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Unsolved homicide investigation reopens into Sydney's gay killings



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For the third time in three decades, the deaths of three men in Sydney's eastern suburbs will be investigated after being linked years later to a spate of gay-hate crimes.

John Russell's body was found at the bottom of the Bondi-Tamarama cliffs in 1989, four months before Ross Warren disappeared and his possessions were found in the same area.

Gilles Mattaini, also a gay man, went missing from the same coastal stretch in 1985.

Almost two decades after the botched initial police investigations into their deaths, a coroner found Mr Russell and Mr Warren were murdered and Mr Mattaini probably met a similar fate.



John Russell's body was found at the bottom of the Bondi-Tamarama cliffs in 1989. JACKY GHOSSEIN

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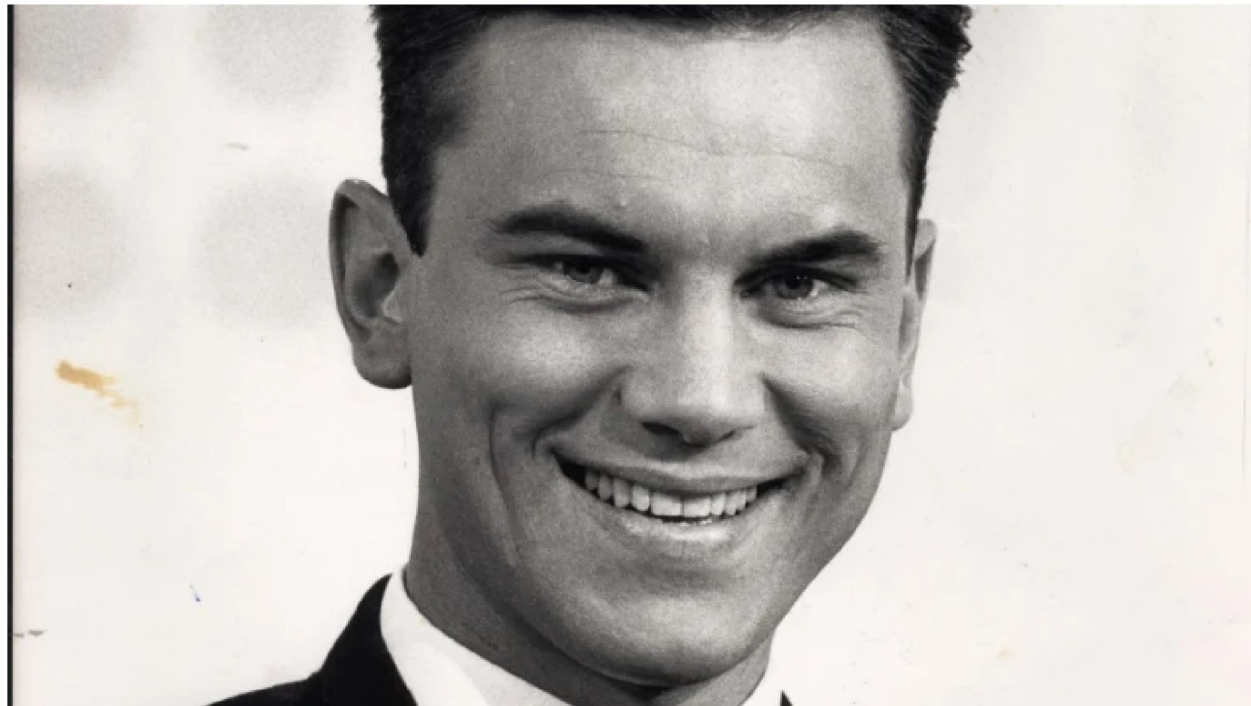
Unsolved homicide investigation reopens into Sydney's gay killings

Now the NSW Unsolved Homicide Team has reopened the investigation into the three men's deaths in the hope of putting their killers behind bars.

Fairfax Media understands Homicide Squad commander Detective Superintendent Mick Willing reopened the investigation earlier this year after the cases were reviewed.

It was partly prompted by information detectives came about while investigating the Manly cliff death of 27-year-old Scott Johnson.

"Flowing on from the UHT's ongoing investigation into the death of Scott Johnson, the investigations into the deaths of Gilles Mattaini, John Russell, and Ross Warren have been recommenced," Superintendent Willing said.



TV presenter Ross Warren disappeared and his possessions were found in the same area as John Russell's body. TARA AXFORD

"As the death of Scott Johnson is subject to an upcoming coronial inquiry, and will touch on these matters, I'm not in a position to comment further.

"I would like to remind the community there are government rewards on offer for information in each investigation."



Gilles Mattaini, also a gay man, went missing from the same coastal stretch in 1985.

The investigation will be overseen by Detective Inspector Chris Olen, who led the investigations into the Lin family murders and the death of Senior Constable David Rixon. Mr Johnson's body was found at the bottom of cliffs near Blue Fish Point in Manly in 1988.



The last family photo of Scott Johnson, who died in 1988. NSW POLICE

After hearing gay-hate assaults might have been behind Mr Russell's, Mr Warren's and Mr Mattaini's deaths, the Johnson family questioned if that had happened to their loved one.

They don't support the suggestion he committed suicide.

Mr Johnson's case will go to inquest for the third time in July.

It will also be the third time the Bondi-Tamarama deaths have been investigated by police, and the victim's families hope this time it will lead to justice.

"They welcome the fresh investigation after 27 years," Support After Murder Group president Peter Rolfe said on behalf of Mr Warren's mother, Kay, and Mr Russell's father, Ted. "We hope that something comes of it."

The body of Mr Russell, 31, was found at the bottom of the cliffs at Marks Park, a well-known gay beat, on November 23, 1989.

Hours earlier, the barman had been socialising with a friend at the Bondi Hotel and was last seen alive at 11pm.

It emerged years later the area his body was found was also a drawcard for roaming gangs that targeted homosexuals with violent assaults.

Mistakenly, police initially deemed his death accidental and Mr Russell's death was put down to "the effect of multiple injuries sustained ... when he fell from a cliff to the rocks below ...".

Four months earlier in July 1989, WIN TV presenter Ross Warren's keys were found on the rocks below the cliffs in the same area.

The 25-year-old's last contact was with a friend in Oxford Street in Sydney and, when he failed to contact his friends, they reported him missing.

His car was found close to Marks Park but his body was never found.

An investigator on Mr Warren's case decided within a week he had somehow fallen into the ocean.

Frenchman Gilles Mattaini was last seen by a neighbour walking the Bondi to Tamarama coastal track in September 1985.

A friend claimed he reported Mr Mattaini missing but a police report was never found.

The death and disappearances were looked at together when former detective Stephen Page began examining a series of violent gay-hate crimes in Sydney's east many years later.

He investigated all three cases under Operation Taradale, which reached the NSW Coroner's Court for inquest in 2005.

It was then deputy state coroner Jacqueline Milledge launched a scathing attack on the investigation into Mr Warren's case, labelling it shameful and grossly inadequate.

"Indeed, to characterise it as an investigation is to give it a label it does not deserve," she wrote at the time.

While Mr Russell's investigation was better, it was far from adequate, Ms Milledge continued.

She eventually found that Mr Warren was murdered and Mr Russell was thrown from the cliff onto rocks.

She found there was a strong possibility Mr Mattaini met a similar fate.

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Rewards totalling \$300,000 are on offer for any information leading to the arrest and conviction of killers in each case.

Anyone with information can contact Crime Stoppers on 1800 333 000.



Ava Benny-Morrison is crime reporter with The Sydney Morning Herald. Connect via [Twitter](#) or [email](#).
