



Media Watch

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THE FAMILY NEWSPAPER

The Sun-Herald

ADOPT A PANDA HOW THE BOSS BUSTED THE CHARTS: P18-19

Rescue bungle killed my boy

SEX AND SINGLES

SHOCK FINDINGS

- After the Swinging Sixties came the Permissive Seventies. But now it's the Anguished Eighties.
- Courting customs have altered dramatically, so have sexual attitudes.
- Today's changes are dictated by the scourge of sex-related diseases such as the killer AIDS.
- Read The Sun-Herald's special report and interviews with young people and the experts. It begins on Page 10.

CANBERRA'S SINGLES AND SEX: P15

In times of crisis the co-operation of the media is of enormous benefit to Police activities. Then there are those times when an ill-informed report, or a mis-directed emphasis, makes you want to throw in the towel.

The MEDIA WATCH page will be monitoring the AFP's media image and is looking for comment and information from AFP members.

We start with reports covering the death of Brandon McIlroy in November last year.

A Sydney newspaper, The Sun-Herald, featured this event on its front page — three weeks after the event. In response to a visit by Philip Castle to the paper's Editor, Peter Smark, and its Assistant Editor, Ray Odium, and a letter detailing the facts, The Sun-Herald printed a retraction of sorts the following week.

The AFP is referring this matter to the Press Council for its consideration. The Coronial Inquest has not yet been held.

Page 2 The Sun-Herald 14 December 1986

Rescue bungle killed my son, says mother

A GRIEVING mother has blamed bureaucratic bungling and a badly co-ordinated rescue operation for the drowning of her son.

Mrs Debbie McIlroy stood for more than 90 minutes on the banks of the Murrumbidgee River and watched her 13-year-old son, Brandon, cling desperately to a raft as police battled to save him.

"He was incredibly close — only 15 metres away," she said yesterday.

But the rescuers could not get to Brandon in time. And later Mrs McIlroy claimed his death could have been avoided if proper rescue facilities had been available.

She said an RAAF helicopter based at nearby Fairbairn, which had earlier in the day been used for joy flights, could not take part in the rescue because there was no-one on duty to fly it.

She also alleged a feud between the police and fire brigade had worsened the situation.

And a union official claimed later police should have notified the fire brigade about the rescue attempt.

Brandon, of Downer, Canberra,

By MATT CONDON

was canoeing with a teenage girl near a weir at the Casuarina Sands, 20 km south-west of Canberra, on Saturday, November 22.

The inflatable canoe was caught by a strong current and pushed into the weir wall. The girl managed to swim to safety, but Brandon stayed with the deflated craft.

After a 90-minute battle for survival, he was sucked under the water. His body was found a kilometre downstream the next day.

Mrs McIlroy said a helicopter should have been readily accessible for the emergency.

"We felt certain there would be a rescue," Mrs McIlroy said. "There were a lot of picnickers and police around."

"The police were too scared to throw out a rope in case the canoe capsized. They said they could have thrown a line across if they had time but they didn't think about it in the beginning."

Police diver Tony Lewis, co-ordinating the rescue bid, tried to reach the boy but was sucked into the water and almost drowned.

"After that, there was nobody else to co-ordinate the rescue," she said.

Brandon's failed rescue operation was the culmination of ironic coincidences. The first police rescue crew to arrive at the scene was a back-up unit manned by off-duty officers who had been called in for the operation.

The major police rescue unit was attending to a man who had fallen from a cliff one kilometre from Kambah pool.

On that Saturday afternoon the only helicopter available at the RAAF Fairbairn base was being used for joy-rides for Air Force families.

Snapped

Once the flights ended the crew went off duty and when the emergency occurred there was no-one available to fly the aircraft.

A rope boom across the weir was also out of service. It was found coiled up on the shore. Police said the rope boom had previously been snapped by floodwaters.

A continuing feud between fire brigade officers and the police rescue squad had also affected the rescue operation, Mrs McIlroy claimed.

The president of the Canberra Civil Branch of the Federal Fire Fighters Union, Mr Michael Fowler, said yesterday his officers may have been able to assist in the rescue. The fire brigade was not notified by police of the incident.

"The control room should have been told," Mr Fowler said. "If clear protocol had been set down, this mightn't have occurred."

RAAF Fairbairn base officials were unavailable for comment.

Australian Federal Police rescue squad chief Sergeant Dale Brown said yesterday there was no way police could have saved the boy. He said a helicopter might have been successful.

Sergeant Brown said police were in the process of sending squad members to the other side of the river to establish a line across the weir but the boy had disappeared. "It was impossible to get the line set up any earlier," he said.

On Friday, the squad received a new inflatable dinghy for rescue operations. A Federal police officer, who declined to be named, said the craft had been ordered "way before" the drowning.

AFP Director of Information Philip Castle wrote this letter to the Editor of The Sun-Herald on 15 December 1986.

DROWNING ON NOVEMBER 22

Dear Mr Smark,

I am concerned that your reporter Mr Matt Condon did not check the facts available to him before writing the page 1 lead article published on December 14, with the headline "Rescue bungle killed my boy — grieving mother accuses".

When Mr Condon spoke to Sergeant Dale Brown on Saturday he was asked to contact myself, the director of information, and to read a press statement issued on December 9 by the Australian Federal Police Officer responsible for the ACT, Assistant Commissioner Val McConaghy. He did not contact me and does not appear to have read the statement.

I have attached a copy of that statement which was widely reported and available. I would have expected any reporter doing such a story to have obtained a copy of it. This statement was shown to the Coroner concerned, Mr Michael Ward, and he agreed to the AFP issuing it.

The mother of the boy drowned in the tragedy, Mrs Deborah McIlroy, has said both on television and in a letter to the Canberra Times today that the story was sensationalised and that it "contains errors of fact, misquotations and omissions". I have attached a copy of her letter.

While some of the allegations are attributed to Mrs McIlroy there is the underlying criticism that the Fire Brigade should have been told. This was answered by Assistant Commissioner McConaghy's statement. The Fire Brigade officers would have been called if they had been needed.

The errors of fact in the story which proper research would have shown are:

1. Brandon McIlroy was in an inflatable canoe with a 33-year-old woman at the time of the tragedy, not a teenage girl as the article asserts.
 2. His body was recovered two days later, i.e. November 24 (Monday), not the next day as asserted.
 3. Senior Constable Tony Lewis, the rescue officer who swam out to the boy and is still suffering the after effects, is not a police diver as the article asserts.
 4. Brandon McIlroy was more than 30 metres from the shore not 15 metres as reported.
 5. At all times there were at least three officers on the river shore with one co-ordinating the rescue attempts. Senior Constable Lewis was in charge and when he became unconscious, Senior Constable Peter Bright, an officer with nine years rescue training, took control. Within 15 minutes there were eight officers backed by three primary rescue vehicles. There was always an experienced officer co-ordinating the rescue attempts.
 6. The rescue team was not a secondary team as asserted. It was equally manned and trained as the other team which successfully rescued a badly injured man from some rocks upstream. The crew was not "off-duty". They had been working since 10am that morning. Their call-out was at 4.25pm. The team had been held at the rescue headquarters when the other team was called out. They were not "called in for the operation". They reached the scene within 10 minutes of being notified.
 7. According to our information the allegations regarding the RAAF are not correct. However that should be checked with it.
 8. There is no protocol which requires the AFP to tell the Fire Brigade about a river rescue.
 9. Sergeant Dale Brown is not a "Chief" and denies saying to Mr Condon that "there was no way police could have saved the boy". He alleges this attributed statement was made up by your reporter.
 10. The diving squad took delivery of a boat for diving purposes in Lake Burley Griffin and at Jervis Bay. It is not primarily a rescue boat.
- The article is damaging to the integrity of some highly trained professionals. It contains serious errors of fact which could have been checked by the reporter. It does not reflect well on the reporter's accuracy or integrity.
- The allegation that the boy's death was caused by "bureaucratic bungling and a badly co-ordinated rescue operation" is a matter for the Coroner to determine. It is not appropriate to comment on that at present.
- I would like your response to these matters please.

Canberra community together to work out ways in which all rescue resources can be better co-ordinated in the future," the parents of Brandon McIlroy said in a letter.

This follows a report in last week's *Sun-Herald* about a 90-minute attempt to rescue Brandon as he clung to an inflatable canoe trapped in strong currents next to a weir. The river was in high flood at the time.

Brandon was thrown into the water and lost when the canoe deflated. Police rescuers had been unable to reach him through the water and were preparing a flying fox so that they could try to pluck him from the canoe.

Reports of the tragedy have raised the question of whether the fire brigade or a RAAF helicopter would have assisted the rescue operation. But a statement issued by Assistant Commissioner (ACT) of the Australian Federal Police, Mr Val McConaghy, has cast doubt on whether either would have been effective.

The letter from Brandon's family, published in *The Canberra Times*, said: "We feel gratitude to those who tried their best under difficult circumstances to save Brandon."

A spokesman for the Australian Federal Police in the ACT, Mr Philip Castle, said yesterday police involved in the rescue attempt were upset by the tragedy, and he made the following comments on *The Sun-Herald's* report:

"Brandon McIlroy was more than 30 metres from the shore, not 15 metres as reported. At all times there were at least three officers on the river shore with one co-ordinating the rescue attempts.

"Rescue officer Senior Constable Tony Lewis was in charge and when he became unconscious (as a result of almost drowning in trying to rescue the boy), Senior Constable Peter Bright, an officer with nine years' rescue training, took control.

"Within 15 minutes there were eight officers backed by three primary rescue vehicles. There was always an experienced officer co-ordinating the rescue attempts.

"The rescue team was not a secondary team, as asserted. It was equally manned and trained as the other team which (earlier that afternoon) successfully rescued a badly injured man from some upstream rocks. The crew were not 'off duty' . . . They reached the scene within 10 minutes of being notified."

Mr Castle also said Sergeant Dale Brown denied saying "there was no way police could have saved the boy".

(*The Sun-Herald* report was compiled as a matter of public interest after continuing public comment about the tragedy in Canberra. It was not intended to reflect adversely in any way on the police officers involved in the rescue attempt, and if any such reflection has been inferred we withdraw and apologise for it — Editor.)

BOY'S DEATH SHOULD HELP COMMUNITY

The following update of the report of 14 December appeared in *The Sun-Herald* of 21 December 1986 on page 37.

THE family of a boy, 13, who drowned in the Murrumbidgee River near Canberra last month say they do not want his death to be exploited.

"We want his death to bring the