the front of the hangar door with everybody watching.

And then very slowly, the three coffins are brought down that, that gangway of the plane, you know, borne by soldiers in full dress uniform, immaculate dress uniform with Australian flags draped over the coffins. And they're marched down and, you know, and they're stepping, you know, to the sound of that single drum and single, you know, piper coming into that hangar.

And then the coffins are laid down on these, you know, supports. And I guess that's, was one of the most single searingly painful memories of the whole thing. Jack was away for seven weeks, and I was looking forward to him coming home, you know, most of that time. Um, and looking forward so much to picking him up and seeing him again. And then for him, you know, to come home in that way, not in the way that we'd

expected and wanted. And I, you know, I remember Bronwyn just draping herself, just sobbing and draping herself over the, over the coffin. Um, yeah. I'll, I'll always remember that.

Narrator: The role of the AFP in global disasters is not obvious to most Australians. Thankfully, most of us will never have cause to interact with the AFP in this way, to be allocated our own FILO, or even assist with the collection of evidence. Those who do are often surprised by what the AFP does.

David Horder: I knew what it stood for, Australian Federal Police, but I had no idea. It's not until you're involved in something that you realise the importance of that. Most people, most people wouldn't understand or appreciate how lucky we are that we're from Australia and we have this.

Jon O'Brien: I would've known we had a Federal Police Force.

Meryn O'Brien: And...

Jon O'Brien: Had a vague idea.

Meryn O'Brien: Something to do with Canberra.

Jon O'Brien: A vague idea maybe about what the sorts of things maybe, some of the sorts of things that they do. But no, wouldn't have, wouldn't have really thought very deeply at all about what their role is or the, that they respond to these sorts of situations. Wouldn't have had any clue that there was such a thing as disaster response and Family Liaison Officers who did that sort of work. But <laugh>...

Meryn O'Brien: I mean, we knew about probably, you know, about like investigative stuff involving Federal things and...

Jon O'Brien: Oh you know...

Meryn O'Brien: Stuff, stuff overseas and stuff like that.

Jon O'Brien: Drug hauls from overseas and, you know, Interpol and...

Meryn O'Brien: Yeah. But not...

Jon O'Brien: But the stuff of movies and...

Meryn O'Brien: Not what we know now.

Narrator: For more than eight years, a global network of professionals worked tirelessly in search of the truth about what happened to Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17. In search of answers. In search of healing.

Using the strong body of evidence from the JIT investigation, the Australian Government joined with the Netherlands to bring a claim against the Russian Federation for its role in the downing of MH17 in the International Civil Aviation Organisation. These proceedings are ongoing.

And while the JIT investigation was officially paused in February 2023, those involved will never forget what happened on July 17, 2014. Nor will they forget the loved ones of those on board.

Yvonne Crozier: We still provide a number of updates, um, and are available if needed as we move into the other action and sanctions. But it's really important for us to step back and, and, um, allow families to try and live their lives without us in it. You're aware that you're a constant reminder to families of their loss. Um, and even though we're not present, um, I'm sure families know that daily, they're still front of mind, uh, in all that we do. Yeah. 'Cause even though the verdict's occurred, there's still, you know, the follow-up care until a point where there becomes a natural, um, lessening of contact in the relationship and, and an exit from the relationship. Yeah. You still watch from afar, though.

Narrator: Jon and Meryn O'Brien will never see their son Jack again. They'll never have another conversation, or barrack at another Western Sydney Wanderers football match, or witness the incredible life he should have had. But without doubt, his memory lives on. And he's still with them, years later.

Jon O'Brien: I wrote Jack a letter the night before he left just 'cause he was going away for seven weeks, and I had a friend who used to talk about writing letters to his kids. So I just thought I'd take the opportunity and put, it wasn't a long letter, it was only a page and a half. And I just said, uh, you know what I thought of him as a person and how much I respected and cared for him and loved him and how proud we were of him and hope he really enjoyed the trip and made the most of it. And I gave it to him on the way to the airport. And he said, oh, what's this? And I said, it's just a letter.

And then he sent a brief text a couple of days later. He said, I read dad's letter. It was very nice and brought a tear to my eye.

Um, when his friend came back, he said, oh yeah, Jack talked about that letter and that it meant a lot to him. So I often thought about that letter and, you know, what happened to the letter and those sorts of things.

And all the stuff that we got back, because it was just so painful and so raw, it sat in a corner underneath a wooden thing in our bedroom for about three years. Yeah. Maybe four years.

Meryn O'Brien: Still all packaged.

Jon O'Brien: The beautifully brown wrapped paper packages with all those different things in them wrapped in tissue, just sitting in this box. Um, and we didn't even know exactly what was in there. And eventually I thought, okay, it's time to unwrap it.

So we, I opened the box and took off the, you know, nicely addressed, just in text, a brown paper wrapper and took out the various things and inside was his day pack. And we knew that they had to have the process of things being taken out and separated and cleaned. So we thought, well, everything's been disaggregated and taken out and there won't be anything in there. And it was just a pack, just a simple day pack with some compartments. But in it so there was, the main thing was empty, but there were two parts of the compartment that were kind of folded together, and I just separated those. And there was a few scraps of paper in there, sort of tickets and those sorts of things. But then there was another sheet of paper and an envelope. And in the envelope was the letter that I'd written him.

Meryn O'Brien: Mm-Hmm. It came back.

Jon O'Brien: So it came back. It survived that whole trip and came back.

Narrator: Most Australians think they know the story of MH17. We remember the vision of the fireball as the fuselage hit the ground and exploded. We remember there were many Australians on board, some of them children. Some may be aware of the criminal investigation, and the people who were charged. And we might know they weren't present when their life sentences for murder were handed down.

But those who knew the victims, and the investigators who strived to find the truth on their behalf, they have a different story. Like Hilda Sirec, now an AFP Assistant Commissioner, they will carry it with them. The human side of the tragedy. Every lost moment, every potential future, every word left unspoken. And all that was left scattered, across fields of sunflowers, far from home.

Hilda Sirec: I've seen a lot of, you know, tragedy in my career and I've seen a lot of things that are hard to sort of look away from. Um, but certainly for, for me and constantly thinking about is, um, you know, the bodies and the belongings. So how tiny the, um, the bones on some of the victims were. Um, just constantly think that there's so many people, um, and it really doesn't matter how old you are when you're a victim of a

crime such as this, but how young so many of the victims were on the plane, and the fact that they had their lives cut so short. And a lot of them were probably on holidays or visiting family or were going somewhere where they really were excited about. And that was just snuffed out.

So the bodies. And then the belongings. So many things, innocuous things like, you know, glasses and sunglasses and boarding passes and passports and little fluffy toys, they, each one of those represented someone on that plane. And even though not everyone was able to be located significantly across the time that we were there, everything that we located in terms of their belongings represented them, uh, and it just became a reminder, uh, that there were humans on board this flight and they're no longer with us.

I can go, you know, days, weeks, months, and, and not put myself there necessarily 'cause you know, life, life does carry on and, um, other things come in its way. And I know for the families and the friends and the victims, you know, every day is still an acute reminder of, um, who they've lost. But every time I do have the opportunity to think and reflect back, it just takes me straight there. Um, I can still remember going straight into that crash site, starting to take photos and snap away. Um, and then look at the tragedy that was there, the sadness that was there, and then all of a sudden you look across the farmland and you've got this whole field of sunflowers and they're just out there standing proud. Um, and either oblivious to what's gone on around them, or a signal to just say, this is what's happened here but we're gonna carry on.

Penny Wong: I'm Penny Wong, Australia's Foreign Minister.

In the 10 years since the downing of MH17, Australia and international partners have pursued truth, justice and accountability for the 298 people who lost their lives and their families.

We continue our fight to hold Russia to account.

All our efforts are for those who we lost that day, and the loved ones who grieve them.

We mourn all the lives lost, including those who called Australia home.

Ithamar Avnon

Wayne Baker

Theresa Baker

Emma Bell

Michael Clancy
Carol Clancy
Francesca Davison
Liam Davison
Liliane Derden
Fatima Dyczynski
Marco Grippeling
Jill Guard
Roger Guard
Howard Horder
Susan Horder
Gabriele Lauschet
Mona Lee
Why Kee-Ong Gary Lee
Edelle Mahady
Emiel Mahler
Otis Maslin
Mo Maslin
Evie Maslin
Nick Norris
Mary Menke
Gerardus Menke
Dafne Nieveen
Jack O'Brien
Victor Oreshkin
Albert Rizk
Maree Rizk
Arjen Ryder
Yvonne Ryder
Helena Sidelik
Elaine Teoh

Sister Philomene Tiernan
Johannes Van Den Hende
Shaliza Dewa
Margaux Van Den Hende
Marnix Van Den Hende
Piers Van Den Hende

We remember you. Our thoughts remain with all who lost loved ones.

Narrator: If the content in this podcast has caused you to experience any mental health concerns, a range of support is available.

For immediate help, please call triple zero.

You can also call Lifeline on 13 11 14 – 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

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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