Preface

IT WAS A COLD, grey November Monday morning, and I was rattling northwards on the train out of King's Cross when my mobile rang.

I was nursing the mother of all hangovers, having spent the weekend getting smashed in London with some of my mates from the Army and the Metropolitan Police, and honouring the war dead at the annual Remembrance Sunday service in Whitehall.

My head was pounding, and I didn't want to talk to anyone.

I looked at the screen: it said 'Jazz'.

Jazz was my handler.

Groaning, I pressed the green button and held the phone to my ear.

'Pete?'

'Yep.'

'You alright, mate?'

'Nope.'

'Right… Anyway, Operation Stealth want you for a quick job. Heroin and crack… You'll be in and out in four weeks. You up for it?'

I paused. I was 42 years old, and I was getting a bit long in the tooth for drugs-buying. I'd been at it for a decade, now, and I'd spent the last 48 hours telling anyone who'd listen that I was kicking it into touch.

'Pete? You still there mate?'

But there's always one more job, isn't there?

'Yep, I'm still here. Yeah, I suppose I'm up for it. When?'

'They want to start tomorrow.'

'No problems.'

I hung up and looked at Slug, who was sitting opposite me. He was smirking and shaking his head. I groaned again, and looked out of the grimy window at the damp Leicestershire countryside racing by.

Op Stealth. There's a blast from the past. Stealth was Nottinghamshire Police's version of the Met's Operation Trident, a specialist unit set up to combat the explosion of Yardie gun crime in the city. That – and the

growing propensity of the homegrown scum to carry weapons – had led to the city being nicknamed 'Shottingham'. A bad joke, perhaps, but it was one which had the ring of truth to it: a significant number of people had been blown away in gang feuds, or hit in the crossfire, and shots had been even fired at police officers.

The mayhem would rage for some years – maybe it has never really gone away – and would include four killings which shocked the whole country: those of the schoolgirl Danielle Beccan, of the city jeweller Marion Bates, and the mother and stepfather of one of those involved in another gangland murder.

When Jazz made his call to me, Stealth had only been running for a matter of months. Eventually, the team would nick hundreds of people, and recover an armoury of firearms, stolen motors and counterfeit cash, enough drugs and real money to pay off half the national debt, but already the results were coming in.

The impetus for the call was the execution a few days earlier of a 33-year-old mother-of-three called Terrisia Jacobs. Mrs Jacobs had been shot dead at 2.30am outside Nottingham's Drum nightclub, in a classic gangland hit which was like something out of *The Sopranos*: a hooded man had calmly walked up behind her, put a gun against her head in front of dozens of witnesses, and brazenly pulled the trigger. Shot at point-blank range, she was dead before she hit the floor and lay there, her blood and brains sprayed all over the pavement and the club wall.

Not a nice way to go, but don't feel too sorry for her: she was a nasty crack dealer, and a player in the city's drugs scene.

The Detective Superintendent leading the enquiry called a press conference at which he described the shooting as a 'tragic loss of life'. He was making the usual appeal for witnesses, but there was no shortage of those. The place had been crawling with clubbers at the time, and at least 40 of them saw it happen, but – for some reason – people who wanted to chat about it were thin on the ground.

Despite this, the local Old Bill were sure they knew who was behind the job. Unfortunately, knowing it and proving it to the satisfaction of a jury are different things, so they were taking the Al Capone approach.

Capone was busted for tax evasion rather than his more colourful crimes; likewise, if they couldn't get the Jacobs killers for the murder, maybe they could nail them and their network for their crack and heroin dealing?

Which was where I came in.

Chapter 1:

The Roots of a Fighting Man

I WAS BORN IN PRESTON, LANCASHIRE, in 1962, one of six sons brought up in a terraced house in the heart of the town's docks.

Although Preston is a dozen or so miles from the Irish Sea, the River Ribble was dredged and widened to allow ocean-going container ships and tankers to pass through. In the 1960s, pretty much every man-jack in town worked on the river, among them my dad and his brothers, Occasionally my old man would come home from work with a bunch of green bananas that he'd smuggled out in his bag, and my earliest memories are of the dock strikes, and long-haired blokes in donkey jackets flicking tabs and waiting for a scuffle.

Dockers' wives saw very little of their husbands – they were either out grafting or on the piss – so my mum did all the work. She was strict with us lads, but then she had to be. She came from a hard family, who solved their problems with fists, and sometimes this meant life was a bit surreal. I remember standing naked in the Belfast sink in our kitchen, being scrubbed down by my mum, with Tom Jones belting out *What's New, Pussycat?* on the radio, and my Uncle Brian hiding upstairs from the Scouse gangsters who were hunting him down with guns.

Modern-day Preston has massive unemployment, child poverty is rampant, and drugs are rife. Young lads look up to the dealers – they're the ones with the cash, the cars and the girls. Back in my childhood, drugs were unheard of, and your social life revolved around the pubs and the working men's clubs. The fellas we looked up to were the drinkers and fighters, and my extended family had plenty of both. We were encouraged to fight from an early age. It was the way things were – not just for the kids, but for the whole town. I remember a couple of transvestite dockers who would get together once a week in the tap room of a local boozer, drinking pints of bitter and smoking fags while dressed to kill in

fishnet stockings, high heels and wigs, with stubble poking through their foundation. They must have had the piss taken out of them, but if you did it once you wouldn't do it twice, because they were proper hard bastards.

I went to school under sufferance, and didn't place a whole lot of importance on it. The teachers were more violent than the dockers. One particularly colourful character, a technical drawing teacher, was the spitting image of Bill Oddie from *The Goodies* – which he clearly loved, because he'd quote from the show at every opportunity. This guy had a plimsoll wrapped in black tape that he called 'Super Wellie', and he would use it at every available opportunity, bringing it down onto the upturned hands of children with as much force as he could muster. I overstepped the mark one day and he got me in a stranglehold and squeezed until I started to pass out, much to the amusement of my mates. These days she'd probably end up seeing the inside of a prison cell, on a wing full of sex offenders and bent police officers; back then he was just someone you didn't want to upset.

There was also a wizened old woman with a hunchback and a blue rinse who I still have nightmares about. She'd work her way round the classroom like a demented granny, wielding a massive, hardback book while she checked your homework. Anyone who produced substandard work was simply smashed over the head with it. Sometimes the old bat's feet left the floor with the effort. I remember one day when she ripped up the pages of crap I had written into little pieces, and placed them carefully on top of my head. Then she let out a blood-curdling screech of 'CONFETTI!' and smashed the book down on my head with all her might, before moving onto her next victim.

In the early 1970s, I followed my brothers into the local scout group. I quickly discovered that bullies existed there, too. I remember one night being forced to bend over while the scoutmaster hit me across the backside with a cricket bat because I was having trouble catching a tennis ball in a game. I ran straight home to tell my mum and dad. I was hoping my dad might go down and sort this bloke out.

Instead, he said in a very matter of fact way, 'Well, lad, if you can't take that type of discipline like a man then you'll have trouble lasting in any organisation.'

Around the same time, I was hanging round with a bunch of kids from a local children's home, who were also members of the Preston Marine Cadets. I was intrigued by the stories they told me; they seemed to have a lot more action and fun than the scouts, and there was no evidence of them getting whacked on the arse by a nonce with a cricket bat for dropping a fucking tennis ball. What's more, they had a cracking blue uniform, so I decided to give it a go.

The cadets shared their location with a unit of sea cadets and a girls' nautical training corps at 277 TS Galloway. We met on a Friday and Monday nights and often spent weekends away at camp. The Marine Cadets was run by two ex-Marines, Lt Jock McLeod and Sgt Jim Bland, and they had a real aura about them. They were a pair of scary hard bastards, but they never once laid a finger on any of the cadets. For the first time, I found people outside my family who I could really respect and look up to. I'm grateful for the example they set me.

In September 1978, their influence led me into the Army when I joined the Junior Leaders Regiment Royal Artillery in Nuneaton, Warwickshire. The place was designed to turn out future senior NCOs for The Royal Regiment of Artillery. I sailed through 12 months of weapons training, gunnery, drill and adventure training without busting a gut – finally having found something I was good at – and passed off the square as an adult gunner at the end of it. After a short period of leave, I joined 16 Regiment Royal Artillery, posted at Kirton Lindsey in North Lincolnshire.

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I SETTLED EASILY into Army life, and spent the following eight years in one miserable Cold War posting after another, often drunk and rolling around in the gutter with other squaddies or the odd civilian.

My weapon of no-choice was the Rapier anti-aircraft missile. Soldiers have always complained that their equipment is crap – I dare say Roman legionaries moaned about the gladius – but the Rapier really *was* useless. Your chances of using it to shoot down enemy aircraft were next to nil, though, by comparison with today's Army,

we were fortunate; aside from one minor piece of bad manners by the Argentineans, we never had to use any of it in anger.

In 1981, we were posted to Dortmund in West Germany and enthusiastically assumed our role of waiting to provide air defence against the Red Menace if it ever poured over the borders from Russia. For 'waiting to provide air defence' read 'sweeping gun parks, pushing Land Rovers round the barracks to save on fuel, practising call-out procedures for the Third World War, and taking part in drunken brawls with the rest of the garrison.'

Dortmund had four gunner regiments within a few miles of each other, and we shared a camp with 26 Regiment Royal Artillery. This was a bit like asking Rangers and Celtic fans to share a minibus. 16 Regiment recruited mainly from around the Glasgow area, with a smattering of northern English lads like myself, and 26 were from Essex. We kicked the living daylights out of the mat every opportunity.

Dortmund city centre back then was a nasty, violent place. Groups of immigrant Turks and squaddies defended their territory with extreme aggression. 16's patch was a boozer called the Hansa Becher, a typical squaddie haunt with cheap beer and local girls who were too ugly to work in the nearby red light area. The clientele were almost exclusively single gunners from 16, and so we nicknamed ourselves the Hansa Commandos. There was a lot of rivalry between us and pretty much everyone else, and every now and then someone would go a bit over the top. The Army would then encourage us to drink in camp for a while, rather than go down town and besmirch the name of our country and get ourselves arrested.

Each battery had a room in its barrack block converted into a bar which sold subsidised beer. One night our bar was broken into and a stash of Kit Kats was stolen, presumably by a group of squaddies returning from a night on the lash. The following night I was in the NAAFI bar with a lad called Andy Bishop, who was a bit of a rogue. We were due a kit inspection in the morning so we each bought ten Kit Kats, being careful to ask the NAAFI manageress for a receipt (to save ourselves from being accused if we were caught with the chocs). Next morning, I hid the Kit Kats in the webbing of a couple of new lads in my troop and

stashed the receipt in my combat jacket pocket. We paraded outside the battery block with our kit in front of us, and the Sergeant Major began his inspection with a troop Sergeant called Gus. Gus was a giant of bloke who played rugby for the British Army and was one of the strongest men I have ever come across; he was also in charge of the battery bar, and he was after the blood of the Kit Kat nickers.

'Show me your washing and shaving kit from your left-hand kidney pouch!' growled the Sergeant Major, in broad Glaswegian.

The entire troop reached for their webbing, unfastened their pouches and produced their washing and shaving equipment… Except for the young lad standing next to me, who produced a handful of Kit Kats. He stood there, mouth open, holding the offending items in his shaking hands, and protesting his innocence.

Gus, towering above him, grabbed him by the front of his combat jacket. Just then, there was a muffled cry from the front, as another young recruit found his ammunition pouch was stuffed with Kit Kats, too. Gus went ballistic.

Eventually, the two lads convinced him of their innocence, but the knowledge that someone was clearly taking the piss, as well as the Kit Kats, was too much for Gus to bear. One afternoon… Bingo! He called in to see his mate, the Battery Quartermaster, and found Andy Bishop, who worked in the stores, sitting behind his desk scoffing a Kit Kat, with a pile of others at his elbow.

Gus glared at him and demanded to know where they had come from. Bishop stopped nibbling, looked Gus in the eye, and said, 'Ashton gave them to me.'

Gus let out a fearsome roar and ran from the stores. I was sweeping up leaves from underneath the Land Rovers when I saw Gus running towards me, screaming like a banshee. Discretion being the better part of valour, I dropped the brush and ran for my life. I still see Gus at regimental reunions, and he remains convinced that I nicked the Kit Kats. Gus, I didn't do it!

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WE STILL WENT out into the city from time to time. One day I was on the lash with the Hansa Commandos and we found our way to a local boozer called the Power Pub. It was a disco bar and a neutral drinking haunt with mixed clientele from any regiment, and even some locals. There was never normally any trouble in there, but within half an hour some of our lads were embroiled in a punch-up with a group of Germans. This spilled out onto the street before it was stopped by a group of junior NCOs from 16 who were having a quiet drink in the pub with their German girlfriends, and most of the Hansa Commandos left. For some unfathomable reason, I stayed on.

A short time later, I was thrown out of the pub, and punched the pub window in frustration. To my horror, a crack appeared down the centre of it. A group of German bouncers then chased me down the street and up on to some flat roofs, yelling at me to *kommen hier*, *schnell*. It all ended with the musing my head as a dancefloor and throwing me through a garage roof, twice, before handing me over to the police. The following Monday morning I was marched out in front of the RSM to be told that the damage I'd caused came to £800. I only took home £200 a month.

I didn't have a clue how I was going to repay it, short of signing on for the full 22 years. As luck would have it, shortly afterwards we were deployed to San Carlos Water in the Falkland Islands. The war had just ended and we had missed the whole thing, but no-one knew if the Argies might have another pop. We were one of three air defence regiments rotating through four-month tours just in case. This involved sitting in trenches, overlooking the bay, freezing our nuts off, and dying of boredom. The one advantage was that there was nothing to spend your money on, so I was able to save up the £800.

We flew from Germany, via Dakar in West Africa, and onwards to Ascension Island, a big pile of volcanic ash plonked right in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean just south of the Equator. From there, we transferred to a cruise ship, the Cunard *Countess*, for a 10-day voyage south towards the Falklands. Sadly, she had been commissioned as a troopship, so there was no tennis court or cocktail bar. Life on board was inevitably taken up with weapons training, fitness drill, honing

our first aid skills, and endlessly practising aircraft recognition – the latter being something I feel our American allies should take a bit more seriously, given their penchant for 'friendly fire' incidents. Many of the aircraft types used by the Argies were classed as friendly in our role in Europe, but hostile in the South Atlantic.

Happily, the swimming pool hadn't been decommissioned, and so we spent our afternoons lounging around the pool. It was during one of these lazy sessions that I first noticed a group of suntanned and well-manicured blokes who clearly weren't with us. As it turned out, they were waiters from the ship, and I quickly realised that they were flirting with any of the squaddies who would give them the time of day. Being a sheltered sort of lad, the only openly gay people I'd seen at that point were Larry Grayson and Kenneth Williams, and I found the whole thing slightly scary.

Evenings saw us pouring copious amounts of beer down our necks and playing bingo, hosted by the RSM. It was quite funny watching some of the toughest men in the battery sweating and biting their nails over a line or a full house. It all helped the time pass, but not very quickly, and it seemed like an eternity before we arrived in San Carlos and were airlifted, section by section, to our site – relieving our colleagues from 14 Battery who had been posted there immediately before us.

Our site was on a hill at the end of Bomb Alley and, as the helicopter lifted and whizzed away out of sight, I turned to survey the grey scene that would be home to me and six other lads for the next four months. It was a big, mice-infested hole in the ground, covered in Harrier stripping and camouflage. Only a nearby Rapier missile launcher and tracker shelter, protected by a bit of a bunker built against the (very) off chance that we might be attacked, showed we were in the right place.

There were 11 other virtually identical sites scattered around San Carlos Water, all designed to pretend that the Army was providing air defence cover for the dozen or so ships that were anchored in the bay, in blissful ignorance of how crap Rapier really was.

The Battery HQ was based in a Portakabin camp called Kelly's Gardens, which was near to San Carlos settlement and was also

inhabited by our infantry cover – initially, a company of Gurkhas who patrolled the hills every night. Those guys were horribly efficient and professional, and we would never have known they were there, in stark contrast to their replacements, the Royal Irish Rangers. The Paddies bumbled in halfway through the tour, and every night we would hear them stumbling about and cursing in the dark – they were so bad that they actually disturbed our sleep. One particular night, they wrongly thought they had seen some movement around our position, so they fired a flare which lit up the night sky and helpfully silhouetted our section. We shouted fully justified abuse at them, to which they responded with their own volley of obscenities. Thank God, the Argies never came into contact with them as they couldn't have hoped for a better morale boost.

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ANY SOLDIER WHO says he looks forward to war is either lying, or seriously lacking in imagination, or mad, and I spent most of my waking moments praying that hostilities didn't break out again. We were all armed with our personal weapons, along with a general purpose machine gun and, oddly, an 84 mm Carl Gustav anti-tank rifle, but I didn't honestly hold out much hope of our fighting off an Argie charge. For starters, we only had four belts of ammunition for the Gimpy, so if we were attacked we would have run out of ammo in around 45 seconds – always assuming that the man firing it survived that long. As for the Charlie G, we were more likely to see the London Philharmonic Orchestra coming over the hill than an enemy tank. But it was covered in dust and had never been zeroed, so in the million-to-one event that we'd needed it to take out a rogue T55 (or a string section), the projectile would probably have sunk one of our own boats instead. It's fair to say that we weren't exactly armed to the teeth.

Gus was the sergeant in charge of our section, which was good and bad at the same time. He was a top sergeant, and he could get us organised when he needed to. Ultimately, that might save our bacon. On the other hand, a tiny part of him was still inwardly

fuming about the Kit Kat affair, and I knew I was unlikely to get away with much pissing around. And, compared to some of the other unit leaders, he was very strict with our ammo. We wouldn't fire our weapons unless we were zeroing them in on one of the extremely rare range days.

After a couple of weeks, one of our number, a lad known as Biter, was moved to another section to replace a sergeant who had gone home on compassionate leave. Shortly after his arrival, Biter was in their living area eating his lunch when a burst of machine gun fire erupted outside. Being used to the quiet life with us, Biter instinctively screamed for the section to stand to, grabbed his webbing, rifle and steel helmet and ran outside… to be greeted by a gunner from the section blatting away at a flock of upland geese that were flying overhead. Gus would never have stood for that.

I had my own moments of panic, too. One day I was sitting in the tracker bunker with the radio headset on, daydreaming and writing a letter home, when a call came across the airwaves. *'Hello Charlie-Charlie Alpha, this is Two-air raid warning red, battle stations, weapons free on all fixed-wing aircraft – three times Mirages approaching at 100 miles.'*

Shit! I stared at the radio set. My eyes opened wider still when the tracking kit alarmed onto an unknown aircraft which was approaching at speed. I fumbled with the controls and looked through the eyepiece of the tracker, sweat running down my forehead, and immediately locked onto one of our own Chinooks, which was dashing back to the safety of San Carlos Water. The ships anchored out in the bay were gunning their engines and firing chaff to confuse any incoming Exocets. *Shit shit shit!*

I was dimly aware of the rest of my section, all charging around like blue-arsed flies, running to foxholes with their weapons or trying to find the helmets they had last seen weeks ago.

I was trying to remember the words to the *Our Father*, when a flight of Phantoms from Port Stanley intercepted the incoming Mirages, and that was enough to send the Argies back home. Shortly afterwards, we got the clear signal, the battery was stood down, and I went off to change my underpants.

A few nights later I was on sentry duty with our bombardier in charge, Geordie G, while the rest of the section slept. Geordie was a great lad, feared and respected in equal measure. He showed extreme loyalty to his mates and was always a reassuring influence to have around – in his mad bastard sort of way. The Rapier wasn't working, as usual, and with the minutes passing at a snail's pace we decided to head off and make a brew. We still had to listen to the radio, of course, so we clipped a remote handset on some wire and reeled it out behind us as we walked the 50 yards or so to the living area, enabling us to listen to and transmit on the radio while we were brewing up. We placed the handset onto a makeshift table and set about boiling some water. As I prepared the tea, we were both startled by the sound of the handset sliding off the table and landing on the floor. Somebody, or something, had obviously tripped over the cable outside – and given that we were the only people awake from the section that was a bit worrying.

'What the fuck was that?' I said.

Geordie bent down to pick up his sub-machine gun. He cocked it in a business-like way, picked up a torch, checked that it was working, and then handed them both to me. 'You'd better go and find out,' he said.

I took the weapon and the torch, gulped, and made my way outside, knees knocking, in search of an infiltrator. I crept around, spinning round at intervals whenever I heard a crack or a rustle. After 10 minutes of nothing, I returned to report back, and found Geordie snoring. It perfectly summed up the adrenalin-fuelled and death-defying nature of life in the Army.

Sleep was very important to us, to be fair, and Geordie was a keen exponent. The first night I was on duty with him I noticed that he had brought his sleeping bag into the bunker as well as his webbing and personal weapon. I said nothing, until an hour or so after our shift started when he unzipped the bag and climbed into it.

'Night, Pete,' he said, cheerfully. 'You want to get your head down.'

Being the junior on this jaunt, I was a bit uncomfortable. 'Aren't we supposed to be on sentry duty?' I said.

Geordie leant forward. 'Listen son,' he said. 'If the Argy special forces decide to attack us during the night, they're going to kill us. It'll be much easier on us if we're asleep when it happens.'

I couldn't really argue with that, and whenever I was on stag with Geordie I had to go through the charade of pretending that I was tired the next day. Our routine involved the night shift gunner making breakfast for the rest of the section before waking them. I used to stand over the petrol cooker, rubbing sleep from my eyes and doing comedy yawns as I made Gus his sausage sandwich. After breakfast, I'd wander off and pretend to sleep for six hours.

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AFTER WHAT SEEMED like years, we reached the end of the tour and were transferred by helicopter to a troopship and then on to Port Stanley to pick up the rest of the battery. We were allowed into Stanley one day, and after a respectably brief and cultural walk around the capital we all met up at the legendary Globe Hotel to get shit-faced. We were all humble enough to admit that, compared to the lads who had preceded us and recaptured the islands, we hadn't done a great deal. But, that said, we *had* given up four months of our lives (including my 21st birthday) to do our bit in keeping the islands British, so we rather naively expected a warm reception from the islanders.

We got nothing of the sort – quite the opposite, in fact. Basil Fawlty could have learnt a bit from the miserable bastards.

We hadn't had the opportunity to drink much alcohol during those interminable four months, so we were soon drowning in the stuff, and loud and raucous sing-songs quickly broke out, much to the annoyance of the locals behind the bar – a particularly sullen bunch, all bearded, and dressed in Parkas and woolly hats, and all getting plenty of abuse.

They threatened to stop serving us, but changed their minds as a riot threatened; I suspect they were half-wishing those civilised Argentineans were still around.

When it finally came time to leave, we decided to take a little souvenir from the place. I opened the top of my combat trousers and Geordie G handed me the poker – thankfully cold – that was on the hearth. I limped out into Stanley singing *Flower of Scotland* at the top of my voice with all the rest of the lads, but as we staggered towards the

landing craft to take us back to the ship MV *Keren* it was announced that we were going to be searched before boarding, just in case we had picked up anything illegal. Bollocks. I breathed a regretful sigh and dropped the poker into Port Stanley harbour. As it turned out, the kit search never actually materialised, much to the relief of one Lance Bombardier. When we had arrived back in Dortmund and were unpacking our kit, Andy Bishop approached this lad and asked to look in his sleeping bag. Bishop un-wrapped the sleeping bag and retrieved a Colt .45 automatic which he'd planted there... He then calmly tucked the shooter down the front of his trousers and walked away.

Bishop was a bit of an oddball. One night I was boozing with him in the battery bar when I jokingly suggested we mugged the barman as he took the night's takings down to the guardroom at closing time. Bishop made no comment but looked thoughtfully in the direction of Shakey MacBeth, the barman. Shakey was a very friendly and popular bloke, and nobody would ever have wished him any harm. Shortly before closing time, I felt a tap on my shoulder and Bishop motioned for me to follow him. We went to his room where he produced two balaclavas and two small metal bed-ends which people used as clubs from time to time. Somewhat non-plussed, I asked him what was happening.

'We need to lie in wait for Shakey,' he said.

I looked at him. 'I was joking, you daft bastard!'

Bishop just shrugged his shoulders, hid the balaclavas and bed-ends, and the subject was never mentioned again.

Back in Germany, we quickly slipped back into the old routine of pushing wagons around, kit inspections and insane boozing. And fighting. I soon became the latest bed warmer for a Hansa Becher girl, and one Sunday afternoon we were walking hand-in-hand through the city centre when a large group of American sailors caught my eye. They were strolling towards the red light district, being very loud and quite annoying, but I thought nothing much of it and we wandered on our way. A couple of hours later, I persuaded Heidi to pop into the Hansa Becher for a slurp or two, and as we turned the corner towards the boozer we witnessed a scene of impressive carnage. The Yanks were brawling with the Hansa Commandos, and it was all hands to the

pump: in a pleasing display of post-war European solidarity, even the German barman was fighting alongside our lads.

I was about to join the fray when the German civvie police screeched up alongside a Rover or two of MPs, and the combatants scattered. Later I asked the lads what had caused the fight. 'The Yanks came in the pub,' said one of them. 'It was all going fine, until one of the tossers asked Kev if he wanted to hear a joke.'

The joke was, 'What's got 100 arms, 50 legs and no heads? *HMS Sheffield*.'

Kev promptly slotted him straight between the eyes, and bedlam erupted in a re-enactment of a scene from *The Quiet Man*.

Exciting as it was, at times, all good things come to an end, and the time arrived when I had to leave 16 Regiment. The move was partly accelerated when the regiment was kicked out of Dortmund in the mid-80s after a soldier stole a petrol tanker from a local field regiment, before crashing it into a taxi rank and killing a couple of Germans.

In 1984, I was posted to the Royal Artillery Parachute Team based in Woolwich. I spent the next two years jumping out of perfectly good aircraft into showgrounds and football stadiums around the country. While it was entirely different to my time with 16, it was good fun and we had plenty of laughs. But it was not without its risks. I remember parachuting into the Norfolk Tattoo one cloudy day. We jumped from about 5,000 feet, which gave us about 20 seconds of freefall, with smoke canisters for visual effect. Two groups of three were jumping, the idea being that we would all link up in mid-air before splitting apart to deploy the chutes.

It should have been an easy and straightforward display. After about 10 seconds, you reach terminal velocity of 110 mph; you then 'wash off' your speed as you approach formation by pushing your arms forward. It was all going smoothly until a Zimbabwean lad, relatively new on the team, flew in to link up with me and my oppo. He failed to wash off his speed, and smashed straight into us and knocked us for six. The three of us scattered across the sky. The other two lads quickly regained stability and deployed their parachutes, but the idiot had hit me with such force that I was semi-conscious. To make matters worse, he'd also

ripped my right arm out of its socket – and given that you open your main parachute with your right arm I was in a lot of trouble.

I plummeted towards the ground, tumbling out of control and gaining speed. I remember seeing green grass and grey sky intermittently flashing past like a deadly kaleidoscope. As my right arm flapped in the wind, I regained enough of my senses to open my reserve parachute with my left hand. I deployed it just in time, and saved my life. But it was not without cost. In those days, the reserve chute was just a very basic, circular canopy, designed to open instantly and get you down just about alive. As soon as I pulled it I stopped immediately – from 110mph to about 10mph in a matter of a second or so. This knackered the whole of the right-hand side of my body – I wasn't right for months afterwards.

I floated, out of control, to earth and ended up in a heap in a ploughed potato field about half a mile away from where I should have landed. I just about remember a bloke cycling up to me as I sat in dazed agony in the field. 'Well done, mate,' he said. 'That was a brilliant display. The best I've ever seen, by a country mile!'

I guess the moral of that story is: if you have a stupid African in your team, never parachute on a cloudy day in Norfolk.

On one of my last sorties with the team, I dropped into the Rhine Army Centre at Bad Lippspringe in West Germany and was blown off course (bad steering, to be honest). My parachute collapsed over a forest and I fell through the trees, fracturing a vertebrae. On the upside, this does mean that I can honestly claim to have been injured parachuting into Germany during the war – no need to mention that it was the Cold War.

I'd had a terrific grounding in the Army, and I'd made a lot of mates in 16. But by the end of my shift with the parachute team I knew it was time for a change. I decided to put in my papers and follow my two older brothers into the police.

Chapter 2:

Thin Blue Line

I WENT BACK TO my parents' house in Preston for a year while I went through the selection process.

In those days, they were still recruiting white male heterosexuals with gay abandon, and eventually I got accepted and landed a job with the Metropolitan Police. In the period between leaving the Army and joining the Old Bill, I worked intermittently as a labourer and nightclub bouncer. I rarely missed an opportunity to roll around in the gutter with anyone who wanted to take me on, and began getting a bit of a reputation. I was actually becoming a pain in the arse, particularly for my very good mate Ray, who watched me trying to fight the world and his wife, and frequently dug me out or cleared up the mess.

When I wasn't working, I usually found myself in a boozer, and it was there that I met my wife. It was the August of 1987, shortly after I'd left the mob, and I went to a local club with a mate, intent on having a skinful and seeing where the evening took us. As we skulked around the bar, we saw a lass we'd been at school with called Donna. She was with a pretty little dark-haired girl who took my eye. When she opened her mouth it turned out she was a Scouser. Despite this, I decided to ask her out, and it was one of the better decisions I've made. Carmel and I are still together 25 years later, and I love her to bits. She has always been a reassuring voice of good reason in my 'jump in at the deep end' approach to life, and she has stood by me in some difficult times.

We headed down to the Big Smoke together so that I could complete my training at Hendon, and I got my first post at West Ham. Before joining the Met, I'd considered myself to be a reasonably well-travelled, streetwise guy, but nothing prepared me for the melting pot of humanity that is the East End. Life moved at 110mph, in a violent, dog-eat-dog frenzy. There had been some legendary gangsters spawned

there over the past half a century, and the area had a culture all of its own, but it had lost the steely sense of community that had been prevalent in the 1950s and 1960s. Then, the diamond geezers really had looked after their own. Now, pensioners who'd been top dogs 30 years earlier often lived behind locked doors in high-rise flats, too terrified to venture onto streets full of new gangs from alien cultures. All too often, they got cut off and died, cold and alone, only to be found curled up on their kitchen floor when the smell got too much for their neighbours.

I cut my teeth in the late 1980s and early 1990s in places like Stratford, Forest Gate, and Manor Park, areas populated by a heady mix of West Indian and Asian groups, with the odd dash of Irish and the remaining original East Enders thrown in.

The East Enders had a distinct mentality. There was a pub near West Ham's ground that had a bouncer who was rumoured to be an IRA man. Known as Blackhands, he wasn't an imposing sort of character to look at – in fact, he looked a lot like Buddy Holly. But he could handle himself rather better than Buddy. One night, a disturbance kicked off in the boozer and a local kid was kicked out by Blackhands and sent on his way with a dismissive cuff round the ear. The little prat, clearly annoyed by his humiliation, threatened to come back with some mates to sort the bouncer out.

The following Sunday evening, the pub was full of local families enjoying a quiet drink when suddenly the doors flew open and in walked the bounced kid, backed up by a few of his pals. Give him credit, he was true to his word – if a little stupid. The youngsters squared up to Blackhands and offered him outside for a round of fisticuffs. Their first mistake was in entering the pub in the first place: this had cut off their escape route. And things suddenly took a turn for the worse when the pub doors were locked and a group of customers overpowered the young lads and then held them down on the dance floor while Blackhands appeared from behind the bar carrying a pool cue. He adjusted his glasses and then coldly and systematically beat the lads, one at a time, around their heads with the pool cue until they were unconscious, like a scene from some mafia movie. If it hadn't been for someone phoning the police, I'm pretty sure one or more of them

would have been killed. When I turned up with my colleagues, the lads were still unconscious on the floor in pools of blood, while multi-generational families were just sitting around them, drinking their ale and port-and-lemons without batting an eyelid.

As we moved around the pub in an attempt to find out what had happened, we were met by the heralded East End wall of silence. Young, old, male, female… not one of the buggers had seen anything.

* * *

DURING THAT PERIOD, the police's relationship with some sections of the public became slightly frayed. Being used as strike-busters from time to time didn't help. During the ambulance strikes of the late 1980s, I was called up to man a police ambulance, and, armed with the six-week medical assistant 3rd class course I'd done in the Army a decade earlier, and which I had forgotten in its entirety, I set out to heal the sick and lame.

In the first week, we were called to a shooting outside a pub in Canning Town, where a lad in his early 20s had been shot in the back as he was walking into the boozer. When we arrived on the scene we did a quick examination that revealed a tiny entry wound in the small of his back but no exit wound. It looked to me like it was a small calibre round, probably a .22, so I stuck a field dressing over the point of entry to stem the small trickle of blood. But the lad started complaining that he couldn't feel his legs. So we carefully placed him onto a stretcher and took him to Newham General Hospital. We successfully handed him over to the hospital staff and then stood around the reception having a chinwag with the local police officers. Then I noticed a group of heavies in their forties hanging around and muttering. One of the local coppers explained that the gunshot victim was part of a local crime family. The gangsters refused to talk to the police and insisted that they could sort this little problem out themselves.

Exactly one week later, a car pulled up outside Accident and Emergency at Newham Hospital and a bullet-riddled body toppled out onto the forecourt. Problem solved, it seems.