

# Why notorious bank robber Alexander MacDonald killed a lonely Melbourne man and stole his identity

IMAGINE snagging a high-paid job in our mining heartland. Struggling Ron Williams did, but his dream come true was really a cunning bandit's evil trap, and it would be the last trip he ever made.

**Paul Anderson** True Crime Editor

February 4, 2015 - 12:10PM **Herald Sun**

0 comments



Why notorious robber lured loner to doom

HE called himself Ron Williams, but that was not his real name.

Sitting under arrest in a Victoria Police armed robbery squad interview room, the man had confessions to make: startling confessions not even experienced robbery detectives Allan Birch and Michael Grainger could have foreseen.

The man posing as Ronald Williams was, in fact, escaped bandit Alexander Robert MacDonald — a man with a violent criminal history.

Two years earlier, in September 1995 and with about three years to serve on a minimum stretch for armed robbery, MacDonald had escaped from the Borallon Correctional Centre at Ipswich, west of Brisbane, and was suspected of having committed several armed robberies while on the run.

Birch and Grainger were sure they had fugitive MacDonald in custody, yet MacDonald was maintaining he was 47-year-old Ron Williams, born May 14, 1950.

**[BOOK EXTRACT: READ MORE ABOUT THE ARMED ROBBERY SQUAD](#)**



Alexander MacDonald knew the game was up after detectives from the Victorian armed robbery squad arrested him.

At that stage, the two detectives had no idea where the name Ronald Williams had come from.

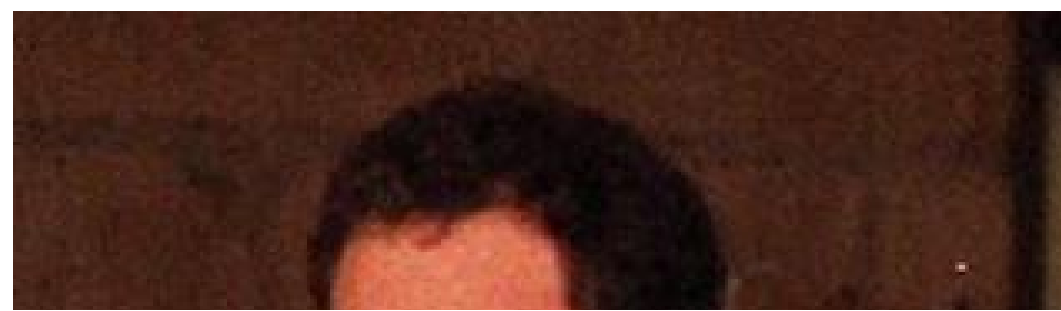
They had no idea Ron Williams — a battler from Melbourne conned and killed by MacDonald — was actually lying buried with two bullet holes in his skull in a shallow grave on a remote West Australian beach.

To confirm the prisoner's true identity, Birch and Grainger needed fingerprints.

MacDonald balked at providing them.

The two detectives from the squad known as “The Robbers” told MacDonald his prints could be taken by force, if necessary.

It was then MacDonald admitted his true identity, saying the name Ron Williams was an identity he'd assumed after escaping from prison.





Detective Michael Grainger (pictured in 1995) was also surprised by MacDonald's candid confession.





Detective Allan Birch (pictured in 2005) was running the interview when bandit Alexander MacDonald confessed to murder.

Sen-Det Birch: “Right. Now how did you assume that identity?”

MacDonald: “By taking the identity from the actual person.”

Sen-Det Birch: “Right. Who is Ron Williams?”

MacDonald: “He’s a guy from Melbourne.”

Sen-Det Birch: “Right. And do you know Ron Williams?”

MacDonald: “Yes ... I met him on the pretext of employing him.”

Sen-Det Birch: “Can you explain to me how you would assume the identity of a person who responds to an advert for employment?”

MacDonald: “You kill them.”

Sen-Det Birch: “Did you kill Mr Williams?”

MacDonald: “I did.”

It was a shock admission, to say the least.





Alexander Robert MacDonald was a man of few emotions.

Having been read his rights for a second time, MacDonald asked for one of Birch’s cigarettes and then told the full story.

He explained how, using the false name of Paul Jacobs, he placed an ad in the *Herald Sun* for someone to take up a position on a fake geological survey.

“My intention was to find a person of suitable age and background, with no close relatives and assume his identity,” MacDonald told Birch and Grainger.

The fake job ad appeared in January 1996 on behalf of Jacobs Associates — a fictitious family company that was said to carry out geological surveys for WA mining companies.

The bogus job was for a field hand to work on surveying expeditions in remote areas for two years.

The annual salary was \$60,000.

Some 50 men applied.

MacDonald interviewed the candidates at a sham office in a unit in the outer Melbourne suburb of Greensborough.

The unlucky applicant was Ronald Joseph Williams ... because he got the job.

“He was a guy of my build, roughly — maybe a little shorter,” MacDonald explained.

“Obviously of the same age group ... At the time I was 80 per cent certain that he was suitable, so I asked him back to a second interview perhaps a week later ... at which time he could supply more personal details.

“Those details included educational background, family background and employment. (That was necessary) to give me the background story of the person.”

Sen-Det Birch: “At the times you were writing (his particular details and background) down, what was your intention to do with Mr Williams?”

MacDonald: “To kill him ... in Western Australia.”

Sen-Det Birch: "Why Western Australia if the interviews took place in Victoria?"

MacDonald: "'Cos that's where the supposed employment was to occur ... I told Williams the position was his."



A family picture of Melbourne man Ron Williams. MacDonald chose him because he had few family ties, was the right age and had the right appearance.

RON Williams was a loner.

An estranged father, he had few relatives and only a couple of close friends.

A man with few prospects, he worked a tin-can job at an auto-wrecking yard.

Williams thought he'd finally caught a break.

He was about to see the other side of Australia while being handsomely paid.

Or so he believed.

MacDonald borrowed Williams' driver's licence, birth certificate and other personal papers and used them to set up two bank accounts in Williams' name.

He also successfully lodged an application for his own copy of Williams' birth certificate from the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages.

Sen-Det Birch: "What money did you intend to channel into those bank accounts?"

MacDonald: "Money from armed robberies."

MacDonald paid Williams a weekly \$500 retainer to keep him hooked until they left for WA in early March 1996.

The two drove a four-day journey across Australia in MacDonald's Toyota Land Cruiser.

Sen-Det Birch: "How did you cause the death of Mr Williams?"

MacDonald: "I shot him."

Sen-Det Birch: "And what did you shoot Mr Williams with?"

MacDonald: "With a sawn-off .22 rifle."

The murder was committed on a remote spot at Cheyne Beach, about 50km east of Albany.

MacDonald shot Williams at point-blank range in the head as the two were beach fishing at night.

It was about 8pm and they were fishing by torchlight, MacDonald said.

It was an idyllic setting — for murder.





Cheyne Beach proved the perfect spot for murder.

“We fished for perhaps an hour and then I shot him,” MacDonald said coldly.

“I extracted the rifle from (my fishing) bag, faced Mr Williams and shot him once in the forehead ... he fell forward and was prone on the ground.

“I stepped over him and shot him in the back of the head ... just to make certain.”

Sen-Det Grainger: “So how was it that you were able to distinguish him and kill him in the dark?”

MacDonald: “I have reasonably good night vision.”

The killer bandit told the detectives he’d had “quite some experience with weaponry” while a soldier with the Australian Army in Vietnam.

MacDonald buried Williams in a shallow sand grave.

“It was a job at hand,” MacDonald said of the murder.

Sen-Det Grainger: “Do you know that killing someone’s wrong?”

MacDonald: “I know that many people consider it to be, yes.”

Sen-Det Grainger: “Do you consider it to be wrong?”

MacDonald: “Depending on the circumstances, no.”

Sen-Det Grainger: “Why?”

MacDonald: “To me it seemed appropriate.”

Sen-Det Grainger: “Is what you’re saying — his death was a means to you to assuming a new identity?”

MacDonald: “That’s correct.”

Sen-Det Grainger: “And you found it necessary to assume that identity to avoid further incarceration?”

MacDonald: “That’s correct.”

Sen-Det Birch: “Have you found yourself in other circumstances where you’ve found it necessary to kill someone?”

MacDonald: “Yes.”

Sen-Det Birch: “When?”

MacDonald: “In Vietnam.”



A weapon similar to that used by Alexander MacDonald.

MacDonald said he “just switched off” when the time came to kill.

“I guess it’s part of military training that sometimes you need to switch off your emotions.”

After the murder, MacDonald discarded Williams’ clothing, watch and wallet but kept his driver’s licence and credit cards.

He drove up through Perth to Carnarvon, where he camped for two days and dumped his vehicle and gun before hitchhiking back to Perth, and then all the way back to Victoria.

Once back in Victoria, MacDonald started living as Ronald Williams.

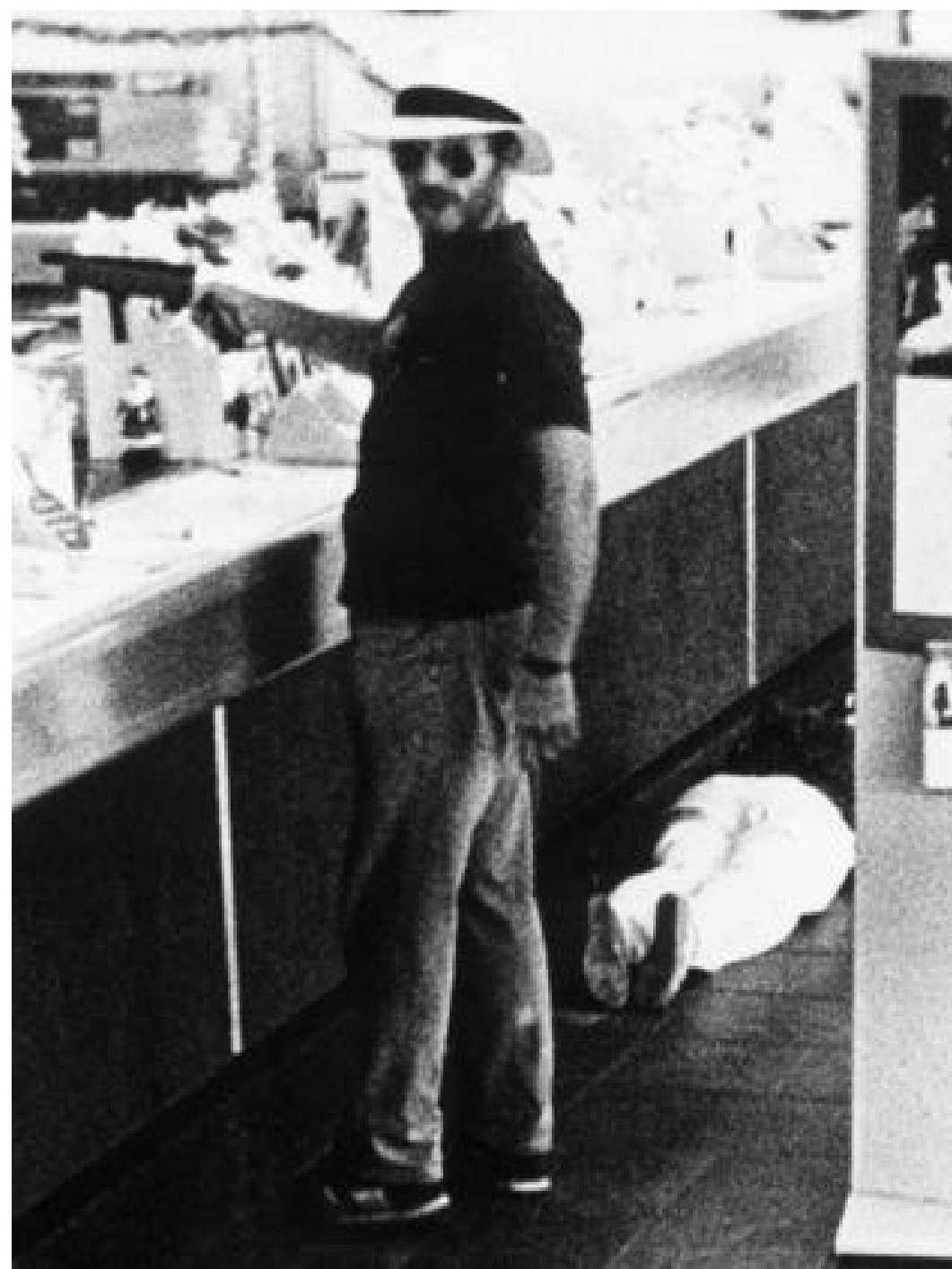
He went on to obtain an Australian passport in Ron Williams’ name.

To make it appear that Mr Williams was still alive, MacDonald made deposits into the dead man’s bank account and regular personal loan repayments.

MacDonald told Birch and Grainger he owned a 34-foot motor yacht moored at a marina near Tyabb on Victoria’s Mornington Peninsula.

He said he bought it through the proceeds of armed robberies.

MacDonald admitted to committing several holdups while hitchhiking and camping around Australia after his jail escape.



MacDonald during another bank robbery.





A bank photo believed to show Alexander MacDonald robbing one of several banks during his string of heists.

During one bank heist at Airlie Beach, he took a female teller hostage after robbing \$83,000.

He said he committed further bank holdups, in different states, after murdering Mr Williams.

He travelled to distant locations and held up the banks via his regular method in an effort to confuse police and hide the fact he was residing in Victoria.

He said he never did a stick up in Victoria because, “as they say, ‘don’t crap in your own backyard’.”

MacDonald netted big money, some of which went towards his boat on which, he said, he eventually planned to take his own life while in the Solomon Islands.

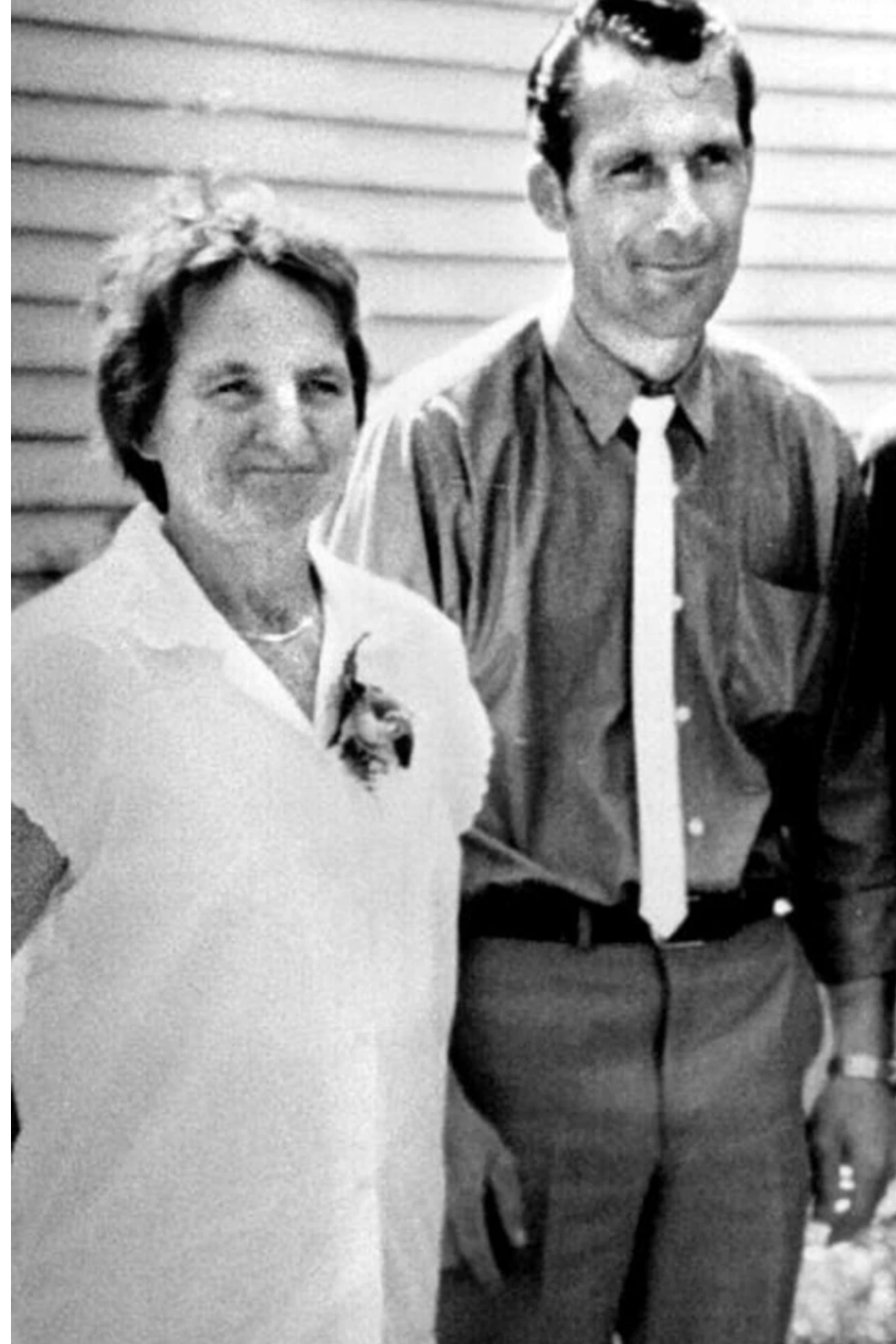
Sen-Det Birch: “Why would it be necessary to kill yourself in the Solomon Islands?”

MacDonald: “More pleasant surroundings.”

The killer bandit drew a sketch of where he buried Ron Williams’ body.

WA detectives used it to locate the skeletal remains.





Another family photo of unfortunate murder victim Ron Williams.

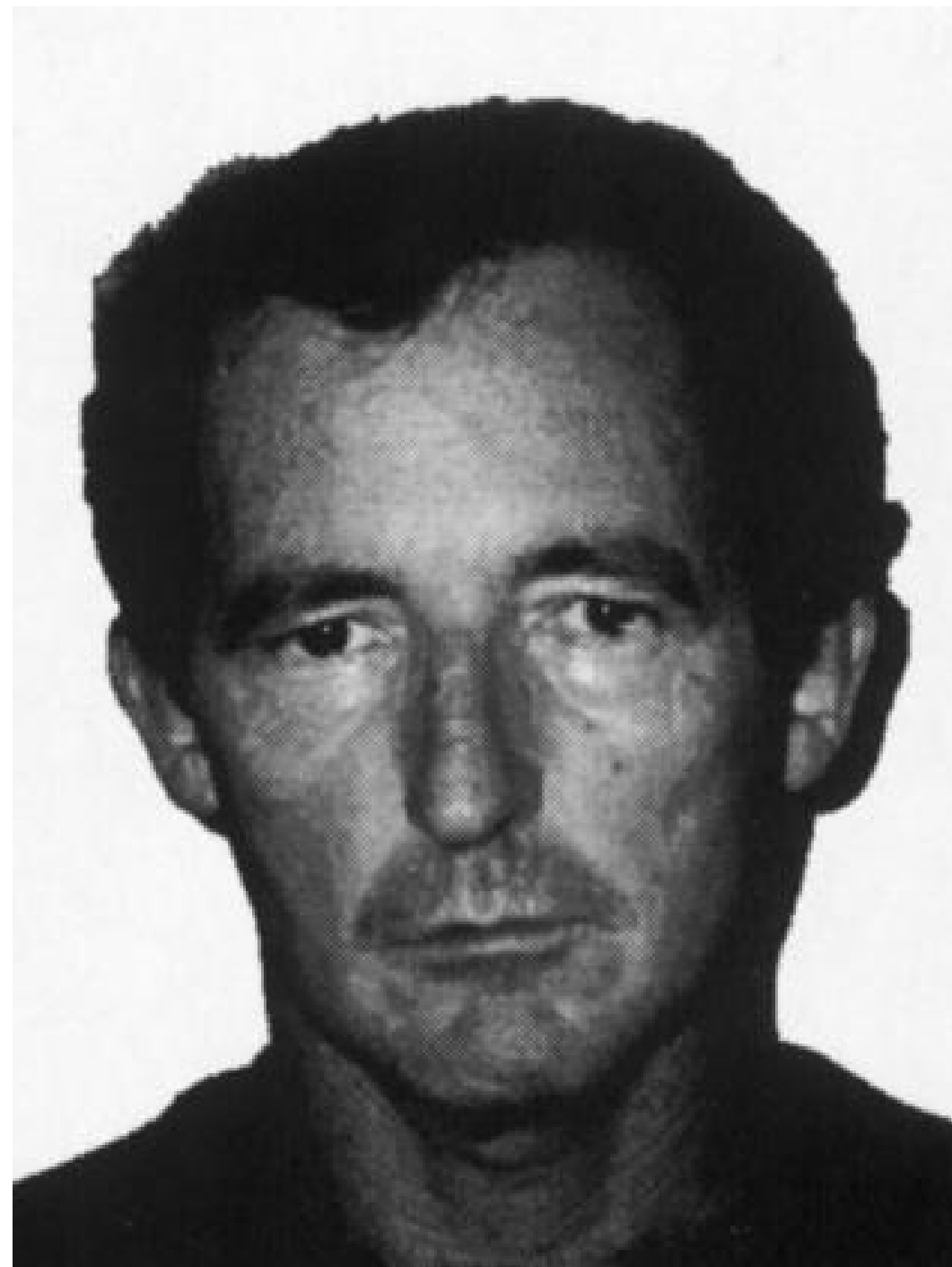
Sen-Det Birch told an out-of-sessions court hearing that MacDonald was wanted in three states over eight armed robberies and had been on the run since escaping from the Queensland prison while mowing lawns.

The court heard that before his escape, MacDonald had served 13 years of a 22-year sentence for armed robberies in Queensland.

Police alleged MacDonald had committed robberies in Western Australia using explosives, and had also participated in extortion attempts.

MacDonald was extradited back to WA where he was charged with the murder and armed robbery.

He pleaded guilty.



Clean shaven.





MacDonald with beard.





Yet another look.



MacDonald as he appeared in one robbery.

His barrister had no option but to label the Cheyne Beach murder as “one of the most carefully planned that probably we have seen”.

Justice Robert Anderson was told MacDonald did not hate society but did what he felt he had to do because he was an escapee.

“Having done it, he does not then, if you will pardon the expression - if I can use Mr MacDonald’s own words - ‘cry in his own beer about it’,” the defence barrister said.

The killer bandit’s only straw of mitigation was the speed with which he killed his unsuspecting victim, the Supreme Court of WA was told.

“It appears ... that he simply bent over, picked the gun up, turned around and fired it,” his barrister told the plea hearing.

“The movement was so quick and fast that apparently Mr Williams didn’t even have the opportunity to change his expression.

“There was no kind of torture ... It was just flash, and it was done.”

Justice Anderson sentenced MacDonald, 47, to life with a 25-year minimum term.

In this case, the wheels of justice turned quickly after MacDonald was charged.

It was just “flash” and he was gone — consigned to a high-security jail with no banks or beaches in sight.