

ONCE A COPPER

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF
BRIAN 'THE SKULL' MURPHY

VIKKI PETRAITIS



FOREWORD

Brian Francis Murphy is one of the last of a breed of coppers we'll never see again in Australia. Some may consider this a big plus, but the old-style methods got results, with very little interference from the 'bosses' and not much help from modern science. During his time in the job, Murphy shot 40 crooks and suspected crims, without killing any of them, saving his own life on many occasions. He never went anywhere without a gun.

Brian's close mate, Paul Higgins, summed up those 'bad old days' for me during a chat we had after he got out of prison, after 'serving time for other guilty people'. He said that when he and Murph were in the job they could 'batter down front doors, give crooks a knee in the knackers, or a biff in the breadbasket and if all else failed, take them to the infamous fifth floor at Russell Street Police Headquarters, where if a few clouts with a phone book didn't produce the right answers, they could hang them upside down out the window, to give them a chance to revise their story'. Higgins said that these days cops have to knock politely, be viewed through the front-door peephole and by the time, or IF, the door is opened, 'the suspect is standing in the hall on his mobile phone, already getting lawyered up'.

Brian's recollections, as told to my friend and colleague Vikki Petraitis, using the old-time police vernacular, are not only about tough policing, but about his disdain for bent coppers, the unorthodox methods used to achieve results and the sometimes unbelievable incidents that seemed to only happen to Brian. His

stories remind us that in those days police had to find a phone box or a wall phone in a pub to call for backup or to relay information. They also recall a time when the Breakers, the Consorters, the Robbers and the Doggies consisted of blokes just as tough as the crooks they were chasing.

But like all tough guys, Brian has a soft spot—his unfailing respect for the women he encountered in the job, and in particular, his enduring love for his large family, from his parents to his own children and his Catholic faith, which has sustained him on many occasions. I'm pleased Margaret, Brian's loyal and long-suffering wife, gets more than a mention. She has been his rock and he has protected her and his family throughout his dangerous career.

Now in his eighties, he's been retired for around thirty years, nearly as long as he spent in the job. But he has not been idle. He has many clients who engage his 'negotiating' services and a mobile phone that rings incessantly, bringing him all the 'good mail' from his huge network. In his dapper suit and trademark fedora hat, he is recognised by many as he keeps himself busy around town. But what he actually gets up to? Well, that would fill another book.

I hope you enjoy reading this engrossing tale about Brian 'The Skull' Murphy as much as I did. He is not only one of the last old time coppers still standing, but a gentleman as well.

Robin Bowles, award-winning true crime writer, Melbourne

INTRODUCTION

It was Christmas 2014 and I'd just finished writing my latest book, *The Dog Squad*, about Victoria Police dog handlers and their dogs. Over lunch with retired Assistant Commissioner, Sandra Nicholson, I talked about finding a new writing project.

'You should write a book about Brian,' Sandra said.

'Brian who?' I asked.

'Brian Murphy—The Skull. He was my old boss back in the 80s.' Sandra got up from her chair, went to her bookshelf, and returned with a book called *The Skull* by journalist Adam Shand. The cover was red with a picture of a bald man in dark glasses on it. The subtitle read: *Informers, hitmen and Australia's toughest cop*.

I have to admit, informers and hitmen are not my favourite topic, but I had recently dabbled in the dark side of organised crime in my writing.

'This was written by a journalist,' said Sandra, 'but Brian always wanted to tell his own story.'

I told Sandra that I would read *The Skull* to get a feel for Brian's story, and if I was interested, she could put me in touch with him.

I found *The Skull* intriguing more for what it didn't say than what it did. Adam Shand had done a fine job creating the rogue that Brian Murphy was as a copper—a dashing man, fast with his fists, breaking the rules and getting the bad guys in the end. By the time I reached the final page, I wanted to meet the man himself. There was a lot of *what* he had done, but not so much *why* he had done it.

My interest always lies in the method behind the madness.

Brian Murphy lives at an address that, just by sitting quietly immovable in Middle Park for the last hundred or so years, had

morphed in location from undesirable to highly desirable. It's a family home with stained-glass windows and high ceilings. It is here that Brian met me at the door. For a writer, I'm not particularly good at describing people and have wondered in idle moments if I could describe members of my own family to a police artist with any accuracy.

My first impression was that Brian reminded me of my dad; around the same vintage, give or take half a dozen years. But there is something recognisable in men of that age. Politeness, a ruddy glow to their cheeks, a lack of hair, a gait swayed by a dodgy hip. And because I adore my dad, and because I trusted the judgement of my friend Sandra Nicholson, I felt an immediate fondness for Brian 'The Skull' Murphy.

We started writing over summer. Brian was 82 and sharp as a tack. His memory for times and dates was phenomenal. But writing someone's story takes patience and a fair bit of wrangling. With a project like ours, there always needs to be a rapport. What did I have in common with The Skull? We were both Catholic, knew people in common, and were interested in some of the same criminal cases, but there was something else. He was a natural-born storyteller and so was I. We both understood that words spoken in just the right way, at just the right time, can change lives.

I always like to start at the beginning.

I knew The Skull ended up with the reputation for being Australia's toughest cop in his heyday, but what were the early hints? What were the suggestions in the child of the adult he became?

'So, where did it all begin?' I asked.

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A week after Brian Francis Murphy entered the world on 12 March 1933, his parents took him home to a double-fronted weatherboard in South Melbourne. Their house was built by his great-grandfather and once had an uninterrupted view to the lagoon where longboats brought passengers from the ships to Port Melbourne. But by the time Brian arrived, the area was built up and the outlook more industrial than bay views.

Brian grew and thrived in a no-nonsense world of lots of kids and strict but kind parents. In those days, South Melbourne was a mixture of working-class families, factories and tiny run-down workers' cottages. The local Dunlop Factory sounded a whistle each morning at 7.25 to mark the start of the working day. For the Catholic kids like Brian, it was also the signal that 7.30 Mass was about to start. He would race off towards St Peter and Paul's Catholic Church in South Melbourne, trying not to breathe too deeply if there was a north wind; the stink of the nearby Lever and Kitchens factory that made soap from the fat of the boiled-down horse carcasses was the perfume of his suburb.

Some days, the stench hung over South Melbourne like an ill wind.

Brian was born into a world where you knew where you stood. There was good. There was bad. And sometimes there was a grey area in the middle where you had to stretch the rules a little for the greater good.

His mother, Maggie Murphy, was an astute woman; she was

South Melbourne born-and-bred, and a staunch follower of Dr Mannix and the Catholic Church. She hadn't had a good education, but she could read people better than anyone, a psychologist from the school of hard knocks. A strong woman of Irish descent with a couple of generations of Australian thrown in, Maggie had a tough life growing up. The worst thing that ever happened to her began one Saturday night after Maggie and her sister had been to Saturday night Confession, and skipped home without a care in the world. On approaching their house, a horse and cart from the fire department stood outside. A woman from the neighbourhood stepped out in front of them to stop them from getting closer.

Maggie's mother had fallen asleep in bed and the newspaper she was reading caught fire when it slipped onto the hurricane lamp. Her hair had caught alight; so by the time she woke up, she was engulfed in flames. She was said to have run out into the street screaming horribly.

She was taken to hospital where she died a couple of days later, her grieving husband by her side. From that moment on, the girls took on their mother's role and became unpaid servants to their demanding male siblings.

One night, Maggie's brother, Bill, lost his temper when his dinner wasn't ready on time and he had a union meeting to go to. He waited impatiently at the table wearing an open-necked shirt. Stirring a pot of rice, Maggie suddenly flung a ladleful at his face. Rice stuck to the hairs on his chest as he wildly tried to brush the gluggy white scorchers from his flesh. Maggie took off out the door and hid for hours until her dad came to find her and take her home. It was the first time she really flared up. Her brother had blisters on his chest for a week. Once she got over the fright of what she had done, Maggie felt empowered by her anger.

Brian, too, would come to know this intoxicating feeling.

When she had her own children, Maggie swore she would treat them equally. Accordingly, Brian grew to be an expert at doing dishes, and polishing linoleum floors with Wonder Wax every

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Saturday till they shone like glass. Maggie always said, ‘Water is free and soap doesn’t cost much more. Just because you live in a slum, doesn’t mean you have to be part of it.’ Her six children were always spick and span. So was the house.

The Murphys had a slight financial advantage over others in the neighbourhood in that they owned their own house, handed down from two generations. Even so, the family was as poor as everybody else’s. Socks were darned and trousers were patched.

Brian was number four in the order of kids in the family, which made him the king of hand-me-downs. He would never forget the first new item of clothing he ever received; he was six years old when he was given a brand new chocolate-coloured coat with brown velvet pockets and lapels. It was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen and he wore it at every opportunity, feeling like a little gentleman. He had the coat for about a year when one Sunday morning, before Mass, he searched but couldn’t find it anywhere.

‘Where’s my coat?’ he yelled.

‘Just put your school coat on,’ said Maggie. ‘Hurry or we’ll be late for Mass!’

They set off up the street, heading for St Peter and Paul’s, but Brian’s thoughts were panicked: *where was it?* Just as he was working himself up, thinking maybe he’d lost it, Brian saw a kid he knew called Jimmy, sitting in the gutter wearing a brown coat with velvet lapels.

‘Hey! That’s my coat!’ he shouted.

Maggie swiped the back of his head. ‘Shut your mouth and keep going!’ she growled.

‘But—’

‘He needs it more than you do,’ she hissed.

Brian fell silent. Backchat was rare in the Murphy house. As he drew closer, he got a better look at Jimmy, feet bare in the chill of the morning. The only thing keeping him warm was the brown coat. He knew Jimmy. He’d played with him. Both Jimmy’s parents were boozers, and there was little joy in the boy’s life.

In his mind, Brian said goodbye to that coat. Even though the Murphys had very little, there was always someone with much less. His mum and dad did their best to bring a little comfort wherever they could, Maggie often feeding stray kids from their street. She always said, ‘When you’re feeding eight, everyone can have a little less so that someone else gets to eat.’

Brian’s dad, Reg Murphy, was a volunteer at St Vincent de Paul, and he was also a probation officer for the Catholic kids in the area who got into strife. He’d organise to meet them right after Mass—his way of ensuring they all *went to* Mass—and he tried to keep them on the straight and narrow. He’d even ride his pushbike around the street at night and, if his probation kids were out playing cricket, he’d stop and ask them if they’d done their homework.

By day, Reg was a despatch clerk at Carlton and United Breweries. While the brewery allowed workers to have a couple of beers each day—perhaps to cut down on theft—Reg always came home ramrod straight. Sometimes, Maggie would say, ‘You’ve been drinking!’ And Reg would always say, ‘Yes. I’ve had two.’ It was a bit of a family joke. They never knew if it was two glasses, or two bottles, or two dozen. However much he drank, he held it well because Brian never once saw his father drunk.

One day, in his first year of school—known as ‘the babies’—Brian was walking to school and, as little boys do, stomping in the wet gutters. He couldn’t believe his luck when he noticed that a ten-bob note had stuck to his shoe. He told everyone at school of his good fortune. When he showed it to his teacher, she took it from him and posted it into the tin for African babies that sat on her desk. When Brian got home and told Maggie, she said, ‘Bugger the African babies! We need it more.’

The money was more than Reg made in a week, but Maggie never would have gone to the school to ask for it back. She wouldn’t want the teachers to think they were poor. Even though everyone was poor, it was important to hide the fact. Maggie went to church in gloves and a hat, looking the best she could. In those days, poverty

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often only existed behind closed doors.

Poverty wasn't the only scourge. Polio was a blight in the days before a tiny spoonful of medicine wiped it out. One of the kids in the neighbourhood, Paddy Brown, was stricken, then pushed around by his mum in a big wooden pram for years before he began waddling around on his own calipered legs. He never played football or cricket but the local kids tried to include him in games whenever they could. The first words from the lips of any Catholic mother when confronted with the crippled or the lame were: *There, but for the grace of God, go I*. An important reminder that calamity could strike anyone at any time, and since medicine offered few solutions, strict adherence to the Church and the power of prayer were some of the few options available to worried mothers.

Melbourne is about as physically far away from the war as a place could be, but war's dark tendrils reach out across oceans and touch the lives of all. Brian's was no exception. He was six years old when war was declared in 1939. It was announced on the wireless. Soon afterwards, food was rationed and mothers everywhere pasted dark paper over their windows. Street lighting was reduced at night to dim the streets should enemy planes ever make their way to South Melbourne. While London was in the grip of nightly blackouts, the shadowy dimming of Melbourne's streets was known as the 'brownout'.

Every day at school, children prayed for the soldiers and that the Germans didn't take over the Vatican and kill Pope Pius XII. One of Brian's classmates, Allan Carey, lost his dad when the *HMAS Perth* was sunk by the Japanese in March 1942. Allan disappeared from school for a couple of days. While he was absent, they all said prayers and had a Mass for his dad; every kid in the class cried. When Allan came back to school, his classmates made an extra effort to make his life a bit better. He was picked first for teams and people were nice to him. Another boy, Porky Martin, lost his dad too. He looked so bereft and miserable.

The loss of dads made the war overseas feel very close to home.

Before the war, vanilla slices were the staple of any good bakery in Australia, but as sugar and butter became scarce with rationing, they too became a casualty of war. Every now and again, though, this favourite delicacy would inexplicably appear in shop windows. Some kids had money to buy them, and others were cunning enough to follow their cashed-up friends to the cake shop. There was always a kid who would share, and they all munched on chunks of custard and pastry and talked dreamily about a time in the future when peace reigned, dads were safe and there was a steady and constant supply of vanilla slices.

Every newspaper was filled with the war during these years. The wireless gave local and BBC bulletin updates; and at the pictures, Cinesound showed newsreels of the battles being fought on the other side of the world. Brian's understanding boiled down to this: Hitler was bad and the Allies were good. He bought war savings stamps and stuck them onto a collector's board scrawled with the motto: 'Every stamp stuck on is another nail in the Axis coffin!'. Even nuns collected pennies to 'put a nail in Hitler's coffin'. The way young Brian saw it, dads, brothers and uncles went off to war to fight against Hitler's way of life. For a while, it seemed Hitler and his German youth could march all over Europe with impunity. Conversely, there was never any doubt that the Allies would win, because they were on the side of right.

The big question was: *when was it going to finish?*

During this time, the availability of apples and pears was limited, too, because Australian produce was sent overseas, principally to Britain, to help the war effort. Inevitably though, a black market sprung up; if people could afford it, they could buy anything, from ration books to highly-sought-after car tyres.

Maggie always said: *anything that's got rotten, goes rotten*. And while she would never dob anyone in for buying extra ration books, she didn't like the fact that it went on. At a time when everyone should be contributing to the war effort, she would often grumble about those making money from the desperation of others. Around

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the corner from the Murphys was a man who became a black marketeer at this time. Maggie never spoke to him again, nor did anyone else in the family.

One day when Brian was about nine years old, he went into Taylor's Produce Store in Albert Park to buy some things for his mum. The lady behind the counter beamed at him. 'Are you from the Catholic school?' she asked.

'Yes,' he answered, politely standing in front of her in his patched uniform.

'My son went to the Catholic school,' she said with a sad smile. 'But he's overseas now.' That meant he was a soldier.

Brian stood awkwardly, not knowing what to say to her.

The shopkeeper took Maggie's list and prepared the order. When she came around the counter and gave it to Brian, without warning, she enveloped him in a big hug. Even though he was only young, he knew that when she wrapped her arms around him, she was really hugging her own far-away son.

He hugged her back.

American soldiers appeared, generous and clean-cut in their smart uniforms, and were quick to hand out chocolate. The kids had great fun running alongside them as they marched from Port Melbourne to their tent city at the South Melbourne football ground—one of the many that sprang up in ovals and parks across Melbourne.

However, Brian's Aunty Mary had a brush with an American soldier that the family would never forget. She lived near the Fitzroy Gardens and used to walk through there every Sunday and often during the week on her way to 7 a.m. Mass in the city. One day, in late May, 1942, she made her way through the leafy avenues and was approached by a dishevelled Yank. He was disorientated, unshaven, and looked as if he'd slept in his clothes. Something about him made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up.

When he came closer, he slurred a question. 'Where are you going?'

Thinking quickly, Aunt Mary said: 'I'm on my way to the Cathedral to pray for all of you brave American soldiers.' Every fibre of her being told her to get away from this man, and yet, in her heart was the compassion of a church-going woman. She looked into his eyes. 'And I will pray for you especially, young man.'

The man began weeping. He fell to his knees, then grabbed her hand and kissed it.

Aunt Mary wriggled her hand free and went on her way.

A couple of days later, there was an announcement on the radio; the so-called Brownout Strangler had been caught. Three women had been murdered in Melbourne within a couple of weeks. Mrs Ivy McLeod was found strangled in Albert Park, Mrs Pauline Thompson was murdered outside a boarding house in the city, and finally, Mrs Gladys Hosking was found murdered in Royal Park near an American army tent city.

When a photograph of American soldier, Edward Leonski, was published in the newspaper, Aunt Mary gasped. It was the man she had seen in the Fitzroy Gardens. In the telling and re-telling of the story, Aunt Mary was sure that it was her use of the word 'brave' that saved her when she said she would pray for the brave American soldiers.

Because of Aunt Mary's connection to the Brownout Murders, the Murphys followed the case in the media. It was only a couple of months since Brian's classmate, Allan Carey, lost his dad on the *HMAS Perth*. Allan's dad died a hero. Leonski would die a murderer. Brian was nine years old and the deaths all swirled into one. At home, the Murphys prayed as hard for Leonski as they did for the lost and missing dads in their nightly Rosary.

When Leonski was hanged, they prayed for his soul.