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BROTHER FOR BROTHER

We choose our friends. We don't choose our family. But family is family, for better or for worse. Mostly we love them, at times they drive us to distraction. They embarrass us, and we embarrass them. But as life pitches up its cruel and crazy curveballs, family is a constant.

I was born the youngest of three brothers. Long before I ever went to school my father taught my brothers and me Aesop's wise fable of the old man who handed each of his sons a bundle of sticks, and ordered them to break it into pieces. When none of them could break the bundle the father untied it, and handed each of his sons the separate sticks, which they all broke easily. "Together nothing can defeat you," he told his sons. "Divided you will be broken as easily as these twigs."

My old man knew a thing or two about brotherhood, and about sticking together. He was just 15 years old, the eldest of three brothers, when German troops occupied his home-town of Marseilles in 1942. They launched a systematic, house-by-house search of the Old Port area of the city, arresting more than 6,000 people, and displacing tens of thousands more, as nearly 2,000 French Jews were loaded onto death trains, destined for Nazi extermination camps. When my father's parents were accused of hiding Jews, and threatened with internment, they put their three sons on a night train to the north of France, where they would go into hiding for the rest of the war. Together the three brothers steamed into a dark night and an uncertain future. Together they eventually made it home.

Beau Geste, the 1924 adventure novel by British author Percival Christopher Wren, tells the rollicking tale of another three brothers - the inseparable Geste boys, Beau, John and Digby - who for reasons of honour and loyalty run away from their privileged, upper-class English upbringing to join the French Foreign Legion in far-away North Africa. On its surface the novel is a 'boys own adventure,' a romantic tale of derring-do set against the exotic back-drop of the

desolate Sahara. But at its heart lies the story of a deep brotherly love that survives both treachery and tragedy.

When *Beau Geste* was brought to the screen in 1939 by director/producer William Wellman, the film opened with a forward card that recounted an old Arabian proverb: *The love of a man for a woman waxes and wanes like the moon, but the love of brother for brother is steadfast as the stars, and endures like the word of the Prophet.*

I was reminded of that sentiment recently when I read the dignified and decent words of Queensland football legend Mal Meninga responding to news of his brother, Bevan's release from

prison after serving 21 years for murder. With the first of the year's three State of Origin matches due to kick off less than a week later, it was a tough time for the quietly-spoken Queensland coach to be fronting the press to publicly answer issues of family shame. But he stood up, as he should, speaking of his family's pain, relief and excitement, and pledging to do everything possible to rehabilitate his brother. As the hype around the series opener went into overdrive, Meninga quietly slipped out of the Queensland team's base on the Gold Coast to be by his brother's side.

Only days later another little-noticed news story told a similarly tragic tale of family shame and sibling loyalty. As our football fervour careered into overdrive, dominating the front and back pages of our newspapers, an insignificant news item noted the demise of Shamem Rahman, 46, a would-be robber shot dead in the course of a botched robbery on the Gold Coast. The story recorded the sad epitaph of his sister, who expressed sympathy for the man who shot him, and gratitude her brother had not hurt anyone else the day he died. But Nasreen Rahman still stood staunchly by her brother, remembering him as a dedicated father and a loving husband. "He was my little brother, no matter what he did wrong."

I guess that says it all. Family is family, for better or for worse.

We don't choose our family, but for better or worse, family is family and the relationship is "as steadfast as the stars".