

MARK BRANDON READ

CHOPPER

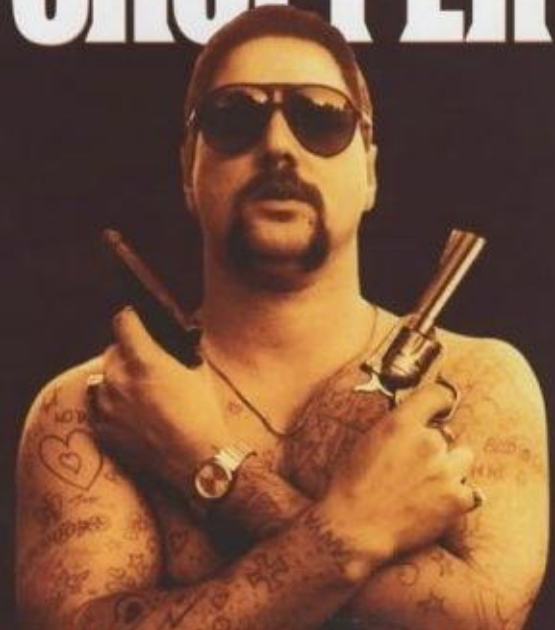


FROM THE INSIDE

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MARK BRANDON READ

CHOPPER



'TO THE HUMAN FILTH I HAVE BASHED, BELTED,
IRON BARRED, AXED, SHOT, STABBED,
KNEE CAPPED, SET ON FIRE AND DRIVEN TO
THEIR GRAVES...I REGRET NOTHING.'

About From the Inside: Chopper 1

Mark Brandon “Chopper” Read is the son of a strict Seventh Day Adventist mother and a shell shocked soldier who slept with a loaded gun at his side. Bullied at school, he grew up dreaming revenge, determined to be the toughest in any company. He became a crime commando who terrorised drug dealers, pimps, thieves and armed robbers on the streets and in jail — but boasts he never hurt an innocent member of the public. From street fighter to standover man, gunman to underworld executioner, he has been earmarked for death a dozen times but has lived to tell the tale. This is it.

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Also by Mark Brandon "Chopper" Read

The Editors

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Apart from Irish whiskey, good cigars, Pontiac motor cars, and a pistol grip baby .410 shotgun with solid load shells, what I love the most is kidnapping smartarse gangsters and taking their money. To the human filth I have bashed, belted, iron barred, axed, shot, stabbed, knee capped, set on fire and driven to their graves, I can only quote from the motto of the French Foreign Legion, 'Je Ne Regrette Rien'. . . I REGRET NOTHING.

— **Mark Brandon Reed**

FOREWORD

‘Without any disrespect to police, the NCA, and investigative journalists, they all stand on the outside straining their eyes to look inside the criminal world . . . The truth is, the underworld is a cess pit, not a science.’

— *Mark Brandon Read*

WHEN, 25 years ago, the brilliant British playwright Emlyn Williams spent a year writing an account of Britain’s most chilling child murder case — the Moors murders — he was repeatedly asked why a self-respecting writer would devote himself to such a ghastly subject.

Williams tackled the question in the foreword of his subsequent masterful chronicle of murder and its detection, *Beyond Belief*.

‘My answer is a simple one’, he wrote. ‘For me, just as no physical aberration can ever be too extraordinary to interest the medical scientist, so no psychological phenomena can be forbidden to the serious and dispassionate writer, however ‘unsavoury’ the details. Who expects savour from a story of evil? When a shocking scandal blows up, with all the attendant sensationalism, there is in some people an instinct to avert the head and shovel the whole thing under the carpet, ‘I don’t want to know’. But some of us do want to know . . . the proper study of mankind is Man. And Man cannot be ignored because he has become vile.’

Prison is full of vile people: mostly habitual criminals, with a sprinkling of psychopaths and deviants, and not counting a few non-criminals paying the penalty for a moment of madness. For all the good intentions and rhetoric of governments, Pentridge, Long Bay, Boggo Road, Yatala and the like are not institutions of reform but keystones in the Australian underworld, an underworld which operates with the same ruthless efficiency behind bars as it does outside.

Criminals, especially in prison, have a rigid and jealously-maintained hierarchy, in which the price of upsetting the social order is usually injury or death. At the top of this brutal pyramid are the few who can instil fear in the many with their propensity for violence.

Of this few, none is better known than Mark Brandon Read, known as ‘Chopper’.

Read has been one of the most feared men in Australia for 15 years. A childhood runaway, nightclub bouncer at 15, a street fighter at 17 and a notorious standover man at 19, he has carved a fearsome reputation for violence: not just with his hands, but with an armoury ranging from iron bars, knives and tomahawks to pistols, sawn-off shotguns and high-powered military weapons.

Read is hated by many in the underworld, even those Mr Bigs whose vast criminal wealth can buy the best protection. For Read is what the underworld calls a head-hunter — a lone wolf who plunders other criminals of the money they make from drug trafficking, gambling, vice or armed robbery.

And for all his efforts to invest his actions with some sort of vigilante justness, it is a sickening business. Headhunters use torture to discover what they want to know. Favourite methods include cutting off toes with boltcutters, knee capping with nail guns, burning feet with blowtorches, and nailing hands to tables. Worse, the victims are almost invariably murdered. Read, not surprisingly, attempts to rationalise such barbarism, mounting the bleak argument that his targets are ‘drug dealers’, themselves responsible for dozens of deaths, and who are invariably armed and willing to kill to defend their money.

By any civilised view, Mark Brandon Read is a monster. The question is: What made him like that? Was he born or made that way? There are interesting points to ponder.

Although Read is in the criminal world, he is not of it. Unlike most of those who he has been

imprisoned with — and preyed on — for most of his adult life, he is not from a criminal family condemned by breeding and circumstances to the endless cycle of crime and punishment. The opposite, in fact, appears to be true.

Read's father was a law-abiding former soldier who held down respectable if undistinguished jobs before his retirement. And Read describes his estranged mother and sister as devout Christians. His mother, a strict Seventh Day Adventist, was the daughter of an Adventist clergyman, and his uncle is a well-known doctor who gives medical advice on the radio.

But underneath the outwardly respectable facade, there were stresses in the family which resulted in his parents being divorced when he was a teenager. Stresses which, although Read refuses to discuss them in detail, he often alludes to, saying he had a strange and miserable childhood.

One extraordinary fact is that as an infant he was placed in an orphanage for more than 18 months before being returned to his parents. Another is that he was sent to mental institutions as a teenager — where, he claims, he was given shock and deep sleep therapy. Yet another fact is that his father, like many former soldiers, exhibited (on his son's evidence) some of the classic symptoms of post-traumatic stress. Read says his father slept with a loaded gun at his side and ordered the boy to call him at night if he was going to the lavatory, to avoid being shot as an intruder. And it was his father who taught him to fight and to shoot, apparently sparking Read's adolescent obsession with firearms and military tactics.

Having said all that, it must be admitted Read is a more complex character than his reputation allows. As a lone gun in the criminal scene, he has studied the milieu with a critical eye — and a remarkable memory. Although verging on illiterate, because of fragmented schooling, he is a keen observer whose dry wit and eye for drollery shines through his tortured handwriting and primitive spelling.

Read is a 'character': street smart, witty and good company, but he admits he uses these characteristics as weapons to lull potential victims into dropping their guard before he strikes. He is a contradiction, an amusing and charming man who has devoted his life to committing acts considered barbaric even in the world of crime.

So why the book?

It has been said that writing is a neurotic art. It is no surprise that a man as ego-driven as Read has long toyed with the idea of a book on his life. He has said that many other major figures in Australian underworld history have been vilified without having the chance to tell their own stories. 'Who ever heard Ned Kelly's or Squizzy Taylor's side of things?' he asks.

Read sat down in his tiny cell in Pentridge's H Division in 1991 and started work. For eight months he laboriously hand wrote more than 300 letters on jail issue paper. The result is a piecemeal but astonishingly frank insight not just of the man himself, but of crime in this country. It is chilling but has the stamp of authenticity born of more than two decades in the underworld.

Read flippantly writes about torture and murder — and says he finds it hard to believe society could not see that by 'culling' drug dealers and gangsters he was doing the community a big favour. He admits that if he was convicted for all the crimes he has committed he would do 'a 1000 year jail'.

In fact, Read confesses he has been involved in shooting and killings and torture sessions which have never come to light. It is easy to gloss over these crimes; Read speaks and writes in a disarmingly matter-of-fact, chatty way about brutality beyond ordinary people's imagination.

He makes no apologies for his violent life, preferring not to shelter behind a disadvantaged childhood: 'I don't need to win a popularity contest, I am not running for public office and I don't want to be a game show host,' he writes. But he adds the disclaimer: 'I have not hurt innocent members of the community; everyone I've got had it coming. I'm not a bully.'

Read's police record speaks for itself. Like so many criminals, he graduated from the Children's Court to boys' homes and then to prison. He started committing minor crimes, from breaking into factories to street brawling, then became a standover heavyweight.

The impression he leaves is of a soldier who never found a war . . . except the one he has waged on the streets. He has convictions for assault by kicking, assault with a weapon, robbery, attempted escape, assault occasioning actual bodily harm, attempting to kidnap a judge at gunpoint, arson and shooting a drug dealer. In 1989 a Supreme Court Jury found him not guilty of murdering a Turkish drug dealer, Siam Ozerkam, outside a St Kilda nightclub. It was a verdict which both surprised and delighted Read.

Police who have dealt with Read say he is a bizarre blend of rat cunning and childlike innocence. Inspector Rod Porter of the Victoria Police, who has dealt with some of the hardest men in the underworld while serving in the armed robbery squad, regards Read as unique. 'He is such a likeable bloke it is easy to forget what he is capable of. He tells you yarns which seem unlikely, but when you check them out they all tend to be true. I have never caught him fabricating stories from his past. He is one of the funniest but most violent men I have met. In my view there are two Mark Reads: the fun-loving rogue who could laugh at anything, and the hard-nosed head-hunter who has no compassion for his victims.'

Read built an awesome reputation in Australian crime circles because of his love of spilling blood — and his indifferent attitude to his own safety. He has been shot, stabbed, bashed and beaten yet remains outwardly unperturbed. He has a standing price on his head from several crime cartels, but laughs off the threats.

Read says that as a standover man he is able to make dispassionate observations about his fellow crims. He is able to give an insider's view on many of the major players in Australian crime. As a criminal who delights in flouting both mainstream society and underworld conventions, it is typical of his contempt for the criminal world that in his self-proclaimed parting shot he has breached the crook's most sacred law, the code of silence.

Read is proud of the fact that he is a huge name in crime and feared by underworld syndicate heads. But he also knows that having spent most of his life in jail — and living in constant fear of a knife or bullet in the back — his existence, in any reasonable terms, has been a total waste.

He claims he is prepared to tell all because he has had enough of crime and wants to move to Tasmania and try to live a normal life. Many criminals and as many police refuse to believe him. They say, sooner or later he will be back in the headlines . . . either as an offender or victim.

A postscript. Read's memoirs are often horrifying, but there is a thread of gallows humour that leavens the litany of mayhem. In fact, some of his droll anecdotes reminds the reader of the classic Broadway stories of Damon Runyon.

One perceptive critic wrote of Runyon that, for all the humour, the characters' underlying ruthlessness came through. He said that one of Runyon's funniest stories, *A Sense of Humour*, was as ghastly as anything in modern fiction. The reverse is true of Read's rough memoirs. Ghastly as they are, some of his stories are undeniably funny. Runyon, who rubbed shoulders with the Chopper Read of New York 60 years ago, would have understood him very well.

Anyone who doubts that violent crime and humour can be literary bedfellows should take note of what the critic E.C. Bentley wrote of Runyon's famous stories. Runyon, he said, 'makes crime, and violence and predatory worthlessness, together with offhand decency where you least expect it . . . keenly interesting and frantically funny'.

While on the subject, Bentley quotes a character in a John Masefield novel who comments 'Courageous energy is always valued and remembered, and though the highwayman and others often use their energy wickedly, they still used it, and risked their lives to use it'.

Runyon himself once wrote: ‘legitimate guys are much interested in the doings of tough guys, and consider them romantic’.

Chopper Read puts it even more succinctly . . . ‘Posh people love gangsters’.

— *John Silvester and Andrew Ru*

Chapter 1

Digging my own grave

'I'd lived with murder contracts over my head for years.'

I HAVE been shot once, stabbed seven times, had a claw hammer stuck in my skull, been run over, beaten unconscious and left for dead.

Any one of those incidents could have killed me. But the time I came closest to dying didn't leave me with any scars at all. Except, maybe, on my soul. I still dream about it sometimes.

It is something I have never told anyone. It happened one night in 1977, when I went for a walk through the shops in South Yarra.

I'd lived with murder contracts over my head for years. Most of the best crooks in Australia had wanted me dead, so I should have known better than to drop my guard and wander around the suburbs like a tourist.

I was taken by total surprise. I was walking along the street when a man jumped out of his car and began to look at a road map on the bonnet. He had a torch on the map and looked puzzled. He called me over and asked if I knew where a certain street was. Not suspecting a thing, I looked at the map.

He had a gun under the map. In the split-second that I saw the barrel shining in the torchlight as he swung it up, I knew it was too late. He had it under my neck. Seconds later, I was in the boot of his Monaro, handcuffed.

It is a matter of shame and embarrassment that I could have been so stupid to get captured so easily. I'd been put in the boot with an old trick.

The abductor was a Melbourne criminal who I will not name. It's funny what you remember. He had the car cassette player on and was listening to Dean Martin's greatest hits. That music still makes me feel sombre now.

You can't imagine the terror. I can still almost taste the petrol and exhaust fumes I smelt on the ride. I could hear the tyres spread as we went over tram tracks, presumably the ones in Toorak Road.

I hadn't suspected for a moment that it could have been a set-up, even though he was parked and waiting for me to get near the car before he jumped out to look at the map. It was my fault. But it didn't give up hope. I vowed that would be my only mistake that night.

After all, the enemy had already made one mistake, too — not finishing me when he had the chance. I was willing the car to stop so that I could get back on my feet. I didn't know whether he planned to torture me or whether it would be straight-out murder. I thought I had smelt alcohol on his breath when I was trying to read the road map so I hoped he was a little pissed. Anything which would slow his reflexes down to give me an outside chance.

My mind was racing at a 1000 miles an hour and I decided that the first half chance I had, I would go for it. I knew that without a bit of luck there would be no tomorrow. While I was thinking and trying to plan, all I could hear was Dean Martin blasting out *'Everybody Loves Somebody Sometime.'* I couldn't help laughing a little at the song, considering my circumstances. I would have loved a few friends, all armed to the teeth.

I was full of terror at the thought of what was going to happen. But I kept thinking; 'He's made one mistake already by not killing me; if he makes another I might have a chance.'

He had handcuffed me with my hands at the front. I thought about trying to kick my way out of the

boot, but it would have made too much noise. One bullet through the back seat would have finished me.

He pulled me out of the boot. As soon as he hit me with the pistol butt, I knew it wasn't going to be a straight shooting: I was in for the flogging first. I was beaten, kicked, pistol whipped and punched. It was the first time and only time I'd ever lost control of my bowels through fear. But the pain was nothing . . . at least I was still alive.

The bashing over, it was stage two. He marched me through the dark about 30 feet in front of the car and handed me a garden spade.

I had to dig my own grave.

I think he was surprised I didn't argue, but started digging straightaway.

After a while I complained I couldn't dig properly with handcuffs on, and he unlocked them.

That was his second mistake.

I dug as hard as I could, and all the time I was talking to him, laughing and making stupid jokes. I was digging like a mad Welsh coal miner. I know my vigour in digging put him off guard.

All the time this was happening I didn't allow my face to reflect the terror I felt. I laughed and joked about the predicament I was in while digging the hole. The bloke said: 'You're a tough bastard Chopper. I'll give you that'.

That compliment — and the word 'No!' — were the last words he spoke.

When I was about hip deep in the grave, I could sense he felt it was deep enough. I had to do something — anything to buy a bit more time. I pretended I had hit a hard spot. I took a fresh grip on the handle of the spade with my left hand as if I was going to dig even harder.

I am right handed but he was standing on my left side above me. I gripped the shovel like a baseball bat — and let go at his left knee cap.

I knew he would get a shot off. But it was the only card I had left, and I had to play it. A wounded man, a man with the blade of a spade through his knee cap, wouldn't be taking correct aim.

I also know my guns. He had a Spanish-made, very heavy, cheap .45 calibre automatic, and after banging me about the head with it, who knows? It might jam on him.

So I took the chance and swung. He screamed in pain and fired. The flash of the gun was right beside my head. I was going to die anyway, so I had nothing to lose. I nearly severed his leg with the first blow.

Next second, I was out of the grave. That's when he screamed 'No!'.

For him, it was too late. The spade was in his brain.

Let's say, for me it was a bit of a character builder.

That night still chills me to the bone. I don't feel as though I defeated a worthy opponent. I simply cheated death.

I got into the car. It was more comfortable to be in the driver's seat than the boot. I drove along the track and found a main road. It was only then, when I found a sign, that I realised my last resting place was to have been Mount Donna Buang, up past Warburton. I drove the car home. The other bloke didn't need it. He was in the ground.

While I had been putting him in the grave, I kept thinking I could hear a man walking through the bush. It was probably a wild pig, but it sounded spooky. Let me tell you that if it was a man, he did himself a big favour by not coming over to say hello. There was plenty of room for two in that hole.

Being ordered to dig my own grave is something I try to forget, and I have never talked about it. I got out alive because of the other chap's lack of concentration and because I kept cool. I was looking at my own death that night; it still comes back in my dreams sometimes.

I remember standing over his body that night and saying 'Thankyou God'. I believe that God must have protected me that night.

He was good. He had got me and beaten me fair and square, and full credit to him. He may have been a bit pissed but he taught me a lot that night, about what to do and what not to do. Nevertheless he got me and the fact that I lived and he died doesn't count.

I was a dead man. He had me cold, so why he went through the drama of getting me to dig the grave I wouldn't know. I have heard that quite a few fellows in the 1970s had to dig their own graves but none of them got a second chance. The bloke who got me was as stupid as he was clever.

I've dug a few graves in my time. But I have never made a man dig his own. There's no need to go that far — it would be plain bad manners.

I was walking to the shops when the would-be hitman got me. The moral is simple: never go to the shops without your gun.

When you have killed a man the brain sometimes fuzzes over the details. The mind numbs itself otherwise anyone who has ever killed would end up in a mental hospital.

I remember waking up the next morning and thinking for a moment 'did that really happen?' Then I looked in the mirror and saw all the lumps and cuts on my head from the pistol whipping, and I knew it was for real.

People now think I am mad because I don't show physical fear, but after that night what is there to frighten me? How can the police, the prisons, the screws, courts, judges or criminal world frighten anyone who has stood in his own grave — and lived?

There may be some who doubt the story. Well, I am quite prepared to do a full re-enactment for them, providing they ride in the boot. I'll even bring the Dean Martin tape.

There were other times when I should have died. Plenty of them. In 1977 I was attacked and beaten nearly to death by two Melbourne criminals armed with baseball bats outside a pub in Port Melbourne. They only left when they thought I was dead. The two criminals, who I will not name, are no longer with us.

I was hit by a car in a hit-and-run in 1974 and left lying unconscious in a South Yarra street, never found out who was behind that attempt.

I was beaten half to death in the toilets of the old Dover Hotel in the city by a group of criminals. I'm still not 100 per cent sure who was behind that, although I have been trying to find out for years.

I hate talking about defeats and near-defeats. But, oh well, what the hell.

*

I think I should say that I have shot, wounded and crippled 11 men altogether. One chap lost an arm, one wears a colostomy bag, one lost his leg, one has a badly-crippled leg, one has a pin in his hip, another a pin in his shoulder, one lost an eye and has brain damage. And the rest have life-time grinds and aches.

But they are at least alive, if not well.

I think I was 17 or 18 when I shot my first man. I used to shoot people in the feet and legs when I was younger but I don't count them. Who counts a little .22 slug?

As for killing, I can't be charged for simply saying that I've killed more than one man. I don't know if anyone will believe me but I will tell the truth about the past.

If you combine the deaths I have carried out personally, those I've been involved in with help and partners, and the deaths I have helped plan but not taken any personal part in, the figure is quite large. I have no worries about acting as a 'consultant', then leaving others to carry out the dirty work. If you can make a monkey dance then grind the organ, I say. The upshot is that, either personally, in company, or at a distance, I have been involved in 19 deaths inside and outside jail since 1971. Okay it's no world record, but it's not bad for the little kid in the schoolyard who always got bashed.

All those who died had it coming. There wasn't a 'civilian' in the bunch, and I don't regret on it. ~~It's not that many when you think of all the criminal violence there has been in Victoria over the years.~~

Strange as it may seem, I have never considered myself a murderer, because they all had it coming. Most of them came under the heading of tactical necessities. All of them were killers and violent crims, so big deal.

I have never felt that I murdered, or helped out in anyone's murder. I always believed that the 'Dear Departed' had it coming in the eyes of God. One drug dealer I killed — as a matter of fact, he died of shock half-way through a kneecapping — had bragged of overdosing about 50 prostitutes and junkies over a ten-year period in the western suburbs. How could his death be classed as murder?

Consider that. Fifty people. God, I'm just a babe in arms. One out of every three drug overdoses is a hotshot. Some of the chaps I've grabbed were mass murderers in the drug world. Compared with them, I'm no murderer . . . I'm a garbage disposal expert.

What Julian Knight did at Hoddle Street, that was murder. I have never killed an innocent member of the community.

Just as a point of interest, every man that I have shot or stabbed, who lived, looked up at me like a beaten puppy and asked 'Why?'. Before a man dies, his last word always seems to be 'No'.

Men from certain ethnic groups cry and scream and go to their deaths like screaming females crying 'No, No, No'.

The hardest man of all, without a shadow of a doubt, was an old Scot from Glasgow. He was an old crook and as hard as nails. Even after two burnt feet from a blowtorch he didn't let out a scream or a tear; he just abused and spat blood on us. He was tied up and secured, but feared nothing. He knew he was going to die, but struggled and fought, yelled abuse and spat.

In the end, he gave nothing. We shot him to shut him up. He was a tough fearless bastard, and we had to admire him. Reluctantly, I have to admit the mad Scot came from Sydney to Melbourne. He would be the only tough man to come out of Sydney, in my opinion.

The smell when you put a blowtorch to someone's feet is hard to describe. It is a cross between burnt hair and roast pork. A sweet, sickly smell that hangs heavily in the air and gets right into your hair and clothing.

I still have a few mixed feelings about some of the things that I have written. Telling normal people some of the things I have done makes me feel ill at ease. Violence, death, guns and torture have been my whole life for so long now, it seems normal to me, inside and outside jail.

That is all I seem to talk about and think about, or involve myself in. How many people that person has killed in his life is a question that is never asked in the criminal world and would never be answered at any rate. I don't think I can get into trouble, I've named no-one: no name, no murder. But it still leaves me with mixed feelings. I've done enough jail.

None of the people I've killed were innocent, normal or average nine to five working types: they were all drug dealers, hoons, pimps, crime figures and killers. I doubt whether any one of them was a virgin as far as death and murder were concerned. Some of them had killed plenty in the drug world with a needle.

I have a clear heart and clear mind over it all, but I've never come out and put a number on it before. I know this sounds quite odd, but I still suffer from confused religious beliefs as a result of my upbringing. I suffer no real guilt but I know that in the eyes of God even killing scum is wrong. But then again He's let me live and let them die.

However, writing about these things gives me a nagging inner discomfort. I can't put a finger on it. I guess my strict Seventh Day Adventist upbringing is coming back to haunt me.

Every now and again I suffer bouts of bad conscience, a type of guilt left over from my

upbringing. I am by no means a religious man, but the teachings of childhood are hard to shake off. ~~may come as a shock to those who know me but I do feel spooky at times about some of the things~~ that I have done. I justify it all to myself by saying that I've never killed or hurt anybody who didn't have it coming to them in the eyes of God. But sometimes I get spooked as none of us knows what awaits us in the hereafter. Personally, I think I am owed an apology.

Anyone who has killed will confess in private that the faces of his victims come back in his dreams. I have spoken to multiple murderers like Robert Wright and Julian Knight about this. In Knight's case it is not the faces but the whole Hoddle Street massacre that comes back.

Quite a few fellows who have taken human life have confessed to me in private that I am not the only one who has this happen to them. Every now and again the buggers come back to you in your dreams and talk to you. In my case, it has been quite disturbing over the years.

*

Anyone who has killed and claims the face or the event does not come back to them in a dream, is lying.

It is no secret that mental health and myself have enjoyed a shaky friendship at times, but at the risk of being called a nut case, I will admit that I believe in God. It may sound silly, but I used to pray before going into battle. I used to have a silent prayer, 'Lord, if you are with me, no man can stand against me.'

Having escaped death so many times has only strengthened my belief. I believed that The Lord saw my enemies as foul sinners and me as his messenger sent to punish them. I no longer believe that. But if there is no God then I am the luckiest man to have survived all the battles. It is something I often think about.

Perhaps I am alive because as bad as I am, The Lord saw me as the lesser of two warring evils and allowed my enemies to die or be defeated.

Who knows what is the truth? I have lived through too many attempts to kill me for it to be simply good fortune or my own quick thinking.

At my murder trial, I prayed to God to make the jury find me not guilty. You figure it out. I can't tell.

They say there are no atheists in foxholes, and I have stood at the edge of the grave for most of my life. It is hard for me not to wonder, at times, why I am still alive. How have I continued to escape death in every life and death situation?

I don't ever talk about this stuff inside jail. People in here think I am mad enough already without adding to it. But I can't help thinking, if God was not with me, why am I alive? No-one has that much luck on his own.

Chapter 2

From orphanage to Pentridge

‘Don’t ask for mercy from a man who has been shown no mercy.’

THE name ‘Read’ is an old Irish name. I’ve been told that ‘Reid’ is English and ‘Reed’ is Scottish. The name Brandon, my middle name, comes from Brandon Head, a small fishing village on the south west coast of Ireland in the county of Kerry.

I was born in Carlton on November 17, 1954. I spent the first 18 months of my life in the Methodist Babies Home in Melbourne, in which time my sister Debbie was born.

My Mum’s name is Valerie, and Dad’s is Keith. Mum was an ultra-strict Seventh Day Adventist. Dad became a Seventh Day Adventist to marry Mum.

To be honest my Mum and I were never close. The church ruled her life. It came before family before everything. Mum told Dad to get out when I was 16 years old. They divorced when I was 19.

I hated the Seventh Day Adventist Church. I had a violent childhood, and I was sort of ‘brainwashed’. I didn’t feel loved as a kid and I grew up praying to God that He would kill my mother. I loved my Dad, although he belted hell out of me as a child right up until I fought him back at the age of 15. Every time my Dad belted me it was at my Mum’s orders.

I ran away from home six times between the age of 10 and 15. It was not a happy time for me, but I don’t blame the past for what I am.

My grandfather, Mum’s father, was a Seventh Day Adventist minister. Pastor George Weslake. I hated the church and I hated my home life, and it gives me no joy to remember it. But I do love my old Dad. He left the church when I was 15 or 16, after I stopped going to church.

I don’t remember ever liking my sister Debbie. To this day she is a devout Christian. She left the Seventh Day Adventists to become a born-again Christian. She sends me letters telling me to change my evil ways — or else burn in the fires of Hell.

As a cook my Mum would have made a great steam cleaner. Everything I ate was either steamed or boiled. By the time I left home at 15 to go cane cutting up north I was practically steamed and boiled.

There is a saying: ‘Don’t ask for mercy from a man who has been shown no mercy’. As a kid I was shown no mercy, so I’d rather not go into much detail about my childhood. My best and happiest days have been on the streets of Melbourne. If I had happy times at all it would be when my Dad moved to Mornington for a couple of years. They were carefree days. There was still violence in the home but I loved Mornington. The seaside was wonderful. When I settle down for good I’d love to live by the seaside.

One of the few things about my childhood that was completely normal was that, like most kids, I had a dog, which I loved. One day there was a blow-up at home. Dad walked out, and naturally I followed. When things were patched up Cindy was nowhere to be found. She had been put to sleep. I don’t think I’ll ever forget that.

I was put into Melbourne mental hospitals a few times when I was about 15, but my Dad got me out. I was put into assorted mental institutions up until I was 19, but Dad kept getting me out. I was given several treatments of deep-sleep therapy. My Mother thought I was dyslexic and autistic. The fact was all I was really guilty of was leaving the Seventh Day Adventist Church.

I was treated for all manner of mental disorders. Some in my family were convinced that my rejecting the Seventh Day Adventist Church showed that I had a severe mental disorder and that it had to be treated. Of course my treatment back in the mental hospitals in those days was not kind.

I was sent to a mental hospital in the south eastern suburbs of Melbourne where I underwent deep sleep therapy. I was completely off my head when I got out of one of the mental hospitals. I was put in assorted institutions four times as a teenager.

It took about ten years for me to get over the so-called treatments I got. I was completely psychopathic when I got out of there once. They put me on all sorts of weird and wonderful drugs and shock treatment. With the shock treatment they put the big bit in your mouth and hold you down and give you a big charge of the soup. I used to have a saying, 'EST won't get me'.

It was terrifying as a teenager to be placed in a ward with grown men strapped to their beds. The noise was unbelievable.

I know it's popular these days to talk about all the abuse you got as a child. Personally I'd rather keep the worst parts to myself. That's my business. But some of it would make strong men vomit, if told all. I'll leave it at that. I suppose it could have been worse. Mum could have taken me on a day trip to Ayers Rock. Ha ha.

My childhood and schooldays were nothing to talk about, except that all I ever learnt as a child and teenager was violence and hatred for would-be tough guys.

In my schooldays in the 1960s I was the victim of schoolyard bullies five days a week. There were fights in the schoolyard day in, day out, and Adventists tend to get picked on. I must have been the most punished kid at any school I went to. Six of the best on each hand.

I grew up to hate bullies. I guess that's why I take such delight in belting the hell out of the so-called 'tough guys'. I'm violent, but I'm not a bully. Everyone I've ever moved against has been a bully boy, a two-bob tough guy. Most of the truly violent men I've known in my life have been the victims of school bullies and violence in the home.

I took a twisted pride in the fact I was the most strapped kid at school. I remember once I was kicked so bad in the head by bullies at Lalor High School that my parents didn't recognise me at first when I got home. But I always came back for more. Every time I got knocked down, I got up — for more, and more, and more, again and again.

As I said, through the 60s I ran away from home six times. One adventure was going into the city on the train when I was a 10-year-old to see the Beatles. I never did get to see the Beatles, but I had great time getting lost in the crowds.

Another time I ran off to see LBJ, the American president, with other kids in front of the town hall. After kicking my way through the crowd to try to shake hands with him, I got to see the paint splashed over one of the cars. It was a great adventure.

I used to love to go in and watch the anti-war marches. The other kids and me would stand on the footpath and spit and yell abuse at the anti-war protesters. The whole city seemed to be closed and empty. Everyone was either marching or yelling abuse at the marchers. It was all high adventure for a young teenager.

I remember in 1969 going to see a then little-known lady in the city at some shopping centre place. She kissed me on the cheek and got lipstick all over me . . . it was Edna Everage, now Dame Edna Everage. Silly old drag queen.

The 60s was a great time for kids to grow up. When Harold Holt died I remember there were billboards all over Melbourne — photos of Holt with the words 'A Great Australian' written underneath. A lot of Australian history happened in the 60s. It was a good time.

When I was growing up Australia was still influenced by the White Australia policy. We hated all the 'wogs'. . . yet my girlfriend Margaret, the greatest chick I've ever known, is Maltese. We hated all the 'Abos', yet I've been shown great kindness by Aborigines. We hated all Asians yet — and I've never told anyone this — my Dad is quarter caste Chinese. Their family name was Shan Han, but later they changed it to Shanhan to give it a more Irish sound.

Looking at my Dad it is very hard to pick that he is quarter Chinese. He hates the Japs. Everyone I've ever met born in this country — regardless of their race or family nationality — is racist towards some other race or nationality or culture.

Whites in Australia either hate the blacks or the 'slopes' — or, if not, they don't mind a sly giggle at their expense. In years to come the Asians in Australia — talking with Aussie accents and drinking beer in the pubs and going to the footy — will be putting shit on the 'wogs' and 'coons', as the 'wogs' and blacks are already putting shit on the 'chows' and 'slopes'.

I don't think it is really blood-hatred racism but more a part of the 'rough as guts' Australian sense of humour, part of the Aussie culture and attitude.

Anyway, I'm racist — and my great granny was a chow, bless her heart.

*

My Mum's father fought in the First World War in the cavalry, but I don't know much about him. My Dad's father, Alfred Read, was nicknamed 'The Bull' because of his great physical strength. He could bend a penny in half between his thumb and forefinger. He fought bare knuckles as a heavyweight prize fighter and worked as a shearer, wool presser and horseman. He was once photographed at Dalgety's wool stores with a bale of wool weighing 900 pounds resting on his shoulders as it was being rolled from platform to truck.

After the First World War 'Bull' Read bought and sold remount horses — travelling with them to India, where he would do the deal. He walked out on my Dad and his young brother and my grandmother when Dad was a small boy. My grandma died in Dad's arms when he was about 14. Dad worked as a stockman then joined the army at 16 to find that his father 'Alf the Bull' had also joined up for the Second World War.

Dad did a bit of boxing in the army. That's where he first met his good friend Eddy Miller. Later, I used to call Eddy Miller 'Uncle Eddy'. He was a great old chap. When my Dad took us to live in Mornington in the 60s for two years Uncle Eddy had a taxi cab business down there. It was down there that Eddy and Dad taught me to box when I was a kid.

As a teenager I was always interested in joining the army. I did try to enlist once but got knocked back because I failed the psychiatric test . . . the female captain psychiatrist said I had a personality given to violence.

Using that as an excuse to stop someone joining the army — well, I thought it was quite amusing to admit, I also had flat feet, but I didn't get as far as the medical.

*

In 1977 when I got out of prison, with my Dad's help and on his advice, I applied to join the Rhodesian Security Forces. I wrote away to the head of the forces — a Major General Kurt something or other. As I expected, I was accepted, and the necessary application forms plus assorted other paperwork and travel instructions arrived. I filled out the application form and sent it back. A letter returned to say I had to fly to South Africa and then take a bus up to Salisbury, Rhodesia, as you couldn't fly from Australia to Rhodesia direct.

I told the Parole Board via my parole officer that I was leaving. ‘No you aren’t’ said the parole officer. ‘You’re on parole; you’re going nowhere’.

Had I been allowed to leave we wouldn’t be bothering with all this now, and the Victorian Government would have saved a fortune in jail and courts, police and legal costs.

Some men dream of dying in a hail of bullets, and in 1977 I was one of those men. But my dream was not to be. You could die of old age and boredom in Melbourne if you were hoping to die in a hail of gunfire in face to face combat in the streets. Let’s face it, the Australian crim isn’t a great one for any form of gun-in-hand face to face shoot-it-out combat. If they ever get me, it will be in the back.

*

When I ran away to Queensland when I was a teenager I worked for a while on the cane fields at Mossman, 40 miles north of Cairns in Queensland. One day I caught a skinny black snake about two feet long. I had no idea what it was, and still don’t — I’m no snake expert. But it was handy.

I was having some bother with some Abo cane cutters, so I held the snake around my neck and said ‘Come on’. They backed away, so it must have been a nice, evil type of snake.

I emptied the hut real quick the night I brought ‘Speedy’ back from the cane field. I fed him live mice. He would eat two a week. He didn’t seem to drink, and he would cough his mouse bones and muck up the day after he’d eaten. I lasted a month on the cane fields — cane toads, snakes, 100 degree heat, dirt and sweat — chopping cane by hand for \$35 a bloody week. It was twice as much as a 15 year-old was paid in 1970, but I didn’t like sleeping in a hut with farting, snoring, drunken cane cutters.

I brought my snake back to Melbourne and swapped him for a carpet snake and a python. Boy, did I have fun with them. I would push the face of the carpet snake into the faces of my enemies while my friends Dave the Jew and Cowboy Harris held them. The carpet snake would bite down. You could pick my enemies around Prahran — we moved from Thomastown to Prahran in 1970 — as a fair few of them had badly swollen and festering faces from the bite of the carpet snake.

The carpet snake and the python were called Reggie and Ronnie after the Kray brothers in London. The Krays had been my boyhood heroes, and I’d read that they, too, had kept pet snakes.

My teenage gang was made up of Terry the Tank, Dave the Jew and Cowboy Johnny Harris. We were the Surrey Road gang. We hung around at the Try Boys youth club with Lee and Wade Dix — Billy Dix’s boys. I did Greco-Roman wrestling, swimming, and weightlifting and I boxed at Ambrose Palmer’s gym in West Melbourne. I used to wrestle with big Lee Dix. He is now a top nightclub bouncer and still a good mate of mine.

Try Boys youth club was our headquarters. We had a collection of iron bars, knives, sawn-off shotguns and .22 calibre rifles, tomahawks, and meat cleavers. With ‘Ronny and Reggie’ in their carry bag we were a young but violently advanced crew. Dave the Jew owned his own handgun, but refused to part with it, which made me very jealous. We would engage larger gangs in combat with our World War One issue Australian Army bayonets, and we were undefeated.

Terry was bigger than me, and I wasn’t small. Cowboy Johnny was a few years older than me, and a bit punchy. He wasn’t a big thinker, but loyal.

Dave the Jew and I nearly fell out — it could have come to bloodshed and death — after Reggie the carpet snake bit him on the hand and he cut Reggie and Ronny both up with a meat axe.

Dave was sentenced to punishment. He had to eat a full packet of lit smokes one after the other, swallow them down with a bottle of ouzo then receive a sound beating. It was either that or a shot in both legs. Dave ate the cigarettes — all lit — then polished off the ouzo to kill the pain of the coming beating. We broke his face up well. In fact, he lost his front teeth. All was forgiven.

The Surrey Road gang didn't muck around. Cowboy Johnny wouldn't eat the smokes or drink the ouzo or take his beating so Dave shot him in both legs with a sawn-off .22. We dug the slugs out with a potato knife. Johnny then went to hospital. No slugs, no police.

Terry the Tank refused his punishment once and the three of us attacked him. Had Terry carried on and entered the criminal world full on, he would have been a force to be reckoned with. Physically, he was as strong as 10 men. However, we got him in the end. Dave was mad keen on shooting him in the legs, but Terry agreed on the standard pack of lit smokes, ouzo and a sound flogging.

A crew can't expect to dish it out if it can't take it as well, and we were a top crew. Violence and street combat was our religion. I was the general, and I ruled with an iron fist. Great days.

*

My 19th birthday party was going to be a big event in my life. To be honest I never had a proper birthday party. Seventh Day Adventist birthday parties for children in the Read home ended up as prayer meetings. So by the time I was turning 19 and not living at home I wanted a real one to make up for all the other years.

I set about getting ready for the big day. I had a one bedroom flat in Williams Road, South Yarra. I emptied most of the furniture out. Then I rang the Thomastown Boys via 'Satchmo' and the Croydon Boys via 'Bernie'. I notified 'Terry the Tank' and his mates, 'Mad Charlie' and his crew, Horatio Morris and his old South and Port Melbourne mates, and Vincent Villeroy and his friends. I told them all to bring the biggest sluts they could lay their hands on. But I didn't tell any of the crews I'd invited that other crews were coming.

The big night had come. All was set. I had spent several hundred dollars on grog and the bath tub was full of ice. I put Cowboy Johnny Harris up on the roof of the flats next door with a walkie talkie and a 30-30 lever action hunting rifle so he could let rip if any gatecrashers dared to pull up outside.

No one came.

Only my dear old dad, 'Satchmo', a few of the Thomastown boys and Robyn the policeman's daughter.

It turned out that bloody 'Terry the Tank' had rung around and every crew in Melbourne knew the other crews were coming. It was decided behind my back that my 19th would be a bloodbath. I've never tried to toss a party since.

*

Our gang kept a supply of weapons hidden in the toilets of the South Yarra Arms, the Morning Star hotel and later the Bush Inn hotel. We stashed one sawn-off shotgun, one tomahawk, one meat cleaver and one iron bar in each pub — an idea I got from what the Kray brothers did in London. We also had a very high-powered cattle prod stolen from the Newmarket cattle yards. When we got hold of the leadership of rival gangs, one blast of the cattle prod on the lower guts and their bowels dropped out — shit everywhere.

The Surrey Road gang was feared. We had blues with the Richmond boys regularly, but as there weren't many of us, we would go to the home address of our enemy and get him as he walked out, through his own front door. These are the same tactics used by the IRA. We once bashed a rival gang leader as he left the cemetery after his mother's funeral. Another time we broke the legs of the brother of an enemy — then caught the one we wanted in the waiting room of the Alfred Hospital. It was another IRA trick learnt from my reading of military history.

Terry the Tank is now a well-to-do honest member of the community with wife and children.

Cowboy Johnny is dead. Dave the Jew is living in South Yarra in relaxed comfort with his trust fund.
And I'm where I am. That's the Surrey Road gang now . . . a memory of my teenage years. —

Chapter 3

Family and friends

‘Dad saved me a lot of bother . . . and Brian Kane an early funeral.’

MY dear old Dad, Keith Alfred Read, served in the Australian Army for 24 years, the merchant navy for two years, and was a professional welterweight boxer for a while. As a result of his time in the ring he became friends and remained friends with the great Eddy Miller until Miller’s death in the late 1960s.

During the 1939-45 war Dad served on the island of New Britain, then he went to Indonesia, Rabaul and other islands, then to Japan, where he saw Hiroshima first hand.

Later, he joined the merchant navy for two years, then rejoined the army and served in the Korean War in Korea.

On leaving the army the second time he worked for Apps funeral directors. Apps had the Government contract picking up all the homicide and suicide jobs.

My Dad is well known to all the crims who know me. He has withstood gossip and slander in the streets where he’s lived and countless death threats, all because of me. The stress and strain of my 20 odd years of police, prison and criminal trouble have taken their toll on Dad. However, he has stood with me rock solid and loyal through thick and thin. He would stand in front of me and take the bullseye meant for me if he could. His love and loyalty is without question. What else can I say?

*

All my life Dad has slept with a gun beside his bed. And after his divorce from my mother he took to sleeping with a fully-loaded pump action alongside him in the double bed, barrel pointing down towards his feet. But I got him out of that. It now goes under or alongside the bed on the floor. Getting up at night to go to the toilet, with my old Dad and his trusty pump action in the next room, means yelling out: ‘Going to the toilet, Dad’ so he knew who was walking around.

‘Right, boy’ he would yell back. One thing, with the old soldier in the next room, armed up, I slept well.

*

Once, when he was young, Dad got the idea that the next-door neighbours were mistreating the family pet. Every time he looked over the fence the animal seemed to be getting thinner and thinner.

He complained to the neighbours, and said he hated cruelty to animals. Every time he asked them if they were feeding the dog, they swore they were. But it seemed skinnier than ever, and one day Dad could take no more. He jumped the fence, threatened the neighbour with a beating, then took the dog and drowned it to put it out of its misery.

It was the first time he had seen a greyhound.

*

Old time gunman Horatio Morris introduced me to an old Melbourne bookmaker we’ll call Bert,

dark horse, behind-the-scenes man and quite a nice chap. And there was another fellow, a book called Pat. I met Pat years later in South Yarra in 1977. He was very close to Brian Kane. On the night in question Kane had pulled up outside an address in Rockley Road, South Yarra, to speak to a chap who had been roughing up Pat's lady friend. The address was right next to where my Dad and I lived.

I grabbed Dad's pump action shotgun — the old Bentley — loaded it with heavy shot and ran down and bailed Kane up. Having met him at the Morning Star hotel in Prahran a month or so before in the company of police regarding a matter concerning Billy Longley, I was convinced he was on Rockley Road to kill me, and I had the barrel of the gun in his mouth.

My Dad rushed out and calmed things down, allowing poor Brian to explain that he was on a mission of mercy regarding Pat's lady friend being belted by the chap in the address near us on Rockley Road. Whereupon, we all went in and spoke to the offender in question.

It was a close call. Dad saved me a lot of bother . . . and Brian Kane an early funeral.

*

Margaret is the only real girlfriend I've ever had. She has stuck by me with love, loyalty and devotion since 1983. Don't ask me why, as I can't understand it myself.

Once, she was questioned by the homicide squad over me for five hours — and stuck rock solid. She was questioned by the Internal Security Unit three times running for hours at a time over me — and remained rock solid. She has withstood death threats too many times to count — over me. She saw through my murder trial. She has never failed me, let me down or betrayed me. She's got more heart, guts and dash than any man I've known.

I cannot explain how I really feel about this woman. I'm not a great romantic or a playboy. I'm not the hearts and flowers sort of man — and until Margaret I strongly believed that love of a romantic nature was never to find me. I was a lone wolf all my life until I met Margaret. To say that I love her seems a feeble way to describe my feelings. I owe this lady more than I could ever pay in 100 lifetimes. If I could put my finger on one reason for why I am really walking away from it all, Margaret would be the reason.

But a love affair with a crim with a price on his head is not all hearts and flowers, sometimes it's more like a war movie than a romance. Being covered in tattoos and hated by half the underworld has its drawbacks. Like when you want to go swimming, for instance.

Margaret and I used to love going to the beach — but we had to pick nice out-of-the-way spots, I am covered neck to ankle in tats. And then there's the matter of security, which is why we had to take along quite a bit of hardware.

That consisted of a .25 calibre automatic handgun in Margaret's beach bag — along with a .38 calibre five-shot revolver, a .32 calibre automatic pistol, a .410 sawn-off shotgun, a .357 magnum revolver, a .44 magnum revolver, a .38 automatic pistol — and a .22 calibre 30-shot fully automatic cut-down machine gun fitted with a silencer.

That's eight firearms. I used to carry all I could with me, so 'beach time' was 'paranoid time'. I used to have a small esky that floated on the water. I'd pop some ice and beer cans in it along with the cut down machine gun and take it out with me and swim and dive around near it.

I took no chances at all. Margaret had been taught to use the .25 automatic pistol. God, she looked great in her teeny weenie bikini. I loved taking her to the beach. However, if anyone else came to the beach I'd swim back and get ready for battle. Beach time could have turned into a nightmare, and I wanted to make sure no-one was going to gun me down without a fighting chance.

If something had happened, I had full faith that Margaret would have blown them to hell. Like a Maltese woman, she has a terrible temper. The first reaction of the Maltese female when angered is

head straight into the kitchen to the knife drawer. Once I had to run out the front door into the street with dear little Margaret in hot pursuit, carving knife in her hand and screaming at me.

I used to have to hide my guns after she picked up my .32 revolver and tried to pull the trigger on me. However, it was a stiff trigger and she couldn't make it work, thank God. Throwing heavy objects at me was another favourite. Mind you, I was always in the wrong, and no doubt needed telling off. But her temper was quite frightening. Once, while Margaret was driving me down Sydney Road in Brunswick in thick traffic, with me carrying several guns and a bag full of assorted other guns and ammo, we had an argument. She stopped the car in the middle of the traffic, got out, took the keys and stormed off down the street — leaving me sitting there, paranoid, expecting to be arrested at any moment, and with other cars blowing their horns at me. Luckily, she took pity on me and came back. I've always found it wise never to anger little Margaret too much.

Her bad temper — and blood loyalty — were part of the reasons I love her so much. That and her teeny weenie bikini.

*

Two more friends I have to mention are 'Mad Micky' and his wife Lynn. They have shown me great kindness and friendship. When I got out of jail in November, 1986, and went to Tassie to see my old Dad, Lynn took me to the Launceston casino.

It was the first time I'd ever been into a real live legal gambling place. She showed me how to play roulette and I gave her the dough and she played for me. I was shocked to see her winning. We had a great time. I kept going back to the casino day after day — and winning a few hundred each day. I thought I must have had some magic touch, so I took my Dad with me to show him what a great roulette player I was — and blew \$2000 in front of him. He stood there, shaking his head and looking at me as if I was a complete idiot. And I felt a complete idiot. That will teach me for showing off.

Mick is a great bloke — and also a friend of Craig 'Slim' Minogue's, and still keeps in touch with him today by post. A loyal chap, our Micky. He is nicknamed the 'Man John West Rejected' after getting arrested in Launceston for hi-jacking a truckload of frozen prawns. There was big money involved — but the comedy of being arrested over a lorry load of prawns is something he may never live down.

Once we brought Micky over to Melbourne for a bit of nightclub life — me and Amos Atkinson and Mad Charlie and a few of the boys. We had plans to take Micky and do all the clubs. But at the first hint of bloodshed Charlie stayed at home. Charlie is more a telephone gangster — lying under his doona in his big double bed making phone calls. And Amos bailed out as well, after meeting Mad Micky. So it was me and Micky and a nut case crew of boys from the western suburbs.

We all had guns as normal. However, when we offered Micky a nice little .32 calibre revolver for the night out he said no. Off we went — to the Chevron first, then Bojangles. Back in 1987 Bojangles was the biggest bloodhouse in Melbourne. We all knew there would be trouble on the night, but I thought we wouldn't tell Micky.

As we expected, there was a large crew of Italian gents at Bojangles who had let it be known they would deal with me when they saw me next . . .

A .44 magnum can be a great weapon when used to pistol whip. At first when the two teams met there was a Mexican standoff — until I got proceedings under way with a sneaky pistol whip across the head of the leader of the other crew. Guns were produced all round. I rested the magnum on the shoulder of one of our crew, another Tasmanian named Andrew, and pulled the hammer back.

That was it. All guns out on both sides in a crowded nightclub, and everyone set to shoot each other. Poor Mick, being empty handed, felt awful. He was standing there like a Chicago gangster with

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