



Murder on Christmas Island

by Jeff Woodgate

THE musical voices of the Chinese patrons almost drowned out the rickety klak-klak of the sliding mah-jong tiles on the gaming tables in Christmas Island's Poon Saan Club, on a May night in 1987.

As the night wore on, one man, showing moderate signs of intoxication, left the gambling den, never again to be seen there alive.

The murder of that Chinese gambler presented AFP criminal investigators with one of their most interesting cases.

Christmas Island is an external territory of Australia, four and a half hours flying time north-west of Perth in the Indian Ocean. Its police force, responsible to the Minister for Territories, consists entirely of AFP members, seconded for a two-year rotation. The Island Administrator is the ex-officio Commissioner of Police.

At the time, the force consisted of Superintendent Bernie Smith and six constables — Steve Allen, Dale Cooper, Audrey Fagan, Susan Hammill, Andrew Phillips and Graham Schmidt.

On the morning of Thursday, May 14, 1987, police were called to accommodation quarters in the Poon Saan district by workmates of Tan Soon Cher who had found his body after he had failed to report for work for several days.

The police immediately began to contain the crime scene and ACT Region CIB was notified through International Division. Detective Sergeant Don Bailey in Canberra got together a team consisting of Detective Sergeant Chris Lines, Detective Constable Geoff Cotterill, Detective Sergeant John MacDonald (Scientific) and Detective Sergeant K.C. Yeung (Southern Region). They travelled to Perth to connect with a chartered flight to the island, taking with them a WA Forensic Pathologist, Dr. John Hilton.

Arriving at Christmas Island next day, the investigation team was sworn in as members of the Christmas Island Police and briefed by Superintendent Smith.

Stab wounds

The detectives visited the scene of the murder and then attended the autopsy where the doctor found a number of stab wounds on the front of the body, with multiple stab wounds in the back and hands. The doctor said the shape of the wounds suggested they could have been inflicted by a weapon with a triangular blade, commonly used by Chinese criminal elements in Singapore and Hong Kong.

were in Singapore. He was generally well-liked in the community. He was a money-lender and a known gambler.

Poon Saan Club was frequented by Chinese and Chinese-Malay gamblers and up to \$50,000 changed hands there on some nights. A syndicate would form 'the house' at each table and contest all-comers.

It was revealed that Tan had won a considerable amount of money during his last night at the club. It was said he had almost bankrupted one



The Poon Saan Club, Christmas Island.

He was unable to establish the exact time of it but believed death had occurred some 2-3 days before. A search of Tan's room revealed a footprint mark in dried blood on the floor and a fingerprint in dried blood on the inside of the front door handle. A piece of glossy magazine paper lying among rubbish on the floor appeared to have traces of blood on it, possibly another fingerprint.

The investigators now had a trump card — two fingerprints which could be enhanced to a degree where identification should be possible.

Tan, 47, single and employed as an office cleaner by the phosphate mining company, had worked on the island for a number of years. His relatives

syndicate. The detectives were in no doubt he had met his death shortly after returning to his room that night. No money was located during the search of Tan's room.

Investigation Problems

The CIB team's early problems with language difficulties were solved when Detective Sergeant K.C. Yeung, from Melbourne stepped in as translator, talking with the local people and gaining their confidence.

A further problem was the fact that the weekly flights to Perth and Singapore from the island had left before the team arrived. One phosphate ship and a number of small yachts also had left.



Passengers on the flights were identified for interview and the Malaysian Police searched the phosphate ship on arrival. They established that no Islander was on board.

The AFP's Overseas Liaison Offices in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur also assisted.

Evidence needing further examination was carried by members of the regular Christmas Island Police to Perth and Canberra. In Perth, AFP Constable Tom Stewart, attached to the WA Police fingerprint bureau at the time, did the major work on the fingerprint exhibits.

Police believed the fear of retribution for informing was likely to spread throughout the gambling fraternity quickly, so they decided to launch an extremely intensive style of investigation, working 18-hour days. They broadcast an appeal for help over the community radio station, emphasizing it was in the interests of the small community to assist in the investigation.

They paid frequent visits to the Poon Saan Club to fully familiarise themselves with the gambling community. They were looking for a Poon Saan gambler or someone who had suffered a loss from Tan's gambling fortunes. They talked to as many people as possible to keep the pressure on the offender or offenders.

Trump card

The subtle game began to work. After a few days the gambling stopped whenever police appeared. They suspected the gamblers were afraid the murder investigation might uncover further unrelated but suspicious activities.

With the consent of all people interviewed, they began to take fingerprints and footprints.

"This was our trump card," Detective Sergeant Bailey said. "At least we could embark on a course of elimination. It was becoming widely known on the island that the AFP had scientific evidence."

Whenever an aircraft or boat left the island, the AFP interviewed outgoing travellers.

Ten days after the investigation began, Detective Sergeant Baily received a telephone call from Mr Gordon Bennett, the secretary of the Union of Christmas Island Workers. Bennett said two young men at his flat wished to surrender for the murder of Tan.

The two were escorted to the Police Station, where initial interviews substantiated their involvement in the murder to some degree. They were both Chinese, Toh Yu Teng, 22, and Chong Wooi Sing, 19.

Next day, a professional interpreter arrived from Perth and formal records of interview conducted. Both suspects were regular gamblers and members of one of the gambling syndicates, though not the one Tan was reputed to have nearly bankrupted.

Later tests showed the footprint and fingerprint on the glossy paper belonged to Toh. The door knob print was inconclusive, though probably Toh's.

Committal Hearing

A committal hearing on the island before a Perth Magistrate committed both men for trial.

The trial began on Christmas Island with Justice Gallop of the Federal Court of Australia and the Supreme Court of the ACT, sitting as a judge of the Supreme Court of Christmas Island. The trial was adjourned to Perth in the interests of jury impartiality.

The two defendants admitted guilt in the police interviews, but used the defences of provocation and self-defence. They claimed that after gambling at the Poon Saan Club that Monday night they had gone to Tan's room to ask for a loan. They claimed he was drunk and had become angry with them, pulling a knife from under his bed.

It was then necessary to disarm him and stab him, they said. They had taken money from his pockets and buried the money, knife and their clothes behind their own accommodation block. Police later recovered these. The cash totalled over \$11,000. The knife had a three-cornered blade.

The defendants were found guilty on a re-trial following a successful Federal Court appeal and both sentenced to 15 years gaol.

"We received co-operation from many of the locals," Detective Sergeant Don Bailey said. "The people on Christmas Island did genuinely want to help establish who had killed Tan.

"The remoteness of the island and the predominantly Chinese-speaking community notorious for keeping quiet, made this case unique in my experience."

History Society



The inaugural conference of the Australian Police Historical Society held in Brisbane on February 18 had wide representation from the Australian states, and from overseas.

Full details are being issued in the next issue of the APHS magazine.

The Australian Branch of the society was formed in 1986 after the establishment of the Police History Society in Britain in 1985. The APHS was founded by Acting Sergeant Ray Bedford and in recognition he was not only elected as President for the next two years but was also awarded a "Fellowship", the Society's highest honour for his distinctive contribution to police history and for enhancing the standing of the Society. Ray is serving with the AFP in the Northern Region.

Since May 1987, Ray as editor, has produced five journals of extremely high standard and according to one correspondent: "If your organisation can be judged from the journal, then the future of the Australian branch is assured" (Metropolitan Police Museum).

For any Society to succeed it needs the support of a solid membership and I appeal to all our readers and policemen generally. Annual membership is a mere \$15.00 with an initial enrolment fee of \$10.

As a member you will receive four quarterly issues of the police journal and an update on the latest police history conferences held in Australia and throughout the world.

The journal offers insight into the origins and development of policing from a State, territory, national and international perspective.

Contributions with a "warts and all" approach to ensure accurate, historical records are encouraged.

Now is your opportunity to be part of the first national organisation in Australia to record a history still waiting to be explored.

Don Bosman
APHS Membership Secretary
AFP Representative to APHS.