

# ALMOST LOST IN

# Paradise

by Detective Sergeant Tony Langer,  
Western Australia Police



Dongara Tourist Park



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### Detective Sergeant

**Tony Langer** is currently attached to South Hedland Detectives Office, with the Western Australian Police Force. Tony has over 18 years of operational service and during his career has worked in various general duties positions before completing his detective training in 2004. Since then Tony has served at the Central Tactical Investigation Group, the Major Fraud Squad, Midland Detectives, Geraldton Detectives, Peel District Crime Team, Mandurah Detectives and as the Officer in Charge of East Pilbara Detectives.

*The names of persons involved in this article have been changed to protect the innocent.*

## JUST A QUIET HOLIDAY

Port Denison is situated in Dongara, a small coastal town approximately three and a half hours north of Perth in Western Australia. The town is renowned for its beautiful beaches, fishing and crayfish. Many families take their holidays there every year as the town has many activities.

In September 2009, Peter Smith took his nine-year-old daughter Holley on a short holiday to Dongara with some family friends. The Smith family had previously lost their mother/wife to illness, so Peter viewed the trip as a chance to give Holley a break and a change of scene.

The families set up their tents in the Dongara-Dennison Tourist Park, under the shade of some trees, and set about enjoying their holiday. Peter and the family friends slept in separate large tents and Holley and her friend Stacy slept in a three-man tent, which was right next to the larger tents.

## TAKEN!

On the night of 25 September, Holley and Stacey went to sleep in their tent. Around six o'clock the following morning a male person wearing a dark hoodie and dark clothing opened the zipper on the tent, picked Holley up and told her not to worry, he was taking her to her dad. The man then carried Holley, who was still half asleep, to a nearby motor vehicle and placed her in the passenger seat, then got into the driver's seat and began driving away.

Holley woke up and, not knowing who the man was, asked him what was going on. The male said nothing and continued driving out of the caravan park. Holley, now sensing imminent danger, screamed and managed to open the door and jump out of the vehicle. The male then sped off. Holley's screams woke Peter who jumped out of his tent and ran to her aid.



# Man tries to abduct girl, 9, from tent

DANIEL MERCER

Police are searching for a man who attempted to abduct a nine-year-old girl from a caravan park in the popular Mid-West coastal holiday town of Dongara.

Sgt Nathan Dawe, of Mingenew police, said yesterday that a man had carried the girl from her tent at the Dongara Denison caravan park to a nearby car about 6am on Saturday.

He said the girl screamed and escaped before alerting her father.

The girl had been sleeping in a tent with an eight-year-old friend when the abduction attempt happened. Her father was in a separate tent nearby.

Sgt Dawe said the family were from Perth and had been holidaying in Dongara, about 360km north of Perth, for the long weekend. They had returned home after cutting short their visit.

He said they had been traumatised by the event and did not want to be identified or contacted.

"It's been quite a traumatic experience for both the father and the daughter and they've shot back to Perth now," he said. "It's quite scary for a nine-year-old to be pulled out of her bed."

Sgt Dawe said the man did not assault the girl.

"There was no violence or anything like that," he said. "He hasn't put her in a headlock or threatened her in any way — he has just picked her up and carried her to the car."

"She was half-asleep and when she realised, 'hold on a second, this isn't supposed to happen', she screamed out and then leapt from the car."

The abduction attempt happened just hours after an incident believed to have involved the same man.

A 43-year-old woman was woken when a man entered her tent about 2.30am on Saturday. He fled when she screamed.

Sgt Dawe said he was concerned the man could reoffend and asked anyone with information to come forward.

The man is described as 30 years old, Caucasian, with a slim build and having a noticeable tan.

He is believed to be driving a white dual-cab, four-wheel-drive vehicle with a distinctive loud exhaust.

Park owner Sue King was reluctant to speak but said the event had shocked the small community on one of its busiest weekends of the year.

Dongara usually has a population of about 3500 but swells to more than 6000 during holidays such as the Queen's Birthday long weekend.

Mrs King said residents were hoping police could catch the offender quickly.

"It is a lovely tourist town and that won't change but I guess the reality right now is to focus on catching the person that we need to catch," she said.

"Nothing has changed — Dongara is still a beautiful place and that's why a lot of people come here."



Holley's blue tent, pitched next to her father's

## THE INVESTIGATION BEGINS

After making sure Holley was alright, Peter contacted Geraldton Police Station and the local Dongara and Mingenew police arrived shortly afterwards. Later that morning, I was contacted at Geraldton Detectives Office regarding the incident and made arrangements to attend Dongara with the district forensic officer. Operation Melbury had officially commenced.

This was a fairly brazen attempt to steal a child. Even though it was early in the morning, it was daylight and while Dongara is a small coastal town, it was a busy holiday period, with many people staying at the park. So, we assumed someone would have seen something. We immediately started taking statements from witnesses, conducting door knocks and forensically processing the crime scene.

A witness who was heading home from her night-shift at the Iluka mine site around the time of the abduction stated that she had seen a white dual-cab utility speeding off out of the Holiday Park, heading north along George Street, before losing sight of the vehicle. The witness was adamant that the utility had yellow and black coloured

News

## Police have 50 leads in hunt for abductor

ALEX MCKINNON

POLICE are following up 50 leads from hundreds of phone calls and search to police and CrimeStoppers as they maintain the manhunt for the Dongara kidnapper.

The mobile police facility on the Dongara foreshore attracted several people who wanted to give information. It has now returned to Mandurah.

First Class Constable Ben Tomasi said the unit had provided a much higher profile for police.

He is hopeful it has helped bring some good leads.

Acting Detective Sergeant Craig Edwards said last weekend police were concentrating on the names that had been provided.

"At this stage the investigation remains broad. We haven't yet been able to narrow it down to any one person or persons," Det Sgt Edwards said.

"We are still hoping for that single phone call."

Earlier in the week the father of the young girl said there were "no words" to describe the terrifying moments when he realised somebody had tried to abduct his daughter.

He wishes to hear screams and then eyes screeching. He then recognised the screams as those of his nine-year-old daughter.

She had been sleeping in a tent with an eight-year-old friend when the abduction attempt happened. Her father was asleep in another tent nearby.

He said his daughter told him, "Daddy, Daddy, someone tried to take me" when he put his hand inside his daughter's tent to make sure she was safe.

The girl's father said there were "no words to describe how awful the consequences of the kidnapper's escape".

Anyone with information can call Crime Stoppers on 1800 333 000.

Sharing information: Police and members of the media at the mobile Police facility stationed alongside the Dongara Pier.

Picture: ALEX MCKINNON

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*Jones' vehicle was forensically examined*

Western Australian registration plates and that the prefix was from a town called Mullewa (the prefix was MW).

Another witness, who worked at the Holiday Park, also stated she observed a white utility speeding out of the park, but could not be sure if it was a dual cab or single cab and could not describe if it had a tray back or utility back. Peter had also spotted a white utility in the distance heading north along George Street, when he had come to Holley's aid.

Holley's clothing was seized for DNA analysis and forensic samples were obtained from her tent zipper, the blankets inside the tent and photographs were taken of the the track marks left by the offender's utility. Holley described the offender as approximately 20 years of age, Caucasian, 175cm tall, with short hair and wearing a black hoodie.

### **ANOTHER VICTIM**

Later that day I received information that a male had entered another tent that same morning, but this time at the Big 4 Caravan Park, situated on Ocean Road, Dongara and which was only about three kilometres away from the Dongara-Dennison Tourist Park.

Twenty-year-old Caroline Watts had been sleeping in her tent alone. In the early hours of the morning she was woken by the sound of the unzipping of her tent and was shocked to see a man's head come in through the opening. The man was wearing a

dark-coloured hoodie and removed a blanket from her and said something like "Hey Joe."

Caroline thought the man must have been lost and challenged him. He replied "Sorry, wrong tent" and walked off. Caroline didn't get a good look at him as it was still dark.

This incident was obviously no coincidence, so we attended the Big 4 Caravan Park and forensically processed Caroline's tent, along with interviewing other people staying in the park.

### **A SUSPECT?**

About 10.05am that day we received reports of an intoxicated male who had got his white utility bogged on the beach approximately six kilometres away from the tourist park. Upon attending that location, we found one Jason Jones bogged in his white Mitsubishi dual-cab utility. Jones, however, didn't match the description of the offender as he was far too tall at 190cm and he was much older. Also, his vehicle did not have Mullewa prefix registration plates, but it made good investigative sense to look at him further.

So a decision was made to convey him and his vehicle back to Dongara Police Station and conduct further inquiries. A full forensic examination was conducted on Jones' white utility, with DNA and trace swabs being taken from the inside of the vehicle. Jones' own DNA was also taken and his clothing seized for examination.



*Tyre pattern examined with track marks found*



*Composite of the suspect as described by Holley*

Jones was interviewed at length and gave an alibi of spending the previous evening drinking with mates, before deciding to go for a drive north along the beach in the early hours of the morning. Jones stated he stopped at some location north of Dongara on the beach and had a sleep and when he was making his way back to his accommodation got bogged.

We then attended Jones' accommodation and found that he was staying with several male friends. The other men all gave varying accounts of his movements due to their level of intoxication. But all confirmed that Jones had left in the early hours of the morning.

Through inquiries we later identified a family of five witnesses who were fishing on the beach north of Dongara on the morning of the incident and they placed Jones driving south along the beach at approximately 5.30am, which corroborated his version of events.

All of the forensic material obtained from both crime scenes, Jones' vehicle and his clothing were sent to the laboratory for DNA testing and examination. Holley's DNA was not located in Jones' vehicle and no other forensic material belonging to Holley (hairs/fibres etc.) were found. Jones' DNA was not located at either of the two crime scenes.

A composite image of the offender that was later obtained from Holley also did not match Jones.

## INVESTIGATION CONTINUES

Offences like these weigh heavily on investigating teams as we know the potential outcomes if the offender isn't caught. There was no doubt in our minds that had Holley not been brave enough to jump out of this man's utility then we would potentially have been investigating a homicide.

At the time of this investigation, Dongara had three petrol stations. We seized hours of their CCTV footage and reviewed it to establish if the offender had purchased fuel or anything else in the hours leading up to the incident. Unfortunately, this did not identify any persons of interest.

We stationed a mobile police facility near the foreshore in Dongara, searching for witnesses and trying to jog people's memories for any information, but again this only provided minimal useful intelligence.

We interrogated virtually every person staying in rental accommodation in Dongara and also interviewed anyone matching the suspect's description or who owned a white utility.

## HUNT FOR THE WHITE UTE

We searched for the white utility in Mullewa as the number plates were possibly from there. Mullewa is approximately 140 kilometres from Dongara and 98 kilometres from Geraldton. It is a small town, with a population of just 500 people, however the shire



# Hunt continues for abduction attempt suspect



Wanted: Dongara attacker

GABRIELLE KNOWLES

Police are continuing their hunt for the man who tried to abduct a young girl and accosted a woman in the coastal town of Dongara.

They have released an identikit of the offender and are scouring security footage from service stations and other businesses around the town, about 360km north of Perth.

The man snatched the nine-year-old from her tent at the Dongara Denison caravan park about 6am on Saturday.

He carried the girl to his vehicle but she woke up as he put her inside, screamed and escaped. She

alerted her father but the would-be kidnapper fled.

Geraldton Det-Sen. Const. Tony Langer said police believed the same man had crept into a woman's tent at another Dongara camp site just three hours earlier. The man pulled down the 43-year-old's blankets but when she woke he said "sorry, wrong tent" and left.

The man was described as a caucasian, aged about 30, of slim build and with a noticeable tan. He was wearing a black hooded jumper and was driving a white dual-cab, four-wheel-drive utility with a distinctive loud exhaust.

Anyone with information should call CrimeStoppers on 1800 333 000.

of Mullewa covers approximately 10,800 square kilometres. It is a farming region; mostly wheat and cereals. Unfortunately for investigators, there are a lot of utility vehicles in farming towns and most are white.

Initially, we identified 97 white utilities with registration plates bearing the Mullewa MW prefix. While this was positive, given the geography of Mullewa, it meant travelling long distances, often to find that even though the utilities were still registered, they were broken down and unused or for farm use only. Given the vast distances, there were days when we could only check two or three vehicles. Often, we would drive to a farm house, only to be told the farmer and the vehicle we wanted to check were hours away on the property, which was frustrating for the investigation team. Eventually however, we found and photographed all of them. We also took DNA samples from any owners/vehicle users who matched the offender's description.

## A BUMP IN THE LONG ROAD

After later revisiting our primary eyewitness about the Mullewa prefix registration plates, she now was not sure, stating they could have been blue and white. She remained adamant, however, about the utility type. The different coloured number plates meant the white utility could have come from anywhere in Western Australia, which blew out the numbers of potential utilities into thousands.

This information changed the direction of the inquiry and the investigative team decided on a strategy to search locally and then expand from there. We had an analyst search the Australian National Child Offender Register for known sex offenders with links to white utilities within the mid-west Gascoyne region. This region covers approximately 138,000 square kilometres and encompasses Dongara, Geraldton and numerous other country towns. A large number of registered offenders were interviewed, but no links to the offence were established.

The investigative team drilled deeper into the Australian National Child Offender Register for registered offenders in the state who had access to

a white utility. As a result, we interviewed a large number of registered offenders all over Western Australia. All were verified as not being in the Dongara area at the time of the offence. We confirmed this by double checking banking and phone records, before any persons of interest were eliminated from the inquiry.

We then looked at registered sex offenders with access to white utilities nationally. This was a huge task and again a large number of registered offenders were interviewed, but no links were established. A number of press releases were carried out through our Police Media Unit and state newspapers, which included an Identikit™ of the offender and a description of the offender's vehicle. As a result of this public awareness, 79 Crime Stoppers Information Reports were generated with numerous persons being nominated. All these information reports were actioned and persons interviewed where applicable. There were no significant persons of interest generated from these information reports.

## CAN'T LET GO, NEVER LET GO

As police officers, we see many terrible things: violent murders, fatal traffic accidents, sudden unexpected deaths of innocent people and children, and the result of violence inflicted on others. While I have always coped with these things well, this attempted abduction really stayed with me. I would often think about it, as I was seriously concerned about what other offences this offender may commit.

In October of 2009, I requested officers from the Sex Assault Squad to conduct a full review of the investigation to identify any other potential lines of inquiry and to see if we had missed anything. I know from experience that when asking other investigators to review an investigation you have conducted, many factors come into play, the predominant one being ego. Not many of us like to admit we are wrong and not many of us like to admit we have overlooked something or missed a crucial piece of evidence. I have been fortunate during my career to have some

very sound mentors and very good peers. One of the most important things I have learnt as an investigator is that, apart from being tenacious, never be so arrogant to think I always knew everything.

The review was conducted by two very experienced detectives from the Sex Assault Squad, and while it did not reveal anything new or anything that had been glaringly overlooked, it did identify two potential lines of inquiry. As part of the review, a recommendation was made that we look at mixed count DNA as a possible avenue. While this exercise did identify some new persons of interest, they were all quickly eliminated as suspects.

The investigation team also looked at all previous attempted abductions and newly reported attempted abductions to establish any possible links to the Dongara offence. We looked very closely at the descriptions of the offenders, the vehicle they used and their method of operation, yet no further links were established.

By late 2010, over 300 investigative actions had been undertaken and the investigation had essentially stalled, due to all lines of inquiry drying up. This was massively frustrating for me and I held onto the file when I left Geraldton in 2011.

### **A REVIEW WITH NEW FORENSIC TECHNOLOGY**

In 2013, while I was Operations Manager at the Mandurah Detectives Office, I requested another review be conducted by the Sex Assault Squad. By June 2013, the review was completed and while the review didn't identify any new avenues of inquiry, it did however recommend that the Forensic DNA evidence be revisited.

In 2013, a new DNA testing system, called PowerPlex® 21, was rolled out in Western Australia to replace the previous DNA profiling system (Profiler Plus). The rationale for this was that the previous method analysed nine DNA markers, plus a tenth test that determines gender. PowerPlex 21 analyses 21 areas of DNA – 20 DNA markers plus one test for gender. Most importantly, all of the markers tested with Profiler Plus are also tested with PowerPlex 21, meaning that our existing Profiler Plus results were still useful and could be compared to PowerPlex 21 results. Data surrounding PowerPlex 21 suggested the new system would provide information in approximately 30% more cases.

This improvement in DNA analysis meant that results could now be obtained from samples that previously did not always yield useful information, such as degraded samples from criminal casework and remains from unidentified deceased or missing persons etc.

While I have always coped with these things well, this attempted abduction really stayed with me. I would often think about it, as I was seriously concerned about what other offences this offender may commit.

The new system works in exactly the same way as the old system, but offered improved performance such as:

- extreme resistance to inhibitors in challenging samples
- better results from degraded samples; and
- increased sensitivity in obtaining results from low levels of DNA.

### **A BREAKTHROUGH!**

In 2014, the DNA was sent for re-testing using the new system. In March 2015, I was in my office when I received a phone call from a Detective Senior Sergeant at the State Crime Office. He asked me if I recalled Operation Melbury, which I advised him I did. He informed me that new DNA testing (using Powerplex 21) was carried out on Holley's pyjama top, and that they had identified Jones' DNA on that top, linking him as the offender.

My reaction was one of happiness and disbelief. Knowing the offender had been identified was brilliant news, but knowing we had Jones in custody and had released him (as there was no evidence linking him to the offence), deflated me.

### **AN UNEXPECTED ENDING**

The Detective Senior Sergeant then went on to tell me that Jones was now deceased and had passed away in non-suspicious circumstances in December 2014.

Jones was 31 years of age when he died. There was no previous intelligence linking him to any child offences and he had only three previous arrests for minor traffic offences. Given this background, it is difficult to determine his mindset at the time of the offence, but also proves that as investigators we shouldn't pigeon-hole persons of interest based on their previous offending. Numerous inquiries were conducted into Jones and, fortunately, he was not linked to any other offences.

I believe that being reflective about our work is always a positive thing. Had the investigating team and reviewing officers not kept pushing this investigation, Holley and Peter would have never had closure on the matter. While we can't tell them Jones' motives, we can say we identified him and hopefully that gives them some peace. I know it has for me. **APJ**