

# ‘I didn’t need to try and check a pulse’



John Silvester

September 29, 2023 – 11.30am

The 12-storey, 90-year-old Manchester Unity Building can lay claim to be the most beautiful and innovative structure in Melbourne. Built with Depression labour, it was designed to show that even in times of turmoil, the solid insurance company was still a trusted investment.

The Gothic design, complete with towers, was a smaller model of the famous Tribune building in Chicago. (About 10 years later, the art deco Russell Street Police Building was built as a mini version of New York’s Empire State Building.)



Police seal off the ground floor of the Manchester Unity building after three men were killed during the Manchester Unity jewel robbery on March 17, 1978. THE AGE ARCHIVES

The Manchester Unity building was the first in Victoria to include an escalator (that became a tourist attraction), the first with air-conditioning and the first with a high-speed lift.

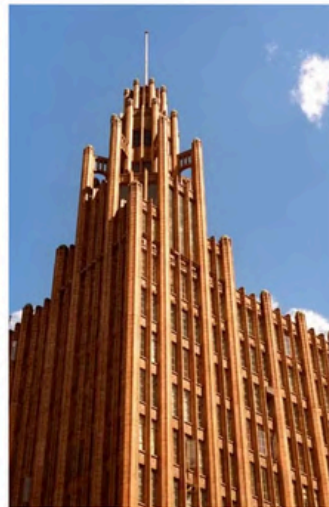
It had a rooftop garden with relaxing ponds, and in the basement was a South Pacific-themed restaurant complete with palms and live crocodiles in tanks.

But when a dairy farmer-turned-policeman walked the short distance from the Elizabeth Street office of Victoria Police’s traffic and patrol group to the Manchester Unity Building, his mind was not on history or architecture. He had more pressing duties.

The self-confessed “green-as-grass” cop was assigned to direct traffic at the intersection of Collins and Swanston streets, in the shadows of the building and opposite Melbourne Town Hall.

Wearing white gloves and the summer-issue pith helmet — and without a gun or even a radio — he was about to step out into the intersection for what he expected would be a routine shift.

It was March 17, 1978 – St Patrick’s Day – and what he didn’t know was that eight storeys above, three jewellers were lying dead in a triple murder case that remains unsolved.



The Depression-era Manchester Unity Building. MARIO BORG

---

Peter Kemp was brought up on the family’s Katunga dairy farm and joined the police force almost on a whim. “I dropped in at the police station at Numurkah and grabbed an application form. That was late in 1976.”

His mission was not to right wrongs or solve complex cases. He was about to marry and wanted a secure wage. On the farm, he was earning \$90 a week, at a horticultural research centre it was \$120, but in the police force it would be \$240.

He passed the entrance exam. “They told me to go out and buy a spelling book.” It wasn’t his strong suit.



Dairy farmer turned cop, Peter Kemp.

In February 1977, he was given five days’ notice to turn up at the police academy for the five-month training course, and at 23 was the oldest of his squad.

On graduation, all but one of his squad (the odd one out had relatives in the force who pulled some strings) were sent to traffic and patrol, which is why on that hot March afternoon, he found himself outside the Manchester Unity Building.



“I was standing by the curb when a man came running down the street yelling for me to come with him because [his friends had been killed](#). I didn’t want to leave my post, but he almost dragged me with him.”

Kemp was supposed to take the police radio from the cop he was relieving on point-duty, but he had wandered off without handing it over, which meant the young constable couldn’t call for back-up.

Hidden behind a locked, opaque-glass door, in the small, two-room office next to a solicitor’s room, were the bodies of jewellery manufacturer Paul Pace and jewel dealers Robert Wartman and Keith Hyman.

Hyman and Pace were putting together a deal involving eight cut diamonds valued at \$31,000 for a mystery buyer who was supposed to arrive with the money. Wartman had just wandered in to buy a pair of inexpensive earrings and was shot because he could have been a witness.

They were forced to lie face down with their arms outstretched in the surrender pose before being shot in the back of head – execution style.

Kemp and the unknown tenant who had virtually dragged him to the eighth floor peeked through the slit-style letterbox and could see no activity.



Police image of the crime scene.

“I wasn’t really sure what to do, and it was the citizen who grabbed my pith helmet off my head and started smashing the glass in the door. I took over and smashed it in, then climbed in,” says Kemp.

“I remembered the lessons from the academy to preserve the crime scene.” (It was later described as perfectly preserved.) “There were two males face down who looked like they had been shot in the back of the head.”

In the next room, he saw blood splatter on the wall and the third body. “I didn’t need to try and check a pulse. I had been around farms long enough to know they were dead.”



Police at Melbourne's Manchester Unity building in 1978, where robbers killed three jewellers. THE AGE

He went to another office to ring his bosses, who first thought it was a practical joke. A crime car was sent to confirm the discovery.

The keen but raw Kemp was determined to preserve the scene, so much so that he refused entry to a senior homicide investigator until he proved his identity. Kemp was told: "Sit over there and write down what had happened."

Eventually, he walked back to his office, deposited his kit and took the train home. No debriefing, no stress counselling and not even a pat on the back. On the train, "I had time to start thinking, and I started to feel a bit wobbly."

Walking home from the station, delayed shock hit him. "I froze in the middle of the street and grabbed hold of a traffic pole." It took minutes for him to compose himself to continue walking home.

---

***"I had been around farms long enough to know they were dead."***

Peter Kemp

The next day, a boss took him aside and said, "you did good". But then it was back to directing traffic. Kemp remembers the inquest and seeing the devastated families. "It was so sad. It's never left me."



I had been a cadet reporter for 40 days when the news of the Manchester Unity triple murder broke, and I was ordered to get there fast. I ran the four city blocks gasping like a goldfish not from fatigue but panic – and was unable to find out the most basic information until I was relieved by crime reporters who knew what they were doing.

The murders remain unsolved with the main suspect, Alex Tsakmakis, to become a homicide victim much later. In January 1978, about seven weeks before Manchester Unity, he bound professional runner Bruce Lindsay Walker with ropes, chains and chicken wire before tossing him over the side of a cabin cruiser.

Walker was alive when he went under and his body was found washed up at Point Lonsdale. Police believe he was killed over a minor dispute involving a payment for a 1935 Plymouth.

While on bail for murder, Tsakmakis robbed a Hawthorn Tattsлото agency on June 29, 1979, desperate for money to pay legal fees for his upcoming murder trial. He forced Ivy and George Kartsounis to lie on the floor, shooting Kartsounis twice in the head and his wife three times. Against all odds, they survived.



Alex Tsakmakis, the chief suspect in the 1978 Manchester Unity murders.

The way they were placed on the ground and shot was identical to the Manchester Unity crime scene.

In 1984, Tsakmakis murdered jail rival Barry Robert Quinn by pouring industrial glue over him then setting him on fire. Four years later, Tsakmakis was killed after being bashed with a pillow slip filled with jail weights.

Kemp soon left Melbourne to spend nearly 20 years working in country stations in the Shepparton district, enjoying the work but not the pettiness of some administrators.

As a country patrol cop, his cases rarely made headlines, but they left a mark on him. The fatal car accidents on lonely roads and the suicides. “One used a shotgun in front of wife and children. He was still breathing though he could never have survived. The ambo turned off his lights and sirens, so he was gone by the time they got to hospital.”

At the crash scenes, police used a private photographer to take pictures for the inquest brief. Kemp said the difference was the photographer

At the crash scenes, police used a private photographer to take pictures for the inquest brief. Kemp said the difference was the photographer had attended every fatal crash while police shared the load. “He was a lovely fellow. He said he was OK with it, but it hit him hard later on.”

For Kemp, the pull of the land never left him and he and his wife, Aileen, bought an orchard filled with pear, peach and apricot trees. He thought he could balance being a cop and an orchardist. He was wrong. One day after being “jacked up” by a local violent offender, he came home to tell Aileen: “I’m done. It’s time for me to go.”

She says: “He said it was the closest he had come to drawing his gun and he had not joined to shoot someone.”

Kemp finished on February 14, 1996 – serving exactly 19 years.

If he thought he had escaped policing unscathed, he soon found he took mental baggage with him into retirement. It was only the peace of the farm (he would buy a second) that eventually healed him.

“It took me two years to debrief,” he says. The petrol fumes from the farm machinery would take him back to fatal accident scenes.

“I could smell the blood.”