

Fingerprints & Scenes of Crime, a short story for The Founders Society

On the 30th September 2025, I gave a short PowerPoint presentation to the Auckland & Waikato Branch members of the Founders Society. It was about the unique nature of each person's finger, palm and foot prints together with a quick overview of my experiences as a police officer that had taken me around the World and generally an interesting and enjoyable career. The title was "Fingerprints" and this was deliberate as most of my service (both in this country and in Central Africa) has been related to my involvement with serious and often violent criminal investigations. Fingerprint work and associated scene & exhibit examinations, together with presenting "expert" evidence before the Courts, play a crucial part in such matters. See Note 1 below.

It all started out when I was a young Police Constable in the early 1960s. I was fresh out of the NZP Training School at Trentham and posted to the Wellington District. Taranaki Street Police Station was the busiest station in the country (in those days). Pubs on every corner, lots of bums, drunks, prostitutes and petty crime. A great place to "learn the trade". Public relations & dealing with people are paramount skills. Sudden deaths were common. Recording inked prints from arrested persons was where it started. A couple of years later, I was posted to Petone a town that was heavily involved with industry and commerce. Many workers were in the motor industry, freezing works, railways and similar. There were many domestic disputes. There were many older residents, including some who were my relatives. I was the junior troop on the station. I wanted more adventure in my career, and by December 1966, I had been invited to become a member of the British South Africa Police, a paramilitary Colonial service and the national police force in what was then Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), Central Africa.

What a change, I became a Patrol officer, sworn (again) to serve HM The Queen to uphold Law & Order and at a time when international politics were having an impact. Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) has great weather, African, European and mixed-race people of all sorts, and an interesting and varied policing experience. A great deal of responsibility was placed on young shoulders. After extensive training, I was posted to Salisbury Central (in the Capital), Enquiry Section & after only a few months, I was appointed the Member in Charge of the Police Hospital Posts. This involved hospital enquiries, I had a Team of 10 African staff (my 2i/c being Sergeant Simpson Jiri, from whom I learnt much). I attended many hundreds of postmortems (and I learnt a lot about the workings of the body). Dr Malcolm Ross, the Government Pathologist, was a great teacher. Murder & Sudden death investigations were common. By 1970, I was married & with a young family, promoted to Detective Patrol Officer, & became a member of the Salisbury CID Crimes of Violence Section. Investigations & crime Scene examinations were everyday events. A couple of years later, I had the opportunity to become a trainee fingerprint expert. A police skill that is valued and sought after. It required five years of hands-on training. Promoted to Detective Section Officer (Like a D/Sgt) and became a member of the Scenes of Crime Section at CIDHQ. By 1974, due to the political situation, we had decided to move back to New Zealand, and I was reappointed in April 1975, into the NZP. I completed my specialist fingerprint qualifications in NZ & became

a Detective again and posted to the Auckland Fingerprint Section, attached to the CIB. Of course, crimes of all sorts, murders, rapes, robberies, (Banks were a popular target in the 1980's) burglaries, etc, are everyday events. Giving evidence in Court cases plays a major part in such work. Cross-examination by experienced Defence Barristers, can be intimidating at times. We also became heavily involved in Operation Erebus (the Air NZ disaster in Antarctica), of course, bodies again.

In July 1984, I was a Sergeant & Fingerprint Officer again, the recipient of the Australasian Police Study Award, which took me around the World for several months, to selected police services in the USA, UK, Europe and Asia. It was to report upon and make recommendations related to the employment of "non-sworn" specialist police staff to operate the forensic services, as well as Fingerprint Identification services, including automated systems (to speed up searching responses) and Laser applications (using slices of light waves for non-injurious examinations of exhibits and crime scene items. The third topic involved forensic fingerprint methods relating to terrorist bombings and similar instances. It is something that I know a little bit about. It was to result in the production of a massive report, for the Police College at Manly, Sydney, NSW, and in due course contributed towards the introduction of AFIS, Automated Fingerprint Identification System, in this country. See Note 2 below.

In July 1985, not long after my return to Auckland from overseas, the Rainbow Warrior Incident, a maritime bombing (the sinking of the Greenpeace vessel in Auckland harbour) happened, and I was appointed the Forensic Fingerprint Team Leader to that case. Working with a great NZ Police Team and the Physics Department of the University of Auckland, which permitted us to use their Laser facilities. It was months of hard work, but great fun and resulted in the identification of two of those directly involved. We had been lucky that everyone in NZ seemed to want to assist in that investigation, and it was a great success and an embarrassment to the French Government. (we recently had the 40th Anniversary gathering of the group at Auckland) As a direct result of that case, we eventually established a joint NZ Police/University Forensic Laser Lab in 1989 and the acquisition of portable pseudo-laser Polilight's for each of the four Fingerprint Sections around NZ. They are updated every few years.

I retired on a pension from the New Zealand Police as Senior Sergeant, Principal Fingerprint Officer and Officer in Charge of the Auckland Fingerprint Section (the busiest in the country, I might add), coming off the payroll in January 2000. I am still involved (in my 80s) with forensic fingerprint casework as a member of Fingerprint & Forensic Services Ltd, a small specialist company with an international & national customer base, which we set up for retirees to provide a commercial public service in this particular forensic science.

Note 1. Each person has a variety of either Arch, Loop or Whorl patterns. Arches make up about 10% of the World population, Loops (the most common) 60% and Whorls (the round ones) about 30%. FP experts had to remember 1024 basic pattern combinations.

Note 2. AFIS is simply a system of very fast pattern searching of a fingerprint collection, speeding search times from what used to take minutes, hours, and days manually, into seconds and minutes. It is a form of AI. However, FP experts make the “final decision” when it comes to an identification. Every identification stands on its own merits before the Court.

So I am “still here and still breathing” and a newer member of the Founders Society. I thought the reader might be amused to know that I was not the “first” member of my family forebears to work in Africa. On my Mother’s side, my Grandfather, William Croft, an Architect from Petone, (he was supposed to be studying in London at the time) was a Trooper in the South African Light Horse during the Second Boer War. His father, George Turner Croft, a Builder in Petone and a Farmer, was a Trooper (aged 56 years) in the Imperial Light Horse, a Regiment composed of “Gentlemen” who had been thrown out of Johannesburg by the Boers, just before that war broke out. Great Grandfather George T., was in London at that time, rushed to Durban in Natal, SA, and joined up. He was “not amused” when he found out his son William, my grandfather, had followed him to take part in the 2nd Boer War. I suppose William, like myself, wanted some “adventure” in his Life. These reports have been confirmed via Ancestry.com, of which I am a member.



