

I Can Smell Onions!

It is not just the police who are pestered by persistent psychics



Ken McLeod, our resident Search and Rescue expert, who spent a lifetime in that field before retiring to the NSW South Coast to peer under rocks.

The article in the Autumn 2004 edition (24:1) “Murders and Clairvoyants” got my mind going back to my nigh-on 30 years in Search And Rescue, SAR. I worked my way up in that industry from humble quill-sharpener in the early 70s to editor of the *Australian SAR Manual* and Vice-Chairman of a UN committee on SAR, before retiring a few years ago. In all that time, we too had our brushes with “clairvoyants”, just as our colleagues in the Police still do, as the article showed. Sometimes, in spite of our dedication and the best that science could offer at the time, we would have no success in our search for a missing aircraft or boat. We never called on clairvoyants; no, they called on us. If ever the media reported our lack of success in any protracted search, as sure as night follows day, the phone would bring one of those little rays of sunshine into our lives.

It's not as if we were just bumbling around in the dark, SAR is a highly technical business. Our planning and allocation of search units was based on probability mathematics, research on how the eye and brain interact to register objects, the effects of weather and ocean currents, navigation, etc, and lately the use of satellites to detect distress

radio beacons and determine their position anywhere on the planet (See www.cospas-sarsat.org).

Generally we found what we were looking for, plus no end of marijuana plantations and WWII wrecks in the Northern Territory. The lack of success was usually due to thick jungles obscuring aircraft wreckage or a vessel sinking in the wide expanses of ocean without leaving any floating evidence.

Occasionally, if a search appeared to be unsuccessful, the families of the missing would call in clairvoyants for assistance. That was always a recipe for a difficult situation; in their desperation these poor people would clutch at any straw, and there was no shortage of the rip-off artists, shonks, and the deluded to take their money. Having been presented with urgent suggestions, we were in a difficult position, between using common sense and empathy with these families. Always, the advice from clairvoyants followed the same format:

- The clairvoyants, usually female, really did appear to be genuinely concerned, convinced of their powers, and were very persuasive.
- The advice was so vague as to fit almost any location.

• It would be our fault if we ignored the advice and the lost people died.

• Usually it made no sense at all. Clairvoyants seem to have no understanding of how aircraft and boats work, no understanding of geography. They really are on a different plane.

Were we ever assisted in our searches by a clairvoyant's advice? No. Invariably, it resulted in wasting our time while we thought of how to make sense of the clairvoyant's advice, and deal with the families, and never led us to the missing people.

In one difficult search, for an aircraft missing between Coolangatta and Bankstown, a clairvoyant contacted us as follows.

Me: Hello, Rescue Co-ordination Centre.

Caller: It's (name of "respected clairvoyant" withheld) here, I have some information about the missing aircraft.'

Me: Go on, please.

Caller: I can smell onions.

Me: Pardon?

Caller: I can smell onions. Tell your searchers to try to smell onions, that's where you'll find the wreckage.

Me: Thanks very much, if you'll leave your phone number... etc

Picture the Rescue Co-ordination Centre. There was much frowning of brows, chin-scratching, rustling of new packets of Valium being opened, mumbling into coffee cups, and poring over navigation charts. We went through our mathematics to find out where we had omitted the Onion Factor. Try as we might, we couldn't find "Here be onions" on the charts. I still lie awake at night asking myself "Should we have told the search aircraft to open a window?" Extensive investigations revealed that the people on the aircraft had eaten hamburgers before the flight, so I suppose that nowadays that advice would be classified as "Microsoft Advice"; technically correct but no use at all.

In my time in the UN committee on SAR, my colleagues and I occasionally used our spare time to discuss the assistance we had been offered by clairvoyants. After much selfless research in some of the best pubs in the world, none of us could recall any clairvoyant being any more than a nuisance.

After my retirement, another search for a missing yacht in the Coral Sea had a clairvoyant tell the Rescue Co-ordination Centre that the survivors were resting under a tree on an island. Not that this was any help, because between Australia, PNG and New Caledonia there are thousands of islands and billions of trees.

What was really surprising is that the Australian Maritime Safety Authority had introduced a procedure where staff were instructed to "consider the advice of clairvoyants" and so based on that loopy advice, they spent many thousands of dollars of taxpayers' money hiring aircraft to search islands. Not that this was a complete waste, at least they were awarded the Australian Skeptics Bent Spoon Runner-up Award of 1997. (See how the bureaucrats defended the indefensible at Senate Estimates at www.aph.gov.au/hansard/senate/commtee/s1231.pdf go to page 145.)

So, what does this little article amount to? I can hardly claim that the foregoing is "science", indeed the subject of clairvoyants locating missing aircraft and boats had never been researched, to my knowledge. I could claim that the above is illustrative of a general principle: clairvoyants only get in the way and in the process cause already distressed people even more grief.

