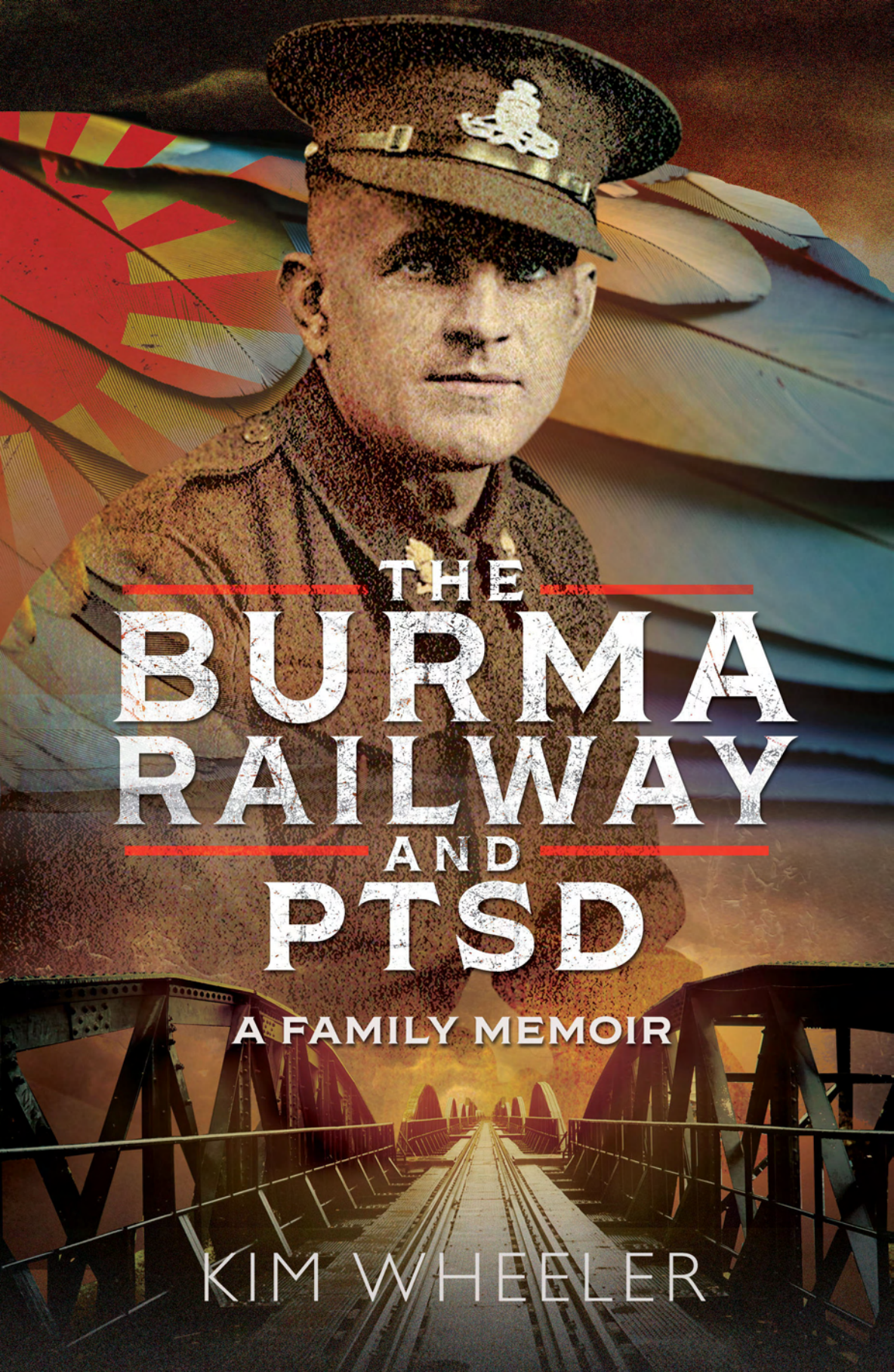
THE
BURMA
RAILWAY
AND
PTSD
A FAMILY MEMOIR
KIM WHEELER

The Burma Railway and PTSD

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A Family Memoir

Kim Wheeler

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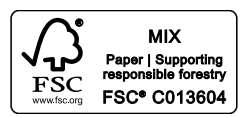

Dedication

For anyone suffering and/or living with mental health issues
Especially for those with PTSD
There is help if you talk and allow the light in.

"*A Bridge of Feathers*"

For June, Beatrice and Jack
who are missed every single day.

"The victims of PTSD often feel morally tainted by their experiences, unable to recover confidence in their own goodness, trapped in a sort of spiritual solitary confinement, looking back at the rest of the world from beyond the barrier of what happened. They find themselves unable to communicate their condition to those who remained at home, resenting civilians for their blind innocence.

"People generally don't suffer high rates of PTSD after natural disasters. Instead, people suffer from PTSD after moral atrocities. Soldiers who've endured the depraved world of combat experience their own symptoms. Trauma is an expulsive cataclysm of the soul"

David Brooks "The Moral Injury,
New York Times. Feb 17, 2015"

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Preface

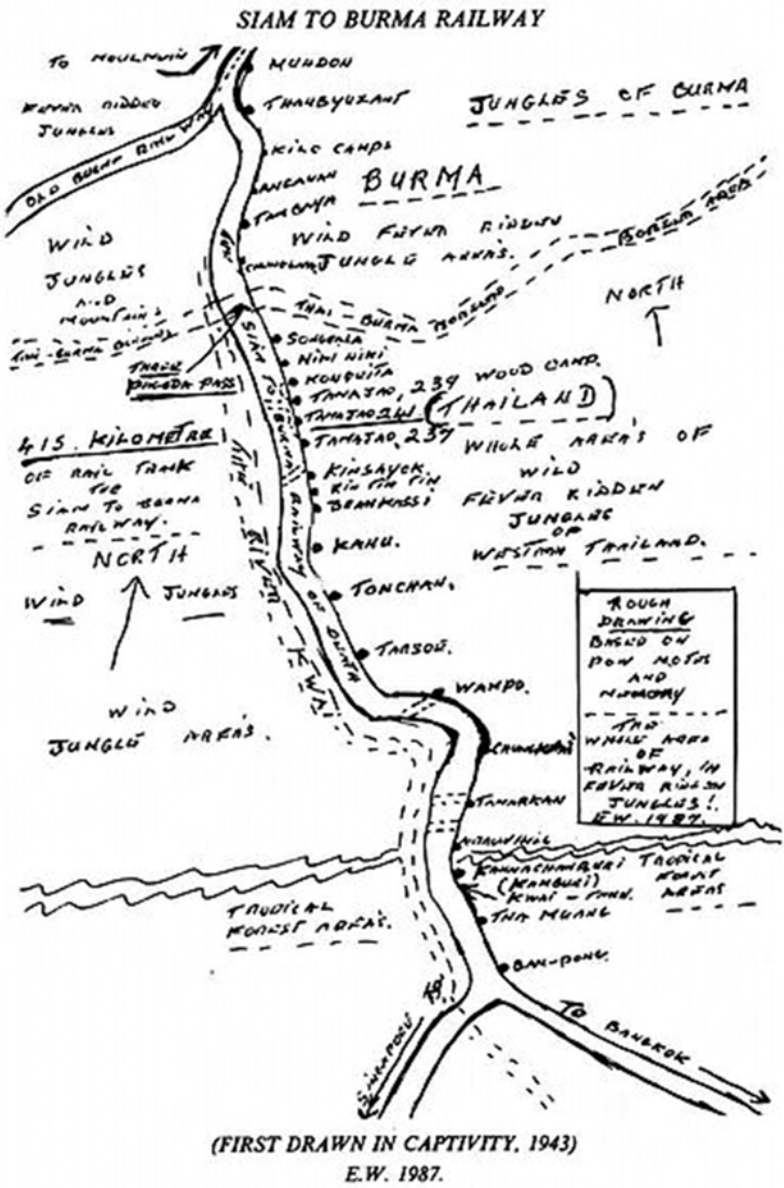
Many books and memoirs have been written on prisoner of war captivity in the Far East during the Second World War. Some contain incredible detail concerning the fall of Singapore and are full of military historical facts. This book is not like that. Instead, it is written from the viewpoint of a young girl who experienced the bittersweet homecoming of her traumatised father, Jack, following the end of the war. June and her mother, Beatrice, had lovingly prepared for Jack's long-awaited return from his imprisonment at the hands of the Japanese out in the Far East. June recounts that they quickly realised how ill-prepared they were to deal with Jack's post-war traumas. The man who returned home did not resemble the man who had left in 1941. It proved to be a troubled journey as they navigated a path back to a semblance of normal family life. Their only way to cut through Jack's decompression from three and a half years of intensely cruel mental stress in the notorious POW camps was by exercising incredible patience and, ultimately, talking it through with brutal honesty.

Jack was not a man who would have sought out help, especially in relation to how he felt inside. Today, we comfortably talk about mental health and, in Jack's case, PTSD. Following recent conflicts across the world, the topic of mental suffering

has been thrown wide open. It has become part of our everyday language and is viewed with compassion. There is no shame in any type of mental health issue. However, June admitted that thirty years ago she would have been nervous to have me put down her story on paper. We are now acutely aware of what those unfortunate returning prisoners of war were suffering back in 1945. There is no shame to call out what it was – Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This was a psychological trauma gained in horrific circumstances: Invisible injuries that became imprinted on minds.

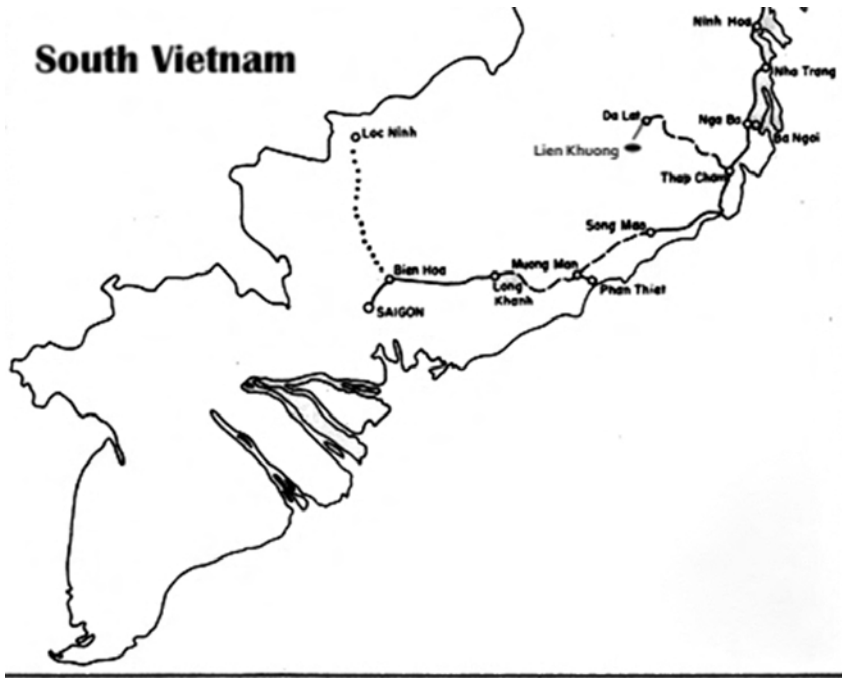
The military and government put the traumatised returning prisoners of war under immense pressure not to speak of their experiences in captivity. Sadly, many of them took the instruction seriously and never discussed it with their families or friends. The message that had been conveyed was that they were nothing more than an embarrassing inconvenience. Jack recalled how they were told Britain was over the war and that people were moving on with their lives. No one would be interested in their tales of horror and, indeed, they may not even have believed them. Jack told us they were given leaflets concerning the matter on board their repatriation ships as they sailed homewards. Those returning POWs had already been dubbed The Forgotten Army, and then they were told to just disappear into society without recognition.

Map of South East Asia.



(FIRST DRAWN IN CAPTIVITY. 1943)
E.W. 1987.

POW Ernest Warwick's sketched map of the prison camps situated along the Thai Burma Railway, first drawn during 1943. His map shows the location of Tamarkan and its two bridges over the river, Kanchanaburi and Ban Pong at the South of the line.



Map of French Indochina (South Vietnam today) showing the journey from Saigon up into the mountain region of Dalat and, onto Lien Khuong.

'Jack'

John 'Jack' William Hart was born in 1910 in Porton, Wiltshire, to a railway employed family. From Porton, the railway moved them to Kings Somborne in Hampshire from where the family originated. Jack married Beatrice in Romsey, Hampshire, in 1934. He was called up to military service for the Second World War aged 30 and joined the 135th Field Regiment Royal Artillery, 336 Battery. The regiment was destined for The Middle East. However, in December 1941, whilst en route to The Gulf of Aden, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour, bringing The US into the war. Winston Churchill retasked Jack's regiment to sail directly to defend Singapore against an attack by the Japanese. Jack and his comrades were taken prisoner by the Japanese at The Fall of Singapore in February 1942. Over the next four years, the Japanese used their newly acquired labour force to work on their various construction projects. Jack's journey as a POW took him from Singapore to Thailand, where he worked on the infamous Thai-Burma Railway. Upon completion of the railway construction, he suffered a nightmare journey aboard a 'hell ship' in the South China Sea bound for Japan's mainland. Jack's hell ship, the Haruyasa Maru, was attacked by allied submarines and was forced to reroute to Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City).

From Saigon he was sent to POW workcamps which he called Longtan (actually Long Thanh in Dong Nai Province) and Linkang (actually Lien Khuong in Lam Dong Province) in French Indochina (now Vietnam).

Jack firmly believed he only survived because he was already familiar with hard labour on the railways prior to being called up to war. That was his job.

Jack admitted he returned home to his family a much-changed man.

His endurance to survive still astounds us.

Chapter 1

Beatrice, Me and The War

Sunday 7th October 1945 is a long time ago now, and I was a young girl. However, that day and the events that followed are as crystal clear to me today as if they all happened last week. If you were to ask me what I did this time last year, I probably couldn't tell you, but my father's return home from his captivity after World War Two and the months that followed have remained diamond-sharp in my memory. My name is June. I want to recount my story, most likely for the last time, and get it down on paper with my daughter, so that it does not disappear into the ether of time. *Lest we Forget,* as Rudyard Kipling wrote. If it should help just one person who is suffering with mental health issues in the home, either themselves or with a loved one, I will be content.

My father's return to us from four years as a prisoner of the Japanese out in the Far East during World War Two had unforeseen and painful consequences for our family, which reverberated for decades afterwards. The loving and joyful plans that my mother, Beatrice, and I had made for his eagerly anticipated homecoming were bluntly ignored, and our jubilation receded slowly away from us like ripples on the surface of a pond. When Jack eventually walked back into our home, I describe his return as 'eventually' due to its exasperating nature and, about which you will read during the first few

chapters, he did not acknowledge me. When Jack stepped back through our rear kitchen door, he did not even acknowledge me. He avoided all eye contact and went out of his way to avoid any personal interaction. He begrudgingly talked to Beatrice, his wife, albeit only out of necessity. The memory of the hurt and rejection that caused me still pinches today.

So, Beatrice had organised a memorable trip from our village, North Baddesley – Badgley as Beatrice called it in her broad Hampshire tones – to Southampton. I was thrilled. During the previous four bleak and challenging years of World War Two, we had not enjoyed the luxury of adventures together. With Jack away, we had been on our own, and money was exceptionally tight. However, although I had no school, I woke early with excitement, listening out for Beatrice to stir from the room next to mine. We would meet Jack (christened as John but known as Jack) off his repatriation ship. For three and a half long years, he had been held as a prisoner of war by the Japanese. I was a well-practised eavesdropper of adult conversation, and I had overheard Beatrice telling our good friends and neighbours, Mr and Mrs Betteridge, about Jack's imminent return and how she'd planned the day as a surprise for me. She told them she'd booked a fancy afternoon tea for the three of us at the Dolphin Hotel to celebrate Jack's arrival home. Beatrice had received notice that he would return onboard the SS Corfu, which, conveniently for us, was docking in Southampton.

I was excited about the fancy afternoon tea. Beatrice had told our neighbours she had been saving up for such an occasion. She had wanted to go to the Dolphin Hotel for a long time. She had read that Jane Austen held her 18th birthday party

there, and Beatrice loved her books. So, the occasion would be a good excuse for her to be frivolous just for once and live a little. I regretted being so nosey and played along with her surprise. I lay in my bed and closed my eyes to try and summon up Jack's face and his handsome looks in my mind. I knew he was good looking from the photograph of him that Beatrice proudly displayed in our front room, but it was hard to remember us as a family prior to his departure in 1941.

Early on that Sunday morning, Beatrice and I caught the first bus down to Southampton. It was decorated in advertisements for Romsey's famous strawberry jam, from where the bus had originated. (The town of Romsey was also renowned for its well-known Strong's brewery, where Beatrice had been sent to work aged fourteen.) The vehicle was noisy, and I remember how damp and fusty it smelt. It travelled through our unremarkable village towards the famous port city a few times each day, but we rarely made the journey. It was just as well, because during the war years it was far from safe. Southampton was home to the famous Spitfire fighter plane, built at the Supermarine factory, which meant that it was a target for German bombs.

Some months earlier, on 8th May 1945, we had celebrated VE Day with a fabulous street party in our small village cul-de-sac. Back in the 1940s and 50s, Church Close had a wonderful community feel and was a great place to grow up. Despite the food rationing, Beatrice, who, for some odd reason, everyone in the close called Hart, pitched in with all the neighbours to make party food. We all sat out at a long table to eat, and then we danced and played games, including musical chairs. The vast United States Army gathering at the top of our village had by

now packed up and left our playing fields, having used them as an assembly point for embarking troops for The D Day landings in Northern France. The skies above us had become quiet once again, and we no longer had to worry about flying shrapnel, which once visited our home during the night, breaking our windows. Unfortunately, we could not replace them, and they had to be patched up with tape and board. Beatrice was proud of her home, not having had a proper one growing up, and it irritated her that the broken window was at the front on display. She convinced herself that it was not too noticeable and, with the night time blackout rule during the war, designed to hinder German bombing raids, it mattered not. She hoped the local council would repair them at some point, but the windows remained like that for some time. There were more critical repairs to deal with in the city.

Beatrice dipped into her hard saved-up funds for the trip to Southampton. She said it was imperative that we looked our absolute best for such a special occasion. She went all out by sewing us both new dresses from some second hand cast-offs. Her sewing skills had been popular in the village during the war, and for a small charge she often undertook dressmaking and alteration jobs for our neighbours. This provided us with a few extra pennies to live on. I remember Beatrice borrowing a burgundy felt hat from our neighbour, Mrs Betteridge. While we were on the bus, I noticed a man staring at Beatrice, and so, curious to see what he was so fascinated by, I took a long sideways glance at her too. She was utterly oblivious to the attention as she sat silently staring out of the bus window with the ship's arrival notice clutched tightly to her chest. I remember noticing

that she had applied some face powder and a touch of pink rouge to her cheeks. Her lips were shiny, and she looked perfect. It was the first time I had ever seen her wear makeup.

For four years it had just been the two of us, and we had kept each other's spirits up and helped each other deal with everyday life. Without Jack's income, Beatrice had taken up a full-time job at the local railway yard, moving railway sleepers and carrying out track repairs. I only realised much later what a tough job that was. (Incidentally, as you'll read later in my story, this turned out to be amusingly ironic.) She worked alongside many other women on the home front to fulfil the jobs of the men who'd been sent away to war. After the First World War, when women had stepped in to do jobs such as ticket collecting and administrative roles, the railway companies re-evaluated the contribution they could provide in times of crisis. With World War Two looming, and with the knowledge they would lose most of their workforce once again, they recruited women to work within the infrastructure of the railway operation, including inspections and maintenance work. The women more than proved themselves capable, but, sadly, any future employment after the war was curtailed. The returning men required their jobs back, and so the women were relieved of their roles.

I admired Beatrice so much, as she bicycled to and from work every day in her blue dungarees and her hair tied up in a scarf. I do not remember ever hearing her complain about life, and she always had a smile on her face that could illuminate a dark room. We rarely crossed swords. When I think of her today, I am in awe of her memory. Whilst Beatrice worked, I spent time with my Granny Em, Jack's Mother, who was frail and

sick with worry about her son being a prisoner of war in a far-off country she did not know. To exacerbate matters, Jack's much younger brother, Albie, was serving in the Royal Army Ordnance Corps in Europe.

Jack received his call-up papers and enlisted into the British Army on 22nd October 1940. He joined the 135th Field Regiment Royal Artillery. Before his unit was deployed overseas, they spent twelve months training in and around coastal areas of the UK, namely Norfolk, rehearsing I believed, for a coastal invasion attempt by the Germans. Before his enlistment, Jack had followed his father into employment on the railway. He worked heavy labouring jobs on the Romsey to Southampton line. His father had been a porter and ticket collector at the station at Porton in Wiltshire and they had lived in the tied railway cottages. From Porton, the family were returned to Kings Somborne, from where their families originated, to work at Horsebridge Station. That was followed by a short stint at Stoneham, finally ending up at Redbridge Station, Southampton. Jack would later describe his pre-war work experience as lifesaving. (Again, just as it was with Beatrice, Jack's railway employment will go on to become a source of great irony later in the story.)

I am recounting my story from my childhood memories, from things Beatrice told me, and, much later, from conversations I had with Jack himself. Jack passed away in 1991. Towards the end of his life, for some curious reason, he suddenly wanted to talk to me again about his time as a POW out in the Far East. I often wonder if he needed to explain it all again to me, a kind of apology, not that an apology was ever necessary. I can't be

sure. He also opened up to my daughter as she sat patiently listening to him when he was unwell. I understand from the families of other POW veterans that they often start speaking of their wartime experiences when death is near, so I wonder how common it is. My daughter was exceptionally close to Beatrice and Jack and spent much of her childhood with them. Beatrice taught her valuable sewing and baking skills, and she became Jack's mate. They were as thick as thieves. On one occasion, I discovered her picking out horses for the races – he showed her how he studied form and filled in his betting slips. Jack and I had our only big argument over that, because I knew how often he had left Beatrice short of funds because of his gambling. He had developed a nasty betting habit in the POW camps, which remained with him for life. On the other hand, and to be fair, I think I was envious of their relationship. Jack was a fantastic grandfather. They developed a bond that lasted, without interruption, from when she was a baby. I often wondered how much he reflected on that.

Before he left us for the war, I could only remember Jack as a big, strong bear of a man with enormous hands. I vaguely recalled the three of us being on the sand. Beatrice said it was a weekend in a bed and breakfast guesthouse by the sea in Swanage, during some home leave before he was deployed in October 1941. I cannot imagine how we got there and back with little money and no transport of our own. Jack's army pay must have stretched to allow the rare treat for us all, probably because they had no idea when, or even if, they would see each other again. I did remember going with Beatrice to watch Jack play football locally, and I knew his favourite dinner was a traditional

Sunday roast, especially the roast potatoes. There were a few photographs about the house to keep those memories alive, especially the one we had taken before he left. The photo was on the windowsill at the foot of the stairs, and I looked at it every day. I tried to imagine him in our home again and us being together doing everyday family things. Still, as the years passed, and despite Beatrice's best efforts to keep her husband's presence alive in our home, he became just a handsome man in a photograph.

After the war, Jack explained to us that following our trip to Swanage, the regiment had sailed from Gourock in Scotland on 31st October 1941, aboard a Polish ship called Sobieski. Further troopships from Liverpool joined their convoy, and together they sailed northwest. Once out in the North Atlantic Ocean, they were escorted by the United States Navy, despite the US not being officially involved in WW2 at that point. The men believed they were heading to Basra in the Middle East. They had been trained for the desert and were duly equipped for that theatre of war. Jack's troopship, Mount Vernon, which he boarded in Nova Scotia, was redirected straight to Singapore mid sail. Jack never reached Basra. I have no recollection of Jack leaving us. No big goodbyes, no tears, and no big send-off. He simply disappeared from our home and from my life. Beatrice had said nothing to me about his leaving, but later Gran revealed that he had left during the night to avoid any dramas. Apparently, Jack was not a man for emotional scenes.

For months after Jack's departure, Beatrice and I would race each other down the stairs each morning to see if the postman

had brought us a letter from him. We hoped it would tell us where he was and what was happening to him, but nothing ever arrived – there was no communication from him at all. Beatrice said she did not expect long romantic letters, but he had promised to keep us regularly informed. I remember how she fretted when nothing came from him, repeating phrases such as, "It is most unusual" and "Not a good sign." Meanwhile, we sat and wrote Jack a letter every weekend, giving him any small news we had and local gossip reports from our neighbours. I would enclose one of my many crayon masterpieces and imagined my artwork mounted on the walls surrounding wherever he slept. We must have sent hundreds of letters over the four years and never once doubted they would find their way to him. I know now, because Jack told us years later, that when he was in the POW camps, he only ever received one letter from us, and by then it was already a year old. Fortuitously, it was the only letter in which we had enclosed an updated photograph of Beatrice and me. I often wonder today where all our other letters disappeared to. Could they be out there somewhere? I remember Jack teasing me once by telling me that when censoring the mail, some Japanese officer probably took a liking to my crayoned pictures and stole them for his office wall.

It would be a full six months before we heard anything of Jack. It was of him, but not from him. The communication finally arrived on our doormat in March 1942, when Beatrice was nearly at the end of her rope with the lack of information. The letter was addressed to her, and it was from the Royal Artillery Manning and Records Office in Footscray, Kent. It was dated 20th March 1942.

Dear Madam,

According to the records in this office, your husband 1094212 Gunner J W Hart Royal Artillery was serving in Malaya when the Garrison of Singapore capitulated on 15th February 1942. Every endeavour is being made through diplomatic and other channels to obtain information concerning him, and it is hoped that he is safe, although he may be a prisoner of war. Immediately any information is obtained, it will be sent to you, but in the meantime, it is regretted that it will be necessary to post him as missing in action.

Yours faithfully
Colonel Officer In Charge

I remember her loudly exclaiming the words Malaya and Singapore. As you might imagine, we didn't have a house full of books, and what my mother needed right then was an atlas. Despite leaving school at just twelve years old, Beatrice was clever. She loved reading and was always back and forth to the library. She knew Malaya wasn't in the Middle East, where Jack believed his regiment was being deployed. Nevertheless, she wanted to see for herself. I was told to grab my coat, and we took off immediately to the local vicarage at the top of the village armed with the letter. Beatrice said the vicar would most likely have an atlas. She was right, and after reading our letter, he kindly allowed us to take it home for as long as we needed it. We poured over that atlas for hours, speculating as to how Jack

came to be in Malaya. It would be many years later before we discovered those exact details.

It transpired that Jack's regiment had sailed as part of Winston Churchill's CT5 Convoy, which had initially headed northwest across the Atlantic to Halifax, Nova Scotia. The men then boarded larger, converted, troop-carrying ships. Jack's was the USS Mount Vernon, which sailed south as part of a sizable, protected convoy, down to The Port of Spain in Trinidad, and on to South America. The convoy then headed east and crossed the Atlantic again towards Cape Town in South Africa. Upon arrival, the troops enjoyed a few days of shore leave hosted by local families. They were supposed to proceed northwards up the east coast of Africa, stopping off at Mombasa, before heading towards the Persian Gulf to Basra. However, the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbour on 7th December 1941, bringing the US officially into the war. The following day, the Japanese made a successful land invasion in Malaya. Following these developments, Winston Churchill, with agreement from the US Government, redirected Jack and his comrades directly to Singapore.

The USS Mount Vernon made its planned stop in Mombasa on Christmas Day to refuel and take on supplies, and the men were allowed briefly ashore for exercise. Upon leaving the Kenyan city, they headed east to join up with an alternative convoy already en route to Singapore. I remember Jack telling us how frustrating it was when they stopped briefly at the Maldives for water and fuel but weren't allowed off the ship. He described the islands as beautiful and once pointed them out to me on a map. Unfortunately, the price of their sudden and necessary

reroute was that their artillery and other vital equipment was loaded onto another ship in their original convoy. They were assured there would be plenty of equipment available to them in Singapore. Of course, this was not to be the case, and Jack told us if it had not been for the dogged determination of their esteemed and much respected leader Colonel Toosey, to resupply his units, the 336 Battery, and others, would have been resupplied as infantry rather than as gunners.

A further telegram arrived at our door stating only that Jack was 'Reported captured at The Fall of Singapore – on a casualty list – whereabouts unknown.' Of course, Beatrice found the positive in such a short message. It confirmed Jack was alive, and it was certainly better news than simply 'Missing in Malaya.' She reasoned that because Jack was injured, the Red Cross and our government would see to it that he came home soon. She was expecting too much, of course. Following receipt of the card, we heard nothing further from the War Office or Jack. The emotional and financial strain it put on Beatrice was clearly visible. It was tough for her and, being an orphan, she had no close family of her own to fall back on. Finally, after twelve long months, a weathered and undated piece of card covered in Japanese symbols and English handwriting appeared on the doormat. Beatrice stared at it for a while but quickly picked it up when she recognised Jack's distinctive left-handed writing. She held it with her fingertips at a distance, as though it were poisonous. Her face lit up when she read the brief, censored message. Jack informed us that he was in Japanese hands as a POW. He said he was OK and gave no mention of any injury. He was held at a prison camp but didn't say which one or where