



Special Commission of Inquiry into LGBTIQ hate crimes

Statement of Peter Russell

6 March 2023

This statement made by me accurately sets out the evidence that I would be prepared, if necessary, to give to the Special Commission of Inquiry into LGBTIQ hate crimes as a witness. The statement is true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

1. My name is Peter Russell. My address is known to the Special Commission of Inquiry.
2. I am the younger brother of John Russell. Our dad was Ted Russell. Dad died in October 2022.
3. I first heard about John's death when police came to find me at Double Bay Public School where I worked as a grounds man at the time and asked me to come to Glebe to identify a body that they believed was my brother's.
4. I can still remember standing behind a glass screen and the curtain being drawn to reveal John's body. I remember seeing blood on John's clothes. I remember seeing brownish, blonde hairs next to John's thumb. The hairs were not John's; they were too long and the wrong colour. I didn't give this a second thought until police showed me photos of the hairs in connection with Operation Taradale years later and I remembered that I had seen them when I identified John at the morgue.
5. After I identified John, the police dropped me back at Bondi Junction. There was no mention of counselling or anything.
6. My first visit to the police station in connection with John's matter was a bit rough. The police wanted to know where I was on the night of John's death. When they found out that John was going to get an inheritance just before he died, the police basically turned around to me and said, "well, why did you do it? We've got no one else... you're it." I got offside with them straight away.
7. I made a statement to police dated 24 November 1989 (**SCOI.02744.00077**).
8. John's funeral was about 10 days after his death.

9. I got a notification to go to the first inquest into John's death which was to be held before Deputy State Coroner Derrick Hand on 2 July 1990. The inquest was about 18 minutes long. It was walk in, rubber stamp and out you go. I walked away thinking "what does this all mean?". Not too much was ever explained to me and dad.
10. Sometime after John's funeral, dad got a call from Glebe Coroners Court asking him to pick up a box of John's possessions. I went to the Coroners Court to pick up the box but didn't look in it. I thought "I'm not touching it". Dad came down from Wollombi. I gave the box to dad.
11. John's shoes, socks, jeans and sloppy joe were in the box. It was all as it had been taken off John. The clothes hadn't been washed and I knew this because dad picked up the clothes and said, "I can smell the boy".
12. I don't remember who contacted dad about John's clothes after this. I can only assume it would have been a police officer who was arranging to put a dummy out with John's clothes on it. They asked dad for clothes that were similar to the clothes that John was wearing when he died but dad, being dad, told them to take the whole box as it was if it would help. I remember the police had set up a mannequin either opposite the Bondi hotel or at the Bondi police station to see if the public knew anything about John's death. This was a month or so after John's death. I lived in Bondi at the time and I went down to have a look at the mannequin and saw that the clothes were spotless; the shoes were clean. It was obvious to me that the clothes in the box that dad had given police had been through the wash and put on the mannequin because when I had first seen John's clothes on his body at the morgue they were covered in blood and salt water. I didn't think much of it at that stage. It did not occur to me then to think about what testing could have been done on the clothes, or whether the washing might have reduced the effectiveness of testing.
13. I'm not sure how long the clothes were on the mannequin for but at some point after this, the clothes were returned to dad. He told me he had them and dad said, "this has been washed". I told him that you couldn't have put the clothes on a mannequin the way they were with blood on them.
14. In June 2001, a police officer came to Wollombi to collect John's clothes from dad in connection with the re-investigation of John's matter by Steve Page in Operation Taradale.
15. Dad and Steve knew each other from many years prior to this when dad was head of Wollombi Fire Brigade and Steve was in charge of a death in relation to fires up there. They set up a base camp on dad's farm.

16. Steve told dad about the results of the testing of John's clothing. I found out through dad.
17. I was wary of giving a statement to Operation Taradale at first because I didn't know if it would be friendly or hostile after my experience with Bondi police. Steve Page was very pleasant. It was clear I wasn't a suspect. I made a statement dated 15 June 2001 (**SCOI.02744.00191**) and a statement dated 30 July 2001 (**SCOI.02744.00192**).
18. The first I heard that the hairs found on John's hand were lost was through Steve Page. I think he had mentioned it to dad.
19. I went to every day of the Taradale inquest. I also gave evidence on 1 April 2003 (**NPL.0115.0003.2127, p. 18 – 34**).
20. I recognised Sean Cushman at the inquest as soon as he turned up. I remembered his face from the Regis Hotel in Bondi and just generally from around Bondi in around the late 1980s. There was a disco out the back of the Regis Hotel. I used to go there a fair bit. I think it is the Beach Road Hotel now. It was on Beach Road at the back of Bondi heading towards the Golf Course.
21. I did not recognize any other person of interest called to give evidence.
22. I attended the Inquest's findings handed down by Coroner Milledge in 2005.
23. In May 2016 I was contacted by a police officer who explained that there was a review process underway into John's death by Unsolved Homicide. I was supportive and open to phone calls and any questions. The police officer warned me about impending news articles that were going to come out about the re-investigation. Over the years I have collected newspaper articles about John's death. I keep them in a folder. One of the articles that came out after the call from the police officer was titled "Unsolved homicide investigation into Sydney's gay killings" dated 22 May 2016 in the Sydney Morning Herald (**SCOI.32988**).
24. I don't recall being told the name of the re-investigation by Unsolved Homicide when I spoke with the police officer. I have attended most of the public hearings of the Special Commission of Inquiry into LGBTIQ hate crimes (Inquiry). It is through this that I have come to know that the re-investigation was called Strike Force Neiwand.
25. I didn't know police were going to test John's clothes again and I wasn't told about the results of any testing. As far as I knew, dad had the clothes.
26. I'm not sure if police tried to contact dad in 2016. If they did, there is no way I would have known. At that stage dad had dementia and basically only used a landline.

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27. I don't recall getting any further updates from police.
28. I have been told that the Inquiry is getting further testing done on John's clothes. I have also provided a buccal swab to the Forensic and Analytical Science Services. I had never previously been asked to do this.
29. I knew where John died was a gay beat. You didn't hear too much about what was going on back then. Once it came out about what was going on at beats not long after John died, a lot of stuff started to come out about other deaths of gay men. I remember all that.
30. Over the years I have done newspaper interviews about John's death and dad and I participated in the SBS documentary "Deep Water: the true story" in the hope that someone will come forward with information. I continue to hold out hope for answers about John's death.

Signature:



Witness Signature:



Name:

6-3-23

Witness Name:

ELIZABETH BLUMFIELD

Date:

Peter Russell

Date:

6-3-23