

## MERCURY FEATURES

# Missing Persons:

## portraits of mystery and loss

**T**ELEVISION weatherman Ross Warren last month drove his car to South Bondi and then vanished. Little Renee Aitken was abducted from her Narooma home in 1984, never to be seen again. Kiama's Jacki-Lee Walsh disappeared without trace on April 14.

Grave fears are held for all three, and for hundreds of others who are listed by police as missing persons.

Police books are still open on all three cases, but as time passes, the less likely it becomes they will ever be solved.

Each year about 24,000 Australians are reported missing. Hundreds are never found — they simply vanish.

"They disappear like socks," a federal police officer said. "It's like they fall into a black hole."

Missing Persons Week is like a beacon for families hoping against time that their private puzzle will be solved; that displays in shopping centres and today's Operation Phone Home police hotline may uncover new clues and help resolve the mystery of why someone close left home or was taken away.

Ross Warren, 24, a WIN TV weatherman, disappeared on July 22. His brown Nissan car was found abandoned in Kenneth St, South Bondi, and his car keys were found on rocks near the beachline at Bondi the following Monday.

While police have found no trace of Warren, they are investigating reports that a relationship which went wrong could explain his disappearance. Murder, suicide or a staged disappearance are possible explanations.

If any missing person case troubles police more than others, it's the disappearance of tiny Renee Aitken. She was abducted by persons unknown for reasons unknown from under the nose of her mother, and while she slept alongside her brother Bradley, 8, in the same bed.

On February 16, 1984, the abductor entered the room, somehow lifted the child out of bed and disappeared into the night. She was never seen again.

No satisfactory explanation has ever been given for Renee's disappearance, though police at one stage believed the abductor and killer was already behind bars in a Melbourne jail, for other, unrelated sex crimes.

Police believe the child was probably sexually assaulted, murdered and her body buried somewhere near Narooma on the Far South Coast. Massive, repeated police searches failed to find any trace of the child.

Jacki-Lee Walsh, from Kiama, almost certainly disappeared because of some drug-related matter. She went missing on the morning of April 14 after failing to keep appointments at her bank and with a girlfriend the same day.

Her 1970 Torana car was found locked in the Open Hearth Hotel carpark at Warrawong. Later police examination found massive amounts of blood in the car boot. The theory is that from the quantity of blood a victim almost certainly bled to death.

In other cases there are no cars, no keys, no clues. The person is there one minute...

In November, 1982, Father Brian Jones' brother Tony disappeared. The last contact between the Catholic priest's family in Perth and Tony emanated from a phone box on the outskirts of Townsville.

Fr Jones carried out an exhaustive search for his brother but found nothing except the desire to improve the resources available to authorities, family and friends looking for missing people.

The priest found an ally in the Institute of Criminology in Canberra and last year, with the co-operation of Federal and State police forces, staged the first Missing Persons Week.

Last year 10 people were located as a result of Missing Persons Week, this year Fr Jones is hoping for more of the same.

But, as importantly, the priest believes by focusing on the issue, pressure might be brought to bear on politicians and bureaucrats to support the development of a cohesive national strategy on missing persons.

"For example, it's ridiculous that there is not a central computer where all missing persons are listed," he explained.

"Police need to get together. Instead, each State has its own file and its own methods of describing the missing person, sometimes they (the missing people) are just lumped together.

"There is a big difference between a kid lost in the bush and one running away from sexual abuse. And these days someone who goes missing in Perth is just as likely to turn up on the Gold Coast.

"It would make sense for all police to use the same file with the same extensive information about the missing person."

Federal police in Canberra have the system bearing the closest resemblance to a national file on reported missing persons.

Constable Steve Kent said the Federal Police computer was used to store material on missing people in the ACT and regular exchange of information with other forces resulted in the computer "flagging" some missing people as "persons of interest".

**H**OWEVER, the system does not contain a complete list of reported missing persons. Indeed, Federal police do not have a full-time investigative unit dedicated to tracking down people who have gone missing.

In NSW the missing persons bureau is well staffed and the officers have a good success rate but there are still hundreds of people who vanish and leave no trace.

In the financial year 1988-89, 4,303 people were reported missing, of which 2,299 were aged 15 years or less (1,187 males and 1,112 females).

Three hundred and seventy four of those people were yet to be located (136 under 15).

There were 68 reports of unidentified bodies, seven of which remained unidentified.

Sergeant Peter Bird said the unit's work could be frustrating. Even when police manage to track someone down they are not always in a

position to alleviate the concerns of the person's family and friends.

"If they are adults all you can do is ask them to let people know they're alive, but they don't have to do anything once they're over 16," he said.

Victorian police contend with a problem of a similar scale. Between 1978 and 1987 more than 58,000 Victorians were reported missing.

More than 120 are still missing and 46 of those are believed to have been murdered or drowned.

According to the Queensland Police Department's annual report for 1988, there were 167 adults and 119 juveniles listed as missing as at June 30 that year. The Department figures showed that a total of 3,763 persons were reported missing during the year and 3,477 were located — a "success rate" of 92.4 per cent.

Perhaps the most frightening statistic is the unknown number of people who have disappeared and have not been missed.

"There are about 12,000 kids living in the streets around Sydney and nobody knows who they belong to or where they come from," said Fr Jones.

The frightening reality that thousands of run-away or "throwaway" teenagers lived on city streets was confirmed by Human Rights Commissioner Brian Burdekin's homelessness report released earlier this year.

Police and welfare authorities believe many of these children had previously been victims of physical and mental abuse in the family home and had run away to escape that horror.

But some children just leave.

They leave their families and friends, their schools and jobs, and they leave an emptiness in the hearts of those who loved them and live to hear from them just one more time.

Of the 24,000 people reported missing in Australia each year the whereabouts of only a few hundred remains a mystery forever.

But for the families and friends of the disappeared, the pain of "not knowing" is perhaps worse than the news that their loved one has been found dead or injured.

"The not knowing is unbelievably painful. You can never get on peacefully with your life," Fr Jones said.

He said there were many different "types" of missing persons from sick elderly people who disappear to the sexually abused teenager trying to escape.

Police had to investigate cases which ranged from small children who wandered off to young men who inexplicably disappeared.

"The only thing many have in common is the pain experienced by the people left behind," he said.

Since his brother's disappearance, Fr Jones and his family have experienced all the traumas associated with being the kin of a missing person.

"There have been sightings, here and there, but we have discounted all of them except for one and that was on the night he rang home from Townsville.

"But you still think 'what if,'" he said.

— By BARRY BENJAMIN, and GREG TRUMAN, of AAP

● Operation Phone Home numbers are 698 7888 or 008 025 091.



● Ross Warren, 24, disappeared on July 22, 1989. Abandoned car found at South Bondi.



● Renee Aitken, five years-old, abducted on February 16, 1984, from her Narooma home.



● Jacki-Lee Walsh, 21, disappeared on April 14, 1989. Car later found at Warrawong.