

A world map with a dark blue background and light blue landmasses. Several regions are highlighted in a bright orange color, including North America, South America, Europe, Australia, and parts of Asia and Africa. The map is centered on the Atlantic Ocean.

Rescue in the dark recesses of the Internet

How cooperation between international law enforcement agencies brought down a nefarious online paedophile network.

The offenders came from all walks of life. Some were teachers and others were Scout leaders, retail workers, IT consultants and farmhands. They were aged as young as 19, while some were in their eighties. They came from Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States, New Zealand, South America, Canada and Europe. Arrests were ultimately made in 30 countries.

The two things they had in common were a sexual interest in male children and membership of the BoyLover.net website. When Operation Rescue culminated, 184 offenders were taken into custody. A further 670 suspects were identified. Importantly, 230 children were rescued from ongoing sexual exploitation.

Operation Rescue was the largest operation of its kind in the world and one of the most successful international law enforcement actions in its own right. The magnitude of the investigation prompted intense worldwide media coverage. The flow-on effect of media also served to send a warning into the dark recesses of the Internet. In the wake of the BoyLover arrests more than a dozen similar websites closed shop for fear of police action.

The media opportunity was certainly not lost on law enforcement agencies. At a media conference in March 2011, the head of the UK's Child Exploitation

and Online Protection Centre Peter Davies issued a stark warning.

“Most of our advice to children and young people is to think carefully on how they go on the Internet because they don't know who they are speaking to.

“The truth of it is that if you are an offender, if you are pursuing the Internet to pursue your interest in child sexual abuse then you also do not know who you are speaking to. Because during the course of this operation offenders were discovered because they were talking to our own covert Internet investigators – not the people they thought they were dealing with.”

Operation Caledon

For the AFP, the BoyLover investigation began in Sydney. The AFP's newly formed Child Protection Operations (CPO) was still in its infancy in 2008 after an amalgamation and restructure of different teams. Federal Agent Kel Mansfield had just taken over as team leader in the Sydney office.

The staff in Sydney were relatively new to the crime type and pursuing many high-turnover overseas referrals. The AFP was generating its own referrals as well, mainly working on persons downloading child pornography material. “We were mindful of making

The world map shows the reach of the BoyLover.net through the Internet.



The BoyLover.net website masked a dark tide of global child sexual exploitation. Its members were targeted by multiple law enforcement agencies working together under Operation Rescue.

our mark,” Federal Agent Mansfield says, and “looking for a job that would stretch the boundaries of the team into more complex areas”.

Then the perfect opportunity came along. Information was referred to Sydney office on an Australian citizen who was travelling to Thailand to sexually offend against young boys. The Australian was known to law enforcement and referred to as ‘Box’. The problem with Box was that he worked as an IT consultant and spent a lot of his time overseas.

“So it was pretty hard to monitor him,” Federal Agent Mansfield says. “But he did have a close colleague who again was an IT specialist residing in Sydney, and who the AFP held information on related to alleged child sex offences. So we broadened the scope of the investigation to include him.

“We were looking for evidence through their communications of any historical trips the two had made to Thailand together or whether they were planning another trip.”

Specialist policing methods were used to identify illicit communications between Box and the Sydney-based man, known as ‘SyD’. Both suspects were part of a website discussion board known as BoyLover.net. It became apparent the two had senior positions in the BoyLover hierarchy.

Federal Agent Kel Mansfield can’t remember exactly what he thought when he first encountered the BoyLover.net website but as the investigation advanced he and his team were already looking ahead to orchestrate a multi-agency investigation into the BoyLover network. The AFP investigation also now had a name – Operation Caledon.

From the AFP investigations it became apparent that the BoyLover group had its own rank structure and was heavily regulated and stringently policed internally. BoyLover members were clearly aware that their sexual interests in children were unlawful in most jurisdictions in which they lived. Senior members were responsible for monitoring new posts. Anything that could be clearly determined ‘child pornography’ was removed from the site.

“I can’t state as to whether they were confident it would stay under the radar forever,” Federal Agent Mansfield says. “But BoyLover.net certainly took measures to ensure there wasn’t anything on the website that was illegal – pushing the boundaries – but technically not illegal.”

New members started off as a ‘new kid’. The more that members posted on the site and interacted with other members, the quicker they progressed through the ranks. Members advanced from new-kid status to kid, kid brother, brother, older brother, elder brother, moderator, director and owner. Both Box and SyD had been moderators.

The priority was to identify any historical child sex tourism offending by the two suspects and gather sufficient evidence for prosecution. The AFP team was also confident the two suspects would engage in the exchange, possession or creation of their own child exploitation material. The secondary objective was to gain intelligence on the BoyLover group to broaden the knowledge base and ultimately share with our international partners.

A covert AFP officer, armed with internet policing skills, joined BoyLover as a member and commenced monitoring activity and posting on the website.

A common discussion thread was protection against law enforcement for both online and physical contact offending. Encryption was always a live topic. But obtaining detailed information from the website was difficult. Newer members were not allowed into all of the website discussion rooms and the team was obviously blind to other communications between members outside the BoyLover website.

In particular, AFP officers soon became concerned about how SyD was communicating. The undercover AFP member knew that SyD was posting on the website. But his online activity wasn't visible to the Special Projects monitoring, even when SyD was posting from his Sydney residence.

It was later discovered that SyD was using a computer that was invisible to the AFP at that time. The network also employed a variety of high-level encryption for their illicit communications. Additionally, Internet protocol address cloaking tools were used.

"We thought 'there has to be some other way', either another computer or another unsecure Internet connection. So we applied for and were granted a listening device warrant to listen to conversations enabled by Skype." Success soon followed.

"We didn't have it in the place a week and we intercepted a telephone call on a Friday afternoon where SyD arranged to pick up his eight-year-old half-brother," Federal Agent Mansfield says.

SyD took his half-brother back to his apartment. The team was alert and ready to respond but the audio quality from the listening device was patchy. "While it wasn't completely clear, from what our AFP officer was listening to we formed enough suspicion that SyD was abusing his half-brother in his room."

The police response was quick but unfortunately the sexual act had concluded by the time they entered the premises. Assistance from the New South Wales Police, particularly the Sex Crimes Squad, and from Westmead Children's Hospital was outstanding but as is often the case in such matters, evidence of disclosure from the victim was not initially forthcoming. At that time the only real evidence was the recorded audio from the listening device.

But other evidence soon surfaced. Crossing international borders is a vulnerable point for any criminal activity. That's no different for child-sex offenders. Box returned to Australia, in effect to

support SyD, but at an earlier point had travelled to New Zealand.

The AFP was aware of BoyLover members in New Zealand and had informed the New Zealand authorities. New Zealand Customs stopped Box at the border and searched his laptop. As an IT consultant, Box was law enforcement savvy and thought he had permanently cleaned any images from his laptop. But a forensic analysis of the machine revealed numerous child-abuse images. Among them were photos of SyD's eight-year-old half-brother.

So the investigation continued in the pursuit of gathering the requisite evidence against the backdrop of the two primary suspects knowing they were the subject of police attention.

The support from the AFP's High Tech Crime Capability and Development Team was crucial in the employment of new investigative tools and soon Operation Caledon officers were intercepting exclusive online chat between the AFP targets and other BoyLover members, both in Australia and offshore.

It was at this point that the investigation team commenced disseminating material to partner Australian and foreign law enforcement agencies.

Persistence on other investigative fronts was rewarded and in the months that followed CPO had a much deeper insight into how the website operated and "gave us the opportunity to target the top tier of BoyLover".

Operation Rescue

The international effort also had intensified. The UK's Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) Centre had been investigating UK-based BoyLover.net members since 2007. CEOP also had infiltrated the website. By February 2008, CEOP had provided Thai authorities with intelligence gleaned from the site on suspected child sex offences.

In June 2008, a separate US investigation had also led law enforcement to The Netherlands and to 27-year-old Robert Mikelsons, a Latvian-born daycare provider who became known as the Monster of Riga. Mikelsons would eventually be sentenced to 18 years for offences against 67 children – 52 boys and 15 girls.

The AFP initiated and advanced the suggestion that law enforcement agencies should work together. By the first round of resolutions in late 2009, the



The primary AFP target of Operation Caledon, 'Box', was arrested for child sex offences. The ensuing Operation Rescue investigation resulted in 31 Australian and hundreds of international arrests.



A UK citizen living in Thailand was arrested under Operation Rescue.



Australian BoyLover operational targets 'SyD', left, and 'Box' in Sydney.

international investigation had coalesced into Operation Rescue.

The AFP was now sending referrals on individuals as far afield as the US, Canada, UK, the Philippines, Germany, Thailand, France and Brazil as well as New Zealand. While all suspects could not be fully identified, a clear picture of how BoyLover.net worked beneath its just-legal veneer was emerging.

Members shared imagery and descriptions of child sexual pornography and abuse external to the BoyLover website. An elaborate child sex tourism organisation was also in place. Members made contact through BoyLover.net (and other similar websites). As they became more trusted they were accepted into the inner circle. This brought them into contact with the overseas network. Thailand was a preferred destination.

In the main, victims were street kids, and offenders targeted them. The most vulnerable were identified and groomed. They were homeless; often orphaned and caught up in the sex trade. Many worked in specific bars catering to paedophiles.

"This would allow these other BoyLover members to offend and take away the mementos, videos and photos, and return home."

But this time was different. Federal Agent Mansfield says the AFP was working closely with CEOP and law enforcement authorities from New Zealand, the US, Canada, The Netherlands and Thailand. Federal Agent Mansfield says coordination enabled through contacts from the Virtual Global Taskforce (VGT) raised in 2003 was a crucial factor.

"It was a very slick and easy way for us to communicate. If I needed to speak to someone in Canada I'd just ring my VGT counterpart and give him a heads up and we started working together. The VGT was very much an enabler in a very complex operating environment."



Federal Agent Kel Mansfield led the successful Child Protection Operations team during the Australian investigation.

“What we didn’t want was someone to remotely disable and delete all of the information on the server before we got our hands on it.”

A further breakthrough in the UK came when law enforcement took over the account of the UK administrator of BoyLover.net. CEOP officers could now see the personal details of members, including date of birth, occupation and country of residence. A later news report in the UK’s *The Guardian* newspaper states CEOP officer Kelvin Lay was one of three British officers who had infiltrated the BoyLover website in the UK. “We were amazed that they had registered their true occupations,” he says.

“We painstakingly went through every post and message to identify whether they were physically abusing children or had access to children.”

CEOP intelligence also provided results for the AFP and Thai authorities. A UK citizen living in Pattaya, Thailand, was a close associate of the two original

Australian targets. The AFP was able to identify Thai victims of the UK citizen. One of the child victims then identified Box from a photo board.

Operation Rescue was now an extremely large multi-national effort. The operational intent was to identify the top tier of BoyLover.net and secure the evidence necessary for convictions. But the operation was also becoming extremely complex. Ultimately, more than 4000 intelligence referrals to law enforcement agencies in 30 countries would be disseminated.

Concerns for child safety added to the complexity and are always primary considerations for CPO investigators. With increased visibility of BoyLover activity, it was becoming easier to determine when children were about to be abused. Law enforcement officers were compelled to make a call in dire

A web post on BoyLover.net by AFP target ‘Box’ was typical of the advice passed to other members on how to avoid law enforcement detection.



New laws impact on sex predators

New laws and tougher penalties introduced in 2010 on Australians travelling overseas to sexually abuse children are having an impact on sex predators.

The laws made it an offence to prepare for or plan to commit a child sex tourism offence, or to groom or procure a child for sexual activity overseas.

The new offences allow law enforcement to intervene before sexual activity involving a child takes place. Child sex tourism is not a term that AFP National Coordinator Child Protection Operations Todd Hunter particularly likes.

He says it diminishes the reality that people are travelling overseas to commit sexual assault on children. But he is sure the new laws are assisting law enforcement agencies to monitor and maintain the edge on registered sex offenders.

He says the new legislation can be used to target high-risk offenders travelling overseas and to implement technical and physical strategies to monitor them.

Detective Superintendent Hunter says the new laws are making a difference and the aim is prevention — “nobody wants to see a child offended against”.

The target country is notified of any convicted child sex offender travelling to their jurisdiction. It's then a matter for the jurisdiction to determine a course of action.

“By notifying foreign jurisdictions, we ensure that those jurisdictions are placed in a position to consider the character of the traveller,” Detective Superintendent Hunter says.

“In the many visa-free international travel environments, notification ensures visibility of the criminal histories of offenders.

“We have seen a number of offenders deemed to be a risk of offending in the destination jurisdiction and refused entry.”

But where an offence is committed by an Australian overseas then the AFP will assist the foreign jurisdiction to prosecute.

The AFP deploys investigators to assist with tasks such as specialist advice on victim interviewing and specialist computer forensic advice to collect evidence to present in court.

Detective Superintendent Hunter says the AFP has assisted foreign jurisdictions “very successfully” in quite a few matters, particularly Cambodia.

He says this program also helps to develop capacity in the foreign jurisdictions while sending a message to communities that the local police are working with us.

“It actually sends a good message to the community that they can speak up and the crime will be prosecuted and builds community confidence in the police.”

situations conscious that the arrest of an offender could jeopardise the bigger investigation.

One of the main problems was the server and its owner were in The Netherlands and another man who constructed, and had access to, the server lived in the US. “What we didn't want was someone to remotely disable and delete all of the information on the server before we got our hands on it,” Federal Agent Mansfield says.

The decision was made to execute simultaneous resolutions in multiple international jurisdictions. So in November 2009 law enforcement agencies struck.

Federal Agent Mansfield says Europol and CEOP played a major role in the investigation after the server was seized by Dutch authorities. It became apparent that the forensic analysis of the server was too complex for the Dutch on their own. Europol had already been approached to assist with the analysis once the server had been seized. That analysis was painstaking and took many months to complete. By the end of the decoding of the server, details on the more than 70,000 registered members had been obtained. The data was assessed and relevant material disseminated.

Operation Rescue culminated in March 2011 with arrests across the globe. By the end of the investigation more than 31 Australians were arrested. Four of those (including Box and SyD) were among the most senior members of the group. Two had reached director status.

Federal Agent Mansfield says the joint investigation showcased the true strength of law enforcement agencies from multiple jurisdictions working together in “this most disturbing and challenging crime type”.

“The success of these investigations was extremely satisfying, not just for the Sydney CPO team, but for all those who contributed, from various other areas within High Tech Crime Operations, Computer Forensic Team [now Digital Forensics] to investigators who assisted from throughout Sydney office.

“There was certainly an eager willingness from other areas of the AFP to assist the team whenever we needed resources. Additionally, these investigations helped CPO nationally to mature more quickly and contributed to a stable platform for the AFP in chairing the VGT.”