



The JaReVe

Vital connection

International liaison officers are a vital connection in the AFP's law enforcement partnerships across the world.

It was like a Hollywood mystery. The 13-metre 'ghost' yacht lay beached on a tiny island 20 kilometres from Vila. Inside, Tongan police found a badly decomposed body. Further investigation revealed more than 200 kilograms of cocaine hidden in the hull of the boat bound for Australia.

But the beached JaReVe was no mystery to police. The US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) had alerted Australian authorities that the JaReVe had departed Ecuador en route to Australia with two crew members. What happened exactly to the ill-fated JaReVe, or the second crew member, is a mystery.

There is nothing really unusual about the massive drug shipment either. The cocaine on the JaReVe had a street value of \$116 million in Australia. It's easy for a lone yacht to avoid detection in the large expanses of the Pacific Ocean and the criminal rewards are massive.

The JaReVe wasn't so successful. Law enforcement tracked the yacht from Ecuador to the Cook Islands. At this point the JaReVe dropped off the police radar and sparked a massive search to find the yacht before it arrived somewhere in Australia. Inevitably, the JaReVe ended its fateful journey on Luatatifo in the northern Vava'u province of Tonga.

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The Australian connection to South American drugs is not something that looms large in Australian consciousness. The world of Mexican drug lords and firefights between warring drug syndicates seems remote. Like the JaReVe, it does sound more like a movie than Australian reality.

Yet, changing circumstances are making Australia a prized destination for South American drugs. A single kilogram of cocaine can be bought for \$2000 in Colombia. That same kilogram of cocaine can sell for \$250,000 in Australia. That economy of scale is a significant motivator to drug syndicates.

During the last two years at least two detected large-scale cocaine imports via small craft to Australia have seen the drugs originate from Peru. Law enforcement authorities are expecting those drug detections from South America in general to increase.

"The markup there is what's enticing people to take the risk," says AFP Commander David Sharpe. "We have seen an increase over a number of years of the small craft coming into Australia carrying 400-500 kg per venture. There was a 700 kilogram shipment in Vanuatu that was destined for Australia. But we also see shipping containers and students are now a big issue out of South



Drugs from the JaReVe.



Cocaine seized on the JaReVe.

America – students are paid money to carry suitcases concealing drugs into Australia.”

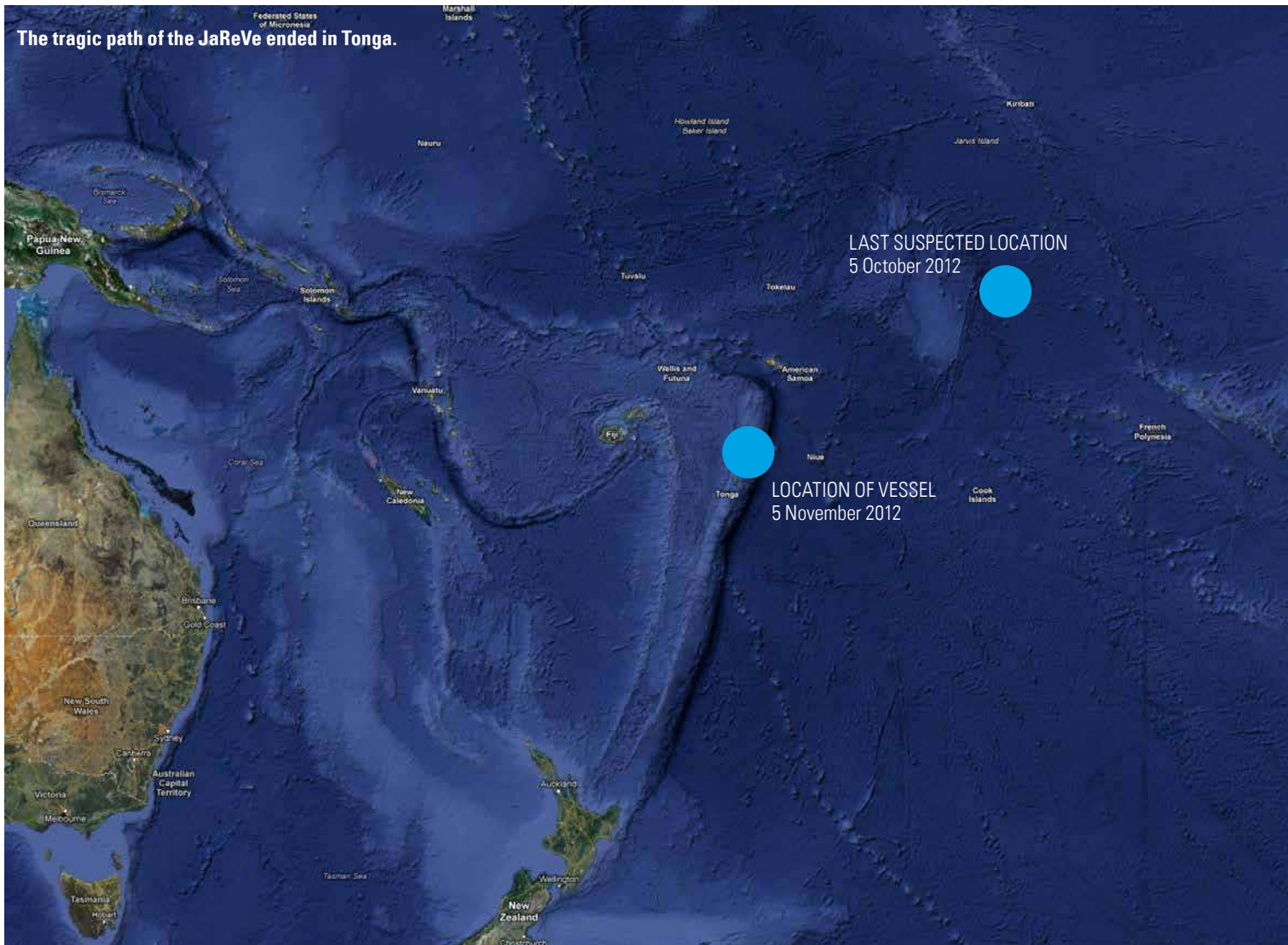
Drugs, of course, are not the only problem in the Americas. Commander Sharpe says crime trends are cyclical. Counter terrorism was an important focus in the post September 11 world and has a new focus in response to conflict zones such as Syria and Afghanistan.

Cybercrime is another pressing issue in North America and shares an equal focus with organised crime. The region is also the source and transit point of transnational crime such as money laundering, high-tech and tech-enabled crime and online child sexual exploitation. But drugs in the Americas are always big business for criminals.

International Network

The AFP’s International Network is a critical element in combatting this transnational crime from the Americas. AFP liaison officers are located in Washington, Los Angeles, and two in Bogota. A further counter terrorism liaison officer is located in Washington. The AFP also has the Police Advisor United Nations in New York.

Commander Sharpe’s position as Manager Americas, Europe and Africa is one of three managers from the AFP senior executive service (SES) posted to the International Network. These positions, along with the MIIN role operate under the new AFP Regional Manager Strategy which was



implemented on 1 January 2014. It's the first time SES officers have been posted offshore to coordinate regional responses.

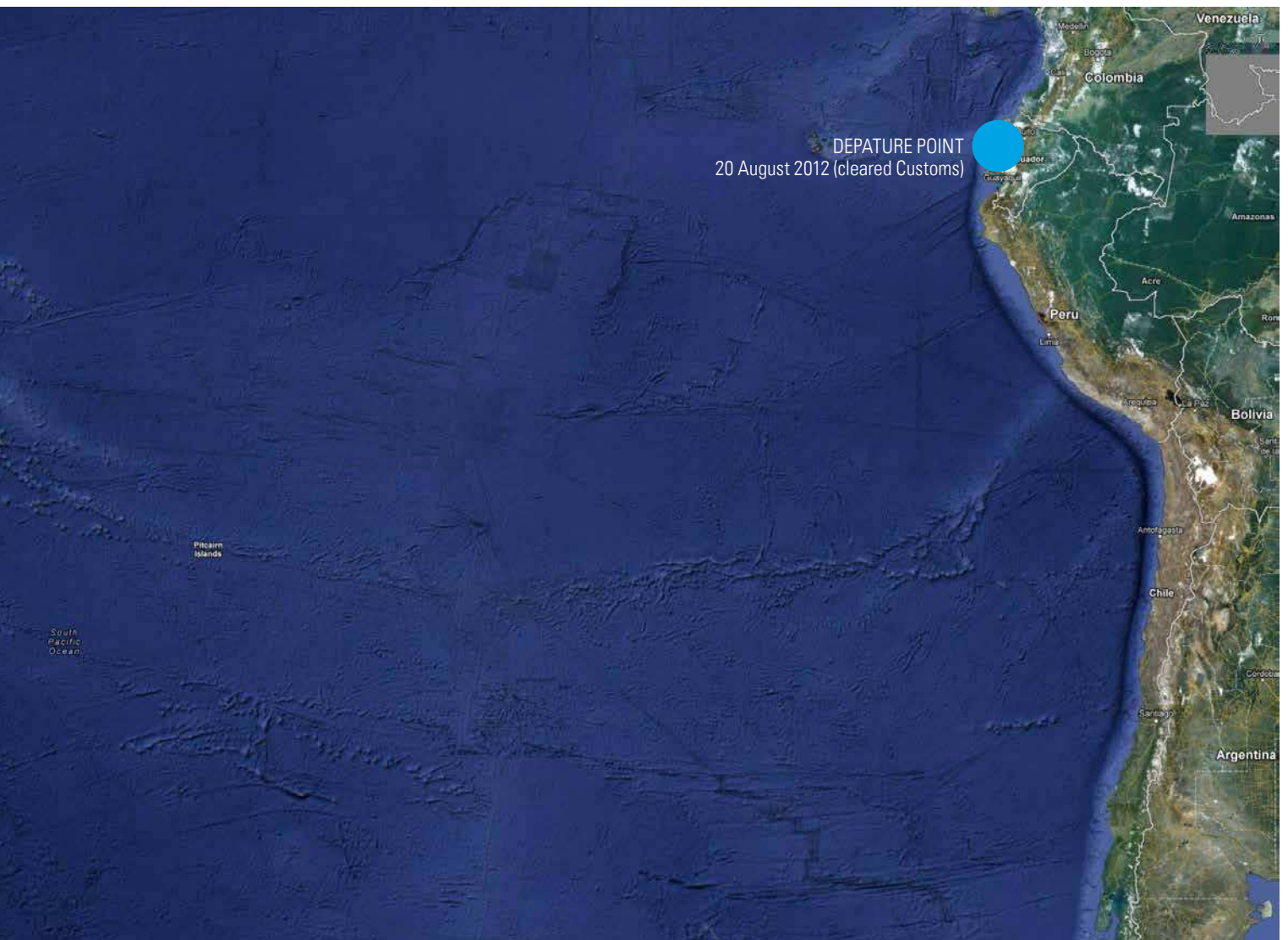
The liaison officers provide a vital operational link with international law enforcement agencies – not only in the Americas but in 36 positions around the world and with Interpol and Europol. The primary role is to develop and maintain relationships with the host countries.

Importantly, the network gives the AFP the ability to obstruct organised crime offshore and at its source. Developing real ties with host countries enables and simplifies intelligence sharing in a way not possible by contacting people unknown on the other side of

the world. Host countries also then have a direct point of contact for their own enquiries from the AFP.

“The DEA and the FBI have a strong presence in South America,” he says. “The AFP leverage off the strength of these partnerships in the region to disrupt organised crime syndicates at the source. The key is to be able to develop and maintain those relationships at the highest levels of those agencies.”

Partnerships are more than just having a point of contact. The network engages at the highest levels with host governments. AFP members take part in discussion on strategy and the response to organised crime. The AFP's Bogota post has a Transnational Crime Team that includes 10 Colombian police officers.





An international law enforcement operation in August 2013 seized 750 kilograms of cocaine aboard the Raj in Vanuatu.

These are all opportunities enabled by the International Network. In terms of a whole-of-government response, the liaison network in the Americas is closely aligned with the Department of Foreign Affairs, Australian Customs and Border Protection Service, Attorney Generals Department and Immigration. This enables further opportunities for relationship building between Australia and the host nations.

Bogota Post, Colombia

The relationship between the AFP's Bogota Post and South American law enforcement is strong. The AFP was recently welcomed into the American Police Community (AMERIPOL)

as one of 21 observer agencies. AMERIPOL is essentially modelled on police organisations such as Europol and Interpol. Senior Liaison Officer, Bogota David Berston says the seven-year-old AMERIPOL is laying the foundations for a bigger and better future. "In the past, the law enforcement response has been quite fragmented within this region and working in isolation. Now through this forum they are starting to work together," Federal Agent Berston says.

Fighting the drug cartels certainly has its challenges. It is a continually morphing environment where Federal Agent Berston says you squeeze the balloon in one place and it pops out sideways somewhere else. "The quantities here are



ridiculous," he says. "Just about daily they are seizing hundreds of kilograms of drugs in various parts of this region."

Successful efforts by Colombian law enforcement have contributed to the displacement of coca cultivation and cocaine production to Peru and Bolivia. According to estimates by US Joint Interagency Taskforce South, up to 23 per cent of South American cocaine production is now emanating from Peru. A portion of the cocaine produced in Peru is being shipped to Australia, but

the end destination for the bulk of Peruvian cocaine is unclear.

Ecuador, the departure point of the JaReVe, is becoming increasingly important for law enforcement because of the displacement effect of counter narcotic operations in Colombia. Driven by the profit margins, availability and the often poor socio-economic conditions in much of still-developing Colombia and South America in general, the rewards are high and the risks are, at least for the time being, relatively low.



Commander David Sharpe says the mark-up on South American drugs motivates criminals.

Meanwhile, the rise of Mexican cartels within the Central American region is having a significant impact on neighbouring countries. This is highlighted by significant increases in violent crime especially in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. It suggests that the epicentre of drug trafficking-related violence may be moving into Central America.

“It is just a completely different world over here,” Federal Agent Berston says. “In Colombia for instance, the proportion of poor people is very high with many people displaced from their homes and community due to the ongoing guerrilla war with the FARC [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia] and other criminal groups. Colombia has one of the highest rates per capita of displaced people in the world.

“It is very simple, a lot of these people are very poor, and with Colombia being the historical area for cocaine production there is a significant criminal element in the community that takes advantage of the situation that these people are in with drugs and crime being an easy avenue to make money. Additionally with the FARC involvement with drug trafficking, particularly in controlling important drug routes out of Colombia, the situation for the Colombian people is unique and highly complex.”

The successes of law enforcement, both foreign and domestic, combined with focused government policy has effectively limited the Colombian based syndicates ability to operate at the levels they previously enjoyed. This, however, has not eradicated

or decreased the drug problem within the region, it has just moved it elsewhere – the ‘balloon effect’.

In this case other countries in the region, such as Peru, are becoming significant producers of cocaine; Ecuador has become a significant trans-shipment point. However those countries do not have the same government policies, funding and support for law enforcement so the problem intensifies.

Increased immigration from South America to Australia is also being exploited by Australian criminal organisations. For instance outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMCGs) are using the family relationships of those who gravitate to the OCMGs in Australia to gain direct access to drug connections in South America.

Meanwhile, the never-ending attempts to export drugs from South America continue. “We get intelligence reports weekly,” says Federal Agent Berston. “Australia is being targeted by criminal groups utilising what ever methods are available: from small craft, sea containers, couriers through the airstream and in some cases using corrupt insiders to facilitate the transport of drug to our country.”

Fast boats are used to take drugs offshore to upload to other small craft or container ships and avoid taking drugs through ports. The emergence of semi-submersibles and submarines are just one further criminal innovation to ship drugs in sea lanes. Now in the South American sailing season, drug syndicates are soliciting people with yachts – or buying their own to transport cocaine to Australia.



The formation of the American Police Community is unifying the law enforcement effort in South America.

The opportunity for collaboration between the 30 member countries and 21 observer counties and organisations, including US and European agencies, cannot be overstated.

"We recently assisted with an operation in Panama that has not yet come to fruition. The criminal group had problems with the yacht on this occasion. However, I strongly suggest they will keep trying as the rewards are so high and risks are so low. We receive intelligence on similar ventures regularly, particularly this time of the year as the sailing conditions to Australia from here are optimal."

The air stream is equally vulnerable. Federal Agent Berston says law enforcement went to resolution in Australia on a syndicate that was transporting cocaine 20 to 40kgs at a time. Using trusted insiders from an airport in a country in this region they were placing the drugs in baggage which was identified and received in Australia to subsequently enter into the distribution chain.

"It's not just always cocaine," he says.

"Methamphetamine, heroine and synthetic drugs are all produced and transported from this region and those enterprises are growing. It is ill conceived to focus on and target specific commodities like cocaine. The syndicates are just about making money and whatever commodity suits will be used towards that goal."

This is the importance of AMERIPOL. Federal Agent Berston says the opportunity for collaboration between the 30 member countries and 21 observer counties and organisations, including US and European agencies, cannot be overstated. He is

highly optimistic about the innovations within AMERIPOL that are just around the corner.

"It's a great opportunity to engage in and develop strategies in which we can all benefit from."

The Spanish are currently developing an information sharing database that member nations will link to, similar to the Interpol database. "It is going to be invaluable when it gets up and everyone starts using it," Federal Agent Berston says.

Another innovation is collaborative training. "A lot of this is about cooperation and collaboration. The joint training is where they are really going to get a good purchase on what they need to do to start fighting these bigger cartels. This forum is enabling them to start working together."

A unified law enforcement response in the South and Central Americas spells bad news for criminal syndicates. A collaborative offensive on cartels would circumvent the balloon bubble effect created by the success of law enforcement and government policy in a country such as Colombia. It may just burst the balloon altogether.