

CLOSE TO THE EDGE

WHEN AN AMERICAN MAN WAS FOUND DEAD AT SYDNEY'S MANLY, IT WAS RULED A SUICIDE – BUT HIS BROTHER BELIEVED IT WAS MURDER. MORE THAN 20 YEARS LATER, POLICE ARE FINALLY BACK ON THE CASE

By Daniel Glick

The subject line from the email jumped off my screen: “Scott Johnson Murder CONFESSOR!” I was on holiday with my son, and the last thing I expected was a confession to a murder I had investigated in

Sydney four years previously. The email tip in January pointed me to an Australian Facebook page where somebody had written: “As this is a fake profile and I have an IP address blocker I will publicly admit to killing Mr Johnson.” “Mr Johnson” was a 27-year-old gay American whose naked body was found at the base of a cliff at Manly Beach in December 1988. Scott Johnson’s death had been ruled a suicide the following year after a perfunctory investigation and his brother, Steve, has been haunted by that ruling ever since.

Steve, now a wealthy internet entrepreneur based in Boston, contacted me in early 2007 to see if I’d be willing to fly to Sydney and use my investigative journalism skills to poke around. I had covered the high-profile murder of six-year-old beauty queen JonBenet Ramsey and the Columbine High School massacre for *Newsweek*. Steve had learnt that a number of gay men had been murdered at a gay beat in Bondi in the late 1980s and believed that his brother Scott may have fallen victim to a similar gay hate killing in Manly around the same time.

In May 2007 I visited Sydney briefly to try to spark interest in the case. Now, out of the blue five years later,

A shy, intelligent man (opposite): Scott Johnson mountain-climbing in the US state of New Hampshire in 1988, four months before his death

I seemed to have the emailed “confession” Steve had been waiting 23 years to receive. When I forwarded him the email, relief, sadness and outrage poured back in equal measures. “I never, never believed Scott killed himself,” Steve wrote. “I’ve spent more than 20 years at a complete loss to understand what happened to my brother. In all that time, no more than a handful of days ever go by without my longing for Scott and wondering what happened to him.”

The last time Scott Johnson, 27, was seen alive was on the morning of Thursday, December 8, 1988. His boyfriend’s sister, Marguerite O’Connell, saw his feet protruding from a blanket on the spare room bed of her family home in the Sydney suburb of Lane Cove. Sometime after noon, a friend phoned and spoke with Scott, later reporting that he sounded “normal”. A ticket found in Scott’s shirt pocket suggested he took public transport to Manly Beach. Scott probably followed a trail above the Shelly Beach parking lot to a large, flat rock at the edge of a cliff face with a stunning vista of the Northern Beaches from Dee Why to Curl Curl, Narrabeen and beyond.

Two days later, two local men and one of their sons on a spearfishing expedition found Scott’s body at the bottom of the 50m cliff. Manly police noted Scott’s neatly folded clothes, but moved them before their photographer documented the otherwise prosaic pile of personal effects: a bone-coloured shirt, jeans, blue briefs, socks, running shoes, a pen, a comb, a cheap watch, a student ID, a bank card, \$10 folded in a plastic sheath in his shirt pocket, and the bus ticket. No wallet. No note.

Police contacted William Byrd*, Scott’s boyfriend, at the Canberra address on Scott’s photo ID, and told him to come to Sydney. Steve, in America, caught a flight to Australia straight away. William told police that Scott was shy, intelligent, may have belonged to “a group at high risk for the AIDS infection” and once mentioned he had thought about jumping from the Golden Gate Bridge. Police concluded that Scott was almost certainly “a jumper”.

Neither William nor Steve believed that assessment; nor did anybody who knew Scott. The slight young man with sandy hair and a wry grin was about to earn his PhD in mathematics from the Australian National University. Scott possessed an excellent academic pedigree: California Institute of Technology, the University of California at Berkeley, the University of Cambridge in England. He had worked at NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory and collaborated with professors at



Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government. His relationship with William was solid; there were no financial problems besides routine student poverty; he was elated that he'd solved his dissertation's key problem and had essentially earned his PhD.

Scott would regularly visit Sydney from Canberra to attend a seminar at Macquarie University, staying at William's parent's home, where he'd been treated like an adopted son. He had recently celebrated his 27th birthday with parties William had thrown for him in Canberra and Sydney, and was looking forward to seeing Steve and his wife Rosemarie's new baby, Emma. Scott didn't drink or smoke, and was a long-distance runner and mountain climber. He had no history of mental illness or depression, and the autopsy revealed he was not HIV positive.

Marguerite O'Connell, a psychiatric nurse, repeatedly told police that Scott seemed just fine. In May this year I spoke to her by phone. She told me that while a policeman was collecting her statement, his questions took a strange turn. "Did you know your brother was a poofter?" he asked her about William, and then inquired, "Do you still love him?" She glared at him and said, "Like a brother." Twenty-three years later, she is still incensed by the policeman's attitude.

At the inquest at City Coroner's Court, Glebe, on March 16, 1989, Manly police presented their case for suicide. No sign of a struggle. Clothes folded neatly, indicating premeditation. Scott was an avowed homosexual. His boyfriend had mentioned a previous



Shelly Beach, Manly, near where the tragedy occurred; "Scott was my closest friend," says Steve Johnson (opposite) of his brother

men had been arrested a few miles from Manly, in Reef Beach, for a series of assaults against gay men around the same time. The court was never informed of a witness who heard one of those same men bragging about driving around the Northern Beaches with his mates to "bash poofers". Former Manly constable Troy Hardie, who recovered Scott's body, was never asked whether the location and manner of Scott's "suicide" was unusual. Wayne Plant, a former police rescue squad and air wing member who had retrieved many suicides from the area, later told me: "It does not fit with the type of suicide we normally found around North Head. You would have to have known that place or have been led there by someone with local knowledge."

NSW authorities now know that roving gay-hate gangs in the eastern suburbs near Bondi routinely terrorised gay men in the late 1980s and early '90s, chasing some off cliffs and brutally bashing others. Less than a year after Scott's death, the body of 31-year-old John Allen Russell was found at the bottom of a cliff, crumpled and bloodied. At first, Russell's death was ruled a suicide and, like Scott, nobody could figure out why he would do such a thing. Among other things, Russell had just inherited \$100,000.

Almost exactly a year after Scott died, a 24-year-old gay man was bashed at Bondi and his attackers threatened to throw him off a cliff. "You're going over the

suicide attempt in California, and had definitely mentioned AIDS. The autopsy noted no "defence wounds". Finally, police stated that the area was not a known gay "beat" where homosexuals routinely arranged sexual encounters. NSW Coroner Derrick Hand ruled the death a suicide.

We now know that the ruling was made using information that was incomplete, inadequate or just plain wrong. It was never brought to the court's attention that the area where Scott died was indeed a gay beat where men would disrobe and sunbake until a sex partner appeared for a quick, anonymous tryst. The magistrate never learnt that another gay man survived a stabbing after having sex with a stranger at the exact spot where Scott died. The court didn't hear that three

side, you poofter,” one of them screamed. The victim later said the attackers “tried to remove my clothing”.

Another gay man, television newsreader Ross Warren, had gone missing in the same cliff area around the same time and his body has never been found. In 1999, 10 years after Warren’s disappearance, his mother, Kay Warren, began a letter-writing campaign begging for official closure to her son’s death. In May 2000 her letters landed on the desk of Stephen Page, a detective sergeant in the homicide division. His dogged four-year investigation, code-named Operation Taradale, returned a 2638-page report detailing attacks on young Sydney gay men. A coroner’s inquest ruled that John Alan Russell’s “suicide” was due to “multiple injuries sustained when he was thrown from the cliff on to rocks, by a person or persons unknown.” Ross Bradley Warren, Gilles Jacques Mattaini, Richard Norman Johnson, Kritchikorn Rattanjurathaporn, William Allen, Wayne Rick Tonks and Raymond Keam were all listed as victims of similar, deadly violence.

On March 9, 2005, Jacqueline Milledge, then a senior deputy coroner at the Glebe Coroner’s Court, stated that the police conduct in the original investigations had been “grossly inadequate and shameful”. She noted: “It is fair to say that only a percentage of the brutality would have been reported to the police at that time.”

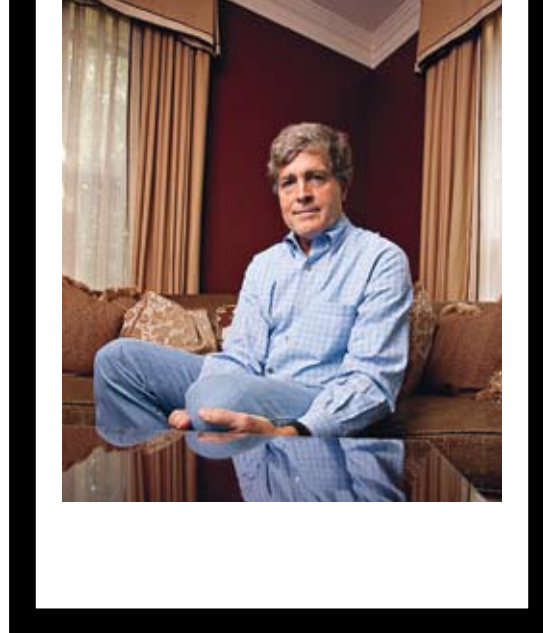
Even with the report’s broad conclusions, it apparently wasn’t considered that this kind of anti-gay violence might have been repeated on the other side of the Harbour Bridge.

In 2005, news of Operation Taradale’s findings carried across the Pacific to Boston where, coincidentally, William Byrd and Steve Johnson had both settled. William wrote to Steve, noting that the Bondi cliff deaths appeared chillingly familiar. Like Kay Warren before him, Steve wrote to NSW authorities and received no response. Like Kay Warren, Steve persevered. In 1993, he had sold a mathematical algorithm to America Online that allowed digitally compressed images to travel over phone lines, and his lucrative place in the internet revolution was assured. By 2005, Steve was CEO of ChoiceStream, a successful IT company.

When I met Steve I started to get an inkling about how much his brother had meant to him. Scott and Steve were close, as befitted brothers two and a half years apart who had sought solace from familial dysfunction in each other’s company. After their parents split up, life for the family took a series of turns for the worse as they moved around the more downtrodden Los Angeles suburbs. Steve held three paper routes, and Scott helped with folding and rubber banding. Their older sister Terry moved out before her 15th birthday, and the two brothers became even closer.

As college kids, Scott and Steve had climbed the Matterhorn in Switzerland and routinely took 50km walks around Los Angeles while discussing computer-programming languages. They drummed up a couple of consulting jobs together and had big future plans.

But it wasn’t until he was 22 that Scott came out to his older brother. Scott had just returned from his Cambridge studies and Steve had just finished his first year of graduate school at Harvard. They met in Los



Angeles and Scott tried to tell Steve about a new relationship. “What happened?” Steve said. “Did you get her pregnant?” “It’s not a her,” Scott replied.

When I agreed to go to Sydney in early 2007, Steve shared a letter he had sent to Bondi investigator Stephen Page a year before. In it, Steve explained why it was so important to find his brother’s killer. “Scott’s death, for the longest time, stopped my life,” he wrote. “Scott was my closest friend; it’s easy to say that Scott helped define me, and was one of my primary sources of joy and purpose. He and I shared and worked together on our most important dreams. When Scott died, I was shattered.”

Page had just started a new civilian job so he recommended hiring John Macnamara, a fellow retired detective sergeant from the homicide division. Page still took an active interest in Scott’s case and counselled us to focus on two questions: did Manly have active gay beats at the time of Scott’s death; and had any anti-gay violence been reported on the Northern Beaches.

In May 2007 I took a room in Manly and literally hit the ground running, jogging up Darley Road towards the North Head cliffs and sewerage plant. I talked to a plant worker, Les Wicks, who had been there since the mid-’80s. He didn’t recall Scott’s death, but I asked if he knew whether homosexual men came up there in the late 1980s. His answer sent me reeling. “Oh, all the time,” he said. “They’d clear off little areas and make love nests,” he said, pointing to the shrubs and trees by the side of the road. If this place was a gay beat known to a straight sewerage plant worker, surely police should have uncovered that fact during their investigation?

The next days were a blur of revelation. Ulo Klemmer, an outreach worker for the AIDS Council of NSW, told me he patrolled the same area in the late 1980s. It was “definitely” a beat, one of about 500 or more that operated at the time around Sydney. Some of the Manly beats were merely meeting places, and men would then head for the hills to have sex.

I contacted longtime *Manly Daily* reporter John Morcombe to see if he could recommend any sources. He was intrigued enough to write a front-page story two days later with the headline: “Was it Murder?” The article included my contact information. My mobile phone rang before nine. An American woman married to an Aussie said her brother-in-law was “at the heart”

of the gay scene in Manly in the ’80s but now lived in Queensland. When I called Christian* he launched into a 90-minute description of gay life in Manly in the late 1970s and early ’80s. He had heard many stories about the “notorious” beat near the cliff, where men would strip, fold their clothes neatly and wait for others to come and “have a root”. He described people “flinging themselves into the bushes” above the Shelly Beach parking lot, a 12-minute walk from where Scott died.

My investigative colleague Macnamara also got wind of a well-known local queen who went by the name of “Sadie”, worked as a window dresser and may have been stabbed at a Manly beat. We found him. “Sadie” was then 63 and recovering from a quadruple bypass, with thinning strawberry blond hair and an ample belly. He recounted his 1986 visit to the same cliff where Scott had died. Sadie described how he took off his clothes, waited, and accepted the advance of another man – exactly as Klemmer and Christian had described. After sex, the stranger stabbed Sadie in the back with a Bowie knife. He walked to the hospital with the knife lodged millimeters from his spinal cord. The attacker was arrested. As we sat, stunned by the import of his story, Sadie turned around, pulled up his shirt and showed us his scar.

At the Coroner’s Court in Glebe, Dr Johan Dufflou, who had performed Scott’s autopsy, said the fall was so disfiguring that the police statement at the inquest that there were no “defence wounds” made no forensic sense. Dufflou said there was “nothing to suggest one way or the other – suicide, accident or homicide.” Newspaper weather reports from the time of Scott’s disappearance until his body was found showed that it had rained often. What did “no signs of a struggle” mean in the police report if the crime scene had been washed by rain?

The *Sun-Herald* ran a story that raised questions about the suicide verdict and included my email address. Within hours I received an onslaught of messages: from gay men who had been bashed but never reported it; from emergency room doctors who had treated apparent gay bashings; from a woman whose gay brother’s death had been ruled a suicide but she didn’t believe it. One person told me how a young thug had regularly bragged about beating up gays with his mates all over the Northern Beaches. I went to Manly Library and saw a 1987 article detailing the arrest of two men and a juvenile for “alleged bashing attacks on homosexuals on the North Shore”. The same thug was one of those arrested. On December 15, 1988, just a week after Scott’s death, the dead body of 29-year-old Ronald Currie was found in a toilet block in North Manly. At least a dozen other *Manly Daily* articles from the time described assaults in places such as parking lots and toilet blocks from Reef Beach to Narrabeen.

Before leaving Sydney in 2007, Macnamara and I sent a detailed report to the Coroner’s office and the NSW unsolved homicide squad. I met with Magistrate Milledge, who agreed the new evidence sounded familiar to the Bondi revelations. She said it might be possible to reclassify the case from “suicide” to “open finding.” Somebody would be in touch with us. Despite repeated emails and telephone calls, nothing happened.

Four years later, on January 29 this year, we caught our fresh Facebook lead. The email claimed to be from a 13-year-old boy, who alerted me to a posting on the Gay Marriage Rights in Australia Facebook page with the “confession” after finding my email address on the web. I contacted Steve, and sent the information to NSW State Coroner Mary Jerram. She responded almost immediately that she would pull Scott’s file. I also sent the Facebook “confession” to the NSW police, and was told somebody would look into it.

Finally, in early May, Steve sent me to Sydney again. This time, Stephen Page took a more active role. We met Manly police Detective Inspector Luke Arthurs, who said they weren’t having much luck tracking the young man who sent the email, much less the alleged “confessor”. We explained that even if the “confession” was a prank, the other information we had developed was solid. Arthurs dismissed this by saying police had reviewed the case in 2007 and declined to act. Page and I left the meeting with a sinking feeling. Using an internet expert Steve had hired, we found the young man who wrote me with the Facebook details. I spoke to him and his mother, but we were no closer to finding the alleged “confessor”. Police have since told Steve that they believe it was a hoax.

Sue Thompson, the former NSW police gay and lesbian liaison officer from 1990 to 2003, wrote a report in support of a new investigation, stating that there is a “likelihood or strong possibility of Scott’s death being another gay hate clifftop homicide/murder”. Stephen Page did the same. At a meeting at the Coroner’s office in Glebe with police, I laid out the new information that indicated a high probability that Scott’s death was not a suicide. I was told our new evidence would be considered.

I received this update at the end of May: “The State Coroner has, based on the information provided by you, reopened the inquest for the purpose of directing police to investigate those issues. Once the Coroner is in receipt of that investigation she will make a determination whether to reopen the formal inquest into the death or leave the finding as it stands. No decision can be made until the coroner has received the police material. It is not anticipated that will occur till later this year.” Manly police recently told Steve that they anticipate completing an investigation for the Coroner in the coming months.

“I do not imagine it will be a relief to learn that my brother was the victim of a murder rather than a suicide,” Steve wrote to me recently. “But understanding the true circumstances surrounding his death would be very important to me and Scott’s family.” The one shred of comfort he’ll cling to is that the investigation should highlight awareness about how gay hate can destroy lives and leave everlasting scars on loved ones. ●

*Not their real names. If you have any information on this case, contact Manly Police 9976 8099 or Crime Stoppers 1800 333 000. Daniel Glick can be reached at djayglick@earthlink.net



“
**Scott’s death,
for the longest
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Steve Johnson at his
wedding in 1985, with
best man Scott (left)