

Dingo attack or murder?

Tragedy struck a family camping trip in Australia's barren outback when a dingo—a wild dog—snatched nine-week-old Azaria from a tent. Public sympathy turned to anger when the police accused Lindy Chamberlain of her baby's murder after finding traces of blood on a pair of scissors and in the family car.

"A dingo has my baby!" Lindy Chamberlain's panic-stricken scream sent a surge of alarm through the outback campsite. It just didn't seem possible. Everything was so normal. With hundreds of other Australians, Michael and Lindy Chamberlain were camping at the site, in August 1980, to visit nearby Uluru. They were cooking dinner when, at around eight o'clock, they heard a cry from the tent where their four-year-old son and baby daughter were sleeping. Lindy spotted a dingo near the tent and broke into a run. Only as she got inside did she realize with horror that her daughter had disappeared. There was

JAWS OF DEATH ▼

Canine expert witnesses testifying against Lindy based their evidence mainly on studies of domestic dogs; none knew anything about the bites of wild dingoes.

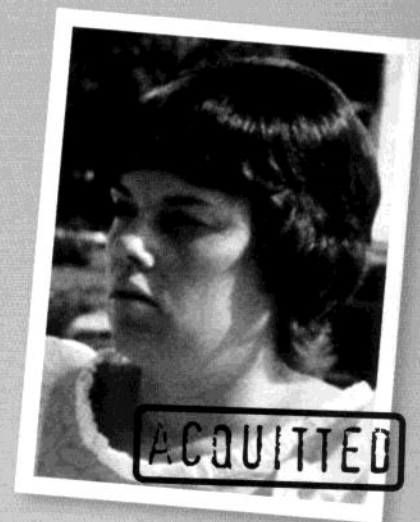
a pool of blood on the floor of the tent. Soon, the police arrived and organized a search. Aboriginal trackers followed the dingo's trail until its prints disappeared, but they didn't find Azaria. At eleven o'clock the distraught Chamberlains left the campsite and moved to a motel.

The police make up their minds

The next morning a local police officer interviewed them. He took away several bloodstained items, but left many more. Later the same day a police inspector flew in from Alice Springs. Lindy's description of the previous night's events made him suspicious—dingoes just didn't take children. Also, how far could a dingo carry a 10-lb (4.5-kg) baby?

A week passed with no further leads, but then a tourist found Azaria's romper and undershirt at a dingo lair close to Uluru. Again, the police response was desultory. They did not seal the scene, or conduct a thorough examination of the clothes.

The lack of a systematic evaluation of the crime scene and the potential evidence it contained, together with a few persuasive clues, led police to believe Lindy was lying. There were no bite marks or dingo saliva on Azaria's romper, but there were cuts and bloodstains. The baby's booties were still tied in the feet of the romper, but her undershirt was, inexplicably, inside out.

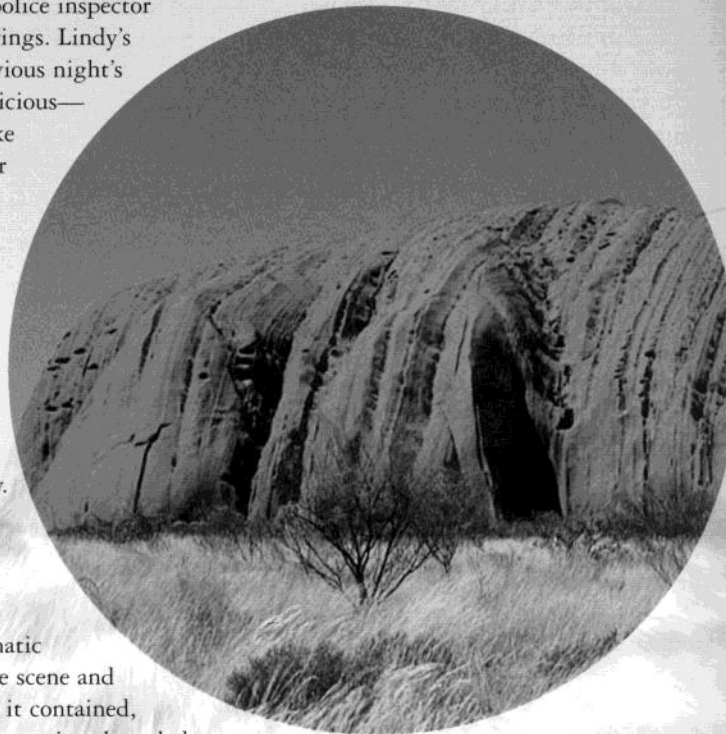


ACCUSED OF INFANTICIDE ▲

After she had served six years in prison, Lindy's conviction was quashed in September 1988, and she eventually received \$765,000 compensation.

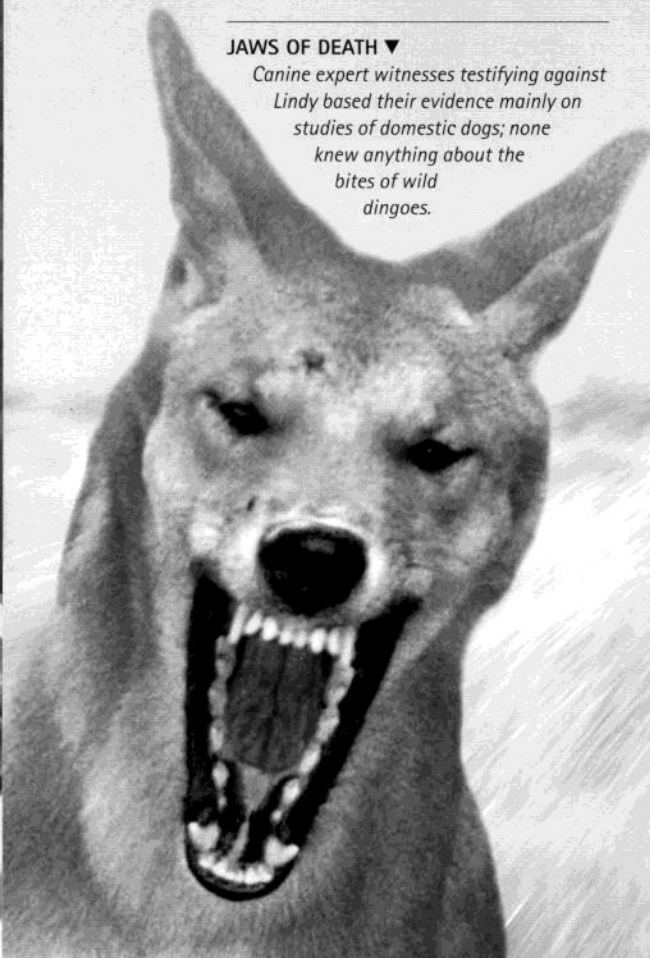
ULURU ▼

Revered by Aboriginal Australians for its unique place in their mythology, Uluru or Ayers Rock attracts half a million tourists every year.



The inquest verdict

In February 1981 the police expressed their doubts at an inquest into Azaria's death, but the coroner dismissed their suspicions, and was highly critical of police procedures. He concluded that a



dingo had indeed taken baby Azaria. With the inquest ended, Michael and Lindy believed they could at last get over the shock of losing their third child, and get on with their lives.

But the Australian media had different ideas. The "Dingo Baby" story was sensational, and the press had fed the controversy to boost sales. Journalists focused on the fact that the family were Seventh-Day Adventists, which led to bigoted and fanciful rumors. It was even suggested that Azaria was killed in a religious ritual. Nor were the police satisfied. Seven months after the inquest verdict, they returned to the Chamberlains' home, with a search warrant. They told Lindy they had new evidence. Further forensic examination of Azaria's clothes had revealed a bloody print in the shape of a woman's hand.

The second inquest

More dramatic evidence came out during the second inquest. A forensic biologist had examined stains in the Chamberlains' car, and on a pair of scissors found there. She concluded that the marks were the blood of a baby. Other expert witnesses testified that the pattern of stains and cuts on Azaria's clothing looked like scissor stabs, not dog bites. The police trap was starting to close around the Chamberlains.

It snapped shut on February 2, 1982, when the coroner concluded that Lindy Chamberlain had killed her baby in the car with a pair of scissors. Lindy was charged with murder.

The trial

At her trial the police presented a closer analysis of the same evidence that they had given to the coroner, and put forward more expert witnesses. Despite evidence that Lindy was a caring mother who had no motive to kill, the jury found her guilty. She was sentenced to life. When two appeals failed, Lindy Chamberlain faced many years of imprisonment.

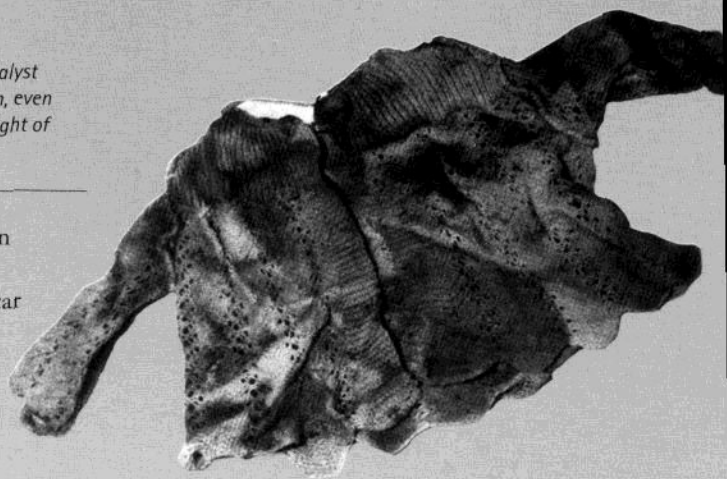
Freedom

Then, in February 1986, Azaria's jacket was found part-buried at Uluru. Five days later, Lindy was released, and the

AZARIA'S JACKET ►

Azaria's bloodstained jacket acted as a catalyst for Lindy Chamberlain's release from prison, even though its discovery added little to the weight of evidence pointing to her innocence.

following year a Royal Commission completely exonerated her. They decided that "bloodstains" in the car weren't blood at all—they were probably sound-absorbing material sprayed in by the car's manufacturer—and concluded that the bloodstains and marks on the romper were consistent with a dingo attack after all. The Commission's report censured the police for prejudice and bias, for burying expert evidence that didn't fit the case, for failing to preserve evidence, and for inadequate forensic work.



LINDY AND MICHAEL ▼

The stress of the case, and Lindy's imprisonment, eventually ended her marriage to Seventh-Day Adventist minister Michael, who was charged as an accessory to the murder.

