Trouble in Mind

An Autobiography

Bernard O'Mahoney

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About the Author

Bernard O’Mahoney is the bestselling author of *Essex Boys*, *Essex Boys: The New Generation*, *Bonded by Blood*, *Fog on the Tyne* and numerous other acclaimed true-crime titles.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to dedicate this book to my mother, who died in my arms on 20 January 2010. I love you, Mum. Until we meet again, may you rest in peace.

I would also like to remember my brother-in-law Elric Tierney, who died suddenly on 16 July 2010, aged 33. A life spent in the fast lane – better to burn out than to rust.

Those who have passed leave us all legacies from which I hope my children – Adrian, Vinney, Karis, Paddy, Daine, Lydia – and others will learn.

Thank you to my brothers, Jerry and Michael.

Last, but by no means least, I would like to thank my wife, Roshea, for the strength she has shown throughout the many difficult challenges that life has presented us with.

May your God, whatever, whoever he, she or it may be, be good to you.

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INTRODUCTION

FOR what you are about to read may the Lord make me truly thankful. I say that because, looking back on my life to date, I have to concede that I am fortunate to still be amongst the living. War on the streets of Ulster, civil war on the streets of South Africa and gang wars on the streets of Essex: you name it and – excluding Morris dancing – I've probably experienced it. My beautiful late mother is the person I have to thank for helping me survive the madness in which I have found myself immersed. Not only did she give me the gift of life, she taught me by example how to overcome any hardship, to survive brutality and, more importantly, to get back on my feet after being knocked down.

Extreme violence has been a prominent feature of my existence ever since my birth. My father's psychotic abuse physically hardened me, but it left me with a seething hatred for those who tried to control me. Physical ability combined with mental instability is a dangerous mix.

I careered through my formative years venting my inner anger on all that I encountered. This brought me to the attention of the police and, henceforth, my future appeared to be mapped out. When my tyrannical father eventually left home, I followed suit. I believed I was giving my mother the peace and quiet she deserved: a new start, a new beginning. I knew that it was what we both needed.

But it's fair to say my new start failed miserably. However, I followed my mother's example and never gave up trying to better myself and my situation. I joined the army; I started a 'new life' in London, following a prison sentence; I attempted another 'new start' in South Africa, and another re-birth followed in Essex. It, too, failed when three friends

were murdered. My umpteenth attempt at finding tranquillity ended when my 26-year-old wife died suddenly after just 19 weeks of marriage.

Thirty-five years after walking out of my mother's front door, I am embarking upon yet another 'new life'. I have re-married and have once more walked away from all the elements that I have blamed for previous failures. I sincerely hope that this time I will succeed – despite my failures, I have never doubted that one day I will eventually achieve my goal.

A positive attitude to overcoming the hurdles that we all face in life is one that my mother instilled in me by example and one that has helped me to survive the numerous extraordinary events detailed in this book.

Sitting comfortably? You won't be for long.

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BEWARE THE IDES OF MARCH

BEWARE the Ides of March, they say; only bad things happen on that day. My mother didn't know 15 March had ancient links with impending danger, although she did know something was up when I started kicking my way out of her womb as she did her shopping. The year was 1960 and the place was Dunstable in Bedfordshire. My mother collapsed in the street with the first contractions, then picked herself up and staggered home to our council maisonette. She sent my four-year-old brother out to summon help, but he went to play in the garden instead. So, as always, she just got on with it. Apparently – it's not one of my memories – I made my way out easy enough and emerged onto the front-room floor. My mother broke the umbilical cord with her hands and I started screaming. Perhaps I knew what was coming; perhaps I had picked up in the womb that I was about to move into the domestic equivalent of what the army call a 'hostile environment'.

My mother came from Sligo town in Ireland, one of thirteen children raised in a four-bedroom council house. I was her third child; there were two boys before me, Jerry and Paul. I was christened Patrick Bernard, taking the first name from my father and the second from my uncle. As soon as I could exercise a choice in the matter, I stopped using my father's name. He came from Dungarvan in County Waterford but never told me anything about his background; in fact, he never told me anything about anything, there was no such thing as a normal conversation in our home. Over the years, I have pieced together

fragments of his story and, although I'll never forgive the bastard, I have come to understand why he became such a bitter and twisted individual.

Things started going wrong for him at birth. He was born illegitimate at a time when – and in a place where – illegitimacy stamped you with the mark of the beast. Hate the sin but love the sinner, Christians sometimes say, but at that time in Catholic Ireland I think they must have hated the sinner and the product of the sin. His childhood experiences killed any decency within him and convinced him that only by suppressing any normal human emotion could he hope to survive. That was what life had taught him and it was the only lesson he wanted to pass on to his children. He hated to see us showing emotion. Even as infants he expected us to behave like grown men – or rather like the man he had grown into: cold, hard and ruthless. But still those first few years in Dunstable were relatively happy, at least compared to what came later. My mother had quite fond memories of those times: going for walks on the downs, visiting nearby Whipsnade Zoo and getting money regularly from my father, who worked on the production line at the nearby Vauxhall car factory. However, for reasons known only to my father, when I was four, he decided he wanted to move to Bilbrook, near Wolverhampton. Almost as soon as we arrived things changed for the worse. My father, who always drank, began to drink to excess. He also became extremely violent towards all of us, my mother especially. He would come home barely able to stand, spitting obscenities at my mother before beating her senseless and slouching off to bed. Memories of my mother screaming as she was beaten still haunt me. She would be screaming for him to stop and we children would be screaming with fear. Other nights, even without much drink taken, he would turn off the television and sit there slandering her family, humiliating her, degrading her, even questioning the point of her existence. His most decent act

would be to send us to bed. I would lie awake in the darkness, listening to her sobbing downstairs, pleading with him to stop. As I got older, I would sometimes overcome my fear and shout out, ‘Leave her alone, you bastard.’ Then he would come running up the stairs to beat me with whichever weapon he had picked up en route.

My father had his increasingly heavy drink habit to finance and so the money he gave my mother for our upkeep gradually became less until some weeks there would be nothing at all. I hid in the front room with her when the creditors came knocking, which was often. My mother took on three jobs to feed us, cleaning in the very early morning, working on a factory production line during the day and cleaning again at night. Sometimes my father would even manage to take the little she earned off her.

I grew very close to my mother and only felt secure when she was near. For this reason, one of the most traumatic days in my life was my first day at school. I remember the pain and sadness I felt as I left her at the cast-iron railings of St Peter and St Paul’s in the centre of Wolverhampton. She was crying and I was crying. She told me to hang on to the toy red petrol tanker she had given me. The next thing I remember is standing in a queue with the other boys. An older boy grabbed hold of my toy and said toys were not allowed. He tried to pull it from me; I pulled it back. A struggle developed and the other boys started shouting, ‘Fight! Fight!’ A nun swooped down and separated us. She asked my name.

‘Bernard O’Mahoney,’ I said.

She said I had to call her ‘sister’ whenever I spoke to her.

‘You’re going to be trouble, aren’t you, O’Mahoney?’

I said yes.

She screamed, ‘Yes, what?’

I said, ‘Yes, I am going to be trouble.’

She put her hands on my shoulders and shook me. ‘What did I just tell you? You must call me sister! You must always

call me sister! Do you understand?’

I can still remember the smells that day, especially at lunchtime. I did not like liver – I hated the stench of it and never ate it at home – so, of course, my first school meal just had to be liver. Its smell had contaminated everything on the plate, so I sat at the dinner table hardly able to touch anything. Another nun spotted me. She came over and lectured me about the world’s starving children, then force-fed me through my tears. Finally, I swallowed the last revolting mouthful, and ran to the toilet and vomited everything up. When the final bell went that day, I was a ball of emotion. I couldn’t wait to get out of that hellish place. I ran to the gates, where my mother was waiting, and hurled myself into her arms. As we travelled home on the bus, I felt secure once again. I prayed for the bus to keep on going and going, away from the school and my bastard father.

When I was six, my father had another notion to move, this time to Codsall, a small village on the outskirts of Wolverhampton. He had found us a three-bedroom terraced house there that backed onto the main railway line. At night I felt as if the house was going to fall in on us as coal trains thundered past at the end of the garden.

In 1967, my youngest brother, Michael, was born prematurely and went into intensive care. Following the birth, my mother became extremely ill and had to stay in hospital. Michael grew stronger, but my mother grew weaker. One night, at my mother’s insistence, my father took us to see her in hospital. She waved and smiled at us from behind a glass screen, but she looked so ill. I was terrified that she would never come home. My father showed concern for neither my mother nor his sons, including the newborn baby – he would not let anything interfere with his drinking. At one point, we did not see him for three days. There was no money and no food in the house. We survived on school dinners. Our local GP even

called on my father and appealed to him to take better care of us, but my father ignored him. In the end, my mother was so worried about us that she discharged herself from hospital.

As I grew older, I didn't try to hide my hatred for my father. I forced myself to endure his violence stoically; I didn't want him to know that he was hurting me. His dislike for me seemed to grow in response to my defiance. His physical violence only ended up hardening me, but his verbal abuse had a far more disturbing effect. He would grip me by the throat or hair and shout obscenities in my face while prodding or punching me in the head or body. His favourite insult to me was a reference to the circumstances of my birth.

'You were born in the gutter,' he would say, 'and you'll die in the gutter.'

One Mother's Day, I brought home a card I'd made at school. My mum put it on the sill above the kitchen sink. I was still sitting at the table eating my dinner when my father staggered home, stinking of drink. He saw the card and picked it up. 'Is this what your little pet got you, is it? Mother's little fucking pet.' My mother asked him to stop, but that only made him worse. He turned to her and said, 'Shall I give you something for Mother's Day, shall I?' He picked up a plate off the draining board and went to smash it over her head. She raised her arm to protect herself and the plate broke across it, cutting it wide open. She spent the rest of Mother's Day in casualty getting her arm stitched.

Another evening he came home and complained his dinner wasn't freshly cooked, just heated up. Presumably he expected my mother to guess what time he'd crawl back from the pub. He threw the dinner and the plate against the wall, grabbed my mother by the hair and started punching her. She was bleeding from the nose and mouth, but he kept punching her until she collapsed on the floor. He stood over her as she lay there, his hands and shirt smeared with her

blood. My mother raised her head slightly, coughed up some blood and asked me to get her some water. My father said he'd get it. He walked out of the room and I helped my mother sit up. He came back holding a mug of water. 'Here, Anna. You wanted fucking water – take it.' And with that he dashed the mug into her face.

I used to go to school in the mornings like a bomb waiting to explode. I loathed the other children's happiness. *Daddy did this for me, Daddy did that for me.* I needed to shut them up. I used to fight them with a ferocity fuelled by my hatred of their normality and happiness.

Even at that young age I was developing a fearsome reputation for violence. I must have spent more time in front of the headmaster than I did in lessons. When those in authority were standing shouting at me, I would take myself to another place in my mind, reliving a favourite film or a great football moment. My seemingly cold and detached manner would infuriate them more and I would usually end up being physically shaken out of my daydreams – or, in the case of my father, punched out of them. He preferred to employ his fists than talk, regardless of how trivial the matter might have been.

I remember, just before I went to secondary school, my father showed me how to do up a tie. He made me stand still with my hands by my side. This meant I could only see his hands, not what he was doing with the knot. He then undid the tie and told me to try. I got it wrong. He grabbed the tie around my neck and began pulling me about with it, slapping me round the head, saying I was 'fucking stupid'.

Finally, I could take no more. 'I wish you were fucking dead,' I shouted at him, then punched him on the side of the head. I then ran out of the room and up the stairs. He caught me halfway up and laid into me with a vicious fury. I ended up at the foot of the stairs, curled into a ball to protect myself from his kicks, which were aimed at the small

of my back. I thought he was going to kill me. My mother was screaming at him to stop.

Suddenly, I felt a sharp pain and my legs went numb. ‘I can’t feel my legs!’ I shouted. ‘I can’t feel my legs!’ Only then did he stop. He tried to get me onto my feet, but I kept collapsing. My mother ran out to call an ambulance. As I lay on the floor, waiting for assistance, my father knelt down beside me. He pulled my head up by my hair and said, ‘Say you were playing and you fell down the stairs on your own or I’ll fuckin’ kill ye.’ And that’s what I told anyone who asked.

Fortunately, nothing was broken, but the discs in my spine had been damaged, so that even today it causes me pain.

I started going to Codsall Comprehensive, a school of around 1,200 pupils. I’d have fights with other boys almost every day of the week. If I came home with a black eye or another mark on me, my father would beat me and offer me the only bit of fatherly advice he ever gave any of us: ‘Don’t let people get away with hitting you. If they’re bigger than you, hit them with something.’ We all started following his advice.

My brother Paul got into a fight in a pub car park with a gang from another part of town. He ran at them with two screwdrivers, one in each hand. He stabbed three people before being beaten to a mess. He served two years in borstal.

The eldest, Jerry, took on a group of men in a pub. He’d armed himself with a large pair of mechanic’s spanners and started clubbing all round him. The police arrived and he clubbed one of them, too, before being overpowered. He’d given one of the men a fractured skull; a policeman had a shattered knee. Jerry was sent to prison.

All of us, under my father’s tutoring, had developed a capacity for extreme and awful violence. It set us apart – and set us against the world, especially the world of

authority. I hardly needed to consult a fortune teller to know where I was heading.

* * *

The cause of my first criminal conviction was laughable. I had developed a passion for Manchester United and most Saturdays I would travel around the country to watch them play. One Saturday I was with my friend, Mickey, on a train going to Bristol. We stopped at one station where there was a small group of Manchester City supporters on the opposite platform. They started jeering and shouting insults and we responded in kind. Nobody took it seriously; it was all quite light-hearted, just kids engaging in a bit of banter. There was certainly not going to be a fight, if only because our train was about to move off.

Once the train got going, two middle-aged men in suits who had been sitting opposite us stood up and announced that they were British Transport Police. They said we were under arrest for using obscene language in a public place. They made Mickey and me stand in the corridor; they stood on either side of us, guarding the dangerous felons. They took us to Bristol police station, where a fat-faced desk sergeant formally charged us with using the F-word and gave us a date to appear at Bristol Magistrates Court. Then the sergeant – his fat face bloated further with glee – told us he was not going to release us until after the match had started. Presumably unaware of the irony, he said, ‘Don’t think you little fuckers can come to Bristol and cause fucking trouble.’

To top everything, my father, the man who from the cradle had taught me all the bad language I knew, had to accompany me to court. My mother had an appointment at the hospital that day. On the train journey, he made three brief points: one, he had lost a day’s work because of me; two, I was an ungrateful little bastard; and three, I would

fucking pay for it. I stood in that court feeling bewildered, confused and angry. The magistrate gave me a lecture about bad language and fined me £5. This was my first experience of the justice system – and it seemed no more justifiable than my father's.

On the journey back, I was slapped in the face and punched repeatedly in the head by my father. He told me that I would pay for the fine and the expenses he had incurred that day from the money I earned from my two jobs – doing a paper round and helping the milkman.

As I was one of only a few pupils with a criminal conviction at school, whenever anything punishable happened I was rounded up as the usual suspect. Admittedly, I did get up to a lot of mischief, but I also found myself blamed for things I hadn't done. After the window of the school coach was smashed, I was unjustly fined for the offence. I had to pay the fine over three months in weekly instalments. The money came from a part-time job I had recently started, killing turkeys at a local farm. At first I did various menial jobs there, but the boss soon promoted me to chief executioner – no other boy had the stomach for such grisly work. I had to put the squawking creatures head first into a cone-shaped metal bucket, trapping their necks between two metal bars; I would then simultaneously squeeze and pull down the bars, breaking their necks and killing them instantly. I think it's what they call a humane method. The birds would kick and scratch at the bucket as they fought for their lives, struggling with such force that the bars and my hands would shake. I used to close my eyes and imagine I was squeezing the life out of whoever had upset me that day, usually my father or one of my teachers. I despised the teachers at my school and I despised their justice, just as I despised the woman who'd slide back the hatch at the school office and take my hard-earned money.

For the first six weeks, she said the same thing: 'Oh, you ought to be putting this in the bank, O'Mahoney. Maybe next

time you'll think before you act. Do you want a receipt?' I hated the bitch. One night I crept into the school grounds and hurled a crate of empty milk bottles through the headmaster's window. Then I sprayed blue paint over the school coach. I wasn't caught. For the next eight weeks, as I handed over my money, I used to smirk at the woman and ask, 'Have they caught anyone yet?'

My second criminal conviction was for an even more laughable offence. At the farm where I worked, I found a broken wristwatch on the floor in the yard. It was useless – one hand was missing – so I assumed someone had thrown it away. I took it home with me that evening to give to my brother Paul to tinker with, then I changed and went to play football at the nearby sports hall. Midway through the game, a policeman burst into the hall, marched up to me and announced that I was under arrest. I found out later that Paul had been outside a shop with his friends when the policeman had walked by and told them it was time to move on. Paul had said something cheeky like 'No, it's about eight o'clock, actually.' All the boys had laughed, and the policeman had asked if he was trying to be funny. He said he wasn't; it was just that his watch only had one hand. He showed it to the policeman, who asked him why he was bothering to wear something so useless. Paul explained that I had found it at work and given it to him to fix. The policeman asked where I was and Paul had told him. Hence his dramatic arrival at the sports hall.

I was completely embarrassed and bewildered when he put my arm behind my back and frogmarched me to his van in front of my friends. I sat in the front seat beside him.

As we were driving towards the police station, he kept asking me where I had got the watch. I told him the truth, but he kept saying that I was a liar and slapping me in the mouth with his glove. I was frightened, I didn't know what I had done to justify such treatment, so I leant over and grabbed the steering wheel, forcing him to slam on the

brakes. The van skidded and struck the kerb before stopping.

He hit me a few times, and I shouted at him that I wasn't going to the police station without my mother and eventually he relented. My mother was picked up and we were taken to the police station, where I was charged with 'theft by finding'. A magistrate later fined me £35 and gave me a lecture on morality.

To my adolescent mind, it seemed the forces of law and order could hound a boy for petty irrelevancies but couldn't intervene to prevent a man battering his wife and children half to death. Rage and resentment stewed inside me. School was a farce, the law was a farce, 'normal' life was a farce. But I wasn't going to take their shit for long. I planned to hit back.

No one ever seemed to question why I was so angry and unruly. People could only see this aggressive, couldn't-care-less delinquent. I was just 'bad', as far as those in authority were concerned, and I had to be punished. No one witnessed the physical and mental torture I endured at my father's hands. They didn't see me as the confused and frightened child I knew myself to be. I wish I could have broken and poured everything out to someone, but instead I continued to act out my bad-boy role because at least that way I could get a bit of adoration and recognition, which is what I craved. When my violence reached 'unacceptable levels', I was ordered to stand outside the headmaster's office at playtimes and I had to leave the school premises at lunchtimes. The teachers thought they were humiliating me, but some of my fellow pupils admired my anarchic spirit. The special treatment I received, and my reputation for violence, gained me what I thought was the respect of my peers; in fact, it was only deference based on fear, but I liked it. It made me feel powerful – an enjoyable sensation for someone who'd felt powerless for so long. I soaked up the attention of my minions. In my mind, I felt I was

beginning to win the fight against those who tried to impose their authority on me. I thought I'd become a 'somebody' – a status they'd said I'd never achieve. In reality, I was systematically destroying myself and my future.

At home, throughout my early teens, I'd harm myself, gouging my stomach with a craft knife or broken glass. I still bear the scars of this self-mutilation. I didn't want to feel I was being hurt by my father and when I realised I was I hated my weakness and wanted to harm myself. Emotion and pain were for weak people. I'd learnt that from my tormentor.

At the end of the summer term of 1976, I left school without any qualifications. Aged 16, I had little fear of anything or anyone, and even less respect. Only my father continued to have the power – physical and psychological – to turn me into a frightened little boy. But that wasn't going to last much longer. He must have noticed what he'd turned his sons into – and he must have guessed the day of vengeance was on its way. In fact, it came in August 1976.

My father arrived home drunk as usual, and started beating my mother in the kitchen. My brother Paul and I were in the front room. We heard the familiar sounds. Paul looked at me, and I looked at him, and we both just got up and ran to my mother's aid.

'Leave her alone, you fucking bastard!' Paul shouted at my father. He lurched towards Paul and punched him. Paul snapped: he grabbed my father by his hair with one hand and with the other began punching him in the face with an unstoppable ferocity. I stood and watched as Paul went berserk, punching and kicking until my father lay on the floor, his face a bloody mess. Everything went quiet. The only sound was of Paul breathing heavily from his exertion. I suppose we all expected my father to get to his feet and inflict violent punishment on us for this outrage, but he stayed on the floor. He didn't move for a little while, but when he did, he averted his eyes from our gaze before

slowly pulling himself up and onto his feet. Paul was ready for more, and I was ready to help him, but we could both see something had changed. The fight had gone out of my father. He didn't say anything. He just slouched off to bed. As he walked past me, I spat at him. He didn't respond. His face gave nothing away, but he had the air of a tyrant who knew his time had come. He left the house the next day – and never came back.

From the age of 15, I had been involved with a girl named Carole Lett. We had been in the same year at school and had somehow ended up together. I say somehow because Carole and I were chalk and cheese. Pretty, prim and proper, Carole would not have been able to sleep if she had forgotten to do her homework, whereas to most of the teachers I was the devil incarnate. They do say opposites attract, and attracted to one another we most certainly were. So much so, in fact, that in December 1977 Carole gave birth to our son Adrian.

Joy soon turned into anguish when Carole's parents understandably banished me from their home and their daughter's life. I could have fought harder to see my son – in fact, I know I should have – but sadly I didn't. I accepted their decision and in doing so I believe I let my son down. My absence did not prevent Carole from raising a decent and talented young man. At the age of ten, Adrian was signed by Arsenal Football Club and went on to play for Aston Villa, West Bromwich Albion, Wolverhampton Wanderers, Hereford and Bournemouth. I am pleased to say that in his teens Adrian and I did become acquainted and he is now as much a part of my life as any other member of my family. When Adrian's football career ended, he went on to serve in the Royal Navy before forging a career in the prison service.

By the age of 18, I too was destined to become an integral part of HM Prison Service. I had made 13 separate court appearances, during which I'd been convicted of more than

20 offences. I'd received almost every one of the legal system's alternatives to incarceration. By the end of 1978, I was subject to a supervision order for street robbery, I was carrying out 240 hours' community service for going equipped for theft and I was on bail for assault, theft, threatening behaviour and possessing an offensive weapon. I should have left it at that, really, but I became part of a criminal conspiracy to steal a blue-velvet jacket with huge lapels, like those worn by Marc Bolan. I think I intended to wear it.

Bad taste isn't a criminal offence. Theft is.

Store detectives caught me with the shoplifted jacket in my hand. Incarceration now seemed inevitable – unless I could think of a dodge. And that's how I ended up in the army. I signed up at a recruitment office in Wolverhampton town centre, although I had no intention of ever joining the ranks. My plan had been to wave my recruitment papers at the fearsome Robert Smythe, a stipendiary magistrate who'd already said he intended to impose a term of imprisonment. I hoped he'd let me off with a suspended sentence, then I'd 'resign' from the army.

At my hearing, Smythe looked at my army papers suspiciously. I said I'd always wanted to become a soldier. 'You might just be saying that,' Smythe said. He told me he intended to give me a total of six months' imprisonment but was prepared to defer sentencing for a little while. If I wasn't in the army on the day he set aside, then I'd be sent to jail. However, if I was a soldier by that date, he'd suspend the sentence for two years.

The army seemed the least unsatisfactory alternative, although my friends laughed hysterically at the idea of me as a soldier. They didn't think I'd last five minutes in an environment where I had to take orders.

I was sent to start my seven weeks of basic training with the Royal Armoured Corps in the Yorkshire garrison town of Catterick. A childhood of verbal and physical abuse had

prepared me well for the training regime. Indeed, some days I used to feel my childhood was being repeated as pantomime farce. Unlike most of my fellow recruits, I found a lot of the extreme behaviour hilarious. None of the instructors ever talked normally. They barked, shouted or screamed every instruction and would often supplement their words with punches, slaps or kicks, perhaps afraid you hadn't heard them. The training left me physically exhausted all the time. One of the instructors' favourite games – usually played at 3 a.m. – was called 'Changing Parades'. They'd order us to change into a bizarre combination of clothing, which had to be worn in the stipulated order. Then they'd shout, 'Go! Go! Go!' and we'd have to run back upstairs to change, before running back down as fast as we could. The first three downstairs would be allowed back to bed; the others had to change into another combination, invariably involving a gas mask.

One recruit lived in fear of Changing Parades because he always ended up last in bed. Nicknamed Rommel because he spent his time sitting alone reading war comics or books about Hitler's elite troops, the Waffen SS, he was slightly built with short, dark hair parted to the side, just like his hero. He sometimes wore glasses, too. He didn't mix well and rarely spoke, but he knew everything you might possibly want to know about panzer divisions, especially the soldiers' clothing and weaponry. He wanted to join the Royal Tank Regiment because their tank crews wore black overalls like his SS panzer heroes; members of other tank regiments wore green. He also listened to tapes of the 'Speak German in a Fortnight' variety. We used to take the mickey out of him and sometimes he'd play up to us, goose-stepping up and down the room with his right arm outstretched in a Nazi salute. Though clearly army barmy, his enthusiasm didn't translate into efficiency, however, which was why he feared Changing Parades.

One night as we frantically changed and he was cursing that he was going to be last again, I suggested he jump out of the window to get downstairs quickly. As we were at least 20 feet up on the third floor I thought he'd take my suggestion as the joke I meant it to be. But in his desperation it must have seemed like a good idea, because the next second he was clambering out the window. The image that remains in my mind is of him looking back at me, eyes flickering madly, as he launched himself into the air. I heard a crunch and a piercing 'Argh!' and I ran to look out. Rommel was writhing on the ground.

'What are you doing, you silly cunt?' the instructors were standing over him shouting. Fortunately, he didn't break any bones. Unfortunately, he could hardly walk – and they made him crawl back upstairs to continue the game. Most recruits, especially those from normal, loving backgrounds, couldn't overcome the shock of army life. They cracked under the bombardment of abuse. At night, people would be talking about running away – or even suicide. Around two-thirds of the recruits in my intake didn't finish the course. It seemed to me that the whole selection process was designed to weed out normal people. Only the disturbed or desperate survived.

The shock of constant exercise can do strange things to your body, so I wasn't too worried when I noticed a swelling on one of my testicles. At a routine army medical I mentioned it to the doctor, who sent me for tests at the Duchess of Kent military hospital in Catterick. I was reluctant to go, mainly because I didn't want to lose any training days; if you missed too many, you faced being 'back-squadded' – forced to start your training again with the new intake. Not only did back-squadders have to repeat the awfulness, they were also regarded as losers. The doctor assured me the tests would only take a day, so there was no need to worry.

If I had known what awaited me, I would probably have deserted immediately and reported to the nearest prison. It was six long months before I emerged from that hospital. I remember the period as a blur of extreme pain, morphine-induced hallucinations and bedsores. The swelling had been caused by testicular cancer and had it not been detected, I might well have died. The exploratory operations and finally the removal of a cancerous testicle is not something I would wish on anybody – well, maybe one or two of the police officers I've met.

After recovering from my medical treatment, I returned to start my basic training again. Nothing much had changed; the instructors had not become noticeably more compassionate in my absence. I was once more a 'pig'. Moreover, I was now a pig who had been 'living it up, skiving in hospital'. However, I think they respected me for having put myself back into their care, when I could easily have got a medical discharge.

After completing my basic training, I was sent to Osnabruck in West Germany to join my regiment, the 5th Royal Inniskilling Dragoon Guards. I had chosen this regiment because my parents were both Irish Catholics and, being an Irish regiment, it was policy not to deploy troops to Ulster, where war was raging between Catholic republicans and Protestant loyalists. Life in West Germany was a total contrast to basic training. There was very little of the clockwork soldier routine I loathed: the marching, the parades, the spit-and-polish. It was partly because we spent our days covered in oil and grime from our vehicles. Keeping your vehicle operational was regarded as far more important than having shiny boots.

My social life in Germany mirrored my social life prior to enlistment. The main difference was that I now had a wage from the state to fund my drink-fuelled wild nights.

I found a group of people I liked – most were from cities such as Liverpool or Belfast. I found that we shared the

same approach to life. It was a cocktail of drinking and fighting. Alcohol was a hobby shared by almost everybody else in the regiment, which contained its fair share of full-blown alcoholics. Before I knew it, 1980 had drifted by in a reasonably pleasant but boozy haze; however, 1981 was about to sober us all up and bring us to our senses.

* * *

In December 1980, the Ministry of Defence announced that they were abandoning the policy of not sending Irish regiments to Northern Ireland. Initially, everyone thought they would send the Irish Guards because they were foot soldiers armed with the standard self-loading rifle (SLR). Most of our regiment had not even seen an SLR, let alone fired one. As members of a tank regiment, we knew nothing about patrolling on foot and we used submachine guns. Of course, we should have had enough experience of military logic by then to know that the army wouldn't necessarily do what was rational or sensible. Within a fortnight, the news landed like a mortar among us that the 5th Royal Inniskilling Dragoon Guards were going to be given the privilege of being the first Irish regiment to be sent to the Six Counties.

I felt strangely neutral at the prospect of our tour; in fact, half of me felt quite excited about the idea. I had been in the army for two years by then and Germany had begun to bore me.

One afternoon I was told to report to the major's office in the administrative block. He said he knew my parents were Irish Catholics and that I had relations living near the border of northern and southern Ireland, where our regiment was to be sent. If I strongly objected to going to Northern Ireland, he said, I would remain in Germany. I insisted that I wanted to go, although I did not explain why. My desire had nothing to do with going to fight for Queen and country; it was far more basic than that. I just wanted to be with my friends.

My loyalty was to them – I had no intention of being the one waving at the gate as they left. To me, it was like they were going out for a fight in the car park and I was going to join them.

In April 1981, I was posted to Northern Ireland to serve a five-month tour along the Fermanagh border, a notorious killing ground for the IRA. One of our jobs was raiding houses, which I hated. I remember once going into the home of an IRA man on the run. His wife was standing in the front room, her two sons, aged about eight and ten, next to her, with their arms around her. I could tell they were protecting her, rather than seeking protection. I'd clung to my own mother in the same way in the face of my father's brutality. I recognised the look on their faces, that expressionless gaze of silent hatred. At such times I felt like a Judas betraying my own kind. I wanted to reach out to them and explain: 'Look, I'm not here to oppress you. I just didn't want to go to prison, OK?' At other times, when Catholic youths would spit or throw stones, I could happily have smashed their heads open with the butt of my British oppressor's rifle.

Our job was unrewarding, sordid almost, but our methods were all about survival at any cost. On republican housing estates, we'd hand out sweets to small children, knowing that as they eagerly swarmed around us they'd effectively be shielding us. No IRA sniper would dare fire at a soldier surrounded by children, especially Catholic children.

On Tuesday, 5 May 1981, IRA Volunteer and elected MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone Bobby Sands died after 66 days on hunger strike. The Fermanagh branch of the IRA took its revenge on the Saturday. I was on Quick Reaction Force (QRF) duty that day. For my 12-hour shift, if there was a shooting, a riot, a bomb or some other form of violent incident, it was my job, along with 11 others, to deal with it.

It was around 10.30 p.m., too early to bother trying to sleep, so I was lying on my bed in our sleeping quarters,

reading someone else's tabloid newspaper. The other members of that night's QRF were likewise either lying on their beds or sitting in twos or threes around the room, talking quietly and seriously. Bobby Sands' death and our thoughts about its possible consequences had removed all lightness from the atmosphere. Everyone expected something unpleasant to happen within the next few days. As always, the Phil Collins album *Face Value*, the only music cassette we had on the camp, provided the background music. I think I heard that album in full at least six times each and every day I was in Ulster.

I half expected we would get called out at some point that night – I imagined the local republicans getting tanked up in the pubs to mark the passing of their MP and they would soon be spilling out onto the streets, looking for targets to vent their anger on. I had just thrown the newspaper down and sat up as the door flew open.

'Heli-pad! Heli-pad! They've attacked Rosslea!' a soldier shouted. We burst into activity, grabbing our weapons and running out of the door into the slumbering camp.

A few hundred yards away on the heli-pad I could see the rotors of the Lynx in full frenetic spin. I threw myself into the helicopter and huddled down in the seat behind the pilot. Within seconds, everyone was aboard and the Lynx lifted up smoothly. Then, as it passed the roofs of the watchtowers, a powerful thrust from the engine sent the sleek machine zooming off into the darkness.

'Mortar attack, Rosslea,' shouted our commander.

I felt my stomach churn, slipping an inch – I knew almost all of the soldiers who were based at Rosslea, although I had no close friends there. It was one of the smallest and most vulnerable camps, usually described as a joint RUC/Army base; in fact, it was little more than a police station based in what looked like a four-bedroom family house with four Portakabins in the garden. A barbed wire fence surrounded

the camp, which stood alone, apart from a pig farm next door.

The person I knew best at Rosslea was Edwards, a Catholic from Liverpool. I had been through basic training with him and enjoyed his company. Like all Scousers, Edwards thought he was a bit of a comedian. I felt anxious for him and hoped he wasn't now 'fertiliser' – our slang for the dead victims of explosions.

The pilot was in contact with Rosslea and through the information he relayed to our commander I could tell the base was in total panic. People were shouting and screaming down the radio. I looked out of the window. At first I couldn't see anything, but within a few minutes an orange glow appeared out of the darkness. As we got closer, the glow got bigger until I could clearly make out the flames. The atmosphere in the helicopter was filled with fear and tension. My thoughts were of my mother back home in England; she would be asleep in her bed, oblivious to the dangerous situation from which her son was only moments away.

Suddenly, we had arrived. As the helicopter circled, we found ourselves looking down on a scene of devastation. The whole camp seemed alight: orange and yellow flames danced madly around plumes of grey-black smoke. I could make out figures running around the flames and felt a dryness in my mouth and a sickness in my stomach. The pilot was looking for a safe spot to land – he had to be careful, we had been told that there were unexploded mortars on the ground. As the helicopter hovered, I watched the scene below with horrified fascination. I knew there had to be casualties. Surely, the Provos could not blast the camp apart like that and not hit anyone. I felt almost hypnotised by the mayhem. In that half-trance, part of me was expecting the professionals to arrive to sort things out. Then the reality hit me: we were the professionals – we were the