

**WANDA**  
**THE UNTOLD STORY OF THE**  
**WANDA BEACH**  
**MURDERS**

**ALAN WHITICKER**



**CRIMINAL INTENT SERIES**

*For Christine Sharrock and Marianne Schmidt*

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# PREFACE

On Monday, 11 January 1965, Christine Sharrock and Marianne Schmidt, fifteen-year-old neighbours from the Sydney suburb of West Ryde, travelled by train to Cronulla Beach along with Marianne's three younger brothers and sister. In the early afternoon the two older girls took the Schmidt children for a walk across the sandhills at nearby Wanda Beach. When the wind became too strong for the children, Christine and Marianne left them sheltering behind a dune on the pretext of returning to Cronulla to collect the group's belongings for the train journey home. The children never saw Christine or Marianne alive again.

When the bodies of the two girls were found buried in the sand the following day, one of the largest manhunts in Australian history swung into action. The death of two teenage girls, raped and murdered on a popular Sydney beach, shocked the nation. In the 1960s, a time when the Western world was enjoying an

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explosion in youth culture, the murders signalled a loss of innocence for the Australian public.

The Wanda Beach murders, as the deaths of Christine Sharrock and Marianne Schmidt became known, remain one of the most infamous unsolved crimes in Australian history. Today, the mere mention of the word ‘Wanda’ is enough to send a whole generation of baby boomers back to their teenage years — and for the wrong reasons. For them, Wanda Beach will forever be associated with the brutal murder of two teenage girls. It is a crime shrouded in secrecy, myth and misunderstanding, with the countless suspects and theories that have been brought to light over the past thirty-eight years continually fascinating and horrifying us.

The story behind the Wanda Beach murders — and the subsequent police investigation — has never before been told. The primary reason for writing this book was not to sensationalise what was an abominable crime: the facts concerning the deaths of Christine and Marianne speak for themselves. This book needed to be written because the two young girls who lost their lives at Wanda Beach all those years ago were more than simply murder victims; they were just like any other teenagers, with hopes and dreams, and families and friends who loved them and suffered greatly after the girls’ deaths.



During the writing of this book, the NSW Police allowed me access to some of the eighty volumes of archived police material involving over 10,000 pages of interviews manually typed on original police running sheets. These files provided a foundation for re-creating events, as well as putting forward police theories that resulted from their investigations (unless otherwise noted). In some chapters, the names of witnesses and suspects have been changed to protect their identity, and these have also been noted in the text. All other names of people who played a major part in the original police investigation remain unchanged, as does material from these original running sheets, including statements and verbatim interviews with witnesses and suspects.

Many of the detectives who originally worked on the investigation have now passed away. For many, such as former Detective Sergeant Cecil Johnson, the Wanda Beach murders remained a haunting influence throughout their lives. Johnson's obsession with one of the Wanda suspects remains an integral part of the mystery that engulfs the case. Former Detective Sergeant Keith Paull, who worked with Johnson and later took charge of the investigation, provided an excellent insight into the case. Paull, who is eighty-two years old and lives in quiet retirement, consented

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to an interview while remaining extremely conscious of not compromising what remains an open, ongoing investigation. After going through the NSW Police Media Unit, detectives currently investigating Wanda Beach and a number of other unsolved crimes also proved helpful, while taking great pains to maintain the integrity of their current investigations.

While the surviving members of the Schmidt family, including those at the beach the day the girls died, declined to comment — a decision I understand and respect — many friends of the girls and eyewitnesses to their final hours were re-interviewed specifically for this book. Their reminiscences add a new dimension to the clinical statements taken by police in 1965 and in many instances their stories were poignant, heartfelt and, in the case of Margaret Kavazos, Christine Sharrock's childhood friend, somewhat therapeutic.

Christine Sharrock and Marianne Schmidt do not deserve to be remembered merely as victims; footnotes in the annals of Australian criminal history. *Wanda: The Untold Story of the Wanda Beach Murders* is their story and it needs to be told.

Alan J Whiticker

## CHAPTER 1

# THE LAST DAYS OF INNOCENCE

*During that summer, the Daily Telegraph Sand Models Contest encouraged children and teenagers to sculpt models in the sand at local beaches, with weekly winners taking part in a final at Bondi Beach on 30 January.*

Looking at a map of the east coast of Australia, one cannot help but notice the narrow corridor of land between the Pacific Ocean and the nondescript group of mountains named the Great Dividing Range — this area is home to the majority of the Australian population. With 36,000 kilometres of coastline, Australia holds any number of beaches, both popular and remote, for people to pursue the Australian dream of sun, sand and surf. It is no wonder the beach is an integral part of Australia's history, culture and myth.

Many writers and social commentators have suggested that the beach has replaced the bush as the mythical home of the modern Australian. The beach is much more accessible to suburban Australia than the traditional bush and has become an essential part of the national identity, producing the bronzed Aussie stereotype and providing a context for other nationalities, especially immigrants, to relate to Australians.

Australian beach culture, especially interest in surfing, exploded in the suburbs in the early 1960s, with ordinary kids catching the wave of enthusiasm, via Hawaii, from America's west coast. Australian teens embraced music by The Beach Boys, Jan & Dean, and our own Billy Thorpe and the Aztecs, who got their break as the house band at the popular Surf City nightspot in the heart of Kings Cross; they adopted the fashions, spoke the language, and suburban boys dreamt of owning a surfboard. (This was still several years before the women's liberation movement and the common mantra at the time was 'chicks don't surf'.) The dream of riding a surfboard was not limited to those teenagers who lived in seaside suburbs and could see the beach from their front verandah: in Sydney, kids from as far away as the outer western suburbs had that same dream.

During the 1960s Australians Nat Young and 'Midget' Farrelly dominated world surfing championships. The rise in popularity of 'surfies' — tanned, blond (bleached or natural) surfboard riders — brought them into direct confrontation with 'bodgies and widgies' — male and female 'rockers' who were the last remnants of the Elvis-dominated 1950s. This was particularly the case in the beachside suburb of Cronulla, south of Sydney, where any number of stand-offs degenerated into rumbles or brawls between the rival groups on Friday and Saturday nights outside the shops and pubs that lined the main strip into Cronulla.

Bate Bay, immediately south of Botany Bay, is rimmed by Sydney's longest span of beaches; a sweeping arc of sand almost five kilometres long. Four separate beaches — Cronulla, North Cronulla, Elouera and Wanda — are lined together in the bottom half of the bay, with the northernmost section of beach backed by a nature reserve.

The area north of Wanda Beach is known as Greenhills, named after the washed-out, pale-green sand dunes that once ran 3.5 kilometres to Pimelwi Rocks at the northern point of the bay. The area is familiar to Australian audiences, as several classic

Australian movies — from *Forty Thousand Horsemen* in the 1940s, to *Puberty Blues* and *Mad Max III* in the 1980s — as well as countless television commercials were filmed there.

During the Depression there was a cluster of old shacks at nearby Boat Harbour, but the development of the Kurnell Oil Refinery in the 1950s saw any chance of the development of a residential area die out. Over the past thirty years, the sandhills closest to the sea have been both mined out by concrete companies and washed flat by huge seas that hit the bay during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The sand dunes behind the beach are only accessible by four-wheel drive, contrasting with the southern part of the bay that is today a highly developed tourist area.

Despite North Cronulla originally being declared unsafe for bathing by a government committee in 1919, the area grew in popularity and a Surf Lifesaving Club was formed in 1924. The surf lifesaving movement, now an Australian social institution, quickly took hold at Cronulla Beach, because it was the only beach in Sydney serviced by a railway. In an October 2002 interview for this book, Barry Ezzy, a former lifeguard in the local Sutherland Shire during the 1960s, recalled:

*Not a lot of people had cars in those days ... People were a lot more reliant on public transport than they are today. The beach was much more popular then it is today because there's just so much more to do now. In the sixties during summer, the beach was the place to be.*

However, the beach meant different things to different people, as Ezzy described:

*There was a distinct culture between the surfboard riders and the 'clubbies' ... The board riders wanted to maintain a separate identity to the members of the surf club. The board riders did their own thing and didn't want to be regimented by the surf club people like me, who were very much involved in the surf lifesaving movement and whose main objective in life was competition in surf lifesaving.*

To the true surfer, the beach was a way of life bordering on religious devotion; for the surf lifesaver it became a source of immense pride and competition; and for the ordinary suburban family it was a chance to spend precious leisure hours away from the bustle and grind

of daily life. And this was especially true for the millions of immigrants who came to these shores after the end of World War II. The beach seemed to symbolise the best of everything an Australian way of life had to offer.

In the twenty years following 1945 Australia adopted an ambitious reconstruction and expansion program. The realisation that Australia needed a larger population to fulfil this plan — and also to defend itself if invaded — led to the Federal Government's call to 'populate or perish'. In 1945 the Labor Government launched the first Migration Program, which was intended to increase migration to 1 per cent in order to increase the annual population growth rate to 2 per cent.

The following year the government provided assisted passage for British migrants, especially ex-servicemen and their families. This was later expanded to include other countries such as the United States, Italy, Greece, Spain, France, the Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland, Belgium and Denmark. Despite Australia's involvement in two world wars against Germany, German nationals were considered highly desirable migrants in the government's post-war resettlement program. Australia and West Germany reached an agreement in 1952 to



assist 3000 Germans per annum, and another 1000 were offered unassisted passage.

Although Australia's population growth rate did not reach the projected 2 per cent per annum, the millionth post-war immigrant arrived on these shores in 1955. The following year Australia modified conditions to make it easier for migrants of non-European descent to gain entry into Australia. In 1956 the Federal Government commenced Operation Reunion, a scheme designed to reunite migrants from (the then) USSR and eastern Europe with relatives who had already settled in Australia. An uprising in Hungary against Communist control also led to Australia accepting 14,000 Hungarian refugees that year. In 1957 the 'Bring out a Briton' campaign encouraged the public to sponsor a British family and assist them in settling in Australia.

In 1958 an important development occurred in the history of Australian migration with the introduction of the *Revised Migration Act*. The new Act abolished the controversial and racially biased dictation test that was compulsory for all prospective migrants. The test was predominantly in English and subsequently, a low percentage of non-English speaking migrants passed. That same year, an agreement of assisted passage with West Germany was renewed. From July 1949 to June

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1959, Australia accepted 162,756 German-born immigrants — the third highest number behind the United Kingdom and Italy — representing 13 per cent of all migration during this period. Between 1951 and 1962, 84 per cent of German migrants received assisted passage to Australia.

The Schmidt family was one of the many German families that took up the Australian Government's offer of a new life. Helmut and Elizabeth Schmidt were the parents of six children — Helmut (born 1948), Marianne (born 1949), Hans (born 1952), Peter (born 1954), Trixie (born 1955) and Wolfgang (born 1957) — when they immigrated to Australia. (Elizabeth Schmidt also had a son, Robert Hauschberger, from her first marriage. Robert remained in West Germany and the family lost contact with him in early 1964.) Despite having no family living in Australia, the Schmidt family made the trip and arrived in Melbourne on 13 September 1958 and stayed at the Bonegilla Migrant Camp before moving to the Greta Camp and then Unanderra Migrant Hostel in New South Wales. There they developed friendships with the Bandte, Sterker and Kruger families before moving to the Riverina town of Temora. A seventh child, Norbert, was born to Helmut and Elizabeth in 1959.

On 10 March 1963 the Schmidt family moved to Sydney after securing a housing commission residence in Bush Road, West Ryde. Helmut Schmidt was a carpenter but could not find steady work because of the onset of Hodgkin's disease, a form of cancer that attacks the lymph glands, which ultimately claimed his life on 15 June 1964.

When the Schmidt family moved into their former war service home in West Ryde, Christine Sharrock was living next door with her grandparents, Jim and Jeanette Taig. Christine, who chose to live with her grandparents after her mother remarried and moved to the north-western Sydney suburb of Seven Hills, struck up an immediate friendship with Marianne Schmidt. Although the pair attended different schools, Christine and Marianne both sat for the Leaving Certificate at the end of 1964 and were awaiting their results over the summer holidays.

The Australian public approached the 1965 New Year with great optimism. With a population of eleven million, Australia was basking in the overflow of the economic, political and cultural revolution that had hit other industrialised Western nations. But in many ways, Australia was still a conservative stronghold. The Federal Liberal Government had been in power since

1949, with leader Robert Menzies in the final twelve months of what would be a record seventeen years as prime minister. On 15 January, swimming sensation Dawn Fraser became the youngest person to be named Australian of the Year, at the not-so-young age of twenty-seven. The news media at the time was also conservative and reactionary. Australia was still getting over the stir caused by the June 1964 tour of The Beatles when The Rolling Stones held their first tour of Australia in January 1965. The fact that a girl's dress was ripped in a 'riot' at Sydney airport was enough to make the front page of at least one newspaper.<sup>1</sup> Australian society was naïve, provincial and insular. During that summer, the *Daily Telegraph* Sand Models Contest encouraged children and teenagers to sculpt models in the sand at local beaches, with weekly winners taking part in a final at Bondi Beach on 30 January. When Merrick Fry, on holiday from Bathurst, won a heat of the competition for his model of a boy scout at North Narrabeen, he was awarded a £3 cash prize, a Streets ice-cream pack and a Supertex beach towel.

In the early hours of Tuesday, 12 January 1965 teenagers waited in Castlereagh Street, Sydney, for the results of the Leaving Certificate published in the early edition newspapers. For years it had been the practice

of the major newspapers to publish the examination results in proof form before the newspapers were printed, with teenagers cramming the streets outside the News Ltd offices to check the results. That year, however, the NSW education department requested that the newspapers not publish the results in proof form, ensuring that teenagers would keep a long night's vigil outside newspaper offices until the newspaper hit the streets at around 3 a.m.

At the same time another vigil was being kept, in adjoining homes in working-class West Ryde. The younger Schmidt children had returned home from their outing to the beach without their sister Marianne and her friend Christine. One part of the Australian dream, Wanda Beach, would soon be forever associated with the brutal murder of two teenage girls.