

Guilty plea in gay-hate killing

By ROBERT

BONDI BLOODLANS

Fourteen years ago, a spate of vicious gay hate crimes bloodied the cliffs of Bondi, but many of the teenage killers – male *and* female – got off scot-free. Now, one dedicated detective is hunting them down.

The pathway skirting the cliffs between Bondi and Tamarama beaches in Sydney's upmarket eastern suburbs seems too spectacular a setting to have the stench of murder hanging over it. By day it's crowded with suntanned locals, smartly dressed tourists and visiting Hollywood stars, but it was here in the late 1980s that a handful of young men were bashed and dragged screaming to their deaths after nightfall. Men such as television newsreader Ross Warren, whose belongings were discovered on a sea ledge after he went missing in July 1989, and barman John Russell, whose body was found at the foot of the same cliffs four months later, his right hand still clutching a clump of his killer's hair. There were others.

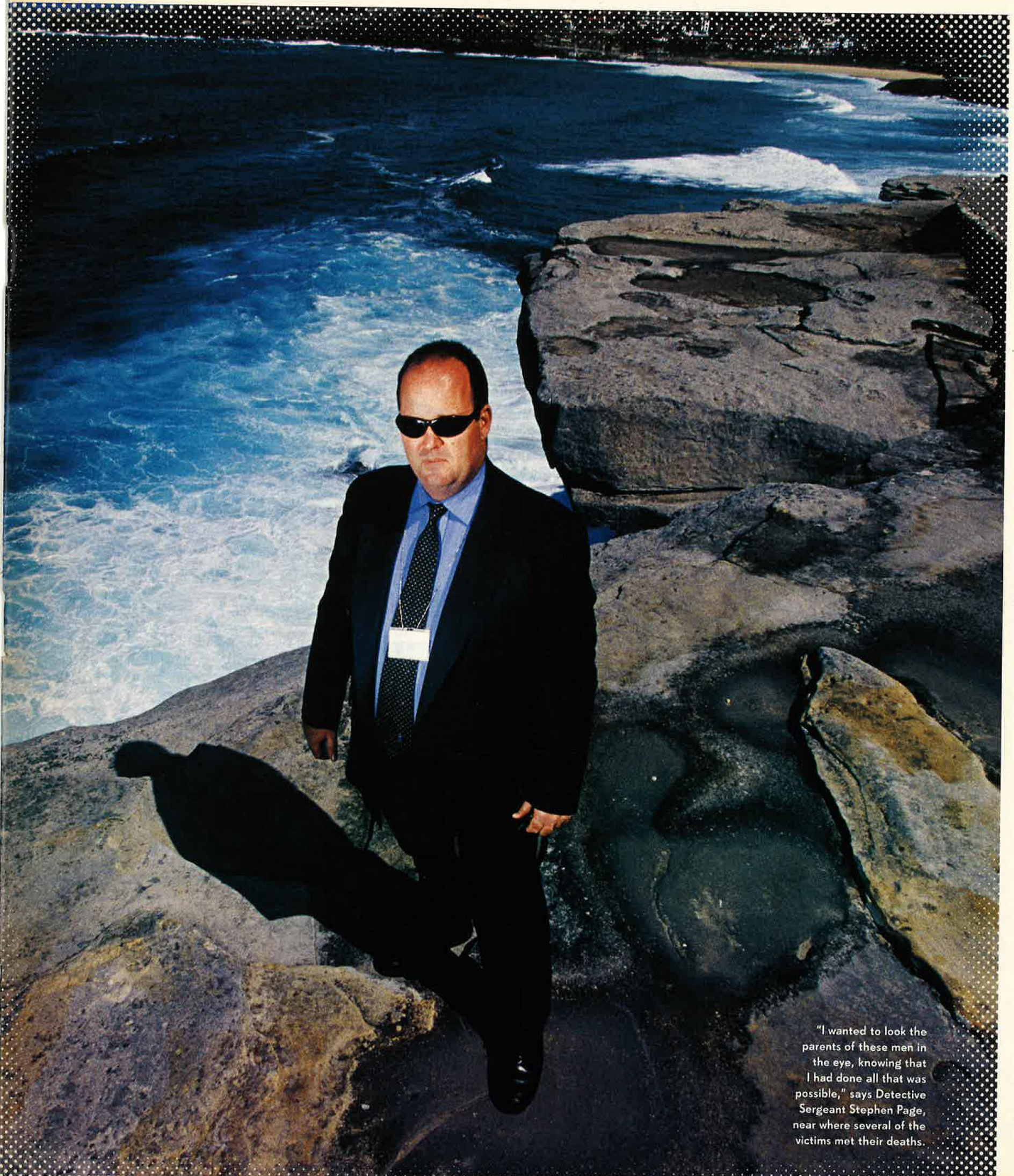
The exact circumstances of these hellish deaths may never be known, but what has become abundantly clear is that a gang of teenage thugs, some as young as 14, was engaged in a murder spree, and that this shadowy cliffside walk – then a popular gay beat – was their favoured killing field. One of them would act as bait, enticing a gay man into the bushes for sex. The victim would then be surrounded by ten or more others who attacked him with fists, boots, claw hammers, whatever crude instrument came to hand.

Using these trademarked tactics, the Bondi Boys, who nicknamed themselves PTK (People That Kill), joined

other local gangs in slaughtering up to eight young men and bashing countless others at beats across inner Sydney. The impulse for this spree? Pure hate. These teenage death squads saw "gaffs" (gang slang for male homosexuals) as soft targets, men whose fear of being outed meant they were unlikely to go to the police. Beats were popular not so much with openly gay males, but with married bisexuals and closeted young men who would not identify as homosexual or think of going to a gay bar. The stony silence on all fronts – police relations with the gay community were poor back then – ensured an open season for bashers and killers. What brought a couple of the perpetrators unstuck, however, was their macho gloating about "killing fags".

Some of them are still out there. Three men have been jailed for murder and a group of others for unrelated drugs crimes, but the rest are leading clean suburban lives, raising kids, maybe planning their next holiday. And not all of them are male. Do the women now tucking in their children at night ever picture themselves as teenagers, goading their boyfriends to crush ribs and break jaws, laughing as a man's liver is split in two? The pop psych explanation – that these kids must have come from troubled backgrounds – doesn't always stand up to scrutiny. Some of the killers came from broken homes, others from loving, middle-class families; one, who denied in the Coroner's Court any involvement in the bashings – and is not a murder

STORY **GREG CALLAGHAN**
PORTRAIT **ANDY BAKER**



"I wanted to look the parents of these men in the eye, knowing that I had done all that was possible," says Detective Sergeant Stephen Page, near where several of the victims met their deaths.

This is a story about gay men being beaten to death. It's also about the slow road to justice for their distraught families, beginning with their angry disbelief at the initial investigations, when police not only failed to link a series of awfully similar murders, but lost or destroyed vital forensic evidence. And it's about the ferocious single-mindedness of one police officer, Detective Sergeant Stephen Page of Sydney's Paddington Police Station. Moved by a series of letters from Ross Warren's mother, Kay, Page revived the investigation as Sydney parted to the Olympics in 2000, and spent the next two years piecing together a dark mosaic of murder.

THE BURLY DETECTIVE IS SITTING IN HIS OFFICE SURROUNDED BY shoulder-high stacks of cardboard boxes, his proof of evidence. Page's Operation Taradale collected up to 3000 pages of witness testimony, not including his own 270-page statement, which culminated in a coronial inquest this year. Those inquests won him warm praise from the coroner, but not a lot besides.

Page is a modest, circumspect man who says a lot by saying little. You won't catch him using words like "sloppy" or "grossly unprofessional" to describe the original non-investigations.

But here's what the lives of these murdered men amounted to in the eyes of the Bondi Police in 1989. Ross Warren? A four-page statement on his disappearance was not even forwarded to the Missing Persons Unit. John Russell? A clump of hair, gripped in Russell's right hand, with the roots still attached, was lost by police, who also had his clothes washed without any forensic analysis. There were no comprehensive doorknocks, no police divers, not even an appointed investigator, despite angry protestations in court to the contrary by Kenneth Bowditch, who was head of Bondi detectives at the time of the murders.

As Page tells it, a professional murder investigation is not just about achieving justice for the victims' ghosts: it's about giving closure to the living. "I wanted to look the parents of these men in the eye, knowing I had done all that was possible." He recalls reading those letters from Kay Warren. "Kay didn't think for a moment her son had committed suicide. She knew Ross was gay, believed he had met with foul play, but ten years after his death just wanted an inquest held so she could attend to his effects and estate."

The 25-year-old Wollongong newsreader was in typically fine fettle on the night he disappeared - Friday, July 21, 1989 - having driven up to Sydney to spend the weekend with his best friend, Craig Ellis. Over a pizza that evening at Ellis's inner-city apartment, Warren enthused about an upcoming job interview with Network Ten in Sydney, which he saw as his big break. As he left later that night to meet a colleague for a beer, Warren made firm plans to see a movie with Ellis the following evening. But he didn't show.

Ellis knew "something terrible had happened" the moment he called WIN 4 studios in Wollongong on Sunday afternoon, to be informed by panicking staff that Warren hadn't turned up to read his scheduled 5pm bulletin. Feeling sick to his stomach, Ellis drove to Marks Park, adjoining the cliff face - Warren was known to go there "every few months" - and pulled into a parking spot directly behind Warren's brown Nissan Pulsar, which was locked. He spent the next couple of hours scouring the cliff face before he saw something that drained the blood from his face - his friend's car keys, glinting on a sea ledge at the bottom of the cliffs.

After talking to Ellis and other friends of Warren, and sifting through carbonised police and coroner's reports, Page quickly came to share Kay Warren's conviction: this young man did not kill himself. It was a

and brutal gay bashings at the Bondi-Iamarama cliff face between 1989 and 1990.

Only one of these deaths - that of a Thai national, Kritchikorn Rattanajurathaporn, who had fallen off the cliffs in January 1990 while fleeing his assailants - had led to a murder investigation. In that case, the victim was with his partner, who was bashed unconscious but survived to testify. Three men - brothers **NP22 & NP23** and schoolmate **NP24** - were sentenced to 20 years' jail (they are due for parole next year).

But it was the unsolved death of Bondi barman John Russell, whose body was found in November 1989, four months after Warren's disappearance, that grabbed Page's immediate attention.

Page still remembers the forensic expert's first chilling words as they pored over the photographs: "This guy didn't fall face down." They were looking at black-and-white images of John Russell's body lying in a pool of blood at the bottom of the Bondi cliff.

To Page, the photographs bore the hallmarks of murder - not "misadventure", as the files claimed. By brutal coincidence, when he contacted the Russell family to tell them he was re-opening the investigation, he realised he knew the victim's father. They'd met briefly in 1994, in different circumstances, and got along well.

Like Kay Warren, Ted Russell was convinced his son had been murdered. "There was no way he would have committed suicide," Ted told Page matter-of-factly. His son had inherited nearly \$100,000 from his grandfather only weeks before his death, and planned to build his dream home on the NSW Central Coast - he was just about to start a new life on his dad's farm at Wollombi, just south of the Hunter Valley, in the meantime. He was on an all-time high.

From long talks with Ted, Page drew an image of Russell's character. Like generations of Russells - the family ran cake shops in the beachside suburb in the 1950s and '60s - John was Bondi born and bred. He grew up in a large, rambling home only minutes from the beach. At the time of his death, the 31-year-old shared a flat in Ocean Street with his younger brother Peter, a single father with a nine-year-old son who "saw John as a father". Although shortish and slim, John Russell was no pussyfoot, according to his father. "He could have defended himself against one or two, but against a pack of six or ten? No-one can do that."

Russell never made a fuss about his sexuality, but if he felt comfortable in someone's presence, he would open up. He was "a regular type of bloke" who enjoyed fishing and coaching the local junior rugby league team, the Rose Bay Rams. "If he was sitting here now," says Ted, "you'd never spot him for being gay."

Russell's best mate, "Dino" (he didn't want his full name used), was

evening in November and the pair, who had known one another since they were teenagers, had met for a few farewell beers at the Bondi Hotel. Russell was "typical John", cracking jokes and looking forward to "going bush" with his inheritance. The pair planned to hook up again the following night at the nearby Waverley Legion Club, where a group of friends were to toast Russell's farewell.

But he never showed up, either. When Dino farewelled his old mate that Wednesday evening, he watched him cross the road to the beach. Dino can't say why Russell decided to do the cliff walk. Certainly, he knew how dangerous it could be at night. His friends had occasionally wound up with black eyes and broken ribs as a result of attacks in the area. There was also Russell's deep contempt for gay bashers and their pack mentality. "They're gutless," he once fumed, "and would never take you on one-on-one because it might mean getting hurt themselves."

Maybe it was his way of saying farewell to Bondi, maybe it was the booze reducing his inhibitions, but as Russell headed toward the cliffs that night, he was a dead man walking.

Peter didn't worry too much when his brother wasn't at home the next morning. "Sometimes John would go to Oxford Street [Sydney's gay mile] and if he struck it lucky, you wouldn't see him until the following afternoon." But Peter became seriously concerned that night, when he heard John had failed to turn up for his farewell drinks. When Ted arrived late the next morning to pick John up - they were heading off to Wollombi that afternoon - Peter had already been to the morgue to identify his brother's body.

An inquest into Russell's death, held two months later, lasted just 23 minutes. The only person who gave evidence was a sergeant from Bondi. Death by misadventure, they called it, consigning the young man's memory to that loose catch-all which is so often a euphemism for suicide.

Some months later, Russell's family was presented with his freshly laundered clothes. It was a particularly painful moment for Peter: "We had lived together all our lives. That was what I was left with. If I had known back then that they didn't even send them off for forensic analysis, I would have thrown 'em back in their faces."

How did the original investigation become so tragically muddled, Peter asked Page. "How come the media were on to it - there were newspaper stories about it being a possible gay murder - but the police weren't? Back then, anything that was gay-related was swept under the carpet." Dino feels the same way: "I gave one statement to Bondi Police shortly after his death and didn't hear from them again. They didn't seem too interested."



Ross Warren



John Russell



Gilles Mattaini



Kritchikorn Rattanajurathaporn

Justice for their ghosts:
"It's important we do the very best for these men," declared coroner Jacqueline Milledge, "for they were loved and they were decent men."

Warren's disappearance 11 years after the event was daunting enough; linking it with John Russell's death and a string of other bashings and murders proved a major headache for Page, who methodically set about organising doorknocks, police divers and phone taps of suspects in and out of prison. He also consulted a tides expert at the University of NSW who checked records for Bondi on the night of July 21, 1989. Conclusion: in the stiff currents, Warren's body would have been swept into the churning Pacific within a few hours.

After a steel pipe fished out from below a sea ledge at Tamarama proved to be identical to ones used in gay bashings in the inner-city suburbs of Alexandria and Centennial Park, only a few kilometres from Bondi, Page began joining the dots. He came across the case of Richard Johnson, a gay man who had been kicked and beaten to death in January 1990 by the so-called "Alexandria 8" after being lured into a park. Two men, **NP19** and **NP16**, were already in jail for Johnson's murder.

Page checked bugged conversations recorded in 1991 as part of the Johnson investigation and stumbled across the following: "He should have gone off the cliff

or disappearances at that time were in fact gay hate crimes," says Page. In hate crimes, he explains, people kill to make a point: we *hate* gays (or blacks, or Jews, or Asians), they don't deserve to live and this is what we do to them. "Hate crimes aren't about money – although they can involve robbery – or jealous rage or desperation," Page says. "They're about frenzied violence. Weapons used in gay murders over the past decade include a saw, a fire extinguisher, a spade, a wheel brace and a crossbow. "Back in the '70s and '80s, poofster bashing was a sport." Page pauses. "A blood sport."

The full horror of the problem became painfully apparent to Page once he staged the re-enactment, and reports of more gay bashings in the late '80s flooded in. But there was one that stood out from the others: a cliff-side bashing in December 1989 in which the assailants were foiled. Page had found what he hoped would be the ultimate witness: the man who got away.

"THROW THE POOFSTER OFF! THROW HIM OFF!" YELLED one. "C'mon, let's do it where we threw the other one off," barked another as ten or 12 crazed teens took turns dragging their victim 500 metres along the concrete

only two metres from where Russell had been pushed to his death a month earlier. Rick had the luck of the gods, however: after he punched one of his attackers in the belly, there was a moment's meltdown. Glimpsing a break in the crowd, he flew up a staircase to nearby Fletcher Street. Bloodied and frantic, he cried out to a man on a balcony, who was moving to the thump of rock music. "I don't help poofsters," the man yelled back.

If anything, Page's investigation is a potent symbol of how relations between the gay community and the police department have improved. Gay and lesbian police liaison officers are now active in most states – NSW alone has more than 120 on duty – and, according to NSW Assistant Police Commissioner Mark Goodwin, relations with gay community groups are now so strong, "it's what we don't know that concerns us – the assaults that aren't reported to us".

The prevention of such assaults, says Brad Gray, head of the NSW Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence project, lies in education that counters preconceptions about gays. While Sydney's Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, and TV shows such as *Will and Grace*, might create the perception of sunny, live-and-let-live tolerance toward gay

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that night ... we went down and put a cigarette butt out on his head." This was **NP19** mouthing off about another bashing in Centennial Park. Also mentioned on the tape was Darrell Trindall, a former first-grade rugby league player with the Canterbury Bulldogs. "You were there when we got the guy with the wig," **NP16** replied. "There was Trindall, me, Sharkey and Brad. They'd belted him at Moore Park ... and took his wig. Trindall pissed in it, and they chucked it in a hollow tree." (Trindall gave evidence at the coronial inquiry in March. Page says he is not a person of interest in relation to the murders.)

Page now faced several knots of suspects – some of them murderers, some not – and when he set about organising more than 70 phone taps, the picture grew even more complicated. By late 2001, what he needed was some fresh witnesses. That's when he thought of a re-enactment. "Some of my colleagues thought it odd to hold a re-enactment 12 years after John [Russell] was killed," confesses Page. "But I didn't care. I needed to pique fresh interest in the case and keep the momentum of the investigation going."

The gamble hit paydirt. Dramatic images of a dummy dressed in Russell's clothes being tossed off the cliff made the evening news and morning papers. A small army of new witnesses presented themselves, but sadly, the stunt unveiled yet another likely murder, this one of a French national, Gilles Mattaini, who disappeared in September 1985, last seen setting off on the Bondi-Tamarama walk.

A warm-up to the other murders? Page doubts it, but he hasn't ruled out the possibility of an earlier, older gang of killers sharing loose connections – or perhaps murder strategies – with the youths who killed Russell and Warren. The Mattaini case had additional poignancy: his family in France had disowned him because of his homosexuality; they hadn't even considered his life worthwhile enough to register him missing. Meanwhile, a missing person's report lodged by a close friend was wrongly filed, so that 16 years later, when the friend contacted Page after watching the re-enactment, not a single record of Mattaini's mysterious disappearance could be found.



Ted Russell and his surviving son, Peter: "John could have defended himself against one or two, but against a pack of six or ten? No-one can do that."

path and up three staircases to a peak on the cliff face.

"Rick", who wants his name suppressed because so many of his attackers are still "out there", gave Page a grim account of having his jaw cracked open and his body battered by kicks and punches. What burned into his memory most, however, were the girls, cheering on and goading their boyfriends. He remembers the whites of their eyes, high on hatred.

A young waiter at the time, Rick was out for his routine run that steamy summer's night. He had just passed the famous Bondi Icebergs swimming pool when he was set upon by a group of teenagers lurking in a cave. Yes, he quietly answers, he knew it was a gay beat; yes, he had read about Warren's disappearance and Russell's death; yes, he knew it was dangerous. Why, then, did he expose himself to so much risk? "Because you never think it will happen to you."

Now 38, Rick told his story this year to the coronial inquest which flowed from Operation Taradale. He

men, the reality, says Gray, is that we still live in a culture that stereotypes and dehumanises homosexuals.

The prejudice that begins with verbal taunts in the playground can evolve into soul-destroying harassment in later life. Or worse. Gay men are still being attacked – it's estimated more than 50 have been killed in NSW alone over the past 15 years. And the violence continues. Last year, Terry Trethowan, CEO of the AIDS Trust of Australia, spent three weeks in hospital after being bashed on Oxford Street.

While the net has yet to close sufficiently for specific charges to be laid over the murders of Warren and Russell, Page has succeeded in pinning 14 men – all members of the Bondi Boys and the Alexandria 8 – on lesser charges. One of them will be sentenced on drugs charges next month. "I would have liked to have finalised this with a couple of homicide prosecutions, but at least most of them are off the streets," Page says. "After all, they couldn't pin Al Capone as a gangster but they finally got him on tax evasion."

Among the questions that linger: who was the gang's ringleader? Although "Rick" is "70 per cent sure" he knows who it is – he saw the man at the inquest – "it's not absolute enough to convict". Ted Russell feels the same: "I think John's killer was in the Coroner's Court. Some have been put behind bars but I don't think the ringleader is one of them."

Exhausted by the investigations, Page has thought about leaving the force. But he and his team are adamant: "This case is not over. We'll keep digging and we could still come up with some new evidence. I haven't given up hope John's murderer will be charged."

In her closing statement at the coronial inquiry on September 10, Senior Deputy State Coroner Jacqueline Milledge delivered her findings, to be formalised next month: John Russell, formerly and unsatisfactorily listed as a victim of misadventure, is now deemed to have met with foul play, removing any suggestion of suicide. Ross Warren, finally and formally, is deceased; his missing persons file was closed, perhaps also giving some sense of closure to his mother, Kay. "It's important we do the very best for these men," declared Milledge, "for they were loved and they were decent men." ☉