



MAGISTRATES COURT of TASMANIA

CORONIAL DIVISION



Record of Investigation into Death (Without Inquest)

*Coroners Act 1995
Coroners Rules 2006
Rule 11*

I, Simon Cooper, Coroner, having investigated the death of Dan Kokholm

Find that:

- (a) The identity of the deceased is Dan Kokholm;
- (b) Mr Kokholm died in the circumstances outlined in this finding;
- (c) I am unable to find the cause of Mr Kokholm's death;
- (d) Mr Kokholm died on or after 29 April 1970, in the Cradle Mountain/ Lake St Clair National Park in the vicinity of Mount Ossa, Tasmania; and
- (e) Mr Kokholm was born in Dannevirke, New Zealand on 6 June 1945 and was aged 24 years; Mr Kokholm was a single man whose occupation at the date of his death was a soldier in the Australian Army.

Jurisdiction:

The investigation of deaths in Tasmania is governed by the *Coroners Act 1995*. Section 21(1) of the *Act* provides:

“A coroner has jurisdiction to investigate a death if it appears to the coroner that the death is or may be a reportable death.”

‘Death’ is defined in section 3 of the *Act* as including a suspected death.

‘Reportable death’ is defined in the same section as meaning, *inter alia*, a death which occurred in Tasmania and was unexpected or the cause of which is unknown.

Thus if a Coroner suspects (on reasonable grounds) that a person has died and the death meets the definition of a reportable death, then that Coroner has jurisdiction to investigate.

For reasons which will become apparent in this finding I am satisfied that jurisdiction exists to investigate the disappearance of Gunner, Dan Kokholm.

Background:

Mr Dan Kokholm was born in 1945 in New Zealand to Danish parents and returned with them to Denmark after World War 2. His parents divorced in 1950 and Mr Kokholm lived with his father. Soon after they immigrated to Australia and settled in northern New South Wales. His father died in 1955 and Mr Kokholm was subsequently raised by his godmother, Mrs Anne Hobbs, and also spent time in foster care. His mother and younger sister also moved to Australia in 1965 however they did not have a close relationship with him. Mr Kokholm completed a university degree and travelled extensively throughout Australia and New Zealand. He was apparently an experienced bushwalker.

Mr Kokholm was called up for National Service which he deferred until completion of his studies. He then joined the Australian Army and volunteered for service in Vietnam in late 1969. He was due to deploy to Vietnam on 25 May 1970.

Mr Kokholm was granted two weeks pre-deployment leave in April 1970.

Circumstances Surrounding the Death:

The material furnished to the Coroner's Office in relation to this long term missing person satisfies me as follows.

Mr Kokholm travelled to Tasmania on the 'Princess of Tasmania' (a ferry which travelled between Melbourne and Devonport at the time). I am unable to find when he arrived in Tasmania, but it is clear he arrived in Queenstown on 19 April 1970. He stayed in the Methodist Hostel in Queenstown for two nights and made an entry in the hostel visitor's book on 20 April.

On 21 April a male hitchhiker, who fitted Mr Kokholm's description, was picked up by two women (Jennie Dell and Cecilia Goss) who took him as far as the Strahan turnoff. I am satisfied the male was Mr Kokholm as he reportedly said he was from NSW (which Mr Kokholm was), was in the Army, and shortly to deploy to Vietnam. He told the women of his plans to hike through the Cradle Mountain/ Lake St Clair National Park.

Later the same day he met up with two other young women in Queenstown, Vicki Johnston and Rosalie Upton.

On 22 April he hitched a ride from Queenstown with Vicki Johnston and Rosalie Upton. The women report that Mr Kokholm was dropped off near Derwent Bridge and was last seen walking towards Lake St Clair. He has never been seen since.

On 16 May 1970, Mr Kokholm's godmother, Mrs Hobbs, sent a telegram to Queenstown Police asking for information about him. Queenstown Police also received letters from Mrs Hobbs on 18 and 19 May 1970 detailing her concerns about Mr Kokholm. This was the first notification Tasmania Police had that Mr Kokholm was missing.

On 26 May the Australian Military Forces reported Mr Kokholm 'Absent Without Leave' ('AWOL') and requested that Tasmania Police search for him as it was considered he would not voluntarily be AWOL. Enquiries were then commenced, and continued throughout 1970, to attempt to locate Mr Kokholm.

Initial police enquiries determined that there was no recorded entry by Mr Kokholm into the National Park. It does not seem to have been known by police at the time that he was an

experienced bushwalker, nor that he had plans to undertake bushwalking in the Park. Thus it does not seem to have been considered that he would walk into the National Park. This conclusion was not unreasonable in the circumstances. However, a conclusion that appears to have been reached by police that he was avoiding deployment to Vietnam was not reasonable. There is absolutely no reason to have reached the view. Mr Kokholm had volunteered to fight in Vietnam and was highly regarded in his unit. The search for Mr Kokholm was reasonably extensive, by the standards of the time, but seems to have been influenced by this wholly baseless view. I note no searches of the Cradle Mountain/ Lake St Clair National Park were undertaken until months had passed. However given that Tasmania Police only became aware he was missing several weeks after he was in fact missing, the time that had by then passed meant there is, in my view, no reasonable chance that he would have been located alive even if the searches had commenced straight away. The other point of course is that police at that time had no information, at all, as to where to commence any search.

On 7 December 1970 police were advised by the Head Ranger of the Cradle Mountain/ Lake St Clair National Park that Mr Kokholm had visited the Park in April 1970. Police were advised that entries had been made by Mr Kokholm on 22 April 1970 in the Narcissus Hut logbook and also on 22 and 23 April in the Pine Valley Hut logbook.

On 22 February 1971 a Park Ranger, Mr Josef Oetterli, found an entry I am satisfied was made by Mr Kokholm in the Kia Ora hut log on 29 April 1970. Mr Kokholm wrote in the logbook that he was "going on to climb 'Ossa'" (which can only mean Mt Ossa, the highest mountain in Tasmania located more or less in the centre of the National Park and around four hours walk from Kia Ora hut). This is the last recorded entry and known location of Mr Kokholm; however as has already been noted, the logbook entries were not found until months after his disappearance.

I observe that the dates of the entries are completely consistent with Mr Kokholm being dropped at Derwent Bridge on 22 April and then making his way north in the National Park from hut to hut.

I find it is likely that Mr Kokholm became lost or injured some time on or after 29 April 1970. Despite his apparent experience as a bushwalker he was unable to survive his injury or get himself back to the Kia Ora hut or any other place of safety.

Despite searches in the National Park months after his disappearance his body was never found.

Police investigated several reported sightings of Mr Kokholm at the time after his disappearance was reported. I am satisfied that none of those reported sightings were Mr Kokholm.

Since Mr Kokholm's disappearance there is no evidence, at all, that he has made contact with any friend or member of his family. Extensive investigations have been conducted in Australia, New Zealand and Denmark without locating any evidence at all that Mr Kokholm is alive.

In all the circumstances I am satisfied that Mr Dan Kokholm died on or after 29 April 1970 in the Cradle Mountain/ Lake St Clair National Park, in the general vicinity of Mt Ossa. I am unable to find the cause of Mr Kokholm's death.

Comments and Recommendations:

The circumstances of Mr Kokholm's death are not such as to require me to make any recommendations or comments pursuant to section 28 of the *Coroners Act* 1995.

In conclusion I wish to convey my sincere condolences to the surviving family of Dan Kokholm.

Dated: 2 October 2015 at Hobart in the state of Tasmania

Simon Cooper
Coroner