

IN THE CORONERS COURT
OF VICTORIA
AT MELBOURNE

Court Reference: 2011 / 2601

FINDING INTO DEATH WITH INQUEST

Form 37 Rule 60(1)

Section 67 of the Coroners Act 2008

Inquest into the Death of: DAVID MAXWELL PRIDEAUX

Delivered On: 15 JULY 2014

Delivered At: MELBOURNE

Hearing Dates: 15 JULY 2014

Findings of: IAIN WEST, DEPUTY STATE CORONER

Police Coronial Support Unit: L/S/C KING TAYLOR

I, IAIN WEST, Deputy State Coroner, having investigated the death of David Prideaux

AND having held an inquest in relation to this death on 15 July 2014

at Melbourne

find that the identity of the deceased was David Maxwell Prideaux

born on 7 October 1960

and the death occurred on or about 5 June 2011

in the vicinity of Tomahawk Hut, Mirrimbah, Mt Buller, Victoria 3723

from:

1 (a) Unknown cause

in the following circumstances:

1. David Prideaux, aged 50 years, was married with two teenage children and was employed by Corrections Victoria, as the General Manager of HM Prison Barwon. He was described as a methodical and considered person, very safety conscious and not a risk taker, who loved the outdoors, bush shooting, four wheel driving and motorcycling. Mr Prideaux was said to be in generally good health, despite a history of high blood pressure for which he was taking medication.
2. On Saturday 4 June 2011, Mr Prideaux left home in the morning and travelled to Mansfield to meet his brother in law, Robert Dale, for several days deer hunting in the State's alpine region. Planning for the shooting trip was commenced in May and a few days before departure, Tomahawk Hut was chosen as the destination. This location is near the Mt Stirling ski area, between Mansfield and Mt Buller and is at the top of the water course that is Tomahawk Creek. While Mr Dale had visited the area approximately 15 years earlier, it appears Mr Prideaux was not familiar with it. They decided to rendezvous in Mansfield on Saturday morning and to return home on the following Tuesday or Wednesday.
3. Following arriving shortly after midday and transferring Mr Dale's gear into Mr Prideaux's 4WD, they had an uneventful drive to the hut, where they arrived at approximately 1.30 pm. They later independently scouted around the area during the afternoon and following a meal and general discussion about the day ahead, retired to bed at 10.30 pm, for waking at 6.00 am.
4. On the morning of the 5 June the pair set-off at 7.45 to commence hunting, wearing thermals, camouflage clothing and carrying backpacks that included a small thermos of coffee and a number of energy bars. Apart from their rifles and ammunition, both carried a UHF radio and Mr Prideaux also carried a GPS navigation device, but no map of the area. He did not take his mobile phone which was left in his vehicle at the camp site. After walking in a northerly direction for some time, they followed their plan to separate. For safety reasons, Mr Dale went down a valley moving to the right, while Mr Prideaux went up a knoll in a north westerly direction along Buckland Spur Track, moving to the left to look for deer. This was the last known sighting of Mr Prideaux.
5. Mr Dale returned to Tomahawk Hut at approximately 11.30 am and decided to remain there. As there was no specific return time arranged, he was not concerned when Mr Prideaux failed to return for lunch. At about 4.30 pm, however, Mr Dale made a number of unanswered radio calls over multiple channels, as there had been a plan to collect fire wood before evening.

6. On nightfall, Mr Dale's apprehension increased and with torches, he set out along the road he expected Mr Prideaux to reconnect with, had he followed the plan of going up the knoll and around to the left. Whilst searching, Mr Dale continuously shone his torches into the bushland and made further unsuccessful attempts to make radio contact. He put the UHF radio to scan in case of a transmission and requested over it, "If you can't respond by radio, shoot your rifle", however, he got no verbal response, nor did he hear any shots. At approximately 8.45 pm, he reported Mr Prideaux as a missing person by contacting emergency services and subsequently providing details to Mansfield police.

7. Police arrived at 9.45 pm in conditions they described as 'atrocious', with it being cold, raining heavily and very windy. Snow was forecast for the area down to about 800 metres, with that being 300 metres below the elevation of the hut. When driving to the hut, police proceeded with the vehicle's red and blue LED roof lights operating and with two side spot lights panning the landscape. Periodically they stopped and sounded the vehicle's siren before waiting to see if they got any response. After meeting with Mr Dale and an hour of further searching, it was realized the search needed to be escalated and as soon as radio and phone reception allowed, measures were put in place for a full scale search to commence at first light. Family in Melbourne were notified while police continued to search until 4.00 am.

8. The first search teams were in the field by 8.15 am, whilst additional search resources were still en-route from around the region and from Melbourne. Searchers found the area to be steep and rugged mountain terrain, with rocky cliff and escarpment features in some areas. The majority of the landscape was covered in thick and entangled vegetation. Experienced police search and rescue members noted the challenge facing them of finding an unresponsive missing person in the impenetrable surroundings. The Victoria Police Air Wing flew continuously throughout the day and other searchers included family and friends, members from the State Emergency Services and volunteers from Bush Search and Rescue Victoria also participated. Over the following days deteriorating weather conditions, including fog and snow dumps impeded both aerial and ground searching.

9. Search controllers liaised with medical staff at the Alfred Hospital as to the likelihood of survival in the conditions encountered, given the clothing worn and equipment known to be carried by Mr Prideaux. Despite extensive search efforts over a number of days, including searches undertaken by canine teams from both Victoria Police and Corrections Victoria, the searchers failed to find any equipment, clothing, food wraps or footprints belonging to Mr Prideaux. The search continued until the 10 June, when at the end of that day's searching, the decision was made to suspend it. Further searches were undertaken later in June, in September, October and November 2011, involving police members, family members and other search parties, with nothing being located.

10. An investigation was conducted into the disappearance of Mr Prideaux by Sergeant Cameron McPherson of the Mansfield Police and the case was subsequently peer reviewed by Detective Senior Sergeant Ron Iddles, of the Homicide Squad. A number of possible scenarios were identified to explain his disappearance:

- Homicide
- Suicide
- Manufactured disappearance
- Accident or serious medical condition

11. The following investigations or checks were conducted in relation to Mr Prideaux:

- Births, Deaths and Marriages offices around Australia

- Centrelink officers in relation to any payment
- Banks and other financial institutions
- Alleged sightings
- Customs and Federal Police
- Medicare
- Interstate Driver's Licence Records
- Mobile phone accounts
- Computer contents
- Criminal Records all States of Australia
- Australia Post
- Tabcorp
- Casino accounts
- All state Coronial Offices in Australia for unidentified males

12. No tangible piece of evidence was obtained to suggest that Mr Prideaux met with foul play, nor was any physical evidence located to suggest his disappearance was manufactured. Both Sergeant McPherson and Detective Senior Sergeant Iddles believe that Mr Prideaux is deceased. They further believe that he died from a major medical event or a serious accident that caused him to be incapable of movement or communication, whilst hunting in the vicinity of Tomahawk Hut. No additional search operations are planned in the area unless further information comes to hand.

13. The evidence satisfies me that Mr Prideaux is deceased, with the cause of death unknown.

I direct that a copy of this finding be provided to the following:

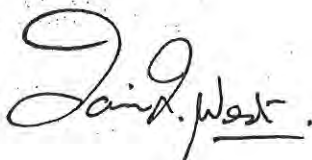
Family of David Prideaux

Sergeant Cameron McPherson, Victoria Police

Detective Senior Sergeant Ron Iddles, Victoria Police

Mr Robert Hastings, Corrections Victoria, Department of Justice

Signature:




IAIN WEST
 DEPUTY STATE CORONER
 Date: 15 July 2014