

**NEWS**

## AUSTRALIAN STORY

**VIDEO: On The Precipice**By [Ben Cheshire](#)

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His teachers and boyfriend described Scott as "vulnerable".

**Transcript** ▲

CAROLINE JONES, PRESENTER: Hello I'm Caroline Jones. Scott Johnson was a young man with everything going for him - a maths genius with a bright future. But on a trip to a Sydney beach one sunny day in 1988 everything changed. The search for the truth of what happened that day has brought together a wealthy internet pioneer, an international super sleuth, and the New South Wales police cold case unit. This is the story of their quest to resolve a 25 year old mystery.

MARGUERITE RILEY, SISTER OF SCOTT'S PARTNER: It was early in the morning and I was up for an early shift - would have been 5.30, 6 in the morning. And I was the last person to see him alive. And I could see his legs in the bed, in my brother's old bedroom, from the kitchen.

DANIEL GLICK, INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST: Somebody called him at around noon and said he sounded normal. And then we suspect, because there was a Sydney bus ticket found in his pocket, that he probably took a bus from Lane Cove to catch the ferry to Manly. It was the

beginning of summer, and that he went there possibly to celebrate, to celebrate the fact that he'd completed his doctoral thesis. It's a big day in anybody's life.

STEVE JOHNSON, BROTHER OF SCOTT JOHNSON: He talked to his professor on the phone and his professor said 'Hallelujah, you've got it!' I can understand the feeling of exhilaration and exhaustion. To my mind, Scott put his pencil down, said 'I'm going to see my professor next Tuesday, this is Thursday. I'm going to take the weekend off'.

DANIEL GLICK, INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST: The next thing we know is that a couple of spear fishermen and one of the spear fishermen's sons find a body at the bottom of the cliff. They call the police, the police come. They investigate, they see the body, they see Scott's clothes folded neatly at the top of the cliff. Scott is completely naked.

STEVE JOHNSON, BROTHER OF SCOTT JOHNSON: I got a message that Scott's body had been found at the bottom of a cliff. We were both crying by that point, and I asked how it happened. And by the time I got here about 36 hours later, the police had decided that it was a suicide.

MARGUERITE RILEY, SISTER OF SCOTT'S PARTNER: I was... Well, I was shocked, absolutely shocked. We couldn't understand, I couldn't understand how that could have happened. He was happy, he was fine.

STEVE JOHNSON, BROTHER OF SCOTT JOHNSON: And from then on, the wonder about what happened to Scott has always been there. I didn't know whether (chokes up) my brother had chosen to leave us. I didn't know whether someone had pushed him. I didn't know whether he had slipped. I didn't know why we lost Scott.

DANIEL GLICK, INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST: And for Steve to have to live with that for 25 years, I think that's a tragedy - and I think it's a tragedy that just has been going on for far too long. Scott died in December 1988. That's a long time to be looking for justice, and we still haven't gotten there.

DANIEL GLICK, INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST: So at the time of Scott's death, Steve was a grad student. He had no money at all and so it wasn't until several years after Scott's death that he sold his first big idea to America Online and made what to any person I know would be a fortune - not a small fortune but a real fortune. Steve was a central figure in the beginning days of the internet. He wrote this mathematical algorithm which allowed photographs to be transmitted over phone lines.

STEVE JOHNSON, BROTHER OF SCOTT JOHNSON (on video): Everything was text based in those days. Getting a picture up on a computer screen over a telephone wire took five or ten minutes. Our life was forever changed. I've never liked to worry about money and after that happened I've never had to, fortunately.

DANIEL GLICK, INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST: That ultimately allowed him to really dig in and put some resources behind this investigation, 20 years later.

STEVE JOHNSON, BROTHER OF SCOTT JOHNSON: I tried to roust some attention to my brother's case, getting more and more incredulous that no-one was interested. I finally decided I needed a little ground support, so a mutual friend introduced me to an absolutely phenomenal investigative journalist named Dan Glick. He was the reporter that was most closely involved with the JonBenet Ramsey case, the little girl who was killed in Colorado around that time. He had a great mind for a complex case. My proposal to Dan was, how would you like to work for me getting this case investigated and finding my brother's killer?

DANIEL GLICK, INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST: I said to him two things, as I recall, at that meeting. I said, 'Listen if I think that your brother killed himself, I'm going to tell you that'. And the second thing I said was, 'If I think he was killed, I will investigate it as if it was my own brother that was killed'. So Steve and I sat down and he just told me about Scott's life.

STEVE JOHNSON, BROTHER OF SCOTT JOHNSON: So we were all born in Los Angeles. My parents split up when I was 10 years old. We lived on welfare for most of the time I was in high school and so Scott and I became much closer during those few years. We were really on our own. And Scott loved math and was brilliant at math.

PROFESSOR JOHN DONAHUE, HARVARD UNIVERSITY: Scott Johnson was in some ways the stereotypical math genius - quiet, shy, introverted. But the exception is that he had deep levels of sweetness that don't go with the stereotype. Steve and Scott were closer than most brothers are. They'd gone through a lot together.

STEVE JOHNSON, BROTHER OF SCOTT JOHNSON: One night he was trying to tell me about a relationship that he'd had. He was having a lot of trouble telling me who this was that he was in love with. And in fact I even thought that what he was having trouble telling me was that he had gotten his girlfriend pregnant. And so I said it. And he said, 'it's not a girl.' I was shocked. I was shocked when this person that I felt like I knew better than anybody else and was closer to than anybody else, I didn't know this about him. I didn't know that he was gay. So not long after Scott came out to me, we went off on a trip to Europe together and wound up climbing the Matterhorn. And so I wanted to hear everything. I wanted to hear how the relationship started. I wanted to hear about this man that he fell in love with. The person he fell in love with was Australian. He really missed his partner in Australia. And so finally he decided at the end of that school year that he wanted to move to Australia. He got into ANU, Australian National University, to study for a PhD in math.

MARGUERITE RILEY, SISTER OF SCOTT'S PARTNER: I met Scott in our family home in Lane Cove, as a friend of my brother's. I guess he was my brother's boyfriend. You know, I was in my twenties at that time and I guess he was the sort of young man that I would've, you know, looked at myself. He was good looking, very fit.

STEVE JOHNSON, BROTHER OF SCOTT JOHNSON: So in October of 88, we had our first baby and we made this fabulous video tape a couple of days after she was born, and as Scott was in Australia we sent it to him.

MARGUERITE RILEY, SISTER OF SCOTT'S PARTNER: Yes I remember him telling me he was about to become an uncle. We were in the kitchen one morning, and he was beaming and very happy that there was a new niece in the family. The next thing I heard, his body had been found dashed up on the rocks at Flying Fish Point in Sydney.

STEVE JOHNSON, BROTHER OF SCOTT JOHNSON: So the days that followed were the worst days of my life. It was clear when I got to the police station, the Manly police station, that the police already assumed it was a suicide. And I said, 'Impossible, he was dying to meet his niece. He had just finished his PhD that he'd been working on for five years.'

MARGUERITE RILEY, SISTER OF SCOTT'S PARTNER: Well, I've been now a mental health nurse for 35 years. Scottie was fine. The years I knew him and the days leading up to his death, he showed no signs of depression or moods or negativity. He showed none of the usual signs of wanting to take his life.

DET.CHIEF INSP. JOHN LEHMANN, NSW POLICE: Well there was no evidence of foul play. Scott's partner provided some information that either Scott attempted suicide or contemplated suicide in the United States some years prior to his death in 1988. Now police, as far as I am aware, haven't been able to ascertain whether that is factual or not. But certainly it would be a consideration.

MARGUERITE RILEY, SISTER OF SCOTT'S PARTNER: The police had a strange attitude towards me about both my brother and Scottie's sexuality. I would say they were quite homophobic towards me, asking me if I could still love my brother, knowing that he was homosexual. And I said, 'Well, you know...!' I said quite sarcastically, 'Like a brother. I love him like a brother.'

STEVE JOHNSON, BROTHER OF SCOTT JOHNSON: And basically I got stonewalled, no answers.

DANIEL GLICK, INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST: The coroners at the inquest in 1989, it seemed like it was just an open and shut case of suicide. Steve asked if I'd be willing to come down to Sydney and just poke around. I have to be honest, I wasn't convinced that it was impossible that Scott had killed himself. There wasn't that much evidence one way or the other so I flew to Sydney in May of 2007. One of the first things I did was meet with former Detective Sergeant Steve Page, who had been in charge of Operation Taradale that was looking into the gay cliff top murders at Bondi and Tamarama Beach and Marks Park, on the other side of the harbour from where Scott died. And these were at gay beats, these were places where gay men met to have sex. And this all happened right around the same time as Scott's death in 1988.

(Four Corners, ABC-TV, 2005)

REPORTER: In November 1989, a gay man John Russell had been thrown from a Bondi cliff, one of a series of murders in the area.

(End of excerpt)

(ABC News, 2005, on Operation Taradale)

(Police push a dummy over a cliff)

REPORTER: Today an unusual re-enactment, police using a dummy to help them work out, did he jump or was he pushed?"

(End of excerpt)

STEVE PAGE, FORMER NSW POLICE DETECTIVE: What we had in Sydney back in the late eighties and early nineties was an epidemic of hate crime against gay men. One thing that we wanted to establish was the area around Scott's demise. Was it a gay beat? The next point that we needed to try and challenge was, was it a gay beat that was known for violence?

DANIEL GLICK, INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST: And I had a vague idea but I didn't have a really specific sense of where Scott had died. So I went running and as I ran passed the sewerage treatment plant, I saw a couple of men who were working there and I said 'Well, do you recall that gay men would come up here at the time and was this a beat?' And he said 'Oh yeah, all the time.' He said they'd make little 'love nests'. I remember he said that - 'little love nests all over the headlands there.' I wanted to understand what this beat culture was so I met a man named Garry Wotherspoon at the Midnight Shift on Oxford Street for a drink because he had been recommended to me as somebody who was kind of an historian of gay beats.

GARRY WOTHERSPOON, AUTHOR AND HISTORIAN: There is no doubt in my mind that the place where Scott's body was found, the cliffs above that, were a gay beat. I've been there myself. It's well known in the gay world that this was a beat and it couldn't have been unknown to anyone like Scott at that time. The reason he was there probably with his clothes off, having a day in the sun was because it was a gay beat.

DANIEL GLICK, INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST: So I went to the manly library and started looking through some of the old newspaper articles. I found a whole slew of articles that really looked a lot like assaults on gay men. I found this really chilling article about a man who had been stabbed in the back with a bowie knife and it turns out it was the same spot where Scott was killed. There were these roving gangs, they were young kids - some of them were 15, 16, 17, you know, early twenties. And they would meet up and it was sport for them to go out and bash poofers.

GARRY WOTHERSPOON, AUTHOR and HISTORIAN: Poofter bashing is usually a group of young guys going around bashing up people they think are homosexual or could well be gay. Someone would be found dead at the bottom of the cliff. As far as the gay world knew, that was some poofter bashers had set upon someone and thrown him over the cliff.

DANIEL GLICK, INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST: I placed an ad asking people to contact me and the phone just started ringing. So one guy called me and he said that he recalled that a man used to brag about bashing poofers all over the Northern Beaches. So I asked him if he'd tell me the

guy's name so that if I saw it anyplace else, I'd know that I'm onto something. And he did. So the next day I went back to the Manly Library and this guy's name jumped off the page because he'd been arrested not far from Manly with two mates, about a year before Scott's death, for bashing a series of gay men. That was the moment where I felt I had the first solid lead about what might have happened to Scott. If I started out thinking it was 50-50, Just trying to keep my mind open, the scales just kept tipping and tipping and tipping and tipping until at the end of the week I was more than 95 percent sure that he had met with violence and that he hadn't killed himself.

STEVE PAGE, FORMER NSW POLICE DETECTIVE: I thought Dan Glick's work was outstanding. I think taking into account everything we now know, the investigation in relation to Scott's death was closed way too quickly. Dan Glick was able to come up with new information. Scott Johnson, gay man, fits straight into the victimology of someone who would be assaulted for a hate crime at that beat.

STEVE JOHNSON, BROTHER OF SCOTT JOHNSON: We put a report painstakingly together, knitting all of these pieces of information together, and we send it on to the Coroner and the police department towards the end of 2007 and everything went silent.

DANIEL GLICK, INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST: We also now know, but we didn't know at the time, that somebody in the New South Wales police wrote a lengthy rebuttal to our report.

STEVE PAGE, FORMER NSW POLICE DETECTIVE: I've had the opportunity of having a look through that report and the amount of critical information that appears to have been omitted I just can't... I can't explain.

DANIEL GLICK, INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST: I tried calling somebody from the Unsolved Homicide Squad but they told me that because it had been ruled a suicide that there was nothing they could do. So we felt a little bit like we were in a Kafka novel or a Catch 22 because we couldn't get the suicide verdict overturned unless the police were going to look at the new evidence. But they wouldn't look at the new evidence until we got the suicide verdict overturned. So it was a very frustrating time for us.

DET CHIEF INSP. JOHN LEHMANN: We've read all the material. I can tell you that this matter has been investigated and looked at numerous times. This is a very, very difficult case and it's very, very challenging and we don't have any direct evidence or direct links to determine how Scott's death was caused.

DANIEL GLICK, INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST: For four years, nothing happened. Then out of the blue I got an email that said that someone had confessed to killing Scott Johnson. The confession turned out to be a hoax but it got people interested in the case again.

SUE THOMPSON, FORMER NSW POLICE GAY LIAISON: For 12 years I was the police gay and lesbian client consultant. I read about Scott's case and contacted Dan because I felt passionate about it. And after doing lots of work on it Steve offered to compensate me. I wrote a lengthy detailed

report which explained to the police my reasons for thinking that this was definitely a homicide and needed to be re-examined.

DANIEL GLICK, INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST: Here's what I think happened to Scott: He probably finished this PhD problem. He was elated. His boyfriend was away. He had heard about this beat in Manly somehow from one of his friends...

GARRY WOTHERSPOON, AUTHOR and HISTORIAN: It was a lovely summer day in Sydney, he was probably feeling exhilaration. What better way for a gay man to express his exhilaration than to go out in the sun, sit on a headland above Sydney Harbour and have a great day in a gay beat?

STEVE JOHNSON, BROTHER OF SCOTT JOHNSON: Took off his clothes, laid down and so somebody probably walked up to Scott while he was there and proposed sex, proposed something. Scott got up and two others came from the bush...

GARRY WOTHERSPOON, AUTHOR and HISTORIAN: And who knows the terror he would have felt in those moments?

SUE THOMPSON, FORMER NSW POLICE GAY LIAISON: So I imagine they would have been there and ambushed Scott and either pushed him over the cliff or chased him over the cliff.

DANIEL GLICK, INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST: Two police officers with a lot of experience recovering bodies from that area told me they'd never seen a naked suicide or one in the same spot where Scott died.

GARRY WOTHERSPOON, AUTHOR and HISTORIAN: Why would a man who was going to commit suicide, who had had a wonderful morning, solved a problem, take off his clothes, leave them in a neat pile and jump off the cliff?

STEVE PAGE, FORMER NSW POLICE DETECTIVE: I don't think the death of Scott Johnson was suicide. Playing the percentages, more likely than not, I think it was murder.

DANIEL GLICK, INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST: Finally in June last year the Coroner agreed to hold a new inquest into the death of Scott Johnson.

STEVE PAGE, FORMER NSW POLICE DETECTIVE: It was a big day when we got the finding that suicide had been overturned, and we got an open finding. It's not often that the courts will admit they've made a mistake.

DANIEL GLICK, INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST: We're obviously really thrilled that there may be a real investigation now.

STEVE JOHNSON, BROTHER OF SCOTT JOHNSON: (Sighs) My team, or gang of friends now, group hugged in the court, lots of tears. And we went out to celebrate.

SUE THOMPSON, FORMER NSW POLICE GAY LIAISON: This is just the beginning, hopefully. There's a lot more work to be done on Scott's death.

(Re-enactment of celebration dinner)

STEVE PAGE, FORMER NSW POLICE DETECTIVE: There's a number of persons of interest that Dan Glick and I have been able to put together and could well be involved in the death of Scott Johnson - or alternatively, have knowledge of others who may be involved. Those persons are known to the New South Wales police. Whether they are being investigated, I don't know. But I can say they should be.

DET.CHIEF INSP. JOHN LEHMANN, NSW POLICE: The case is with the unsolved homicide team, having been referred to by the Coroner. I won't comment on what stage the investigation is at. Certainly we haven't closed the books on this case, it's an open case. And to that end, we've also applied for a monetary reward to the Government for information that may lead to the identification of the persons that may have been responsible for Scott's death.

STEVE JOHNSON, BROTHER OF SCOTT JOHNSON: I'm extremely fortunate to be able to fund my own investigation. It's too bad that I need to. I've never really thought about the money. It's not about the money; it's about finding justice for my brother.

DANIEL GLICK, INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST: So far I've made four trips down here to Sydney to investigate this case. I think that at this point, the role between me being Steve's friend and being his investigator has blurred to insignificance. I consider him a friend.

DANIEL GLICK, INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST: I'm sure it could look like I wrote what Steve wanted to hear, but I wrote and I've investigated where my nose, my instincts and my professional judgement has taken me at every step of the way.

STEVE JOHNSON, BROTHER OF SCOTT JOHNSON: And after the verdict in June, I decided it was time to do what I had always wanted to do, which is scatter Scott's ashes from the top of the Matterhorn. It was like being with him for a few minutes. The clouds parted, it was early in the morning and for a few moments there was a blue sky and I opened Scott's ashes and sent them into the wind.

END CAPTIONS:

Scott Johnson's former partner was approached by Australian Story but preferred not to be interviewed.

Police say a reward of \$100,000 has now been approved and will be announced by the NSW Police Minister tomorrow.

Crimestoppers 1800 333000



**Introduced by Caroline Jones**

Scott Johnson was a young man with everything going for him - a maths genius with a bright future.

But on a trip to a Sydney beach one sunny day in 1988, everything changed.

The search for the truth of what happened that day has brought together a wealthy internet pioneer, an international super sleuth, and the NSW Police Cold Case Unit.

This week, the story of their quest to solve a 25-year-old-mystery.

Email for Justice for Scott Johnson: [justiceforscottjohnson@gmail.com](mailto:justiceforscottjohnson@gmail.com)