

● The Illawarra's "worst criminal" ... gay rapist Mark Anthony Scerri was yesterday sentenced to 16 years' jail.

Rapist region's worst criminal

By PAUL McINERNEY

Brutal gay rapist Mark Anthony Scerri, described by police as the Illawarra's "worst ever" criminal, was sentenced to a minimum 16 years' jail by a Supreme Court judge yesterday.

Scerri, 28, of Roche Place, Berkeley, stood impassively in the dock as Justice Bruce James handed down the lengthy sentence for the violent homosexual rape of three Wollongong nightclub patrons in 1989.

Justice James said: "There is no doubting the seriousness of the crimes and that they are examples of the worst class of case."

Justice James said he had looked at the "totality" of the offences when considering an appropriate sentence.

Scerri, who has been in custody since his arrest on September 26, 1989, will be

be eligible for parole on September 26, 2001.

His reign of sadistic terror upon nightclub patrons lasted more than three months and led to one of the biggest undercover police operations ever mounted in the Illawarra.

Outside the court yesterday, the man who led the investigation team that arrested Scerri, Inspector David Ainsworth, said: "I am happy with the sentence, he was the most vicious and cunning criminal I have dealt with during my police career".

"The sentence will never make up for the devastation of these ordinary men's lives and the embarrassment and emotional pain they went through while giving evidence in court.

"I really feel sorry for the families of these victims, whose only crime was to leave a nightclub early in the morning with a few drinks under their belt."

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Late showers. Max 29. Details P68. THURS. 8: 6.30 am, 8.06 pm. L: 2.13 am, 3.10 pm.

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Police close book on 'monster'

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As the ferocity of Mark Anthony Scerri's rapes on heterosexual nightclub patrons increased, Wollongong police set up one of the biggest undercover operations ever conducted in the region.

Heading the operation was Inspector David Ainsworth, then senior sergeant in charge of Wollongong detectives, who feared the serial rapist's next victim may be killed.

More than 40 police officers, some armed with

video cameras, were used to man positions on the routes used by past victims and in the general areas of the earlier attacks.

Several more male officers spent the night in Pips and took turns to act drunk as they left the nightclub under the surveillance of colleagues.

"It was a well-run and organised operation, but unfortunately it failed to flush out the target," Insp Ainsworth said.

Scerri struck again three months after the undercover operation — inflicting horrendous head injuries to his victim, who spent five days in

hospital.

But the brutal rapist's luck ran out when a nightclub doorman, who knew Scerri, spotted him walking away from the nightclub foyer with the third victim only minutes before the attack.

It was enough for Insp Ainsworth and partner detective senior constable John Fitzgerald, who obtained a photograph of Scerri from the Corrective Services Department, taken while Scerri was on periodic detention for driving offences.

Armed with the photograph, both the doorman and the nightclub manager, plus two of the victims, positively identified Scerri.

Detectives Ainsworth, Fitzgerald, and Paul Davidson arrested Scerri at his Roche PI home before laying charges in relation to 13 separate attacks dating back to 1984.

"There are a lot of people, particularly Wollongong's gay community, who will breathe a sigh of relief after (yesterday's) sentencing of Scerri," Insp Ainsworth said.

"He has left scars on those three nightclub patrons and their families that will never be erased. Scerri is a monster, the most vicious and cunning criminal I have been associated with during 24 years in the police force."

Region's gay rapist jailed for 16 years

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After his arrest at his Berkeley home on September 26, 1989, Scerri was charged with more than 30 offences relating to the bashing and raping of 13 men, 11 of them in Wollongong, one in Nowra, and one in Jindabyne.

In five Supreme Court trials, juries found Scerri not guilty of all charges relating to attacks in Wollongong's MacCabe Park, Jindabyne and Nowra. On May 22, 1991, Justice Colin Allen ordered a new trial when the jury hearing charges relating to the Wollongong nightclub attacks failed to reach a unanimous verdict after nearly two days' deliberation.

In November last year, the new jury trial found Scerri guilty of eight charges, five of sexual intercourse without consent, one of grievous bodily harm with intent to have sexual intercourse, one of inflicting actual bodily harm with intent to have sexual intercourse, and one of stealing.

Scerri consistently maintained his innocence, but finally admitted the attacks on the three nightclub patrons during an interview with psychiatrist Dr Bruce Westmore at Long Bay Jail on January 13, this year.

When referring to Dr Westmore's written report of the January 13 interview, Justice James said Scerri had told the psychiatrist his reasons for extreme violence was that he was blind drunk.

However, the judge said the evidence given by a Wollongong taxi driver who had driven Scerri home soon after one of the attacks showed that Scerri was quite sober and very talkative.

The first attack occurred about 3 am on June 11, 1989, when a Keiraville man left Pips nightclub in Crown Lane, Wollongong to walk home.



Scerri walked up to the patron in Keira St and asked for directions before grabbing his victim and pulling him over a brick fence and threatening him with a rock.

The victim was then dragged to a nearby shed where his pants and underpants were forcibly removed. Scerri then forced an act of oral sex on the man before sodomising him.

The second attack occurred on June 25, 1989, after a Fairy Meadow man left Pips nightclub at about 2.30 am.

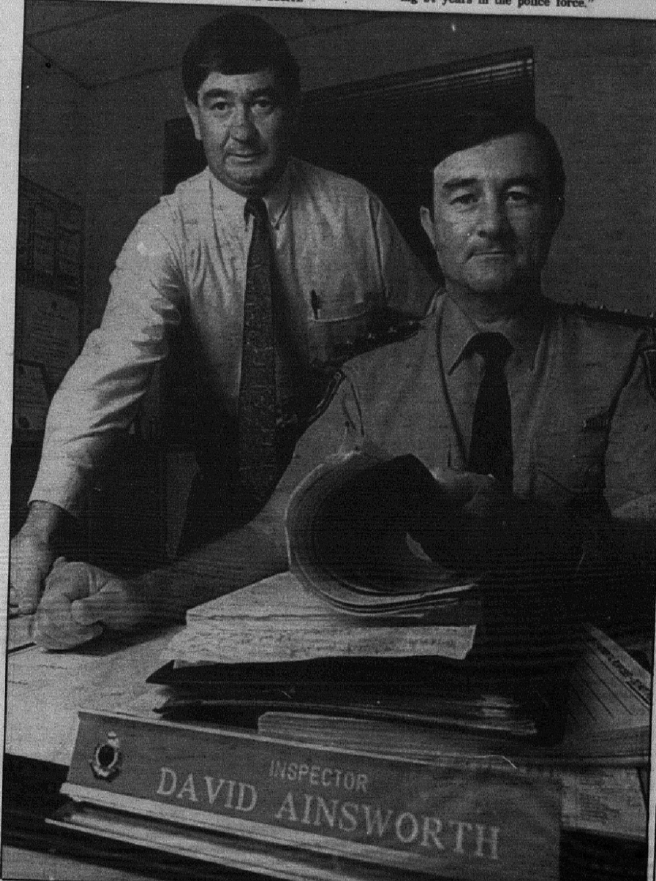
The nightclub patron was walking along Plinders St, when Scerri approached and asked for directions to Thirroul.

Scerri then tackled his victim from behind and bashed him several times around the head with a rock before dragging him dazed to a toilet block in Beaton Park.

The victim was forced to perform oral sex and later anally raped for about 10 minutes before fainting. Scerri then waited for his victim to wake up before raping him a second time.

A passing security officer found the blood-spattered man and took him to Wollongong Hospital.

The third and final assault was on a Bellambi man who gave evidence that he had a vague recollection of being carried from Pips in the early hours of September 22, 1989.



Outside the nightclub he met up with a man he later identified as Scerri and they began walking away together.

After walking about 140m, Scerri punched the man in the face several times and then hit him about the face and head with a rock.

The bleeding victim had his trousers and underwear removed before being anally raped.

He was treated in hospital for severe concussion and had 40 stitches inserted in scalp wounds.

● PICTURE: Inspector David Ainsworth and detective senior constable John Fitzgerald (left) close the book on the "region's worst criminal".

Detectives probe 'early' death ruling

Detectives are investigating the rived he had placed a sheet over her, a collapse of a woman in Sydney's spokeswoman from police media said

Tired teddies nearing home

Two hundred tired teddies, battling head winds and strong currents with round-the-world yachtsman Don McIntyre, are nearing the end of their trip to Antarctica.

The bears, who are within 200 nautical miles of home, are reportedly keen to be reunited with their owners who should be there to meet them at the Australian National Maritime Museum, Darling Harbour, tomorrow.

Owners sponsored their bear's trip to Antarctica by giving the Royal Alexandra Hospital for Children a

SPECIAL BRENDA CUI

Vanessa Popov death has shak Park family but ed by the fact saved five lives.

Mrs Popov, 33, severe brain haem gans were donate tion.

Her husband, A gong police prosec ple talked about do in the unlikely ex though he never ex decision so soon.

"Vanessa and I h that was what she the kind of person al said.

"It's funny thoug tricks on you.

"We were talki more children the n Popov said as he i back the tears.

Mr Popov admitte was "an emotive in He said it was a di make when he was by Wollongong Hos Vanessa had been dead.

"I don't criticise (doing it because the defaul: they have t straight away to k alive," he said.

"We were crying because Vanessa an about it the decision After Mr Popov i wishes known to h brother, two transpa geoms from Sydney we form the operation Vanessa's heart, lung neys.

Mr Popov does not ceived the organs.

Nor will the organ know Mr Popov's ulta gift — the gift of his a because legal require "caring strangers" fr known to their recipie

However yesterday i formation from the Ho firm five lives wer changed through Mrs I

I was so glad to get i to read all about it aff Mr Popov said he co stand how others reject tion.

"I really can't unders or people don't want everyone has their own pose," he said.

There are currently al ple in Australia on org transplantation waiting



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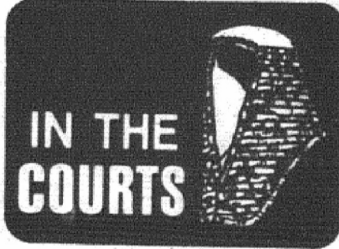
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