

Guilty verdict delivered for Janelle Patton murder

The conviction of New Zealand national Glenn McNeill for the March 2002 murder of Janelle Patton marked an end to one of the most sensational and disturbing chapters of Norfolk Island's history.

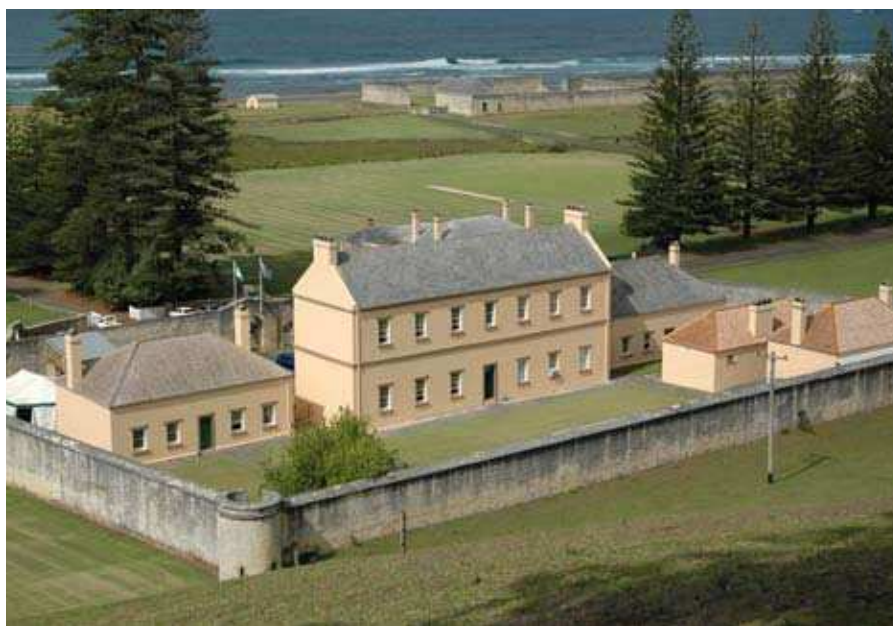
It also drew a close to the 32-year career of Detective Sergeant Bob Peters, who retired from the Australian Federal Police (AFP) on 31 March 2007 – the fifth anniversary of Janelle Patton's murder.

Detective Sergeant Peters had postponed his scheduled retirement for three years in order to find the person responsible for the vicious attack on the 29-year-old Ms Patton. Together with Detective Sergeant Tony Edmondson and Detective Senior Constable Mark Elvin – he worked through four years of painstaking investigation to arrest Mr McNeill as the suspect, and then another year to bring him to trial.

Speaking after the verdict was announced on 9 March 2007, Detective Sergeant Peters downplayed his commitment to bring the case to a resolution by saying that as a police officer, "if you're not willing to finish something, you shouldn't start it".

The investigation started immediately after Ms Patton's body – with more than 60 separate injuries – was found partially wrapped in black plastic shortly after 6pm on Easter Sunday by two New Zealand tourists out for an evening stroll.

The investigation team knew the names of all 2771 men, women and children on the 8km by 5km volcanic outcrop that day, yet no one saw anything to definitively identify who murdered Janelle Patton and then



The Norfolk Island Court House was refitted to accommodate the intense media interest in the Janelle Patton murder trial.

dumped her body in the Cockpit Waterfall Reserve.

A rainstorm had hit the island shortly after 3pm on Easter Sunday – after Ms Patton's body was dumped in the reserve – and washed away what could have been vital evidence.

A voluntary fingerprinting exercise of Norfolk Island residents was conducted in August 2002 in an attempt to identify some of the seven possible fingerprints found on the black plastic. AFP members Wayne Morrell, Bruce Comber, Susan Eggers, Susan Palzer, Peter Lawler, Ian "Herbie" Prior and Scott Saywell travelled to the island to fingerprint more than 1300 residents turning up one positive match – that of local carpenter Steve Cochrane, later found to have no connection with the murder. It became apparent during the investigation was that Janelle Patton

disappeared sometime after 11.45am on her daily walk along Rooty Hill Road. She had been seen before her disappearance by a number of locals. However, she failed to meet her parents, who were visiting from Sydney, for lunch at 1pm. It was during this time that she was murdered.

Local rumour, innuendo and misinformation hampered the investigation, with the investigation team often receiving information that was later determined to be malicious gossip.

A coronial inquest in June 2004 returned an open finding. During the inquest, Detective Sergeant Peters named 16 persons of interest because of their connection to the evidence gathered, their relationships to Janelle Patton and through the information (and misinformation) volunteered to the investigation.

Four months after the coronial inquest, on 28 October 2004, Detective Sergeant Peters received a call about a new lead. A set of prints on the black plastic was found to belong to a New Zealand national Glenn McNeill, a relative unknown to the investigation, who had left the island to return to his home town of Nelson six weeks after Janelle Patton's murder.

The investigation team of Detective Sergeants Peters and Edmondson and Detective Senior Constable Mark Elvin was re-formed to make enquiries into Mr McNeill and his possible involvement in the murder. They found that Mr McNeill had owned a white Honda Civic sedan and they found it four days before Christmas 2004 in the backyard of a residence in Little Cutters Corn – the same street where Mr McNeill had lived with his then-wife.

From 7 February 2005, the investigation team searched Mr McNeill's former

residence, the property next door – which had been a building site that Steve Cochrane had worked on around the time of the murder – and the car, in storage at the Norfolk Island Police station.

Detective Sergeant Peters praised crime scene examiners Katrina Gates, Bruce Comber and Forensic Scientist Dr Naomi Speers for their work in methodically examining the car in a makeshift clean room in the garage of the Norfolk Island police station. The trio wore heavy overalls, gloves, face masks and surgical caps and worked 16-hour days as they went through the car piece-by-piece in a room covered in black plastic during weather averaging 26 degrees and 95 per cent humidity.

The evidence they collected proved critical to the investigation. A sample of Janelle Patton's DNA was found on the lid of the car boot, while a hair found in the boot was analysed in the United States and found

to share a similar DNA profile to that of Ms Patton. The examiners also found pieces of glass that could have come from the same source as glass found in Ms Patton's hair and in an area next to the carport at Mr McNeill's residence.

After the analysis was complete, Detective Sergeants Peters and Edmondson travelled to New Zealand and, assisted by New Zealand Detective Sergeant Chris Roberts, arrested Mr McNeill at his Nelson home on 1 February 2006.

Following his arrest, Mr McNeill confessed to stabbing Ms Patton, but claimed he had accidentally hit her with his car while driving along Rooty Hill Road. The video tape of this confession was a key prosecution exhibit during the trial. Mr McNeill was committed to stand trial in August 2006 and chose to plead not guilty at his trial, which began on 1 February 2007.

After more than 11 hours of deliberations, the jury returned with a guilty verdict and Mr McNeill was remanded in custody and is expected to be sentenced in late May or early June.

Recounting his experiences, Detective Sergeant Peters acknowledged the contribution of all AFP members who were part of the investigation including those named previously, along with Petra Clissold, Leigh Coutts, Vincent Otieno-Alego, David Royds, Ben Kwok, Jo Lee, Liz Brooks, James Robertson and Phil Herd from Forensic Criminalistics; and Phil Van Dissell and Geoff Brown of Intelligence support.



Detective Sergeants Tony Edmondson and Bob Peters approaching the Norfolk Island court.