

**Submission
No 50**

**INQUIRY INTO UNSOLVED MURDERS AND LONG-TERM
MISSING PERSONS CASES IN NEW SOUTH WALES
BETWEEN 1965 AND 2010**

Name: Mrs Sue Pritchard

Date Received: 31 March 2026

Submission for Inquiry into unsolved murders and long-term missing persons cases in New South Wales between 1965 and 2010

Submission by Sue Pritchard

Search and Rescue Dog advocate, researcher and Churchill Fellow

Terms of reference 1a - Current and emerging developments in policy, practice and technology in relation to such crimes

Utilisation of volunteer search and rescue dog teams to improve search response

Dear Committee,

I will keep my response brief, but I am happy to be contacted.

Background

I have 30 years of emergency services experience as a volunteer and paid professional. I have volunteered with NSW Surf Lifesaving, VRA Rescue NSW, and NSW SES plus was employed by them for 12 years.

Over the last 14 years, I have focused my energy into advocacy to improve search and rescue in Australia. This has been primarily on the integration of volunteer search and rescue (SAR) dogs into search response.

In 2016, aware of the lack of recognition and utilisation of volunteer search dogs in this country, I was awarded a Churchill Fellowship to identify the factors involved in successfully integrating these resources into mainstream usage by emergency services. Visiting New Zealand, England, United States, Ireland, Northern Ireland and Switzerland, I discussed, trained, and responded with Police, emergency services and volunteers. The insights gained informed the attached Churchill Fellowship report.

I am currently retired, and volunteer as the Captain for the VRA Rescue NSW Search Dogs Squad. I am a founding member of the Australian Council of Search and Rescue Dog Organisations (ACSARDO) an organisation developing a national coordinated approach to volunteer search and rescue dog development in Australia.

Investment in search and rescue

On most land and water searches, the majority of those undertaking the search are members sourced from volunteer emergency service agencies.

Providing appropriately trained and resourced volunteers to undertake these searches is therefore fundamental to supporting the missing person and their loved ones, and the Police agencies tasked with conducting the search.

Unlike other countries, Australia does not have dedicated volunteer search and rescue agencies such as LandSAR New Zealand, Mountain Rescue in the UK and Europe, or SAR teams in the United States. The investment in search differs with each agency, the training courses offered, the supplementary resources available, and the on-ground support provided to search teams. The combat roles of these volunteer agencies (flood, storms, tsunami for SES and bushfires for RFS) of course take priority in the form of training and resource investment.

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I think there is much more to accomplish through improved training and resourcing in volunteer SAR search skills. Making this a priority with commensurate agency financial allocations will enhance our volunteer's knowledge and skills in line with search teams in other countries.

Volunteer Search and Rescue Dog teams

Volunteer search and rescue dog teams are a search resource used internationally for decades. In Western Australia, South Australia, and Victoria, they have also been used for decades. This has not been the case in NSW.... until recently.

Search and rescue dogs are trained in specific search disciplines that are targeted for missing people in a range of conditions and situations.

Scent Specific Trailing dogs will only focus on the target individual scent, which makes them an ideal resource in a populated search environment to provide direction of travel of the missing person.

Area Search dogs can work off lead covering large areas to find live people. All search and rescue dogs are safe to use around the vulnerable people that are commonly being searched for, such as those with autism, dementia, or people intending self-harm.

Water Search dogs have only recently been established in Australia and have already proven their ability to narrow down search areas and find drowned people in very short periods.

Human remains detection or cadaver dogs are trained to find people across a range of time, decomposition stages, and environmental conditions including buildings, and above and below ground.

Making progress

I am pleased to say that in the past three years, qualified emergency service-based volunteer search and rescue dog teams are now being successfully utilised in NSW. These teams have developed all the search disciplines: Area Search Dogs, Scent Specific Trailing Dogs, Human Remains Detection/Cadaver Dogs and Water Search Dogs.

The NSW Police and Australian Federal Police are now regularly calling upon these teams to assist in search operations. In addition, these agencies are inviting the organisation to participate in knowledge enrichment opportunities and SAR exercises.

The recognition and utilisation of volunteer search dog teams is due to competent teams that are trained to international standards, with professional development, training and assessment carried out by experienced handlers from Australia and overseas. Importantly they have built trust and confidence with Police and emergency services through ethical conduct, skilled handlers and dogs, and consistent service delivery. This quality assurance is fundamental to the professionalism that is required for the vital work undertaken.

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The next step is to have volunteer search and rescue dogs integrated into emergency plans and associated legislation. This will ensure their ongoing utilisation and development in NSW.

Conclusion

For missing persons searches in NSW, the utilisation of trusted volunteer search dog resources by Police SAR Coordinators is continuing to grow.

Finally, at a recent search exercise I mused with a colleague who I attended my first search with 20 years ago. We stood amongst a group of specialist trained individuals, supported by qualified volunteer search and rescue dog teams, enhanced technology in the form of remote piloted aircraft systems (RPAS/drones), plus GPS tracking devices, and game-changing mapping platforms. We agreed we have come a long way since that search, and that SAR in NSW is on the right track.

Please don't hesitate to contact me if you any further questions.

Kind regards,

Sue Pritchard
Churchill Fellow