

Title: **Episode 10. Road to Nowhere**

Speakers: Georgie Vestey, Dead Honest, & Mac Hobbs, Hobbs Recovery

Interview Transcription

Georgie Vestey: Now, this week my guest is a bit different, because he is not someone you would naturally associate with death. In fact, if it hadn't been for a chance remark, I'd have never come across him.

I was talking to a coroner's officer, and we were discussing this remote beauty spot. It's a popular location for people who want to take their lives. He said, "Once we have recovered people's bodies, we also need to get the cars they have abandoned and bring them back to their families". That thought had never occurred to me, so in this episode I want you to meet Mac Hobbs, because it's his company that's responsible for this very sensitive task, as well as recovering vehicles after fatal accidents.

I'm Georgie Vestey and this is Dead Honest.

When you're called out to a job, by and large what is going to be the thing that has caused an accident?

Mac Hobbs: Most of the time it is lack of attention, and we've all done it; I am just as guilty as the next person, but you've sat at a crossroads and maybe gone to pull out in front of somebody, haven't seen the motorbike, haven't seen the car coming the other way or whatever and 99 times out of 100 you'll get away with it.

Speed is another one. I think it's a false idea that it's only youngsters that are subject to having accidents down to speed. It's quite a broad spectrum of people, and people push those cars too far and they run out of talent really.

Georgie Vestey: Do you remember the first fatal accident that you attended?

Mac Hobbs: Yes, I do.

Georgie Vestey: Tell me about it.

Mac Hobbs: It was quite sad; well it was very sad in fact. It was a young lad who'd just passed his test and he wasn't going fast, and it was just inexperience. Unfortunately he hit a lamp post; it was not a very pleasant scene to see. Almost 100% of the vehicles that we have in here that are fatalities are unnecessary. When you see the impact that has on the families that want to see the vehicle; we've had pretty horrific sights.

Georgie Vestey: But when you are called to a road crash, are you aware before you go there that there have been fatalities? Are you told that by the emergency services?

Mac Hobbs: Yes. There's a terminology called KSI, killed or seriously injured, and we're given that information before. If it is a particularly bad incident, then the emergency services will request what they call an incident manager, which would be one of the senior managers here would go and assess the situation before we dispatch any vehicles or any drivers.

There are certain situations that you would not take particular members of staff on, for various reasons. For instance, if there are children involved, obviously if they've got young children themselves, we consider whether that would be a good idea to have them involved in that kind of incident.

Georgie Vestey: When you're on the way to attend a fatal accident, what's running through your head?

Mac Hobbs: If I go out personally, then what's going through your head is what are you going to see; how are you going to deal with it; how will you be able to approach it? You may well sit in the vehicle for a few minutes and assess the scene before you get out. There are always incident commanders, managers and so on from the emergency services and our job is to liaise with them.

Georgie Vestey: When you are picking up a vehicle where you know someone has died in it, this is going to sound odd, but does it have a different feeling? How does it feel for you when you have to open that door and you might see a child's teddy bear on the seat or whatever; do you try and block that out?

Mac Hobbs: Yes. Over the years, over the 30 years that I've been doing it, you become hardened to it. I wouldn't say you're immune to it, but you're definitely hardened to it, and you try and block that out as much as you possibly can.

Georgie Vestey: Does it ever cross over when you can't?

Mac Hobbs: Yes, absolutely it does. We attended a suicide where a car had driven under a truck, and it took a day to extract the vehicle and the emergency services were obviously the primary attendees, but they needed our equipment to lift the lorry and pull the car out. The body was still in the vehicle, and it was clear that the driver of the car was dead, but there was a baby seat in the back of the car which could be seen underneath the lorry. We had to lift the lorry and remove that vehicle.

Now, nobody really knew whether there was a child in that seat or not. Fortunately, there wasn't and that was a devastating scene for everybody involved. It still bothers me now, some 20 years later.

Georgie Vestey: What bothers you?

Mac Hobbs: The wastefulness of it all. Why did that person end up in that situation? It's just very, very sad to witness and it was a very hot day and at the end, the fire brigade were there, the ambulance, the clean-up crews and so on. They had access to counselling, and there was a team of people there that went to see them, and we were standing in a huddle, the recovery operators. It was almost a secondary thought, "What are you guys doing? There's no back up for you guys".

My answer to that was, "We go down to the café, and we have a bacon sandwich, we talk about it, and we'll be back at work in an hour's time".

Georgie Vestey: Do you think that the other emergency services really understand the trauma that you're exposed to? Did they really get that you're facing pretty much a lot of what they're facing in a way?

Mac Hobbs: I'm not sure that they do. I don't mean that in a detrimental way, I think that it just isn't considered. They are considering their own situation, they are the first responders, so their own situation is worse than ours; they've already had a very traumatic experience themselves.

Georgie Vestey: I am going to take you back to the scene of the crash, and you have recovered the vehicle and then you bring the vehicle back to your base, and then what contact will you have with the families?

Mac Hobbs: First of all, all fatal accidents would have a liaison officer from the police that would deal directly with them, and they would generally bring them in or accompany the families here. Or they would speak to us and say, "Look the family would want to come and collect the personal effects", or whatever it might be from the vehicle.

In those situations, we have a huge responsibility that we undertake really that somewhere along the line, somebody is at fault here and there will be an investigation that goes on with these vehicles. Our responsibility is to protect that evidence, so we have to be very aware of what we can and can't do, because it could make the difference between a conviction and a non-conviction.

Georgie Vestey: When a family first sees that vehicle that you have recovered, they open the door, what is it that they take from those cars?

Mac Hobbs: It can be anything really, from just a small memento, and it may be a coin, it may be some coins in the ashtray. I think it's just that connection back to that person. Some families just don't want to know, and I get that as well. They just don't want to see, and they don't want anything from the vehicles.

Georgie Vestey: What do you do? How do you deal with those families?

Mac Hobbs: It depends on the situation, it's a moving feast really. Some people become so distraught that you just can't do anything to console them, you just have to let it take its course. Some people are very angry; other people we'll give them a cup of tea, or we'll talk to them, and they'll tell us the whole story behind it, which is just them unloading really. They have to talk to somebody, so we'll talk to them, we'll listen to what they've got to say.

That in itself has an effect on the office staff, the parking office staff and so on and so forth, because they have listened to what is sometimes very, very upsetting. A lot of time, we're dealing with broken-down people not broken-down vehicles, because

suddenly the emotions come over them and they're within our care, they're within our premises.

We're not necessarily trained to do that, but experience tells you this is how you deal with it. I don't think you can prepare or train anybody to do that, it's very difficult.

Georgie Vestey: I am curious to know when you've been at a very difficult scene, how do you bring yourself back to yourself? How do you decompress?

Mac Hobbs: We just go back and get on with it, because if we get back to work, then you haven't got time to sit and dwell on it; there are other people that need our assistance, and we just get on with it. We do offer counselling to all our staff that attend fatalities. I wouldn't be able to tell you how many take that up because it's confidential.

I would say that there are some people within this industry with what you may term as PTSD that don't know it yet. That could well be somebody like me. We get back to work, we bury it, we put it in a box, we shut the lid and we move on. Who knows when those lids might open on those boxes?

Georgie Vestey: I'm aware that one of the roles that you have is because of your proximity to a very well-known spot where people take their lives, that you are also involved in recovering the vehicles of those people and returning those to their families. Tell me about this aspect of your work.

Mac Hobbs: Most people will leave their vehicle in the car park, before they do whatever it is that they need to do. We would then be charged with recovering that vehicle. Of course there are no keys with it, sometimes they're difficult to load depending on where they've been left. Some people try to drive them over, but that isn't an option anymore. Then we bring them here for the coroner to do their investigation.

The aftermath and consequences of that is that there are family members that may or may not have been aware that whoever it was was in that state of mind. It varies remarkably as to whether some people really were expecting it to happen, others were not expecting it to happen. Again, there's a difference in how you would handle that.

One particular instance that springs to mind that the partner came to pick the vehicle up and he was quite relieved. He said that for 20 years, he hadn't slept because he knew that this was going to happen one day, so he hadn't slept properly for 20 years and that was quite shocking to me; for somebody to say that they were quite relieved that it had happened. When you actually analyse it, it makes sense, but at the time it was a bit of a shock that somebody would say, "Well, I'm quite relieved that this has now happened".

There are some families that will only communicate with us by email, and they don't want the vehicle back, they don't want the memory back. In some of those situations, what we've managed to do in the past is we've had permission to be able to sell those vehicles, and we have then donated the proceeds. We have tried to turn a tragic circumstance into a benefit in a very small way, and I think that helps with some of the trauma that we have to deal with, that we feel there is a positive come out of a negative.

Georgie Vestey: I have spoken with a coroner's officer in the last season who says that it has a certain magnetism. Do you feel that?

Mac Hobbs: Yes. When I was a child, in those days health and safety wasn't quite the same; you could walk right up to the edge or crawl up to the edge and look over and there was definitely some kind of -- I remember the feeling quite well, that you would stand on the edge and look over, and it would be quite -- it was a weird feeling to be there. It has got a magnetism and I don't know what that is.

Georgie Vestey: When you were collecting these cars that belonged to people who have taken their lives and you first open that door, does it feel different?

Mac Hobbs: I suppose it does, yes. You're aware that person, whoever, that's the last thing that they touched, that they were part of, and it's something that I suppose me personally I've become hardened to over the years because sadly, it's such a regular occurrence. Some people don't want those vehicles back and for that very reason, because that is the last thing that that person had interacted with before. I am hesitant to use the word "suicide" and I don't like the word "suicide".

Georgie Vestey: Why?

Mac Hobbs: I don't know really. It's such a final word isn't it, and it becomes a little bit difficult to keep talking about suicide; it's so final.

Georgie Vestey: What has this job taught you about death?

Mac Hobbs: Stay away from it! It's taught me to face it and make sure that it's not a taboo. We discuss it, we talk about it, we talk about it here, I talk about it at home. I think it has more of an effect on me when it's something like we've just discussed, to be honest with you. I think it has more of an effect on our staff as well, that when it's somebody you don't know and you find out the circumstances behind it, it has more of an impact.

Georgie Vestey: What's the best thing about your work?

Mac Hobbs: The best thing, by our very nature of what we do, we are problem solvers. If you did a poll of this industry, their general ethos is that they want to help. It's in their nature to want to help you. I guess we're kind of one of the best kept secrets; we're the companies you've never heard of until you need us.

Georgie Vestey: What has this job taught you about love?

Mac Hobbs: When you see people walk through the door and they're absolutely completely devastated by the loss of a loved one, I suppose what it's taught me really is, make sure that you let people that you love, let them know you love them, because you just don't know what's round the corner.

Georgie Vestey: My thanks to Mac Hobbs for discussing this very sensitive aspect of his work, and if you've enjoyed the episode then I'd love you to share it or better still, rate it on your favourite podcast app.

I'm Georgie Vestey and this is Dead Honest.



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