

Prologue

“Well grandad, is that you, in the picture, or not?”

I studied the photograph young Leah had found while searching for items that could be used in her school project. Which I thought was quite intrusive. Tell your family's story; it sounded more like a way of prying.

The photo, one from a time long ago. The photo was from another time, a time when these faces laughed, cried, joked, got drunk and caused more trouble than I care to think about.

Each leapt out at me as I put a name to each face: Spike, Tomo, Dave, Kevin, Tony, and, of course, Pat, my mentor and tormentor.

Faces from the past that had never been honoured and now gone.

But this was only one group; this photograph had been taken on the spur of the moment, and it should never have been. A camera should never have been present, it should never have existed, yet here it was. I was stunned when I found a copy on my bunk all those years ago. I looked around and saw the same expression of shock from the others who also had copies. The photo was taken by the forbidden camera; a camera had no film, so we were told at the time. We agreed to burn the copies in the usual way but were called out before I could burn mine. Then I didn't. The individual who had taken the photo against all protocol never took another photo; ever.

Yet here was my granddaughter asking the very questions that should never have been possible to ask. The very reason why, as a group, we followed a strict doctrine of no documentation.

These men, friends from long, long ago, men that I had entrusted my life, and the lives of my family to. Some of these men had died in unknown locations for an unknown reason. “Yes, darling, that is me.” I finally say.

“I knew it was, mummy said she wasn’t sure, but I was.” Then without taking a breath, she continued. “I have another question now Grandpa. Can I ask you?”

“Come on then, ask away.”

“Mummy said that you were a soldier and a policeman. I knew you were a policeman, but not in the army, you must have lots of stories to tell, and they may help with my project at school. Could you tell me some?”

“Yes, there are lots of stories. “But first, I was never in the army, I was a Royal marine.”

“But isn’t that the same thing?”

“Absolutely not, Royal Marines are navy.”

“Oh,” she whispers. “So, you were a sailor?”

“No, we were the navy’s personal soldiers, we were commandos, highly trained and very effective, sadly though, I cannot tell you, mummy, or anyone else, the real stories.”

“But Grandpa, it’s family history. When you go to heaven, all of that will go with you, and we will never hear those stories. Mummy says that when she was my age, you always carried a gun, but she didn’t know why. Please, please tell us some stories, " she pleaded.

“I will, one day.”

“Will that be before you go home, because when you go home, we don’t see you for years.”

As I looked at the innocence on her face; all the reasons I had given for the things I had done, came flooding back, and I knew I would do it all again.

“Will you be a good girl and ask mummy for a green tea,” I say, changing the subject.

She slides off my lap, hugged me and left the room.

As Leah vanished through the door, I drifted back to a time, years earlier, when my daughter had made a similar comment.

"Dad, what do you mean? I know how it is. I have no idea how it is or was; I hardly knew you. You would come and go; at one stage, I thought I didn't have a dad, so how do you expect my children to know who you are, or what you did? When I still don't know."

Of course, she was right; I had been away for months at a time since before she was born.

"If you're not going to tell us, then write a damn book or something, at least that way, my children, your grandchildren, will learn about their granddad. I may even find out myself, who, or what my dad was, even what he did. However, I won't hold my breath on that one. I have heard snippets here and there. I am proud of my dad. I would like to know a little more as to why? As with me, my children are growing up without you, and they have a right to know, as do I."

Now my grandchildren are also asking. Perhaps I should consider a book, but I am not a literary man, being self-educated having left school at fifteen with no qualifications. Though I love books. I don't think my first job as a messenger for the Sunday Times in Greys Inn Road, even if it was primarily for Lord Snowdon, would count for anything. Plus, I have always been against former colleagues publishing books, revealing secrets that weren't theirs to tell, and garnishing the truth so that they always looked good, especially those who thought they were the *crème de la crème* but were really a danger both to themselves, and their colleagues.

But, given what has been said, first by my daughter and now granddaughter, is it something I should consider?

There was also another reason that I should perhaps be considering a book.

After the incident in Cyprus, my non-existent employers had also tried pointing me in a direction for years to create a support system without creating one. Or at least one that no-one could see what it really was.

I had made two previous attempts without really knowing why I had been asked to do so, and without any visible support from the organisation. Now, I knew it was with greater urgency

since the demise of the last Verus. I am also the holder of some of the secrets of the Great Society, after G finally told me what it was, I was trying to create, and why.

However, there would be problems. Problems I had reiterated with the employers I had never met, as I would say to G on more than one occasion.

“It's not realistic sir, I have been a man with no name, though, as you know, I have had many over the years, so many I must think hard about which one came first. I now live in a house with no number, on a road with no name. You need a drop pin to find me, or maybe three words. I've carried a gun for more than sixty years and used it more often than I care to think of. I worked for the State, but the state never knew because I belonged to an organisation that did not, and has never, existed. I had plenty of colleagues and associates but no friends; I was the original, Billy, no mates. I had a day job as a marine, then a police officer, but the State used me after hours, and sometimes during, but the State never knew.” He would nod and say,

‘Think about the security you achieved for the state and your family.’

But there was the added problem. How do I now tell stories to my children and grandchildren of events that never happened, done by men and women who never existed and employers who never were? How do you explain all that with any credulity?

I pondered on the comments, then picked up my mobile, gave it a stare for a few moments, and then came to a decision.

Out of habit, more than security, I set the VPN, then dialled a number,

“Hi,” I say as the phone is answered. “This is Trojan Six One.” The last call sign I had used operationally was while serving as a team leader with the Mets firearms unit.

“Confirm prefix and primary letters two and five.” It replies.

“Prefix is Bravo; primary two is Lima, primary five is Kilo.” I respond

“Begin message.”

“I confirm Geminis.”

I click off. That was all I needed to say. I recalled the two earlier attempts, a project that Verus had been trying to set up for over thirty years. All G kept telling me was that it would take a specific type of person; it wasn't until much later that I discovered he was referring to me, following an incident that wouldn't occur for a few years.

Today, I gave no name; It would have been meaningless, as it wasn't my real name. My last call sign and the mobile itself, the last item ever provided by the organisation, would send an identification tag that would verify that call sign and Prefix.

It was months later; I had concluded that they had rejected the offer I felt a little relieved and disappointed at the same time. So, I stopped thinking about it.

Then came the message.

'Go-ahead, Geminos confirmed with restrictions. Await confirmation of G plus one closure before release. Execute Occlude; Good luck.'

The Geminos was a name that had followed me throughout my non-career with the non-existent organisation. I knew they constantly considered how they could initiate the Geminos without involvement. I had tried twice, third time lucky, maybe.

So, now I have committed myself, how was I going to start the Geminos without starting the Geminos? Have I bitten off more than I can chew? And all they can offer me is a 'good luck.' FFS. They had been in the background on the two earlier attempts, never visible, never direct, but I could see their influence in occurrences that would have been impossible without it.

For months, I wracked my brain. The idea of a book kept coming back. Then, a thought came from what my daughter had said. Maybe, just maybe...a book may work!

I submitted a brief, factual manuscript to a book agent in hopes of publishing a biography, albeit in a much reduced form. After exchanging a few emails, the agent expressed interest in meeting. Consequently, I flew into Gatwick and went to meet the agent at his home near Victoria.

To cut a long story short, he was excited about the book's potential, another Bravo Two Zero, he says. Sorry, I say, what's a Bravo Two Zero? A highly successful book by an ex-SAS man he says.

By the expression on my face, he says you're not too fond of the SAS then? No, I say, too many poor decisions and fuck ups you've probably never heard about.

Then came the question, are there any other operations above those in the manuscript? Probably 50 or so.

Can you tell me about them? He asks,

"No,"

"What can you tell me?"

"What's in the manuscript."

"How far up the chain does it go? Who knows?" He asks.

"I have no idea who knows."

"Does the Queen know?"

"I just said, I have no idea who knows. Things are kept tight."

"How do you know you're working for the good guys then?" He pushes

"You've read the manuscript," I say. He ignores the question.

"There will be a great deal of redaction from both the MOD and the Police, you know that don't you?" he asks instead.

"I just need to publish the book; I need to get a message out there."

"A message, what's the message?" A natural question.

"I cannot tell you,"

He looks a little exasperated.

"So how will people out there know what the message is?" He tries.

"When they see the term Verus, they will understand that the book itself is the message and by reading it, they will understand what the message is."

"What is Verus?"

"At this point, I can't tell you."

He paused.

Well, that's it, he's had enough I thought, but no he continues.

“Can you confirm your credentials?”

“Yes, service records etc., they’re all available,” I reply.

“They can be made up, there are a lot of forgeries, and I have been caught out before. We got as far as printing the book before we discovered he was a fake; we had to crush the whole print.”

“My service history puts me in all the locations in the book, the ones that are not shown in the manuscript are where my postings were the nearest location. But all of that is, or would be, explained in the book.”

“Reading what you have outlined, I believe the redaction process would kill most of your stories. You would need to come up with some way of preventing that.”

“What were the alternatives?” I ask.

“Well, what about a different style of book, perhaps a faction series?”

Other than creating a system to bring the Geminos out of the cold, I had no idea what those silent men and women, my unknown bosses, wanted, but I was sure they would not be very keen on story books. So, I declined, and yes, he had had enough and closed the meeting; I flew home that evening, despondent at my failure to produce an answer, but more determined to resolve the problem.

I spent another few months thinking about that meeting and talking it over with my wife, who was the only other person who knew about my ‘other’ life, though only a small part.

But the more I thought about it, the more I could see the logic: it does not need to be a factual book to get the message out there. After all, it was the message that was important, not the content, a fictional biographical-style trilogy of books would do the same job. I need to ensure the title is clear enough to catch the eyes of those Geminos out there. They would recognise the title and would undoubtedly examine the book. Certain parts will point them to the non-existent group and, hopefully, make contact. So, what do I call this non-existent organisation? Well, I suppose I should keep it simple with a name they would recognise instantly. So, after months of deliberation, I could have done with G’s advice, but that was no longer possible. I altered the original script, added incidents that I would not otherwise have done, and changed a few names

and locations that, I thought might work, then added the title: VERUS. A name they would instantly recognise. Every member of the organisation knew that name.

One last use of that mobile before I destroy it, then my final link with the organisation will be gone, it will be a one-way flow.

Following the usual protocols, I spoke.

“Yes,” I say, to the dulcet tones of a female-sounding AI. “I know how to get that message out there. On confirmation of broken G link, I will activate without reference.”

This third, and for me final attempt may just succeed. Only the Geminos will know what the real meaning of the faction biography is.

The Geminos, those lost souls who have been wandering after their links had passed, will have somewhere to call home, and may yet still serve at a time when their country desperately needs them.

A peculiar aspect of my life has always struck me: whenever I needed something I hadn't even recognised, a small voice—call it intuition—would whisper in my mind. This time, it urged me to renew my lapsed subscription to the *Globe & Laurel*, the bi-monthly journal of the Royal Marines. I had let it slip away thirty years ago, but not before compiling a significant collection.

The first issue that arrived at my daughter's home was utterly shocking. I read the obituary multiple times, astounded by how close I had come to missing the most crucial message of my non-existent career. My connection with G was closed. The final link was broken. The project would now activate.

I had to sit and think. It was a time I knew was coming, but it was still a shock: The passing of my primary link. I was already aware of the passing of my former team members, so I knew my closure was drawing near, but to see Captain G's obituary was definitive.

I thought about the long line of green binders on my library shelves, holding years of issues. How many men and women were stood down via those journals? How many names within those journals were Geminos? An organisation within an organisation. Clever fucks.

Then I pulled the chip and cut it up. With a last look at my old friend, I put it in the microwave,

“Dad,” My daughter screams as she enters the kitchen. “What are you doing, have you gone senile? You can’t put a mobile in the microwave.” She adds as she runs for the microwave now kicking sparks and crackling.

I smiled, “For you sister.” I murmured, thinking back to a time gone.

“What?” She shouts.

I smile.

And so, I will try to integrate how a former Marine/police special ops veteran made a final attempt at bringing the Geminis home. To aid a nation in desperate need of them, a plan was set in motion through the fictional ‘autobiography’ of a young Royal Marine Commando. And maybe my family will learn a little about what their father/grandfather did for them.

My avatar, Johnny Roberts, begins as a naive young marine, fresh out of training. He has short, messy black hair, bright, curious hazel eyes, a slightly scruffy appearance, and a humble but earnest expression. He is leanly built, always standing upright with a determined posture.