

# Murderous rampage of gay-hate gangs

Has Sydney overlooked an 'epidemic' of up to 80 murders motivated by the hatred of gay men? **Rick Feneley** investigates.

**D**avid McMahon is the gay man who got away. He will never forget the summer's night when a teenage gang ambushed and bashed him and dragged him to a Bondi cliff where their leader told him: "I'm gonna throw you over the side." In December 1989, the 24-year-old McMahon managed to escape and outrun his assailants among a mob of about 18 teenagers. They included four girls cheering on the boys. Other men did not get away from murderous gangs on the same cliff-top path. These cases have been widely publicised and were part of a wave of "poofter bashings" in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

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But NSW did not experience a mere wave of gay-hate crimes. "It was an epidemic," says Sue Thompson, a lawyer and the former NSW Police Force gay liaison co-ordinator. The epidemic extended to the Manly cliff-tops and the northern beaches and regional NSW, and might add up to almost 80 murders.

"Tragically," says Thompson, "in those cliff-top murders - often officially called suicides or accidents - the teenage bashing gangs were the experts and police the amateurs. It is time to right that wrong."

Thompson worked with Steve McCann and Steve Page, the two homicide squad detectives who exposed the flaws in the original police investigations that found

John Russell, 31, and a 25-year-old television newsreader Ross Warren fell accidentally to their deaths from the Bondi-Tamarama cliffs. In 2010, the first deputy state coroner Jacqueline Milledge found they were murdered and condemned the original investigations as "lacklustre" and "grossly inadequate and shameful".

During her 12 years in the gay liaison role, Thompson used police intelligence data to record 46 gay-hate murders in NSW between 1989 and 1999. The criminologist Stephen Tomsen supported that with his finding of 50 between 1985 and 1995. These statistics, as sensational as they were, never made big headlines. And they didn't go close to accounting for the full scale of the gay-hate murder rampage.

They were based only on reported homicides. They did not include cases explained away as "deaths by misadventure" or disappearances. They did not include any dismissed as suicides, such as the death of Scott Johnson, the 27-year-old gay mathematician found at the base of North Head in 1988 - and whose American family has finally convinced authorities that he may well have been murdered.

Thompson and Tomsen's tally of close to 80 cases spans from the late 1970s to the 90s. Almost 30 of them remain unsolved.

Secret police tapes captured teenagers convicted of killing one man boasting about their involvement in dozens of other gay bashings, but it was not enough evidence to charge them with a single other attack.

Former detective-sergeant Steve Page, now in corporate security, says society would not have accepted so many unexplained killings of women, children, teachers or doctors. "We dropped the ball," he says. But now the gay-hate gangs are approaching middle age. "They've been living with the

## Do you know what happened to these men?

These cases are unsolved murders, deaths or disappearances that have either been established or are highly likely to be, which may fit the category. A fuller list appears at [smh.com.au](http://smh.com.au), although it omits some of the almost 30 unsolved cases noted by the former police gay liaison co-ordinator Sue Thompson and the criminologist Stephen Tomsen, in some cases because the victims' families preferred not to be mentioned. Not all victims were necessarily gay. It is possible their killers mistook them for being gay.



**Gilles Mattaini**, 34, disappeared around Marks Park, Bondi-Tamarama, September 5, 1985 (coroner found in 2005 it was a likely murder).



**Raymond Keam**, 43, martial arts expert, savagely bashed in Alison Park, Randwick Park, January 13, 1987.



**Gerald Cuthbert**, 27, stabbed 64 times, Paddington unit, October 17, 1981

## Families want answers



Crispin Dye



Peter Sheil

Peter Sheil, 29, was not gay but his body was found in an area known as a gay beat, with his trousers removed, at the base of a cliff at Gordons Bay, north of Coogee, in April 1983. If Crispin Dye, 41, was gay, he also had attractive girlfriends and had been engaged to be married at one point. A long-time manager for rock group AC/DC, he was bashed to death near Taylor Square in 1993. Both men's families still don't know why they died. Is it possible they were killed because someone assumed they were gay? **They talk to the Herald as part of our investigation in Good Weekend.**



**Ross Warren**, 25, WIN TV news presenter, disappeared at Marks Park, Tamarama, July 22, 1989 (originally dismissed as accident, coronial finding of murder in 2005).



**John Russell**, 31, thrown from cliff, Marks Park at Bondi, November 24, 1989 (originally dismissed as accident, coronial finding of murder in 2005).



**Cyril Olsen**, 64, bashed, then fell into Rushcutters Bay and drowned, August 22, 1992.



**Scott Johnson**, 27, naked body found at base of North Head near Manly, December 9, 1988. Police announced \$100,000 reward in February this year after coroner overturned original finding of suicide.

**If you know anything that could help solve these cases, contact the Police Force's Crime Stoppers on 1800 333 000.**

guilt," says Page. "A few of them might want to relieve that burden and give these poor families some answers."

The head of the homicide squad declined to be interviewed. Instead, police issued

this statement: "A number of these deaths were investigated by Strike Force Taradale (headed by Page) and briefs put before the coroner, whose role it is to determine the cause of death. Investigations into the death of

Scott Johnson are being reviewed by the unsolved homicide team. If anyone has any information that could assist police in any of these matters they should contact Crime Stoppers."

David McMahon, almost 24

years after he was attacked, is reclaiming his name and putting it to this story. He refuses to live in terror. He hopes that some of his attackers, or their cheering spectators, can find as much courage. "If even one of

them has the guts to tell the truth, maybe we can solve some of these crimes."

**Do you know more?**  
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