

New search in bid to solve Kaimai mystery

Written by Administrator

A group of Tauranga teenagers will head to the Kaimai bush tomorrow in the hope they can unearth a major clue in the disappearance of Te Paewhenua (Bobby) Roberts.

The case is one that has remained unsolved for Tauranga police since 2004.

Youth Search and Rescue (YSAR) members will start their search from Mr Roberts' last-known point, and are using the search as a training exercise.

Twenty-five young people applied in February for YSAR, and 17 were selected.

Steve Campbell, police constable and Tauranga YSAR volunteer co-ordinator, said 15 students would use track and clue awareness and search methods they had gained through national search and rescue training, to revisit Mr Roberts' case.

It was 8.30am on Tuesday, November 30, 2004, when Mr Roberts made an impulsive decision.

Nearing the peak of State Highway 29 on the Kaimai Range as he headed towards Tauranga, Mr Roberts turned his Fulton Hogan work van around and sped back down the hill, towards the summit lookout.

He swerved across two lanes and sped into the lookout area.

Mr Roberts, 53, travelling about 100kmh, smashed through the brick and steel lookout barrier, plunging more than 100 metres down the bush-clad cliff.

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The impact popped the van's windscreen from its pillars, flattened the vehicle's front and catapulted an unbuckled Mr Roberts through the air.

The van swerved to the right, hit a tree and rolled several times before stopping, mangled, against a tree stump.

Emergency services converged on the scene almost immediately after startled witnesses reported the crash.

Police officers scrambled down the cliff and searched the van and the area around it and a police dog was put through the dense bush.

Search and Rescue teams comprising 60 people from Tauranga and Hamilton moved in and began a meticulous grid search of the bush that lasted four days.

In July 2005, clothes belonging to Mr Roberts were found stacked next to a log in the Kaimai bush.

A pair of brown leather work boots, thick socks, a shirt and blue overalls were discovered. Mr Roberts' body is yet to be found.

A coroner's inquest into his disappearance opened on January 11, 2006 and the case remains open.

Mr Campbell said the search would begin from Mr Roberts' last known point - approximately 300m from where his vehicle landed.

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Mr Campbell believed there were two possibilities as to what happened to the Te Puke man.

"One, he became hypothermic and started shedding clothes, which is something that does happen. They get a false sense of warmth. There is a possibility he shedded his clothes and wandered off and huddled up somewhere and passed away.

"The second, is the avoidance thing. There is that element ... some people are of the thought he might have gone to Australia, or something like that."

Mr Campbell said if Mr Roberts did pass away in the bush, there was a high level of pig activity and his body could have been destroyed by pigs.

Mr Campbell said the Kaimais were an area where police did conduct a lot of searches, both real and mock.

The Hamilton YSAR members used the Bobby Roberts case as a training exercise last year but unearthed no new evidence.

Mr Campbell said the important thing was that police did not forgot cold cases.

"When you talk about victimology and some of the feeling that surrounds people ... there's always the questions and the questions remain.

"Knowing search and rescue teams are passionate about cold cases and we will follow them up [gives comfort]. It's all about closure."

The officer in charge of the case, Sergeant Graham McGurk at Matamata police station, said

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he believed Mr Roberts' body was in the Kaimai bush.