

Dogs on the Runway

Roger Thyer-Jones



Queen Anne's Fan

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PREFACE & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

What right do I have to openly discuss my memoirs and share my emotions, secret thoughts, conduct, behaviour and career with family, friends and strangers? Was it ego that prompted me to write about my life? I hope not but I don't know.

Jonathon Swift said, 'the latter part of a man's life is taken up in curing all the follies, prejudices and false opinions he has contracted in the former part.' I believe that reviewing my life experiences, my early mistakes and letting go of my previous emotional anchor-weights has helped me understand myself better. Testing experiences and suffering have forced me to look within myself. Often I have not liked what I saw. But most importantly, I am prepared to keep trying to learn from others, polish my character and find ways in which to give back my experiences in a positive and enriching manner.

This book is not my work alone. Thank you to Drina and Michael Parker for your editing work. I have learned so much from your knowledge and skills over the last twelve months. You pulled no punches.

Martin Lloyd, you have given me encouragement, wise words, tempered with a gentle humour, and an insight into the arcane world of publishing which has been invaluable. Besides this, you are a dear friend and I value your friendship.

Michelle, my wife and friend, has supported me throughout the project and chided me when I have been chronologically challenged. I love her dearly. My sons, Gareth, Alex and Andrew have taken an interest in my work and fed me encouragement. I am indeed a lucky man.

Nothing of worth is ever achieved without the help of others and I am particularly grateful to my close friends, John and Elaine Doust, Mike and Pat Knight and Nick and Sue Westfold and Alp and Elaine Mehmet who have never ceased to keep me firmly grounded. You are all dear to me. My brother-in-law Peter has shared many a guitar thrash (and whisky) with me over the years, helping me to keep my perspective on life.

Derek Beadle, you were my first boss and mentor. You are a bard whose love of poetry and language has inspired me.

I have had the privilege to work and train with so many extraordinary people in the world of immigration, intelligence and martial arts and so many of you have contributed to my development in some way or other. I would particularly like to thank Jun Shihan Tony Robinson, Branch Chief of Seido Karate in Jamaica for his love and friendship. Roger and Roxanne Blatz and Jesse Horowitz, you have put up with me staying in your New York apartments during my many visits to our Seido HQ for training and promotions and I really appreciate your kindness.

Finally, if you get the privilege to become a student under one master in life then cherish that opportunity. My fighting master, Kaicho Nakamura, founder of the World Seido Karate Organisation, has encouraged and supported me for many years and I deeply appreciate his wisdom and guidance. I wish his son and successor, Nidaime Akira Nakamura every success in steering our Seido organisation into the future.

Osu!

1

FATE

‘Don’t you dare die on me,’ I shouted at Richard. Dave was on the floor at the side of me, pumping Richard’s heart. ‘Don’t you dare die on me,’ I shouted again before putting two more breaths into his mouth.

Damn those dogs on the runway. I knew that Richard had to get to London. The connection to London would have been tight to make without the delay. Damned dogs. We would have to run with our hand baggage to make the flight. Dave and I were fit but if you are in your late fifties, overweight and your idea of exercise is walking to the bar to order another pint, then running is not a good idea. I really hoped that the stewardess would have responded to my request and have asked the pilot to radio ahead. If Lufthansa knew that we would be a few minutes late they might just keep the gate open for us. In my heart I somehow knew that this wouldn’t happen but I had told Richard not to worry. He was red-faced and anxious. He had to get home and be there for his wife’s operation. He had told her that he would be by her side. She was relying on his word.

I exchanged looks with Dave sitting on my right. We both knew that unless a miracle happened then it would be highly unlikely that we would make the connection. All I could do was reassure Richard. He seemed a bit calmer after my reassurance.

At last the dogs were caught and we were off. We all relaxed and, once we were airborne, Richard ordered a

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large gin and tonic. After all, it had been a very successful trip in the most trying of circumstances. We had wrung a commitment from the Bosnians to arrest a major criminal who operated illegal entry and drugs networks, as well as dealing in the awful trade of body parts. This was something to be celebrated. We were tired – travelling, presentations, negotiations and socialising had all taken their toll. Richard had been tireless in supporting our aims. He was very well-connected and knew whom to approach to get the job done. He could be testy at times but had a self-deprecating sense of humour and a knack of putting people at ease. He was a born diplomat and was highly focused. A fondness of drink might have got him into trouble but he handled it well and I had never seen him act unprofessionally.

Yes, it had been a good trip.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, we shall be landing at Munich airport in twenty minutes time.’

I opened my eyes and became fully awake. I had been dozing pleasantly. I looked at Richard, who was staring intently ahead as if he could see the airport. His face was quite red. He looked at his watch, stared ahead and then peered at his watch again. Dave met my gaze. I said that as soon as the plane landed we should grab our hand luggage and run for the check-in desk. Once there, we would be able to manage the situation. We would have just fifteen minutes. We had no idea how long it would take and the stewardess had been unable to tell us. I told Richard that all he needed to do was to follow us at a brisk pace. He was not to run. We would do our very best to get him on to the plane.

Bump. The wheels of the airplane touched the tarmac. The engine noise reduced as we left the main runway and turned towards the gate for disembarkation. I could almost feel Richard’s anxiety but I didn’t want to look at him. We came to a halt. We were in the front row of business class so I knew that we could be the first off the aircraft. As soon as

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the seat belt signs were extinguished, all three of us sprang out of our seats, opened overhead lockers, grabbed our hand luggage and headed for the exit. I almost knocked over one of the stewards as I ran out on to the enclosed gangway that led from the aircraft. I still had no idea from where our Munich flight was due to depart. I looked frantically for signs. I couldn't see any indication but Dave grabbed my shoulder and pointed. Richard was behind us so I turned and pointed to the sign. He nodded.

We ran.

Our gate was about ten minutes away. It would close in five minutes.

We ran.

Sweat dripped from my forehead and into my eyes. Passengers on either side passed me in a blur. Dave was at my shoulder. We ran up an escalator and saw the Lufthansa desk. There were no passengers waiting there.

Bad sign.

One young man, smartly dressed in his dark Lufthansa ground staff uniform, stood behind the desk. Dave and I slammed down our tickets at the same time.

'Our flight from Sarajevo was delayed.' I said. 'I asked the pilot to radio ahead to say that we would be a few minutes late. Did you get the message?'

'No sir. The gate is now closed. No more passengers can board the flight. *Nein.*'

I tried to calm my breathing. I needed to persuade him to let us on the plane.

'We have a colleague coming behind us. He must get on the flight.' I explained the situation.

Nein.

'Look, even if we two cannot go, you must make an exception for Richard.'

He was implacable. In a clipped English accent, he said, 'The flight is now preparing for take-off and the captain will not accept any more passengers. *Nein.*'

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I pleaded with him to reconsider but deep down I knew that my request was useless. I thought that he was taking some pleasure in his *'nein'* but that might have been just the state of mind I was in.

I turned away from the desk as Richard came up behind me, red-faced and out of breath. I caught him by his jacket as he tried to move forward. I told him that it was useless. We would have to get a flight the next day. The gate was shut. I was very sorry. He pushed me out of the way with an abrupt motion. He dropped his hand luggage and strode, bristling with anger, towards the check-in. I looked at Dave who shrugged his shoulders as if to say that we could not have done more. I heard Richard arguing with the ground staff representative and demanding to speak to the manager. His voice was raised. I turned slowly and saw Richard walking towards me. He had a glassy stare and I sensed that something was wrong.

'Richard,' I said. 'Richard.'

He brushed past me and collapsed, falling forward and hitting his head against a stainless steel rubbish bin. He crashed face down to the ground.

2

WINSTON REBORN

With a pen stuck in my mouth, and a face like a wizened walnut, you would have thought that my impression of Winston Churchill was a bit unconvincing. You would have been right.

My mother was a nurse at the time of my birth on 4 April 1949 and already had one boy, my brother Mike, then aged seven. What she really wanted now was a girl, not a Winston look-alike. In fact, my mother was so small that the other nurses barely knew that she was pregnant and she certainly made no fuss about it. She was two weeks overdue when I popped out and, because she was then a children's nurse, she was well known to all in the maternity ward.

She was celebrated in the children's ward as being the only night nurse who could get the whole ward full of babies to shut up. I asked for her secret once and she told me that a tiny drop of water and sugar does the trick, and if that doesn't do it, just a single drop of brandy works even better!

So, she must have been solely responsible for a generation of London-born babies yearning for a glass or two of brandy to get off to sleep, or cooking sherry if brandy wasn't available. Still, it has fuelled distillery profits over the years since, and what's the loss of an odd liver or two balanced against a decent night's sleep? Anyway, she was up and about shortly after the birth and waltzing about the ward with me jogging on her shoulder. I weighed in at about 4 lb at birth, barely the size of a decent pumpkin, and

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apparently had the look of a skinned rabbit about me. So picture me as this sorry creature with a pen in my mouth, reducing the ward to tears. I am inclined to think that my mother (I am sure that I called her that at birth as she felt that it was somehow more dignified than being called 'Mum') would have swapped me for any girl available, but presumably they were a bit short that night.

So, with that start to life, I clearly needed feeding up and I think that I was fed full cream milk, sausage, egg and chips and Yorkshire pudding during the first months or so, in order to ensure that at least the weighing scales jumped when I was plonked on them.

It's hard to remember details of my early days, even my birth is a bit hazy, but I can remember being left out in the garden for 'fresh air' for weeks at a time. At one point I was almost swallowed by a tortoise that somehow got into the pram. I can just about recall it licking my face as I gurgled happily, rain water slowly filling the pram.

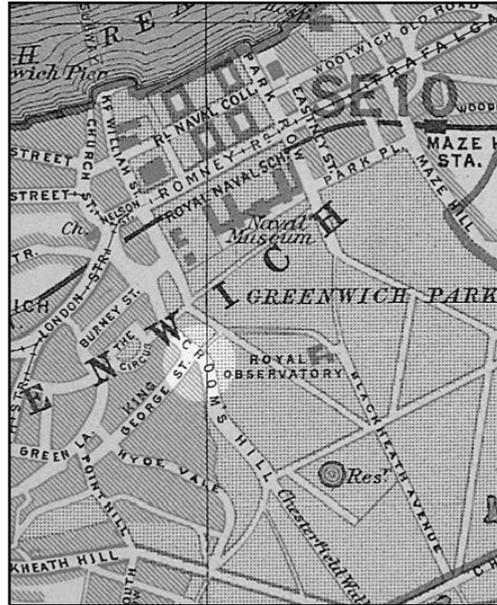
The only reason I came in from the garden at all is that I floated out of the pram and into the kitchen where my mother noticed I needed changing. She also adopted the tortoise as a pet. Incidentally, that same tortoise became a garden resident and stubbornly refused to leave its garden lair until several years later.

I left all sorts of offerings outside its shell: grass, bacon rind, snails. But all to no avail. Finally, I picked up the shell and, finding it a bit light, looked inside only to find that that there was nothing there. What a swizz ! All that time I thought I had a pet and all I had was an empty shell. Now there's a point for reflection if there ever was one.

We lived in Greenwich. The flat we lived in was enormous and you could fit a bowling alley into the hallway. The full address was, 50 Crooms Hill, Greenwich, London SE10. It was right next to the park and one of the directors of Millwall Football Club, Bill Neelan, lived next door to us in a house within a walled garden. Poor old Bill. Every time

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50 Crooms Hill
Greenwich
(Bartholomew 1939)



Millwall lost a home game the ‘fans’ would come around looking for his Jaguar car and then trash it. He used to have to hide it before games.

The entrance to our house was in King George Street. Our local church was called ‘Our Lady Star of the Sea’. It was a Catholic refuge with a nunnery just up the hill where unspeakable practices must have taken place. Well, you would think that, wouldn’t you? I’ve seen *The Devils*.¹ Why on earth did my mother send me to the nuns at such a young age? Mother Margaret Mary was my own personal nun trainer and I had to go to see her every week. She was a kindly red-faced person who wore glasses. She had no body that I could see and I often wondered if she actually had legs as when she walked she seemed to glide along, a bit like a Dalek.²

Apart from encouraging me to have St. Michael as my patron saint, I have absolutely no idea of the purpose

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of Mother Margaret Mary. She did prepare me for my ‘confirmation’ which seemed to consist of a load of mumbo jumbo totally unintelligible to a youngster. This is a Catholic ritual, akin to a coming of age ceremony, that binds you further to the church.

I can’t recall any unspeakable practices being done to me but I think I attended the convent for a couple of years. Maybe I was given a potion to wipe out the memories of satanic rites with nuns dancing around a vegetable of human dimension or something. (Now I’m just fantasising. Steady).

Chris Difford of the group Squeeze,³ and his family lived up the road and Chris wrote a song, funnily enough, with the title *King George Street*. In later life I really enjoyed the music Squeeze produced – great lyrics that tell a story. In fact *Cool for Cats*, written by Chris, is still high on my list of great songs and has a real south London feel to it.

I loved Chris’ mum, Mrs Difford, who was from Coleraine and had black hair and twinkling eyes. She used to give me sweets when I was a kid and lived in a prefab – the technical name for low cost housing – with her husband, Sid, and their sons, Lewis, Leslie and Chris. Lewis was about my brother’s age. He was a very calm lad and a terrific swimmer while Leslie was anything but. He would fetch a right hander at anyone who upset him even though he had a hole in the heart.

When I was younger, I never understood what was meant by a hole in the heart. I imagined that you could see right through the hole which must be about two to three inches wide. Leslie’s heart defect didn’t seem to affect either his ability to punch or to play football. He didn’t complain about it at all and I felt it was something that I wouldn’t mind having if it would make me a better footballer.

I recall my first act of law breaking. Mrs Difford was a generous woman who used to give me sweets when I visited. One day I went to the prefab to see her and no-one was in.

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I knew that the Diffords hid the key to the door under a stone so I quickly found it and opened up the door. I must have been only about six years old. I knew that I was doing something wrong but the lure of sweets drove me on. I found the green tin that held the temptation and helped myself to a few sweets. After all, Mrs Difford would have given them to me anyway. But, already, as a fledgling Catholic recruit, guilt was rising slowly through me and I knew that God was watching. The sweets quickly started to lose their appeal and I replaced the lid securely, or so I thought, and put the tin back. I then locked the door and returned the key to its hiding place.



Roger on his getaway trike after the Great Sweet Robbery.

Of course, a six-year-old was no match for the vigilance of the Difford family and somehow – was I under surveillance at the time? – word came down to my mother that I might be the culprit. Mother kept a twig in the kitchen which she called the ‘rod’ and if I was naughty she used to eye it and even on occasion wave it about a bit. I was never actually beaten with it but the thought of that evil bit of stick hitting my legs made me cringe.

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Hence her looking lingeringly at the 'rod' during her interrogation about the 'break in' reduced me to a wreck. I promptly confessed. If I did something I shouldn't then she would nearly always tell my father and you didn't really want him on your back. So a double whammy loomed and it was suggested that I hot foot it back up to 'Ma Diffs,' as she was affectionately known, and apologise.

I vaguely remember dragging myself up the street to face my executioner and apologising to Ma Diff who gave me a bit of a dressing down and a hug while the rest of the Diffs eyed me suspiciously. I really didn't like Leslie doing too much eying especially with that big hole he had in his heart that might prompt a punch or two. No more sweets for me. Funny how as a boy I never thought of the right or wrong of stealing. I simply acted on self interest.

Ma Diff was a great character and very friendly with my mother even though there was a north versus south divide in their homeland. Sadly Ma Diff ended up as a recluse suffering from agoraphobia which I suspect was connected to the tumour she had on her face. My mother encouraged her to go to the doctor when it was just a small mole but she didn't and it just grew bigger and bigger until finally it killed her. She was a sad loss.

Ma Diff and Sid lived in Blackheath at just about the time that Squeeze were emerging as a band. Chris used to compose upstairs in his bedroom with Glenn Tilbrook and Jools Holland who had a Rolls Royce. Jools Holland sometimes offered my mother a lift back home in his Rolls but she never accepted. Ma Diff always knew that Chris had talent and Sid did too. Apart from the usual parents' sniping about 'getting a proper job', they supported him during the early days when the band was establishing itself. The Diffs always were a lively family.

Now picture 50 Crooms Hill, our home. You entered through an enormous green door facing onto the street. It led into a glass cupola with a flat on the left and iron stairs

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leading up to our door straight ahead. Our door was also green and seemed immense to me as a child. It had a big brass knocker. Under the iron stairs was the basement. God, that place would make Dracula shiver. You went down wooden stairs to a creaky door next to a filthy window.

Our coal was kept in one of the rooms in the basement which was a warren and had been used as some sort of chemical storage space during the war. The whole building had originally been a school. It had been designed by Sir Christopher Wren so it was of historical interest. The servants' quarters were down below. My brother Mike told me that one of the servant girls had been found hanging by her neck in one of the rooms. He was clearly trying to cheer me up for when I was on coal duty.

I hated that damn place. Once the fire in the enormous lounge started to go down, Mother or Dad would eye the empty bucket and it would be either my or my brother's job to hop down and get the coal. I could barely lift the scuttle and my heart would sink if Dad told me to fill up.

Imagine yourself on a cold winter night, lighting a pathetic candle stub with a shaking hand. Clutching the coal scuttle and iron shovel and setting off down those dark stairs. The door would always creak and as I entered the first room, the shadows thrown by the candle would half light up dark corners. My first few steps would be tentative and I sometimes tried to whistle but soon stopped as I thought it might alert any horrors waiting to get me. Fear coursed through my young blood.

I wish Mike hadn't told me about that hanging rope as I swear that I could sometimes see a dark stained rope eerily swinging across an old beam.

The coal was held in a bunker behind a thick oak door with iron fixings. You had to leave the first room, open a door and then open the coal door. The candle light would flicker, caught by hidden currents and by now I would be so aware of every sound that I could hear a mouse breathe.

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I would jam open the big oak door with iron fixings and then make a beeline for the coal.

Next came the difficult part of the task: I had to put the candle down on the shelf as I couldn't shovel with one hand. I didn't like doing that. What if the flame went out? Anything lurking in the pit could get me. So, shovelling furiously, I would try to fill the scuttle to the top in order to avoid having to make another journey to the cellar.

The trouble was that once the scuttle was full, I couldn't actually lift it as well as hold the shovel, pick up the candle and get out of there. Often, I simply tipped half of the coal out on the floor in order to be able to carry it. Rather self-defeating.

Once, the worst thing happened to me. In my darkest dreams it should never have happened. Never. The door shut behind me with a bang and the candle blew out just as I was shovelling the coal into the scuttle. I stopped dead. I could hear my heart thumping and desperately willed it to shut up as clearly whatever was in the pit would hear it too. I stood still for what seemed ages just waiting for the touch of some scaly claw on my shoulder.

In fact Coleridge⁴ must have experienced the same fear:

Like one that on a lonely road
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And having once turned round walks on
And turns no more his head,
Because he knows a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread.

I fumbled slowly in my pocket for the box of Swan Vestas matches, guaranteed to light under any circumstances. Not when you open the box upside down and all the matches fall out. Now I had no matches and I could hear strange scuttling sounds around me. My heart was beating so loudly now that any self-respecting monster, even a totally deaf one, would hear me.

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Gingerly, I squatted down and felt for a match. Success. I slowly scraped it against the side of the box, assured of a light, but it broke in half with a sharp crack. I felt as if I had been in the room for an eternity. I fought back the tears that were brimming in my eyes. Steady the Buffs. I felt the ground with my hand again and this time scooped up a handful of matches.

Just imagine my joy when I actually succeeded in lighting the match – it must have been how Gandalf⁵ felt in lighting up the Mines of Moria with his magic staff. I saw the candle stub and grabbed it like the Holy Grail. Shaking hands lit it and once again the shadows danced around the room making me feel elated.

Then I felt sick. I had to get out past whatever had closed the door and I knew that IT must be awful what ever IT was. So, with the scuttle in my left hand and the shovel inside it, I walked to the door holding the candle. It was then that I thought that a demonstration of assertive behaviour would probably scare the pants off any monster so I shouted out, 'Here I come!' or some such battle cry, pulled open the door and rushed through the room towards the stairs and safety. It was a pity that I dropped the coal scuttle on the way out with lumps falling all over the place but no matter, I bounded up the stairs like Linford Christie⁶ at his best and into the light.

Saved. I walked back into the lounge and put the coal scuttle down. Dad said, 'What have you been playing at? There's not much coal. Give it here.'

Mercy, perhaps there is a God after all. I watched him walk off holding the scuttle while Mother told me to wash my face and hands.

My character was developing as I faced and dealt with my childhood terrors but the twin horrors of royalty and rice pudding lurked close by.

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NOTES FOR CHAPTER TWO

1 – This refers to Ken Russell’s 1971 film based on Aldous Huxley’s non-fiction book of 1952, *The Devils of Loudun*.

2 – The Daleks are a fictional extraterrestrial race of mutants from the British science fiction television series *Doctor Who*.

3 – Squeeze are a British band that came to prominence in the United Kingdom during the New Wave period of the late 1970s, and continued recording successfully in the 1980s and 1990s. They are known in the UK for their hit songs *Cool for Cats*, *Up the Junction*, *Tempted*, *Labelled With Love* and many more.

4 – A poem, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

5 – *The Lord of the Rings* Trilogy by the English writer and poet JRR Tolkien.

6 – Linford Christie OBE, born 2 April 1960, is a former sprinter from the United Kingdom. He is the only British man to have won gold medals in the 100 metres at all four major competitions open to British athletes.