Detective still on trail
47 years on

The Somerton beach body mystery has baffled police for 47 years. Now, the last surviving detective from the original investigation believes he has pieced together the circumstances of the man’s death. DEREK PEDLEY reports...

When the body of a man was found propped against the sea wall at Somerton Beach in 1948, it was first believed he may have suffered a heart attack.

It soon became apparent this was no ordinary case.

The man was found at 6.30am on December 1, and 47 years later the case remains officially unsolved.

Name tags from the man’s clothing had been removed, and he was not carrying identification.

His picture, description and fingerprints were sent around the country, leading to five people viewing the body and “positively” identifying him — as five different men.

His body was embalmed and a life-sized plaster cast of his head and shoulders was made to help identify him.

Pathologists were unable to establish a cause of death and no traces of poison were found.

Former Chief Superintendent Len Helliard, who originally investigated the case, remembers it as one of the most intriguing of his career.

“We were brought in to the case about two months after he was found, so there was no chance of recovering evidence from the beach,” he recalled yesterday.

Train tickets found in the man’s pocket proved useful for tracing his movements, but the first break in the case came in January, 1949, when police found the man’s suitcase at the Adelaide Railway Station.

A thread of cotton from the suitcase was matched to the man’s clothing. An unusual knife, a pair of scissors, slivers of zinc and a stencil brush were also found and would prove vital in Mr Brown’s final theory of the man’s identity.

The body was eventually buried at West Terrace Cemetery, with a headstone bearing “Here lies the unknown man who was found at Somerton Beach, 1st Dec. 1948.”

The strongest clue was discovered in April, 1949, when a pathologist discovered a “cryptic note” in the pocket of the man’s trousers.

It was The Advertiser’s police reporter, Mr Frank Kennedy, who deciphered the words on the note — Tamam Shud. They were the last line of Persian poet Omar Khayyam’s work, the Rubaiyat. Translated, it means “the end” — the most convincing evidence in the case that the man had committed suicide. The book from which the line was torn was found in a doctor’s car at Glenelg — the day before the man’s body was found.

A series of letters, presumed to be in code, were written on the back cover of the book, but Army and Navy intelligence experts were unable to break it. Eight-and-a-half years after the man’s body was found, the coroner officially closed the case, declaring, “I am unable to say the identity of the deceased, nor the cause of death.”

But Mr Brown, who retired from the police force in 1977, believes that, based on the evidence gathered, certain conclusions could be drawn on the man’s identity and cause of death.

“Ship’s officers in those days were responsible for labelling cases and the instruments we found in the suitcase and the slivers of zinc indicate that this was the man’s job,” he said. “He was thought to be European and a number of unused airmail envelopes were found in his suitcase. All this evidence, in our minds, established that he was a seaman.”

Mr Brown believes the man committed suicide by poisoning, but the post mortem examination delay resulted in the poison dissipating from his system.