

Easy game, not only for vicious gang but for police intimidation

As a gay murder epidemic claimed as many as 80 lives over 20 years, many survivors of bashings lost all trust in police. Two victims tell Rick Feneley why.

‘Sport for some coppers was chasing blokes around toilets and either arresting gays, beating them or both.’

Former police officer

‘I was a young gay man, Catholic upbringing,’ says Patrick*. ‘I lived with my parents on Sydney’s northern beaches. I had no contact with other gay men.’

Patrick soon learned where to find them. It was 1981 and he was 19. He had been to boarding school. His homosexuality was still his secret. But gay liberation was changing the lives of men and women who had long repressed their sexuality. Now many men found convenient venues for expressing it: the gay beats, often parks and public toilets, where they could meet for casual and – if they wished – anonymous sex.

“So I stumbled upon the beats on the northern beaches,” recalls Patrick, now 51. There was graffiti on the walls, men loitering. “It was a bit of a heyday. There was very busy beat at Narrabeen, at the bus terminus there. There was another very busy one in the toilet block at Collaroy Beach.”

It was here, after a Saturday night dinner with friends, that Patrick encountered a gang of youths. It was about 1.30am when he parked his car and went into the toilet block. “It was unusually busy,” he says, perhaps six or seven gay men meeting inside. The block had a door at either end.

“There was a commotion and shouting at one end, and I heard people scuttling from various cubicles and running away.” He was the only gay man left in the toilets.

“I froze in my cubicle. I waited until I thought things had calmed down and people had left, so I was in there a couple of minutes. As I opened the door to my cubicle and stepped out, I got a baseball bat straight across my face. I was

stung by that and staggered out of the cubicle, and there was a group of six or seven guys about my age, late teens to early 20s, who proceeded to kick the shit out of me. They screamed the usual things: ‘Faggot! Filthy bastard. What do you think you’re doing here? Kill the c---.’

“After they got bored and moved outside, I picked myself up off the floor. As I staggered out the front of the toilet block towards my car, blood streaming down my face, the guys saw me coming out and started to head towards me again. Their car was parked immediately behind mine. But as they approached me and started screaming abuse again, their girlfriends jumped out of the car and ran up and grabbed them and started bashing them on the chest, saying: ‘Leave him alone. Look what you’ve done. Look what you’ve done.’ They jumped in their car and took off.”

They left Patrick with a broken nose, black eyes and split lip, cracked ribs, bruising around his ribs, back and kidneys. He did not go to hospital or report it to police. “I had to drive home and try to explain to my parents and brother what had happened.” He lied. “I said I was visiting a friend at Beecroft and stopped for a piss on the Wakehurst Parkway and got bashed up.”

As reported in the *Herald’s* Good Weekend magazine, as many as 80 men were murdered in an “epidemic” of gay-hate crimes from the late 1970s to ‘80s. Almost 30 of those cases remain unsolved.

It would be another couple of years before Patrick came out. He had another reason not to tell police. They had been “endlessly roaming around the toilets to bust gay men having consensual sex. I was busted several times. I was never charged but they’d take your driver’s licence, push you up against the wall, call you a filthy faggot. ‘Get home to your parents.’ It wasn’t policing. It was harassment.”

Almost a decade later Patrick did seek police help. He and a friend had gone to Marks Park on the Bondi-Tamarama cliff tops, a popular gay beat and a regular haunt for youth gangs of “poofter bashers” who found easy prey there. Patrick can’t be sure of the year but it was between 1989 and 1991. Now we know that was the height of a murderous rampage in the same park, when John Russell and Kritchikorn Rattanajurathaporn were thrown from the cliffs and when, according to a coronial finding in 2005, missing men Ross Warren and Gilles Mattaini were likely to have suffered a similar fate. Police originally dismissed the Warren and Russell cases as accidental falls.

Patrick and his friend had split up in the park, to find other company, but then saw youths assaulting and abusing other gay men. They decided to leave. “These guys started throwing bottles at our car.” They had a car phone so called police for help. They never arrived.

Patrick is a donor father to two children. Otherwise he would put his real name to this story, but he thinks the children are too young to be confronted with it.

A former detective who dealt with a severe bashing of a middleaged man at the Collaroy toilets, about the same time, thinks Patrick was “wise not to report” his bashing. The former officer says: “Sport for some coppers was chasing blokes around toilets and either arresting gays, beating them or both. The only reason we got involved with the other guy at Collaroy is that our dear leaders feared he may die, and thus boxes needed to be ticked ... there was a sigh of relief when he didn’t want to talk – or keel over. Isn’t that a sad state of affairs. A bloody awful time.” * Not his real name.