A case of sudden death at sea -Kiribati

Posted by Stacey King on January 28, 2010 at 8:52am

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It was an ordinary day in the office for Henderson detective senior sergeant Jill Rogers late last year. But then her manager phoned, asking her to be at Auckland airport in two hours.

"All I was told was that the destination was tropical and could I take a coffin," Mrs Rogers says.

She rushed home, packed her bags and met Auckland city detective sergeant Mark Franich at the airport before boarding a flight to Kiribati - an island nation located in the central Pacific Ocean.

The detectives had been asked to investigate the death of an apparently healthy 27-year-old man on board the Korean fishing vessel Sajo Accordio.
to investigate the death of a man on a fishing boat.

"Tebuia Tekaie was found dead in his bunk by one of the ship's 23 crew members," Mrs Rogers says.

"The Kiribati government made a request to the New Zealand government for assistance."

The pair were asked to provide guidance on whether there had been any foul play.

Mrs Rogers says the Sajo Accordio was far out to sea when the death was discovered.

"The captain arranged for the body to be carefully wrapped in many layers of plastic and placed in a foam-lined, made-to-measure crate, then stored in a sashimi freezer at minus 40 degrees centigrade."

The ship, crewed by a mix of Korean, Indonesian, Peruvian, Chinese and Australian sailors, was too large to bring into harbour and remained in deep water a mile out to sea.

A police boat was not available because the fuel allowance for the month had been used up, so the New Zealand detectives were sent out in an inflatable.

The captain was keen to start fishing again and had already made one attempt to unload the body to maritime police with disastrous consequences.

The crate had fallen into the sea as it was winched from one boat to another.

Other evidence was also contaminated.

"The dead man's cabin had been made scrupulously clean after his death," Mrs Rogers says.

"No fingerprints or forensic evidence of any sort was available. Nor was there any forensic capability in Kiribati to take or test it."

The pair interviewed the crew and other witnesses and carried out an examination of the scene over the next five days.

Then, with no warning, the Kiribati government gave the boat permission to leave.

The body was transferred to shore and placed in a refrigeration unit attached to the police station.

"We watched our crime scene sail away," Mrs Rogers says.

A decision was made to take the body to New Zealand for a proper autopsy.

"We had the task of obtaining the proper clearances needed to transport the body by air to New Zealand and finding a suitable coffin that complied with airline transport requirements," Mrs Rogers says.

"After liaising with civil aviation authorities, customs and foreign affairs officials, we finally managed to get the body on to a plane," she says.
A subsequent autopsy found Mr Tekaie's death was not suspicious and his body was returned to his family for burial.

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