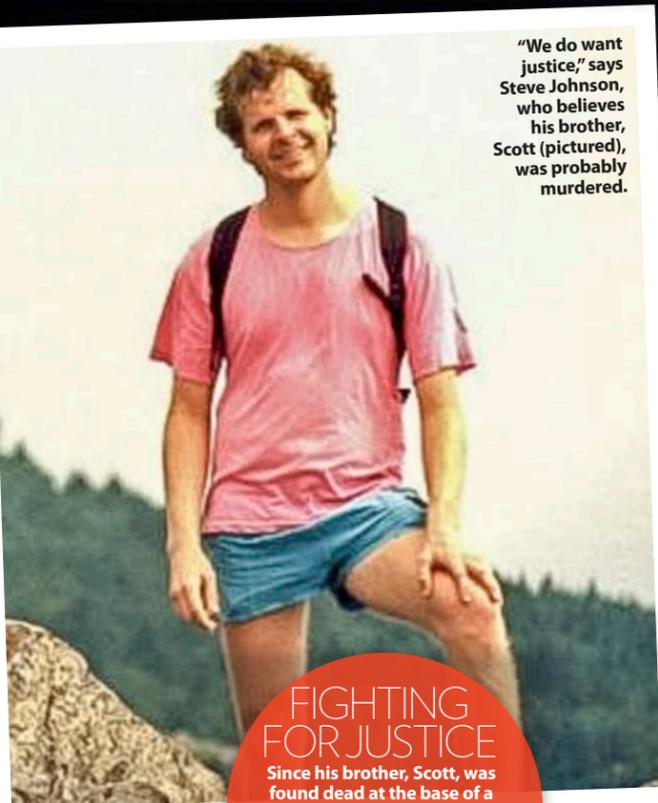## SYDNEY'S GAY HATE CRIMES

'I ESCAPED MURDER'

Decades after a spate of unsolved deaths across Sydney, David McMahon   *reveals how he escaped a gang of killers*

"They kept hitting or kicking me in the head for so long," says David McMahon (pictured).

"We do want justice," says Steve Johnson, who believes his brother, Scott (pictured), was probably murdered.

FIGHTING FOR JUSTICE

Since his brother, Scott, was found dead at the base of a Sydney cliff in 1988, Steve Johnson has demanded a better police investigation: "All would be forgiven if the police rolled up their sleeves and started investigating these cases."

Steve Johnson in Sydney on April 13, after the announcement of a third inquest into his brother's death.

Suffering blows and kicks to the head as his attackers dragged him across the rocky terrain of a Sydney beachside cliff, David McMahon had no doubt where he was heading. The openly gay 23-year-old was on his way home from a jog south of Sydney's Bondi Beach on Dec. 21, 1989, when he was set upon by a group of young men and women who called him "faggot" as they beat him in a sickening 20-minute attack. "They surrounded me, they started hitting me," McMahon, now 50, tells WHO, recalling how they then pulled him towards the edge of the cliff. "When they started dragging me, I knew I was going to die."

Yet after seizing a moment, McMahon was able to flee his attackers, and his survival has given voice to the many who were likely murdered during a spate of horrific gay hate attacks in Sydney during the 1970s, '80s and early '90s. NSW Police are now reviewing 88 deaths that are possible gay hate murders, many of which were ruled suicides or misadventure because the bodies were found at the base of cliffs. But McMahon's ordeal was

> *"When they started dragging me, I knew I was going to die"*

evidence of a starkly different story, one of multiple murders motivated by homophobia in a city now celebrated throughout the world for its LGBTQ culture. "I realise my police statement has meant so much for this whole process," says McMahon, whose harrowing story features in the SBS documentary *Deep Water: The Real Story* (Sun., Oct. 16, 8.30 PM). "I want answers for the people who lost those they loved."

It's a quest he can undertake through the good fortune of his escape. Back in 1989, McMahon was living in Bondi and working in a café, Shelley's, frequented by famous locals including future casino mogul James Packer and his mate the future Nine Network boss David Gyngell. "I really enjoyed my job," says McMahon. "Being gay wasn't an issue. My boss knew I was gay. Many of the customers were gay."

On the night of the attack, McMahon took some café food to his flat, where he ate and watched TV before jogging to Marks Park, then a popular cliff-top gay beat. Only a month earlier, on Nov. 24, 31-year-old John Russell had been found dead at the bottom of the cliffs, his death initially deemed an accidental fall. And four months earlier, WIN newsreader Ross Warren disappeared, his keys discovered at the bottom of the same drop.

With that in mind, McMahon was »

Ted and Peter Russell, the father and brother of John Russell (at his gravesite in 2013), who was killed weeks before McMahon was attacked.

connected with the Gay, Lesbian, Transgender, Bisexual, Intersex and Queer community," read a statement supplied to WHO.

And in December there will be a new inquest into the death of Scott Johnson, a US maths whiz who had just finished a PhD in Australia when his naked body was found at the base of a cliff in Sydney's Manly. Though his wallet was missing and his clothes found in a neat pile, his death was initially ruled suicide. Police have now offered a $100,000 reward for information. "Scott's case can be solved by hearing from people who did it—or know who did it," his brother, Steve Johnson, tells WHO.

Those who lost loved ones are hoping the new investigations, together with the SBS drama series *Deep Water*, based on the events, will provoke new interest in the crimes and bring witnesses forward. "There are two gangs involved in our inquest and we have a lot of information about one gang in particular," says Johnson, a Harvard University graduate who lives in Boston, Massachusetts. "There isn't a day that goes by when I don't think about Scott. He was a warm, gentle, kind, brilliant young man. So finding out who did this and bringing them to justice—that will get Scott something he deserved."

McMahon, too, is on a crusade for justice. But not for himself. While he was being interviewed for the documentary, he met the parents of John Russell, the Sydneysider who was killed a month before his own attack. The pair credit McMahon for exposing the truth about their son's death. "His mum said to me, 'Can I give you a hug?' I said, 'Why?'" recalls McMahon, his voice breaking. "And she said, 'If it wasn't for you, we wouldn't be here today.' And that means a lot to me. Getting answers for them is probably my biggest driving force. They are the ones who lost somebody."

■ *By Emma Martin and Michael Crooks*

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wary of the group of nearly 20 youths, aged 15–20, he passed on the stairs to the park. Worried about crossing paths with them again, he stayed in the park until finally making his way home along the cliff top. "They were hiding in a little cave and came out when I went past," he says. "They encroached on me. Then it all started."

As blows rained on him, McMahon—hopeful of getting a follow-up interview for a flight-attendant job at Qantas—covered his face as he fell. "I was protecting my face and I felt them kicking me in the head," he says. "The girls were talking to the guys and saying, 'Stick a stick up his arse.' They were calling me 'poofter' and 'faggot.' I thought I was going to die." He then heard

one of the men say, "Throw him off the cliff like the other one."

"They were exactly the words," says McMahon, now a public servant. "That was the start of them dragging me to that point where they were going to throw me off. I knew the edge was loose gravel and I swung around and it knocked them off their balance and I ran like the wind." At his flat, he called police, who soon arrived. "They were not helpful—they were laughing a bit," says McMahon, adding that the officers did not take his statement.

Police are listening now. Nearly three decades later, NSW Police have assembled a new task force of eight detectives to "review a number of investigations into the deaths of people

"They were going to throw me off"

If you can help, call Crimestoppers: 1800 333 000

HUNTING KILLERS

In April, NSW Police announced a new task force, Operation Parrabell, which would investigate up to 88 deaths that occurred in Sydney between the 1970s and early 1990s, and which may have been part of a spate of gay hate crimes.

While it was widely known gangs such as "The Bondi Boys" were bashing gay men, police often ruled deaths at gay beats as suicides or misadventures.

However, in 2005, deputy state coroner Jacqueline Milledge condemned police for their "lacklustre" investigations and found that at least two men— John Russell and John Warren— had not died accidentally but were likely murdered.

On the new investigations, Supt Tony Crandell told Fairfax Media, "Whether the outcomes are good or bad for the police ... we will report the truth."

From left: Operation Parrabell's Ashley Grimes, Rebecca Parish, Hugh Brandon, Brad Yusuf, Craig Middleton, Kathleen Collins and Cameron Bignell.