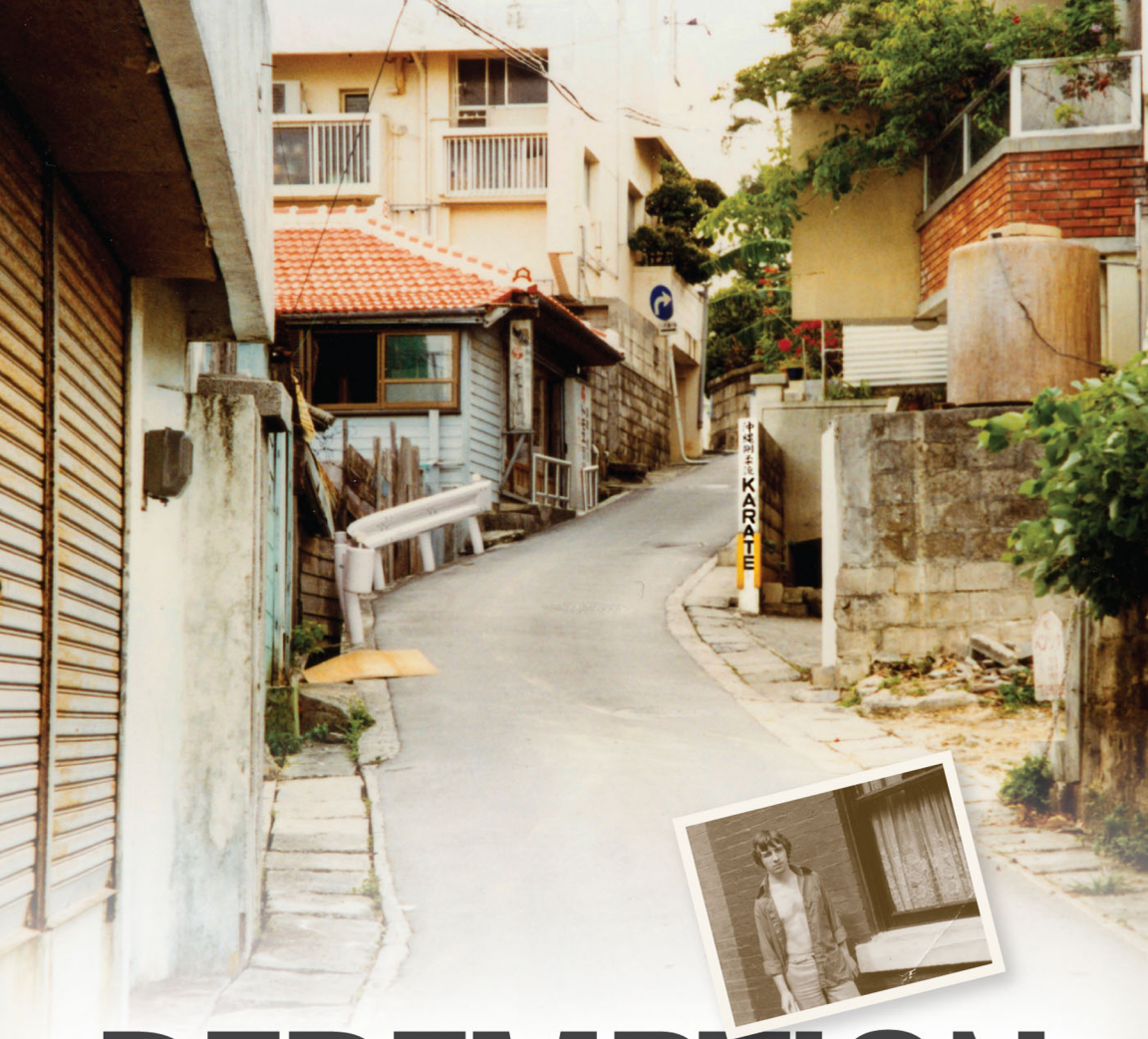


# REDEMPTION

## A STREET FIGHTER'S PATH TO PEACE

A MARTIAL ARTS MEMOIR

**Michael Clarke**

AUTHOR OF *THE ART OF HOJO UNDO*

A British "karateka" offers a bone-crushing, lip-splitting, and often elegant memoir of a tough guy searching for higher meaning through the study of martial arts.
*—KIRKUS REVIEWS*

In this memoir describing how karate turned his life around, Clarke displays passion and grit in spades.
*—FOREWORD REVIEWS*

Michael Clarke was an angry, vicious kid, a street fighter. He grew up in Manchester, England, in a tough neighborhood where, he writes, "Prostitutes worked the pavement opposite my home, illegal bookmakers took bets in back-alley cellars, and street brawls were commonplace."

Clarke left school at fifteen and began his education as a pugilist on the streets. He fought in bars and clubs, at football matches, in parks, and in bus stations—and he was good. He reveled in the victories and the admiration they brought.

It was a life of knuckles and teeth, of broken bones and torn flesh—and the arrests that followed. Clarke was seventeen when a judge sentenced him to two years in Strangeways Prison, also known as "Psychopath Central."

In time Clarke was released, but the transition was difficult and he almost fought his way back to prison. Then one night he entered a karate dojo and his life changed forever. He began a lifetime pursuit of budo, the martial way.

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**Michael Clarke**, Kyoshi 8th dan, Okinawan Goju-ryu, has practiced karate since 1974, and kobudo since 2006. He has written over five hundred articles and authored five books. Acknowledged and read around the world, Clarke teaches karate to a handful of students, and lives quietly with his wife on the shores of the Indian Ocean near Perth, Western Australia.

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YMAA PUBLICATION CENTER
YMAA Publication Center
1-800-669-8892
info@ymaa.com · www.ymaa.com

**Advance Praise for *Redemption: A Street Fighter's Path to Peace***

**From the media**

"A British 'karateka' offers a bone-crushing, lip-splitting, and often elegant memoir of a tough guy searching for higher meaning through the study of martial arts."

—Kirkus Review

"In this memoir describing how karate turned his life around, Clarke displays passion and grit in spades."

—Christine Canfield, ForeWord Reviews

**From readers**

"Be prepared to think because as Mike once told me, 'There is more to karate than kicking and punching.' "

—Lyn J. Jehu, martial artist; faculty member, University of South Wales, Department of Education and Social Sciences

"Clarke reflects on his journey in what's both an entertaining and meaningful look at a portion of the life of a martial artist."

—Alain Burrese, author, martial artist, safety self-defense instructor, attorney

"[*Redemption* is] what our karate is supposed to be about: taking the lessons learned in the dojo and applying them in the rest of one's life."

—Frederick W. Lohse III, A.M., Ed.M., martial artist, chief instructor, Kodokan Boston

"This is an uplifting story of one man's quest to find himself through the discipline of martial arts."

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"A very interesting, fruitful, and at times testing and heartfelt story, *Redemption* charts a journey that has seen the author make the transition from unruly street fighter to disciplined budoka."

—Glyn Jones, renshi sixth dan, Ryusyokai Okinawa goju-ryu karate

"I have no hesitation in recommending this book to anyone who seeks to understand the transformative role karate can have in your life."

—John Mercer, author, martial artist, senior psychologist

"An insightful and eloquently written account of the adventure and the transformative potential of legitimate traditional karate training."

—Mark Tankosich, martial artist; assistant professor/ martial researcher and translator, Hiroshima University of Economics

"A work of hope that gives again order to the practice of martial arts, a work that gives an accent on the health of the human spirit, which will always be superior to physical force . . ."

—Jean-Michel Serra, seventh-dan martial artist

"*Redemption* opens a door for us all to inner peace."

—Charlotte Kirchgaesser, author, martial artist

"[*Redemption*] belongs in every serious karate student's library."

—Chuck Merriman, martial artist, former senior security officer at United Nations, personal bodyguard to many Hollywood stars (Michael Jackson, Diana Ross, Kiss)

"This is an inspirational story of a young man rescued from the brink of self-destruction by karate and how he never gave up hope, channeling his natural fighting instincts to create a life of value and great achievement."

—Garry Lever, author; martial artist; police officer, London Metropolitan Police

"The perfect tale of how the martial arts can transform us into human beings of great compassion, and hard-won wisdom."

—Matthew Gouig, author, martial artist

"An engaging and insightful account of a student's journey along the path."

—Daniel Kogan, author, martial artist

"I recommend this book to all those interested in karate, as this story tells us how budo can be a catalyst in changing our lives."

—Richard Barrett, author, martial artist

"Mike is treading the right path, a path worth following—no matter what martial art it is you train."

—John Rockstom, sixth-dan martial artist

"An intensely personal yet instantly accessible autobiography . . . A must-read for the serious martial artist of all levels."

—Thomas B. Shea, sixth-dan martial artist, author, professor at University of Massachusetts

"To my mind, Mike is just about the best martial arts writer around."

—Tony Smibert, seventh-dan martial artist; president of Aiki-Kai Australia; senior councilor, International Aikido Federation

# REDEMPTION

## A STREET FIGHTER'S PATH TO PEACE

By

**Michael Clarke**

YMAA Publication Center, Inc.
Wolfeboro, NH USA

**YMAA Publication Center, Inc.**
Main Office:
PO Box 480
Wolfeboro, New Hampshire, 03894
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Everything here is true, but it may not be entirely factual. In some cases the author has compressed events; some identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of the people involved. The events are portrayed to the best of the author's memory.

# CONTENTS

# DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the memory of my parents, Katherine and Thomas Clarke. Sadly, their lessons of love, respect for others, and having a sense of balance in life took far longer for their youngest son to understand than they would have wished. My deep sense of regret for the shame I visited upon them during the turbulent years of my youth will remain with me forever. In return for my stupidity and utter disregard for their feelings, I received from my parents nothing but unconditional love. I now understand that loving another person, even your children, is an extraordinary act of generosity. I also recognize that it takes a particular level of maturity to accept the love of another. During my transitional years, as I was busy roaring my way through adolescence, silence would have served me better. I once thought anger to be the strongest human emotion; I now realize its influence is insignificant in comparison to the eternal force that love creates. Like many young men growing up in difficult circumstances, I wasn't up to the task of loving and chose instead the easier option: hate. As I grew older I learnt from my mistakes, and eventually the example and advice of my parents began to gain purchase in my life. Although I struggled at times, I left my world of violence behind and made my peace with society: I also spent decades thanking my parents for their gift of unwavering love and generosity.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Books are seldom written alone. Even when written in isolation there are others, waiting, ready in the wings. I would like to acknowledge my wife Kathy for her help preparing the original edition of this book and for allowing people into our private life, at least a little. Her support in the writing of this story has always been greatly appreciated, and although her arrival occurs toward the end of the book, her presence and influence in my life is all-pervasive; without Kathy, I would be a very different man and would have experienced a very different life. There are no words I know that are adequate to thank her for sharing her life with me . . . of all people.

Sincere thanks must go to my seniors and contemporaries in karate for the examples they have provided. It is the result of our experiences, or so I believe, that makes us who we are, and that being the case, I have needed everyone I have ever met or interacted with in order to be where I am now. For good or bad, without the involvement of others in my life I would have had little opportunity to discover where my personal boundaries lie. Now living the life I truly wanted, I realize my success was less about what I was prepared to do to get it and more about what I was prepared to let go so that I could find it. Letting go is perhaps man's true final frontier, for without the capacity to keep life simple, a deep and lasting contentment will remain forever beyond the horizon. Stillness, in body and mind, remains outside the experience of

many, until illness or death imposes it. I have learnt not to wait for either, but to balance the chaotic nature of life with the tranquility of being still. To the men and women who, by their example, allowed me to discover this most valuable tool for living, I offer my sincere thanks and gratitude.

Finally, you would not be holding this book, or tablet, in your hand if it were not for the ongoing support of my publisher David Ripianzi and the dedicated folk at YMAA Publication Center: Thank you! But as all writers know, it is the relationship between them and their editor that really matters; it is entirely due to the tireless effort of my editor Dolores Sparrow that the jumble of awkward words that fell upon the page in front of her were transformed into something approaching literature. Given my rough skill with the pen, it was no mean task, and my appreciation runs especially deep.

# INTRODUCTION

In 1985, in front of a borrowed typewriter, I sat down to write my first book. I had written very little since leaving school at the age of fifteen; even so, at the age of thirty, the opportunity to write a book arrived and I did what I could to take advantage of it. My journey to Okinawa a year earlier to study karate was rare. Few British karateka had reached the island before me, and upon my return to England, the interest in my experience soon led to the publication of my first magazine article. From that article, published in Terry O'Neill's *Fighting Arts International*, a book deal quickly followed. I am not Japanese, nor did my involvement with the sporting side of karate ever amount to much, so with the exception of *Moving Zen*, detailing the exploits in Tokyo of the Welshman, C. W. Nicol, there were few karate memoirs available from the hand of a Western karateka.

All that was a long time ago. Although the book, *Roaring Silence*, became something of a landmark publication in the karate literature at the time, it was not well supported by the publisher, and within a few years it fell out of production. Writing, however, like karate, has become an important part of my life, and in the years since 1985, I have written and published over five hundred articles and interviews in martial arts magazines around the world, as well as going on to write four more books. In October 2003, I finished writing a sequel to my first book, *Small Steps Forward*, publishing the book myself and limiting the print

run to just five hundred copies. It sold out in six months. I've been asked many times since then if either book would ever be published again, and I'm happy to say that I am now in a position to make that happen. It has taken some time, but I'm very pleased to have made good on the promise to make my first book available once again, and here it is. It has a different title today and is twice the length of the original book, but at its core is the same message: take control of your life by taking responsibility for your actions, and reap the benefits of living a good life.

The manuscript for *Small Steps Forward* is back on my desk. Revisiting some of the moments that created the narrative found in both this book and *Small Steps Forward* has given me an opportunity to research the timeline more accurately than before and to re-examine the events shaping my karate training and personal life at that time. However, I have to say it has not always been a joyful experience. Looking back over my life often revealed events and people I would sooner forget. Nevertheless, the whole point of this book and *Small Steps Forward* is to relate something of my early and middle years walking . . . no, stumbling along the middle path that is budo karate.

The mistakes and pitfalls you will discover in the following pages will, perhaps, serve as a warning not to repeat them yourself. Neither this book nor its sequel was written to provide a detailed description of the physical training I was doing at the time, so anybody looking for such information will be sorely disappointed. The book works best if it is read with an open heart and a mind that isn't searching for a catalogue of physical techniques and a series of "Ah-ha!" moments. From the vantage point of age, it is possible to look back and connect the dots that chart one's life. Once you read this book, you may find it useful to chart your own course through life and the learning of karate. Living well and karate training share a number of common traits, the first of which is learning through experience; who among us has lived a

life without errors being made and disappointments being felt? And who, at times, has not been the beneficiary of extraordinary good luck? An important life lesson my study of karate has taught me is this: you not only have to walk your own path through life, you have to build the path as you go!

For the most part, I have kept the preface from my first book in place here, with only a few minor changes to indicate the way I was thinking when the book was first written. Many of my thoughts back then (1985) now seem as naïve as the writing style I employed at the time. Although in fairness to myself, I can admit to receiving a great many gracious comments from a wide variety of people across the martial arts landscape. That said, I have also been on the receiving end of comments made by people who were anything but complimentary. Some of the letters I received were wrapped in threats of violence. I was never in the slightest bit concerned for my safety though, as anyone cowardly enough to issue threats anonymously was no threat to me at all. I always thought it odd that people with such a spineless disposition could, at the same time, think of themselves as karateka. I've since come to understand that the capacity for dualistic thinking is perhaps one of the stronger characteristics of human nature.

The fact that one angry young man (me) was able to find something of value in his study of karatedo gives rise to the hope that many more can do the same. The paradox of authentic karate training is not an easy one to put into plain words. Becoming nonaggressive through the study of fighting remains too unlikely a scenario in the minds of the general public. Nevertheless, in my case, spending the past four decades fighting the negative aspects of my character in the dojo has proven to be a far healthier alternative for me and society than fighting others on the street. Authentic training in karatedo, the way of karate, remains for the youth of today an underrated and underused alternative to incarceration and a life wasted behind bars.

# PREFACE

Becoming a karateka, a person who pursues karate with a sincere heart and open mind, is no easy task. In this book, I am telling the story of my experiences, both good and bad, during the first ten years of studying karate: my beginning. For the first time, I am also going to look back, in more detail, at my behavior in the years leading up to entering a dojo. I'm doing so in an attempt to shed light on the choices I was making in life back then, choices that saw me languishing in a prison cell on my eighteenth birthday, instead of going out on the town with my friends to celebrate the arrival of my transition into adulthood. I think it will become evident early on that the grip I had on life as an adolescent emerging into manhood was slipping away, lost as I was in a downward spiral of frustration and violence. Had I not stumbled upon karate when I did, there is no doubt in my mind that I would have continued to live my life drifting from one drama to the next, out of control, a life that would sooner or later lead to my inevitable self-destruction. That didn't happen, and so I want to address the paradox of karate in this book, and how, with the correct guidance, it is possible to achieve a sense of balance and control in life.

When this story was first written, during the spring and summer months of 1985, I wanted to relate my limited progress in karate at the time and bring to light the mistakes I had made along the way. By doing so, my hope for the book was that readers

might be saved from living through similar mistakes. I now understand that we have to learn by experience: life is an exercise in existentialism. Still, I thought an awareness of my teenage years and my early training in karate might help others avoid the same pitfalls and make their life a little bit easier to navigate. Throughout the original text, I tried my best to describe events as they actually happened, or at least, as I perceived them happening; but if, with the passage of time, I now know differently, I'll mention it. I have also tried to avoid embarrassing or offending individuals who find themselves implicated, either directly or indirectly, in the story being told. For those who come after me on the difficult but exciting path of karate, I hope this book will entertain and enlighten. I once saw a black belt as the symbol of mastery only to discover some years later that it held no such power.

There are many things capable of halting progress in karate: pride, greed, laziness, impatience, and a lack of moral courage. These are among the character traits that will bring to an end any progress made. Because of this, there is an unrelenting need to be vigilant and to guard against such things, never assuming they have been assigned to the past simply because of efforts you may have made long ago. Eastern wisdom tells us there are many different paths to the top of a mountain, but from the summit, the view is the same for all. In my experience, nothing will serve you better as you head toward the top of your own mountain than a genuine, sometimes brutal, sense of truth. Being true to yourself from the beginning will ensure any change in direction is short lived. Our ego, that false friend to us all, will do its best to persuade you that shortcuts are achievable, but believe me, there are none. It would be impossible to relate everything I experienced during the first decade of my training in karate, but I hope I have included all the major landmarks from those early years.

Back in January 1974, I was young, headstrong, impulsive, extremely violent, and very often on the edge of self-destruction.

But somehow, in that same year, I also turned a corner that would take my life in a new and very different direction, along a path I would follow for the rest of my life. Coming to grips with karate was, during my early years, an enormous burden, something I often imagined I could do without. Like a second conscience, I was confronted with the things I learnt about myself, and they plagued me with doubt as well as providing moments of clarity when I thought to myself, "I can do better than this." When a sense of consideration toward others began to surface within me, it became clear that karate was challenging me to change, and just like my transition from adolescence to adulthood, it was often a painful process. As I approached middle age and karate had been a part of my life for more years than it had not, it demonstrated its capacity to be of tremendous support, providing consistency and simplicity, and clearing my mind of so many unnecessary distractions.

Now, in my sixties, karate is like an old and trusted friend and, like all good friends, reminds me to remain true to myself. Regardless of how I have perceived karate over the years, my commitment to it has been constant, and because of that I have managed to absorb its core message—at least a little. I am by no means alone in having achieved this; indeed, there are a great many individuals around the world who have made far more progress than I have. But it is with the understanding that the study of authentic karate can, literally, change lives that I invite you to read on.

This is the story of my beginning in karate and where I was coming from on the night I walked into a dojo for the first time.

# CHAPTER ONE

*"A hasty temper can be provoked by insults.*
*Then recklessness leads to destruction."*
*–Sun Tzu, The Art of War*

Being born the fifth child into a working-class family of six children guaranteed I had a fight on my hands from the very beginning. That my siblings and I grew to be productive members of society suggests that my childhood, although often chaotic, served me well. Dublin, Ireland, was not the attractive city in 1955 that it is today, so my birth on the fourteenth of May that year, in the upstairs front bedroom at 88 Kylemore Drive, rekindled thoughts in my father's head of returning to England. As a young man, he lived and worked in London. Throughout World War II, the long hours he toiled in an engineering plant were counterbalanced by his volunteer work as an Air Raid Warden. "Turn that light out!" was, he once told me, a common order barked at the top of his voice. After the war, he returned home to Dublin to marry his childhood sweetheart, my mother. The small end-terrace house my family occupied in the Ballyfermont district of Dublin was, by the time I arrived, already well past its capacity to provide

adequate accommodation, and so in 1958, when I was three years old, the family moved to Manchester in the heart of England's industrial northwest. Employment was abundant in England after the war, and for the next two decades, the country witnessed unprecedented growth as Britain emerged from the wreckage visited upon it by the conflict. This was to be the first of a number of migrations for me, although the others that followed wouldn't come about until much later, in my adult years.

In his younger days, my father had been a keen amateur boxer and had taken part in many tournaments, winning trophies and medals that I now hold onto with quiet pride. His exploits on the football (soccer) field did not go unnoticed either, and as a young man he took to the field a number of times with the Bohemians, one of Ireland's top amateur football clubs. He was offered 'papers' (a contract) on a number of occasions from professional clubs in the Irish league, but turned the offers down. Back then, what few professional sportsmen there were, were paid a normal wage; a far cry from the obscene amounts of money they attract today. Fearful of losing his steady wage as an engineering apprentice with the government-owned Irish Rail, he continued with the amateur game. A good friend of his did the opposite, choosing instead to play football full time. In his second season, he broke his leg during a game and was carried from the field. He never played football professionally again. Unfortunately, his position as an apprentice was lost also. The saying "Fortune favors the brave" is true enough, for where would the world be without individuals who are prepared to accept the risk and move forward into unknown territory? I asked my father if he ever regretted not turning professional when he had the chance. "Not at all," he told me. "I've played the game all my life, and I kept my job."

My father died in 2009 at the age of eighty-nine; his love of football stayed with him until the end. Although he stopped playing the game in his early fifties, as Britain's oldest football referee, he

took control of as many as three amateur games each week until well into his eighty-fifth year, a feat of fitness and longevity that saw him featured many times on local and national television, as well as in numerous British and Irish newspapers. As engrossed in football as my father was in his middle and later years, it was his accounts of fighting in the ring and the training he did to prepare for it that captured my imagination. Once, in an effort to make the weight for an upcoming fight, he went to work and dressed himself in two pairs of overalls, a large sweater, and a balaclava; then he climbed into the boiler of a steam locomotive and cleaned it out by hand. The plan worked perfectly. He lost the required weight and made the weigh-in for his next fight. How he fared on that occasion I don't recall, although as I said, it was never the fighting that gripped my imagination; it was the training.

The things he did to get ready for a fight fascinated me, chasing chickens around a friend's backyard, drinking raw eggs, and even using his own urine to toughen the skin on his knuckles. To me, such stories were mind-blowing, otherworldly; I was amazed that ordinary people, like my dad, would apply themselves to 'the fight' like this. Long before I heard the word 'karate', or became aware of Okinawa and the fighting art that evolved there, I knew there were men, other than the military, who trained themselves for combat. He told me, too, of the fights he had growing up on some of the poorer streets of Dublin back in the 1930s.

The reckless abandon and excessive living of the Roaring Twenties never made it to Dublin's working-class areas with quite the same heady rush they had in the city's more respectable quarters. The Great Depression that followed a few years later, however, arrived, took up residence, and flat-out refused to leave. According to my father, there was no such thing as the 'good old days': only hungry ones. When my father was a small child, his father died, so my dad grew up working odd jobs before and after school to help support his family. Shoes, he told me, were saved for church on Sundays

and going to school. Other than that, it was bare feet and "Watch out for nails in the road!" He took a job delivering milk in the mornings and working after school for a butcher. Back then, animals like sheep, pigs, and chickens were commonly slaughtered in the backyard of the butcher's shop. As a small boy it was my father's job to hold on to the pig's back legs once the butcher had tethered the beast's head to a post; a special iron bar, a poleaxe, was then placed on the pig's skull, between its eyes, before being struck one mighty blow by the butcher's hammer. Death came quickly to the animal, and for his role in its demise my father was allowed to take home some of the offal, a valuable supplement to the family table.

Given the childhood my father endured, I always appreciated his reluctance to take risks later on in life when the promise of an easy living playing football was stacked up against a steady weekly wage. Settling the family in a new country was not easy for my parents. Although my father had secured work before leaving Ireland, his income provided barely enough to keep the family housed and fed. I was much too young to understand what was happening around me, but my parents had a struggle on their hands that would continue long after our life in England settled down. Decisions were made and options taken that would haunt both my parents for the rest of their lives. Families, so often the seat of great comfort and support, can sometimes become an arena of deceit and treachery, places where promises are made and broken, and help extended with hidden motives in mind. Although I knew little of such things at the time, the grown-up world swirled around me like an emotional tornado; it was a storm that would eventually weaken my mother's spirit and harden my father's.

While my mother suffered bouts of depression later in life, my father's coping methods were less internal, and I have vivid memories of his frustration spilling over into acts of destruction. I never once saw my father hit another person, but to my recollection, at

least two internal doors in the house died at his hands. In spite of witnessing the occasional outbursts of anger and frustration from my father, and seeing my mother crying for no apparent reason, my childhood was a happy one. By today's standards, I grew up in abject poverty, but I never grew up unhappy or under the threat of abuse. My home was a safe place. I have never lived a day of my life without the knowledge that I am loved: I'm not sure how many people can say the same.

It must seem strange that my early childhood is remembered with such fondness. I was just three years old in 1958 when my family left Dublin to live in Manchester. As an adult myself, decades later, I would personally experience the emotional and financial difficulties that accompany the upheaval of migration when my wife and I left England to begin a new life in Australia. As a child, I knew nothing of the strain my parents were under throughout the late 1950s and into the 1960s. Because of the stress of establishing themselves in a new country, the inevitable cracks appeared and just like fissures in a volcano, they led to eruptions that rivaled anything Mother Nature had to offer. Listening to the rows going on downstairs from the safety of my bed, the cursing, the crashing, and the slamming of doors, was muted only by my head being buried deep in my pillow and my fingers pushed even harder into my ears.

The following morning it was never certain how many cups the family still had to drink from, or plates to eat off of, for they would regularly fall victim to the rage that swept through the house like a tornado on such occasions. Coming down the narrow staircase the next morning I often didn't know what would greet me when I opened the door. My parents fought over few things: one being a lack of money, the other being family interference that reached out from Dublin, across the Irish Sea, into the heart of my otherwise happy world. My dad worked as a fitter for British Rail, responsible along with others for the maintenance of rolling stock

and locomotives. This was the age of steam and it was dirty, heavy, and sometimes dangerous work. He worked a three-shift rotation of lates, earlies, and nights, over three weeks, and never failed to take advantage of any available overtime; to say he worked hard scarcely does justice to his efforts during those years.

Although due to the size of my family and the mortgage on our tiny home, money was always in short supply. Fun usually came with few overheads, like visiting the local 'Sunblest' bakery to solicit 'stale cakes' or 'yesterday's biscuits' from the van drivers, or raiding the 'posh people's' gardens in Victoria Park to help ourselves to apples and pears from their fruit trees. These annual events, although falling into the realm of petty crime, were conducted without malice on our part. Nothing was ever damaged. In fact, 'scrumping' for apples was conducted more like a commando raid than a break-in. Getting in and out without being noticed only endorsed my prowess and that of my fellow street urchins as expert hunter gatherers; we were capable, too, of manufacturing our own transport from nothing more than a few discarded wheels and a length of timber. We were a pretty self-reliant bunch, as were most kids back then.

We had little expectation for shop-bought toys, and even if we did, the likelihood of getting our hands on them was slim. With the exception of Christmas and birthdays, my friends and I either found or made the things we played with. It's no wonder that my childhood memories are, at least in part, of a time when the world was a trouble-free place to be. As I recall, the only serious threat to the stability of my world was the trouble that blew regularly across the sea from Ireland. For most of my childhood, the word 'Dublin' was a dirty word, synonymous with the friction it visited upon my otherwise happy life.

In spite of the adversity experienced by my parents as they struggled to raise their family in less than ideal circumstances, my siblings and I were never under threat from the kind of child abuse seen with such regularity in the media today. Yes, my childhood

situation was impoverished, but there was no sense of that in mind at the time: everyone I knew lived as we did. My parents were imbued with the natural quick wit of the Irish and the blarney flowed through our home like the soundtrack of a movie. When neighbors gathered together the 'craic'[1] was something fierce. My siblings and I grew up in a harsh world for sure, but it was an existence protected by a doting mother and a loving father.

I have fond memories of growing up on the inner-city streets of Chorlton-on-Medlock in spite of its unsavory reputation. Not exactly one of Manchester's most salubrious districts, it was a neighborhood where prostitutes worked the pavement opposite my home, illegal bookmakers took bets in back-alley cellars, and street brawls were commonplace. It was a place where Irish laborers (navvies) gave way to their liking for 'the drink' and Caribbean revelers gave in to their dislike of drunken Irishmen trying to gain access to their late night drinking clubs and shebeens.[2] As a schoolboy, I was rarely involved in fighting past being a witness, but this changed soon after I left school in 1970, at the age of fifteen. That's when my pugilistic activities began and grew rapidly, becoming a major part of who I was, or at least who I saw myself as at the time. Over the months following my departure from the world of formal education, I enrolled in a different kind of school: the classroom was the street and the lessons were provided by exchanging 'ideas' with my fellow pupils. I happily attended class as often as I could, becoming involved in violent altercations with those who sought to inflict their will over mine.

During my first year attending 'fight-school', I initiated few, if any, of the conflicts that came my way, but a teenager's life in a city like Manchester always had its problems. In the summer of 1969, the skinhead cult found its way from America to England, and all over the country, young working-class men and women were embracing it with fervor. Unlike their American counterparts, however, British skinheads had little to do with Adolf Hitler or a love of the Nazi Party. Skinheads in England were racists, for sure,

but the attraction of the cult in the UK had more to do with music, fashion, and fighting, rather than establishing a new world order.

The year after I left school, in 1970, I was ready to become a skinhead. It didn't happen straightaway, as the look wasn't thought well of by prospective employers and the media were doing their best to blame everything from school truancy to the state of the national debt on the out-of-control youth who were now terrorizing the country. The idea, as far as I understood the role of a skinhead, was to look as tough and menacing as possible; so to this end I bleached Levi denim jeans, wore high-laced Doc Martin boots, and had my head completely shaved. Though such a look would cause hardly a glance these days, back in the early 1970s it was enough to make people cross the street to avoid me. Of course, looking tough didn't necessarily mean that you were, and so for most skinheads it was important to belong to a gang. From a gang you could gather the courage to front up to almost anybody or anything. The two most dominant gangs in Manchester at the time were the 'Hulme Team' and the 'Wythenshawe Crew'. Both had hundreds of members, many of whom had fearsome reputations, and though there were other gangs in other districts of the city, none came close in size or reputation.

An older brother of mine was associated with leading members of the Hulme Team, and this in turn gave me a certain amount of standing on the street by virtue of the family connection. Not that I was ever a member of the Hulme Team, or any other gang for that matter. Still, I did enjoy some fringe benefits due to the reputation held by my brother and his 'friends'. But this notoriety was not always welcome, and on a few occasions proved positively dangerous. It was not unusual to confront people who wanted to fight with me just because I was the brother of someone they didn't like. Fortunately for me, I learnt I could fight and fight well. These engagements often served as an invitation to others to try their luck, and like moths to a flame, they did just that. Frequently

resembling a scene from a Wild West movie where two gunslingers would step outside to settle their differences, I'd be called out to fight in front of an expectant crowd who stood just far enough back to dodge the blood, but close enough to witness the gore.

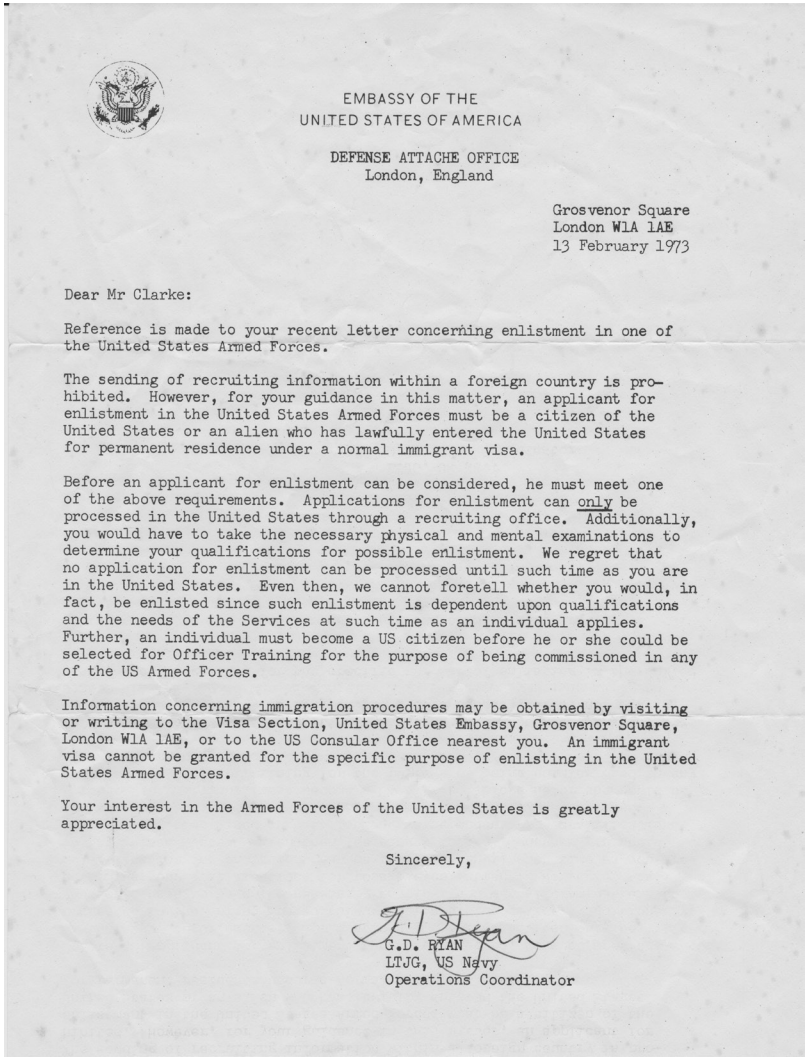
Strange as it might seem, I began to enjoy these fights and the adulation that followed them when I emerged victorious; had I lost as often as I triumphed I may well have held a different point of view. Still, I was now averaging two fights a week, almost always on a Friday or Saturday night. Fueled by alcohol—yes, I was an underage drinker too—and a simmering anger, I began to look for conflict with people from the very crowd I'd been fascinated by: skinheads. Looking back, I simply grew tired of people who couldn't live up to their image, tough guys who weren't tough unless they were in a gang, villains who never got arrested because, in reality, they never did anything illegal. For many, being a skinhead was more about image than anything else.

A veteran of conflict on the streets and only seventeen years old, I let my hair grow again and stopped listening to reggae and ska, the music skinheads had claimed as their own. Even that irony was not lost on me: a racist group of white people had adopted the black music of the Caribbean! My attraction to fighting, however, far from diminishing, grew ever more intense. Almost every weekend saw me fighting in dance clubs, pubs, at football games, or in the street, as I made my way from one drinking establishment to another. It wasn't difficult to find a fight in Manchester's Piccadilly bus station in the 1970s or in the park that once stood alongside it. Though not exactly a killing field, Piccadilly Gardens was not the kind of place you entered after dark, unless you were confident of your pugilistic skills. Unsure of where my life was heading, I made a number of attempts to legitimize my aggression. My entry into Her Majesty's Armed Forces was denied due to poor vision in my damaged right eye, so I approached the French Foreign Legion as well as the

US Marine Corps, but again, failed to gain entry. Meanwhile, back on the street, I continued to spend my weekends searching for an opportunity to trade blows with anyone willing to stand before me.

Inevitably, my antisocial ways led to problems with my parents, and of course, the police. A trail of particularly nasty clashes led to a number of arrests throughout the latter months of 1972 and into the following year, but the arrests only added to my already growing reputation as someone to be wary of. On Friday, May 11, 1973, I found myself standing in the dock in the Manchester Crown court. As I sat on the bench waiting for the judge to enter, I knew I was facing the very real prospect of a custodial sentence. Up to then I had managed to avoid time behind bars due in part to my age and the gullibility of a judicial system that looked upon out-of-control adolescents like me as lost souls in need of nurturing, instead of the selfish, uncaring, and malicious individuals we truly were. My parents who, with all the love they could muster for their wayward son, had paid all my previous fines while clinging to the remote hope I would start behaving myself. They had, in reality, enabled my bad conduct. It is with no small amount of shame that I look back on the love of my parents and their deeply felt fear for my future well-being, and how that love was met with sullen indifference on my part. At the time, I simply didn't comprehend the additional pressure I was placing on the two people who loved me the most. It was an attitude I grew out of in the years that followed, but I have never truly forgiven myself for the trouble I brought to their door and the shame I put them through.

The incident bringing me before a judge on this occasion had its origin in my dealings with three young men that I now stood accused of beating so badly they all required hospitalization. In the weeks and months prior to our meeting, they, along with others in their gang, had taken it upon themselves to regularly and systematically beat the retarded brother of an old school friend. Not content with giving their victim a regular kicking, on one



EMBASSY OF THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

DEFENSE ATTACHE OFFICE
London, England

Grosvenor Square
London W1A 1AE
13 February 1973

Dear Mr Clarke:

Reference is made to your recent letter concerning enlistment in one of the United States Armed Forces.

The sending of recruiting information within a foreign country is prohibited. However, for your guidance in this matter, an applicant for enlistment in the United States Armed Forces must be a citizen of the United States or an alien who has lawfully entered the United States for permanent residence under a normal immigrant visa.

Before an applicant for enlistment can be considered, he must meet one of the above requirements. Applications for enlistment can only be processed in the United States through a recruiting office. Additionally, you would have to take the necessary physical and mental examinations to determine your qualifications for possible enlistment. We regret that no application for enlistment can be processed until such time as you are in the United States. Even then, we cannot foretell whether you would, in fact, be enlisted since such enlistment is dependent upon qualifications and the needs of the Services at such time as an individual applies. Further, an individual must become a US citizen before he or she could be selected for Officer Training for the purpose of being commissioned in any of the US Armed Forces.

Information concerning immigration procedures may be obtained by visiting or writing to the Visa Section, United States Embassy, Grosvenor Square, London W1A 1AE, or to the US Consular Office nearest you. An immigrant visa cannot be granted for the specific purpose of enlisting in the United States Armed Forces.

Your interest in the Armed Forces of the United States is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

G.D. RYAN
LTJG, US Navy
Operations Coordinator

occasion they decided to add to his humiliation by stealing his belongings and leaving him stripped to his underwear in the middle of the street. When I heard this story, I was outraged, and as fate would have it, the paths of three of the gang members involved crossed mine later that very same night.

The judge said it was a case of "misplaced loyalty" toward my friend and his brother, adding that the world would descend into chaos if individuals took it upon themselves to settle matters in this way. He continued, "The charges you are facing, and of which you have been found guilty, have to be dealt with harshly. Grievous bodily harm, actual bodily harm, and assault and battery are serious assaults against the person, and while I understand what motivated you in this instance, your record before the court leads me to believe a significant custodial sentence is necessary." The judge went on to say that he hoped the two-year prison term he was about to impose would give me time to ponder my life to date, as well as the destructive direction it was headed.

I can look back now with a sense of gratitude for the 'time out' the judge provided. It allowed me to take a long, hard look at myself and to conclude that I had indeed been wasting my life for quite some time. Sitting in the holding cell below the court, I looked around at the others in the room: misfits, all of them. I knew right there and then that I'd made a major mistake. Time slowed to a standstill that day. It was difficult to collect my thoughts and get my head around what had just happened: I was going to prison! Sitting handcuffed in a prison van, as it made its way through evening traffic to one of Britain's harshest jails, brought my life into sharp focus; just two days before my eighteenth birthday I was on my way to Strangeways Prison. Renamed later as Her Majesty's Prison Manchester, it had always enjoyed a fearsome reputation. Opened in the summer of 1868 to hold a thousand prisoners, Strangeways Prison remains to this day a notable landmark on the Manchester skyline. Nicknamed 'psychopath central' it was, just nine years before my arrival there, the site of Britain's last execution, that of John Walby (aka Gwynne Evens), who was hung for the murder of John West, on August 13, 1964.

The Victorian prison, with its haunted-house Gothic architecture, did little to put my mind at ease. Even now, over forty years

later, I can still call to mind the sound of the gates crashing closed behind me and can connect to the feeling of sickness in the pit of my stomach. The uncertainty of what the next two years might bring my way was overwhelming. It's interesting to note that Strangeways Prison has the highest number of suicides of any correctional institution in Britain; having come of age behind its walls, I am not at all surprised by this statistic.

The first month of my sentence was served in a place I knew well from the outside, but never in my wildest imagination thought that one day I would call it home. My silent vow to keep my head down, do my 'bird' (time), and get out as soon as I possibly could was already made before the gates closed. I learnt within hours of my arrival that life on the inside bore no resemblance at all to the life I lived on the outside. What counts for normal behavior among people depends entirely on which side of the wall you are talking about. On the inside, the rules were basic but clear, and life was at times brutally simplistic. Being stabbed with a 'shiv' (homemade knife, made from almost anything, also known as a 'shank') just because you picked up the piece of toast someone else had his eye on, was not such a strange event; and though I shake my head in disbelief now, I can remember the day I almost suffered the same fate all because of a roast potato! Fortunately, I was able to face down my would-be attacker that day, and convince him he would either have to kill me and face the rest of his life behind bars, or I would eventually get out of the prison hospital and kill him. Inside, life was often that simple, and often that ludicrous.

Discipline was strict, and I learnt too that the screws (prison officers) were not there to help. As much as I could tell, they were there to have a quiet life and heaven help anybody who disturbed their peace. To underscore this idea of 'peace and quiet' firmly in the minds of those new to life on the 'in', each new intake of prisoners was provided with a practical demonstration of the consequences awaiting anybody who deviated from the established order. As fate

would have it, I was chosen to be the recipient of the demonstration for this particular intake. In the center of the cellblock, at the spot where the four wings came together in a hub, was a large octagonal iron grill set into the floor, in the middle of which stood a large octagonal table made of wood. On the table lived the register of inmates and a second book containing both the standing orders as well as the orders of the day. A small group of inmates fresh from the induction center, myself included, had been left by the grill by two screws with an order to stand still and be quiet, which we dutifully did.

We looked like contestants in a bizarre game show in which we had all won the same set of prizes: a bunch of ill-fitting clothes, one blanket, two sheets, a pillowcase, and a piss-pot. Within moments of being left alone, another screw walked toward us, a man so impeccably turned out it was easy to imagine that a quick turn of his head might just see him cut his throat on the blade-like edge of his shirt collar. This man was no stranger to an iron, as the razor-sharp line of his shirt collar was repeated on the trousers and sleeves of his uniform. That he was a drill sergeant, in his own head at least, was immediately obvious and something I could have accommodated had the dream stopped there; but this man was intoxicated by the power he had over others and took every opportunity to indulge his fantasy at the expense of those entrusted to his care.

He was looking for someone to participate in his next demonstration and I had the misfortune of being the one he chose. Fixing his gaze on me, he made quite a show of placing his clipboard on the table, and then, with a great deal more deliberation than necessary, he placed his pen upon the clipboard: he then turned his full attention my way. The insults he began hurling made little impact, as I was feeling as low as I had ever felt in my life and was already lost in a crippling sense of captivity. I could barely hear a word he was saying, so it wasn't until his second or third scream

for me to "Come here!" that his command finally registered. As I began to move toward him, my arms still loaded with my newly acquired belongings, he stepped forward and caught me with a punch square on my jaw. It was a blow that sent me sprawling, along with my bedding, clothes, and piss-pot, back across the iron grill. It was then explained to everybody present that the grill was out of bounds to inmates, and infringements of the slightest kind would be dealt with harshly. No one in the group, least of all me, was left unconvinced as to the sanctity of that grill. So another demonstration had been conducted and another group of young men had been put on notice. As for my jaw, well, the bruising which I was later asked to explain and which I chose to lie about, settled down after a few days.

In truth, I had been hit much harder on the street. Still, I wasn't sure how much I would be able to take before hitting back, and that worried me. Not hitting back was a new concept for me, one that along with my new reality I was going to have to learn to deal with. Left alone for the most part after the demonstration, I was slowly beset by a feeling of dread. I made a terrible mistake, choosing a way of life that focused on fighting, drinking, and having a bad attitude. In prison, such fame, or infamy, that I had enjoyed on the street counted for nothing. I am not ashamed to say that for a lot of the time I was in Strangeways I was fearful, although I would have died a hundred times over before showing it. My apprehension stemmed from the continual uncertainty of what could happen once my cell door was opened, and whether or not I had it in me to walk away from trouble. From day one of my life behind bars, I was meeting people whose sentence had been lengthened due to fighting and causing havoc, and I knew that I too could easily go the same way. I had little confidence that I could control my rage once it was ignited, and in this place, there was no shortage of people willing to introduce a spark to an already short fuse.

Between the idiots I mingled with and the strict discipline imposed by the screws, it was often a struggle to get through each day. My only relief came when I was 'banged-up', the term used for being locked in your cell. Because I was serving time for crimes of violence, I had a cell to myself; the solitude came as a great relief from the day-to-day contact with my fellow inmates. The residents on each of the four landings in K-wing took turns to 'enjoy' an evening's recreation before being returned to their cells at 8:30 p.m. Every fourth night, prisoners were allowed to spend time on the wing outside their cell, watch TV, play table tennis, or listen to music. I often chose to forgo spending time with my neighbors, preferring instead to find distraction in the pages of a book. Besides, recreation was often used as an opportunity to settle old scores, and I had no desire to get caught up in any peripheral fallout from the outbreaks of violence that kicked-off at least once a week.

I was learning to live life by the bell. I was awakened from sleep by a bell, forewarned that the cells were being opened by a bell, ordered to 'slop-out'[3] by a bell, go down to the landing to collect my meals by a bell, and get back to my cell by a bell. Perhaps the most difficult thing about prison life in 1973 was the imposed decision making; my day was planned for me down to the minute, and I had no say at all. I simply did what was expected of me when the bell rang. A half-hour passed between the first bell of the day to the second, and in that time I had to be out of bed and dressed, ready to slop-out when the doors were opened immediately following the second bell. Fifteen minutes later a third bell signaled the call for breakfast, and I made the long walk to the ground floor of the wing to collect my food on a tin tray, before making the long walk back up to my cell: I never ate a hot meal in Strangeways.

The bells that followed throughout the day saw inmates return their breakfast trays and set out their beds, ready for cell inspection.

The top and bottom sheets were taken off the bed and folded lengthways into long strips about a foot wide. The blanket was spread over the mattress and the corners tucked neatly under in a precise way, once referred to as 'hospital corners'. The two sheets were then laid on top, along the length of the bed at either side, and again, tucked in at both ends to make a crisp, straight, line. Between the two broad white strips made by the sheets every item of issued kit—soap, toothbrush, and spare clothing—was laid out in a particular way, beginning from the top of the bed and working down to the bottom. My bed had to be neat, clean, and have nothing missing from the range of kit that had been issued; if even a single item was absent or in the wrong place on the bed, I would be placed on report,[4] an act that always resulted in a loss of privileges. The laying out of kit each day was all about the prison system exercising discipline, of course, but it had for the screws, a secondary significance: personal control.

The daily inspection of cells may have been routine, but it wasn't the only time the screws would visit. Random inspections were common, as were searches. One day, about an hour after the usual inspection had taken place, the door to my cell swung open unexpectedly and three screws entered. I was ordered to stand with my hands behind my back and my face up against the wall. With my legs spread and my feet about a yard back from the wall, I was now leaning forward against the wall, my bodyweight resting on my forehead; it was a difficult position to hold, and the immediate vulnerability of the position was exactly what the screws wanted. As I maintained the required position, dealing with the growing discomfort of my situation, the bed was tipped over, sending my kit sprawling to every corner of the cell. Neatly folded clothing was shaken and thrown about and the toothpaste squeezed from its tube to fall in a sticky mess on the floor. The visit lasted no more than a few minutes, after which I was told to clean my cell ready for a governor's inspection in half an hour. What

pleasure grown men derived from such acts of bastardy I'll leave for others to decide. Perhaps they thought it enhanced their manhood. Who knows? It didn't break my spirit though; if anything it only made me appreciate my own stupidity, for I alone, by virtue of my poor choices, had put myself in the cell, in the prison, and in the hands of the screws and their childish dreams of being tough guys.

In April 1990, seventeen years after my time on K-wing, Strangeways Prison exploded into anarchy. For twenty-five days, hundreds of prisoners destroyed large sections of the jail in a riot that led to the death of one prisoner, forty-seven prisoners being hurt, and one hundred and forty-seven prison officers being injured. For decades, prison officers had controlled inmates with intimidation, violence, and the misuse of sedatives, in particular, the drug Largactil, also known as the 'liquid straight-jacket'. In a world within walls, closed off from the rest of humanity, prisoners lived a Dickensian existence at the mercy of prison officers who were charged with their welfare. That spring, the oppression had become too much for some, and following a series of beatings, a group of prisoners decided to take retribution. The riot began in the chapel before spreading quickly to other parts of the prison.

The one fatality of an inmate came about not at the hands of the authorities but from his fellow prisoners. Derek White was an alleged sex offender remanded into custody while awaiting trial on charges of indecent assault and buggery. Under the protection of 'rule 43', a designation applied to inmates who needed protection from the general prison population, White, along with others, was attacked and beaten by the mob when it burst into the segregated part of the prison. He suffered several head wounds, a dislocated shoulder, and internal chest injuries, no doubt the result of being stomped on; but he didn't die from the beating immediately. Instead, White passed away in the North Manchester General Hospital to where he had been evacuated. The screws may

not have dealt the blows that killed White, but their cowardice, in my opinion, contributed to his death.

While I have little sympathy for prison inmates, I recognize how grievances surface, and how in this case, given the behavior of some officers in Strangeways, those grievances gave way to aggression. I believe prison should be a place of punishment, and it should discourage a return visit; it should be a harsh environment loaded heavily with discipline and toil: but it should never be brutal. In the brief time I spent in Strangeways during the spring of 1973, I was allowed outside for one hour a day to exercise: walking the line. I was allowed one communal shower a week, issued a single sheet of paper to write a letter once a week, and allowed a one-hour visit every second weekend. During the visits, no physical contact was allowed; there was no chance to feel the warmth of another person who was dear to you, not your girlfriend, nor your mother, or even your child if you had one. The Strangeways riot, described by the Greater Manchester Police Commissioner as "the most savage incident of its kind ever experienced within the British prison service," was a turning point in the treatment of prisoners in Britain.

In the weeks and months following the riot it was noted in an official report that the confrontation may well have been contained within the chapel had the prison officers who were first called to the original disturbance not abandoned the gate to the chapel block and run for safety. When I read that, I smiled to myself, remembering my own encounters with several officers and the lack of moral fiber that shone from their eyes, eclipsed only by the brightness of the shiny silver buttons on their tunics. That they abandoned their post and ran, allowing the riot to escalate out of control, came as no surprise to me. A great many reforms were instigated following the government-sponsored "Woolf Report," in which twelve recommendations and two-hundred and four accompanying proposals were put before Parliament by Lord Woolf.

Personally, I think, at least in Great Britain, the pendulum has now swung from one extreme to the other. These days, prison inmates are allowed to wear their own clothes, have a TV and radio in their cells, and play computer games; they have access to public phones, allowing them to call home whenever they feel like it. Ironic clichés abound as a result of successive governments' inability to grasp the equilibrium of crime and punishment. Examples of psychopaths gaining a tertiary education in psychology and fraudsters who graduate with a degree in accounting point to a system that remains out of whack.

When I think of the situation as it stands in Britain today, I am reminded of an old adage: the road to hell is paved with good intentions. I'm also left wondering where the sense of punishment is in all this 'humane' treatment of offenders. Where is their sense of loss to come from if they stand to lose very little by their imprisonment? When the time came, I was relieved to leave the walls of Strangeways behind, even though my relocation to another tight-security prison was not much better. My five weeks within Strangeways' walls had made a lasting impression; the jail had seen the last of me and would claim no more of my life. As I was bussed across the country to be incarcerated elsewhere, I silently confirmed my intention to stay out of trouble, but it was a promise that would prove easier to make than to keep. Both of my brothers served in the British Army, and each can remember their army number. Looking back to the beginning of my nineteenth year on earth, I can only boast a prison number, 900822, and a Strangeways' cellblock address, K.4.10. (K-wing, landing number 4, cell number 10). Unlike my brothers, my numbers evoke no sense of satisfaction.

Life in Hindley Closed Borstal[5] was only marginally better than at my previous address. After a month of evaluation and psychological testing in Strangeways, it was decided my sentence needed to be served under continuing tight security; I was considered too