

A few pages contributed by John Dexter
to Peter Shaw
for his book
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OPERATION PENRITH

Michael phoned soon after breakfast.

“John, are you busy?”

“What do you want me to do, Michael?”

“I want you to do something that I have never asked of you before and I sincerely hope I shall never have to ask you to do again. You remember Peter Shaw?”

“Of course, and I saw the BBC report. He’s been taken hostage in Georgia, has he not?”

“Yes. We have a team working for his release. Will you join us? We want you to communicate with his kidnapers.”

Yes, of course I would. And so began a white-knuckle ride lasting much of the summer.

Dave, head of the Hostage and Crisis Negotiation Unit at Scotland Yard, would act as our adviser, alongside the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Counter-Terrorism Policy Department. I rang Scotland Yard for instructions. I was to buy a new mobile phone dedicated to what we would call Operation Penrith, and come to Scotland Yard for a briefing.

The next day I took the train to London for a meeting with Dave and his team. A silent policeman took me up to Dave’s office and left me on my own for five minutes. Should I explore? Was I being watched? Was the room bugged? On one wall an organisation chart reminiscent of something from MI5. Opposite, the uniform of a Chicago police sergeant—perhaps used in a shoot-out when Dave had played the leading part? On the desk lay an ash tray inscribed with grateful thanks from the Government of Colombia. Soon someone with a cheery smile came in and offered a cup of coffee. It was James. The coffee arrived in a polystyrene cup, accompanied by a new face: Ron. And then Dave appeared to complete the party. During the next few months these people became my firm friends.

My task would start by making contact with Georgia. I had to agree to have a tap put on my mobile phone. I was to buy various pieces of recording equipment from an apparently innocuous electronics shop conveniently next door to Scotland Yard, and then establish a link with the hostage takers. We had a mobile phone number. That was all. Their only contact so far had been a text message to one of Peter’s friends still in Georgia. So text messaging would be my method of communication too. I’d start that evening once I got home.

So, with some trepidation, I began:

My name is John. I want to help Peter. I am a family friend.

Again twice the next day, before breakfast and then just after lunch. Nothing came back. Then whilst doing business with my patent agent, the blue phone gave off its distinctive bleep. Excusing myself, I read the message:

Do you speak Russian?

I replied: *Sorry, no I don’t.*

Fifteen minutes later, the phone rang. Again I excused myself from the meeting. The call was coming from Georgia, but the caller did not speak at all.

I merely said: *Hello, this is John.*

The caller rang off. Almost immediately another incoming text: the same message, asking if I spoke Russian.

I sent back: *Sorry I don't speak Russian. May I speak to Peter please?*

By now my business colleague could see I was on edge and for some reason surmised that I must be having an affair—an awkward complication I could have done without. An hour later the same caller left the line open for three seconds whilst connected to my answer-phone, but again said nothing. The following day I repeated my text message at lunchtime and sent a new message at teatime:

Thank you for your message. I am sorry I do not understand Russian. May I speak to Peter please?

After an hour the angry response came back:

Are you joking? Peter times nou. [sic] Where is the interpreter?

I sent back a polite reply, to be met with:

I'm sick and tired of it! I demand an interpreter present. I don't speak english.

Dave and James had been advising on the wording of my part in this bizarre conversation. Now it was time for closer collaboration. We agreed to wait till the Georgian evening and then play ball:

I will have a Russian interpreter available tomorrow at 1330 BST (1730 Georgia). Please may I speak to Peter then?

Next day I arrived at Scotland Yard a little ahead of Tony, my new interpreter. Tony works for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. He interprets regularly between Blair and Putin—nothing but the best for Peter Shaw! Up in Dave's office, Ron produced a tape recorder and wired it up to my new blue mobile. The recorder lay on a small oblong coffee table alongside five polystyrene cups of hot coffee and various papers including a contribution from James: a sheet with big red letters proclaiming the responses I was supposed to make to the expected harsh demands from hostage takers. The guidelines were: always mention Peter by name; always show concern for his health; emphasise my position as a friend of the family; ask for proof that the caller was actually holding Peter and that Peter was alive and well; avoid making promises; indicate a need to consult others; develop an atmosphere of uncertainty; establish a time for the next contact.

So began a long series of meetings to try to deal with someone we did not know. We gave him the nickname Boris; that seemed to make things easier somehow. We would start a session by phoning him. Perhaps Boris wanted to control times of communication and avoid giving away his position, for usually his phone was switched off. Then he would call us. Tony or I would respond, and Boris would hang up. Why did Boris not speak? Here was the interpreter he had demanded, speaking perfect Russian, interpreting for me, the friend of the family. We spent hours wondering, guessing whether Boris had actually diverted his phone to avoid detection, analysing the detail of his communications, and thinking who and where he might be.

Suddenly, in one of these sessions, Boris sent his first substantial text in Russian:

Ask John and then reply. Have you been hired in from outside as an interpreter or are you a person in whom John trusts to pass information in this matter?

After a confusing set of unanswered voice calls and texts, we were able to send a carefully constructed reply. Then the threats began. The first came one Friday:

Please give John our conditions. Peter and K have damaged our business to the tune of \$US 5,600,000. We wish to regain our capital in exchange for Peter's life.

Then, much later:

If the decision on this matter does not depend on you, there is no point in our dealing with you or carrying out your requests, because we shall get our capital in any event.

There had been a lull during this exchange, so we had dispersed: Tony to Surrey, me to

Hampshire. At Waterloo my blue phone rang briefly, but Boris was cut off. It was one of those very hot summer days when the rails buckle and trains leave late. With so many in the station concourse trying to phone home, the Orange network was jammed. No chance of getting back to Boris. What would go wrong now? At last a train left. Out in the suburbs the phone worked once more. I leant out of the carriage window to avoid the crush inside, while Tony gave me the Russian for my crucial next message, to puzzled stares from the other sweating travellers.

The next Tuesday we all assembled at The Yard. It turned out to be a frustrating afternoon. Garbled texts, misunderstandings, furious responses while we were still working out how to deal with the last text but one. We gave up and suggested another attempt on Thursday. That day I stayed at home and operated from there, with no better luck. I called Boris but he did not respond, so I signed off setting a rendezvous for the following Monday. On Monday, back at the Yard, Boris called us four times and sent four text messages. He was angry at what he called our *jokes* and *Chinese messages* and *malfunctioning phone*.

Then he turned nasty. We must realise he had the option of amputation. This was worrying and depressing, We were not in good communication, we did not know whether this Boris actually held Peter, and we had no idea whether Peter was well, or even alive. However, thanks to the efforts of the various police forces and government agencies, we were getting closer to the bandits' lair—at least we were beginning to think we could guess roughly where these calls might be coming from. That afternoon I went over the road to Stanford's and bought a large scale map of Georgia.

We kept up a barrage of texts and voice calls for nine weeks, trying to discover how and where Boris was operating, whilst impressing on him the need for him to tell us about Peter and keep him safe. Yet we were not to hear from Boris again. The focus was moving from police, spies, technicians and negotiators to the politicians, whose pressure was eventually to persuade his captors to let Peter go.

John Dexter 30 October 2003 [1,551 words]