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Before Laos

There was nothing extraordinary about my childhood. I was a tomboy, playing army games with the boys up the road, climbing gum trees with my skinny tanned legs and racing with other kids around suburban Brisbane on our second-hand bikes and paint-chipped skateboards. My long, dark pigtails flowed along behind me, reminding everyone that I was actually a girl. I was born on 20 October 1967. I loved the colour red and so almost everything I wore was red. There were no pink-laced dresses or silk ribbons in my wardrobe. No pretty little hats or bows or shiny pins. I was always in a hurry to get to where I was going. I didn't ever conform to the popular view that little girls should walk with poise and grace and not come home with swamp mud caked three layers deep on their elbows and knees.

Although I was somewhat of a free spirit, I did what my parents told me. Well, most of the time anyway. When I was only about six years old, I told my mother that I wanted to live with the angels who walked our local streets in their long, white, flowing gowns. Several weeks later, I ran away to the nearby Catholic convent, Nazareth House, to be with them. Our local police tracked me down much to my parents' relief and my annoyance.

I had reasonable grades in school, and I enjoyed music and writing. Perhaps the oddest thing about my childhood was that my father was a damn good Elvis impersonator. When he hit the stage, he had the women screaming, that's how good he was. I still think those screaming women were a bit odd. After all, it was only my Dad dressed up in a costume Mum had made on her Singer sewing

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machine. One night, Dad was moving and shaking so much he split his red sequin jumpsuit right up the back. Like Elvis, he too had put on a bit of weight. He wept when Presley died.

That same year my father converted to Christianity, the evangelical kind and our lives changed dramatically. Talk of hell fire and brimstone was quite terrifying for me at nine years old. The coming of Jesus and Judgment Day meant I would not reach my sixteenth birthday. I never questioned these evangelical teachings, unlike my older brother Ricky and my sister Karen who thought it impossible for a man to exist inside the belly of a whale for three days.

Our family was working middle-class. My father worked various jobs over the years but was never out of work. My mother worked long hours in a meat factory on Brisbane's Southside. She never complained because the money helped pay the mortgage and as kids, we never went without. My mother was a selfless person who only ever wanted the best for our family. She said she was very proud when I secured a hairdressing apprenticeship after graduating from high school, with Australia's leading hairdressing salon, Stefan. I told my mum that one day I would be a hairstylist for the stars in Hollywood. It was a nice dream but my life, in reality, was ordinary and I didn't achieve greatness. I did make terrific friendships, though, and was the proud owner of a 1967 Customised Volkswagen Sedan. It was hot tomato red of course.

I wanted a life of adventure and to be with someone who would encourage me to be all that I wasn't but could be. It sounds melodramatic but when I met Kerry Arthur Danes it was like a meeting of the souls and we clicked instantly. This was rather odd considering I had been raised all my life in the city and he was from the outback town of Longreach, the birthplace of Qantas Airways. We came from different worlds but had a lot in common. I was born on 20 October 1967 and he was born on 21 October 1958. We were both Librans, we both skydived, we were about the same height, and we both loved the colour red. He told me I could be anyone I wanted and I believed him. He promised me a lifetime of adventure and somehow I knew he would keep that promise.

In both our genealogies there was a strong military influence. Many of my ancestors were military men. My Great Uncle Ben had died on the famous

Sandakan Death March in Borneo while one of Kerry's ancestors had been a general in the Parliamentary Army with Oliver Cromwell and had signed the death warrant of King Charles I of England.

As a young man, Kerry would listen to stories told by returned servicemen at the once famous Rex Hotel in Longreach where his mother worked as the publican. Not surprisingly, he enlisted in the Australian Army in August 1976 and promised to serve Queen and Country to the best of his ability. After only four years as an infantryman, Kerry applied for and was successful in completing the Special Air Service Regiment selection course, one of the toughest military courses in the world. He became a trooper in the elite Australian Special Forces unit, more commonly known as the 'SAS'—a unit shrouded in secrecy. He was trained to the highest levels of surveillance and reconnaissance and other intelligence gathering and combat tasks, including counter terrorism.

Throughout his career, Kerry went all over the world and, though much of what he did and where he went was not disclosed to the general public, or to me, he did admit one time that he actually sat in the chair of the then President of the United States, Ronald Regan.

Kerry always had a strong sense of loyalty to his family. When he first joined the army he sent home to his mother most of his wage. In those early days he didn't need much because the army fed and housed him in the barracks. His family members, however, were struggling through the loss of all their possessions and almost their lives in a terrible fire in January 1977 that claimed their house and several other houses in their street. Kerry's family was devastated and ended up moving from Longreach without a penny to the Central Queensland coastal town of Yeppoon in search of a new beginning. His brothers found it tough finding work in a country town where the unemployment rate was high and ended up on welfare. Desperate to help them, Kerry and I decided to start a small family-run security business to enable his brothers, Leslie and Ian, to re-enter the workforce. At the time, Kerry and I were living on the Gold Coast because Kerry had been posted to the Jungle Warfare Centre at Canungra. We submitted various applications to the Queensland Government for security industry licences, business registration and insurances, and Leslie and Ian

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submitted their applications to attend the next security officer training course.

We gained state accreditation for our security officer training manual and, once approved, we tendered for and won several major contracts to provide static guarding services to the International Iwasaki Resort, Keppel Bay Marina and Rockhampton Hospital. We employed Leslie and Ian in the Yeppoon operation as soon as they were qualified. In the Rockhampton sector we employed a longstanding family friend, Terry Molloy. Terry, a former Australian Army soldier, was fully proficient in the security industry with extensive martial arts and K9 Protection training.

We were only a small company but our reputation soon grew and we were able to engage other casual staff. I administered all the invoices, tax records and accounts from our home on the Gold Coast and kept Kerry informed as he continued his military service at the Jungle Warfare Centre. Actually it cost us quite a lot of money to establish our family business but with Kerry's military wage still coming in, we at least had a buffer against all the outgoings in the initial stages. As time went by, I undertook further study to develop my administration skills, security knowledge, self-defence and firearms training. I also started working on a new training syllabus for VIP Protection, for which we would later seek accreditation.

We enjoyed success for quite a long time until eventually some cracks in the Yeppoon operation began to form. We received a number of complaints from the management of the Iwasaki Resort, all of which were directed towards Kerry's brother Leslie. We tried to resolve these issues but they persisted. The critics would say we should never have employed family. There's no doubt in my mind that they'd be right but it's a little difficult to turn your back on family when there's a chance you might be able to help them. Eventually, we decided to scale down the Yeppoon operation and notified the client that we would not be re-tendering for the security contract when it came due for renewal. Our relationship with the Iwasaki Resort management remained amicable, in fact they respected our position completely. We managed our other contracts with a good deal of success until eventually the contracts ran out and we decided to wind up the company altogether.

Kerry was transferred back to Western Australia, the home of the Special Air Service Regiment. He became part of the multinational Peace Keeping Monitoring Group sent to monitor and report on the compliance of the parties involved in the Bougainville peace process. He was also deployed overseas while I juggled part-time work, study and home life, as well as volunteering to various civilian and military committees. I held various official appointments as President of Army Families (WA) Inc, the Editor of the Sandgroper Defence Family Magazine and became a general dog's body to other charitable organisations.



In the latter part of 1998, the SAS experienced a mass exodus of elite soldiers, wooed by the private sector and its big money to employ their foreign language skills, combat and weapons expertise in Iraq and other global hotspots. Many of Kerry's colleagues traded their coveted sandy beret to pursue such lucrative contracts. Almost all of them landed jobs with multinational security firms. Kerry submitted his resume to a former colleague working for Jardine Securicor Gurkha Services in Hong Kong. Its director, Chris Hardy, a former British Army officer, said he was looking for a capable security manager with broad multicultural experience to head up his Lao Securicor operation. Within weeks, Kerry was offered a job.

Jardine Securicor Gurkha Services was a division of the Jardine Securicor Group, one of the largest commercial security companies in Asia with more than 14,000 staff and boasting a strong presence in other South-East Asian markets. JSGS entered into a joint venture agreement with the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) to form a start up operation, Lao Securicor.

Having obtained permission from the Western Region Military Commander, Colonel Paul Noonan, Kerry and Chris Hardy travelled to Laos on 4 January 1999 to view the operation. Hardy pledged full support to Kerry on behalf of the entire Jardine Securicor Group.

'If you have any problems, we'll take care of them,' he said.

Being the seasoned veteran that he was, Kerry assessed the risks of working

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in Laos as minimal, based on extensive research in regards to the political environment, the laws that governed the country and the information he obtained from Hardy and his expert team of American lawyers based in Laos on the reality of working there. Dirksen, Flipse, Doran and Le (DFDL) Lawyers were Securicor's in-country advisors and to most foreign investors in Laos. They had previously assisted the Lao Government in drafting the Foreign Investment Laws of 1997 when Laos really opened up to foreigners.

After careful consideration, Kerry took the job in Laos with approval from his military commanders. Their one stipulation was that Kerry would not conduct any specialist type training similar to that which he provided to the Australian Defence Force. With that undertaking given, Kerry was approved to work in Laos for the duration of his approved leave, a combination of long-service leave, accumulated days and leave without pay. He would return to service on 4 January 2001 and decide whether or not he wanted to continue soldiering or make a more permanent transition to the corporate sector.

Kerry left Australia for Laos mid-January 1999 to commence his probationary period of three months, after which I would join him with our three children, Jessica, Sahra and Nathan. I used the time we were apart to further research the Lao environment that could possibly become our new home.

My overall impression of Laos was that it would be similar to living in Thailand despite the fact that the two countries had completely different systems of government. Not a lot was ever reported in world media on Laos. In fact, according to most sources, it was only ever referred to as a sleepy yet charming backwater of South-East Asia, a tropical paradise, home to four million people in a land not yet jaded by tourism.



Chris Hardy had played down the fact that the troubles with the joint venture partners were far from over. He played down the fact that the first manager of Lao Securicor had only stayed in the job three weeks and the second, three months. He washed over the difficulties and, with all the confidence in the world, said

the differences had been resolved. It wasn't exactly the case. In fact, no sooner had the ink dried on their joint-venture agreement than the troubles for Lao Securicor began. One of the representatives of the Ministry of Interior, Khamphe Sulivong, began making demands on the then Lao Securicor managing director John Carnochan. Khamphe was envious of his colleagues who had prospered by association with other rich foreign organisations. He wanted what they had and in his eyes all foreigners were rich, spoilt and frivolous. He wasn't ashamed to demand a little extra and his sights were set on getting rich from Lao Securicor and the wealthy British who ran it.

Khamphe was as shrewd as he was greedy and had to be to survive in an urban jungle filled with spies and corrupt individuals vying for the foreigners' almighty US dollars. He expected to be given the luxury incentives and didn't take the denial of his requests well. On 20 December 1998, a letter was sent to Lao Securicor from Minister Asang Lao Lee of the Ministry of Interior (MOI) suggesting Lao Securicor close. Such recommendations were also sent to the Foreign Investment Management Cabinet (FIMC). These were, however, formally rejected in correspondence from the Prime Minister's Office, on two separate occasions, acknowledging support to the Securicor Company and directing the FIMC to resolve the matter. Shortly thereafter, rumours circulated that Carnochan was a British spy. The charge of spying was a capital offence punishable by death. Presumably, Khamphe had started the rumour. The Lao Securicor manager wrote a letter to his landlord, dated 28 October 1998, to terminate his lease on the rental property in which he cited the reason for his pending departure as being *due to difficulties with the Lao Government*.

It may seem incredible that anyone could be put in this position simply for not conceding to such unimportant demands, but Laos is steeped in corruption and, with so many government officials grabbing what they can, it's often a case of dog-eat-dog. Khamphe made sure everyone in other ministries complied with his instructions to make life as difficult as possible for Lao Securicor.

Despite having been granted an import licence, the Lao border guards impounded the Lao Securicor vehicles at the Lao–Thai border and charged \$26,000 per month to illegally keep them there. Eventually the cars were

returned to Thailand when the payments stopped. The promised skilled workforce, trained from military, police and government sectors, was never provided in lucrative supply. Lao Securicor was forced to recruit from the villages and neighbouring provinces. The majority of recruits had little to no education and their English-speaking skills were in most cases non-existent. Highly educated human resources were promised but only poor to no educated human resources were made available to Lao Securicor.

The Lao Government promised a capital injection of \$350,000 to help the Lao Securicor operation to its feet, but no actual capital was ever invested. This was not revealed until after the signing of the joint venture agreement. The Ministry of Interior also demanded all the projective profits in advance despite the fact that Lao Securicor hadn't any clients at that time. The Lao Government promised to supply a fully functional security training academy and administration offices but these were again not provided. Instead they seized property from a village community which immediately caused ill-will between Lao Securicor and the community.

The Lao Government promised no competition within the industry but the Ministry of Interior joint venture partners maintained major shares in a competing company and, despite promises to close the company, it kept running in direct competition to Lao Securicor. Businesses were forced by the Ministry of Interior to engage these services despite the fact that Lao Securicor was able to offer a better quality of service. Marketing and advertising support promised by the Lao Government was denied by the Ministry of Interior. Lao Securicor was prevented from advertising or publicly marketing the company.

The Lao Government promised Lao Securicor a radio frequency and permission to use radio equipment to support its requirements but the radio frequency and permission to use radios was denied by the Ministry of Interior joint-venture partners. This was a major setback to a security company that relied heavily on monitoring its clients' premises in order to ensure the best protection and responsive action in time of need. Effectively Khamphé, through the Ministry of Interior, had a stranglehold on Lao Securicor and they weren't letting go until the company was completely defunct.

2 Going to Laos

As we flew over the sleepy hollow of Laos on route to Vientiane, the capital, the pilot made a very serious announcement. He told everyone to refrain from taking any photographs. Looking out the window across the endless sea of green jungle, I wondered why anyone would bother. There wasn't anything to see.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

The small aircraft shuddered and shook as it landed on the tiny runway. Within minutes we arrived at a rather small and dilapidated pale blue building which could have been mistaken for a row of old concrete toilet blocks. I suddenly felt unsure as I followed my husband across the tarmac with our three children following closely behind. I was distracted as I listened to him explaining how he'd arranged for several Securicor staff to meet us.

Sidestepping the big potholes in the tarmac, I walked trance-like to our waiting party waving to us from just inside the dimly lit building. Three ex-soldiers of the former Nepalese Gurkha Regiment greeted us with a friendly 'Nam Estay', which I figured was the same as an Australian 'G'day'. They appeared genuinely thrilled to see us, and especially our children. According to Kerry, this was understandable because they only saw their families once every two years as stipulated in their contractual arrangement with Jardine Securicor Gurkha Services.

The airport was crowded with at least a couple of hundred people waiting for loved ones to arrive on the first and only morning flight from Thailand. It was the