



MAGISTRATES COURT of TASMANIA

CORONIAL DIVISION

Record of Investigation into Death (Without Inquest)

Coroners Act 1995
Coroners Rules 2006
Rule 11

I, Madeleine Wilson, Coroner, having investigated the death of Joao De Ornelas

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

- a) The identity of the deceased is Joao De Ornelas, whose date of birth is 30 April 1933.
- b) Mr De Ornelas, 76, was born in Madeira, Portugal.

He met his future wife when he was 8 years old and they married in 1958. They had three children, Maria (b 1959), Abilio (b 1963) and Jorge (b 1969).

Mr De Ornelas worked in the family lumberjack business until 1973 when he immigrated to Sydney, to give his young family "a better life". His wife and three young children followed the next year. Mr De Ornelas worked for the Sydney Water Board as a construction and maintenance worker from about 1974, until his retirement in 1993.

Mr De Ornelas and his wife lived in Marrickville, New South Wales. He was described by his son as "a very happy man". He and his wife had celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary in October 2008.

Mr De Ornelas was actively involved in the Portuguese community in Marrickville and participated in a number of different community groups. He attended mass locally each morning and preferred to walk or utilise public transport to get around. It was not unusual for him to walk about 8 kilometres throughout the day. Mr De Ornelas also enjoyed the outdoors and travelling. Since retiring, Mr De Ornelas and his wife had regularly travelled within Australia and overseas.

Mr and Mrs De Ornelas travelled to Tasmania in February 2010. The trip was organised by members of their local Portuguese community. Prior to travelling to Tasmania, Mr De Ornelas attended his regular general practitioner (GP) as his family were concerned he was starting to show the early signs of dementia. His general practitioner cleared him to travel.

Mr De Ornelas's past medical history included an enlarged prostate which he took medication for. He had lost sight in one eye and had difficulty seeing at night. In 2000, during a visit to Madeira, Portugal he was stuck by a car when crossing the road and required shoulder surgery. This resulted in him having restricted movement in his left arm.

Mr and Mrs De Ornelas departed Sydney for Hobart on Saturday 27 February 2010.

On 3 March 2010 Mr and Mrs De Ornelas travelled with the tour group by bus to the Tahune Airwalk, in Geeveston. They arrived just before lunch. The group followed their tour guide along the airwalk and at the end, the visitors had the choice of being taken back to the visitor's centre by cart or walking back to meet the bus. The tour leader gave instructions in Portuguese. Mr and Mrs De Ornelas completed the Tahune airwalk. Mr De Ornelas sat down next to one of the tour group members and told her he was going to start walking back. Members of the tour group reported seeing him on the top of the walkway, some distance in front of the remainder of the tour group. A separate group of visitors are believed to be the last people to see Mr De Ornelas. After exiting the airwalk, Mr De Ornelas was seen walking alone down a narrow gravel road away from the airwalk. Witnesses described him walking quite fast and with a sense of purpose. The witnesses estimate this was between 2.00-2.30pm.

Search efforts

Mr De Ornelas was reported missing to staff of the Tahune Airwalk shortly after 2.30pm. They promptly dispatched personnel to the boom gate on South Weld Road to search for Mr De Ornelas. When he could not be located, a coordinated search effort involving all staff members was undertaken, which included searches of the vicinity of the airwalk exit track and surrounding areas. Searches were undertaken on foot, bicycle and buggy and encompassed the short tracks to the river. Forestry Tasmania workers assisted the effort by undertaking vehicle and foot searches of the road and verge along Manuka Road, including line searches.

Tasmania Police arrived at the scene at approximately 5.30pm.

The police response was coordinated by Sergeant Paul Steane. Sergeant Steane had been in charge of Search and Rescue Services in Hobart since 1994 and held an Advanced Diploma of Public Safety (Police Search and Rescue- Management).

Sergeant Steane arrived at the scene by helicopter. The helicopter was tasked to search the immediate open areas, including roads and the Huon River, while checks of the tourist tracks continued on foot and vehicles patrolled Forestry Roads in the area.

During the evening further police and State Emergency Service (SES) searchers arrived from Hobart and were tasked with conducting a search of the tracks and radial searches into the surrounding bush. Search crews scoured the scene until midnight before retiring for the night.

The search effort continued from 7am until approximately 7.45pm each day between Thursday 4 March 2010 and Sunday 7 March 2010. During that time over 200 people from Tasmania Police, Victoria Police, Forestry Tasmania, SES and volunteer groups were involved in extensive searches of the area.

Systematic searches were conducted along obvious routes such as roads and tracks and teams were assigned line search areas immediately adjacent to the airwalk. In addition, Manuka and Warra Road were searched on foot by teams following leads into the bush and searches were conducted of the southwestern side of the Huon River and adjacent bushland.

Over a number of days, police divers searched the Huon River to the Southwood Bridge. In addition, two police dogs and their handlers were flown in from Melbourne to search the full length of Maunka Road and South Weld Road.

On Sunday 7 March approximately 70 people were involved in searching a radius of 24km around Tahune Airwalk by vehicle. The area was segmented up and assigned to 13 vehicles to search the area. Foot searches continued in the area surrounding the airwalk. The helicopter attended and covered the Picton, Huon and Weld rivers.

Throughout the search effort Sergeant Steane liaised with Dr Paul Luckin, a survivability expert as to the prospects of Mr De Ornelas's survival. On Monday 8 March 2010 a decision was made by Tasmania Police to suspend the search, pending more information.

Weather conditions during the search were unseasonably fine and mild, with daily temperatures around 20 degrees Celsius and nighttime temperatures not below 10 degrees Celsius.

The water level in the Huon River was low and photographs taken of the bridge crossing the Huon River at the Tahune Airwalk show the water level was well below the top of the footings of the bridge. Police considered there was not sufficient water in the river to enable a bulky object to float down the river.

Despite an extensive search over five days, no trace of Mr De Ornelas was found.

Survivability

Dr Paul Luckin, is medically qualified and practices as a specialist anaesthetist, he is a recognised specialist in the area of survivability. Dr Luckin is regularly consulted by Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA)¹, State police and other Search and Rescue authorities.

Dr Luckin was first contacted by Police on 5 March 2010 when he was briefed about the circumstances of Mr De Ornelas's disappearance. At that time approximately 52 hours had passed since the last sighting of Mr De Ornelas. At this time, Dr Luckin informed Sergeant Steene that if he was still alive, it was likely Mr De Ornelas would be within one kilometre of his last known location, within 100- 200 metres of the road and would likely have found shelter.

Based upon factors such as Mr De Ornelas' age, medical history, including the limited function of his injured arm, lack of physical strength and poor eyesight, as well as low nighttime temperatures and lack of protective clothing, Dr Luckin assessed Mr De Ornelas's probability of surviving as 50%.

¹ Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA) is the national search and rescue organisation responsible for coordinating responses to maritime and aviation emergencies in Australia.

On Saturday afternoon, his chances of survivability had reduced to 25 % and by Sunday afternoon, the likelihood of Mr De Ornelas being alive was reduced to 10%.

In Dr Luckin's opinion Mr De Ornelas had no chance of survival by Monday morning, 8 March 2010.

In Dr Luckin's opinion, Mr De Ornelas likely died of hypothermia, exhaustion and dehydration contributed to by his limited ability to fend for himself due to poor eyesight and limited arm function, lack of protective clothing in a cold environment and lack of water.

In his opinion the probable time of death was between the time he was last seen at approximately 2.30pm on Wednesday 3 March 2010 and daybreak on Saturday 6 March 2010.

Is Mr De Ornelas dead?

Mr De Ornelas was last seen alive on 3 March 2010 near Tahune Airwalk at Geeveston in Tasmania.

No physical evidence has been found in the area where he was last seen, despite an extensive land and air search.

Extensive enquiries by the Missing Persons Unit in 2010 and again in 2024 indicate that there has been no administrative activity which might suggest Mr De Ornelas is still alive. There is, for example, no evidence that he has accessed his bank accounts or engaged with government agencies since his disappearance. There have been no sightings of Mr De Ornelas.

Importantly, there has been no contact with any of Mr De Ornelas's family or friends. Given Mr De Ornelas's close family ties it is inconceivable he would not attempt to contact them if he was able to.

Moreover, Mr De Ornelas was a happy person who was on holidays with his wife and members of his local Portuguese community. There is no evidence he had ever expressed any suicidal ideation or had a history of depression or mental health issues. Suicide can be safely ruled out.

There is also no evidence that Mr De Ornelas's disappearance was suspicious or that a third party was involved.

Combined with the evidence of Dr Luckin as to the chances of Mr De Ornelas's survivability in the conditions at Geeveston in March 2010 and despite the fact that his body has never been located, I am satisfied to the requisite standard Mr De Ornelas is dead. In Dr Luckin's opinion Mr De Ornelas likely died on or before Saturday 6 March 2010. The chances of survivability declined steadily after that time to the point where there was no prospect of survivability after Monday 8 March 2010. On the balance of probabilities, I find that Mr De Ornelas died between 3 March 2010 and 8 March 2010.

Manner and Cause of Death

Regrettably, without a body or any direct evidence of his death, it is not possible to determine the exact circumstances surrounding Mr De Ornelas's death. On the balance of probabilities, I find that Mr De Ornelas became disoriented in bushland at or near Geeveston on Wednesday 3 March 2010.

I acknowledge Dr Luckin's expert opinion Mr De Ornelas likely died of hypothermia, exhaustion and dehydration. That hypothesis is certainly one possibility. However, notwithstanding the low water levels of the Huon River at the site of the Tahune Airwalk, I cannot exclude the possibility that Mr De Ornelas entered the river at some other location or that he suffered a medical episode. The cause of Mr De Ornelas's death is unable to be ascertained.

- c) I am unable to determine Mr De Ornelas' cause of death
- d) Mr De Ornelas died between 3 and 8 March 2010 at or near Geeveston.

In making the above findings, I have had regard to the evidence gained in the investigation into Mr De Ornelas' death which includes:

- The Police Report of Death for the Coroner;
- Affidavit of Virginia Barbosa-De Ornelas;
- Statement of Jorge Ornelas;
- Statement of Keryn Downie;
- Statutory Declaration of Joan Downie;
- Statement of Winifred Onslow;
- Statement of Michael Powell;
- Statement of Sergeant Paul Steane;

- Statement of Senior Constable Joshua Peach;
- Affidavit of Constable Michael Buick;
- Affidavit of Senior Constable Lucy Brown;
- Medical records;
- Tasmania Police records; and
- Search records.

Comments and Recommendations

The Tahune Airwalk is located on Arve Road, Geeveston, approximately 88 kilometres, or a 90 minute drive, south of Hobart. It features a 600 metre elevated walkway set amongst towering treetops and reaches 30 metres above the forest floor. The walk concludes at a cantilever platform sitting 50 metres above the Huon River and provides views of the merging Huon and Picton rivers, mountain ranges and treetop canopies.² In addition to the airwalk, there are a number of walking tracks nearby including the Huon Pine Walk along the riverbank and the Swinging Bridges Walk which extends down either side of the Huon River and leads to two swinging bridges which are suspended over the Picton River and Huon River, forming a loop track which takes approximately 1 hour to complete.

The bush around the airwalk is a mixture of older rain forest and eucalypt regrowth forest, with thick undergrowth at ground level.

Mr De Ornelas was thought to be suffering from early dementia and may have wandered off one of the defined walking tracks and become disoriented in the thick forest and been unable to find his way back to the group meeting spot.

Despite a prompt response by the staff of Tahune Airwalk and Forestry Tasmania and the extensive and systematic search response coordinated by Tasmania Police, no sign of Mr De Ornelas has ever been found.

The case highlights the importance of staying on the defined pathways and tracks in areas surrounded by dense bushland.

The circumstances surrounding Mr De Ornelas' death are not such that 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 De Ornelas.

² Tahune Adventures website.

I extend my appreciation to all the persons and agencies involved in the search for Mr De Ornelas, and to Constable Michael Buick and Sergeant Simon Ward for their preparation of the investigation file.

Dated: 12 June 2026 at Hobart, in the State of Tasmania.

Madeleine Wilson
Coroner