



Coroner's Court of Western Australia

RECORD OF INVESTIGATION INTO DEATH

Ref /20

*I, Evelyn Felicia VICKER, Coroner, having investigated the disappearance of **Michael Peta** with an inquest held at the **Coroner's Court, Court 2, Broome Court House, Hamersley Street, Broome, on 30 January 2020**, find the death of **Michael Peta** has been established beyond all reasonable doubt, and the identity of the deceased person was **Michael Peta** and that death occurred on **on or about 16 January 1975**, likely somewhere in the area of **Broome**, in the following circumstances:*

Counsel Appearing:

Senior Constable Craig Robertson assisting the Coroner.

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INTRODUCTION

On 15 January 1975 Michael Peta (Mr Peta) was offered a bed at the Roman Catholic Presbytery by Father Michael Anthony McMahon (Father McMahon) pending being able to access temporary accommodation elsewhere. When Father McMahon last saw Mr Peta he was settling down to sleep in one of the bedrooms. Mr Peta was never seen or heard from again.

The inquest in this matter was heard in Broome in the hope that witnesses with information such as Patricia Paddy (Ms Paddy) may come forward.¹ Unfortunately that did not occur and the only evidence was via video link from Perth.

The documentary evidence comprised the brief of evidence, as Exhibit 1 Tabs 1-18 and the Public Notice of Inquest dated 31 December 2019 as Exhibit 2. Oral evidence was provided by Senior Constable Allison Walker who spoke to the report she had written from the available papers from the Missing Persons Bureau (MPB)

Long Term Missing Persons Project (LTMP)

In 2017 it was confirmed there were a number of files relating to the long term disappearance of people who had been in Western Australia at the time of their reported disappearance. Some of these had occurred at a time when there was limited or no jurisdiction for a coroner to investigate a suspected death.

Section 23(1) of the *Coroners Act 1996 WA* (the Act) allows the State Coroner to direct an investigation into a suspected death in certain circumstances without a body, for the purposes of allowing a coroner, under section 23(2), to establish beyond all reasonable doubt that death has occurred. The investigation must be by way of inquest and will attempt to clarify how the death occurred and the

¹ Transcript 30.1.2020 page 3

cause of the death. This effectively brings the suspected death into the ambit of s 25 of the Act and allows registration of the death under the *Births, Deaths and Marriages Registration Act 1998*.

The reported number of LTMP made it unrealistic for the Office of the State Coroner (OSC) to absorb those matters into the already long outstanding inquest list in a timely manner. A plan was proposed for a project to clear the backlog of LTMP files once it had been determined the matters fitted the circumstances set out in s 23(1) of the Act. That is, the State Coroner or delegate had reasonable cause to suspect the person had died and the death was a reportable death (s3 of the Act).

In 2018 approval was given for a coroner to work exclusively on the LTMP cases, on a part-time basis for twelve months, as a separate listing from the OSC general inquest list. This followed a pilot project of four inquests conducted in 2018.

In 2019 a coroner was appointed for that project with the support of an in-house Coronial Investigation Squad (CIS) police officer as Counsel Assisting (CA).

Work on the files indicated a number of the disappearances related to specific areas of Western Australia, such as the Kimberley around Kununurra or Broome, and Albany. For these matters it was decided that, while there is always a preference for inquests to be held in the communities to which they relate, especially for Indigenous communities where there is an emphasis on oral history, resources would not be effectively utilised for all matters to be heard in the place of disappearance. Instead matters where the disappearance occurred in places other than the Perth metropolitan area were considered from the perspective of the best availability for relevant witnesses.

In the case of Mr Peta it was hoped enquiries by CA once in Broome would reveal additional witnesses prepared to attend court while the court was listed in

Broome for a number of cases with known witnesses. Unfortunately enquiries once in Broome were unable to locate any relevant witnesses, however, the matter was heard during the Broome hearings.

The anticipated outcome of the LTMP project was that by June 2020 the majority of reported LTMP matters would be resolved and that future missing person files would be dealt with in the normal course of the OSC's usual business.

THE DECEASED

The only information as to Mr Peta's birth date related to his incoming passenger card for travel to Australia from Papua New Guinea (PNG) and stated he was born in March 1938, without a specific date, in PNG. It is clear he had at least two sisters, one of whom, Gari Kumaina (Ms Kumaina), had travelled from Jakarta back to PNG in March 1977 and at that time was located in Port Moresby. In her correspondence she refers to another sister at home in Samarai Province, Gasumore Peta, reportedly living at Wagga Wagga Mission Milne Bay, PNG.² Ms Kumaina refers to other family members living at home, presumably Samarai Province, however there are no further details of other family members.

The information we do have indicated Mr Peta was intelligent and well educated, and the letter from his sister, Ms Kumaina, reflects a high level of literacy.³

The only other relevant information about family for Mr Peta came from the manager of Australian Hydrographic Services, Alfred Street, North Sydney, Mr Alan Phillips (Mr Phillips) who advised police in December 1975 he believed Mr Peta had parents, or at least family on Quoto Island, Samarai, Papua New Guinea.⁴

² Exhibit 1 Tabs 2 and 13

³ Exhibit 1 Tab 13

⁴ Exhibit 1 Tab 10

There are two incoming passenger cards recorded for Mr Peta by the Commonwealth of Australia. One indicated that on the 13 October 1966 Mr Peta entered Australia on business while a seaman and crew of *Alatuma*. He is recorded as never married, and there is no indication he left Australia following that entry, until another incoming passenger card dated 22 April 1969. That card gave his purpose as business and indicated he was intending to remain in Australia in New South Wales for the next 12 months. His address on that incoming passenger card is c/- Australian Hydrographic Services Pty Ltd, King Street Sydney Australia.⁵

Mr Phillips advised police in December 1975 that Mr Peta had been employed with another Papua New Guinean by the name of Thomas Euu, (Mr Euu) as seamen on the vessel *HV Alatuma*. They had later both been employed in New South Wales by the same Sydney Company. It seems both men applied for an Australian passport, but it is unclear as to whether those were ever finalised. Mr Phillips advised police Mr Peta had been employed by Australian Hydrographic Services for 8 years by the time he disappeared, and that he had travelled to Broome approximately 2 years before he disappeared where he was employed by Streeter and Male Pty Ltd of Broome, agents for Australian Hydrographic Services in New South Wales. He was employed as a wireless operator and camp hand and Mr Euu had also been employed by them at the same time. Mrs Voke of Pearls Pty Limited confirmed Mr Euu and Mr Peta had been close friends.

The papers are unclear as to the relationship between Pearls Pty Limited and Streeter and Male as it appears Mrs Voke, who represented Streeter and Male, was actually employed by Pearls Pty Limited. Leaving aside the relationship between those companies, Mrs Voke advised police in June 1975 that Mr Peta had been employed by Australian Hydrographic Services for 8 years, the last 2

⁵ Exhibit 1 Tab 14

of which had been in the Broome area, and that he had terminated employment with Australian Hydrographic Services on 10 December 1974.⁶

While living in Broome Mr Peta had lived at an address in Guy Street, Broome, with the Williams family. He was also in a relationship with Patricia Paddy, (Ms Paddy). The indications were Mr Peta and Ms Paddy intended to be married, however, something changed in their relationship and in January 1975 their relationship terminated, reasonably close to the time of Mr Peta's disappearance.

Mrs Voke advised police that following Mr Peta terminating his employment he received a cheque from Australian Hydrographic Services for an amount over \$1000 which he had deposited in his bank account in the New South Wales bank when in the company of Mrs Voke on the 8 January 1975.⁷ Later enquiries with the bank indicated that Mr Peta had withdrawn \$300 from that account on 13 January 1975 and another \$72.56 on 14 January 1975, leaving a balance of \$691 in his bank account at the time of his disappearance.⁸

There is no medical information available which would assist in the identification of any skeletal remains for Mr Peta. The only medical information available at the time of his disappearance was that Mr Peta had attended Broome Hospital on 5 January 1975 with a fairly serious wound to his left forearm which required sutures. There was no indication as to where on his forearm, or whether it was likely to have been self-inflicted. Mr Peta returned to the hospital the following day and the wound was found not to be infected. Mr Peta finally returned to Broome Hospital to have the sutures removed on the 14 January 1975. This would indicate that at the time of his disappearance the following day he would have had an obvious scar. Other than that the hospital had no information to provide to the police.⁹

⁶ Exhibit 1 Tab 7

⁷ Exhibit 1 Tab 7

⁸ Exhibit 1 Tab 7

⁹ Exhibit 1 Tab 8

DISAPPEARANCE

Mrs Voke advised police she had seen Mr Peta on the morning of 15 January 1975 and he was agitated. This was also the view of Father McMahon who had seen Mr Peta at approximately 11:30 (presumably am which fits the context) on 15 January 1975, outside the offices of Streeter and Male in Short Street, Broome.¹⁰

Father McMahon stated Mr Peta appeared agitated and advised he was worried for his personal safety. Father McMahon impliedly linked that, although it is not specified, to Mr Peta recently concluding his relationship with Ms Paddy. Mr Peta advised Father McMahon he was anxious about his accommodation and Father McMahon told Mr Peta he could go to the Presbytery and he would accommodate him while he looked into making other temporary arrangements for him.¹¹

Ms Paddy told police Mr Peta and Father McMahon attended where she was living with the Williams family in Guy Street, Broome. She believed she had seen Mr Peta and Father McMahon at approximately 9:00 am in the morning when Mr Peta came to gather his belongings. At that time Ms Paddy described Mr Peta as *“Normal and we had no arguments. He shook his hand with me and said goodbye.”*¹²

It is unclear whether Father McMahon saw Mr Peta at the Williams house in Guy Street prior to later seeing him outside Streeter and Male at 11:30 am when he said Mr Peta seemed agitated and concerned for his safety, or Ms Paddy was confused as to times.

¹⁰ Exhibit 1 Tab 10

¹¹ Exhibit 1 Tab 11

¹² Exhibit 1 Tab 12

Father McMahon stated that at approximately midday Mr Peta attended at the Catholic Presbytery with his personal effects and Father McMahon placed him in the third bedroom. He believed Mr Peta was going to lie down and sleep as that was what he said he intended to do. Father McMahon stated Mr Peta made no mention of leaving Broome, although he had said he might go and sleep in the bush. Father McMahon reiterated Mr Peta was concerned about his physical safety, but the identity of those he was concerned about was not readily apparent.¹³

It seems Father McMahon was the last person to see Mr Peta, at approximately midday, when he left him to sleep.

There is no indication in the papers any person saw or heard from Mr Peta following midday on 15 January 1975.

INVESTIGATION

The disappearance of Mr Peta was reported to Broome Police by Father McMahon on 31 January 1975. The initial report refers to Michael Peter. The initial Missing Person Report (MPR) provided almost no information other than the reason given for Mr Peta leaving was “broke up with his girlfriend”.¹⁴ There is no indication there was any search of the surrounding area for Mr Peta, although that may still have been valid at the end of January 1975. The only checks made were with his accounts and the fact there was an amount still available.

This is followed by a brief report by a police officer in March 1975 which is fairly dismissive of the whole incident and concentrated on the fact Mr Peta “was known to have been associating with natives”.¹⁵

¹³ Exhibit 1 Tab 11

¹⁴ Exhibit 1 Tab 3

¹⁵ Exhibit 1 Tab 4

A later report to Sergeant McGrath in June 1975 by Constable Haendel is quite comprehensive and covers the enquiries he made with Ms Paddy clarifying she was not pregnant, as had been suggested by some, and that she had heard nothing from Mr Peta since his disappearance. She said she was not aware of any reasons for him to leave and that they had not had any arguments.¹⁶

Enquiries with Mrs Voke confirmed she was very concerned about Mr Peta and had contacted local airlines, taxis and Sandfire Roadhouse as well as many members of the community who had known him in an attempt to locate Mr Peta unsuccessfully. She was worried about him.

Constable Haendel provided information about Mr Peta's recent activities to the time of his disappearance, withdrawals from his bank account and Constable Haendel also attempted to contact Dr Reid with respect to Mr Peta's arm injury, but was not able to interview him in person.

The March 1975 report's somewhat negative attitude was silently reprimanded in a June 1975 report by Sergeant McGrath which stated Mr Peta's behaviour was uncharacteristic and he believed there was reason to be concerned about Mr Peta's welfare. He described Mr Peta as being of a "quiet disposition" but also "moody and subject to fits of depression." There followed a reference to the laceration of his arm and a query as to whether the doctor had any particular views as to Mr Peta's state of mind at the time.

Sergeant McGrath goes on to state that Mr Peta was intelligent and literate and the fact that over \$600 remained in his account was of concern. It did not appear Mr Peta had made any attempt to obtain further funds from his account.¹⁷

¹⁶ Exhibit 1 Tab 7

¹⁷ Exhibit 1 Tab 5

I note a concern from Missing Persons Bureau (MPB) the amount Mr Peta withdrew from his account on the 14 January 1975 of approximately \$72 looked as though it could be for a fare, I also note that was the day on which he had attended hospital for finalisation of his wound and it is unclear as to whether he had to pay for medical treatment in view of the fact he was not an Australian citizen.¹⁸

While not specifically stated in the papers it would seem Mr Peta had left all his personal effects in the Presbytery when he disappeared. There is a note from MPB asking the Broome Police to search Mr Peta's personal effects in case they provided any clue as to his disappearance. There is no follow-up on the papers so presumably there was nothing of interest, although there is no indication as to what was in his personal effects nor how relevant they would be if he had disappeared voluntarily.¹⁹

In March of 1977 Mr Peta's sister who had been in Indonesia, contacted police on her return to PNG concerned the family had heard nothing more from her brother. She indicated the last time anyone in the family had heard from him was July 1974 before his disappearance. His sister was very concerned as to his welfare and correspondence to her from the police in 1980 would indicate no more had been heard from or about Mr Peta.

A check of his bank account in 1976 indicated there was no change to his bank account with the New South Wales bank other than the accrual of interest on the original account.

There is no record of the whereabouts of Ms Paddy since the early 80s in Broome and CA was unable to determine whether she is alive, where she may be or any other information which may have allowed us to contact her at this late date to

¹⁸ Exhibit 1 Tab 7

¹⁹ Exhibit 1 Tab 5

see if she was prepared to provide more information, very little having been asked of her at the time.²⁰

Later enquiries failed to discover any further information about Mr Peta, whether he had left Australia, or whether anyone had heard from or seen him again.

All normal agency checks with respect to anybody in the name of Michael Peta proved negative in April 2019.²¹ Mr Peta is recorded on the National Missing Persons Data Base, but to date no further information has been forthcoming.

HAS DEATH BEEN ESTABLISHED?

While initially quite ambivalent about the circumstances of Mr Peta's disappearance, on review of the entire file I am satisfied beyond all reasonable doubt Mr Peta is deceased and was deceased following his disappearance from the Roman Catholic Presbytery on 15 January 1975. I am unsure as to the exact date of his death, but am of the view somebody would have discovered his remains in and about Broome unless care had been taken to conceal those remains.

I am not necessarily satisfied others were involved in his disappearance, although that seems possible, whether that be directly, or indirectly due to his state of mind, as evidence by his agitated state according to Mrs Voke and Father McMahon and the location of his forearm wound.

Mr Peta would now be in his early 80s if he was still alive and I am sure someone would have become aware of his existence.

²⁰ Transcript 30.1.2020 page 3, page 19

²¹ Exhibit 1 Tab 16

I appreciate it is clear Mr Peta had left Australia and returned before without that fact being recorded. However, I am satisfied by December 1974 he was concerned enough about his personal circumstances to resign from a company he had been associated with, profitably, for at least 8 years. He had a good job and, as evidence by his pay, was in a good position to continue with his employment had something not distressed him.

While I appreciate he may well have used the same method to disappear from Australia as he had previously in the late 60s, I do not believe he would have done so leaving over \$600 in his bank account, which at that time was a reasonable amount. The fact he was accessing his account up until the day before he disappeared, and had given no indication he intended to leave Broome, although concerned and wishing to be unobtrusive for a while, does not indicate he intended to voluntarily leave Broome.

The fact he had been given sanctuary at the Presbytery and had disappeared from there concerns me enough as to his state of mind and welfare that I am satisfied he would have given some indication of where he was going if he had intended to leave voluntarily, or was not contemplating self-harm.

As such I am satisfied beyond all reasonable doubt Mr Peta is now deceased and was deceased in the timeframe before his disappearance was reported to police at the end of January 1975.

MANNER AND CAUSE OF DEATH

I am unable to determine how Mr Peta either disappeared or met his death.

There are a number of possibilities which include self-harm in view of reports of his being depressed at times and very agitated when seen by Mrs Voke and Father McMahon on the morning of 15 January 1975. I am somewhat concerned

Ms Paddy may have been able to assist us further so long after the event, however, accept she appears to have disappeared herself from Broome in the years following.

While it is possible Mr Peta may have “disappeared into the bush for a sleep,” without some information as to his personal effects left behind at the Presbytery I am unable to comment further. Had Mr Peta voluntarily gone into the bush there are a number of factors which may have affected his survival, although one would have expected his remains to have been located within a timeframe that would allow his identification.

Speculation indicates he either self-harmed in a place he thought he could not be located, or he suffered foul play at the hands of others who then concealed his remains. The fact his family never heard from him again as far as we know, satisfies me further that whatever happened to Mr Peta following the 15 January 1975, he was not in a position to withdraw money from his account or return to PNG as he had in the past.

While I am unable to determine a manner and cause of death for Mr Peta I remain satisfied beyond all reasonable doubt he is now deceased and was deceased in the timeframe around his disappearance.

I make an Open Finding as to the death of Mr Peta.

CONCLUSION

There are a number of matters of some concern with respect to this file which include the delay in reporting him missing, although I can understand it in view of the fact Father McMahon initially believed Mr Peta intended to “sleep in the bush”.

I am also concerned at the lack of coherent enquiry with Ms Paddy and the Williams family at Guy Street, but am not in a position to follow those matters at this point. I note Mr Peta's sister indicated she had made enquiries along those lines, but had heard nothing and I suspect that if she had heard she would have written to the police prior to 1980.

It seems Mr Peta's family were fairly well travelled in and around Australasia and there is no doubt the family were well-educated and perfectly capable of communicating should Mr Peta ever have reappeared.

I have no doubt that someone who had been in permanent employment and well remunerated would not have disappeared without trace unless they were genuinely concerned for their welfare. The fact nothing was seen or heard of Mr Peta thereafter must have caused his family great concern and continued distress. I am sorry for their loss and the inability to clarify this matter further.

E F VICKER
CORONER

28 May 2020