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Written by Mick Flynn CGC MC
with Will Pearson

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BULLET MAGNET

The true story of the most highly decorated serving soldier in the British Army

MICK FLYNN CGC MC

with Will Pearson



PHOENIX

CHAPTER ONE

I was born in Neath in 1960. We moved to Cardiff when I was three. We lived in a rented house in Windsor Road, Adamsdown, an old working-class area close to the city centre. Another family lived upstairs. We had the ground floor and the garden.

As I remember, Windsor Road was very long, it took my little legs forever to walk to the end of it. My mother, Myrna, was born in Port Talbot. Like many women then, Mam stayed at home and looked after the family. This was a full-time job, with as much unpaid overtime as she could handle. That's devotion for you. I have five sisters: Christine, who is three years younger than me, Tricia, Catherine, Bernadette and last but not least, Beverley, the baby of the family, who came along later.

My father, Vince, came from the rural west of Eire: it doesn't get much more Irish, Catholic and conservative than that. I went to visit the area he came from, on the edge of Ballina, County Mayo, a few times when I was a kid. Dad's large, rambling family had a farm there, but in those days they struggled to make any money. There was no running water in the cottage where we stayed – we had to walk down the lane to collect it from a spring. I thought that was great fun, but it was pretty basic; some of the people we knew had layers of old newspapers plastered on their walls to keep out the draughts.

Ballina's changed now, it's much bigger and brighter. But it

wasn't a good place to be unemployed – if there ever is one. When the farm stopped making any money at all and began to lose it, my dad hopped on the ferry to England, hoping to make a better life for himself. He ended up labouring on the roads: laying drainage pipes to begin with, and then later on cable ducts for broadband and TV. He was your average working-class man, by which I mean everything good – fiercely independent, honest as the day is long and no nonsense. Even when he was sick he hardly ever took a day off work – if he did, then he got no money for the time missed. When we were young my dad was firm but fair. He set clear boundaries for us kids to live by.

It was just as well he did: when I was still just a nipper, the authorities started knocking down large tracts of Cardiff, sweeping away the old, grimy streets to make way for what would eventually become the shiny new docklands development. We moved out to Trowbridge Green, Rumney, on the north-eastern edge of the city, where it was a lot rougher; Mam, Dad, me, Christine and Patricia. The other girls were still a twinkle in my dad's eye. Our house was like most of the others: a small, grey-faced, three-bedroom end terrace, with a little scrap of garden at the back. Being the only boy, once I'd reached the age of ten I got a bedroom to myself, which was luxury in our house. God knows how my sisters managed in one room when they came along. I think my Mam bought a couple of double beds. My window looked south, towards the Severn estuary. On misty nights I'd hear the ships sounding their foghorns in the Bristol Channel and I'd want to be on one. I wasn't unhappy – more like restless: a part of me wanted to be free.

The people I grew up with in Trowbridge were working or lower-middle class, with a strong Welsh identity. It was a tough place

to grow up – if you didn't stand up for yourself they'd pick on you. My dad was no slouch in a fight; the first time I ran into trouble as a small kid he showed me how to use my fists and gave me a few lessons in boxing and street fighting. Vince was stocky and strong, with big hands and arms from working the roads all his life.

'Keep your fists up. Move; don't stand still or you'll get hit. Jab, jab, jab with your left – and then smack 'em in the face with your right. Feint if you get the chance, like this.' He dropped his right shoulder, went as if to throw a straight right, then snaked out a hard left. 'If you're up against a street fighter, try and get your back to something so no one can come up on you from behind, get them in close so they can't kick you, get in between a couple of parked cars if you can. Watch out for the head butt, and use it yourself if you get the chance.'

He showed me how to stick the nut on the best way, to damage the other guy, and not myself. My dad had been forced to fight hard in his day. In South Wales, Irish incomers were seen as a threat to the locals, taking their jobs away and working for less money. I didn't get hugs from my dad, I got lessons in self-defence. That was Vince's way of showing me love.

I went to St Illtyd's Catholic High School, which sounds as if it's posh. In reality, it was a standard state-funded comprehensive for people who believed the Pope was infallible – or said they did. I wore a different-coloured school uniform, which for some of the locals meant I belonged to a different tribe, along with the Donovans, the Kavanaghs and all the other local Irish Catholic families. There were times when the moves Dad had taught me came in very handy. On the estate you either fought or they made your life hell. I fought.

Despite my dad's best efforts, on the stretch of turf where we

lived the only crowd was the wrong crowd, unless you wanted to live like a social outcast. I fell in with a loose gang of about ten lads, with a hard core of four or five looking to make the wrong sort of name for themselves. The rest of us floated in and out as and when. We'd meet up and get into various kinds of trouble.

I'd been taught wrong from right, but that didn't stop me joining in with some of the bad stuff when I got a bit older. It started in a small way: breaking into an ice-cream van when I was fourteen to see if the takings were still in the cash box – they weren't – and moved up the scale. One night I found myself inside a dental clinic, ransacking the cupboards and drawers, trying to find where the dentist kept his stock of gold teeth. Mr Cosgrove fitted people with gold teeth, so the gleaming, golden gnashers had to be in there somewhere. It stood to reason.

I yanked open a metal drawer. There were lots of sets of teeth inside. They gleamed a horrible white in the dark. They were probably dental moulds, but to me they looked like the real thing. Cold terror struck through me. As certain as my next breath, I felt that all those sets of teeth were going to jump out and start biting me. I wanted to run from the surgery as fast as I could. But greed, just as strong, held me fast to the spot. I stood staring down at the drawer. If only I could find all those lovely, shiny, gold teeth! Just think how I'd be in the money.

On the estate, money – especially illegally acquired money – bought you respect. It's a funny way of earning it. And dangerous: pretty soon, I'd come to the attention of the police, like some of the others in the gang already had. My dad gave me a leathering when he found out about my night-time escapades, but that still didn't stop me knocking about with the rest of the lads.

I was going in a bad direction, and at the age of fifteen I began to realize that. And anyway, the failed ice-cream van heist and

the daft idea about the dentist's hoard of gold both told me the same thing: I wasn't ever going to be an international criminal mastermind.

A few months later I was mitching off school with Jimmy Donovan and Kenny Cassimas. I'd started concentrating much harder on my school work, but still took the occasional day off for old times' sake – especially when we had Maths. We snuck out through the art room – it was the best escape route, only 100 metres down a steep slope and into the bushes at the bottom. Then it was school ties off, hop onto a number 62 bus and away. We'd got about halfway down the hill running hell for leather on this particular occasion when I heard a sharp cry: Jimmy had caught his foot in a bramble root. He went flying past us, tumbling head over heels, cartwheeling out of control. He somersaulted all the way to the bottom of the slope and landed in a crumpled heap. He lay there in a daze, moaning and groaning. Kenny and I were in stitches. We laughed all the louder when we saw that his school uniform was covered in green and brown skid marks: Jimmy's mum was going to kill him. If any of the teachers saw the show from the classrooms above, they never let on. My bet was they'd seen us and they were still laughing when the bell rang for home time. The three of us flagged down a 62 and headed for the centre of Cardiff, chuckling when Jimmy's great escape came back to mind.

It started to rain, and we were trying to think of somewhere we could go that was dry and warm. Jimmy Donovan had always wanted to join up. I had no intention whatsoever of joining the British Army. Apart from anything else I reckoned my dad, who clung to his Catholic roots like ivy to a stone wall, would have killed me. So we only ended up in the Cardiff Army Careers Office because Jimmy suggested it. The boy was keen. Mustard.

Kenny wasn't quite as Colman's but he was interested. I thought the pair of them were raving lunatics. But they were right: it was dry and warm in there.

The recruiting sergeant welcomed us with open arms. Business was slack that day, and we had the place to ourselves. The sergeant was good at his job, easing us in with a couple of jokes. He saw what was what, took my more gung-ho mates through to sit the test and then came back. I was just sitting there, minding my own business. The sergeant fixed me with a skinny eye. 'What are you doing here, then?'

'Nothing,' I said, 'I just came along with my mates.'

He nodded. 'They're doing the test – would you like to take it?'

I shook my head. 'To be honest, I'm not bothered.'

'Take it anyway,' he urged, 'it's better than sitting there twiddling your thumbs.' I quite like twiddling my thumbs – it beats working – but I stood up. He took me through to join the others. It was mainly English and Maths, with some general knowledge questions thrown in for good measure. Then there was a separate aptitude test, to find out which bit of the Army you'd suit best.

Kenny failed. He was very upset. I told him he should have done more school work – that made him feel a whole lot better. Jimmy and I passed. The recruiting sergeant took me to one side: 'Going by your scores, Flynn, you've got the makings of a good NCO. How about we send you to the Junior Leaders at the Armour Centre in Bovington?' I stared at him. For all I understood, he might as well have been speaking double Dutch. The sergeant recognized total ignorance when he saw it. 'The Junior Leaders at Bovington is the fast-track way of becoming an NCO in the Royal Armoured Corps,' he chanted, as if he was reading it from a book. I still looked blank. With a visible effort he

mustered his patience. 'Royal Armoured Corps? Tanks and armoured fighting vehicles? Large metal things that go bang when they fire their guns?'

'Yes,' I said, 'I know what a tank is, thanks. What's an NCO?'

He pointed to the stripes on his arm. 'Non-commissioned officer – like me. Corporals, sergeants and suchlike, they're called NCOs, see?' I kept playing dumb, he'd needled me.

'So you're an officer,' I asked, 'but at the same time you're not an officer? Why not?' I could see him beginning to bristle.

'Because I don't hold the Queen's Commission.'

'Why not?'

'Because. I'm. A. Non-commissioned. Officer!' The last word came out as a half-swallowed bark.

'I see,' I said. 'So like a corporal or a sergeant, then? An officer, but not one?'

A malevolent gleam appeared in the sergeant's eye. 'Are you taking the mickey, Flynn?'

'No, Sergeant.'

'Good,' he said. 'Well, what about it, then?'

'What's the money like?'

'I can't pretend it's brilliant when you first join. But it gets better as you move up through the ranks. And remember – you get your food and accommodation for free. Not to mention excellent training; as much sport as you can handle; and you get to fire a big gun.' I thought about it. The words I liked most in everything he'd told me so far were: 'money,' 'sport' and 'gun'.

'I'll think it over', I told him, 'and let you know.'

I thought about it all afternoon. Which was a long time for me, at that age. I was doing OK at school now, but I couldn't see all that much future in the local employment market. On the other

side of the coin I was knocking around with the gang – not the old gang, a new one: Pat, Jackie, Andrea and Kerry. Yes, I'd discovered girls. Still, if I stayed in Trowbridge, there was a danger I'd slip back down the criminal chute and end up in Cardiff prison. Which didn't look like a very nice place. I knew that, because for the early part of my life I'd been able to see most of it from outside my front door. Either that, or I'd wind up in some dead-end job, stacking shelves in a local supermarket.

That evening, after supper, I told my mam I wanted to join the Army. She's strong, Mam, but the news threw her. She grabbed me and pulled me into a corner of the kitchen. In a stage whisper, she mouthed: 'We can't tell your dad!'

'I know,' I said. 'He'll kill me if he finds out. But I need one of you to sign the form. Will you sign it for me?'

'Are you sure, Michael? You never wanted to join the British Army before.'

'I'm sure, Mam. They're offering me a good job – Junior Leaders. It means you get promoted faster.'

'What if they send you somewhere dangerous?' I knew she was thinking about Northern Ireland. The Army had been fighting there for seven years, and there was no sign of the conflict stopping any time soon. My dad would wring my neck if the Army sent me over the water and he found out I was fighting Catholics; then he'd bury what was left of me in a nice, deep ditch. After all, he was a professional at digging ditches. In a way it was the worst thing I could do to my father – I'd be cutting my ties, all right, maybe for all time. But I'd be free.

There was a massive dose of standard teenage rebellion in all of this. Now I was fifteen and starting to feel my water, Dad and I no longer saw eye to eye on anything. The biggest cause of trouble between us was girlfriends, as in Pat, Jackie, Andrea and

Kerry. Dad was such a staunch Fenian that if I met a girl and wanted to take her home, then she and I both had to pretend she was a Catholic. Or better still, a Catholic who wanted to be a nun. Given that the last thing any of the girls I knew wanted was to take the vow, this made things difficult; so difficult that in the end I gave up trying to bring my girlfriends home. I'd persuade them we had to go to their place instead. If they noticed my lack of hospitality I'd tell them, 'You wouldn't like my house,' when what I really meant was, 'You wouldn't like my dad. Especially when he finds out you don't know one end of a Hail Mary from the other.'

My father was stuck in time and place, trying to impose the old, 1950s rural Catholic Irish ways he'd grown up with onto a new generation: me. He went to Mass every Sunday, regular as clockwork. He'd get hopping mad when I refused to go with him. If I went out in the evening he'd tell me I had to be back home by a certain time, which might have been all right if the times hadn't kept on getting earlier as I grew older.

So knowing he'd hate me joining it was part of the Army's attraction. My mother made it plain she didn't like the idea of my joining up one little bit. But she liked the head-to-head between her husband and son even less. A few days later, when my dad was out working, she signed the parental consent form.

Once I'd made the decision and the form had gone in, I was impatient to leave home. But in the end, I had to wait five months until I reached the school leaving age of sixteen. In the meantime, I decided the best course of action was to lie low and do what my father said. Which made things between us a lot easier. So did the fact that, because I'd told him I'd be learning how to fix engines, my dad thought I was doing an apprenticeship. By the time I was sixteen we were getting on reasonably well. When the

day came round for me to go, Mam and Dad came to the stop with me. Mam wished me love and Dad wished me well. I climbed on the number 62 bus. Only this time, I wasn't a truant, nor a trainee crook. I was a tank boy in training.