



FINDING OF INQUEST

An Inquest taken on behalf of our Sovereign King at Adelaide in the State of South Australia, on the 10th day of October and the 5th day of December 2023, by the Coroner's Court of the said State, constituted of Ian Lansell White, Deputy State Coroner, into the death of Alan Leslie Graham.

The said Court finds that Alan Leslie Graham aged 79 years, late of 5 Milson Street, Whyalla Stuart, South Australia died at Angepena Station via Leigh Creek, South Australia between the 30th day of April and the 2nd day of May 2016 as a result of an undetermined cause. The said Court finds that the circumstances of his death were as follows:

1. Introduction and reason for Inquest

- 1.1. Alan Leslie Graham was born on 10 November 1936. It is believed he died at the Angepena Station¹ in Leigh Creek between 30 April 2016 and 2 May 2016 at the age of 79 years.
- 1.2. This inquest was held pursuant to Section 21(1)(ii) of the Coroners Act 2003 as when Mr Graham disappeared, he was ordinarily a resident of South Australia.

2. Personal circumstances

- 2.1. Mr Graham was the father of six children. His children informed the Court that Mr Graham held various jobs when they were small, from milkman to railway guard, through to becoming an engineer for various fishing vessels. Eventually he became a tugboat captain in Whyalla until he retired. In 2013 he travelled to Ushuaia in South America to board a ship to sail to Antarctica.

¹ Angepena

- 2.2. His children stated that he had a keen interest in geology that he shared with them. Throughout his life he never lost interest in this field which led to numerous prospecting trips. He was also keen on photography and tried his hand at painting pictures. He also umpired Australian Rules Football in country leagues for a considerable time. Mr Graham was also interested in his family's genealogy and, although he left school at young age, he had an enquiring mind. His family referred to him as a '*bush mechanic*' as he was very good at repurposing parts of motors and machines.

3. Background

- 3.1. Mrs Lesley Joy Nicholls² is the co-owner of Angepena with her husband Anthony Nicholls. The station had previously been owned by Mr Nicholls' parents, Sid and Fay Nicholls.
- 3.2. Mrs Nicholls stated that at the time of Mr Graham's disappearance she had known him for approximately 20 years. When Mr Graham was in his 50s he had started making enquiries about his family heritage as he thought he may have been related to Sid Nicholls. This proved not to be true, but it eventuated that Mr Graham formed a friendship with Sid and Fay Nicholls.
- 3.3. As stated, Mr Graham had an avid interest in geology and mining. As Angepena has a history of gold fields and unique geographical locations, Mr Graham visited the property and sometimes stay for several days at a time.
- 3.4. Mr Graham arrived at Angepena Station at approximately 5:30pm on Thursday 28 April 2016. He stated that his plan was to sleep in his van, which was a white Ford van which had been converted into a camper van type of vehicle. The next morning he went to the Angepena Homestead at about 9:30am. Mr Graham indicated at that time he wanted to be home by 9 May 2016 as he had to get a cortisone injection in his shoulder.
- 3.5. Around lunch time he told Mrs Nicholls that he was leaving and would stay at the location where he and Mr Nicholls had put in a carpark several years ago. She believed this may have been around Italowie Gorge.
- 3.6. On Saturday 30 April 2016 he arrived back at Angepena. He informed Mrs Nicholls that he had been out at Wooltana Station looking around but he could not locate the

² Exhibit C1, Statement of Mrs Nicholls

spot he was talking about the day prior. He stated he was heading out to Evans Outstation. He gave instructions if he was not back that night, he would be back the following day, namely Sunday 1 May 2016. Evans Outstation is approximately 15 kilometres south of the Homestead, but still within the property of Angepena.

- 3.7. When Mr Graham had not returned by Sunday evening, Mrs Nicholls and her husband decided she would go and check on him first thing Monday morning. The next day she and her son Luke went to Evans Outstation looking for his van but were unable to locate it. They drove around for approximately three hours but could not find him nor his van.
- 3.8. Mr Nicholls and his son later went out on their motorbikes to search for him. They located a handwritten note on the door of Evans Outstation which gave GPS coordinates and read '*11:45am travel east Allan*'. They contacted the police and followed the track south, past the outstation. They then turned left along another track that followed the fence line east across the property. Approximately 6 kilometres in they located Mr Graham's vehicle which had two flat front tyres. They returned home and contacted SA Police.

4. Police search

- 4.1. Sergeant Jason Griffin³ was performing uniformed office duties with Senior Constable Hayman at the Leigh Creek Police Station on Monday, 2 May 2016. At about 3:35pm Senior Constable Hayman⁴ received a phone call from Mrs Nicholls in relation to Mr Graham being missing. At this time Sergeant Griffin declared himself to be the Police Forward Commander.⁵
- 4.2. Sergeant Griffin made contact with a member of the Special Tasks and Rescue Group,⁶ Officer W,⁷ and briefed him on the information known at that time. Officer W was designated as the Field Search Controller and his role was to coordinate aspects of the search in consultation with the PFC.
- 4.3. Officers Griffin and Hayman gathered all the material they would need for the night such as maps, GPS units, water and material for the administrative aspects of the search. At about 5pm Officers Griffin and Hayman left Leigh Creek in separate vehicles to

³ Exhibit C3, Statement of Sergeant Griffin

⁴ Exhibit C2, Statement of Senior Constable Hayman

⁵ PFC

⁶ STAR Group

⁷ Throughout these findings members of the STAR Group will be referred to by their initials only. This owes itself to orders of the Full Court of the Supreme Court dated 13 April 2018. I should add here that this Court is aware of the actual identities of these officers.

travel to Angepena Homestead. This is the main house of the station where the Nicholl's family resided. They arrived there shortly after 5:30pm.

- 4.4. The officers liaised with Mrs Nicholls. She identified the Evans Outstation on a map and the approximate location of Mr Graham's vehicle.
- 4.5. Senior Constable Hayman departed the Homestead shortly thereafter and drove 15 kilometres south along an unnamed track to Evans Outstation where he met Mr and Mrs Nicholls. Together they travelled approximately 800 metres south along the track, past the Outstation to an intersection. They turned left onto an unnamed track to travel south-east. At approximately 6.45pm, having travelled a further 8½ kilometres, they located Mr Graham's vehicle.
- 4.6. Senior Constable Hayman noted the track was very slow going, very rocky, with a number of water washouts and went through parts of thick bush into open low-lying vegetation with a number of steep hill ascents/descents. Senior Constable Hayman believed that Mr Graham's vehicle was in no way suited to the terrain in which he was driving.⁸ It appeared that Mr Graham had tried to drive a distance on the flat tyres as the walls were well-worn and the tyre had come away from the lip of the rim. There was no further damage observed on the vehicle.
- 4.7. Senior Constable Hayman searched the vehicle and located the following:
 - A Garmin GPS unit that was turned off;
 - A map and a metal detector along with some notes about rocks;
 - Clothing;
 - A laptop;
 - A digital camera;
 - Medication, namely pantoprazole,⁹ perindopril,¹⁰ sertraline¹¹, rosuvastatin¹² and metformin.¹³
- 4.8. A blood sugar testing kit was also located. Senior Constable Hayman was advised by Mrs Nicholls that she understood Mr Graham to be diabetic.

⁸ Exhibit C2

⁹ For treatment of certain conditions in which there is too much acid in the stomach

¹⁰ Blood pressure medication

¹¹ An antidepressant medication with a warning stating 'do not stop taking this medication abruptly'

¹² A statin medication used as a lipid-lowering agent

¹³ For treatment of high blood sugar levels caused by a type of diabetes

- 4.9. Senior Constable Hayman observed there was little to no food or water in the vehicle. The fridge was turned off.
- 4.10. Senior Constable Hayman contacted PFC Sergeant Griffin to update him on what he had located, including the list of medications. Sergeant Griffin advised Senior Constable Hayman to stay with the vehicle until the SA Police helicopter arrived so they could be directed to its exact location.
- 4.11. At about 7:40pm Officer W was updated with this information. Based on the information known at the time, it was presumed that Mr Graham's vehicle had broken down in this location and Mr Graham had attempted to return to the Angepena Homestead. Given the items in the vehicle it was thought unlikely that Mr Graham would have chosen this area to be his stopping point. That is SA Police believed he was either going to camp in a specific location, or continue on his journey. For this reason, Officer W advised Senior Constable Hayman that the helicopter would conduct a '*diamond search*' pattern from the location of Mr Graham's vehicle to Angepena Homestead, working on the assumption that Mr Graham would be making an attempt to return to the Homestead following the mechanical failure.
- 4.12. The search pattern utilised Mr Graham's vehicle as the starting point and gradually expanded moving north to its widest point and then reducing as it became level with the Homestead. This was deemed to be the most probable pattern as Mr Graham had a good knowledge of the property and would know which way he needed to go.
- 4.13. During the evening of 2 May 2016, Sergeant Griffin inputted the coordinates on Mr Graham's note to a coordinate format converter on his personal phone. When placed on a simple map in the phone, the coordinates showed a location in Whyalla, within one kilometre of Mr Graham's home address. He spoke to Constable Barwick at the Port Augusta Police Station to task a Whyalla patrol to attend and check the location to see if there was anything which might help search efforts. He later received information that the Whyalla Police Acting Sergeant had attended the location given. The GPS location was the Stuart High School. Nothing located there was linked to Mr Graham. Mr Graham's house at 8 Milsom Street, Whyalla Stuart was checked externally and his neighbours were spoken to. The only known information from them was that he went away on a camping trip.
- 4.14. At about 9:35pm on the same day, the SA Police helicopter flew over the vehicle and commenced its search pattern over the area.

- 4.15. The crew from the SA Police helicopter searched until 11:25pm before returning to the Leigh Creek Airport.
- 4.16. At about 12:05am on 3 May 2016, whilst over the Angepena Homestead, the helicopter advised Sergeant Griffin they had completed their second search pattern and nothing was located. They left Angepena and commenced their flight back to Leigh Creek.
- 4.17. Sergeant Griffin stated that at the completion of the shift on 2 May 2016, they were working on the following known information relative to the search for Mr Graham:
- That Mr Graham could have been missing for up to two full days since leaving Angepena Homestead;
 - The previous night of 1 May through to 2 May had overnight temperatures of about 2°C;
 - Mr Graham was quite fit for his age and Mrs Nicholls believed he would try to make an attempt to return to the Homestead;
 - Many years ago he broke down further south of the van's location and successfully walked back to the Homestead;
 - He was reported as being a stubborn man and would not accept reason when told he should not do something. This increased the strength of the inference he would try to walk back to the Homestead;
 - The condition of the vehicle with both front wheels flat and damaged and the method of how it was stopped indicated the stopping location was not by choice. This reasoned against any potential '*plan*' to stop there and leave the vehicle;
 - The items left in the vehicle indicated he had not gone to camp, prospect or search for precious rocks. Additionally, the items left indicated he would not have gone to camp at a different location;
 - Based on his working knowledge of the station he would definitely know his '*compass directions*' and know the location of the Homestead relative to his vehicle's location;
 - Based on his fitness, age and the time that had passed, he should have been able to make it back to Angepena Homestead, unless something occurred along the way;
 - He would more than likely try to walk the most direct route to the Homestead as opposed to walking a longer way via the tracks;

- Mrs Nicholls stated that the van definitely came to rest at that location on Saturday. There was significant rain on Sunday and there were no fresh tracks on the road (when the Nicholls' family commenced searching) as there would have been if he had driven following the rain.
- 4.18. Given the above information the best presumption at the conclusion of the day was that Mr Graham had broken down while trying to cross the ranges. He decided not to wait with his vehicle and made an attempt to walk back to Angepena Homestead.
- 4.19. The search which ensued over the following days was outlined and thoroughly described in the statements of Sergeant Jason Griffin,¹⁴ Officer JA,¹⁵ Officer AY,¹⁶ and Senior Constable Hayman.¹⁷
- 4.20. I will not describe the intricacies of the search which are set out in each of those affidavits. However, to summarise, the search involved helicopter, fixed wing aircraft, mounted police, State Emergency Service volunteers and station employees on motorcycles. Due to the terrain and conditions, the search after the first day Mr Graham was reported missing was restricted to daylight hours. The search plan revolved around the theory that Mr Graham's vehicle had broken down and he had attempted to walk the most direct route back to the Homestead.
- 4.21. The search was terminated in the afternoon of 7 May 2016. During the briefing in which PFC Sergeant Griffin advised the search would be called off, the following detail was provided:
- Mr Graham was last known to be alive at 12:27pm on 30 April 2016. A photo was retrieved from the laptop in his vehicle that showed the vehicle on the same track it was eventually located on, but in a different location;
 - The vehicle was in an unusual location for its type. The vehicle was a Ford Transit van and to get to where it was currently situated required travel up a steep hill, normally only utilised by four-wheel drive vehicles. Both of the vehicle's front tyres were flat and could not be driven in their current state;

¹⁴ Exhibit C3

¹⁵ Exhibit C4

¹⁶ Exhibit C5

¹⁷ Exhibit C2

- The vehicle had been searched and contained both valuable and personal equipment including GPS, laptop, diabetes testing equipment, metal detector, food and personal paintings;
- A note had been located at Evans Outstation indicating it had been written at 1145 hours on Saturday 30 May 2016. The note stated Mr Graham was heading east and provided GPS coordinates. The coordinates were checked and indicated Mr Graham's house in Whyalla Stuart;
- During the search two medical professionals provided advice regarding survivability. Over the course of the search, that advice was updated and checked on three occasions. Dr Paul Luckin, a nationally recognised search and rescue specialist, had last been contacted at 3:30pm on Friday 6 May 2016. He had stated that the reasonable timeframe for survival had been until Thursday 5 May which had passed;
- During discussions amongst the search coordinators and the PFC, the timeframe for the search was extended in case Mr Graham experienced perfect conditions, namely he had water, food and shelter;
- The search was to conclude at the end of that day.

4.22. As part of his involvement in this matter, Detective Brevet Sergeant Dawe,¹⁸ made enquiries in relation to Mr Graham's medical history. His enquiries confirmed the medication Mr Graham was prescribed was located in his vehicle. It was also confirmed that Mr Graham was a diabetic and medicated accordingly.

5. Proof of life checks

5.1. Senior Constable Trevor Schneider of the Missing Persons Investigations Section¹⁹ provided an affidavit in which he detailed the '*proof of life*' checks undertaken in relation to Mr Graham, including banks, BDM,²⁰ national police, Australian Border Force, Centrelink and Medicare. No relevant information suggested that Mr Graham had been active or in any other location beyond the date of his disappearance.

¹⁸ Exhibit C6, Statement of Detective Brevet Sergeant Dawe

¹⁹ Exhibit C8

²⁰ Births, Deaths and Marriages

6. Conclusions

- 6.1. SA Police expressed an opinion that there is no evidence to suggest that Mr Graham met with foul play. There is also no evidence he had any suicidal thoughts at any time, particularly in the lead up to this event. Consistent with the opinions expressed by SA Police I believe Mr Graham is deceased. I find it is most likely that Mr Graham met his death following the breakdown of his vehicle whilst trying to cross the ranges within Angepena. I find he decided not to wait with his vehicle, but instead make an attempt to walk back to Angepena Homestead.
- 6.2. I find that Mr Graham is deceased. He died within Angepena. His death occurred between 30 April and 2 May 2016.
- 6.3. As his remains have not been located, it is not possible to assign a precise anatomical cause of death. I find his cause of death to be undetermined.
- 6.4. Finally, I note a single source DNA profile was obtained from Mr Graham's toothbrush. In the event that human remains are located within Angepena, this profile can be utilised to analyse whether the remains are those of Mr Graham.

Key Words: Missing Person

In witness whereof the said Coroner has hereunto set and subscribed his hand and

Seal the 5th day of December, 2023.

Deputy State Coroner