



MAGISTRATES COURT *of* TASMANIA

CORONIAL DIVISION

Record of Investigation into Death (Without Inquest)

*Coroners Act 1995
Coroners Rules 2006
Rule 11*

I, Olivia McTaggart, Coroner, having investigated the death of Samuel Liam Whinnett

Find, pursuant to Section 28(1) of the Coroners Act 1995, that

- a) The identity of the deceased is Samuel Liam Whinnett, date of birth 24 November 1984.
- b) Mr Whinnett was 38 years old, was an architect and lived in Invermay. He was in a significant relationship with Hannah Butterfield and he did not have children. Mr Whinnett was in good health and physically fit. He was a very competent climber with many years of experience in indoor and outdoor climbing. He was dedicated to the sport and trained regularly at his local bouldering gym.

In the days prior to his death, Mr Whinnett planned to undertake the Skyline Traverse climb at Cradle Mountain with three friends. They were Mitchell Gorman, Alistair Mooney and Miles Franklin. Mr Whinnett was the leader of the group. He had completed the Skyline Traverse without incident with other friends approximately 12 months previously.

The Skyline Traverse is an unmarked mountaineering route across the four individual summits of Cradle Mountain.¹ Cradle Mountain is a dolerite mountain situated within the Cradle Mountain-Lake St Clair National Park. The Skyline Traverse is described as being in the nature of a rock scramble with frequent use of hands to support balance and handholds and footholds that must be trusted. It is not classed as having a high degree of difficulty as a climbing route. The use of ropes and technical equipment is advised as prudent for some of the route.² The Skyline Traverse is not managed for visitor services and is not advertised by the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service. Whilst climbers choose their own route, there is a relatively well-worn path across the dolerite rock

¹ Little Horn, Weindorfers Tower, Smithies Peak and Cradle Mountain.

² And essential for the short abseil off Weindorfers Tower: Affidavit of Nic Dekka dated 6 June 2023.

which provides a reasonable level of grip, as lichen (or black moss) that usually adheres to rock cannot take hold. However, just off the main travelled track where lichen grows on the rocks, the grip level is substantially lower. The lichen-covered rocks are slippery when wet and known to present a hazard.

Although it was not raining at the time of the climb, the area had received 8.4mm of rainfall since midnight and the rocks were damp. Mr Whinnett was aware of this fact.

At around 7.30am on 2 April 2023, Mr Whinnett and his group left from the Dove Lake carpark. At 9.30am they reached the top of the first peak, Little Horn. They then stopped for morning tea before climbing down into the saddle between the peaks. At 10.30am they began the climb to the top of the next peak, Weindorfers Tower. They carried climbing equipment with them but they did not use it during this ascent as they considered that they were comfortably able to scramble onto the rock ledges. There is no evidence that they were pressed for time.

Towards the top of the climb to the peak of Weindorfers Tower, where the climb had become more exposed, a boulder obstructed their path. Mr Whinnett, who was in front, chose to take a left hand route. Mr Gorman was following him but chose to take a right-hand path as he could see the left-hand side was steeper and the rocks were covered with black lichen. Mr Whinnett and Mr Gorman determined that the right-hand side was easier for Mr Mooney and Mr Franklin to follow as they were less experienced.

Mr Whinnett was two metres to the left of Mr Gorman around the other side of the boulder. Mr Mooney and Mr Franklin were several metres below Mr Gorman. Mr Gorman, Mr Mooney and Mr Franklin heard a slipping noise and looked around to find Mr Whinnett had fallen onto a ledge 20 metres below. Mr Franklin then saw Mr Whinnett's backpack dislodge, with Mr Whinnett continuing to fall over the ledge and out of sight. Mr Whinnett fell approximately a further 100 metres and died instantly of massive head and chest injuries caused by both of the impacts.

Mr Gorman called police and retrieved Mr Whinnett's backpack as it contained the equipment required to descend Weindorfers Tower. He then proceeded to help Mr Mooney and Mr Franklin climb back down into the cradle. At 2.00pm they met police search and rescue officers.

The Polair 72 rescue helicopter was able to identify Mr Whinnett and his position. However, attempts to recover his body were unsuccessful due to weather conditions. The following morning, Mr Whinnett's body was winched from its position by helicopter and was transported to the Hobart mortuary later in the day.

- c) Mr Whinnett died as a result of head and chest injuries due to a fall from a height while mountain climbing.
- d) Mr Whinnett died on 2 April 2023 at Cradle Mountain, Tasmania.

In making the above findings, I have had regard to the evidence gained in the investigation into Mr Whinnett's death. The evidence includes:

- The Police Report of Death for the Coroner;
- Affidavits regarding identification;
- Opinion of the forensic pathologist regarding cause of death;
- Toxicology report of Forensic Science Service Tasmania;
- Tasmanian Health Service medical records;
- Affidavit of Hannah Butterfield, partner of Mr Whinnett;
- Affidavits of Mitchell Gorman, Alistair Mooney and Miles Franklin, fellow climbers and friends of Mr Whinnett;
- Affidavit of Senior Constable Damien Godfrey of Western District Search and Rescue squad;
- Affidavit of Thomas Krause, owner of Betapark Launceston bouldering gym.
- Affidavit of Nic Deka, Regional Manager North West Tasmania Parks and Wildlife Service;
- Affidavit of Constable Dean Wotherspoon, together with photographs;
- Weather data report from Bureau of Meteorology; and
- Information regarding climbing grades and climbing notes.

Comments and Recommendations

I find that Mr Whinnett accidentally lost his footing on a rock made very slippery by wet lichen. Tragically, this resulted in his fall down the face of the mountain and his death.

I comment that Tasmania Parks and Wildlife Service (PWS) has taken commendable steps in recent years to address the issues of visitor safety within the Cradle Mountain-Lake St Clair National Park. It is apparent that PWS continues to carefully consider its safety strategy and how, on the one hand, it may achieve an appropriate balance between providing information,

guidance and regulation and on the other, allowing walkers to engage freely in a particular activity.

PWS does not provide information on its website or in writing regarding the Skyline Traverse, taking the view that persons choosing to undertake the climb do so at their own risk. PWS has recently reviewed its policy regarding the Skyline Traverse and has indicated that it continues to be categorised as “*Not Managed for Visitor Services*”. I consider that this policy is appropriate.

This case highlights that death is one of the risks accepted by those choosing to embark upon such a recreational activity, even in the case of experienced climbers.

I acknowledge the efforts of the search and rescue officers, paramedics and PWS staff who attended and managed the scene in the aftermath of Mr Whinnett’s death.

I extend my appreciation to investigating officer Senior Constable Damien Godfrey³ for his very helpful investigation and report.

The circumstances of Mr Whinnett’s death are not such as to require me to make any recommendations pursuant to Section 28 of the *Coroners Act 1995*.

I convey my sincere condolences to the family and loved ones of Mr Whinnett.

Dated: 2 October 2024 at Hobart, in the State of Tasmania.

Olivia McTaggart

Coroner

³ Who also attended the scene on 2 April 2023 and stayed with Mr Whinnett’s body overnight in his capacity as a search and rescue officer.