

Detectives swooped simultaneously on suspects across the globe in February, cracking open the most extensive and sophisticated child pornography network ever encountered.

Officers from Task Force Argos and their international counterparts executed warrants that saw the arrest of offenders in Australia, the United States, Germany and the United Kingdom.

The dramatic conclusion to the operation was the result of more than two years of painstaking investigation, involving collaboration with international law enforcement agencies, and covert infiltration of the highly secretive and organised network.

Operation Achilles and its associated sub-operations rescued

BKA in Germany and Austria, the Toronto Police Service in Canada, the Department of Internal Affairs in New Zealand, the Belgian Federal Police, and Interpol.

“It has been the most significant infiltration of an international child exploitation network by a law enforcement agency, anywhere in the world.”

Operation Achilles began in January 2006 after Queensland Police received intelligence from the Department of Internal Affairs in New Zealand. The operation was aptly named, as police were looking for the ‘Achilles heel’ or the weak spot to allow the infiltration and dismantling of the network.

Acting Detective Inspector Jon Rouse of Task Force Argos said by July 2006, covert operatives had

in recognition of its Australian origins.”

The Australian component of ‘Koala’ was coordinated nationally by Task Force Argos and the tactical phase was executed in November 2007, resulting in nine arrests in Queensland and the rescue of a young child that had been sexually abused.

A Task Force Argos officer was deployed to the FBI Innocent Images Unit in Washington DC in August 2006 to continue covert infiltration of the network. A second Argos covert operative was deployed in 2007 for two months to assist in data collation and intelligence dissemination.

The United States was chosen as the base for operations due to the fact that the majority of the sex offender network members had been identified as US residents.

Acting Detective Inspector Rouse said the success of Operation Achilles was down to the development and maintenance of key strategic alliances with child protection and law enforcement agencies worldwide, and the use of a combination of investigative strategies.

“In an operation such as this international borders are inconsequential. We try to focus on Queensland offenders, however Argos’ charter is to protect children, and we maintain that no matter where they are located in the world, we will ensure that everything humanly possible will be done to remove them from harm.

“It has only been from the establishment and maintenance of international law enforcement

networks that we have managed to achieve such significant results in child protection,” he said.

The Queensland Police Service has maintained its position nationally as the lead law enforcement agency in the investigation of this type of crime and is now recognised at an international level.

The primary response is provided by investigators from Task Force Argos using covert and overt strategies, and a combination of traditional policing and cutting edge technology to identify offenders globally, infiltrate networks and apprehend offenders.

A particularly satisfying outcome of Operation Achilles was the rescue of ‘Tara’, a nine-year-old girl whose regular sexual degradation and abuse had been watched by police and paedophiles on the internet since she was five years old.

Task Force Argos, the FBI and other international law enforcement agencies had collaborated for the entirety of that time, spending thousands of hours viewing footage of the abuse in an attempt to identify her. Operation Achilles provided the final clue that led police to Tara’s home in Lafayette, Georgia, saving her from further abuse at the hands of her natural father.

Operation Achilles is internationally recognised as the bench mark in online covert operations, and featured as a key note presentation at the Interpol Child Exploitation meeting held in Sydney in June 2008.

By Detective Senior Sergeant Denzil Clark, Task Force Argos

“...the most significant infiltration of an international child exploitation network...anywhere in the world.”

more than 40 children worldwide from sexually abusive situations, and closed down four commercial child exploitation websites.

As well as arresting 22 members of the Achilles network globally, more than 120 people—including nine Queenslanders—were arrested for purchasing child exploitation material.

Detective Superintendent Peter Crawford, Child Safety and Sexual Crime Group, said Operation Achilles had involved collaborative efforts from agencies around the world at an unprecedented level.

“This has been a complex and prolonged investigation into what we consider to be the most organised and insidious group of offenders encountered to date,” Detective Superintendent Crawford said.

“The operation involved long term and effective partnerships by law enforcement agencies including CEOP in the United Kingdom, the FBI in the United States, the

succeeded in breaking through a sophisticated system of security measures and infiltrating an international paedophile network that was trading images and videos depicting the violent sexual abuse of children.

“The major challenge for this investigation was to unravel the intricate web that networked offenders had woven to protect themselves, incorporating strict guidelines, rules and encryption,” Acting Detective Inspector Rouse said.

“There was a range of conditions that needed to be met in order to join, for example, applicants had to answer specific questions about specific images, within a set timeframe.

“Once we had cut through the protective layers, we discovered the exchange of videos, photographs and links to child abuse web sites which then triggered what was to be a 15 month long investigation by Europol, codenamed ‘Koala’

“Our capacity to penetrate this network came from Queensland. We are grateful for the excellent foundation that Queensland laid for us in this investigation and then for the partnership that came out of that.”

J. Stephen Tidwell, Executive Assistant Director, FBI

“The commitment of the Queensland Police Service to the fight against child exploitation is recognised internationally. The guys and girls at Task Force Argos are amongst the best in the world.”

Arnold E. Bell, Assistant Section Chief, Cyber Division, FBI