
JURISDICTION : CORONER'S COURT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA
ACT : CORONERS ACT 1996
CORONER : SARAH HELEN LINTON, DEPUTY STATE CORONER
HEARD : 4 AUGUST 2021
DELIVERED : 6 AUGUST 2021
FILE NO/S : CORC 1349 of 2017
DECEASED : PINCHER, WILLIE

Catchwords:

Nil

Legislation:

Nil

Counsel Appearing:

Senior Constable C Robertson assisted the Coroner.

Case(s) referred to in decision(s):

Nil

Coroners Act 1996
(Section 26(1))

RECORD OF INVESTIGATION INTO DEATH

*I, Sarah Helen Linton, Deputy State Coroner, having investigated the disappearance of **Willie PINCHER (aka Kungil)** with an inquest held at Perth Coroners Court, Central Law Courts, Court 51, 501 Hay Street, Perth, on 4 August 2021, find that the death of **Willie PINCHER (aka Kungil)** has been established beyond all reasonable doubt and that the identity of the deceased person was **Willie PINCHER (aka Kungil)** and that death occurred on an unknown date between 1 September 1965 and 30 November 1965 in bushland near Mornington Station in the vicinity of the Sir John Range in the Kimberley Region of Western Australia as a result of an unknown cause in the following circumstances:*

1. Willie Pincher (also known as Kungil in his own language) was an Aboriginal man from the Kimberley Region of Western Australia. He disappeared in October or November 1965 and was formally reported missing to WA Police on 12 March 1966.¹
2. Mr Pincher had been working as a station worker at Mornington Station with his partner, Dolly Joyjill, prior to his disappearance. Mr Pincher and Ms Joyjill had been reliable and valued workers and Mr Pincher was said to have had a good and trusting relationship with the station owner, Kevin Suridge. When the station closed in late 1965, Mr Pincher and Ms Joyjill decided to walk to Lansdowne Station to look for work. Mr Suridge and his wife left the station in late September 1965 and when they returned sometime later, Mr Pincher and Ms Joyjill had left the station.²
3. The evidence is a little unclear, but it seems that Mr Pincher and Ms Joyjill left the station sometime in October 1965. They became separated early on in their journey. Mr Pincher was last seen walking ahead of Ms Joyjill with his swag and at least one dog (and possibly up to five dogs). She followed behind him. Ms Joyjill followed Mr Pincher's tracks and tracked him to the Sir John Range. She could not follow him up the rock face as she had injured her foot, so she took a different, easier path to Lansdowne Station.³
4. It took Ms Joyjill approximately one week to walk to Lansdowne Station. She was unwell when she arrived at the station on 4 November 1965. Ms Joyjill immediately asked for Mr Pincher and she was told that Mr Pincher had never arrived. After she

¹ Exhibit 1, Tab 3.

² Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

³ Exhibit 1, Tab 7 and Tab 10.

recovered, Ms Joyjill walked to Tablelands Station around Christmas 1965 to see if Mr Pincher had gone there instead, but there had been no sign of him at that station either. When she returned to Lansdowne station, Ms Joyjill told an owner of the station that she thought something must have happened to Mr Pincher as otherwise someone would have heard from him by then.⁴

5. After Mr Pincher's disappearance was reported to police, various witnesses were spoken to and conflicting accounts were given as to what might have happened to him. One witness suggested that Mr Pincher had been murdered by the previous station owner where he worked, but this allegation was quickly discounted by police. Police officers utilised the services of trackers to search the route that Ms Joyjill reported she had taken from Mornington Station to Lansdowne Station. Ms Joyjill assisted the police to retrace her steps in November 1966, but no sign of Mr Pincher was found. Some items of property that had belonged to Mr Pincher were located during this search, but Ms Joyjill told police she had left those items in those locations, not Mr Pincher.⁵
6. Ms Joyjill showed the police the last spot she had tracked Mr Pincher to before taking a different path. The police officer noted it was an almost sheer rock face at the face of Sir John Range that would have taken a good fit man to scale it. The police officer considered it was unsafe to attempt to the climb himself.⁶
7. No person who knew Mr Pincher has reported having any contact with him since he left Mornington Station in the later months of 1966. Police noted in March 1966 that the general belief amongst other Aboriginal station workers at Lansdowne was that Mr Pincher was dead.⁷ Enquiries were made in Broome and at the missions in Beagle Bay and Lombadina and various reserves such as One Mile, to check that Mr Pincher had not made his way to any of these locations. There was some initial information to suggest Mr Pincher had gone to Broome, but later enquiries established that another person with the surname Pincher had been mistaken for Mr Pincher.⁸
8. Another report of a worker with the surname Pincher drowning during a flood at Napier station was investigated and it was established that the person was a different person.⁹
9. All other possible sightings of Mr Pincher were investigated but none were proven. It was noted by police that the terrain where Mr Pincher was last seen was harsh, he was carrying few supplies and was on foot. Friends of Mr Pincher later reported to police that a dog that was known to have left on the journey with Mr Pincher was apparently found alive at the Mornington Station sometime after, which also led Mr Pincher's friends to believe he had died on the journey and the dog had then

⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 10.

⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 10.

⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 10.

⁷ Exhibit 1, Tab 4.

⁸ Exhibit 1, Tab 5 and Tab 6.

⁹ Exhibit 1, Tab 7 and Tab 8.

returned to the station. However, Ms Joyjill told police that she sent a dog back to the camp, so this may not be correct.¹⁰

10. The police investigation in 1966, that was focussed on the allegation that Mr Pincher had been murdered, concluded that Mr Pincher either met with an accident or died of sickness or was still alive at that time.¹¹ The District Inspector spoke to a local Aboriginal man of advanced age to ask his opinion, based upon his local knowledge, and this man expressed the opinion Mr Pincher could have hurt himself or become ill and died in the harsh terrain of the range. The case was reviewed again in December 1967 and it was decided no further action would be taken at that time. Mr Pincher remained recorded as a missing person with the WA Police from that time.¹²
11. In July 1999 an officer from the Missing Persons Unit made enquiries with Centrelink to confirm that there had been no contact with Mr Pincher and it was confirmed that there were no dental records on file for him.¹³
12. On 24 April 2009 Mr Pincher's case was identified as a long-term missing person case by WA Police.¹⁴
13. Many years have passed since then, but no new information has come to light to explain what happened to Mr Pincher and no remains have been found that have been identified as belonging to Mr Pincher. There are no dental records, Centrelink records or medical records available for Mr Pincher. According to police enquiries, Mr Pincher has made no contact with any person, community or agency since he disappeared in late 1965, more than 50 years ago.¹⁵
14. On the basis of the information provided by the WA Police in relation to Mr Pincher's disappearance, I determined that pursuant to s 23 of the *Coroners Act 1996* (WA), there was reasonable cause to suspect that Willie Pincher had died and his death was a reportable death. I therefore made a direction that an inquest be held into the circumstances of the suspected death.¹⁶
15. I held an inquest at the Perth Coroner's Court on 4 August 2021. The inquest consisted of the tendering of documentary evidence compiled through the police investigation conducted into Mr Pincher's disappearance in 1966, as well as hearing evidence from a police officer to confirm that a recent review of the limited documentation on the police file confirmed that no new information had come in to shed light on Mr Pincher's disappearance several decades ago.
16. I am satisfied beyond reasonable doubt that Mr Pincher died around the time of his disappearance, on an unknown date between 1 October 1965 and 30 November 1965. There is insufficient evidence for me to be able to be satisfied of a cause or manner

¹⁰ Exhibit 1, Tab 7 and Tab 10.

¹¹ Exhibit 1, Tab 10.

¹² Exhibit 1, Tab 10.

¹³ Exhibit 1, Tab 14, Running Sheet, entry 20 July 1999.

¹⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 14, Running Sheet, entry 24 April 2009.

¹⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

¹⁶ Section 23 *Coroners Act*.

of death, although it was most likely due to a natural or accidental cause, given the known circumstances. Based on the information available to me, I make an open finding as to how the death occurred.

S H Linton
Deputy State Coroner
6 August 2021