

IN THE CORONERS COURT  
OF VICTORIA  
AT MELBOURNE

Court Reference: COR 2010 4771

**FINDING INTO DEATH WITH INQUEST**

*Form 37 Rule 60(1)*

*Section 67 of the Coroners Act 2008*

**Inquest into the Death of: NEIL QUALTROUGH**

Delivered On: 16 January 2013

Delivered At: Level 11, 222 Exhibition Street  
Melbourne 3000

Hearing Dates: 15 August 2012

Findings of: JUDGE JENNIFER COATE, CORONER

Police Coronial Support Unit Senior Sergeant Jenny Brumby

I, JUDGE JENNIFER COATE, Coroner having investigated the death of NEIL QUALTROUGH

AND having held an inquest in relation to this suspected death on 15 August 2012  
at MELBOURNE

find that the identity of the deceased was NEIL STANLEY QUALTROUGH  
born on 10 September 1943  
and the death occurred sometime after 6 June 2007  
at an unknown location

**from:**

1 (a) UNKNOWN CAUSE

**in the following circumstances:**

#### **Background**

1. Neil Stanley Qualtrough, a fitter and turner in the merchant navy and an engineer, lived in his family home in outer suburban Melbourne for 35 years. He married in 1969 and had remained married to his wife until she passed away in 2001. There were two children of that marriage, a son and a daughter. The evidence is that Mr Qualtrough had run small businesses of modest success during his working life and was retired by the end of 2006.
2. His daughter, Sarah Qualtrough<sup>1</sup> stated that her father had led a settled married life up until the death of her mother in 2001. Sarah stated that in the wake of her mother's death, her father's behaviour became somewhat unsettled and erratic such that she became worried about him and whether or not he was depressed. Sarah also stated that around the time of her mother's passing there had been other family losses including both of her father's parents. The evidence is that in the wake of these family losses there was some estrangement in the family and Mr Qualtrough became estranged from some of his family.
3. Sarah stated that her father sold the family home after her mother passed away. According to Sarah, between 2003 and 2006, Mr Qualtrough was moving around a lot. He took off on a driving trip around Australia for several months; he travelled to Coober Pedy to be an opal miner for six months; he joined a house-sitting association in and around Bendigo and engaged in house sitting.

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<sup>1</sup> Oral evidence: August 15 2012

4. In late 2005, at the age of 63, having met an American woman over the internet, Mr Qualtrough flew to Oregon USA to spend three months with her. Sarah described this relationship as an “on-again off-again” relationship and stated that this woman had travelled to Australia in 2006 to spend some time with Mr Qualtrough.

#### **Circumstances surrounding the last contact with Mr Qualtrough**

5. Sarah stated that over the years, Mr Qualtrough had spoken of his dream to own a yacht and go sailing.<sup>2</sup> She also stated that he had virtually no experience of sailing other than maybe spending an afternoon on a friend’s yacht from time to time, but not amounting to more than about once a year.
6. In late 2006 he decided to fulfil this dream to purchase a yacht. According to Sarah he decided it was cheaper to buy a yacht in America and sail it home. Sarah expressed considerable concern to him about this plan but stated that her father seemed “nonchalant” about the trip.
7. To this end, he located a yacht in Hawaii in late 2006 and consequently flew there to inspect the vessel. After inspecting it he purchased the yacht which was a 16 metre three mast vessel, with a wooden hull. It carried a five person life craft.
8. According to Sarah, her father then worked on the yacht, moored in Honolulu, over the next six months making a number of repairs to it. He was required to return to Australia once during this period to meet the visa requirements in Hawaii.
9. Throughout this time he communicated regularly with his daughter. He indicated that he was becoming homesick and keen to set sail and return home. Sarah stated that her father deliberated over whether to set sail alone or to take a crew, but ultimately the evidence is that he decided to go alone. Sarah stated she was very apprehensive about this decision given her father had limited sailing experience. Her evidence was that she tried to talk him out of sailing alone but apparently to no avail. He reassured her that he had up-to-date navigation equipment, a Ham radio and a distress beacon.

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<sup>2</sup> Statement of Sarah Qualtrough 18.11.2011 and oral evidence 15.8.2011

10. She last spoke to him on 5 June 2007, at which time he intended to set sail from Hawaii the following day. The evidence is that he departed Honolulu alone in his yacht on 6 June 2007. He had told Sarah that he anticipated that he would sail via Tahiti, Fiji or Samoa to the northern coast of Australia and then follow the east coast of Australia back home to Victoria.
11. Mr Qualtrough told Sarah that he anticipated he would be at his first port in about three weeks at which time he would call her. After four weeks without contact, Sarah became concerned and called the Australian Marine Safety Authority (AMSA) in early July 2007 in considerable distress and expressing her concerns for her father's safety.
12. On 9 July 2007 AMSA's Regional Co-ordination Centre (RCC) commenced enquiries with associated RCC's located in the Pacific region, together with operators associated with Ham (amateur radio) networks, shipping channels and yachting communities.
13. No physical search was conducted to locate Mr Qualtrough as his proposed journey was not specific enough to commence any search. No further search and rescue action has been taken by the AMSA or any other body since 9 September 2007.
14. On 19 October 2007 Sarah attended the Box Hill police station and reported her father missing. She made this report to Senior Constable Scott Stephens who became the investigating member for the coronial enquiry. Senior Constable Stephens liaised with Interpol Canberra, AMSA and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in an endeavour to investigate the circumstances surrounding Mr Qualtrough's apparent disappearance.
15. In December 2007 Interpol Canberra posted an Interpol missing person's notice which was distributed to 188 Interpol member countries. No information was received about Mr Qualtrough via this method.
16. On 6 January 2008 Victoria Police conducted a media conference at the Victoria Police Centre which received coverage on Fairfax Digital, ABC, Channel 10 and Channel 9 and all major newspapers and news websites. Radio interviews were also conducted on ABC radio and ABC Radio International which covers the Pacific region.
17. On 8 January 2008, information was received by Crime Stoppers indicating a possible sighting of Mr Qualtrough in a supermarket in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Borneo. According to the investigating member an Australian couple had reported seeing a person that vaguely

fitted the description of Mr Qualtrough in a supermarket. Victoria Police contacted Interpol Canberra requesting checks be conducted with local authorities to see if they had any record of Mr Qualtrough entering the country. Upon investigation no records were found that Mr Qualtrough had entered the country.

18. Various checks have been conducted with a range of bank accounts held by Mr Qualtrough at the time of his disappearance. He last used his Bendigo Bank Account on 5 June 2007 in Honolulu.
19. As a result of some evidence which emerged during the Inquest on 15 August 2012, a number of further checks have since been conducted. All Commonwealth accounts held by Mr Qualtrough show that he has not made any transactions since June 2007. An ASX search performed showed no trading since May 2007 in the one account in Mr Qualtrough's name. Further Medicare and Centrelink searches produced no further information of any contact post June 2007.
20. In the wake of the Inquest on 15 August 2012, as a result of media reports, Senior Sergeant Brumby Assisting, received a telephone call from a member of the public who had heard the report of this Inquest on the ABC news. The caller indicated that he was reasonably confident that he had spent some time with Mr Qualtrough whilst his yacht was docked in Honolulu. That caller, Mr David Pawley, has now provided a statement<sup>3</sup> in which he says that he is a marine engineer who was based in Honolulu in May/June 2007. He has also provided a photograph which he states was taken on 19 May 2007. He stated that the photograph was of the man he believed was Neil Qualtrough, standing with his yacht.
21. Mr Pawley stated that whilst in Honolulu in May/June 2007 he was working on a yacht at Waikiki. He was approached by a US national who expressed concern to him about an Australian man who was preparing to sail back to Australia. Mr Pawley stated that the American man told him he had gone sailing with the Australian chap and he was concerned that he did not appear to be familiar with the system of buoyage used in Hawaii and therefore was steering his yacht improperly.

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<sup>3</sup> Statement of David Pawley 14 September 2012

22. Mr Pawley stated that he went to meet this Australian chap who was about 5.8", greying, late 50's Caucasian who, when approached by Mr Pawley, said: "*I know why you are here and I don't need your help*". Mr Pawley stated that in his judgment this man's proposal to sail his yacht to Australia was not a good idea but that the man was determined to go.
23. Mr Pawley could not remember the name of the man but he was able to provide the photograph of the man with his yacht which has now been shown to Sarah.
24. Sarah has confirmed that the photograph is a photo of her father; Mr Neil Qualtrough.

### CONCLUSION

25. Based on all of the above, I am satisfied that Mr Qualtrough, an inexperienced sailor, set sail alone in his yacht from Honolulu on or about 6 June 2007 and apparently failed to make it safely to his anticipated first destination. He has not been in contact with his daughter Sarah, much to her distress, since that time. I am satisfied that on balance Mr Qualtrough has met with some misfortune at sea and has perished as a result.

I direct that a copy of this finding be provided to the following:

Ms Sarah Qualtrough

Senior Constable Scott Stephens, Nunawading Police Station, Investigating Member

Signature:

  
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JUDGE JENNIFER COATE  
CORONER

Date: 16 January 2013

