



Coroner's Court of Western Australia

RECORD OF INVESTIGATION INTO DEATH

Ref 84/19

*I, Evelyn Felicia VICKER, Coroner, having investigated the disappearance of **Richard Lakeman RYALL** with an inquest held at the **Coroner's Court, Albany Court House, Stirling Terrace, Albany, on 10 December 2019**, find the death of **Richard Lakeman RYALL** has been established beyond all reasonable doubt, and the identity of the deceased person was **Richard Lakeman RYALL** and that death occurred on or about **16 November 1986 somewhere in the vicinity of Lake Muir, near Kojonup**, in the following circumstances:*

Counsel Appearing:

Senior Constable Craig Robertson assisting the Coroner.

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INTRODUCTION

Sometime between 15 and 17 November 1986 Richard Lakeman Ryall (Mr Ryall) posted a letter to his next door neighbour, Marie Duncan (Mrs Duncan) indicating it was his intention to go on a “little trip” to get rid of his pain, which he attributed to cancer. He then went on to ask her if she would look after his will made out to a niece.¹ Mrs Duncan alerted the police and Mr Ryall’s motor vehicle was located in the place referred to in his note. Mr Ryall was never seen or heard of again.

The inquest into the disappearance of Mr Ryall was held in Albany and the documentary evidence comprised of the brief of evidence, Exhibit 1 tabs 1-53 and the public notice of inquest dated 7 November 2019 as Exhibit 2. Oral evidence was heard from Mr Ryall’s neighbour, Mrs Duncan, her husband, Mr Duncan, and then Constable, now Sergeant, John Cook (Sergeant Cook), one of the original police officers involved in the search and investigation with respect to Mr Ryall’s disappearance.

Long Term Missing Persons Project (LTMP)

In 2017 it was confirmed there were a number of files relating to the long term disappearance of people who had been in Western Australia at the time of their reported disappearance. Some of the disappearances occurred at a time when there was no or limited jurisdiction for a coroner to examine the circumstances of a suspected death.

Section 23(1) of the *Coroners Act 1996 WA* (the Act) allows the State Coroner to direct an investigation into a suspected death in certain circumstances without a body, for the purposes of allowing a coroner, under section 23(2), to establish beyond all reasonable doubt that death has occurred. The investigation must be done by way of inquest and will attempt to clarify how the death occurred and the cause of the death. This effectively brings the suspected death into the ambit of s 25 of the Act and allows registration of the death under the *Births, Deaths and Marriages Registration Act 1998*.

¹ Exhibit 1, tab 6

The reported number of LTMP made it unrealistic for the Office of the State Coroner (OSC) to absorb those matters into the already long outstanding inquest list in a timely manner. A plan was proposed for a project to clear the backlog of LTMP files once it had been determined the matters fitted the circumstances set out in s 23(1) of the Act. That is, the State Coroner or delegate had reasonable cause to suspect the person had died and the death was a reportable death (s3 of the Act).

In 2018 approval was given for a coroner to work exclusively on the LTMP cases, on a part-time basis for twelve months, as a separate listing from the OSC general inquest list. This followed a pilot project of four inquests conducted in 2018.

In 2019 a coroner was appointed for that project with the support of an in-house Coronial Investigation Squad (CIS) police officer as Counsel Assisting (CA).

Work on the files indicated a number of disappearances related to specific areas of Western Australia, such as the Kimberley around Kununurra or Broome, and Albany. For these matters it was decided that, while there is always a preference for inquests to be held in the communities to which they relate, especially for Indigenous communities where there is an emphasis on oral history, resources would not be effectively utilised for all matters to be heard in the place of disappearance. Instead matters where the disappearance occurred in places other than the Perth metropolitan area were considered from the perspective of the best availability for relevant witnesses.

In the case of Mr Ryall there were relevant witnesses in the Albany region as well as Sergeant Cook who was in a position to travel to Albany to provide information with respect to the investigation. The inquest was therefore held in Albany.

In addition, Mr Ryall's death was dealt with by the Supreme Court in 1988.² Enquiries with the Registrar General at the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages revealed there was no record of Mr Ryall's death and no death certificate had been issued. It was therefore necessary for an inquest to be held to allow a coroner to provide the Registrar General with the particulars needed to register the

² Exhibit 1, tabs 18, 19 and 49

death as a matter of public interest (section 25(1)(d)). Mr Ryall's surviving family are located in various places in the south west and while they were not wishing to participate in the inquest process had no difficulty with it being conducted.

The anticipated outcome of the Long Term Missing Persons project was that by June 2020 the majority of outstanding LTMP matters would be resolved and that future missing person files would be dealt with in the normal course of the OSC usual business.

THE DECEASED

Mr Ryall was born on 4 October 1925 in Kojonup which made him 61 years of age at the time he disappeared.

Mr Ryall was recorded as a mechanic and at the time he disappeared he was single although the police report records that he had been married.³ Mr Ryall had an extended family consisting of three brothers and one sister with a number of nephews and nieces.⁴

Mr Ryall was recorded as enjoying bush walking and locating pieces of native wood suitable for making furniture or ornaments.⁵

He was reported as enjoying fishing, he had a boat, and that he used to fish at Peaceful Bay with Les Carpenter (Mr Carpenter), however, Mr Carpenter had not seen him at the time of his disappearance.

Mr Ryall had two licensed firearms and was alleged to have had an unlicensed sawn off .22 rifle which he informed his neighbour, Mr Duncan, he kept on his boat for the purpose of shooting sharks. Mr Duncan had never seen the firearm, but confirmed there was no firearm in Mr Ryall's boat at the time of his disappearance. He had on an occasion fished with Mr Ryall, but not been shown the location of the sawn off firearm, only informed of its existence.⁶ Mr Ryall also had a white 1977

³ Exhibit 1, tab 1

⁴ T. 10.11.2019, p.4

⁵ Exhibit 1, tab 11

⁶ t. 10.12.2019, p.1-12

Ford station wagon, registration 6EU270.⁷ He was recorded as having attended two doctors in the area, Dr Lee and Dr Low.⁸ Neither doctor were aware of any suggestion Mr Ryall suffered any form of cancer.⁹

Mr Ryall lived in Wendoree Road, Muradup, near the Duncans and Mrs Duncan worked at the grocery in Muradup where she saw the deceased when he shopped.¹⁰

The only medical information with respect to the possible future identification of any unidentified remains was that Mr Ryall had suffered a broken collar bone at approximately 17 to 18 years of age, and had false teeth in both his upper and lower dentures, with the upper denture plate being chipped.¹¹

On 15 November 1986 Mrs Duncan saw Mr Ryall at the Muradup Cooperative while she was working in the grocery section. Police enquiries revealed that after leaving the cooperative Mr Ryall went to visit his niece, Evelyn Dalton, to show her some photographs he had taken, after which he left and said he would see her later.¹²

DISAPPEARANCE

There is no record of Mr Ryall being seen following 15 November 1986, however, it would appear he visited Manjimup on either 16 or 17 November 1986, probably 16th, where he posted a letter to Mrs Duncan. On Sunday 16 November 1986 at about 5.00 pm Mr Ryall's Ford station sedan was noted by a farmer, Ashley Muir (Mr Muir) parked without any person nearby.¹³

On 20 November 1986 Mrs Duncan received a letter from Mr Ryall post marked 2.30 pm 17 November 1986 advising her he intended to take a trip and did not wish anybody to look for him, whilst also providing her with details of his will.¹⁴ He further stated that his car would be found where the Thompson Highway joins the Muir Highway by Lake Muir and the car keys were on his kitchen table.

⁷ Exhibit 1, tab 2

⁸ Exhibit 1, tab 9

⁹ Exhibit 1, tab 2

¹⁰ t. 10.12.2019, p.4

¹¹ Exhibit 1, tab 3

¹² Exhibit 1, tab 9

¹³ Exhibit 1, tab 13

¹⁴ Exhibit 1, tabs 2 and 6; t.10.12.2019, p.5

Mrs Duncan immediately took the letter to Kojonup Police Station and the officers there rang the Manjimup Police as being the station closest to the given location for Mr Ryall's car.¹⁵

Sergeant Cook was located in Manjimup in 1986 and he contacted the Forestry aircraft which was in the area and requested they fly over the junction of Thompson and Muir Highways to see if they could locate a white Ford vehicle. The pilot later contacted Manjimup Police and stated he could see a white vehicle in the location suggested, without any apparent movement in the surrounding area. The Manjimup Police attended at the location and Sergeant Cook located the vehicle with the keys in the ignition, however, there was no trace of Mr Ryall.¹⁶

Mr Ryall's residence was then searched by Kojonup Police and on his kitchen table they found a wallet containing a small amount of cash, some insurance papers and share certificates, banking information with old accounts, receipts and some old photographs. His current motor driver's licence and two firearm licences were recovered, and both firearms located with ammunition, which were transferred to Kojonup Police Station.

When Mrs Duncan returned home and told her husband what had happened he remembered a conversation he had once had with Mr Ryall about ways he would consider for ending his life. Both involved using a sawn off 0.22 rifle, but different ways of disposing of his body so he could not be found. Mr Duncan had been told by Mr Ryall he kept a sawn off rifle in his boat to shoot sharks. Mr Duncan had only been told about it, but not seen it.¹⁷ They searched his boat but could not find it.

Mr Duncan informed the police about the reported sawn .22 calibre rifle, but a further search of the boat and property did not locate the firearm.

¹⁵ t 10.12.19, p6

¹⁶ t 10.12.19, p16

¹⁷ t 10.12.19, p11

INVESTIGATION

Following the location of Mr Ryall's car by the Fire Spotter plane on the afternoon of 20 November 1986, and the search of the car and surrounds by police later that afternoon, the police returned to Manjimup Police Station and in conjunction with the Kojonup Police organised additional searches to be made.

Mr Ryall's friend, Mr Carpenter, advised police when enquiries were made with him that he had not seen Mr Ryall for some time. He believed Mr Ryall had changed his camping and fishing spot to Augusta where it was believed he had an older brother. Enquiries in Augusta indicated Mr Ryall camped in a small private tent at the Augusta Caravan Park, however, his brother had not seen him recently nor had he seen him when he had visited Muradup the previous week.¹⁸

When contact with relatives and friends failed to provide any sighting for Mr Ryall following 15 November 1986, the police attempted to contact the Mt Barker Tracking Group (dogs) in an attempt to trace Mr Ryall from his car. While it was impossible to organise for 20 November 1986, arrangements were made for the early morning of 21 November 1986 for three dogs and nine handlers to meet at Mr Ryall's last presumed location at the junction of the Thompson and Muir Highways where his car had been located. The car was by then at the Manjimup Police Station and the dogs were first taken to the car before being taken out to the highways.¹⁹

The search over the following two days involved ten experienced riders on horse-back, the local farmer, Mr Muir, the aeroplane pilot, and a number of SES volunteers from the surrounding districts including the dog trackers.²⁰

Unfortunately the tracker dogs did not pick up any scent identified as that of Mr Ryall and the extensive search both by foot and on horse-back failed to produce any indication of Mr Ryall's whereabouts. By the early afternoon of Saturday

¹⁸ Exhibit 1, tab 13

¹⁹ Exhibit 1, tab 13

²⁰ Exhibit 1, tab 12

22 November 1986 there had been 40 foot searchers and two police searchers with six mounted police and ten others on horse-back, coming to a total of 58 people in the field providing a detailed grid search of the suspected area of disappearance. When no trace of Mr Ryall could be found the search was terminated.²¹

In evidence Mr Duncan advised of the two possibilities that had come to mind from his earlier conversations with Mr Ryall. Mr Duncan thought it was possible Mr Ryall had either used his local knowledge as a bushman to end himself by shooting himself with the sawn off rifle in an area of quick sand, thought to be located somewhere in the area or, shot himself in the vicinity of long term burning peat fires which he believed would totally consume a body.²²

That information was used as part of the search, but again revealed no information, nor were the exact locations positively identified. Sergeant Stewart of Manjimup Police Station indicated in his report to the local Superintendent at Bunbury the police and searchers had covered all of the anticipated area at least twice in three days. This was a distance of 6 kilometres radius from where Mr Ryall's car was found, with 24 square kilometres covered on foot and 15 square kilometres on horse back. All tracks and roads in the vicinity were covered by mobile patrols and the lake area was searched along with all caves and buildings west of Lake Muir. It was noted the edges of the lake were soft, but no footprints were evident.

Following the conclusion of the official search Mr Ryall's brother contacted the local police and asked if he and other friends and relatives of Mr Ryall could conduct a private search of the area. This was authorised and they searched for an additional period of time with assistance from police by way of maps. Police were advised on Friday 28 November 1986 that the friends and relatives of Mr Ryall had searched for two days without result and had also concluded their attempts to find him.

²¹ Exhibit 1, tab 13

²² t. 10.12.2019, p.10

Enquiries with the two doctors Mr Ryall was known to visit revealed he had not seen Dr Low of Kojonup since June 1985 for a Workers Compensation Claim and had last seen Dr Lee of Boyup Brook on 20 May 1986 when he had complained of ongoing chest pains for which he was provided with a referral to a consulting physician, Dr Martin Reeve of Bunbury, with the provisional diagnosis of angina. Dr Reeve's office indicated the referral had never been followed up.²³

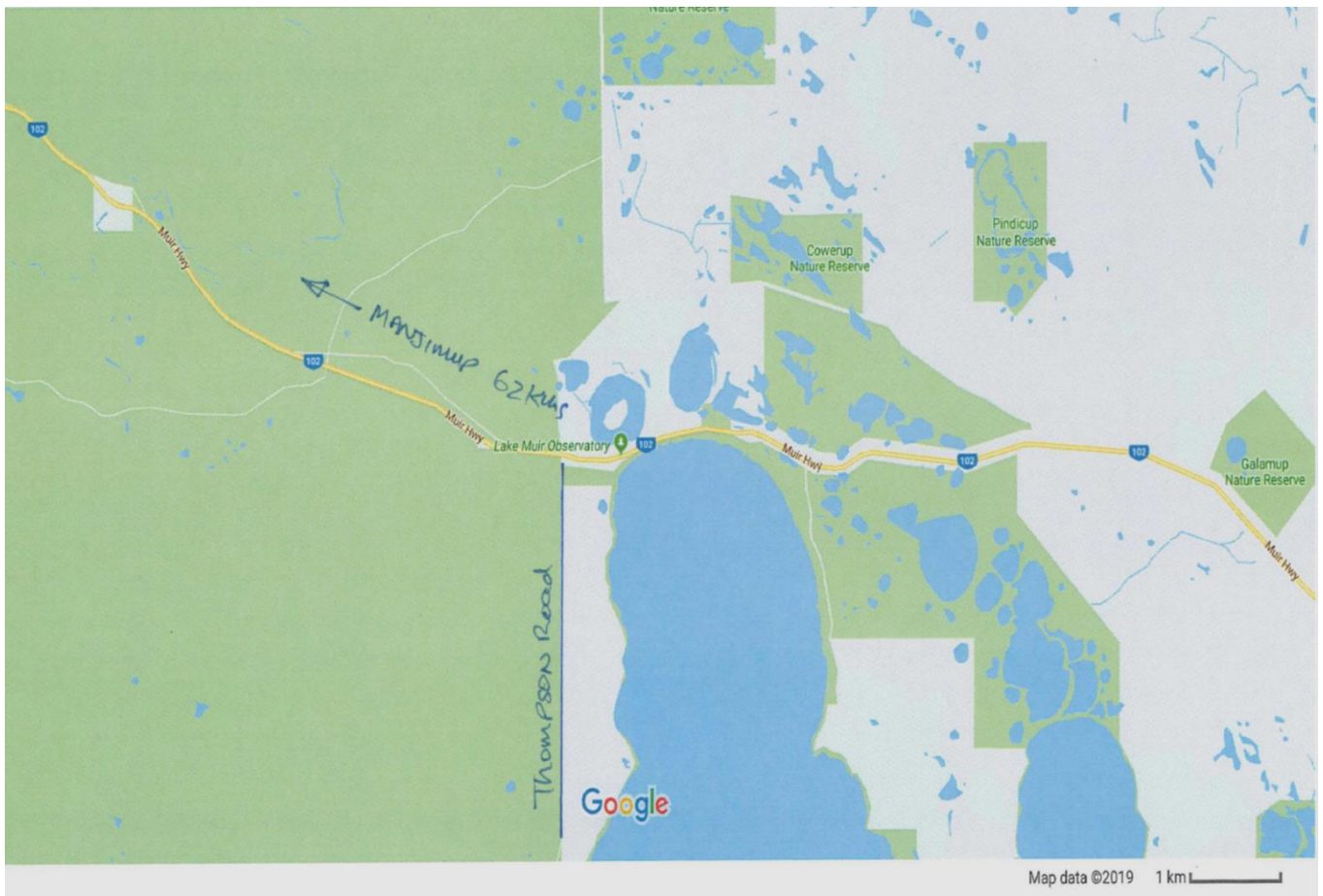


Exhibit 1, Tab 51

It was presumed by all Mr Ryall had been successful in his implied intent of committing suicide.²⁴

Enquiries over the following years with Commonwealth and State facilities such as banks, hospitals and Centrelink indicated there was no further trace of Mr Ryall.

²³ Exhibit 1, tab 9

²⁴ Exhibit 1, tab 13

In May 1987 Mr Ryall's relatives instructed solicitors to make an application to the Supreme Court for a Grant of Probate and the police assisted as they could.²⁵

On 11 May 1988 the Deputy Registrar of the Supreme Court granted Letters of Administration for Mr Ryall's estate to Mr Ryall's brother, Robert Maxwell Ryall of Kojonup.²⁶

HAS DEATH BEEN ESTABLISHED?

Mr Ryall would be 94 years of age had he survived to 2019. Whilst that would be perfectly possible, the circumstances surrounding Mr Ryall's disappearance and his attention to detail in providing a location for his vehicle and instructions with respect to his belongings satisfy me beyond all reasonable doubt that Mr Ryall succeeded in taking his life, sometime following the leaving of his car at the junction of Thompson and Muir Highways on 16 November 1986.

The given reason for his wishing to take his life, the fact he had, rather than he suspected he had cancer, is not based upon any medical evidence, however, does support the fact he was in pain with chest pains, suspected by Dr Lee to be angina.

While it would seem that in the months prior to his disappearance he may have been feeling somewhat lonely, as evidenced by his "cups of tea" with his neighbours the Duncans²⁷, it does not appear there was any specific reason for Mr Ryall wishing to take his life. The number of family and friends searching for him beyond the time provided by the police would indicate, that if he was in trouble of any sort, he did have sources for support.

It is also not clear whether his hints as to quick sand and peat fires were supportable. Both the quick sand and peat fires may well have consumed a body before he could be located and may account for the fact no trace of him was found when searching areas surrounding his abandoned car. While Mr Ryall reported he

²⁵ Exhibit 1, tabs 18 and 19

²⁶ Exhibit 1, tab 39

²⁷ t 10.12.19, p14

had a sawn off .22 calibre rifle for shooting sharks, I note he did not show it to Mr Duncan when Mr Duncan went fishing with him some years earlier.²⁸

While there would appear to be no apparent motive for Mr Ryall's decision to take his life, other than the fear of a diagnosis of cancer, I am satisfied that he was successful in "making his pain go away".²⁹ The fact there was no trace of him in such a remote place, thoroughly searched at the time, would indicate he succeeded with planned, although unstated, suicide.

I am satisfied beyond all reasonable doubt Mr Ryall was successful in taking his life and he did so prior to Mrs Duncan receiving his letter on 20 November 1986.

MANNER AND CAUSE

I am satisfied beyond all reasonable doubt Mr Ryall intended to take his life in a way which would not impact upon people discovering his body. If he indeed had a sawn off .22 calibre rifle it is feasible his death could have been messy. He appears to have thought of ways for a body to disappear before authorities would be informed, following receipt of his letter by Mrs Duncan.

Mr Ryall made it clear he wished to disappear, that he did not want anyone to look for him and that he wished his belongings to go to his niece, Ms Dalton. While I am unable to determine whether Mr Ryall shot himself in a manner which would automatically dispose of his body, or chose some other means to die, I am satisfied he was successful and that he completed his suicide prior to 20 November 1986.

I am satisfied beyond all reasonable that Mr Ryall was successful in taking his life and somehow disposing of his remains.

I find death occurred by way of Suicide.

²⁸ t 9.12.2019, p.12

²⁹ Exhibit 1, tab 6

CONCLUSION

In the last years of his life it would appear Mr Ryall was a somewhat solitary person. He was no longer fishing with his friend, Mr Carpenter, at Peaceful Bay and the indications are that when he fished in Augusta he did so while staying alone at a campsite. His brother in the Augusta area had not heard from him in the timeframe of his disappearance and there appears to have been no one to whom he spoke or saw, who was aware of his belief he had cancer.

Certainly the attempt by Dr Lee to have Mr Ryall examined by a consultant physician with respect to his chest pain proved unproductive. Dr Reeve's office never heard from Mr Ryall and it would seem he had decided that regardless of the outcome he did not wish to experience ongoing pain, and possibly, loneliness.

Mr Ryall was relatively meticulous in timing his disappearance with the expected time of delivery of his letter to Mrs Duncan. While it was post stamped the afternoon of 17 November 1986, the indications are his car was at the Lake Muir location by the evening of 16 November 1986. With no indication as to collection or delivery times of post in that area in 1986, it seems Mr Ryall posted his letter sometime on 16 November 1986 expecting it to be dealt with on 17 November 1986, and delivered sometime after that date to Mrs Duncan. He appeared to be quite determined he would have suicided sometime before there was an opportunity to avert his death.

This was a well thought out plan which Mr Ryall pre-mediated and put into action prior to there being any possibility he would be deterred from his course of action.

All the indications are Mr Ryall committed suicide by some means overnight from 16 November to the 17 November 1986 at a location undiscovered somewhere in the vicinity of Lake Muir. While it is possible he could have walked a greater distance before the authorities were alerted on 20 November 1986, there is no

apparent motive or indication he was intending to disappear other than by way of death.

E F Vicker
Coroner

31 March 2020