

AFP helps bring closure

A four-hour hike up a steep, foggy mountain through a remote jungle in Papua New Guinea was just one hurdle faced by the AFP's Disaster Victim Identification team after a fatal plane crash.

On Tuesday 11 August, a twin-engine plane flying from Port Moresby to Kokoda in Papua New Guinea (PNG) failed to arrive at its destination. There were 13 people on board, including nine Australians, one Japanese, and three people from PNG.

The next morning, a search helicopter located the wreckage high up in mountainous jungle terrain, but was unable to identify any signs of life. After a four-hour trek from the nearest village, Mesima, seven Royal PNG Constabulary members reached the crash site just after midday. They confirmed there were no survivors.

After a request for assistance from the PNG authorities, the first of three teams of AFP Disaster Victim Identification (DVI) specialists travelled from Australia to Mesima, arriving there late on Wednesday afternoon.

Federal Agent Steve Sargent was the field commander for the DVI teams. The remote location meant some time would pass before the DVI teams would arrive at the site, so the PNG police secured it to ensure nothing would be disturbed. The weather added an additional dimension of difficulty.

"Early on the Thursday morning, we set out to hike up the mountain to the crash site," Federal Agent Sargent said.

"It was really foggy, overcast and raining, far too dangerous to go by helicopter.

"While we were hiking up the mountain, PNG police were at

the crash site cutting down trees to make a heli-pad for when the weather cleared. They had already cut a rough track through the jungle to the crash site."

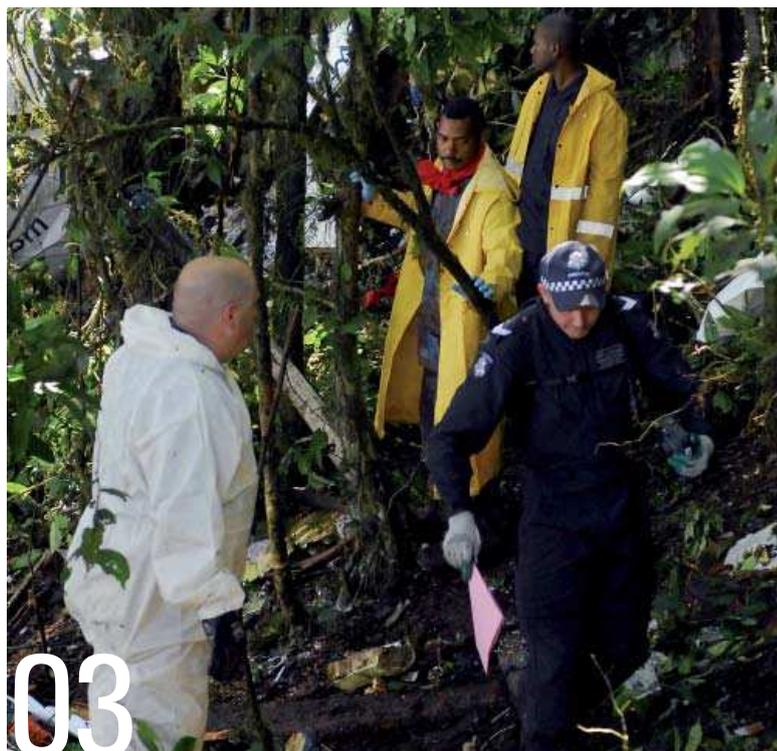
As the teams were hiking in, DVI members from Victoria Police, and personnel from the Australian Defence Force, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the PNG Army arrived to assist with the recovery operation.

When Federal Agent Sargent and the teams arrived, they discovered that the cool weather and the quick work of the PNG police had ensured the site was quite well preserved despite the arrival of a number of interested local people.

The team faced an enormous challenge, exacerbated by the steep, rough, overgrown terrain. The aircraft had disintegrated on impact, and they started a painstaking search of the site, which they soon realised would take much longer than one day.

"We were surprised at how little wildlife there was around the crash site, and especially by the fact that there were very few insects," he said.

"At nightfall we set up the tent on the flattest cleared area we could find, but when we lay down, we kept sliding down off our sleeping mat," Federal Agent Sargent said.





01: A helicopter arriving at a clearing near the crash site **02:** The AFP DVI team
03: Workers at the scene of the crash **04:** AFP members boarding an Australian Army helicopter.

"The locals were very helpful and sorted out this problem. The next day they cleared another area on slightly flatter ground, and wedged a log against the lowest side of the tent for us to put our feet against."

Improved weather on Friday brought the second DVI team to the site by helicopter. Nevertheless, the helicopter was unable to land, so team members had to rappel to the ground.

While the recovery teams were busy at the crash site, DFAT arranged for the relevant State and Territory police to collect other means of identification from the Australian relatives of the deceased.

For example, they asked about items the victim might have been wearing, such as clothing or jewellery, or distinguishing features such as tattoos, birthmarks or scars. They also collected saliva samples from relatives to conduct DNA comparisons which would help identify the deceased.

The AFP also worked with the PNG and Japanese authorities to collect the information to help identify their deceased.

The deceased were evacuated from the crash site by helicopter, and taken to a funeral home near the PNG Defence airport at Port Moresby which had a large refrigerated storage facility. The DVI team there also had access to a fully equipped mortuary, with running water and air-conditioning.

An AFP forensic biologist who specialises in DNA assisted with the collection of DNA samples at the mortuary. The samples were then sent to the AFP's forensics laboratory in Canberra for processing. The laboratory staff there worked two shifts every day to ensure the samples were processed

as quickly as possible.

By Monday 17 August, all the post-mortems were completed, and by Saturday 22 August the DNA testing and comparison was completed, the data was given to a PNG Identification Board and all 13 victims were identified. The AFP then handed responsibility to DFAT, who organised the repatriation of the Australian victims.

While DVI members are trained to cope with the things they experience, team support and support from family and friends is an important part of helping them deal with the particular difficulties of their work. When team members get home, it can take quite some time to get over the impact of what they have seen, and their families have to be more understanding than most. Federal Agent Sargent has two young daughters who are naturally curious about his work, especially when he is away for days at a time, but explaining what he does can be difficult.

"I told them that some people had died, and Daddy had to go and help," Federal Agent Sargent said.

DVI Commander Simon Walsh undertook much of the necessary liaison work in Port Moresby while the teams were in the field. Working with the PNG authorities, Dr Walsh liaised with DFAT, the Royal PNG Constabulary, the AFP Senior Liaison Officer PNG, Australian Transport Safety Bureau, Emergency Management Australia and AusAid. He also gave twice-daily briefings to the Australian High Commission in Port Moresby.

"The operation had a very high level of intensity from start to finish," Dr Walsh said.

"I was lucky to have such an experienced team in the field, who allowed me to focus on getting everything done correctly. It was a fantastic effort from everyone involved."

The AFP continues to help other nations with its DVI capability. Recently, Federal Agent Sargent along with other specialists, travelled to Samoa to assist in the process of identifying victims of a tsunami that was caused by an undersea earthquake.

