



CORONERS COURT OF QUEENSLAND

FINDINGS OF INVESTIGATION

CITATION: **Non-inquest findings into the death of Ray Dark**

TITLE OF COURT: Coroners Court

JURISDICTION: Mackay

DATE: 17 April 2026

FILE NO(s): 2025/2908

FINDINGS OF: Wayne Pennell
Mining and Resources Coroner and Northern Coroner

CATCHWORDS: CORONERS: ex-tropical Cyclone Jasper – wettest tropical cyclone in Australia’s history – rain depression – persistent and torrential rain fall within the Bloomfield River catchment area – up to three to four metres of rain in five days in some areas – Degarra located adjacent to the Bloomfield River – catastrophic, violent and rapid flooding event – the Bloomfield River breached its banks – rapid and catastrophic flooding of Degarra – Degarra residents and deceased known to use boats kept at their residents to evacuate previous flooding events – deceased intended to remain in his house during the flood event – deceased’s house was destroyed by the flooding event – deceased’s boat was located approximately 350 metres downstream from his residence in a damaged condition – the boat had not been used – last known communication with deceased was late on the night of 17 December 2023 – search and rescue operation failed to locate the deceased

Introduction

1. Ray Dark ('Mr Dark') was born on 4 February 1938 and at the time he was last seen on 17 December 2023, he was aged 85 years.
2. On 25 June 2025, the Queensland Police Service (QPS) reported his disappearance to the coroner because it met the definition of a death to be investigated pursuant to the provisions of the *Coroners Act 2003* ('the Act').
3. The Act provides that the role of a coronial investigation is to investigate reportable deaths and to establish, if possible, the cause of death and how the person died. Where appropriate, the coroner's role can also involve examining any systemic failures that may have contributed to a death and make recommendations for improvement. With that in mind, the purpose of a coronial investigation is to establish facts, and not to cast blame or determine criminal or civil liability.

Declaration and reasons

4. In respect to Mr Dark, and his disappearance, I find that on or about 17 December 2023 he died in the area of his residence in Degarra, Queensland, notwithstanding that his body has not been found.
5. Therefore, I further find that the presumption of life had been rebutted and I formally declare Mr Dark to be a deceased person.
6. In reviewing the material and the evidence made available to me by the investigating police officer, I find no evidence to support any view, should it exist, that Mr Dark's disappearance was staged, and nor did it result from suicide. I further find that his bank account and mobile telephone remain unused since his disappearance and there is no evidence consistent with his ongoing life being detected.
7. I am satisfied that the police search and rescue (SAR) operation for Mr Dark was adequate, and I wholeheartedly accept the evidence obtained during the police investigation. I also accept the hypothesis that it is extremely likely that Mr Dark lost his life during a catastrophic flooding event which inundated Degarra following the aftermath of Cyclone Jasper, although I am unable to conclusively determine the exact medical cause of his death.
8. I find this hypothesis is supported by the reliable, contemporaneous statements of Senior Constable Cormie (SC Cormie) from the Cairns Water Police and Detective Senior Constable McNab (DSC McNab) from the Cooktown Criminal Investigation Branch about the nature and level of flooding activity in the area at that time; and the expert survivability report of Dr Paul Luckin (Dr Luckin) who is a survivability expert often utilised during police SAR operations.

Tropical Cyclone Jasper

9. The Bureau of Meteorology reported that on 7 December 2023,¹ severe tropical Cyclone Jasper reached category 5 intensity in the Coral Sea, south of the Solomon Islands, before moving towards the far north Queensland coastline and weakening to a category 1 system south of Willis Island.
10. The cyclone continued to move further westward, re-intensifying into a category 2 cyclone and crossing the far north Queensland coast near Wujal Wujal at approximately 8:00pm on 13 December 2023.
11. Wujal Wujal is located approximately 120 kilometres north of Cairns, and Cyclone Jasper's strongest winds were experienced south of the cyclone's centre, extending to Port Douglas, with gusts estimated up to 130 kilometres per hour.
12. After crossing the coast, Cyclone Jasper weakened rapidly and within hours its intensity had fallen below tropical cyclone intensity. The system then stalled as a tropical low over Cape York Peninsula for several days.
13. During the weekend of 16 – 17 December 2023, a surface trough developed, extending from ex-tropical Cyclone Jasper eastward across the north tropical Queensland coast into the Coral Sea. Moist northeasterly winds from the Coral Sea converged along this near-stationary trough with easterly winds enhanced by a strengthening ridge in the Tasman Sea. This setup produced persistent heavy to intense rainfall across north tropical Queensland. Because catchments were already saturated from the earlier rainfall associated with Cyclone Jasper making landfall, the additional rain resulted in widespread flooding across the region. More than two metres of rain fell across the region of Wujal Wujal, with some areas experiencing three to four metres of rain in just five days, making Cyclone Jasper the wettest tropical cyclone in Australia's history.
14. During the night of 17 December 2023 and into the following day, the fall of torrential rain in the area caused rapid flooding and the Bloomfield River to breach its banks, including in the vicinity of Degarra where Mr Dark lived.

Mr Dark

15. The locality of Degarra is located adjacent to the Bloomfield River, and a few kilometres from Wujal Wujal. At the time of his disappearance, Mr Dark had been a long-term resident of 29 Evergreen Road, Degarra.
16. He lived alone at that address with his dog and maintained regular contact with his family and his friends. Notwithstanding a major heart condition, he remained active and alert for his age and was enthusiastically involved in his local community where he was regarded as a dependable and highly respected person of the Wujal Wujal, Degarra, Ayton and Bloomfield communities.

¹ Bureau of Meteorology, Past Tropical Cyclones, Severe Tropical Cyclone Jasper, <https://www.bom.gov.au/cyclone/history/jasper23.shtml>.

17. The subsequent police investigation established that Mr Dark was the owner of a small 3.7 metre aluminum boat fitted with an outboard motor, and I will return later in these Findings to discuss that boat.
18. The residence where Mr Dark lived was described as a raised dwelling close to the bank of the Bloomfield River. He maintained contact with his neighbours, including Thomas Wright and Peter Roberts.

QPS investigation

19. Helpfully, I have been provided with statements from SC Cormie and DSC McNab. DSC McNab was assigned principally to lead the investigation into what had occurred to Mr Dark and SC Cormie was the SAR coordinator.²
20. On 18 December 2025, DSC McNab received a phone call from SC Cormie who advised that Mr Dark was missing. After receiving that call, DSC McNab contacted the Cooktown Coast Guard and arranged for himself and Senior Constable Shields (SC Shields) to travel with the Coast Guard in their vessel to the Bloomfield River on the morning of 19 December 2023 where they planned to meet up with SC Cormie and his crew from the Cairns Water Police.
21. In his statement, SC Cormie described that on 18 December 2023, he was relieving in the position of officer in charge of the Cairns Water Police. Operational police within the Cairns area were extremely busy responding to the major flooding event which followed Cyclone Jasper.
22. He recalled that about 5:00pm on that day, he received information relating to Mr Dark's residence at Degarra having been completely swept away and that Mr Dark had not been heard from since 10:00pm the previous night. A SAR operation was immediately commenced, with a request for the tasking of aircraft to search the immediate area. Because of the remoteness of the location and the localised inclement weather being experienced around Degarra at that time, it was not possible at that time for aircraft to be deployed to participate in the SAR operation.
23. At 6:00am on the morning of 19 December 2023, the police vessel containing SC Cormie and other police personnel arrived at the mouth of the Bloomfield River. This river flows past Degarra near where Mr Dark lived.
24. Shortly after, a tender was launched from the police vessel along with several police personnel to undertake a ground search of the search area, along with a search along the flow of the Bloomfield River.

² Statement of Detective Senior Constable McNab dated 29 August 2025 and statement of Senior Constable Cormie dated 28 August 2025.

25. SC Cormie went on to describe that he remained on the police vessel, and at about 11:00am, the Cooktown Volunteer Marine Rescue vessel containing four Queensland Fire Service Swift Water Rescue officers, along with DSC McNab and another Cooktown police officer joined the police vessel. Those additional personnel were deployed into the search area to assist with the ground search.
26. At about 1:00pm, the search teams were joined by a commercial Jet Ranger helicopter which had been sourced to assist in the search for Mr Dark. The helicopter remained on scene as a primary search asset and over the coming days it undertook numerous search tasks as required.
27. The search for Mr Dark continued through the afternoon and concluded at last light, and recommenced at first light the following morning, 20 December 2023.

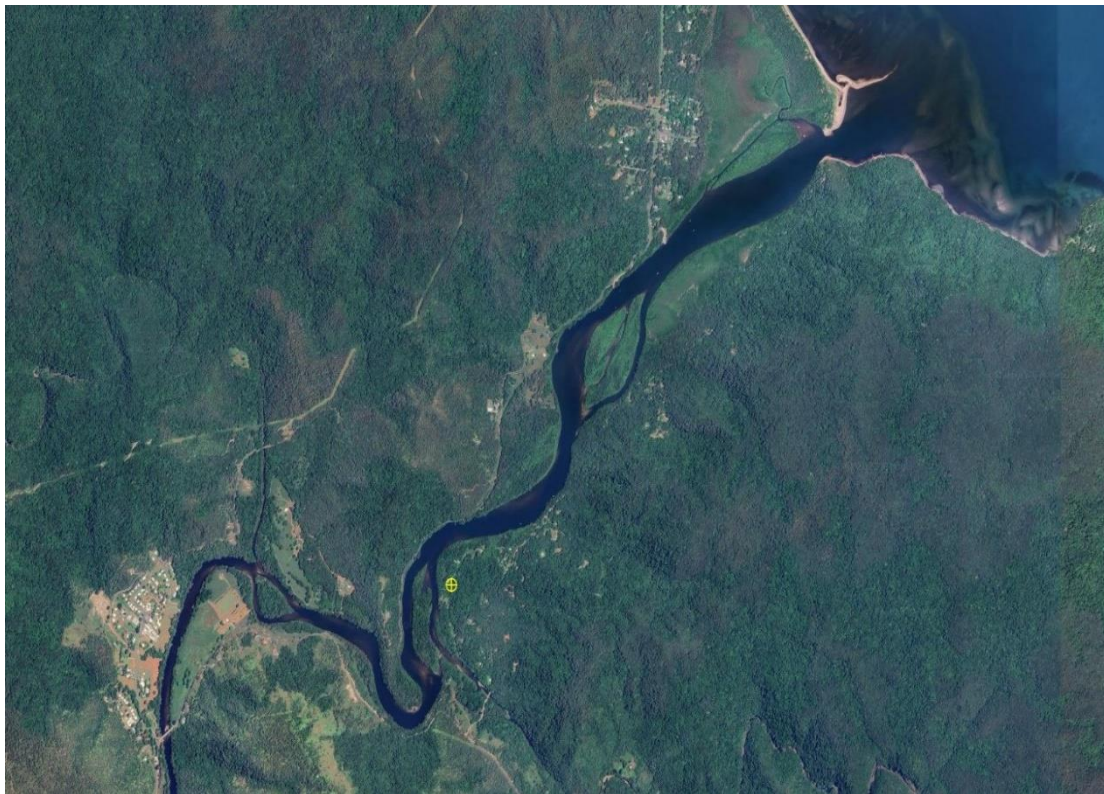


Image 1 – Aerial view of the Bloomfield River

28. Shown above (Image 1) is a satellite photograph image of the Bloomfield River, including the river's mouth at the top of the image. Wujal Wujal is shown at the bottom left side of the image, and the yellow marker to the right of Wujal Wujal depicts an approximate location of Mr Dark's house at Degarra, and his last known position.
29. When the search recommenced, vessels were utilised to search the entire river system downstream of Mr Dark's last known position, being his house, as well as a concentrated land search of the land downstream from his last known position.

30. The search helicopter was utilised to undertake continual low and slow searches of the immediate areas of land downstream, including both sides of the Bloomfield River down to the river's mouth, as well as the coastlines both north and south of the mouth of the river for about ten nautical miles in either direction. Shown below in Image 2 is the wide search area involved in trying to locate Mr Dark.



Image 2 – Search area

31. At about 10:00am that morning (20 December 2023), the helicopter pilot and spotter provided SC Cormie with the exact latitude and longitude coordinates showing the position of a small aluminum boat located approximately 350 metres downstream along the flood path from Mr Dark's residence.
32. SC Cormie was able to make his way to that location and saw that the boat was upright and full of water. He described the boat as being tangled in rainforest timber and debris. Photographs were taken of the boat in situ, and a drone was utilised to capture aerial photographs of the boat's location and the surrounding terrain. A subsequent check of the registration number of the boat confirmed that it belonged to Mr Dark.



Image 3 – Overall aerial view of the location of Mr Dark’s boat

33. Shown above in Image 3 is some of the devastation caused by the flooding, including the felling of a considerable number of large trees and other associated foliage caused by the Bloomfield River’s flood path. Depicted in the middle of the image beside a large fallen tree is Mr Dark’s boat.



Image 4 – Aerial view of the location of Mr Dark’s boat

34. Image 4 shows a closer view of Mr Dark’s boat. Beside the boat is a large fallen tree, and inside the boat is a significant amount of broken smaller trees and branches.



Image 5 – Aerial view of the location of Mr Dark’s boat in relation to Mr Dark’s residence

35. At a subsequent time, a further image (Image 5) was generated to depict the approximate location of where Mr Dark’s boat was found to where his dwelling and his last known location was. Shown in Image 6 below is a closer view of Mr Dark’s boat exhibiting considerable damage to the starboard side, and the large quantity of tree debris deposited onto and into the rear of the boat.



Image 6 – Front view of Mr Dark’s boat



Image 7 – Boat's motor

36. Shown above in Image 7 is the motor attached to Mr Dark's boat. The investigating police assessed that notwithstanding the boat being covered with a significant amount of flood debris, the outboard motor itself was still held and locked in a fixed tilted up position which suggested that the boat had not been used. The bow rope on the boat (shown in Image 6) was found looped into surrounding trees.
37. This was consistent with the boat having been carried to that location by the floodwaters, remembering of course that at the time of the photograph being taken, the height of the flood water on the night of 17 December 2023 would have been significantly higher than what is shown in the image.
38. That in my view is compelling evidence that the boat was never utilised by Mr Dark during the events surrounding his disappearance. Even if I were to accept that he did reach his boat, the discovery of the boat and its present condition satisfies me that he was either unable to or was rendered incapable of using the boat.

39. Shown below in Image 8 is the registration label for the boat, and as I have already explained, the registration number confirmed that the boat belonged to Mr Dark.



Image 8 – Registration label

40. Earlier in these Findings I referred to Mr Dark's house and the rapid flood which caused the Bloomfield River to breach its banks. Helpfully, I have been provided with various photographs taken by the investigating police officers of not only the boat, but also of the devastation of the area in the immediate vicinity of where Mr Dark's house stood.
41. Those images which are shown below depict areas where large trees have been flattened to ground level by what can only be described by the intense, violent and powerful flood waters of the Bloomfield River which engulfed the Degarra area on the night that Mr Dark went missing.
42. Shown below in Image 9 is a ground level view looking in the direction of the flow of the flood. Trees can be seen on the ground which had been felled by the water, with the vegetation stripped from the trees' branches. In the middle of the photograph is a power pole, and other various scatterings of corrugated iron is strewn amongst the flattened vegetation.



Image 9



Image 10

43. Image 10 above shows a view looking in the direction of the flood flow. What can be seen are the remains of Mr Dark's house, being the tiled cement floor and several posts which have been forced sideways in the direction of which the water flowed. His residence experienced complete devastation from the force of the flood waters with all structural components, including the walls and roofing, destroyed, and washed away.
44. Below is Image 11 which shows a closer view of the floor level of where the house once stood with examples of the internal wall fixtures completely obliterated. Scattered amongst the vegetation in the background are pieces of corrugated iron and other household material.



Image 11

45. Shown below in Image 12 is where Mr Dark's house was located. The photograph was taken from an opposite direction as was shown above in Image 10 and Image 11.



Image 12

Last known contact with Mr Dark

46. The weather event and torrential rain resulting from Cyclone Jasper was not the first of such conditions Mr Dark had experienced during the time he had lived in Degarra.
47. Andrew Wright (Mr Wright) was the last person to have contact with Mr Dark. Mr Wright lives in a caravan situated at 37 Evergreen Road, Degarra, and from his caravan, he could see Mr Dark's house which was about 150 metres away. Running between his caravan and Mr Dark's house was a small gully, and the block where Mr Wright's caravan was located was on higher ground.
48. Mr Wright and Mr Dark maintained regular contact with each other and got together a couple of times a week for "a drink". Mr Wright described that he also helped Mr Dark around his house.
49. At 10:00am on 17 December 2023, Mr Wright was at his caravan and looked over towards Mr Dark's house. He described that Mr Dark's house looked "like an island" because it was surrounded by water. He contacted Mr Dark twice that day and asked if he wanted to be collected and taken to Mr Wright's caravan because it was on higher ground. Mr Dark said he would be fine as he would be staying in the "loft". He also said this to family members.
50. By 6:30pm that evening, Mr Wright became concerned about the height of the flood at his caravan, and he tried to evacuate by using his own boat (tinny). He told the police that it was customary practice for residents in the Degarra area to use their tinnies when floodwaters rose.

51. Because of the rapid rise of the flood water, Mr Wright was not able to launch his tinny. Instead, he secured it to a nearby tree. He remained in his tinny overnight as the flood waters continued to rise. His caravan became completely submerged, which he described as being approximately “nine feet” (2.7 metres) above his caravan.
52. Mr Wright received text messages from Mr Dark that night, and at one point said that his generator had stopped working. The last text message received by Mr Wright were at about 10:00pm when Mr Dark said, “we are leaving now”. Although Mr Dark was alone in his house at that time, he did own a dog, and I accept that his reference to “we” was likely to refer to him and his dog. Telecommunications data shows that this is the last time Mr Dark used his mobile phone.
53. The telecommunications data also revealed that several people tried to contact Mr Dark after that time, including his family. On 18 December 2023, his disappearance was reported to the QPS by Peter Roberts (Mr Roberts), who was also lived at Degarra. His house is about two kilometres from Mr Dark’s house, and they had been close friends for many years.
54. Mr Roberts last saw Mr Dark about two days before his disappeared, and at that time Mr Dark was preparing for Cyclone Jasper.

Coronial findings – section 45 factors

55. Having regard to the information provided to me, I consider that I have sufficient information to make the necessary findings in respect to Mr Dark. Earlier in these Findings, I indicated on or about 17 December 2023, he died in or around his residence in Degarra. Notwithstanding that his body has not been found, I also made a finding that the presumption of life had been rebutted and an explanation for his death are the circumstances experienced at his residence on that night which led to his disappearance.
56. I do not consider it would be in the public interest to hold an inquest into Mr Dark’s death and I am satisfied that a public hearing is unlikely to lead to recommendations that could assist to prevent similar deaths in the future. Nor is there resolution required through a court hearing for any factual disputes or suspicious circumstances.
57. In carrying out my role in undertaking a coronial investigation into Mr Dark’s death, section 45 of the Act provides that I must, if possible, undertake a number of things and make findings about who the deceased person was; how he died; when he died; where he died; and what caused his death.
58. When investigating the circumstances of this matter, I have had the benefit of reading a report prepared by Dr Luckin. His experience is extensive, he has over 50 years’ experience in rescue and SAR operations; and his advice and expertise as to a person’s survivability is regularly sought by operations conducted by the various state police forces around Australia, as well as the Australian Maritime Safety Authority, the Australian Federal Police in PNG, and Solomon Islands.

59. Dr Luckin considered the survivability of Mr Dark entering the flood waters and said that if this had occurred, he did not consider Mr Dark would have survived more than a few minutes. Even if he was a strong swimmer, and was wearing a good lifejacket, it was not possible for Mr Dark to have survived in the torrential and fast flowing flood waters. This opinion was based on his age, the fact that it was night-time, and the speed and strength of the flood waters.
60. Dr Luckin also considered the possibility of Mr Dark entering the flood waters and being able to cling to his boat (either upright or capsized); or being washed into a tree or some other fixed obstacle which he could hold onto. If either of those situations had occurred, Dr Luckin expected that Mr Dark would not have survived for any significant period and would have been washed away within one hour at most. That opinion was based on his age, and because it was nighttime, he would not have been able to see any obstacle before being washed into it. The speed and strength of the flood waters were also a contributing factor.
61. Dr Luckin's expertise was sought by the QPS very soon after the SAR was commenced. At that time, Mr Dark's boat had not been found. I note that Dr Luckin provided advice on a third scenario and the possibility of survivability of Mr Dark accessing his boat and being washed out to sea. Given the location of Mr Dark's boat when it was found, as well as its condition it was found in, I am satisfied, and so find, that it is extremely unlikely that he accessed his boat. On the other hand, even if I were to accept that there had been some remote chance that he did access his boat, the evidence is clear that the motor was not used, and the condition in which the boat was found makes it extremely unlikely that he survived.
62. Returning to Dr Luckin's opinion as to the chances of survivability, he said that given the information provided by the QPS, Mr Dark perished in the hours before or at the time his home was washed away in the flood. This was estimated to have been either late on the evening of 17 December 2023 or early on the morning of 18 December 2023.
63. Dr Luckin went on to say that Mr Dark's cause of death was drowning in torrential flood waters, with possible contributory factors being his age and pre-existing medical conditions (mild coronary artery disease, hypertension, mild cardiac failure, and diabetes). He went on to identify that diabetes was not mentioned in the information provided, but Mr Dark's medication included dapagliflozin, which is used for Type 2 diabetes.
64. Although I find that there is significant merit in Dr Luckin's opinion as to the events and scenarios that led to how Mr Dark died, when he died and where he died, I am satisfied that the evidence does not definitively provide an explanation whether drowning or another factor actually caused his death. In saying that, I accept that in all probability, there is an extremely high likelihood that Mr Dark did drown, however I cannot discard the possibility that his poor health may have been a contributing factor to a natural cause for his death.

65. Therefore, when answering those categories as required under section 45 of the Act, I find that sometime after 10:00pm on the night of 17 December 2023 at 29 Evergreen Road, Degarra, Queensland, it is highly likely that Mr Dark died when his house was swept away during a catastrophic flooding event which inundated Degarra following the aftermath of Cyclone Jasper. A definitive medical cause of his death is unknown.
66. I offer my sincere condolences to Mr Dark's family, and I close my investigation.

Findings required by section 45 of the Act

- Identity of the deceased** – Ray Dark.
- How he died** – Mr Dark died when his house was swept away during a catastrophic flooding event which inundated Degarra following the aftermath of Cyclone Jasper.
- Place of death** – 29 Evergreen Road, Degarra, Queensland, 4895.
- Date of death** – 17 December 2023.
- Cause of death** – Unknown.



Wayne Pennell
Mining and Resources Coroner and Northern Coroner