

IN THE CORONERS' COURT OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

Rel No: D0227/2024

Police No: 24 89349

**CORONERS' FINDINGS**  
**ROAD DEATH 48 OF 2024**

*Section 34 of the Coroners Act 1993*

I, Elisabeth Armitage, Coroner, having investigated the death of a **17 YEAR OLD CAUCASIAN MALE** and without holding an inquest, find that he was born on **30 November 2006** and that his **death occurred on 8 September 2024, at Stuart Highway, Katherine in the Northern Territory.**

**Introduction:**

These findings concern the death of a young 17 year old male driver. He was a capable young man who worked hard. He was driving home after a night out. He was almost home when he crashed and passed away.

When speaking to police his parents said, "You shouldn't be burying your kids, they should be burying you. That's not how life goes, but this one's a bit screwed up. Yep. That's what it is".

His death is a tragedy for his family, friends and community.

60 People lost their lives on Territory roads in 2024. The highest road toll per capita in over a decade and by far the highest in the country. This young man's death was road fatality number 48.

In the Northern Territory 73% of fatal crashes occur on rural and remote roads. Of these, 47% are run-off/roll-over crashes. 41% of crashes involve alcohol (though police put the figure higher than this). 33% of crashes involve a failure to wear a seatbelt. 10% of crashes involve inexperienced drivers. 7% of crashes involve fatigue.

The 'Fatal 5' factors which are considered to give rise to the greatest risk of road crash deaths or serious injury are:

- Drink/drug driving
- Failure to wear a seatbelt
- Excessive speed
- Distraction (e.g. mobile phone use)
- Fatigue

This crash involved 4 of the fatal 5: alcohol, speed, a failure to wear a seatbelt and likely fatigue. It occurred in a rural area, was a single vehicle rollover, and the young P plate driver was inexperienced.

**Cause of death:**

- |      |   |   |
|------|---|---|
| 1(a) | Disease or condition leading directly to death:   | <b>Multiple blunt force injuries in combination with positional asphyxia from anteroposterior compression of the thorax</b> |
| 1(b) | Morbid conditions giving rise to the above cause: | <b>Reported single motor vehicle rollover (driver)</b>  |
| 1(c) |   | <b>Acute alcohol intoxication</b>   |

Following a post-mortem examination on 11 September 2024, the forensic pathologist

The opinion as to the cause of death is based on the available police and medical information, and a full post-mortem examination including ancillary investigations.

- The decedent was a 17-year-old male youth who was reportedly found under his rolled vehicle cabin roof. Photographs emailed to me on the 13/09/2024 taken at the scene showed that the vehicle was upside down laying on its roof with the decedent positioned supine with his upper body under the roof of the front left-hand side of the vehicle. In the photographs from the scene, the left side of the chest, abdomen, left arm and lower limbs were visible-the head, neck and upper chest were not clearly visualised. Post-mortem CT scan showed pelvic fractures and features indicative of hypoxic change in the brain. At autopsy, there were abrasions of the body, and bruising and abrasions of the head. The face was congested with the post-mortem lividity mostly absent over the thorax. Internally, a single rib fracture, lung contusions, small bilateral haemothoraces, bladder wall haemorrhage, left rectus abdominus haemorrhage, gluteus medius haemorrhage with pelvic fractures. Subdural haemorrhage was evident with left temporalis muscle haemorrhage. Toxicology showed a blood alcohol level of 0.16% and vitreous alcohol level of 0.15% indicating a moderate level of alcohol intoxication.
- The position of the decedent at the scene, found supine with the upper body underneath the vehicle's cabin roof (vehicle upside-down), suggests the possibility of compressive forces acting on the thorax. The decedent's ejection from the vehicle as reported in the police notification (head and upper torso beneath the vehicle) and the absence of restraint-related injuries is consistent with a seatbelt not being utilised.
- The distribution of abrasions and bruising may indicate multiple impacts

during the rollover and compression phases. The head injuries indicate an acceleration-deceleration mechanism or direct impact during the vehicle rollover. The rib fracture and lung contusions, along with bilateral hemothoraces, suggest moderate blunt chest trauma which likely contributed to impaired respiratory function. The chest injuries, multiple pelvic fractures and soft tissue haemorrhage may reflect substantial thorax trauma likely from direct compressive forces exerted by the vehicle.

- The scene findings, autopsy and histological findings support a combination of multiple blunt force injuries and positional asphyxia from anteroposterior compression of the thorax as the cause of death.
- The blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of 0.16% generally correlates with a moderate degree of intoxication but this is also dependent on individual factors. This level of intoxication can lead to impaired judgment, reaction time and coordination.

### **Police investigation:**

A coronial investigation by police found no suspicious circumstances surrounding this death.

### **Background:**

This 17 year old driver (the driver) was born in Queensland. He was working on a cattle station 40 kilometres south of Katherine when he passed away in this single vehicle rollover car crash. He was a very capable young man with many skills and a hard worker who worked 7 days a week.

### **Circumstances:**

On 7 September 2024, the driver woke up at around 7.00am and worked all day carrying out general farm work.

At 6.40pm, he is recorded on street CCTV driving north into Katherine in his Toyota Hilux, 40 kilometres south on the Stuart Highway. He and a work colleague attended a takeaway alcohol bottle shop. His colleague purchased a 30 pack, XXXX gold and both headed to the Katherine Rodeo for about 3 hours.

At 9.57pm the driver can be seen on CCTV entering the Katherine Country Club. He presented a mobile phone with a photo ID to check in at the front desk. Some of his family and friends knew that he used a false ID to purchase alcohol in contravention of licencing conditions, he was only 17. He spent two hours there and consumed several drinks in the company of others.

Shortly after midnight on 8 September 2024 he left the premises with a friend, who needed a lift back to her car. The friend drove his Toyota Hilux, with the driver in the passenger seat, to her car, which was parked in Katherine East. As she left his Hilux at 12.33pm the driver said to her, "I'll see you back at the Golfie".

At 12.46am the driver returned to the Katherine Country Club and continued to socialise and consume alcohol. At 1.36am he departed on his own to commence the drive back to the cattle station.

At 2.09am he can be seen on CCTV at the Katherine On The Run Service Station. He then drove South on the Stuart Highway and his Hilux can be seen on street CCTV at 2.15am at the intersection of Bicentennial Road.

39 kilometers South of Katherine, his Hilux left the sealed southbound lane, continued in a southbound direction of travel over the left-hand shoulder, and drove on the sloping unsealed verge for 75 metres. It is thought that the driver fell asleep momentarily, regained consciousness and realised that he had left the road before applying hard right hand steering input causing the vehicle to enter an uncontrolled yaw. He then over-corrected to the left, attempting to position the vehicle parallel inside the southbound lane.

The dramatic change in direction caused the vehicle to trip and roll multiple times. The driver, who was not wearing a seatbelt, was ejected by the forces of the rollover. The vehicles' speed and weight contributed to the rollover with such force to cause the vehicles tray to be ripped off and thrown across the opposite side of the roadway. The Hilux came to a rest in a southbound direction, upside down and on top of the young man.

At 4.19am, the crash was located by passers-by and they called 000. It was reported that a person was trapped under a vehicle, was not responding and was believed to be deceased.

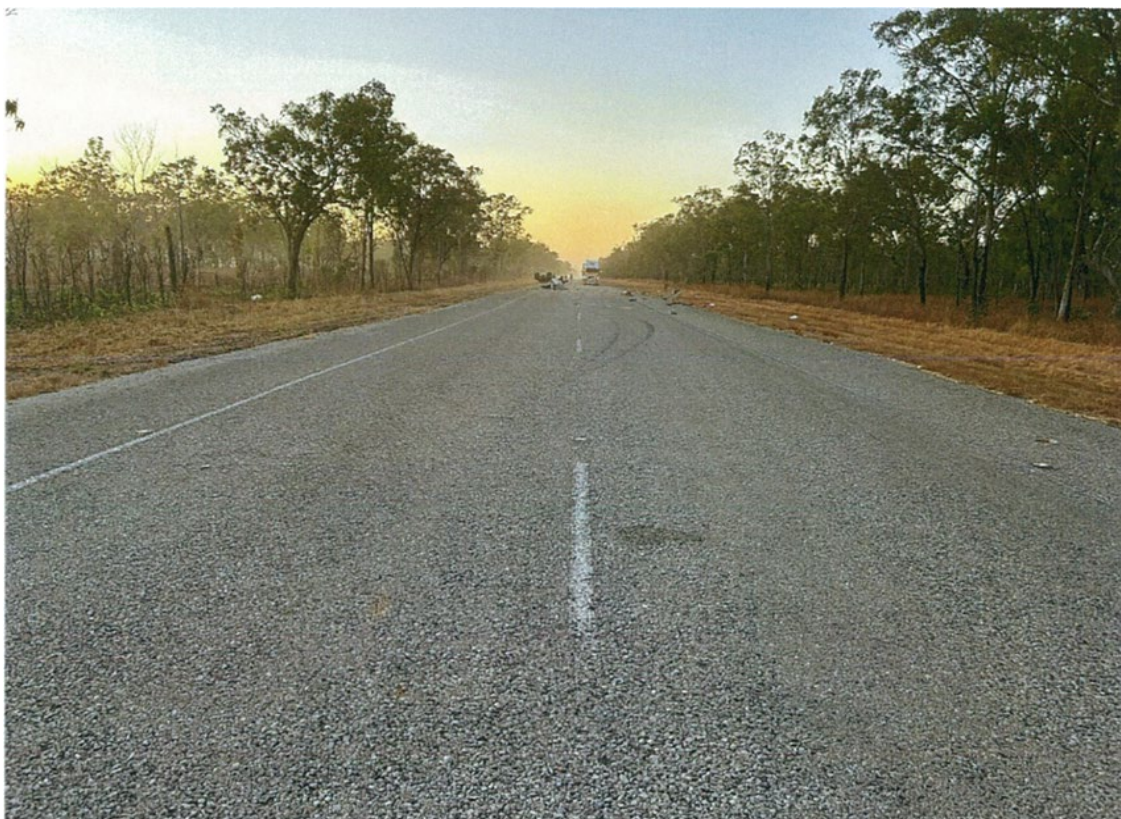
NT Police arrived at 4.38am and St John Ambulance Paramedics shortly after, confirming that the driver was trapped from the waist up and there was some rigor mortis. His death was declared at 4.55am.

#### **Road Features and Conditions:**

The scene of the crash is 39 kilometres south of Katherine on a 200 metre section of the Stuart Highway that is a sealed, straight and level bitumen road. The two lanes of the Stuart Highway are divided only by a broken median line. Each lane has a solid outer line also has high visibility reflector posts every fifty metres.

The road condition was observed by Crash Investigators to be in good condition and free of defects. The posted speed limit in the area is 130 kilometres per hour.

The bitumen edge was approximately 1 metre outside the fog line and the edge commenced a slight gradient unsealed shoulder either side leading away from the road with dirt, coarse gravel, pebbles, and small grassy flora cleared to ankle height out to approximately ten metres each side. There is no street lighting/objects or any other road features within the scene.



Post-crash picture courtesy of Northern Traffic investigation

The vehicle was a White Toyota Hilux - 6100 3.0L. 4x4 twin cam utility bearing QLD registration. The young driver was in receipt of a current drivers (P) license. On 2 September 2024, Motor Vehicle Registry (MVR) authorised inspectors examined the vehicle and determined the vehicle rollover caused such severe damage that it inhibited many of the tests that MVR would normally conduct.

At the scene, Police observed the seatbelt in the driving seat was not buckled, was loose, and extended which indicates that the driver was not restrained by the seat belt. The vehicle servicing logbook was also seized as part of the investigation and indicates that the vehicle has not been professionally serviced since 2011.

#### **Tests and/or Calculations Conducted:**

Major Crash Investigations Unit (MCIU) were consulted regarding a friction value of the crash scene as the investigating unit (Northern Traffic Operations) did not have the resources available.

MCIU utilised a previous friction value from an unrelated historic crash on the Stuart Highway, plus the yaw measurements taken by Investigating members. It was determined using the supplied values, that this crash involved the vehicle travelling at an approximate speed of 169 km/h.

This calculation, however, is an approximate result as the friction value used was from a similar unsealed surface but a different location on the Stuart Highway.

Despite the calculation total, any slight difference in the calculated values would still have the vehicle driving at an excessive speed to the posted speed limit of 130 kilometres per hour and the drivers C (P) licence class restriction of 100 kilometres per hour.

#### **Weather:**

At the time of the crash, the weather was dry and clear with no visible cloud cover. It was nighttime with no mechanical lighting in the area (2.15am- 4.19am).

**Opinion as to the Cause of Crash:**

It is the opinion of the Investigating Officer after reviewing all the evidence that the contributing factors to the crash were fatigue, and a high range level of intoxication caused by substantial amount of alcohol consumed prior to driving.

In addition, he was a young, inexperienced driver who was speeding and not wearing a seatbelt, and these factors also likely contributed to the crash and the fatal result.

**Comments:**

On 3 October 2024, a briefing note was prepared for the Assistant Commissioner Michael White to brief the Child Death and Review Committee (CDRPC) as the driver was 17 years old at the time and the death was reportable.

**Decision not to hold an inquest:**

Under section 16(1) of the *Coroners Act 1993* I decided not to hold an inquest because the investigations into the death disclosed the time, place and cause of death and the relevant circumstances concerning the death. I do not consider that the holding of an inquest would elicit any information additional to that disclosed in the investigation to date, and the circumstances do not require a mandatory inquest because:

- The deceased was not, immediately before death, a person held in care or custody; and
- The death was not caused or contributed to by injuries sustained while the deceased was held in custody; and
- The identity of the deceased is known.