

Liaison officers' role challenging and rewarding in city of great extremes

Photo: Christopher Springmann, courtesy the United States Information Service, Canberra.



Cityscape of the Bunker Hill area of Los Angeles.



Federal Agent Steve Bullock

By Richard Crothers

Federal Agent Steve Bullock has a big territory to cover. He lives in a city with the population almost that of Australia. It's a city surrounded by sometimes snowcapped mountains – that are rarely seen by its inhabitants – smog from millions of cars rises to obscure the view. It's a city where some people have obscene amounts of wealth while others panhandle for nickels and dimes on street corners – or resort to the rule of the gun to get what they need. Yet, Steve has decided to stay for another two years. Los Angeles is that kind of town.

“LA is a 24-hour-a-day city – a city that never sleeps,” says Steve.

“There is smog and crime and tragedy, but there is also fun and excitement.”

Steve is the AFP's liaison officer in Los Angeles. He and senior liaison officer Shane Castles look after a territory that covers the western half of the North American continent, Mexico and Hawaii.

They are two of four LOs in the USA. Federal Agents Tom Lack and Noel Scobell take care of the eastern half and are based in Washington.

Los Angeles city itself covers some 340 square miles and is only a part of Los Angeles County which is made up of numerous other towns and cities and is one of four counties, with no rural area between them, that make up the Southern California area. The population of the area numbers more than 17 million – almost all of Australia's population in one urban sprawl.

"Our job is to liaise with law enforcement agencies over here on a wide range of offences which could have an Australian connection," says Steve.

In the USA there are upward of 17,000 law enforcement agencies, many who have never heard of the AFP, so it is a challenge for liaison officers such as Steve

Bullock to get the message across that the AFP has a presence there to assist in any Australian-related enquiries.

One of the other challenges that Steve says he enjoys is having the opportunity to deal with investigations across a wide spectrum of offences. This could range from family law cases to murder. However, much of an AFP liaison officers' work entails working with other agencies in the war against organised crime.

"This office is here for all police forces in Australia, so we have to deal with kidnappings, homicides, all the way to the major drug investigations that we would handle in the regions."

In a society where all law enforcement officers and most criminals carry weapons, Steve said his American counterparts were amazed that the US-based AFP federal agents were not armed.

"It's a question often asked. When they find out we go about unarmed, our counterparts find it hard to believe and offer up one of their many personal firearms.

"It's an offer we don't take up."

In a city where violence has become the norm rather than the exception, Steve says that he still has to be very careful as he travels around.

"My predecessors experienced the riots after the Rodney King beating and I have had the experience of witnessing reaction to the O.J. Simpson trial and verdict," says Steve.

"It's a bit like the movie *"Falling Down"*. Violence can be just around the corner in a multitude of forms.

"One of the main things that you have to adjust to here is the personal safety aspect. In a

nation where nearly everybody carries guns, you have to assume somebody has a gun rather than the opposite.

"In all the time I've been here, I don't think I have ever honked the horn when I've been driving. The instances of a person honking someone and being shot in return is very high.

"Only recently over a three week period, we had snipers on the freeway and 235 cars had their rear windows shot out."

The AFP has recently set up new offices with the Australian Consulate and the Australian Tourist Commission in the Century Towers complex – two triangular skyscrapers that tower over the smaller buildings around them. The area

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used to be part of the Twentieth Century Fox backlot before it was sold off in the 1970s. The 25-year-old buildings have been extensively refurbished and the AFP offices have a wide view of the surrounding cityscape. The view would be magnificent on a clear day – but that is rare in Los Angeles.

"It was around last Christmas. Traffic was light and a strong wind was blowing the smog out to sea," Steve said.

"I was driving to work and there in front of me were snow-capped mountains. Until that time, I never knew Los Angeles had such a magnificent backdrop. Most people visiting LA wouldn't know they were there."

With such a large territory to cover, Steve and Shane are on the move continually. Steve has recently returned from a conference in North Carolina and Shane attended the AFP's liaison officers' conference in London. But Steve said he loves his work.

"Once a month I attend a conference of 30 or so intelligence officers all from different agencies who meet to share intelligence and network," says Steve.

"Its opportunities like these that you would never experience in Australia."

Steve considers the work carried out by overseas liaison officers very important to the core business of the AFP as well as being personally worthwhile and rewarding.

"I consider my current posting as being the highlight of my career so far. I hope to do more liaison work in the future. Maybe next time in London."