

Cannonball Run death car was lost, inquest told

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A Ferrari F40 involved in the Cannonball Run was travelling at up to 270kmh on the day it crashed, killing four people, a coronial inquest was told yesterday.

The inquest, before Coroner John Lowndes, is investigating the deaths of Japanese competitors Mr Akihiro Kabe, 40, and Mr Takeshi Okano, 45, and voluntary officials Mr Keith Alan Pritchard, 31, and Mr Timothy Douglas Linklater, 22, on 24 May, during the car rally in the Northern Territory.

Mr Bruce Wallis, the navigator of a white Porsche that was passed by the Ferrari seconds before the crash (about 95km south of Alice Springs) said the accident happened during a "special section" where competitors were penalised for early or late arrival at a checkpoint.

He said his car needed to travel an average of 209kmh to complete the section in just over 30minutes. Outside town areas, the NT has no speed limit.

Mr Wallis said the Porsche and the Ferrari passed each other several times and, on one stretch of road, the Ferrari was doing about 270kmh.

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The Ferrari again passed the Porsche, when the Porsche was slowing to come into a checkpoint staffed by volunteers.

Mr Wallis said he saw the car swerve on to gravel to the left of the road, then turn back on to the highway and crash, killing the two officials. He said he believed the Ferrari, the most powerful car in the event, was lost and did not know that the checkpoint was imminent.

Mr Wallis, from Sydney, said he had not raced a motor vehicle before and that participants were not questioned about their motoring qualifications. Asked by the coroner what qualifications he had to navigate the Porsche, he said: "I did a lot of mathematics at school."

Although the Cannonball Run continued after the fatal crash - with an imposed speed limit of 180kmh - Mr Wallis and the driver of the Porsche were too shaken to continue.

Mr John Hayward, who was watching the rally just out of Alice Springs, said he saw two cars - neither of which was involved in the accident - pass and miss a "little old lady driving a little old car" by a matter of inches.

The inaugural Cannonball Run, a six-day event from Darwin to Ayers Rock and back, was organised by the racing identity Mr Allan Moffat, who is due to give evidence during the two-week inquest.

