



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 Laura Rebecca Golding

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

- a) The identity of the deceased is Laura Rebecca Golding;
- b) Ms Golding died in circumstances set out below;
- c) The cause of death is drowning; and
- d) Ms Golding died on 13 October 2017 at Lymington, Tasmania.

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

- The Police Report of Death;
- Geeveston Medical Centre records for Ms Golding;
- Affidavit of Patrick Reardon, witness to events before Ms Golding's death;
- Affidavit of Teresa Hallinan, friend and housemate of Ms Golding, regarding events before her death;
- Affidavit of Tanya Grueber, with whom Ms Golding formerly lived;
- Affidavit of Rosalie Henricks, owner of the dinghy used by Ms Golding;
- Two affidavits of Constable Michael Silk, witness and investigating officer;
- Affidavits of three police officers involved in the search for Ms Golding;
- Affidavits of two officers regarding Ms Golding's behaviour in the days before her death;
- Affidavit of a forensics officer and accompanying photographs; and
- Police documentation regarding the search for Ms Golding.

Laura Rebecca Golding was born Paul Allen Golding in New South Wales on 4 August 1966. At the time of death she was aged 51 years and was a transgender female. She lived in a flat below the main residence at 248 Cygnet Coast Road, Lymington, while her house at Milton Road, Port Huon, was being built.

Ms Golding suffered from ongoing mental health illnesses. In 1980, she was diagnosed with bipolar affective disorder which had resulted in many presentations to hospital. Relevantly, on 14 November 2016, Ms Golding was admitted to the Royal Brisbane Women's Hospital after being found swimming in the Brisbane River in the path of an oncoming ferry. At that time she was described as being acutely psychotic with her thought content marked by paranoid and grandiose themes. She was discharged on 25 November 2016 after undergoing treatment.

On 1 April 2017, Ms Golding was admitted to the Royal Hobart Hospital Emergency Department by police in a florid and manic state. Due to her level of delusion, aggression and agitation, she was admitted involuntarily for assessment and treatment under an assessment order. After treatment with antipsychotic medication, she recovered from the episode and was discharged as a voluntary patient on 5 April 2017.

Ms Golding was under the regular care of her general practitioner. Her more recent medical records show that her doctor tried to prescribe appropriate medication for her condition, which manifested in episodes of delusions and psychosis. Ms Golding, however, declined to take it. It appears that she also did not engage in the other referrals suggested by her doctor to assist her serious mental health condition.

Circumstances surrounding her death

In the days before her disappearance and death, Ms Golding had come to the attention of police officers for increasingly disruptive behaviour in public. On the morning of 10 October 2017, Senior Constable Paul Edwards attended the Ranelagh General Store after a staff member reported Ms Golding's concerning behaviour. In his affidavit, Senior Constable Edwards stated that, when he arrived at the store, Ms Golding was talkative and did not appear under the influence of alcohol or drugs. He said that she appeared to be very tired and displayed some signs of mental illness. Senior Constable Edwards telephoned Ms Golding's doctor who advised him that there were no concerns for her welfare at that time.

A similar report was made on 11 October 2017 where police officers attended the General Practice Plus surgery in Sandy Bay after a staff member reported that Ms Golding was behaving aggressively in the waiting room. The officers encountering Ms Golding described her as

aggressive, abusive and belligerent, with her demeanour changing continuously from being calm to highly agitated. She spoke to them in a number of different accents. They arrested her for an offence relating to her and she was bailed.

On the morning of 13 October 2017, Constable Michael Silk attended Ms Golding's address after a report of a disturbance was made by the owner of the property. In his affidavit, Constable Silk observed Ms Golding standing at the rear of her car, having smashed three windows out of the car. Ms Golding stated that she had lost her car keys and couldn't find them anywhere so she had decided to smash her way into the car to try and locate them. Constable Silk assessed Ms Golding's behaviour, although erratic, as not posing a risk to herself or anyone else at that time.

At about 4.00pm that afternoon, Constable Silk observed Ms Golding walking on Cygnet Coast Road near Kays Beach and she appeared to be acting rationally.

At about 6.10pm, Mr Patrick Reardon was on his 39 foot cruiser at Copper Alley Bay in Lymington with family members. The cruiser was on its mooring 100 metres from the shore. Mr Reardon noticed a person on shore behaving unusually.

In his affidavit Mr Reardon described his subsequent observations as follows;

"A short time later, at about 18:30 hours, I noticed a white dinghy appear from behind the abutment. The dinghy was drifting off shore in a most unusual manner. The dinghy was leaning dramatically, starboard side down. There was no outboard or oars evident. The occupant was initially attempting to propel the boat with the branch of (sic) tree, this attempt at propulsion was quickly abandoned.

At about 18:35 hours I decided to investigate given that I was of the opinion that the dinghy didn't belong to the occupant and the lack of seamanship on display was a cause of concern to me. I used my dinghy and travelled the short distance from Seaquila to the person in the white dinghy. When I was close enough to be able to see I found that the occupant was the same person who I had seen walking along the foreshore earlier and they were kneeling in the dinghy, using their hands over the side in a futile attempt to propel the dinghy. The dinghy was leaning to starboard quite precariously, with minimal freeboard.

I spoke briefly with this person and, given my background as a Paramedic, I quickly formed the view that this person was either affected by drugs or experiencing some form of psychotic episode.

Initially they claimed that the dinghy was theirs and then they said that they had just borrowed it. They indicated that the intention was to proceed to the other shore to visit someone. They told me they lived at Parramatta.

I noted that there were no oars and the person was not wearing a life jacket. They did not respond to my expressed opinion that they would not make it to the other shore and ignored my offer to take them back ashore.

At the time the wind was offshore, blowing WNW at about 12 knots, this wind was causing the dinghy to drift slowly offshore. I briefly considered intervening and towing the dinghy towards shore, however I did not think that I would be able to gain the occupant's cooperation and I was concerned that the occupant would end up in the water and I knew that if that happened I would not be able to effect a rescue."

Mr Reardon then decided to retreat and seek police assistance, stating that he telephoned 000 at about 6.43pm and spoke with police about the situation.

At 7.04pm Constable Silk attended the location and observed a person that he knew to be Ms Golding in a dinghy about 500 metres off shore. In his affidavit, he said that he observed Ms Golding leaning over the stern of the boat and attempting to paddle with her hands. Due to the small size of Mr Reardon's inflatable dinghy, Constable Silk decided that it would be unwise to approach Ms Golding and contacted the Huonville police unit to collect the Swift rigid-hulled inflatable boat (RIB) held at that station to ensure the safety of attending officers and Ms Golding herself.

Constable Silk maintained observations on Ms Golding until 7.20pm when he left the scene to meet the Huonville unit with the RIB. After Constable Silk left, Mr Reardon kept observations on the dinghy for about half an hour, noting that it eventually started to drift in a southerly direction with the outgoing tide. Mr Reardon stated that, after some time, he was no longer able to discern whether the occupant was still in the dinghy due to its distance away from his boat in the fading light. Mr Reardon believed that the occupant of the boat at that stage was too far off shore to be able to swim the distance to shore.

Two officers from Huonville attended the Cygnet boat ramp with the RIB, launched it at 7.54pm and travelled to Ms Golding's location.

At 7.56pm the dinghy was located by them approximately 500 metres from shore close to where Constable Silk had last observed it. On locating the dinghy, Ms Golding was not present on the boat but some personal belongings, including a flannelette shirt and handbag, were found in the boat. A passport belonging to Ms Golding was also found in the dinghy. The dinghy had no bung which had allowed in a significant amount of water although it was in no danger of sinking.

Police anchored the dinghy in the position where it was found and commenced an immediate search of the area. They continued the search for Ms Golding in Copper Alley Bay with the assistance of a second police vessel and two civilian vessels. An aerial search of the bay and surrounding area was also conducted by the police rescue helicopter, commencing at 9.33pm. The search continued in the morning of 14 October 2017 utilising Marine, Uniform and SES units as well as the police helicopter. The search effort continued for a number of days but without locating Ms Golding.

Ms Golding was formally listed by police as a missing person, however no information or evidence has been forthcoming to indicate that she may be alive.

Although Ms Golding's body has never been found, I am satisfied upon the ample evidence that she died of drowning between 7.20pm and 7.56pm on 13 October 2017. There is also ample evidence to indicate that, unfortunately, she was suffering a delusional or psychotic episode and was not rational at the time of using the dinghy. Clearly, without a life jacket, oars or a bung, Ms Golding's safety was at high risk.

The evidence obtained in the investigation does not indicate that Ms Golding had previously attempted suicide or suffered suicidal thoughts in the several years before her death. However, it remains a possibility that, in her irrational state, she decided to end her life by deliberately entering the water and drowning. It is more likely that Ms Golding either fell from the dinghy accidentally or, alternatively, left the dinghy with the intention of swimming back to shore, encountering difficulties and drowning. I am unable to determine to the requisite standard the reason for her entry into the water.

Given the extensive nature of the searches, it would appear that, upon drowning, her body sunk below the surface and was unable to be recovered.

Comments and Recommendations

In this investigation, I obtained helpful opinions from experienced Marine and Rescue Services officers regarding the police response in this case. On the basis of their opinions and my own assessment of the evidence, I am satisfied that the response by Constable Silk to Mr Reardon's report was appropriate. In particular, his decision to send for a police vessel was correct and timely. It would not have been appropriate for Constable Silk to utilise Mr Reardon's dinghy or seek Mr Reardon's further assistance. His dinghy was not equipped for rescue and Mr Reardon, to his knowledge, was not trained.

I am satisfied that Constable Silk was required to leave his observation point to go to the police vessel. Three officers were required on the vessel to effect a rescue, given Ms Golding's mental health issue.

I am also satisfied that, when the empty dinghy was located, the search was escalated as quickly as possible with an immediate request for helicopter.

I extend my appreciation to Constable Michael Silk for his investigation and report.

The circumstances of Ms Golding'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 Ms Golding.

Dated: 23 November 2020 at Hobart Coroners Court in the State of Tasmania.

Olivia McTaggart
Coroner