# Episode 21 - Forensics - v1.mp3

**Inspector John Pratt:** [00:00:05] Hello and welcome to Tasmania Police's podcast, This is Tas Police. I'm Inspector John Pratt and I'll be your host as we chat to a wide range of Tasmanian police officers about why they joined the job and why others should too. We're coming to you today from Lutruwita, Tasmania. And before we start our conversation, I'd like to respectfully acknowledge the Tasmanian Aboriginal people as the traditional owners of the land upon which we work and pay our respects to elders past and present. We recognise the Tasmanian Aboriginal people as the continuing custodians of the rich cultural heritage of Lutruwita, Tasmania.

**Inspector John Pratt:** [00:00:48] Throughout this season of This is Tas Police we've been delving into the specialist areas of Tas police, including marine and rescue services and criminal investigation. Continuing on with that theme, today's guest will be talking to us about what it's like working for Forensic Services. Constable Tanya Curtis is a skilled forensic practitioner, inspirational leader and mentor who has been recognised across the country for her expertise in forensics. She has worked on some interesting cases in her time and will no doubt have some great stories to tell us. Thanks for joining me today, Tanya.

**Constable Tania Curtis:** [00:01:18] Thank you for having me.

**Inspector John Pratt:** [00:01:19] To help our listeners get to know you a bit more, can you tell me a bit about your background and how you became a forensics officer within Tasmania Police?

**Constable Tania Curtis:** [00:01:26] Yeah, almost by accident, really. I went to art school and I was going to be a very famous artist and then during my honours year I came to the realisation that I probably wasn't. I'd also been accepted into law at university before I started my fine arts degree and and found myself at the police academy trying out to become a recruit. I was successful after 3 or 4 attempts at this huge big ramp use. It was like five foot five or something and I'm just five foot. So it was a big achievement to get over that.

**Constable Tania Curtis:** [00:01:58] During my time as a recruit, we were exposed to lots of different areas of policing, and scientific, as it was called then, was something I thought, Yeah, I can use my art stuff because of the photography of drawing, of casting, and you get in on all the big jobs, which is always exciting. And it just sounded like there'd be something different every day. So I was sent to Launceston, which I wasn't overly happy about being a southern girl, but it turned out to be really good for me because small station, you got to know everyone and all the specialist areas pretty quickly and you got more opportunities. So when Victoria Cafasso was murdered on the East Coast, the Sergeant of Scientific knew that I had a lot of skills in casting. And one of the crucial pieces of evidence for that job is a footwear impression that was left near the body. And he asked me to come down and do some work on that, and that was my pathway into forensics.

**Inspector John Pratt:** [00:02:51] So as a member of the forensics team, could you please tell us about a couple of the day to day tasks and responsibilities that you have to undertake?

**Constable Tania Curtis:** [00:02:58] I guess that's the beauty of forensics. There isn't really a day to day. It is same, same, different. In as much as we take photographs, we collect fingerprints, we examine areas for DNA evidence or any physical evidence that might link the offender to the crime scene, to the property that's found. But you never know how you're going to apply that. You come into work and you don't know what you're going to get. So you might be at a murder, you might be at a burglary, you might be at a protest recording the arrest of the protesters by search and rescue. So every day is different. There's just so much variety.

**Inspector John Pratt:** [00:03:34] So with the length of time that you've been attached to forensic services, can you tell us about some of the cases where you've played a key role in solving a particular crime?

**Constable Tania Curtis:** [00:03:42] I like to think it's a team effort. However, there was one job where we'd had a series of armed robberies in Launceston where the offenders were stealing cars and holding up different premises at gun or knife point. And this particular evening they had dumped one stolen car at a service station and stole another car while the person was inside paying for their petrol and they'd taken off. And this information came in to police and the vehicle was spotted, abandoned a couple of suburbs away. When forensics were tasked to the vehicle, there was a pizza box and inside that pizza box was a whole pizza apart from one bite. And I thought, I wonder if you can get DNA off, you know, someone actually eating something, off pizza. So I took the pizza back to scientific, popped it in the freezer and sought advice from the scientists at Forensic Science Tasmania. As it turned out, it was the first time in Australia that DNA had ever been obtained from food that was linked to an offender to solve a crime. So that one will always stick with me as something a bit different outside the square.

**Inspector John Pratt:** [00:04:46] So you mentioned the Victoria Cafasso case a few minutes ago. Are there any other memorable experience you've had in the job so far?

**Constable Tania Curtis:** [00:04:52] There's so many getting to work overseas In my area of expertise, which is disaster, victim identification was extremely rewarding working with police officers from all around the world to help return. People lost in, you know, tragic incidents to their families, working with the cold case unit, reviewing old forensic cases, The evidence part of things to see what could be done to assist in solving those. And a couple of those have resulted in people being charged with murders since then. But I think for me, the most rewarding thing are the little things. It's when you get a thank you or a hug or you know, you've made a difference to someone, and that's the most rewarding part.

**Inspector John Pratt:** [00:05:33] You mentioned overseas deployments. Could you tell us in a little bit more detail about those?

**Constable Tania Curtis:** [00:05:36] Yes. So I'm part of the disaster victim identification squad. That's an Interpol process that a lot of police services around the world are familiar with. So it involves officers going to the scene of a mass casualty incident. And in Tasmania that's an incident involving five or more deceased persons. And we will use methods such as DNA and dental records or medical records to establish the identity of those human remains because they're no longer recognisable. So when a mass disaster occurs, the Australian Government will ask for people if they are providing assistance to that country to provide practitioners in the disaster victim identification field to assist overseas with the identification of all countries, not just Australians.

**Inspector John Pratt:** [00:06:24] And as part of that role, you work with teams obviously from other countries around the world.

**Constable Tania Curtis:** [00:06:28] Yes, you do. So that can be really interesting. Everyone has the same forms and they're all filled out with crosses, not ticks, so they can be sent anywhere throughout the world. And it doesn't matter what language they're written in, people can understand, you know, the form. But yes, you can work with people from your own country in a team, usually small teams of four in the mortuary where I'm an expert, or you can work with people from other countries. So when I was deployed to New Zealand, I spent some time working with the Israeli police force, the English police force, and obviously the New Zealand police force. So really good opportunity to learn from other people. There are different forensic techniques used across the world, so bring some of those back to make Tasmania Police, you know, improve on our knowledge and build on our knowledge.

**Inspector John Pratt:** [00:07:14] So when you travel to areas involving significant disasters, you just mentioned New Zealand, what are the living conditions and the catering conditions and all those sorts of things like that you have to put up with?

**Constable Tania Curtis:** [00:07:23] So Bali was five star hotel, which was, which was lovely. New Zealand, we were at an army barracks working and then we'd be bussed back to a university campus and it was actually quite small university rooms. And whilst we were there, there were multiple earthquakes. So the cracks in the ceiling above my bed were getting bigger and bigger each day for the three weeks I was there.

**Inspector John Pratt:** [00:07:45] And what about notification for such a deployment? Do you get a lot of lead in time?

**Constable Tania Curtis:** [00:07:49] It varies. So I think for New Zealand, obviously the earthquake occurred. I think it was only two days afterwards that I found myself in New Zealand with a team of Tasmanian police officers. For Bali, I think it was a week perhaps, but obviously depending on where you work and what the response is going to be, you might find yourself sent there and then, straight away. For Port Arthur, I just got a phone call to say pack your bag, we're going to Hobart. So it was a couple of hours.

**Inspector John Pratt:** [00:08:18] As you and I both know, forensics is a specialist area of Tasmania Police. What kind of qualifications and training are required to work in that field?

**Constable Tania Curtis:** [00:08:25] So when I started there weren't any. It was on-the-job training. You learnt from more experienced officers. Now there's a pathway through your recruiting course. You'll spend some time with crime scene examiners at the academy learning what we do and what our role is. You can build on that by doing an investigative skills or a forensic examination techniques course. If you come to crime scene and we like people to come on secondment to sort of try before you buy for them and for us because it is a small team and the reality can be a little bit different than what you might imagine it will be. If you're happy with that, come along when a position is available. And then once you're in forensics, there are expectations for you to undertake tertiary qualifications through the Canberra Institute of Technology and then specialise in one of the smaller areas of forensics.

**Inspector John Pratt:** [00:09:13] So I imagine attention to detail is incredibly important. In your line of work. Can you tell us a bit about that? How do you ensure that you don't miss anything when you're working through a crime scene?

**Constable Tania Curtis:** [00:09:22] Yeah, I guess like any scientific sort of response to things, there's a method and a technique and you follow that step by step. So for me, it's always start from the outside. So get the information from the officers at the scene, speak to the victim or the reporting person, get the information from them, and then have a think about how the offender might have got in if it was a burglary. Don't go in that same way. Have a look at that first. So you never want to contaminate any source of evidence and you want to record everything before you do it, because obviously some forensic techniques are destructive. So yeah, always start from the outside, gradually work your way in and talk to people afterwards. So this is what I've done. Is there anything else that you can think of and just, you know, on the way to the job, I guess come up with a mental list about, okay, it's this type of job, this is what I need to do. This might be worth looking at. So go through it in your head before you actually get there.

**Inspector John Pratt:** [00:10:19] I'm sure everyone would love to know how does the role that you undertake in your day to day job compare to CSI and other crime scene shows?

**Constable Tania Curtis:** [00:10:27] Yeah, they've made my life difficult. We don't have a lot of that technology or that capability in that time frame. It's unrealistic. Nothing gets solved before the commercial. I guess a lot of people believe that they are now more qualified than perhaps I am when you go to their home. So I try and explain when I get there what a fingerprint is. And what DNA is. And we usually always have a joke about CSI. If they bring that up I just give them some realistic expectations about what we can and can't do. But there are lots of things we can do that are on CSI. They just don't happen that quickly.

**Inspector John Pratt:** [00:11:05] So you've been working in forensics for quite some time now. How has the technology changed since you first started in the job?

**Constable Tania Curtis:** [00:11:10] It's mind boggling. So I think I've been in forensics for 28 years. There was no DNA when I started as a crime scene examiner. There were no computer systems, no electronic recording of exhibits or evidence. So everything was written down in a book and you'd tear out the perforated copy and pop it in an envelope with your film Negative. So no digital cameras. We were still taking some black and white photographs and processing our own photographs in the dark labs at the station. I was stationed in Launceston initially and we actually had to send our rolls of film down to Hobart to get processed and then they would send the pictures back. So you had a whole week of not knowing if your photographs had come out or not, which was, you know, terrifying if you'd been at an important job. And obviously digital evidence, I mean, we didn't have the ability to extract all the data that we have now. You know, we didn't have mobile phones. We didn't have such complex computer systems. There were no biometrics. We used to have to draw pictures of the criminals from victims descriptions, all that's now electronic.

**Inspector John Pratt:** [00:12:16] So from what you know, how do you think technology will continue to evolve as we move forward? So over the next 20 years or so, it's scary.

**Constable Tania Curtis:** [00:12:23] I'm not a very technologically minded person, but a mobile phone provides so much information today. Who knows what it's going to do in 20 years time? I think other areas of forensics will become more predominant as more and more research is put into things like shoe impression, evidence, tool marks and other sorts of forensic evidence that that are just developing Forensics is, you know, how they say like art is a reflection of its time? Well, so is forensics because as technology and people develop and evolve different ways of doing things, we as a field of policing have to find ways to record and manage that and be able to assist and support our investigative officers as best we can with those developments.

**Inspector John Pratt:** [00:13:10] Tanya, you were awarded the APM or the Australia Police Medal. Can you tell us a bit about that?

**Constable Tania Curtis:** [00:13:15] Absolutely humbling. And I had no idea. I still don't know who nominated me for it. Like I said before, I've been very fortunate in my career. I've had lots of opportunities given to me. I've always believed in making the most of those and I've always tried to share those with the team of people that support me because I don't believe any one person receives an APM. They're the person that has been supported by lots of peers and lots of other officers and and their families too, and been fortunate enough to be nominated for that. It was amazing the support I've received, the messages of thanks for that. It's just really humbling.

**Inspector John Pratt:** [00:13:55] And as well as the APM Award, I'm also aware that you were awarded the Australasian Police Practitioner of the Year award. Could you please tell us a bit about that?

**Constable Tania Curtis:** [00:14:02] Yeah, again, a complete surprise. I was told that I was nominated for the award and would be going to Perth for the ceremony and it was fantastic. Few days at the National Police Women's Association, amazing support and full of inspirational women. And then on the awards night they were reading out this person. I'm thinking, Gosh. And then I realised it was me. And again, completely humbling. So it's awarded to a police officer who practices out in the field across the Australian Pacific region for the work they've done throughout their career.

**Inspector John Pratt:** [00:14:37] As we come to the end of our conversation today, what advice do you have for anyone interested in pursuing a career in forensics within Tasmania? Police?

**Constable Tania Curtis:** [00:14:44] It's worthwhile. It's challenging. I think it teaches you a lot about people. You have to be able to listen. You have to be able to talk to anyone from the king to someone who's just committed a heinous crime because you never know who a victim or a complainant is going to be. It teaches you patience, it teaches you kindness. And I guess it teaches you that every person in the world is different.

**Inspector John Pratt:** [00:15:07] And what about any advice for any people that may be thinking of joining Tasmania Police as a whole, not just forensic services?

**Constable Tania Curtis:** [00:15:13] I think for me it's challenged me, it's given me adventures and opportunities. It teaches you how to be kind to yourself and how to push yourself. 30 years later, I still find every day exciting and rewarding to go to work. Yeah, some days are terrible. I'd be lying if I, you know, if I said every day is wonderful, but you take something wonderful from each day and that's quite often just what you're giving somebody else.

**Inspector John Pratt:** [00:15:40] I think it's fair to say that the work that you've done and the work of the people that you work with have done in relation to solving crimes throughout Tasmania and assisting at other major events around the world has been quite incredible. Thanks very much for your work and thanks very much for your time today, Tanya. Appreciate the time.

**Constable Tania Curtis:** [00:15:55] Thank you.

**Inspector John Pratt:** [00:16:00] That's it for this episode of This is Tas Police. I hope you enjoyed the conversation. You can stay up to date with all our episodes by subscribing on your favorite podcast app. And you can find all our previous episodes on the Tasmania Police recruitment website: recruitment.police.tas.gov/podcast.