



The beach boy ... Peter Sheil with a girlfriend. Source: SBS / , Supplied by Sheil family

He wasn't gay, but could Peter have been a gay-hate victim?

Peter Sheil was found dead at the bottom of a Sydney cliff - below a gay beat - with his fly undone. Police dismissed the incident as 'misadventure', but now his siblings want the case reopened, believing it may have been part of a more insidious spate of crimes sweeping the city at the time.

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By Rick Feneley

Source: SBS

Well before his mental breakdown, and 14 years before his mysterious fatal fall from a cliff, Peter Sheil won first prize in the 16 years and under section of a district

16/05/2022, 15:12

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competition in the Festival of Australian Poetry.

The young surfer from Sydney's eastern suburbs wrote of "riding on the crystal" in his poem "Sweet Contentment". Peace permeated his "untroubled mind".

I stand with her now on the ocean bank

We stand together and face the sunrise

Peter was not gay. He wrote his "wonderful" poetry partly to impress the girls, his bother Christopher Sheil recalls.

But by the time of his death in 1983, when he was 29, Peter did have a troubled mind. He battled mental illness.

Mistaken for being gay? Peter Shiel, the young surfer and poet. Source: SBS / , Supplied by family

Christopher and fellow siblings accept it is possible that Peter leapt from a cliff at Gordons Bay in Sydney's eastern suburbs, but they tend to think it is the least likely explanation for his death.

Their mother, deceased, had been determined that Peter was not depressed or suicidal on that April night when he called her about 8pm to say he was about to walk back to the Clovelly hostel where he was living. He was anxious about meeting the hostel's 9pm curfew, but not "down".

16/05/2022, 15:12

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Peter walked via the path that followed the ocean cliffs and which happened to pass gay beats where men met for sex, and where “poofteer bashers” could find sport.

His body was found more than a day later, at the base of a low cliff, the fly to his trousers open.

Back at Gordons Bay, Christopher tells SBS: “It's plausible that he was mistaken for being gay while walking through a gay beat – that he was attacked for that reason.”

Peter Sheil's is among 30 unsolved deaths, and a wider list of 88 cases, that police have reviewed to see how many might have been gay-hate murders. They are attempting to test the theory proposed by former NSW Police gay liaison coordinator Sue Thompson and criminologist Stephen Tomsen.

Peter Sheil's poem, Sweet Contentment Source: SBS / , Supplied by Sheil family

The Sheil family now considers the possibility because of other gay-hate murders committed during that era, including at a nearby gay beat on the Bondi-Tamarama cliffs, which have been confirmed in recent years.

Peter could be “gregarious” and “reckless”, Christopher says. But could he have been lured off the path to the cliff where he died? Or did he step off that path simply to

relieve himself, then fall to his death in the dark?

The siblings are open to all possibilities but suspect they will probably never know because police, with the co-operation of their father, did nothing to explore the potential causes of death. There was no inquest.

Christopher was 27 when, at the police station on the day Peter's body was found, he witnessed an "inquiry" conducted by his father and a police officer. It lasted "all of about a minute". The pair agreed the cause of death was "misadventure".

Peter's younger brother protested: "We don't know whether he jumped, fell or was pushed." To which his father had replied: "Ah, we're not gunna go into any of that."

Now, 33 years later, the siblings have been disturbed to discover how little police did to review Peter's case.

"There are no coronial records of a death of a person of this name," began a three-line entry on the case in a police report to the State Coroner last year.

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It was among summaries of the 30 unsolved cases for the coroner as he prepares to launch an extraordinary third inquest in December into the death of Scott Johnson, whose body was found naked at the base of a North Head cliff near Manly in 1988.

The entry on Sheil concluded: "The source details of Ms Thompson's spreadsheet indicate that the information is [from] a sibling of [the victim]. This is unable to be verified."

16/05/2022, 15:12

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Christopher Sheil responds: "Police have never contacted us to verify anything."

That remains the case today, a day after SBS revealed Peter Sheil was among four of the 30 unsolved cases dismissed in the same fashion – and that police were yet to contact any of the sources who could "not be verified".

Peter Sheil, centre, with brothers Christopher, left, and Hugh Source: SBS / , Supplied by Sheil family

Police have now told SBS that records for those four cases have been found since the report was handed up early last year. The Unsolved Homicide Team has sent updated

16/05/2022, 15:12

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information on three of the cases - including Peter Sheil - to the State Coroner, with the fourth to follow. Information on that case has been provided to Operation Parrabell for its review. It involves the death of Wollongong man Bill Rooney in 1986 which, as SBS has revealed, was overlooked because his name was misspelt as "Rudney" .

While a coroner made an open finding on Rooney's death, some detectives believed he was murdered by a sexual sadist who was charged with attacks on 12 other men and convicted over three of them.

Operation Parrabell was established in 2013 by the Bias Crimes Unit to review investigations of deaths people connected with the LGBTIQ community.

The operation was revised in August last year and, under the command of Superintendent Tony Crandell, the police force's sexuality and gender diversity, nine specialist investigators focused on the 88 deaths between 1976 and 2000.

Police say Opertaion Parrabell does not carry out individual investigations but reviews the inquiries that took place at the time of the deaths. It will refer for further investigation any case it finds that may have been motivated by anti-gay bias.

Crandell has told SBS that academics will be recruited to conduct an independent review of Parrabell to ensure it is scrutinised and that its final recommendations are carefully considered.

Christopher Sheil said he would welcome more scrutiny of his brother's case.

He acknowledges Peter was mentally disturbed, "but if you consider the lowness of the cliff where his body was found, and the much higher cliffs nearby that he could have chosen if suicide was his intention, we think that's the least likely explanation."

Leaving that cliff where Peter spent his last moments alive, Christopher remembers the precocious young poet. He wrote with amazing ease - until his breakdown.

"We want the truth. But what would you prefer to know – that your brother fell, jumped or was pushed to his death? It's hard. What version of the truth do you really want?"

16/05/2022, 15:12

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