

SATURDAY



They were watching junior footy, laughing and smiling... but dad murdered them all

THE family's clothes were still pegged to the line when police arrived. A boy's T-shirt, a little girl's pink top. Jeans, pants and socks, all carefully aligned and twisting in the wind.

Officers at the scene of the rural property might have stared as the Hill's Hoist gently turned the items that had been dry for hours. Kim Hunt, the woman who put

AARON LANGMAID

them there, lay dead just metres away. The bodies of her children, Fletcher 10, Mia, 8, and Phoebe, 6, weren't far — also shot dead, inside the weatherboard house.

Beyond the boundary of the yard, past the kids' slippery slide and swing seat, the body of their father, Geoff Hunt, was eventually pulled from a dam and covered with

a blue tarp. Then, a diver emerged from the murky water with a rifle in his hands.

There were no words to describe such a scene.

For a moment all police could do was stand silently along the embankment. None of it made sense.

Wagga Wagga Superintendent Bob Noble cast his eyes to the ground as he did his best to explain it to the media. Even the most

hardened professionals, he said, could not fail to be moved by what they saw.

It was teachers at the children's school who first noted something was wrong.

With a roll of just 70, the unexplained absence of all three kids was significant. When a friend couldn't raise Mrs Hunt on her mobile, she decided to visit the house.

She rang Triple 0 at 2.51pm on Tuesday and

relayed a frantic message nobody should ever have to.

THIRTEEN kilometres from the rural hamlet of Lockhart, near Wagga Wagga in southwest NSW, brilliant fields of golden canola billow, flanking long country roads that seem to stretch forever.

Only weeks ago, Riverina growers had come together to discuss the implications of

the heavy winter frosts.

A well respected and much loved local farmer, Mr Hunt had been among those to attend. He mingled, perhaps quietly buoyed that his fields, after a decade of drought, looked better than they had done in years.

"Geoff was worried about the frost but he hadn't lost anything," one local businessman recalled.

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE

Darkness in heart of

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

"I mean, all of the farmers are in the same boat and he certainly hadn't fared any worse than anyone else.

"There was absolutely no indication that anything was wrong or that anything like this was about to happen.

"He appeared to be in fine spirits. He's a lovely guy, very easygoing, and he seemed happy and perfectly normal."

It was only Sunday when the Hunt family were last seen together. They had attended a junior footy match. Fletcher was playing in Lockhart's U14 squad. Mr Hunt was an umpire.

Locals spotted each member of the Hunt family smiling and laughing.

They seemed at relative ease, as if life was finally returning to normal after a trying two years.

Mrs Hunt, a nurse at Wagga Wagga Base Hospital's intensive care unit, had been lucky to survive after her Mitsubishi Triton flipped twice near their home on Lockhart Boree Creek Rd with her four-

to, very self-motivated, a busy nurse at Lockhart and Wagga Base hospitals and raising a family, but after the accident she really gained control of her will power and went out to explain to others that if you work hard you can recover, especially from brain injury."

Family and friends have delivered flowers to the Hunt property every day since the bodies of all five family members were discovered.

Locals on the main street in Lockhart spoke in quiet tones. Some embraced. Others were simply lost in thought.

At first, concerns were raised about the family's financial situation, but investigators do not believe money issues were to blame for the deaths.

Mr Hunt was a third-generation farmer and with his family owned as many as six wheat, grain and canola properties in the region. They were considered one of the wealthiest, most successful farming families in the area.

All that can be felt is an indescribable numbness and all-encompassing, heart-wrenching sadness

KIM HUNT'S SISTER, JENNY GEPPERT

year-old daughter inside.

She suffered a serious brain injury, broken neck and fractured spine. But the head trauma was so bad that when she emerged from a coma she had amnesia for weeks.

Mr Hunt had been by his wife's bedside almost the entire time.

"She's been showing signs of waking over the last two days and she's been making progress," he told local media at the time.

"She's a great mum and a very caring person."

Mr Hunt was there when his wife finally woke up. He helped her eat and drink, and learn to walk again. It had been an enormous challenge for the couple but they had conquered it together.

In the past year, Mrs Hunt had even started speaking to local community groups about her recovery, hoping to inspire others.

"I heard her speak at a Red Cross function," Lockhart Mayor Peter Yates said. "She was very interesting to listen

Police have pointed to mental anguish linked to Mrs Hunt's recovery and the daily stress of running a farm.

But even that theory lacks substantiation. The Hunts were financially secure and settled, with hopes and dreams for the future. The couple were planning to build their dream homestead on the farm they owned, just a few kilometres down the road from Mr Hunt's brother, Allan, and his wife.

Mrs Hunt had returned to the job she loved in a support role. A local hospital spokesman said the 41-year-old was admired for her resolve, her professionalism, her caring spirit.

The children could light up a room.

For Phoebe and Mia it was about the little joys — seeing their friends at school, playing with their doll house on the back porch and painting pictures for their parents to stick on the fridge. Fletcher loved his footy and



PHOEBE, 6
■ Kindergarten

had been anticipating his junior final.

A flag flew at half-mast all week at St Joseph's, where all three children attended school.

"Fletcher, Mia and Phoebe were absolutely beautiful children," principal Debbie Sheather said.

"They loved to smile. They loved to chat ... they were always full of laughs and they were really talented in what they did.

"All their friends at school miss them. We tell them it's OK to be sad and they see us sad, to know that it's OK."

Geoff Hunt was last seen by locals running errands, a day before the horror unfolded.

He chatted to the owner of the Lockhart Hardware Store. Everything seemed normal.

Over the course of the following 24 hours, there is no telling what was going on inside his head.

But at some point, for some reason, the battle to control his dark thoughts became too difficult.

Early investigations suggest on Monday night or Tuesday he first shot dead his

wife on the path at the back of their house, then walked inside and shot each of his children.

He then got into his late-model ute, drove it erratically through a field of wheat, before getting out, walking to the edge of the dam and killing himself.

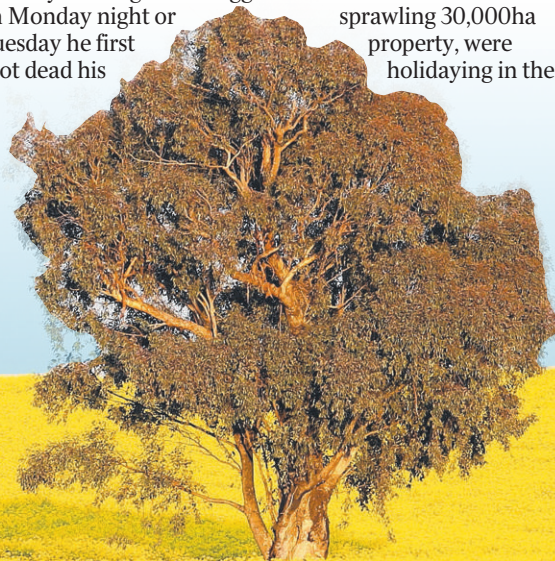
Mrs Hunt's parents, who owned a section of the sprawling 30,000ha property, were holidaying in the

Northern Territory when they received the call. Mrs Hunt's sister, Jenny Geppert, said in a statement she dearly loved and missed her family.

"The void that is left in our lives is immeasurable. They are profoundly missed," she said.

"All that can be felt is an indescribable numbness and all-encompassing, heart-wrenching sadness with losing my sister, brother-in-law, nephew and nieces.

"My most beautiful, spirited sister, Kim, whom I idolised and adored; my dear brother-in-law, Geoff, who was incredibly generous and kind-hearted; my beautiful nephew and nieces Fletcher, Mia and Phoebe, who I cherished and thought of as my own



the perfect family



MIA, 8

- Grade 2 at St Joseph's PS
- Played netball with local club



FLETCHER, 10

- Grade 4 at St Joseph's PS
- Played Aussie rules with Lockhart Under 14 team

children. All are loved dearly."

FARMERS across the region have been canvassed by investigators as they try to piece the tragic puzzle together.

The biggest clue — perhaps the only one — remains a scrawled note; a single line written by Mr Hunt and placed beside his wife's body.

But even a few short words could not come close to explain such senselessness. How a seemingly content husband could kill his wife. How a father could shoot dead his son and two daughters.

It will remain a tragedy of the deepest measure.

There is a desperately sad irony that the Lockhart

shootings occurred in the same week that mental health was on the agenda across the country.

The national initiative, RUOK, was a call to make sure we are all looking out for one another. A simple question, said organisers, could make all the difference.

Beyondblue chairman, former Victorian premier Jeff Kennett said, the latest tragedy highlighted the consequences of not speaking up.

"This is one of the saddest cases we have seen in many years," he said.

"All we can ask is that men, in particular, understand that whatever they are going through at any given time, be it a relationship problem,

financial situation or health issue — seek help because so often the cause that would make you want to exit this world ... those issues can be resolved."

Lockhart Shire deputy mayor Rodger Schirmer said lifting the veil of grief on their little town could take years. But there was a powerful message for the farming community he hoped would eventually shine through.

"People have to take the time to check on their mates, to put their arms around their pal or their brother or their wife or child and say, 'Are you all right? Is there anything bothering you?'" Cr Schirmer said.

DO YOU NEED TO TALK TO SOMEONE? CALL LIFELINE ON 13 11 14.

Supplied family photos of the Hunt children when they were younger.

