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exit
international

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Captain Rob Cane The Story of a Swiss Death

In mid January, former Exit Director and Ansett Pilot, Captain Rob Cane, died peacefully in Switzerland. However, everything was not as it seems. The lead up to Rob's death was dramatic by turns. It was a life and death struggle to make it to his final day. This is Rob's Story ...

Background

Rob Cane's panicked phone call on 4 January came in the middle of the night (Europe time). Rob rang not once but five times, eventually raising Philip from his slumber. This must be an emergency for the same number to ring Philip's personal mobile so incessantly: and an emergency it was.

The caller was Rob Cane from Melbourne. He was in tears. His plans had been suddenly upended. His friends had walked away from a long-held promise of accompanying him

to Switzerland. Rob said he had been left 'high and dry'. He was terrified of having a fall and finding himself trapped in hospital or, worse, a nursing home. Rob had long since decided that spending his final days in an institution was a fate worse than death.

With his prostrate cancer ever-present and his frailty increasing by the week, Rob had become absolutely desperate to ensure that he had choice at the end. 'What will I do?' he pleaded with Philip. 'Can you help me?'

As a director of Exit International for well over a decade, Philip had developed a special friendship with Rob Cane, seeing him at his home in Carlton whenever he visited and talking regularly on the phone in between. With a membership number of 860, Rob's association with Exit went back decades to the days when it was still known by its original name of VERF - the Voluntary Euthanasia Research Foundation.

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Diary Dates

MELBOURNE WORKSHOP

BOOKED OUT!!

Monday 5 February 2024 @ 11am

SYDNEY WORKSHOP

Wed 7 February, @ 11am

Rex Centre, Potts Point

GOLD COAST WORKSHOP

Friday 9 February @ 11am

Robina Community Centre

LONDON WORKSHOP

Saturday 11 May @ 1-4pm

Dragon Hall, Holborn WC2B 5LT



Philip Nitschke, Captain Rob Cane & Russell Schirmer, Switzerland 15 January 2024

Captain Rob Cane

The story of a Swiss Death I

Philip felt an obligation to help Rob (who wouldn't?). Rob's desperation and despair over the phone meant that, as a friend, Philip had a moral obligation also.

That's what friends are for ...

As news of Rob's predicament spread throughout the Exit community in Australia, the organisation swung into action. In the face of huge logistical problems, within 24 hours Rob Cane was booked to fly one last time. Within 4 days, he was in Switzerland. He died 7 days later.

While Rob had already received his 'green light' for a Swiss death, he brought his journey forward from March to January. The reason for this was 2-fold: firstly, the planned trip with friends was now cancelled, he was back to square one. Secondly, he was terrified that now that he was 'on his own', he might have a fall and not be able to travel.

The challenge in getting Rob to Europe at short notice was immense. The first thing to do was to find a replacement friend to bring him. Enter Russell from the Exit Sydney Chapter.



Captain Rob Cane



Rob & Russell

A member of Exit for more than a decade, Russell is well known and popular among Sydney Exit members. An out gay man, he seemed the perfect travel companion for Rob (also gay). Little did we know, that Rob would need so much more than a simple travel buddy. Russell rose to the challenge. Few of us have his humility and compassion. He is one of a kind.

Why not die at home?

Given Rob's prostate cancer diagnosis, many readers are likely asking 'hey wait a minute, Rob lives in Victoria. Why didn't he just wait and use Victoria's VAD law?' The answer to this question is that Rob didn't want to.

In the months prior to the January emergency, Rob had raised the issue of an assisted death with his regular GP. He was told he would qualify but the process would not be immediate. With Victoria's 64 safeguards and rigorous qualification process, Rob felt exasperated at the thought of the bureaucracy.

Captain Rob Cane

The story of a Swiss Death II

Rob was not keen to enter a process that saw him shuffling from doctor to doctor to get permission to die. He wanted to determine his own time lines. And that didn't mean waiting around for three months to qualify. He knew that Switzerland would be quicker.

But Rob had his own drugs!

The real eye-opener in this whole saga is that Rob had Nembutal at home in the cupboard. Years earlier Rob had sourced powdered pentobarbital from China. More recently, he had sent it off to Spain to have it tested at the only commercial laboratory which will undertake this type of testing (when the drug is for 'personal use'). Despite its age, Rob's Nembutal came back as quality stuff. His 12 grams was powerful enough to kill anyone.

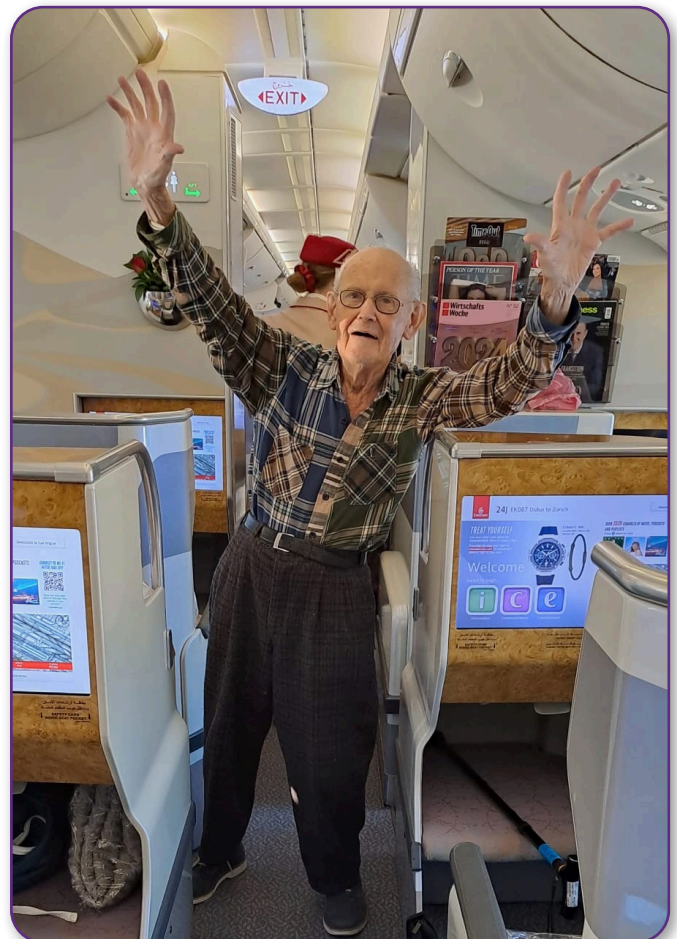
But Rob didn't want to take his Nembutal at home alone. And this is the tragic bit. Rob was terrified of vomiting. The medical-model right to die groups, in Australia especially, have been relatively successful at instilling the 'fear of God' into people that any sort of DIY method is inherently unreliable and will end in failure. The underlying message is that 'you cannot die unless a medical professional is by your side'. This suits their political objectives and justifies the medical model laws that have been introduced. The reality, however, is nothing like this.

Rob Cane could have taken anti-emetic drugs and then taken his Nembutal without any problem. Indeed, at Dignitas, most clients drink a small drink made of water and powdered Nembutal. Everyone who dies this way takes a 'stat-dose' of an anti-emetic an hour prior to their Nembutal drink. Even when Rob was on his deathbed with the infusion in his arm and ready to turn the wheel to allow the pentobarbital solution to flow, he was asking about vomiting. Those who promote the myth of mandatory vomiting have much to answer for.

Leaving Home

Be that as it may, there was no way that Rob could be talked out of an expensive difficult trip to the other side of the world, and so Switzerland it was. With a travel companion found, and flights booked, Rob was soon on his way to Switzerland.

However it was not until he had boarded his flight in Melbourne that Rob began to tell his friends that he would not be coming back. Indeed, it was not until he had arrived in Switzerland that he would tell his landlady and his solicitor that he had left Australia, for good. It was fortunate that upon hearing this news, the solicitor was able to rush to Rob's house, and secure his spare key. The landlady would go on to phone Rob for one last goodbye. They had enjoyed a warm friendship.



Leaving on a Jet Plane

Captain Rob Cane

The story of a Swiss Death III

Rob's desperation not to 'miss the boat' led him, more or less, to abandon his home. He did not pack up his belongings. He did not assign treasured items to certain people. Rob simply packed a travel case and closed the front door. His future now was about getting the death that he wanted. His past was, quite literally, left behind.

Rob said that his solicitor would see to the emptying of the house and disposal of his possessions. The only mementos Rob brought with him to Switzerland were some photos from his pilot days. And one other photo that he didn't want his former friend having. The depth of betrayal ran deep.

The Betrayal

The betrayal by the friend was a persistent theme for Rob during his final week in Switzerland. He talked about it daily, with disbelief and disappointment. His feelings on the matter became increasingly bitter.

Rob received the news that his friend had decided not to help him travel to Switzerland via a 'Dear John' text message from her husband.

'Rob, I is not comfortable for us to accompany you to Europe ... We have asked a friend who is an Exit member if he would consider going with you. He has a medical issue at present and is waiting his specialists opinion. I suggest that you ask Sean if he or somebody else can go with you.'

For many years, the friends had talked about accompanying Rob to Switzerland (when the time came). This was despite the friend knowing that Rob had Nembutal tucked away safe at home or in his 'vault' as the case may be.

Looking back, it is clear that the friend was persistently worried about the legal risk to herself should

she embark on the Swiss trip. Her worry was such that she asked to meet with Philip when he was in Australia in 2023. The conversation revolved purely around her legal position. Despite Philip's assurances that there was no legal risk, she left it until the final moment to say no. Rob's response was one of terror at being deserted in this way and at this time.

This turn of events raises important issues for anyone considering a trip to Switzerland to die. Choose your friends carefully. Be sure to discuss your plans closely with those who intend to come with you. Seek legal advice if there are any concerns. Do anything and everything to ensure that nothing is left to chance. Avoid this type of let-down at all costs.

It is Exit's advice to be particularly aware of the motives of friends when they promise that they will come with you. Your priorities may not be their priorities. Everyone has their own agenda. Make sure your travelling companions are on the same page!

Rob described the actions of his friend and the way her message was delivered as awful and as 'just so disappointing'. So strongly did he feel this loss of friendship that on arrival at Zurich airport he was already wanting to change his will. After email exchanges between a newly-found and highly efficient Swiss notary (see photo from the notary's office below) and Rob's Melbourne solicitor, the will was duly changed. Rob described this achievement as his final hurdle. He could now die in peace.



EDITORIAL with Philip Nitschke

The Alabama Execution

As this newsletter goes to press, Alabama has just used nitrogen hypoxia to execute Kenny Smith. However, Kenny's killing could not be further apart from the peaceful, ELECTIVE, deaths using nitrogen gas and an Exit bag that we witness within the right to die movement.

Rather than dying peacefully and with dignity (as the Sarco will offer), Kenny had an octopus-like facemask strapped to his head. Eyewitness accounts of his death say that he tried to hold his breath and writhed around on the guernsey (presumably to try to physically dislodge the mask). Neither act of non-cooperation worked. It is unclear at this stage whether the mask leaked.

I remain a strong opponent of the death penalty in all cases. Kenny should never have been killed. As he said in his final statement, there is no mercy in the State of Alabama. My visit to Alabama in December 2023 (when I appeared as an expert witness for Kenny's defence) was an intensely sad and depressing experience. The mask, the guernsey, the execution room are the stuff of nightmares and have no place in any civilised society. As I said in media interviews, the method may work but the use of a mask introduces a high degree of unnecessary risk.

The February *Peaceful Pill eHandbook* Update will focus on nitrogen, masks, bags and the Sarco.



Myself with Kenny Smith, Holman Prison USA, December 2023

Australian Tour & the Rob Cane Story

On 5 February, I embark on our Old Age Rational Suicide (OARS) Australian Workshop Tour, visiting the cities of Melbourne, Sydney and the Gold Coast (other Australian capitals will follow later in the year). The focus of the tour will be on the lessons learned from the Alabama Experiment and the Rob Cane Experience (and all that can go wrong with a trip to Switzerland).

The Fear of Falling

I remember from my medical school days being youthfully (and arrogantly) bored when discussion turned to falls by the elderly and the devastating health consequences that these can bring.

As I have gotten older, and a number of falls later, my boredom with the issue has turned to intense interest. This focus was made all the sharper during the Christmas period when I slipped on wet tiles in a hotel bathroom, knocking myself out and damaging my head, shoulder and ribs. I am now well on the path to recovery.

I am very aware that many in the Exit community share the dread of having a fall. This fear was one of the reasons behind Rob Cane's decision to expedite his trip to Switzerland. It was the reason my own mother was forced into a nursing home (a situation she hated). And it was the cause of death of my last remaining friend from my university days, Theo Weller in South Australia.

In the same week, but on the other side of the world, Theo also had a fall. Only unlike me he was not found for three days. By then the damage was done and his family switched off life support a week later.

I feel fortunate to be alive, and I remember my friend (the hapless recipient of many of my student days jokes) very warmly.

Captain Rob Cane

The story of a Swiss Death IV

The Excitement of Arrival

When we greeted Rob and Russell at Zurich airport, Rob was full of joy and excitement. He had survived the journey and was relieved to have made it to Switzerland. Russell said Rob had even celebrated with a champagne breakfast prior to landing. The last hurrah trip was a time for 'bottoms up'.

Rob's first few days in Switzerland proceeded ok. The meeting with the Swiss notary to change the will was achieved. Certain goodbye phone calls to Australia were made. Rob needed minimal help with personal care. His mood was upbeat and he was looking forward to the following Tuesday. He said often how grateful he was to have the company of friends at the end. And he very much looked forward to being joined by fellow Exit director, Kerri Dennis, who by happen stance was visiting family in Germany.

However, as the days wore on, Rob's health took a turn for the worse. Jetlag should never be underestimated, especially when one is elderly. The change of diet and time zone started to play havoc with Rob's body as he became confined to his hotel room, unable to venture far from the bathroom. This changed circumstance made Rob's final few days fairly miserable. The high level of care that he required left Russell in the invidious position of nurse.

Over these intense, difficult few days, the two men formed a deep bond. Russell's patience seemed endless and his genuine care for Rob's well-being was obvious. But there would be no more excursion such as the earlier day trip to the countryside and no more dinners. Rob began to count down the days and the hours until he could die. Sleep became his best friend. Apart from the jetlag theory, it was as if his mind had sent a subconscious message to his body that his time was nigh and that it was ok to give up and close down.



A Selfie on arrival at Zurich Airport



Contemplating life & death in Jura Canton



Kerri showing Rob messages of support from Exit Members

Captain Rob Cane

The story of a Swiss Death V



Biding One's Time

It is somewhat ironic that Rob Cane came to Switzerland because he wanted to control the timing of his death. He did not want to be at the mercy of the system, but that is exactly what happened: even though Switzerland has a simpler system than Australia.

In the days prior to his VAD appointment, Rob stayed in bed. He would repeatedly ask Russell the time and the day and calculate how long he had to go. He spent much of his day on the toilet. The challenge of keeping his hotel room clean was not insignificant. While Russell would repeatedly assure Rob that he 'did not mind', Rob was befuddled by the way his body was 'betraying' him when he was so close to the end.

Standing One's Ground

Still Rob's former lover from Geelong, 'Mario' (not his real name) would call him. For some years after the death of Rob's partner of 46 years, Keith Stott, Rob had a relationship with this man. According to Rob, Mario disagreed strongly with Rob's end of life beliefs. This hostility became increasingly obvious, and problematic, in the days leading up to Rob's VAD.

Mario would call Rob several times a day, and berate him for going down this path. As those of us present were with Rob when these calls came in, we would hear Rob's words being twisted back at him. Mario never gave up on willing Rob to come home to Australia.

This was heart-breaking to watch. Rob's resilience at gently and persistently telling Mario that his mind could not be changed was admirable. But who wants

Captain Rob Cane

The story of a Swiss Death VI

to spend their final days standing their ground against those who want otherwise for them? The pressure that Rob was put under during these calls was unedifying. The phone calls wore him down. They exhausted him. Respecting someone's wishes, even if you don't agree with them, can be a hard ask. But pushing your wishes on to someone else can amount to coercive controlling behaviour?



A Final Farewell

With Tuesday beckoning, the formal Swiss VAD approval system kicked in. On the Monday morning a nurse arrived unannounced with a folder of papers for signing. Tick, one step closer.

On Rob's penultimate day, Kerri Dennis arrived with her daughter. Rob tried to rally. After spending most of the day in bed, Rob was driven by Philip to meet the doctor. It was only after this consultation that Rob would know for sure that he would be able to die the following day. With the green light confirmed, the small farewell party could go ahead.

For a party expected to last 30 minutes, to our surprise, the party went on to 11pm. We shared stories, we danced and we laughed and cried. Rob dressed up in feathers, glitter and sequins for the last time.

With Tuesday finally upon us, Rob had a (very) light breakfast and was ready to go. The team read him many of the well wishes that had come in overnight from Exit members and friends around the world. He was delighted



The Big Day

and heartened. He was especially pleased to hear from old colleagues from his flying days. He never imagined that anyone would remember 'Captain Rob'.

On arrival at the clinic, there was the final paperwork. Around an hour later, all was ready. Rob lay on the bed, and Kerri popped the Prosecco one last time. There was more talk, kind words and 'thank you's'. The cannula was inserted and Rob turned the wheel. And just like that, he was gone to the soothing voice of Frank Sinatra. The song? 'Come fly with me'.

Philip says it was one of the quickest deaths he had seen. Rob will be remembered as a kind and cheeky person with a wicked sense of humour.

Vale - Captain Rob Cane.

