
JURISDICTION : CORONER'S COURT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA
ACT : CORONERS ACT 1996
CORONER : SARAH HELEN LINTON, DEPUTY STATE CORONER
HEARD : 4 AUGUST 2021
DELIVERED : 11 AUGUST 2021
FILE NO/S : CORC 1655 of 2019
DECEASED : CARR, DESMOND FRANCIS

Catchwords:

Nil

Legislation:

Nil

Counsel Appearing:

Senior Constable C Robertson assisted the Deputy State Coroner.

Case(s) referred to in decision(s):

Nil

Coroners Act 1996
(Section 26(1))

RECORD OF INVESTIGATION INTO DEATH

*I, Sarah Helen Linton, Deputy State Coroner, having investigated the disappearance of **Desmond Francis CARR** with an inquest held at the **Perth Coroner’s Court, Court 51, CLC Building, 501 Hay Street, Perth**, on 4 August 2021, find that the death of **Desmond Francis CARR** has been established beyond all reasonable doubt and that the identity of the deceased person was **Desmond Francis CARR** and that death occurred on or about **2 August 1979** in bushland south of Thangoo Station, Broome, Western Australia, as a result of an unknown cause in the following circumstances:*

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INTRODUCTION

1. Desmond Carr (known as Des to his family) disappeared in mysterious circumstances on 2 August 1979, more than 40 years ago. He worked for the Main Roads Department and was based at the time at a workcamp near Thangoo Station, which is located in the Shire of Broome in Western Australia. Des was working with a team sealing part of the Great Northern Highway, which is the main highway connecting Broome to the south of the state. Even now the area is remote, and back in 1979 it was a very isolated part of the world.
2. Des was last seen at about 3.00 pm on 2 August 1979 while operating a steam roller on the road. The official police report says he was working about 6 km south of Thangoo Station, although there is other evidence before me to suggest that he may have been working a couple of kilometres closer to the station at the time. When a work vehicle arrived about an hour later to collect him, the steam roller on the road was still running, but Des was nowhere to be seen. Police were notified the next day and a formal search was conducted, but no sign of Des was ever found.
3. Des had a loving and close relationship with his parents and siblings, so the ongoing lack of answers over his disappearance has understandably caused his family great distress. Over the years, there have been various theories, but no new evidence has been confirmed that sheds light on what happened to Des that day in August 1979. The only area where new evidence may assist is to throw some doubt on the efficacy of the search at the time, which could explain why Des' body was not found if he had collapsed somewhere on the side of the road.
4. Des' disappearance was eventually designated as a long term missing person case by the WA Police. After a report was prepared by the WA Police Missing Persons Unit concluding that Des was a suspected death, the case was referred to the State Coroner on 28 November 2019 for further direction. On the basis of the information provided by the WA Police in relation to Des' disappearance, the State Coroner determined that pursuant to s 23 of the *Coroners Act 1996* (WA), there was reasonable cause to suspect that Des had died and his death was a reportable death. The State Coroner therefore made a direction that an inquest be held into the circumstances of the suspected death.¹
5. I held an inquest at the Perth Coroner's Court on 4 August 2021. It is somewhat fitting that it occurred during National Missing Persons Week 2021, which is designed to raise awareness of the significant issues surrounding missing persons and to profile long-term missing persons and hopefully obtain answers for those left behind.²
6. I note that the circumstances of Des' disappearance have been well publicised, both in the early years after his death and in more recent years through an ongoing podcast publicly available since August 2019³ and requests on social media for people to come forward and provide any new information. In addition, there has been advertisement of the listing of this inquest in public notices and on the Coroners

¹ Section 23(1) Coroners Act Direction of State Coroner Fogliani dated 2 November 2020.

² <https://www.afp.gov.au/what-we-do/campaigns/national-missing-persons-week>.

³ [The Disappearance of Des on Apple Podcasts](#) as part of the Missing Persons Podcast Network.

Court website, as well as a recent article on the ABC news website publicising the upcoming inquest and encouraging witnesses to come forward.⁴

7. The inquest consisted of the tendering of documentary evidence compiled through various police investigations conducted into Des' disappearance, including the results of the investigation of various possible sightings of Des over the years across the country. Oral evidence was heard from a senior police officer from the Coronial Investigation Squad, to expand upon the police efforts to find Des and why the police have reached the conclusion that Des has died. In addition, evidence was heard from Ms Janice Bell, who owns Thangoo Station and who was a young woman living at the station at the time Des disappeared, and also from Des' niece, Michelle Folland, to speak on behalf of Des' family.

BACKGROUND

8. Des was born on 3 November 1946 and grew up in York, Western Australia. At the time of his disappearance Des was 32 years old. He was single and had no dependants. If he is still alive today, he would be 74 years old. It has been 42 years since his last confirmed sighting and he has not been in contact with his family in all that time.
9. Des' parents, Frank and Dolly Carr, lived in Perth at the time of Des's disappearance. Sadly, they are now both deceased, having died without knowing what happened to their son. They were reported as being desperate for answers four years after his disappearance. Des' father speculated to a journalist that, given his medical history, he believed Des may have amnesia and be living somewhere in Australia unaware of his past. Mr Carr campaigned tirelessly for many years to keep his son at the forefront of people's minds, in the hope that some news of him living in another place might emerge. It seems he never gave up hope of finding his son.⁵
10. Des had three sisters, two older and one younger than him, although sadly one of his older sisters had passed away by the time of the inquest. His surviving sisters and extended family have continued to seek answers as to what happened to Des. Des now has nieces and nephews who have been actively involved in the police investigation into his disappearance and the coronial investigation into his suspected death.
11. Des was described by his family as a person with good values who was loved and valued by his family and was a very loyal mate to his friends and well known in the community.⁶ Evidence was given that in the years following his disappearance, Des' family were pleased by how many people came forward to say they knew Des and still remembered him.⁷

⁴ https://www.coronerscourt.wa.gov.au/I/inquest_list.aspx; <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-05-22/desmond-carr-inquest/100152198>.

⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 4 and Tab 21.

⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 23.

⁷ T 26.

12. Information provided to the Court by Des' family indicates that Des left school at 14 or 15 years of age. He first found work at a local store in York, before moving to Perth and learning the trade of carpet and floor laying. He worked for a few carpet companies in Perth then worked in various jobs heading up north, including floor laying in South Hedland and Derby, until his final known job working with the Main Roads Department. Des had tried to enlist in the army with his best friend prior to moving up north, but was refused on medical grounds. His friend was accepted and left to fight in the Vietnam War.⁸
13. Des enjoyed football growing up and later became involved in cars and motor racing. His first car was a Mini Minor and he dreamed of becoming a race car driver. He began racing hot rods, and raced early model Holdens at the Forrestfield race track and elsewhere. However, in a car accident on 15 June 1966 when he was about twenty, which was an ordinary traffic accident and not a racing incident, Des suffered a depressed fracture to his left cheek bone and had a metal plate inserted. He apparently suffered seizures following the accident and was put on the anti-convulsant medication Dilantin. When he moved up north, he stopped racing but was still involved in hot rods and speedway.⁹
14. Des' best friend was killed in action in the Vietnam War on 18 August 1966. His death devastated Des, who reportedly began drinking alcohol to cope with his grief. He had a few convictions for drink-related offences in 1967 to 1969.¹⁰ Noting that his friend's death occurred only a short space of time after he began to suffer seizures following the car crash, Des' family believes the combination of both events may have contributed to Des' future health problems.¹¹
15. Des had significant dental issues, that arose at an early age. In December 1966 he underwent dental work at St John of God Hospital in Subiaco and had his front teeth removed and replaced with a plate. It seems he still retained an underbite, that was a feature of his physical appearance.¹²
16. Des left Perth to start his journey up north with his friend Colin Harding in November 1968. He had a contract to work for a company laying vinyl tiles at the South Hedland Shopping Centre. After completing the work on the shopping centre, Des worked for the government laying tiles in government houses in South Hedland.¹³
17. Des returned to Perth to visit his family and attend to health matters in 1969, 1973 and 1974.¹⁴

⁸ Exhibit 1, Tab 23.

⁹ Exhibit 1, Tab 23.

¹⁰ Exhibit 1, Tab 5.

¹¹ Exhibit 1, Tab 23.

¹² Exhibit 1, Tab 23.

¹³ Exhibit 1, Tab 23.

¹⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 23.

DECLINE IN HEALTH

18. Much of the information about Des' medical history comes from his family's records and recollection, as unfortunately enquiries with the various hospitals he was known to have visited have established that the original medical records have been destroyed. Fortunately, Des' mother and father kept very detailed records, and all of his letters, which were able to provide a great deal of detail about Des' health issues.¹⁵
19. Des' family believe 1975 marked a decline in Des' health. He had been involved in two car accidents, both times as a passenger, and had since complained of headaches and, following a severe concussion, convulsions.¹⁶
20. On 1 March 1975 Des was admitted to Royal Perth Hospital with ulcers. There was a family history of this medical condition. Shortly after he was diagnosed with a liver infection.¹⁷ Des had also received treatment at Derby Hospital, SCGH and Royal Perth Hospital for alcohol related problems in the past.¹⁸
21. When Des returned up north after being released from hospital, he injured his heel at work and was on crutches until 10 April 1975. Des also began experiencing blackouts in 1975, which escalated to him collapsing behind the wheel of a vehicle while at work in January 1976. He was taken to Derby Hospital for assessment but it is unclear if any diagnosis was made at that early stage. Des experienced several more blackouts in February and March 1976 and each time he was hospitalised for several days. After experiencing another blackout on 5 March 1976, Des was diagnosed with a type of epilepsy.¹⁹
22. The blackouts continued in 1977 and Des was unable to work for several months. Des returned to Derby Hospital for more testing and he was eventually flown to SCGH and admitted on 17 March 1977 for further investigations. Des underwent several x-rays and scans and was given an injection of radium into his spine. He was discharged from hospital on 5 April 1977.²⁰
23. After being discharged from SCGH, Des had further medical testing that revealed his neck and spine were displaced. He was admitted under the care of a Dr Good at Oats Street Hospital in Victoria Park and on 22 April 1977 his back and spine were treated under anaesthetic. He had further treatment on 29 April 1977 before returning to Derby on 31 May 1977.²¹
24. In 1978 Des had found work loading and unloading boats when they came into port at Derby. He would sometimes stay with his friends, who noted he was still drinking alcohol, but less than he used to and he appeared to have his drinking under control.

¹⁵ T 9, 23 - 24; Exhibit 1, Tab 10.

¹⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 23.

¹⁷ Exhibit 1, Tab 23.

¹⁸ T 9; Exhibit 1, Tab 12.

¹⁹ Exhibit 1, Tab 23.

²⁰ Exhibit 1, Tab 23.

²¹ Exhibit 1, Tab 23.

He rarely went to the pub or club and instead spent a lot of time working on hot rods.²²

25. Des returned to hospital in July 1978 after getting oil in his eye while working under a car. He remained in hospital for two days. He was reportedly told at this time he might get headaches again.²³
26. Des' mother visited him in Derby in September 1978 and everything seems to have gone well during the visit. She also spent time with Des' good friend, Sue during the visit and they remained in contact afterwards. Des' friend Sue spoke to his mother in April 1979 and advised that Des had gone to Port Hedland with the hot rod crowd. She reported that he was very well and was working at a diesel place. In the next few months Des obtained work with the Main Roads Department and by June 1979 he was living in Derby but based at the Main Roads camp at Thangoo Station, working on the Great Northern Highway. His job was to roll flat the regraded gravel highway to make it ready for the team behind him to seal with bitumen.²⁴
27. Des described camp life at Thangoo station to his family as "You returned back at camp from work, ate, had a few drinks and went to bed."²⁵ Some family members were concerned about his health and his drinking, while others said it was just the way of life in camp.²⁶
28. On 23 June 1979 Des wrote a letter to his mother advising he was planning on coming home for Christmas. He was also looking forward to picking up a new puppy.²⁷
29. The WA Police Missing Person Report completed on 6 August 1979 noted that Des had an injury to the right side of his face at the time he went missing. There is evidence that Des told people he had sustained the injury in a fight. There was also evidence to suggest he was struck in the head with a chair, but it is unclear if he was at the same time or during a separate incident.²⁸ What is known is that Des went to Broome Hospital on 23 June 1979 and was treated by a Dr Robinson. He complained of severe headaches. A skull x-ray revealed no fractures and he received no other treatment at the time. He was told to return to Broome Hospital in about four days, but he did not return, probably because he had returned to Thangoo station for work.²⁹
30. Des attended Derby Hospital on 21 July 1979 with the same complaint of headaches and also suffering from an infection in the wound on the right side of his scalp. A swab was taken from the wound and it appears he was given some antibiotics. He stayed in hospital for a few days and was again requested to return to hospital in a few days, but failed to return.³⁰

²² Exhibit 1, Tab 23.

²³ Exhibit 1, Tab 23.

²⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 23.

²⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 23.1, p. 6.

²⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 23.

²⁷ T 26.

²⁸ T 8 - 9.

²⁹ Exhibit 1, Tab 2 and Tab 6.

³⁰ Exhibit 1, Tab 2 and Tab 23.

31. Des wrote to his family around that time telling them he had to go back to work, even though he was unwell, or he would lose his job. He had a good worth ethic and wouldn't have wanted to lose his employment. The work camp was hundreds of kilometres from Derby, so it wouldn't have been easy for him to get back there when he was working.³¹
32. Des had been off work on 1 August 1979, the day before his disappearance, as he was suffering severe headaches all day. The police report recorded that Des had remained in the camp the whole day. It was believed he had not eaten for the previous two or three days and he appeared to be becoming irrational and abnormal.³²
33. Des' father appears to have later obtained some information that Des was also suffering very badly from a stomach upset and diarrhoea on 1 August 1979. He believed Des had not fully recovered the following day, but returned to work as he had been told by the foreman that if he did not go to work he would have his pay docked and he would have to get a doctor's certificate to cover his absence (noting the nearest doctor was a long distance away).³³

LAST CONFIRMED SIGHTING

34. Des went to work on 2 August 1979 as usual. According to a co-worker, he appeared alright at morning tea time, when he spoke to several people. He went back to the camp again at lunchtime, but he did not eat.³⁴
35. Des returned to the day's worksite after lunch. The work bus, driven by the foreman, dropped Des off at the location of his steam roller, on the highway near the turnoff to Fly Flat Station, where it was intended he would continue to roll a section of highway in preparation for his co-workers to seal it. The foreman told Des at about 2.00 pm he would be back in two hours to collect him. He did not speak to anyone else at this time and he was left at the location on his own with the steam roller.
36. Des was last seen at about 3.00 pm when the foreman drove past and saw Des standing next to the steam roller on the road. Des was reported as wearing a burnt orange or red hat, red t-shirt, black shorts and brown work boots.³⁵
37. At about 4.00 pm, the foreman returned in the work bus to collect Des and return him to the camp. The steam roller was still in the middle of the road with the motor running, but there was no sign of Des. The work crew conducted a quick search but there were no tracks sighted that would indicate a direction that Des might have taken if he had walked away from the road. An assumption was made that Des might have somehow made his way back to camp as he was feeling unwell, so the bus returned to the camp.³⁶

³¹ T 25.

³² Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

³³ Exhibit 1, Tab 23.

³⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

³⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

³⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 2 and Tab 23.

38. When they returned to the camp, the workers found no sign of Des, although they apparently did observe blood on his pillow.³⁷

INITIAL POLICE INVESTIGATION

39. Sergeant Thomas at Derby Police Station notified Broome Police Station at about midday on 3 August 1979 that Mr Frederick Seiler, a foreman from the Main Roads Camp at Thangoo, had reported an employee, Des, missing.³⁸
40. Sergeant Pethick from Broome Police Station attended the Main Roads camp at Thangoo at about 2.30 pm on 3 August 1979. He noted Des's Holden station wagon was still parked at the camp. It was said to be in working order although he had had some trouble with it and it was not considered reliable for a long journey. Sergeant Pethick searched Des' living quarters and found no notes left or any indication that Des had not intended to return to the camp. There was an amount of money on the dresser and all his clothes were still there.³⁹
41. Family report that blood was found on Des' pillow by co-workers, although this was not included in the police report. It is suggested that the blood may have been from his infected head wound, rather than a sign of foul play. There was also some suggestion that he was accidentally hit in the head by a stool at the camp canteen the night before he died, which might explain the blood on his pillow, although his family acknowledge that it is unlikely he was struck twice in the head by a chair within weeks.⁴⁰
42. At about 3.45 pm the same day, police commenced a search from where the steamroller Des was driving was located. Four groups of eight people were sent into the bush. Two groups walked either side of the road, walking parallel to the road north and south from the steam roller, to look for any signs or tracks of Des. The search was called off at 5.30 pm that day.⁴¹
43. The search recommenced at 7.00 am on 4 August 1979 and a further search of the area was continued by 57 searchers. The search extended several kilometres into the bush, but still no sign of Des was found. The search was called off at midday.⁴²
44. Sergeant Pethick noted that Des was believed to be a reasonable bushman, so in normal circumstances he was thought to be very unlikely to become lost in the bush. However, it was noted he had been suffering from severe headaches in the recent past and was not behaving like his usual self the day before.

³⁷ Exhibit 1, Tab 23.

³⁸ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

³⁹ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁴⁰ Exhibit 1, Tab 23.

⁴¹ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁴² Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

45. At 9.30 am on 6 August 1979 an air search commenced. A plane with a pilot and two lookouts searched a large area from the air, but nothing of note was identified. The air search concluded at 11.00 am.⁴³
46. Sergeant Pethick recorded that Des had reportedly complained of being on a rubber tyred road roller/compactor, as it aggravated his back and neck. He was then put onto the steam roller, which would have failed to improve the situation. On that basis, Sergeant Pethick thought it was possible Des had become dissatisfied with his employment and had obtained a lift to another area.⁴⁴
47. Hospitals in Broome, Derby and Port Hedland were notified that Des was missing and were asked to advise police immediately if he attended. All known relatives of Des were also notified, including his parents and sister in Perth, and friends in Derby and Port Hedland were also notified and confirmed he had not made contact. They were unable to provide any additional information about his whereabouts.⁴⁵
48. It appears from information provided by the family that they initially believed no action had been taken to look for Des until 6 August 1979, when they were informed he was missing.⁴⁶ It is apparent from the documents available that this is incorrect, and the search commenced the day after his disappearance. The delay in informing Des' parents may have been due, in part, to information contained on the missing person report suggesting friends of Des only told his parents what they thought was advisable "due to health reasons,"⁴⁷ apparently concerned of the effect that the news of his disappearance might have on the health of Des' parents. The friends who lived in the region had already been contacted to ensure Des had not made his way to them.
49. The primary police search for Des concluded on 6 August 1979, pending any further information.⁴⁸ Des' family have provided information that the local police became involved in the search for a missing pearl diver who had fallen overboard from a diving boat that day, that may have drawn resources away from the search for Des. However, records indicate the diver did not go missing until late on 6 August 1979, and the search for him began on 7 August 1979.⁴⁹
50. Des' father and one of his sisters flew to Broome on 7 August 1979 to continue the search for Des. Another search was conducted with police and Main Roads staff on 10 August 1979, with Des' father and sister participating in the search, but no sign of Des was found.⁵⁰ Unsuccessful in their search, Des' father and sister returned to Perth on 13 August 1979.⁵¹

⁴³ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁴⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁴⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁴⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 23.

⁴⁷ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁴⁸ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁴⁹ Exhibit 1, Tab 2 and Tab 22; *Inquest into the suspected death of Toshiyuki HATAKEYAMA (1412/2019)*.

⁵⁰ Exhibit 1, Tab 3 and Tab 22.

⁵¹ Exhibit 1, Tab 23.

51. In November 1979 a document was completed for the Missing Persons Bureau setting out all of Des' personal details, including his odontology (dental) records, to assist in confirming his identity if any new information arose.⁵²
52. In January 1988, a skeleton was found in bushland about 60 km north of Newman. Police checked Des' fingerprints against a fingerprint found on the skeleton and there was no match so the remains were excluded as being Des.⁵³

POSSIBLE SIGHTINGS

53. Des' sister had passed on to police information from a man who had reported a possible sighting of Des at the Broome Rodeo, two days after he had been reported missing. Inquiries were made but as the witness did not speak to Des, the report was considered to be an unconfirmed sighting.⁵⁴
54. Des' friend, Peter Connolly, appears to have been the person who reported seeing Des at the rodeo. Mr Connolly was spoken to by police in 1979 but no formal statement was taken from him. After hearing the recent podcast, Mr Connolly contacted the police and requested to make a statement. Mr Connolly stated that he was positive he saw Des at the rodeo, although he suggested he now thought the correct date was 11 August 1979. He could see Des appeared drunk and was staggering. Mr Connolly was accompanied by his children so he did not approach Des, given his apparent drunken state. It appeared to Mr Connolly that Des was with four people who he described as European backpackers. Mr Connolly acknowledged that he spoke briefly to a Sergeant Smith in Broome a week or so later, when he heard Des was missing. Mr Connolly recalled Sergeant Smith told him that since he did not speak to Des, the sighting could not be verified.⁵⁵
55. There is a typewritten note dated 21 September 1979 on the police file indicating that exhaustive inquiries regarding an alleged sighting of Des at the rodeo by Mr Connolly proved negative. It recorded that Mr Connolly was thoroughly interviewed at Broome Station and Mr Connolly was said to have indicated he was not sure if it was Des and conceded it could have been someone else. It was recorded that a police aide took Mr Connolly to the rodeo grounds to investigate it further, although Mr Connolly does not recall this occurring. In addition, Main Roads Department employees who were at the rodeo did not recognise Des.⁵⁶
56. It is clear that the police investigating Des' disappearance at the time did not place any reliance on Mr Connolly's account of a possible sighting, and the current investigators indicate that due to the lapse of time and the limited information able to be provided by Mr Connolly, it is felt the information cannot be relied upon as a positive sighting of Des. I note Mr Connolly indicates in his statement that he believes Des must now have perished, even if he did not die on 2 August 1979.⁵⁷

⁵² Exhibit 1, Tab 3.

⁵³ Exhibit 1, Tab 10.

⁵⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 9 and Tab 23,

⁵⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 9 and Tab 15.

⁵⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 9 and Tab 15.

⁵⁷ Exhibit 1, Tab 15.

57. Another report in about 1981 suggested Des had been sighted at One Arm Point, some 200 km north of Broome, but upon investigation the man did not resemble Des and some residents said they knew Des and confirmed they had not seen him since his disappearance.⁵⁸
58. Another possible sighting ended up being a different past employee of Main Roads, which had likely been mistaken for Des.⁵⁹
59. Many reports to Crime Stoppers and local police of possible sightings were also followed up, as well as requests from family to follow up leads, without any result. I note the reports came from all across Australia, which shows that the disappearance of Des was well publicised nationally.⁶⁰
60. On 30 April 2015 a truck driver, Mr Graeme Exell, reported to police that he believed he had seen a person he believed was Des (who he did not know) on the highway on the Monday after he was reported missing. He indicated Des was in a daze and not carrying a water bottle. Mr Exell sounded the truck's horn but Des did not respond or wave. Mr Exell thought it strange at the time but was unaware of the missing person report and took no action. He said that he drove along the same route about 10 years later, in about 1989, and stopped and searched the area and found a football sock, which he left in situ. He did not come forward to police for many more years. When asked why he delayed making a report, Mr Exell explained that he had poor short term memory (but good long term memory) and had only just remembered the information. No statement was taken from Mr Exell as the interviewing officer believed Mr Exell's information had no evidentiary value.⁶¹ Mr Exell did provide a map he had made, but it does not provide any additional information.⁶²
61. Senior Constable Robertson spoke to Mr Exell prior to the inquest, to see if it might assist if we called him to give oral evidence. Unfortunately, Mr Exell still suffers significant memory loss and he struggled during their conversation to recall anything in relation to Des. No statement was, therefore, taken from Mr Exell and he was not called to give evidence. It was unclear whether Mr Exell had ever actually met Des, or if he was just aware of Des' details from the publicity surrounding his disappearance.⁶³
62. Even if it was to be accepted, Mr Exell's evidence would not take the matter much further, as it simply places Des somewhere on the highway around the time he went missing, appearing in a somewhat dazed state.

RECENT POLICE REVIEW

63. In November 2019, Senior Constable Alison Walker, an officer in the Homicide Squad Missing Persons Team, completed a report to the Officer in Charge of the WA

⁵⁸ Exhibit 1, Tab 9 and Tab 11 and Tab 23.

⁵⁹ Exhibit 1, Tab 9 and Tab 23.

⁶⁰ Exhibit 1, Tab 9 and Tab 10 and Tab 11.

⁶¹ Exhibit 1, Tab 4.

⁶² Exhibit 1, Tab 19.

⁶³ T 15 – 16.

Police Missing Persons Team in relation to Des' disappearance and suspected death.⁶⁴

64. Senior Constable Walker noted that details of Des' disappearance were continually published in the media for a number of years after 2 August 1979, including in newspapers, police circulars, radio shows and on national television, including an episode of 'Australia's Most Wanted' on or about 14 June 1989.⁶⁵ In addition, the recent podcast and social media postings have kept Des' disappearance in the public domain.⁶⁶
65. During June 2015, inquiries were made with all States, Territories and Federal law enforcement agencies, major financial institutions and several WA based government agencies with no trace of Des being found.⁶⁷ These are the standard proof of life checks done to confirm whether a missing person may have moved to another place to start a new life. I suppose in the case of Des, if he had amnesia he would not have been using his own name, but what these checks confirm is that Des did not knowingly move to another part of Australia to continue his life without notifying family and friends.⁶⁸
66. While Senior Constable Walker conceded it remained possible that Des became fed up with his job and his pain and left the area by an unknown means, the more likely scenario is that Des became distressed and unwell and possibly even became disorientated and wandered away from his equipment into the surrounding bushland and perished.⁶⁹ This was the conclusion of Senior Constable Scandrett who prepared a report for the Missing Persons Bureau back on 26 November 1979 suggesting the file should be placed in the 'presumed dead' category pending any further information or sighting of Des.⁷⁰

VIEWS OF DES' FAMILY AND FRIENDS

67. Des had made plans to return home for Christmas in 1979 to visit his family. He had recently bought a car, was excited about getting a new dog and had bought new clothes. He remained on good terms with his family and there was nothing to suggest that he had any reason to disappear and cease contact with his parents and extended family.⁷¹
68. When he disappeared, Des left behind his car, money, his bank and cheque books and possessions, as well as his new dog.⁷²

⁶⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 4.

⁶⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 4.

⁶⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 4.

⁶⁷ Exhibit 1, Tab 4.

⁶⁸ T 16 – 17.

⁶⁹ Exhibit 1, Tab 4.

⁷⁰ Exhibit 1, Tab 7.

⁷¹ Exhibit 1, Tab 23.

⁷² Exhibit 1, Tab 2 and Tab 23.

69. It is clear Des' family and friends are sure he would not deliberately disappear and leave them heartbroken, so the only explanation could be that he either died or was prevented from contacting them.
70. A file note from Inspector Wilson to Sergeant Foley at the Missing Persons Bureau in Perth dated 17 January 1980 recorded that Inspector Wilson had received a telephone call from Des' father, Frank Carr. Inspector Wilson had previously had contact with Des' sister following a newspaper report indicating that the family were unhappy with the police search conducted at the time of his disappearance. Inspector Wilson had liaised with Des' sister, Mrs Moir, rather than Frank Carr, because the family wished to avoid causing their father any further distress.⁷³
71. During the phone call on 14 January 1980, Inspector Wilson recorded that he felt Frank Carr was still in a "state of mental confusion"⁷⁴ due to his grief at the disappearance of his son. Des' father expressed criticism that the police were not doing enough to find his son, so Inspector Wilson said he went to some lengths to explain to Frank Carr the police had done all that was reasonably possible to find Des. Inspector Wilson commented that Des appeared to have developed a "fixation that his son is still alive,"⁷⁵ which did not match the conclusion of police.
72. It is apparent that Des' father, and indeed the rest of his family, felt that the initial police search and investigation was inadequate. Without criticising any individual police officer involved, and noting in particular that Sergeant Pethick passed away in June 2000 so he was unable to attend the inquest and provide his own account, Acting Sergeant John Turner from the Coronial Investigation Squad conceded that the initial search could arguably have been conducted a bit quicker and with more personnel. It was noted that today's land and sea searches are conducted in a much more thorough and coordinated manner, but even by the standards of that time, the search seemed to be brief and somewhat limited. There is also a dearth of statements from the foreman and co-workers, Des' family and friends, and other such information that would today be a standard part of any such investigation.⁷⁶
73. The deficiencies in that early investigation were clearly apparent to Des' family and have left them with an ongoing sense that there was potentially missing information. This affected their ability to accept the outcome of the police investigation.
74. In the end, Des' parents came to hold very different opinions as to what became of their son. Des' father was reported as telling a journalist that by 1983 his wife had resigned herself to the fact that her son was dead, but Mr Carr had not given up hope and said he would never give up hope of finding him. He considered it possible Des had hitched a ride with someone away from the area. He appeared to rely upon the possibility that Des had lost his memory to explain Des still being alive but not in contact with his parents.⁷⁷

⁷³ Exhibit 1, Tab 8 and Tab 11.

⁷⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 8.

⁷⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 8.

⁷⁶ T 17 – 19.

⁷⁷ Exhibit 1, Tab 21 and Tab 23.

75. Des' mother, on the other hand, told family that she believed Des had most likely walked into the bush either to relieve himself or because he was feeling unwell and wanted to rest, laid down or collapsed and died. Given his history of blackouts and seizures, as well as the more recent infection to his scalp, and the fact it was a hot day out in the remote north of the state, this theory is quite reasonable and is consistent with one line of reasoning of the investigating police.⁷⁸
76. Other theories have been floated over the years, from concerns about Des being the victim of foul play due to the blood on the pillow, to more unusual suggestions that he had seen strange lights in the area and could have been abducted by aliens in the outback (perhaps fuelled by descriptions of Des appearing to have disappeared into thin air without leaving any footsteps or tracks of any kind).
77. Ms Folland gave evidence that some of Des' family remain concerned that there could have been foul play involved in Des' disappearance. She accepted that there is "nothing concrete"⁷⁹ to rely upon in that regard and it would be likely that someone would have known something from that time and hopefully come forward by now.⁸⁰ However, it seems that some family members still have that concern, probably because of the strangeness of Des' sudden disappearance, and surely not helped by the lack of statements taken from co-workers to explain exactly what occurred. However, there is some evidence, from one co-worker, that is set out below, that does assist.

MORE RECENT EVIDENCE

78. Maxwell Nairn came forward in 1989 to provide a statement after seeing the Australia's Most Wanted Television Programme that covered Des' disappearance. Mr Nairn provided a statement to police on 18 May 1989. Mr Nairn stated that he had been a co-worker of Des with the Main Road Department. He was involved in the original search for Des in August 1979 and he believed the search was conducted in the wrong spot as he had seen the steam roller that Des was working on in a different location than the area that was searched. Mr Nairn stated that he told the police and the Main Roads supervisor, Mr Seiler, at the time of his concern that they were searching in the wrong spot, but no one listened to him.⁸¹
79. Mr Nairn explained in his statement that he had seen the location where the steam roller had been abandoned when Des disappeared, which he described as 2.5 to 3 km south of Thangoo Station. The following day the rest of the Main Roads crew used the roller about 1.5 to 2 kms further south of the station. When the search commenced, they initiated it from the new location of the roller, which was about 6 km south of Thangoo Station (which matches the police reports). Mr Nairn indicated he was certain of the roller's location because he drove the water truck and started work half an hour earlier than anyone else so he could wet down the road.⁸²

⁷⁸ Exhibit 1, Tab 23.

⁷⁹ T 27.

⁸⁰ T 28.

⁸¹ Exhibit 1, Tab 14.

⁸² Exhibit 1, Tab 14.

80. When he was interviewed to provide his statement, Mr Nairn also told the police officer, Sergeant Johnson, that Des had told him that he was not feeling well before he went to work the day he went missing. Des complained of a severe headache apparently resulting from the head injury he had received in a fight some two weeks' earlier. Mr Nairn expressed the belief that Des may have gone into the bush to relieve himself, blacked out and subsequently perished. He believed the searchers did not find his body as they were looking in the wrong place.⁸³ Although the air search might have covered that area, I note the reports are of thick bush in the area, so it might have been difficult to see Des from the air.
81. The police officer who took Mr Nairn's statement was the Officer in Charge of Missing Persons Bureau at the relevant time and he indicated that he thought Mr Nairn's information might well be correct. On 23 June 1989, Sergeant Johnson asked the Officer in Charge of Broome Station to take whatever steps seemed necessary under the circumstances.⁸⁴ It is not clear if anything further was done in response. Mr Nairn's report is included in the running sheet, as well as the request to Broome Police to conduct further inquiries in the search for Des based on the new information, but there is no further related entry in the running sheet. Senior Constable Robertson was also unable to find any further reference to any results of further inquiries.⁸⁵
82. Mr Nairn's evidence adds weight to the concerns about the thoroughness of the original search for Des, and explains why it might have appeared like he disappeared without a trace. Mr Nairn's evidence, based upon his own conversations with Des, also adds support to the theory that Des went into the bush and collapsed.
83. Janice Bell, who is the owner of Thangoo Station, was a young woman living at the station at the time of Des' disappearance. Ms Bell gave evidence at the inquest and provided some additional information that might add to Mr Nairn's account. Ms Bell described the land in the area of Thangoo Station as "very tough land"⁸⁶ and "extremely harsh country."⁸⁷ and indicated that it is extremely easy to become lost in it. At the time Des disappeared there was no infrastructure whatsoever in that area, so if he went to the east of the highway where there was no development, he would quickly lose sight of the highway and have no other landmarks to help him find his way.
84. Ms Bell was not personally involved in the search but does recall that they were told by police that there was a belief that Des might have hitchhiked to Derby. This became relevant about a week later when Ms Bell observed a small fire in the area, which was unlikely to have started as a result of lightning or thunderstorm activities given the time of year. Ms Bell recalls wondering about the source of the fire, and whether it could have been lit by someone as a signal, but given the search had been called off at that time and they had been told the police believed Des had gone to Derby, they did not report it or try to investigate the source of the fire.⁸⁸

⁸³ Exhibit 1, Tab 14.

⁸⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 14.

⁸⁵ T 13; Exhibit 1, Tab 11.

⁸⁶ T 20.

⁸⁷ T 21.

⁸⁸ T 21.

85. Ms Bell also gave evidence that her family were involved in the rodeo referred to by Mr Connolly and she recalled it did occur around the time Des went missing. It was a fairly major event in the area, which was likely to have attracted the Main Roads Department workers and others in the area. Ms Bell could not shed any light on whether Des might have been at the rodeo, other than she did not see him there.⁸⁹
86. The above evidence lends some weight to the possibility that although the searchers may not have found any sign of Des at the time, he might have been still lost out there in the bush, unable to find his way back to the highway.
87. In August 2020 Des' two surviving sisters voluntarily provided a DNA sample to a police officer acting as a coronial investigator to assist in identifying any remains or any person of interest in relation to Des' disappearance. The samples were checked against the national database and, to date, there have been no matches with any unidentified remains located in Australia. Their details will remain on the database, so in the future they can be cross-matched against any newly discovered unidentified remains.

CONCLUSION

88. I indicated at the conclusion of the inquest that I am satisfied beyond reasonable doubt that Des is deceased. His disappearance has been in the public's consciousness for nearly four decades, and many people have come forward to try to provide information, but very little new information is available since the time Des disappeared on 2 August 1979. However, the new information from a co-worker, Mr Nairn, does indicate that Des was feeling very unwell on the day he disappeared. Other evidence also supports Des being unwell and not himself in the days leading up to his disappearance.
89. Further, Mr Nairn's evidence, which I accept, indicates that after a cursory search was conducted in the area where Des was last seen on 2 March 1979 by his co-workers, the more thorough search conducted for Des the next day was not in the correct location. Therefore, the fact that no tracks or sign of Des was found is not surprising. Ms Bell's evidence suggests it is possible Des may have got lost and been seeking help up to a week after he disappeared, although I believe the more likely scenario is that Des collapsed around the time he left the steamroller and went into the bush, and probably died soon after given he was already in a debilitated state, having little or no water in a hot and harsh environment.
90. Based upon all the evidence before me, I am satisfied beyond reasonable doubt that Des is deceased and that he died on or about the time of his disappearance on 2 August 1979. The death was likely due to natural causes, but he may have also met some form of accident, so there is insufficient evidence for me to be able to be satisfied of a manner of death. Without any remains being recovered, I am also unable to reach any conclusion as to his cause of death.

⁸⁹ T 22.

91. I regret that I am not able to provide any greater closure for Des' family than this, given the enormous amount of thought and effort they have put into assisting the coronial investigation. As I indicated at the inquest, if Des' remains are ever found and identified, the results will be referred to this Court and that could provide another chapter in Des' story. Without that occurring, the best that I can do at this time is make a finding that I am satisfied that Des died nearly 42 years ago from an unascertained cause, and an open finding as to the manner of death.

S H Linton
Deputy State Coroner
11 August 2021