

[Transcript] Casefile True Crime / 285: Case 242: The Investor Murders

During the winter of 1993, the Melbourne suburb of Frankston was terrorised by a vicious serial killer named Paul Dania. Three decades later, Dania has applied for parole. To coincide with Dania's bid for parole, case file presents is launching a long-form series about the case as a reminder that Dania must never be released. Researched written and hosted by award-winning crime writer Vicky Betraydis, the Frankston Murders podcast uncovers new material and new victims stalked by Dania in the lead-up to the killings. All 11 episodes of the Frankston Murders are available to listen to right now. Be sure to follow the Frankston Murders wherever you get your podcasts. Stay tuned until the end of today's episode to hear the trailer, and be sure to follow the Frankston Murders wherever you get your podcasts. Our episodes deal with serious and often distressing incidents. If you feel at any time you need support, please contact your local Crisis Centre. For suggested phone numbers for confidential support, please see the show notes for this episode on your app or on our website. Today's episode involves crimes against children and won't be suitable for all listeners. On the night of Sunday, September 5, 1982, the crew aboard a fishing vessel called the Decade threw a party. They were celebrating the coming end of the fishing season, while they drank inside their boat a storm raged across the southern Alaskan coast outside. At around six the following morning, a hungover crew member stuck it out to the deck to be sick over the side. The sun was breaking over the misty horizon as rain drizzled across the cold blue waters of the Pacific. The crew member took in his surroundings and caught sight of something. Another fishing vessel, a 58-foot purse sena dubbed to the investor, was slowly drifting out to sea. Barely visible in the gloomy weather was the investor's pilot house where its navigation equipment was held. At the helm was a man. He looked to be in his 20s and was of average height with a stocky build. He was wearing a baseball cap, though some of his light-coloured hair was visible. The final phase of the salmon season was being reopened by Alaska's Department of Fish and Game that day. It seemed the investor was getting a head start. The man behind the wheel was assumed to be the investor's captain, 28-year-old Mark Colterst. The decade crew member waved to him. The man raised a single hand in response as he steered the investor silently away. Throughout mid to late 1982, dozens of fishing trawlers were docked in the remote Alaskan village of Craig. Located on Prince of Wales Island in the southern part of the state, Craig faces outwards to the Gulf of Alaska, with several other smaller, largely deserted islands inside. The local community of just 600 people relied on its strong fishing industry, supported by the abundance of halibut and salmon in the surrounding waters. Craig was a stopping point for fishing vessels as they journeyed between Alaska and the continental United States. Boats docked at the village overnight, then set sail shortly before first light in search of a fishery, areas of sea where fish are caught in large quantities. Captains and their crews were known to anchor at a fishery for several days before returning to Craig to sell their catch. The fish were then sent to the island's cold storage plant and cannery. The investor was one of the more impressive boats docked in Craig. The state-of-the-art red and grey fiberglass scenery was the largest size of boat permitted to fish in Alaskan waters. Valued at around one and a half million dollars, the vessel was comfortable to live in and decked out with the latest fishing gear. The investor was just one year old when its current captain, Mark Colterst, boarded. Mark was a naturally gifted fisherman from the state of Washington.

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He had taken up fishing in his teens, starting out with a wooden skiff he used to net herring for profit. He then upgraded to an old rusted trawler. During a week-long expedition in 1979, Mark hauled in an impressive \$105,000 worth of fish. Eventually, he bought the boat of his dreams, the investor. In a feature article for Pacific Fisherman Magazine, Mark explained that he had named the investor after the money he was certain it would make. He hoped it would facilitate his plans to retire at the age of 50.

In 1982, Mark arrived in Craig on Sunday, September 5, after two weeks at sea. It was a rare stop. He didn't usually visit the island village. It was also the first time he'd been there in his new boat. A broom was attached to the investor's mast, a message to other vessels that it had so far caught 100,000 pounds of salmon. Because there weren't enough mortgage spots on Craig's dock to accommodate so many boats, the investor was tethered to the decade, which was tied to another boat called the Defiant.

In the early hours of Monday, September 6, the investor was on the move.

Aside from the hungover crew member aboard the decade, a number of other fishermen noticed the investor quietly slipping away. Mike Colterst had left the investor's tie lines, the heavy braided rope that had connected it to the decade, and the boat was tethered to the decade, on the other boat's deck. Tie lines cost over \$100. They were not the type of thing fishermen discarded lightly. At around 7.30am, it stopped at Fishag Island, a small landmass about a mile away. Then a heavy fog rolled in, obscuring the investor from sight.

The fog hung low across the harbour for the rest of the day. It finally cleared by the following morning of Tuesday, September 7, revealing that the investor hadn't moved from its spot alongside Fishag Island. Just after 4pm that day, fishermen Bruce Anderson noticed thick black smoke by Fishag Island. He wondered whether it was engine exhaust from a vessel that had just started its motor. The smoke remained heavy and didn't dissipate.

Bruce grew concerned and grabbed a pair of binoculars. He recognised the investor.

It was engulfed in flames. Bruce and his wife Jan Kittleson raced towards the fire in their own boat. As they drew closer, they saw a smaller boat speeding towards them from the investor's direction. It was a 20ft red and grey fibreglass skiff, a craft used to manoeuvre a purse seen as fishing net into place before the net is pulled on board. Bruce and Jan identified the skiff as belonging to the investor, as it was made of the same fibreglass and painted to match the larger vessel. But they didn't recognise the lone man in it.

He had tanned skin and slightly long hair, partially obscured by a baseball cap.

Bruce thought he had a California surfer look about him.

Jan waved for the man to stop, but he seemed determined to avoid them.

Bruce cut the skiff off, forcing the man to stop about 15ft away.

Are there people on the boat? Jan shouted. The man didn't reply.

Jan repeated herself several times. Wide-eyed, the man finally said,

Yes, there are people on the boat. He then sped off at full throttle towards Craig.

Sue Domaniowski and her boyfriend Paul Page were watching the chaos unfolding from the docks in Craig. It seemed like every boat in town was moving towards the fire, except one.

A man in a red and grey fibreglass skiff was heading to shore. He looked about 20 or 21 years old and roughly 150lbs. He had brown or blonde hair and was wearing a baseball cap with a logo on it.

What was striking was how unbothered the man looked, as if nothing out of the ordinary was

happening. He was driving at such rapid speed, he caused waves that flooded the engine of a passing rescue party. The man landed the skiff with a crash, hitting its bow into the dock that Sue Domaniowski was standing on. She felt its shake beneath her feet. The young man leapt from the skiff and hurriedly tied it to the dock. His face was pale, but his cheeks appeared slightly flushed. He carried what looked like a shoebox under one arm.

Sue and her boyfriend Paul asked if the man had come from the boat that was burning. No, he replied, before explaining that he was in a hurry. He fidgeted awkwardly and kept his gaze downcast. Sue then asked if there was anyone on the burning boat. It was hard to get a clear answer. The man spoke slowly, as though in shock. He reiterated that he had to go, yet he just remained standing there. He offered the couple use of his skiff, before saying that he had to go call the Coast Guard. No one's called the Coast Guard yet? Sue cried out in surprise. The man walked away without a reply.

The fire was fierce, producing waves of heat so intense it was impossible to move in to stop it. It consumed the investor's wheelhouse and spread along the back deck. A smaller, more nimble vessel circled closer to the investor to see if anyone was on board. Nothing was visible, aside from a few unidentifiable objects bobbing in the water. With no way to get close enough to douse the flames, onlookers watched helplessly. At 4.20pm, Alaska State Trooper Bob Anderson was alerted to the situation. He took his personal boat to Fishag Island, where a small fleet surrounded the investor from a safe distance. By now, the investor's entire cabin, galley, bridge and scene net were ablaze. The speed and viciousness of the fire left Trooper Anderson in no doubt. It had been deliberately lit.

Trooper Anderson rushed back to Craig to locate the investor's captain. He was informed that Mark Colterst hadn't been fishing alone that season. He was joined by four decans, 18-year-old Chris Heyman and Mike Stewart, Dean Moon and Jerome Cowan, who were all 19. Also travelling aboard the investor were Mark's wife Irene and their two children, five-year-old Kimberly and four-year-old John. Irene was three months pregnant. Trooper Anderson got to work tracking down everyone who had been on the investor. The last time the Coltersts and their crew had been seen was two days earlier, on Sunday, September 5.

That afternoon, Mark and his decans returned to Craig to offload Salmon Date Court. Payment wouldn't come through until the following day. Faced with some spare time, Mark gave his crew the night off. Dean Moon and Jerome Cowan headed into town. Chris Heyman and Mike Stewart weren't seen with them. It was presumed they remained behind on the investor. Mark Colterst opted to spend the night with his wife and children. It was the family's last chance to be together for a while. Irene, Kimberly and John were flying back to Washington the next day to prepare for Kimberly's starting school. September 5 also happened to be Mark's 28th birthday. The Coltersts had a celebratory dinner at a local restaurant before returning to the investor just before 10 o'clock. They were witnessed clamouring over the two boats the investor was tethered to, passing a party in full swing along the way. No one from

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the investor was sighted after that night. At 8pm, State Trooper Bob Anderson received a call that the fire had been extinguished. The once gleaming investor was now a charred and melted wreck.

Trooper Anderson boarded the ruined boat. It was slick from water and leaning slightly to the right, making it difficult to walk on. Where the galley door had once stood was what appeared to be the badly burnt carcass of an animal, perhaps a dog lying on its side with its legs sticking out. On closer inspection, Trooper Anderson realised the corpse was actually human.

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Dental records confirmed the body belonged to 19-year-old Deckhand Mike Stewart.

He was also Captain Mark Colthurst's cousin. Mike's remains were too destroyed to determine a cause of death. A second body was soon discovered beneath a section of melted fiberglass where the investor's stateroom had been. This one was tiny. It was five-year-old Kimberley, the oldest of the two Colthurst children. While Kimberley's body was also too damaged to determine a cause of death, there was evidence that she might have been bludgeoned.

Another two bodies were found under a separate layer of fiberglass. One was on top of the other. The body on top was Mark Colthurst. Under him was Irene Colthurst.

It appeared Mark had died while protecting his pregnant wife. Both had been shot multiple times, including at least once in the head. As Mark, Irene, Kimberley and Mike's remains were being collected, the fire broke out again. The first responders were forced to disembark as firefighting efforts resumed. It took until the following night of Wednesday,

September 8 to put the fire out for good. What remained of the investor was towed to shore.

A device that detects accelerants uncovered traces of pure white gasoline on the wreckage.

White gasoline is primarily used in camp stoves and lanterns. Its presence on the investor confirmed that the fire was the result of arson. A burnt Ruger Mini-14 semi-automatic rifle was also recovered in the wreckage. This was an unexpected find. Mark and Irene Colthurst had been executed with a .22 caliber firearm, its specifics unknown. This meant the murder weapon was still missing.

Between 5 and 7 pounds of bone fragments were found where the deck hands slept.

A partial jaw bone belonged to 19-year-old Jerome Cowan. The remaining bones couldn't be identified.

It was possible they belonged to one or both of the remaining deck hands, 19-year-old Dean Moon and 18-year-old Chris Heyman. No trace of the Colthurst's youngest child, four-year-old John Colthurst was found. Investigators considered the possibility that he'd been taken from the vessel, but it seemed more likely that his body had been entirely lost to the fire. The fact that the blaze had melted the fiberglass vessel was indicative of its extremely high temperature. John was known to sleep on a daybed in the wheelhouse where the fire might have been lit. Investigators suspected that all the victims were shot and killed beforehand. Kimberley and the deck hands were killed in their beds with the exception of Jerome Cowan.

The location of his remains suggested he'd been by the galley door when he died, as though heading out to the deck. Perhaps he'd been trying to escape.

No one aboard the Investor was seen after the evening of Sunday, September 5, meaning they were likely killed that night. In order to reach the Investor, the killer had to walk across two other boats, the Decade and the Defiant.

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It was possible they hadn't been noticed due to the raucous parties taking place on both vessels. The gunshots could have been drowned out by the noise. The Investor was witness to drifting away at dawn the next day with an unidentified man behind the steering wheel. He was using the vessel's far quieter auxiliary motor, likely to avoid attention. Upon reaching Fishag Island, it was believed the killer tried to sink the Investor by opening the engine rooms of valves. Dense fog concealed the vessel for the remainder of the day. When it cleared, the killer would have seen the Investor was still afloat. Mark Colthurst was so safety-conscious he had filled the hull of the Investor with flotation material. Realizing his initial plan had failed, the killer returned to the boat and set it ablaze. Craig was reeling in the wake of such a violent crime. Rumours spread, with many claiming to know who was responsible. Mark didn't store cash on his boat, ruling out the likelihood it was a robbery gone wrong. Some believed it was the work of Alaska native fishermen furious about the large-scale fishing by outsiders. Others theorized that a float plane had flown the killers away from the scene under the cover of night. It was also speculated that four-year-old John Colthurst, whose body was never found, had been kidnapped. John was a friendly child who stopped in on other boats to say hello during his family's brief time in Craig. He'd often tell people that he wanted to be a fisherman like his dad, had the chatty and independent John fallen victim to a predator. One day, state troopers received a call from a man asking for information. He wanted addresses for relatives of missing Investor crew member Chris Heyman and little John Colthurst. The man knew detailed information about the Investor crime scene, including where some of the bodies were found. He then dropped a bombshell. Chris Heyman and John Colthurst were alive. He had helped them escape and driven them back to Washington. This call was traced to Goshen, a town in the Midwest state of Indiana. The phone number led to a man who identified himself as T. Rex Mullins. When asked what the T stood for, the man replied, Tyrannosaurus. T. Rex was questioned for two hours. Initially, his story about Chris Heyman and John Colthurst's survival seemed credible. Then he described the route he'd driven the pair through Alaska. It was completely at odds with the state's geography. Troopers charged T. Rex with filing a false report. He said that if the police wanted further evidence, they should check beneath the sofa cushion in his house. They did and discovered a sensationalist true crime magazine. It featured an article titled Mystery of the Sailing Skeletons that contained lots of details about the Investor murders. Law enforcement hadn't realized that this information had somehow been made available to the media. One of the more popular rumors about the case was that Mark Colthurst had been smuggling cocaine. Interviews with Mark's family and colleagues convinced investigators that there was no truth to this rumor. Mark wasn't the type to get involved in illegal activity. Moreover, there was no way he would risk the lives of his wife and children by bringing them on a drug trafficking operation. Being from out of state, the Colthurst's and their crew knew few locals in Craig. Yet the brutality and concealment of their murders indicated the crime was committed by someone with a personal grievance. Irene Colthurst was described as loving,

caring and thoughtful. She helped run Mark's boats with skill while fostering her creative side by making her own clothes and jewellery. Mike Stewart and Jerome Cowan were exceptional university students. Both had taken up fishing in the break between semesters. Chris Heyman had only just finished high school. Dean Moon had been a star footballer in his own school days and was now finding great success in the fishing industry. It seemed unlikely that any of them had been the killer's prime target. This left Mark Colthurst. Unlike the others, he had been shot execution style several times as though the killer harbored deep resentment for him. When speaking of Mark, few had a harsh word to say about him. He was the type of guy others jumped at the opportunity to work with. Mark typically hired young people as he wanted them to make money to continue their education. He was aware that he could catch more with an older, more experienced crew, but Mark didn't care. Though Mark had a good reputation as a hard worker, some found him arrogant and argumentative at times. He had spoken to extended family on the phone hours before his murder, who wished him a happy birthday. As far as they were aware, there were no issues aboard the investor. Mark also hadn't mentioned hiring any new crew. It was clear that the killer was very experienced with boats, particularly with purse senors like the investor. The obvious suspects were the two decans whose remains hadn't been found. 18-year-old Chris Heyman was from California. His father owned a marina. Mark Coldhurst had met Chris's dad during a fishing expedition, and offered Chris a decant position on the investor. It was Chris's first-ever fishing job. He was the only person on board who wasn't from Washington. He didn't really have ties to anyone else in the group. 19-year-old Dean Moon had spent the past three fishing seasons working with Mark Coldhurst. He was a good employee, having received a promotion and 2% pay rise weeks earlier. But Dean also liked to party. When a previous investor decanned quit, Dean asked his friend Jerome Cowan to join them. The two friends were seen in Craig hours before the murders, and reportedly bought cannabis there. Did this solicit purchase have something to do with the murders? Perhaps Dean was confronted by Mark over the drugs, or some other conflict flared up between them. Apparently, Dean Moon owned a gun that he carried on the investor. Investigators considered whether the young man witnessed driving the investor's skiff to shore during the blaze was Chris Heyman or Dean Moon. He was described as being in his early 20s, about 5 feet 10 inches tall with a medium build, and with blonde or light brown hair that fell below his ears. This loosely matched both Chris and Dean's appearances. Some said the man looked like he had acne, others remembered him wearing black-framed glasses. He was also wearing a baseball cap, rubber boots, and either a hooded sweatshirt or fishing jacket. The skiff was seen tied up in Craig on Monday morning, the day before the fire. This was further proof that the murders were committed on Sunday night, and the fire was a backup plan after an attempt to sink the investor failed. Fisherman said they'd noticed the skiff next to the investor at Fishag Island before the blaze broke out. This hadn't seemed unusual as skiffs were often tied to fishing vessels. The skiff itself was still tied to the docks when investigators went to examine it. By then, it had been there for three days. Rain had washed it and it had been moved a couple of times by fishermen needing to maneuver around it. Found inside the skiff was a plastic nozzle from a red jerrycan, a flat-sided metal container used for transporting liquids,

typically water or gasoline. This discovery appeared significant when linked to an encounter reported by a local gas station owner named Jim Robinson.

He recalled a short, stocky young man wearing a baseball cap had come into his store carrying a two-and-a-half gallon jerrycan. The man explained that he needed some gasoline.

Jim told him to go ahead and pump it himself. The man seemed nervous and hyperactive as though in a hurry to leave. He then left on foot and didn't appear to have a car.

The investor arsonist would have had to have sourced their own gasoline

as Mark Colthurst didn't stock his own. He was considered a real stickler about fire danger.

Mark allowed diesel on his boat as it was necessary, but he didn't permit any other type of gasoline, alcohol or propane. He was so cautious he was even reluctant about having

cigarette lighters on board. The only way out of Craig was by boat or plane. So,

if the skiff driver had skipped town, he must have flown or sailed away.

Air traffic was temporarily grounded in Craig, but the sea presented a greater challenge.

There had been up to 200 boats docked in town. Tracking down potential witnesses and

suspects was an enormous and difficult task. Investigators travelled all across America

in pursuit of leads. After an extensive search, it became clear. The skiff driver had successfully

eluded them. As the first anniversary of the murders approached, the investigative team

met in Craig to go over what they knew. They kept coming back to the investor's missing

deckhands. Chris Heyman had called home hours before he was killed. He spoke enthusiastically about the trip, telling his mum, it's hard work, but I'm having a really good time.

Chris was ultimately crossed off the suspect list. He didn't have the personal connection to Mark Colthurst that likely motivated the crime. Then there was Dean Moon.

He was an experienced fisherman who'd been promoted to the role of skiff man a week or so before the attack, so he definitely knew how to operate the investor's skiff. Plus, investigators

had received a tip-off that Dean was a heavy drug user who also trafficked. The informant

claimed Dean had made frequent drug runs between California and Vancouver. This person also said Dean stole half an acre of cannabis plants and ripped someone else off for \$20,000 to \$30,000

in cocaine money. A fisherman who'd known Dean Moon came forward to say he'd seen the missing man in early 1983, months after the murders. The fisherman had been at a restaurant in San

Francisco

when Dean Moon walked by the window. The fisherman had previously worked with Dean and was certain

he was looking at the same person. Investigators went to San Francisco and headed to Fisherman's

Wharf, the area where Dean was allegedly sighted. When shown a photograph of Dean,

one person thought they'd recognized him. They said he worked in the nearby coastal city of Monterey.

Investigators followed up with Monterey's Fisherman's Association. It was a dead end.

Further investigations undermined the informant who'd claimed Dean was a drug trafficker.

He had said they went to school together, but he was actually almost seven years older than Dean.

They hadn't been students at the same time. It seemed highly unlikely that 19-year-old

Dean could have survived on the run for almost a year without reaching out to anyone he knew.

It was also widely reported that Dean had idolized Mark Coldhurst, who he saw as a father figure.

Mark, in turn, treated Dean like a son.

Dean Moon was ultimately crossed off the suspect list. Investigators were certain that he,

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Chris Heyman and John Coldhurst, all died on the investor. They were all officially declared deceased.

When discussing their case notes, investigators mulled over another lead they'd picked up on in the early days of the investigation. In the immediate aftermath of the investor blaze, state troopers had walked around Craig on the lookout for anyone who fit the skiff driver's description. They were helped by a local named Jerry Mackie. He was Craig's Village Safety Patrol Officer, a uniformed first responder role created for rural Alaskan communities. As detailed by author Leland Hale, Jerry went to check the local bar as it was a popular hangout spot for fishermen. There were around 10 to 15 people inside drinking. Jerry looked around the room, taking in every face. Most of the patrons returned his gaze, but one man quickly looked away. He continued to sneak looks at Jerry and appeared uneasy. Jerry noted that this man looked to be around the same age, height and appearance as the skiff driver. Jerry informed the troopers patrolling the area. One fetched Bruce Anderson and Jan Kittleson, the married couple who had first sighted the skiff driver and got the best look at him. The couple were asked to go into the bar one at a time to see if they could identify him. Bruce went in first. He stopped near the entrance, but didn't see anyone familiar. Jan took a little longer walking around to see people up close. She didn't recognise the skiff driver either.

Despite this, State Trooper Captain Mike Kolovoski was struck by how certain Jerry Mackie had been. He asked Jerry to point out the suspicious man. He was sitting by windows that overlooked the street outside. He had longish, dirty blonde hair and was around 5'10". He certainly had that California surfer look about him.

Captain Kolovoski noticed that the man kept looking over at them. When approached, he identified himself as John Peale. He provided a driver's license from the state of Washington. Peale revealed that he'd been friends with the victims of the investor murders.

He had previously worked for Mark Colthurst on another boat and had once dated Mark's sister. At the time of the murders, Peale had been stationed on the Libby 8, a vessel tied up behind the investor. He claimed to have been asleep by 6 o'clock in the Libby 8's crew quarters on the night of the killings. The reason he'd gone to bed so early was because he was stoned. While most who knew John Peale considered him to be a good guy, some described him as untrustworthy. He had a temper and would get a wild look in his eyes sometimes. While working for Mark Colthurst, Peale passed out from inebriation.

As a joke, other deckhands tied his hands and legs to a table. When Peale regained consciousness, he started yelling. Dean Moon went to help him as Peale threatened to kick his ass.

Peale drew Mark Colthurst's ire by smoking cannabis and drinking beer while on duty.

But the final straw was when Peale turned up two hours late one day. Mark fired him.

John Peale maintained that there had been no bad blood between him and Mark. In fact, the Colthurst had bought Peale and his wife a wedding present after his dismissal.

Yet Peale was known to angrily complain about Mark behind his back.

In July 1982, Peale bumped into Mark in the Alaskan city of Ketchikan.

Mark was there with his family and crew on his new boat. Peale asked if he could hitch a ride with them to Craig where he was hoping to find work. Mark told Peale they weren't headed that way,

so Peale pawned his watch to catch a ferry to Craig instead. Once there, he was hired to work

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on the Libyate. Two months later, the investor arrived in Craig.

On the night of Sunday, September 5, 1982, Peale and a fellow Libyate crew member named Brian Polinkus went into Craig. According to Brian, they soon came across investor Deccan's Dean Moon and Jerome Cowan. Peale was said to have sold the young man \$400 worth of cannabis, though he denied this. Peale and Brian then returned to the Libyate for dinner.

Afterward, they headed back out. While in town, Brian looked away for a moment.

When he turned back, John Peale was gone. Brian returned to the Libyate at around midnight. Peale's bed was empty.

John Peale later told Brian that he'd been at his girlfriend's house on the night of the murders. Although Peale had a wife in Washington, he'd been seeing a young woman in Craig.

Peale's story to Brian Polinkus was at odds with what he'd told investigators, that he was asleep on the Libyate from 6pm onwards.

Investigators followed up with Peale's girlfriend.

She said she'd ended things with him months earlier after finding out he was married.

Another Libyate crew member named Dawn Holmstrom was good friends with John Peale. She hadn't seen him on the boat on Sunday night, or Monday either.

But late on Tuesday, she bumped into him in Craig. Peale was wearing blue jeans, a flannel shirt, and blue baseball cap with a cannabis leaf on it that he almost always wore.

The following day, after news of the investor murders had broken, Dawn saw John Peale again. He seemed fine, but expressed disbelief that someone could have killed his friends.

Then Peale suddenly said he was scared and started to cry.

I can't believe I could have done that, Peale said. It all happened so fast.

That same day, John Peale flew home to Washington, though he initially told police he'd left on September 9. According to him, the reason for his sudden departure was that he was going on vacation.

First, Peale had to catch a six-seater plane to Ketchikan. It was the last flight that left the island before all air traffic was grounded. Peale spent the flight from Ketchikan to Washington drinking and smoking cannabis. Another passenger felt that Peale couldn't wait to get home. He drank so much that he passed out in the bathroom and had to be carried off the plane. Despite having not been ID'd as the skiff driver, John Peale maintained a lingering presence in the investor murders case. At one stage, Mark Colthurst's mother phoned investigators to let them know she thought the composite sketch of the suspect resembled Peale. Then, investigators received a letter from a man who'd been visiting Craig at the time of the fire. Joe Weiss had gone to Alaska to fish the previous year.

On the evening of Sunday, September 5, he'd been at Craig's laundromat.

He spotted some young men smoking cannabis. Joe would later come to realise that these men were Dean Moon and Jerome Cowan. At 10 o'clock the next morning, one day before the fire, Joe saw a lone man pull up at the dock in what looked like the investor's skiff.

He thought nothing of this sighting at the time.

A year later, Joe Weiss came across an article about the murders.

It featured a composite image of the skiff driver sought by investigators.

It looked like the same man Joe had seen in the investor's skiff the morning after the murders.

Joe contacted the authorities and was presented with a photographic lineup of six different men.

He was asked who looked most like the skiff driver he'd seen.

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Almost immediately, Joe replied, if I had to pick a most like, I think number three.

The man Joe identified was John Peel.

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Investigators orchestrated for Joe Weiss to go to Washington to ID John Peel in person.

They casually escorted Joe to the harbor where Peel was in a small boat with a friend.

Joe agreed that Peel looked like the man he'd seen in the investor's skiff.

State troopers planted stories in the local media reminding people about the crime and hinting that they were closing in on a suspect. Then, they made arrangements to question John Peel.

Newspaper clippings about the case were laid out on a table in the interview room.

Peel was left alone to take in the site before two troopers joined him.

They informed Peel that an eyewitness had identified him as the missing skiff driver in the investor murders case.

Oh, you think you got your man, right? Peel asked sarcastically.

He asked what they thought his motive was. It was laid out to him clearly.

As a boss, Mark Colthurst could be hard to please and had a reputation for being difficult.

Peel had been vocal in his anger about being fired by Mark.

Then, when Mark arrived in Craig after refusing to give Peel a lift there, Peel's feelings intensified.

On the night of the murders, he headed over to the investor to make a mens and wish Mark a happy birthday, but Mark was out with his family.

Peel stayed on the boat and drank with Dean Moon and Jerome Cowan,

whom he knew and was friendly with. By the time the Colthursts returned shortly before 10pm, Peel was drunk. Mark ordered him to leave. Peel then flew into a rage

and pulled out a gun. It hadn't been his intention to kill anyone, but things spun out of control.

Peel listened to the theory before replying. I think you're nuts, man.

He repeatedly professed his innocence and agreed to take a polygraph test.

The results indicated that Peel was being deceptive.

Still, he was released from custody.

Investigators felt they had gotten what they needed. A confession.

Written transcripts of the interview revealed that Peel had seemingly slipped up.

When told he had to make up his mind about what to do next, Peel replied,

I'm scared, man. I can't believe the things I did in there.

The case finally had some momentum. All the people who had seen the skiff driver were shown photographic lineups. They all picked out Peel's image.

This included married couple Bruce Anderson and Dejan Kittleson.

The pair had missed Peel when he'd been sitting in the bar

in the days after the murder, but successfully pointed him out in the lineup.

Out of all the witnesses, only one caught a glimpse of anyone suspicious

on the investor the night of the killings. Larry Demet Jr. was the skipper for the Libby 8, the fishing vessel John Peel worked on that was positioned next to the investor.

Between 10 and 11pm, Larry sighted a person climbing aboard the investor.

In Larry's words, the stranger looked like a dirty old fisherman.

Larry woke at around 2am upon hearing something strange.

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As detailed in author Leland Hale's book What Happened in Craig, Larry didn't say what that something was. All he told investigators at the time was, I felt evil. I felt evil in the air.

After speaking with police, Larry drank alcohol where previously he'd abstained. He'd also started taking Valium and carrying a gun. He said he needed it to feel safe. Investigators tried to coax more from Larry. Eventually, he admitted that the real reason he'd woken at 2 on the night of the murders was because he'd heard what sounded like 6-8 gunshots,

followed by a woman's scream. Larry had peered out of a porthole, but saw nothing.

After a few minutes, he got up and opened the door to his cabin.

Looking outside, he noticed a man walking across some neighbouring boats.

He was wearing a plaid shirt and a blue cap with a cannabis leaf on it.

In his right hand was a rifle. It was John Peel.

Larry Demert Jr. was one of many eyewitnesses that implicated John Peel during his murder trial in January 1986. With no physical evidence, the entire case rested on the testimony of the 150 or so people who took the stand. In the words of a memory expert testifying on behalf of the defense, the problem was that human memories are not perfect recordings of past events. They can change and be manipulated over time.

The eyewitnesses had not identified John Peel with as much certainty as had been presented.

The majority said Peel looked the most like the skiff driver out of all the images in the photographic lineups. Yet none were 100% sure. Some said Peel looked a bit older than the person they'd seen. Others said his hair was a different shade. One lineup included 29 images. Eight were of John Peel. Some were posed, others were candid. A few had been taken from behind a two-way mirror during a police interview. The other photos included missing and declared dead victims Dean Moon and Chris Heyman as well as some men who looked like Peel but had no connection

to the case. John Peel was the only person in the photographs who was wearing a baseball cap as the skiff driver had been. Under cross-examination a number of the prosecution's witnesses admitted that they weren't certain Peel was the skiff driver at all. Other witness accounts were weakened entirely. Peel's lawyer also introduced a witness who had seen the skiff driver that hadn't been caught upon by the prosecution. This witness said the man had been quote a stocky native. Witness Jim Robinson was zeroed in on by the defense. He was the local gas station owner who sold a jerry can of gasoline to a man believed to be the skiff driver shortly before the fire. Jim had been shown the photographic lineups but was never able to identify anyone in them as the customer he'd served. He changed his mind after seeing John Peel in person at a court hearing.

He now claimed that Peel bought the gasoline.

It turned out that Jim Robinson was actually a wanted fugitive named Kenneth Robertson.

In 1981, a year before the investor fire, Robertson escaped Arizona where he was serving a criminal sentence. Peel's lawyer wanted to question Robertson about his past conviction on the stand saying it was relevant to the case but the judge disagreed. Therefore, the jury wasn't informed that Robertson had been previously found guilty of arson.

He'd set a car on fire that belonged to his ex-wife's boyfriend. He'd also threatened to kill an ex and her family with explosives and a sawn-off shotgun. After fleeing Arizona,

Robertson managed to live incognito in Craig for a number of years. The jury deliberated for six days but were unable to reach a verdict. Most were in favor of acquitting John Peel, though a few wanted to convict. Realizing they were hopelessly deadlocked, the judge declared a mistrial. There were several key elements of the case that raised serious concerns. Two witnesses, who had been John Peel's crewmates on the Libby 8, alleged that investigators had coerced statements from them. One was Dawn Holmstrom, who had spoken with Peel the day after the fire. He had started crying, questioning how someone, quote, could do that to his friends. This part of Dawn's story had changed by the murder trial. She claimed that Peel had actually said, I can't believe I could have done that. Dawn claimed that investigators had threatened and sworn at her until she changed her statement. Her colleague Brian Polinkus made similar allegations about the aggressive nature of the questioning. Then there was the matter of Peel's alleged confession to police. According to the transcript of his police interview, Peel had said, I can't believe the things I did in there. When the defense team listened to a recording of the interview, they heard Peel actually say, I can't believe the things you think I did in there. These issues were raised in a pretrial hearing, though were dismissed by the judge. He didn't think the jury would give much weight to the interview transcript and disagreed that witnesses had been coerced. But he was concerned when evidence showed that the traces of gasoline found on the investor didn't match the gasoline John Peel was alleged to have purchased. The residue on the boat was from pure white gasoline, whereas the gasoline from the gas station was the regular kind. It was possible two kinds were used and one had burned away leaving no trace, but the judge still determined that the prosecution had presented this evidence incorrectly. The prosecution remained determined to convict John Peel. Consequently, a retrial was scheduled. It commenced in January 1988. Investigators thought luck was on their side when they found a new witness. Charles Samuelson was a fisherman who John Peel worked for in 1983. Charles said he and his brother had been fishing with Peel one day when Peel turned to him with a strange smile. He then said, I did it. I killed them. Charles dismissed this as a joke, but it played on him over the years. After the first trial concluded, he decided to come forward. Charles Samuelson had a few misdemeanor charges pending against him. The state agreed to drop these in exchange for his testimony. John Peel's defense attorney revealed the deal to the courtroom to undermine Charles's evidence. His brother, who had also been present for the exchange, admitted that he thought Peel's remark was just a joke. Peel's lawyers also attacked witness Larry Demet. The Libby 8 skipper claimed he had heard gunshots on the night of the murders. He later revealed that he'd seen Peel fleeing the investor with a rifle in his hand. Peel's lawyers questioned why it took Larry so long to come forward with such significant information, dubbing him, last-minute Larry. On the stand, Larry came across as vague and confused. His use of Valium was scrutinized, while Peel's lawyer suggested he was only testifying to get out of drug charges. But Larry Demet remained adamant that John Peel was responsible

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for the murders. This time, the jury spent four days deliberating. They found John Peel not guilty on all counts. Having spent the last four years of his life on house arrest, John Peel was a free man. It was one of the only times in US history where a jury had acquitted someone accused of a mass murder. Speaking outside court, Peel remarked,

I'd just like to say it's terrible being innocent and being accused of a crime.

Thank God it's over, and justice did work this time.

To John Peel's family in France, his acquittal was vindication. Those closest to him had always insisted that Peel wasn't a violent person and wouldn't so much as punch someone. They described him as a mellow, easy-going person who was polite and hard-working. He had sold small amounts of recreational drugs on occasion that had no serious criminal history. After Peel's initial arrest, a petition asking for the charges to be dropped reached 1500 signatures within days.

The families of the victims felt differently. Ruth, the mother of missing crew member Dean Moon, was upset. She'd endured her son's name being dragged through the mud over the years, as it was speculated that he was the killer. Peel's lawyers had even presented Dean as a likely suspect than their client, despite the teen having been officially declared dead.

Ruth had been expecting Peel would be found guilty.

Mark Colthurst's parents also believed John Peel was guilty, but ultimately accepted the verdict.

We have to basically now work with going on with our lives and put it all behind us.

Nothing will bring our children back, and that's just the way it is.

Authorities made it clear that they believed a guilty man had gotten away with murder.

As far as they were concerned, the case was solved. They just hadn't gotten the outcome they wanted.

The state had spent \$2.7 million prosecuting John Peel. At the time, it was the most expensive case in Alaska's history. Some jurors later spoke out. One explained that there had been a few on the jury who believed Peel was guilty, but the state's evidence just wasn't good enough to support a conviction. John Peel filed a civil suit against the state for wrongful prosecution.

He said he'd suffered mental anguish, emotional distress, and a loss of income as a result of the charges. He asked for \$177 million, with some to be allocated to his wife, son, parents, and sister. The case was settled for \$900,000. In 2017, John Peel spoke to People magazine after long refusing to give interviews. Somebody was responsible for this, he said.

Somebody out there knows what happened, but I'm not going to waste any more of my life on it.

Every year on the first Sunday in May, blessings for members of commercial fishing fleets who have lost their lives at sea are held in Blaine and Bellingham, the Washington cities where almost all of the investor victims were from.

One of Mark Colthurst's sisters always attends and makes sure to memorialize Mark, Irene, Kimberly, and John Colthurst, as well as Chris Heyman, Dean Moon, Jerome Cowan, and Michael Stewart. The investor murders remains the largest ever unsolved mass murder in the state of Alaska. There is still speculation as to who was responsible. Some are convinced John Peel was guilty. Others believe the drug smuggling theory. It's also been suggested that the culprit and their motives will remain forever unknown. Whatever the truth, authorities have no intention of reinvestigating the case.

In June 1993, Elizabeth Stevens, 18, was murdered on her way home from the bus stop.

Her death began a seven-week reign of terror for the people of Frankston.

I remember thinking, like, how can it happen to someone that's thought so hard to get away

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and have a good life? A serial killer was on the loose. No one was safe. Not young mother, 22, taken on a trip to the shops. Nor Natalie Russell, 17, murdered on her way home from school. The serial killer, Paul Denier, was captured and sentenced to life in prison. On appeal, he was granted a 30-year minimum sentence. Fast forward, 30 years, and Denier has applied for parole. Award-winning crime writer Vicky Petraitis was on patrol with police the night the final murder took place. As a true crime author, I found myself right in the heart of Frankston, doing ride-alongs with the local police when the murders were happening. She wrote the best-selling book, *The Frankston Murders*, which has never been out of print. Vicky has revisited the case in a long-form podcast to remind the world why Denier must never be released. Denier isn't just dangerous where young women are concerned. He is dangerous to all women, babies, schoolgirls, friends, strangers, older women, everyone. The Frankston Murders podcast uncovers new material and new victims stalked by Denier in the lead-up to the killings. Vicky interviews prison guards, police officers, family members, and people caught in the periphery of a serial killer. He has not learned his lesson, he has not changed, he has not become remorseful, he has not repented or even apologized. A scale of one to ten, I'd easily put him as a 20. It's that far off the scale. *The Frankston Murders* is the latest podcast from Case File Presents, available now, wherever you get your podcasts.