



Was Scott Johnson's 1988 death a suicide or a gay hate crime?

By [Emma Alberici](#)

Posted Mon 12 Dec 2016 at 4:56pm, updated Tue 3 Jan 2017 at 11:37am



The third inquest into the death of Scott Johnson starts this week. *(Supplied: NSW Police)*

On December 10, 1988, 27-year-old American Scott Johnson was found dead at the base of the cliffs at North Head in Manly, Sydney.

Since that day, Scott's heartbroken older brother Steve Johnson has reportedly spent up to a million dollars on private detectives looking for a murderer who NSW Police are confident does not exist.

A first inquest in 1989, held before then deputy state coroner Derrick Hand, found Scott jumped from the cliff at North Head with the intention of taking his own life.

There had been no evidence of anyone else being present and no injuries at autopsy other than those that could be explained by the fall.

Key points:

- A third inquest into Scott Johnson's death will begin this week
- Scott's partner believes he committed suicide
- Scott's brother Steve, a tech millionaire, has hired lawyers and private investigators to prove it wasn't suicide
- There are no witnesses to Scott's death

Scott was found naked and his clothes, watch, cash card, student travel pass, money, pen, comb and key were neatly placed together some 10 metres back from the edge of the cliff.

There was also evidence he had previously attempted suicide.

In a second inquest in 2012, former deputy state coroner Carmel Forbes overturned the 1989 finding.

Ms Forbes said knowledge gained in the intervening years showed that the area where Scott's clothes were found was a "gay beat" — a place men met for casual sex.

It had also become apparent that there was a culture of violence against the gay community in Sydney in the late 1980s.

Still the evidence did not allow her to make a finding as to how he fell to his death.

On Tuesday, December 13, Coroner Michael Barnes will begin hearing representations from both sides as they embark on a near unprecedented third inquest into Scott's death.

Scott Johnson's death was referred to the NSW Police's Unsolved Homicide team for investigation.



Scott Johnson's clothes were found folded at the top of the cliff. (Supplied: NSW Police)



North Head at Manly in north Sydney. (Flickr: Adam Foster)

Unsolved homicide team takes on the case

The protocol for managing and prioritising the 700-strong caseload is to balance the principal of equal justice for all deceased persons and the likely solvability of the case.

Given the lack of evidence specific to Scott's death, the case was deferred in preference to other cases.

On February 12, 2013, the office of then NSW Police minister Mike Gallacher contacted the Commander of the Homicide Squad, Michael Willing.

The minister had spoken to the now world-renowned internet pioneer Steve Johnson and on account of that conversation requested a reinvestigation of Scott's death.

Strike Force Macnamir was formed and Pamela Young — one of the state's most respected detectives — was assigned to lead the case.

A two-year investigation by Detective Chief Inspector Young uncovered no evidence to support a finding of murder.

In her 439-page report, Chief Inspector Young made extensive reference to the 2005 police operation Taradale, which revealed the deaths of three gay men in 1989 were as a result of them being forced to their deaths from cliffs at a gay beat in Bondi.

She found no evidence of similar violence against gay men at the cliffs in Manly.

Criminologists concluded the rough and rocky terrain made it improbable that criminals would risk their own lives to commit acts of gay hate at North Head.

In a candid interview with Lateline, Chief Inspector Young expressed the view that Steve had improperly used his influence as a wealthy businessman to successfully lobby state and federal politicians and ultimately the NSW Police minister to have his brother's case re-opened.

"He called me in for a meeting after he'd arranged it with the Johnson family and I — my input wasn't invited or welcome — but I saw a lot of what I would describe as kowtowing by the minister [Gallacher] and his staffers to Steve Johnson in particular.

"I was amazed and incredulous. I didn't understand. I was quite confused. I wasn't understanding what was happening.



NSW Detective Chief Inspector Pamela Young speaks on Lateline. (ABC News)

"I did think the process and how we helped families to understand what's possible is to manage their expectations.

"Steve Johnson arrived with very high expectations about finding that Scott had been murdered and my role is to help them see that that might not always be possible if there's not the evidence there."

Chief Inspector Young is one of the most senior police officers in the state with a stellar reputation among her peers.

She is described as professional, intelligent, admired, tough, committed and without compromise, responsible for investigating the most complex crimes including the 2011 deaths of 11 residents at the Quakers Hill nursing home and the Family Law Court Bombings in the 1980s.

She told Lateline she had been involved in at least 300 cases in her 30-year career and had great respect for victims' families.

"Now, the minister didn't ask, but I have the responsibility of hundreds of families who expect thorough reviews and expect successful reinvestigations," she said.

"They have lost loved ones too. And they come from all walks of life. Some are not as well off as others.

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- [Kids Helpline](#) on 1800 551 800
- [Beyond Blue](#) on 1300 224 636
- [Suicide Call Back Service](#) on 1300 659 467
- [Headspace](#) on 1800 650 890
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- [MensLine Australia](#) on 1300 789 978
- [Care Leavers Australasia Network \(CLAN\)](#) on 1800 008 774
- [Head to Health](#) at headtohealth.gov.au

"My role and the role of the commander of the homicide squad is to treat them equally.

"It is about their loss of a family member. It's not about who they are, who they influence, their status or a network that they have."

Her work with Strike Force Macnamir involved a review of 30 unsolved NSW deaths referred to her by Steve's team of private investigators

Chief Inspector Young could find no link between those and Scott's death.

After an exhaustive investigation, only eight were found to be unsolved and possibly the result of gay-hate-related crimes.

None of the bodies were found in Manly where Scott met his death.

A so-called "confession" and sources claiming knowledge of Scott's "killing" were discredited, uncorroborated or proved to be unreliable.

Chief Inspector Young and her team reviewed thousands of historical crime reports to substantiate assumptions about a "gay hate crime epidemic" in Manly, but the only evidence of violence at North Head involved 21-year-old Richard Milton who pleaded guilty to the stabbing of Brian Thomson at North Head in 1986.

Immediately before the crime, the pair had engaged in consensual sex.

Mr Milton served a prison sentence between February 4, 1986 and March 3, 1989 and is therefore not a suspect in the death of Scott.

Close brothers

From the age of eight, Scott lived across the road from Disneyland, but his home in Los Angeles was anything but the happiest place on Earth.



Scott and Steve Johnson grew up in California. *(Supplied: Steve Johnson)*

It was the late 1960s and early 1970s when being gay in California was still a crime.

According to Steve Johnson, their mother's boyfriend thought Scott was a "sissy".

Long before Scott had come out to his family as gay and while he was still just a boy, his step-father was trying to "correct him" and "make him a man".

With age, Scott became shy and introverted, immersing himself in his education.

By his mid-20s Scott was an accomplished mathematician and had begun exploring his homosexuality, aware that it would continue to be a source of tension within his family.

On his last trip back to the United States before his death, Scott made no contact with his parents.

Throughout their tortured upbringing, the Johnson brothers became increasingly co-dependent.

Scott and his big brother Steve shared a passion for hiking and long distance running.

They also took identical career paths, finding a common thrill in the early discoveries of computer coding.

Not long after Scott's death at the base of the cliffs at Manly, his brother found phenomenal success as an early internet pioneer.

He had commercialised the world-first algorithm he had developed with Scott that made it possible to send photos over the internet.

That discovery and its eventual sale to AOL made Steve an enormously wealthy and revered entrepreneur.

Steve's status as a successful internet pioneer finds him mixing in circles of influence.



A school picture of Scott Johnson. (Supplied: Johnson family)



Scott and Steve Johnson as young men. (*Supplied: Johnson family*)

Democratic senators Edward Kennedy and Elizabeth Warren wrote letters to state MPs and ministers claiming there had been a gross error in the initial police investigation and calling for another inquest.

In his 2013 statement to police, Steve spoke proudly of how effective his prodding of police and authorities had been in having his brother's case re-opened:

"Because this nuisance of an American won't shut up about this case and he has all these important friends, then I guess we better have an inquest. And so an inquest was scheduled."

Steve 'did not fully accept Scott's sexuality'

Scott moved to Australia in 1986 to be with his partner, now a professor in the US, who he met two years earlier while studying at Cambridge University in the UK.



Scott was a talented mathematician. *(Supplied: NSW Police)*

They fell quickly and deeply in love, but Scott did not find the courage early in the relationship to share the good news with his brother.

According to Scott's partner, the Johnson brothers' relationship was "bordering on abnormal" in that they were incredibly close and would often keep to themselves.

After Scott's death, he told police:

"The esteem of his brother was the most important thing in his life."

When Scott did finally tell his brother about his relationship, as feared, his partner said Steve Johnson did not appear to approve and nothing since that time had made him feel that Steve accepted him or his relationship with Scott.

In a 2015 interview with Lateline, Steve Johnson rejected suggestions he was not supportive of Scott's relationship with his gay partner.

In his statement to police, he said Scott was concerned that Steve "did not seem fully accepting of [Scott's] sexuality".

He met his then-partner's cherished brother Steve just once before Scott's death despite being in a relationship with Scott for almost five years.

When the pair travelled to America as unemployed students, they weren't invited to stay at Steve's home.

When asked about this, Steve explained that there was no room — his house was too small.

The day of Scott's death

When Scott was discovered by fisherman at the bottom of the Manly cliffs he was naked and his clothes were neatly folded roughly 10 metres from the cliff top.

His brother Steve told police a Scotland Yard detective had remarked that he had never heard of a "jumper" taking his life naked "so you don't take your clothes off to jump off a cliff".

In contrast to this view, the Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law published [a report in 2008 reviewing naked suicides](#).

It reported that a "review of suicide cases in litigation revealed that an estimated 5 to 8 per cent had completed suicide while naked". At least a proportion of those cases included "jumpers".

The idea of Scott suiciding troubles Steve because no note or explanation could be found for such an hypothesis. [Two thirds of people](#) who suicide do not leave notes.

In media interviews, Steve is adamant his brother could only have been of positive mind in that first week of December in 1988.



Scott Johnson's identity cards were inside his clothing at the top of North Head. (Supplied: NSW Police)



Steve Johnson at North Head in Manly, where his brother Scott died. (*Lateline: Emma Alberici*)

He claims Scott had received good news from his PhD supervisor who had accepted that Scott had solved a category theory problem — a crucial hurdle before completing his doctorate in mathematics.

Steve Johnson has said that Scott had "completed" his PhD and received the good news confirming that on the day he disappeared.

In his own evidence, Scott's PhD supervisor recalls it differently. The supervisor told the coroner he had had only a brief conversation with Scott that day as he was too busy to talk to him.

Scott had told him he found a way of simplifying a complex mathematics problem he had been working on.

They organised to meet the week after. Twenty-eight years later in court, Scott's supervisor recalled that Scott had given a lecture a month before his death in which he had discussed a way of simplifying a complex category theory problem.



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The Scott Johnson case

He described Scott as an excellent student who was unassuming.

In the weeks after Scott's death, his PhD supervisor became friendly with Steve Johnson and invited him to stay at his home in Sydney.

Seven years after his death, Scott's PhD supervisor successfully lobbied the ANU to have the young mathematician awarded a posthumous PhD saying, "I thought it would be good for the family".

He told the coroner it took he and an academic colleague "two to three years" to complete Scott's PhD.

Steve later donated \$1.6 million to the Science Faculty at Macquarie University.

"I don't know whether [Steve] said that was a reward for that [posthumous PhD award] for what we'd done for him," Scott's PhD supervisor told police in 2013.

Police 'decided it was a suicide': Steve

The American business giant is adamant that his brother was murdered and police rushed to conclusions about Scott's death being a suicide.

As Steve recollected in an interview on [ABC's Australian Story in 2013](#):

"I got a message that Scott's body had been found at the bottom of a cliff. We were both crying at that point and I asked how it happened. By the time I got [to Australia] about 36 hours later the police had decided it was a suicide."

In the 28 years that have followed Steve's grieving trip to Sydney, the many facts supporting the suicide theory have been summarily discarded or discredited by Steve, his private investigators and his legal team.



Daniel Glick was hired by Steve Johnson to investigate Scott's death. (ABC: *Australian Story*)

At a Coroners Court hearing in April 2015, counsel assisting Steve Johnson, John Agius SC, asked the coroner to "cull" lines of inquiry about suicide from the remit of the third inquest into his death because there was "not a skerrick of evidence" suggesting he took his own life.

In 2007, Steve hired former Newsweek journalist Daniel Glick to help him prove that Scott could not have suicided.

On this first trip to Sydney and with nothing more than a hunch, Daniel Glick told local member for Manly, Mike Baird — now NSW Premier — that a murder had taken place in his patch.

His claims centred around the notion that Scott had been killed as part of a gay hate crime wave in Sydney during the 1980s.

Could Scott's death be a gay hate crime?

"Men don't go to gay beats to suicide" has been the constant refrain from both Steve Johnson and Mr Glick.

But a read through the 439-page report by Strike Force Macnamir tells otherwise.

Thirty-five deaths, not including that of Scott Johnson, have been identified as occurring at North Head between 1986 and 2000 with bodies found at the base of the cliffs.

Five of those deaths were recorded as accidents and 30 were unequivocally recorded as suicides because there were notes, witnesses, former attempts or long histories of mental illness involved.

Twenty-eight were men. Two were women.

Five of the deaths were recorded as the result of "misadventure" which is police-speak for accidental death.

When it comes to the "epidemic" of gay hate crimes, Chief Inspector Young could find just eight unsolved deaths in her caseload at the Unsolved Homicide unit that might have been motivated by gay hate.

None of them occurred at North Head or in Manly.

At the coroner's court, counsel assisting the Johnson family spoke of other unsolved gay hate crimes that happened in the "same general geographical area as Scott's death".

An examination of those "unsolved gay hate crimes" reveals that one occurred in Newcastle (170 kilometres away from North Head) and was unlikely to provide clues to explain Scott's death.

One of them was in Wollongong (100km away) and one in Tathra (540km away).

The other five were in suburbs several kilometres away and therefore not consistent with any pattern of crime that might indicate a possible murder in Manly.

It is also noted in the report of Strike Force Macnamir that criminologists consulted by police unanimously concluded the terrain at North Head made it not a viable location for "bias motivated crime".

In other words, it was difficult to get to and the terrain was hazardous: "Coordinating an attack at the cliff site posed a risk to the offender/s."

One hired investigator found it was a likely suicide

Former police officers were enlisted to help prove Steve's theory that police had botched the original investigation in to his brother's death.

But at least one former policeman who was employed by Steve came to a very different conclusion.

In his 2013 statement to police, John MacNamara, who had experience investigating gay hate crimes, said he felt the Johnson family had one agenda and that was to convince authorities that Scott had been murdered.

But his investigation led him to conclude it was most likely that Scott had finalised his affairs by folding his clothes and, for whatever reason, he jumped from North Head.

Mr MacNamara believes he may have fallen out of favour with Steve because of his opinion on the case.

His work advising the family slowed, then ceased, shortly after his appointment in 2007.

'Scott had considered suicide before': partner

Three years before Scott's death, the young mathematics genius had told his partner he'd had suicidal thoughts.

A forensic psychological autopsy after Scott's death concluded that "there are no definitive and overt indicators that Scott Johnson intended to take his life in December 1988, however there are a number of risk factors that may have contributed to a negative psychological state".

When Steve married his high school sweetheart, Scott's partner was not on the guest list even though Scott was the best man.

It was a matter of days after that wedding that Scott spoke to his partner about contemplating suicide.

He recalls that in a telephone conversation on or around September 3, 1985, Scott told his partner he was thinking of jumping to his death from the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco.

His partner and two close friends he confided to in 1985 remain convinced Scott really did consider throwing himself off the Golden Gate Bridge.

The young mathematician had been unfaithful and his partner wonders if he contemplated suicide because he was so wracked with guilt.

This was also a time when AIDS was taking so many young lives.

Throughout their five-year relationship, the couple spent a lot of time travelling to college campuses in the United State and Britain.

Scott's partner told police he was unequivocal about what was said by Scott but could not remember if it was on a phone call or in a letter that he mentioned he was worried he might have contracted HIV/AIDS and was distressed for himself and for their relationship.

It was two years before the Australian Grim Reaper advertising campaign, when so little was known about how the virus was transmitted.

By the time Scott plunged to his death from North Head in Manly in 1988, aside from his partner, he had practically no close friends of his own.

A 'vulnerable young man'

Academic colleagues and others who knew him described a brilliant yet vulnerable young man who had no close friends and was socially awkward.

His de-facto told police there was something "very vulnerable about Scott".

In a letter dated May 13, 1989, Scott wrote to a mutual friend of theirs.



Scott Johnson studied at university. *(Supplied: Johnson family)*

He states that while Scott was in the USA with his brother Steve in 1988, he bought and read a copy of Alan Turing's biography.

Turing was a gay Cambridge mathematician who took his own life.

He writes in the letter that he read the Turing biography after Scott's death, and that he was quite alarmed to find so many similarities between Scott's life and personality and that of Turing.

Scott's PhD supervisor also told police that at the behest of Scott, he had been in the process of organising a gathering of students to attend a theatre production exploring Alan Turing's life.

His life outside his PhD Studies at the ANU, Macquarie and Sydney Universities revolved around his partner's family and friends.

He had also become estranged from his mother, and at the time of his death, hadn't seen his brother in four months.

Police would conclude that it was more than a coincidence that this 27-year-old gay man would die in the very circumstances he envisaged for himself three years earlier — jumping to his death from a height over water.



His teachers and partner described Scott as "vulnerable". (*Supplied: Johnson family*)

Back then, Manly police were generally unaware that North Head was a place gay men would meet for casual sex — a so called "gay beat".

Police believe suspicions it was a gay beat were never raised because in the 1980s because gay beats were associated with violence, and there had been only one known act of violence at North Head throughout that time (the stabbing of Brian Thomson in 1986).

Despite countless appeals for information from the family's team of investigators, the stabbing of Mr Thomson remains the only known act of violence in the North Head area throughout the entire 1980s and 1990s and is not categorised as a gay hate crime.

Knowing now that North Head was a gay beat, Scott's partner mused that perhaps Scott, again overcome with remorse about a possible sexual dalliance, had done what he had talked about doing in 1985.

In his statement to police, his partner said: "You can go to a gay beat seeking sex with somebody and be so full of remorse afterwards or disgust that you can then suicide ... that might be a possible explanation for what happened to Scott."

Scott's partner says he suffered a "complete emotional breakdown" after Scott's death which was compounded by accusations from Steve that he was somehow to blame for Scott's death.

He told police:

"[Steve Johnson] accused me of being on the cliff with Scott, he's accused me of lying to his face, he's accused me of any, any number of appalling things all of which are without a skerrick of evidence.

"Scott was not just my lover, my boyfriend, my partner — he was also my best friend. He was my confidant."

There has been very little contact between Scott's partner and Steve in the past 20 years.

Scott's partner told police: "It became so apparent, so quickly, that Steve Johnson and I can't work together, he knows everything.

"He is convinced that the police are incompetent, that the Australian justice system is deeply broken, that our coronial system is corrupt and, I'm just left thinking, 'Great, fine, you're on your own!'"

Death investigation was 'thorough' and 'comprehensive': Crime Commission

Chief Inspector Young was appointed to investigate Scott's death as head of Strike Force Macnamir.

She is considered tough and tenacious with an eye for detail and a passion for solving complex crimes.

A 30-year veteran of the force, her own commander, Mick Willing, described her investigation of Scott Johnson's death as "outstanding".

Her team could find no links between Scott's death and any other hate crimes in Sydney around the same time and no pattern of violence in North Head, Manly.

Constant complaints by the Johnson family about Chief Inspector Young led to an examination of the investigation by the NSW Crime Commission.

That appraisal concluded that Chief Inspector Young and her team had been "thorough" and "comprehensive" in their lines of inquiry.

Steve remains adamant his brother was murdered and was furious to see Chief Inspector Young's interview on Lateline in April 2015, in which she claimed to have found further evidence that Scott had potentially suicided.

She managed to corroborate Scott's partner's claim that Scott spoke of a previous suicide attempt:

"He loved Scott and he has done the right thing with the investigation. And also he has provided the names of two mutual friends of his and Scott's who he told about Scott's very sorry attempt at suicide at the Golden Gate Bridge or at least thinking of attempting to jump from the Golden Gate Bridge to mutual friends. I think it's very important to mention the Golden Gate Bridge and compare it to North Head in that people can choose many varied ways of suicide. Scott has, some years before 1988, chose to at least speak about him thinking of suiciding from a height over water; it happened to be the Golden Gate Bridge. Lo and behold, in 1988, his body is found at a height of 60 metres from a cliff over water."

Following that exclusive Lateline interview, Steve successfully lobbied to have [Chief Inspector Young removed from the case](#).

The case reopened, again

Before the Lateline interview, Chief Inspector Young expressed a desire to bring "balance" to a story that, in her words, had been misrepresented for too long.

She also spoke of her distress about how the relationship between herself and the Johnson family had soured.



Steve Johnson looks over the cliffs at North Head in Manly. (*Lateline: Emma Alberici*)

"The fact that our relationship has broken down is a point of sorrow for me. It has never happened with any other next of kin, as we call them, never, ever. In fact many next of kin and I, we catch up

regularly and we speak to each other. So I was disappointed that our relationship broke down," she told Lateline.

"But I wonder if it might be that Mr Johnson always struck me as someone who was quite determined to have one outcome, that he used influence, including I consider influence on the Government, to make the death of Scott a priority in my office over other jobs that we had.

"I think someone who resisted that influence that he felt quite confident about, and that person was me, I think he did have that — I felt he had that thought: if I wasn't with him, then I was against him, and that was never the case."

NSW Coroner Michael Barnes will [hear the third inquest](#) which begins on December 13.

It is thought to be only the second time in Australian history that a third inquest has been ordered in to the death of a single person. The case of Azaria Chamberlain is the only other known case.

Detective Sergeant Penelope Brown was installed to replace Chief Inspector Young as lead investigator on Scott's case.

Mr Barnes said:

"There are legitimate considerations such as the right of the family and the public to have the new evidence tested in open court. That may allay suspicions and concerns that are held by the family and perhaps some members of the community. It may lead to a different finding as to how Mr Johnson died."

It is Chief Inspector Young's view that Scott Johnson's death would have been a straightforward case of suicide had it not been for his brother's wealth and influence.

This week the court will hear from the first police responders, crime scene investigators and people who had contact with Scott in the weeks and months before his death.

The inquest will continue into 2017, when Chief Inspector Young and Detective Sergeant Brown are expected to give evidence.

Editor's note (3/1/17): This story has been edited to clarify the circumstances of the awarding of Scott Johnston's PHD; the donation by Steve Johnston to Macquarie University; and the finding of research into naked "jumpers". References to the amount of money spent by Steve Johnston on the investigation and on rewards and the relationship between Mr Johnston and the Kennedy family have been clarified.

More on this:

- [Coroner orders third inquest in Scott Johnson's death](#)
- [Top detective taken off investigation after Lateline interview](#)
- [2013 Australian Story: On The Precipice](#)

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