

Sojourn

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A novel written by

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PART ONE

Chapter One

AT FOUR in the afternoon the skies over Maprik – latitude 3°38'00"S, longitude 140°3'00"E, elevation 815 feet – caved in. Everyone knew the time. That's how it was for those stationed at the regimental aid post in that village 20 miles inland from the Bismarck Sea. On the northern shores of Papua, the ides of March 1945. No-one really cared exactly where it was. It was a very basic affair. A clock dangled from a nail fixed to the timber stile of the prefabricated room. The young nurse from the Australian Army Medical Women's Service didn't need to consult it. It was four o'clock, give or take the odd minute or two. Outside, the heavens had opened and who knows how many inches had fallen in the last five minutes. It would cease abruptly in about half an hour. It was the same as yesterday and the day before. Expect the same for the next week or two, she'd been told.

She wasn't expecting any let-up in the heat – outside or inside. But it was the damp that got to everybody. Her sweaty uniform held little resemblance to that in which she'd done her meagre training. A wash out at the end of her shift (whenever that might be) hopefully dry enough to don again by the next. No ironing, just a simple fold and set out on the small table beside her bed. But she wasn't there for her looks.

Around her was a hive of activity as army MOs and other medics attended casualties. Among them a young soldier, Richard Osborn, a mere youth, a wound to his upper abdomen – not overly serious but enough to make him drift in and out of consciousness following his dose of pentothal. Others were not so fortunate.

“Richard?...can you still hear me? Richard, is that the name?” asked the Medical Officer, a Major in his forties attending him. Tall and athletic, had he sported a pencil line moustache, he could well have

passed as a matinee idol, more at home in Sherwood Forest than the rainforests of New Guinea.

Richard mumbled... hardly coherent but it was enough to assume he answered in the affirmative as the Major and his team went about stitching the wound.

“You’re a lucky man, you hear me? You’ll live to tell the tale. But not if you’re going to play the hero again, you hear? You’ve got a bit of a busted rib. We’ve got most of the slivers out and there doesn’t seem to be any other foreign matter there, so we’re going to patch you up now and we’ll give you something which should stop any infection. All it needs is a bit of rest down south. Before you know it you’ll be in like Flynn again up here,” he reassured the casualty.

The nurse, on hearing this, came alongside.

He continued to converse ad hoc with his assistants. “He should be all right down south if they keep him pumped full of the stuff. Thank Christ for that Florey bloke. I studied with him at Adelaide you know.”

“Where is he now?” came a rhetorical response.

“Oxford, I presume.”

“And here *we* are...!”

“Sir,” the nurse interrupted.

He turned his attention to her.

“I’m afraid we’re almost out of it, sir,” she informed him.

“Penicillin?”

“Yes, sir.”

He shook his head in despair. “Why is it that every other bastard can get their hands on it except us,” he mumbled as they finalised the operation. In the background another patient screamed in agony.

“I’m getting too old for this,” the Major conceded with an undisguised sigh. He moved robotically to the screaming patient,

leaving the nurse to organise the task of transferring young Richard to the recovery tent.

FOR THE three-hour flight out of Moresby, Richard remained in a morbidly tranquil state – except when the aircraft went into its periodic roller-coaster mode, creaking and groaning as the thermals tried valiantly to either sling it into orbit or slam it into the mountaintops below. The drone of the labouring Pratt & Whitney twin wasp engines lulled those on board into a kind of careless stupor. But at least the lulling dulled the pain. Penicillin may have been hard to come by but at least Richard had been fortunate to receive a healthy dose after the operation. Decent analgesics were another matter, even more rare in that part of the woods.

There was little to do about it until touchdown in North Queensland. Hopefully something there would take over the lulling.

The drone of the engines was not enough to dampen all senses. Word went around that they would be flying to Cairns, on the coast. Not to Mareeba in the Tablelands. Something about a mishap – another one – on the airstrip. Might take a while to clear. Nowhere, it seemed, was immune to disaster in wartime.

“THE ONLY way to the hospital and the treatment you need at the moment is by train,” a bloke in uniform advised the casualties as they were loaded from the Douglas C-47 into the several field ambulances on the tarmac. “Shouldn’t be too bad for most of you.”

Richard didn’t really care. He gazed around the place. Nothing familiar. He did know he wasn’t in New Guinea and that he was in reasonably safe hands. And he was on the ground: no risk of going into orbit nor slamming into a mountainside. Nor for that matter being mangled on an elementary airstrip.

The swaying of the hospital ambulance train along the narrow gauge railway worked in sympathy with the peculiar click-clack of the wheels. It created a pleasant syncopation that calmed the consignment of wounded. There were no thermals playing havoc down here. But there were still plenty of creaks and groans. Most were ignorant of their whereabouts let alone their destination – except that it was a step closer to home. But the passing parade of acres of banana palms, and the fields of cane constituted an entirely new realm for Richard. From his position he watched them lowing in the tropical sun, gently ebbing and flowing in the phantom breeze. They seemed to be spending their day as if chewing the cud, caring little else about the world around them. Nothing much, it seemed, was happening in haste in this part of the world. This despite the frantic hostilities still raging in the not too distant lands. And not too distant to the west, through the wispy veil of slate-grey smoke belching from the loco, Richard spied a range of hills lingering beyond the plantations. But they weren't the mountains with which he identified: no snow-capped peaks in these whereabouts.

And as he gazed at their purple-green profile, out beyond the soot-smear window of his modified carriage, he suspected an enemy lurked somewhere in their dark recesses.

FOR THE most part, the current crop of patients at the 2nd/2nd AGH had avoided serious life-threatening injuries and were now embracing some well-earned rest and recreation. The emphasis was indeed on recreation as much as rest – it kept the patients occupied not only in body but in soul as well. There was no time for let-up, no time for these young men to ponder their futures.

Many, now fully mended, lingered in rudimentary uniform, recuperating on the verandah of the Recreation Hut, pending transfer to one of the Convalescent Depots. No more the blue trousers, white shirt and red tie.

No longer casualties. Soldiers awaiting orders. Pity they might have to leave these generous facilities for less salubrious conditions. No more tennis with the staff, or dancing, or movies in the arch-roofed structure affectionately known by all as the “Igloo”.

Pity. For many, this would be more than civilian life might ever offer them – should they be fortunate to survive their next posting, wherever that might be.

But at the moment there was no room in the ‘Con Deps’ for any more of this blue trouser mob. So home was still the wards of the AGH.

And while they awaited orders, they watched as another small convoy of army field ambulances entered the grounds from the railhead. Poor bastards, the observers thought as the occupants were systematically assisted from the vehicles by the gathering of orderlies, nurses and other young women in similar uniform. Their welcoming smiles and unflappable devotion helped replace any feelings of apprehension with comfort and ease. These young women, most of whom had forgone their chance at the reckless juvenile pursuits of civilian life, were the cheapest and most effective opiate available. But they told no lies and never betrayed the reality of what lay ahead for these soldiers.

“Welcome to the Second Second Army General Hospital, Rocky Creek, Queensland,” came the cold salutation from Colonel Andrew Faldow, Commanding Officer. “Not to be confused with the interlopers, the Second Sixth across the way,” he continued, nodding in the direction of a similar facility some three hundred yards away. “Who, by the way, won’t be with us much longer,” he added by way of explaining the work being undertaken to dismantle the facility.

Displaying the physical attributes of a seasoned rugby player, Faldow’s light brown hair with a hint of ginger, and bushy eyebrows suggested a Celtic ancestry. No-one really knew his age. Most guesses

put him in his mid-forties. He never let on that he was in fact in his fifties, a career soldier who, in his own words, ‘had the great fortune to serve in the Great War’.

By his side, his ‘lieutenant’, Matron Gwynneth Ondin, stood steadfast. Some said that she should’ve been on the front line. The Japs would soon learn who the enemy was. Comforting to know you’re in good hands. But Faldow’s recitation of the rules and regulations of His Majesty the King’s Imperial Forces was a terse reminder that wounded though they might be they were still soldiers nevertheless.

Designated the 2nd/2nd AGH, the complex nestled in the almost civilized region in the sylvan, sub-tropical hills, thirty-five miles inland from the coast, eight hundred and fifty from Brisbane. The wet, or rather this region’s variation of it, was all but over and the dry season was making its presence felt. Yet for all that, pleasant natural greenery still survived, complemented by numerous well-tended gardens and flower beds, adding hope and blessing for all in its midst.

In effect, the facility was little more than a tent city. Each ward consisted of a series of connected canvas tents intersected and bisected by an administration section forming a structure resembling a cross. Whether this was by design to reflect the prevailing Judea-Christian culture of the nation or to satisfy best practice and efficient design, nobody ever questioned. And Spartan though its design was, the complex was something of a resort compared with the seething jungle of New Guinea – the Rocky River Country Club some called it.

Even so, as with the 2nd/6th AGH, there was evidence, here and there, of small sections being dismantled as efficiently as they had been assembled in 1942. No-one could say why. Perhaps the Generals knew something – something they’d rather keep under their hats for the time being.

A SINGLE 60-watt light bulb that burned in the narrow walkway between the Treatment Room and the Sister's Office struggled to illuminate the adjoining wards. Young Richard Osborn lay motionless in his bed in the pallid softness of the residual light that barely managed a reflection off the glossy white bedstead.

Richard's body was on the mend. The benefit of youth no doubt helped, as did the antibiotics.

But there were the other wounds that also needed healing. The best medicine for that was the priceless benevolence of the young nurses

The heavy canvas walls of the structure slowly heaved in response to the breeze gathering outside. At the far end of the ward the young nurse, Thelma adjusted bed linen, as is a nurse's wont. In this part of the world the evenings were usually pleasantly balmy but a chill would set in as the night progressed, often requiring the donning of the lightweight, grey military issue Onkaparinga blanket. Thelma was one of those women too often taken for granted, who offered so much more than was officially asked of them – but was still expected of them anyway by those in Canberra and Whitehall. She presented a welcome picture to all in her midst. It was the way she carried herself, a certain style that added extra credence to her uniform.

All was quiet, other patients were either fast asleep or lay staring into that ill-defined territory through which one journeys from trauma to recovery.

Richard issued a strained murmur as if he were protesting against a bout of indigestion.

Acknowledging this, Thelma made her way to his bedside. She observed him a while. His was a handsome face but a tortured one as well. But she knew it had nothing to do with indigestion. He sensed the

presence of a woman. “Mother... mother....,” he murmured catatonically.

Moved by this, Thelma took hold of his hand. His fingers closed involuntarily to grip the tips of hers and she felt a maternal swelling in her bosom. She leaned over and gently kissed him on the forehead – she could not fathom why she did this – and her gossamer breath cushioned her charitable lips. It was an angel blessing him and Richard’s hand responded in appreciation ... and then went limp again. She was not concerned. She re-positioned it by his thigh on the bed. No words were spoken but that did not remain the case for long.

PRIVATE ANDREW BLAKEY was an optimist through and through. He had a repertoire of gags and anecdotes to keep a music hall in fits for a season and more. His talents were always appreciated between reels during picture shows in the Igloo.

“I had a chance to join with JC Williamson, you know,” he informed his recuperating audience, among them young Richard reclined on a sturdy cane lounge, taking the time to do absolutely nothing. Blakey eased his right leg a little. “Mum reckoned there was no future in it.”

He knew he would rue the day he declined the offer from the Williamson troupe. It was a way out for the boy from Bankstown who could not only tell a yarn but could also sing and dance. No-one ever told him about the Entertainment Division.

Richard declined to respond.

“No regrets, mind you. Though they say I’ll probably never dance again.”

Certainly not with the better part of his right calf lying somewhere between Buna and Kokoda.

“Still, remarkable what modern medicine can do these days,” was his catchcry. No-one was going to say he would never sing and dance ever again. No-one but he.

Richard still didn't buy into this discourse.

Unfazed, Blakey hobbled along on his crutches to tell a yarn or two to whoever else might listen.

THEY PASSED the days as best they could. A myriad new worlds: such as archery, basket weaving, sewing classes, philately, gardening, presented themselves to these souls furloughed, temporarily or otherwise, from the physical fighting front.

In the Igloo, even with their various disabilities, patients participated in activities with enthusiasm. And why not? The Igloo, for all intents and purposes, was their Raffles. The gentle whirl of the ceiling fans caressed the tropical air that flowed unhindered in through the flyscreen doors – doors that weren't always effective against the ubiquitous hungry mosquito. A bit ironic, considering the research into malaria taking place within some rudimentary laboratories in their midst. The damned pests were ever-present, regardless of the weather: even at this time of the year beyond the end of the hot wet, even at this comfortable altitude.

Outside, the parrots clattered and chattered. They had their small battles to confront daily. That was their natural lot – but for them life was innocuous. They didn't contract malaria.

Other patients found latent yearnings fulfilled in the generously stocked library in the Recreation Hut, an annexe to the Igloo. At one end of the room, Thelma rested a hand tenderly on the shoulder of 'Lucky Eddy' McIntyre, incapacitated with both his right leg and right arm heavily bandaged. She briefly checked that the envelope in her other hand was properly addressed. The soldier's juvenile face was

devoid of animation, personality reduced to that of primitive amoeba. His eyes seemed to be no more than hollow sockets as if they found the world to which they were windows lacked any meaning or character. At least he wouldn't be going back to the front line. Only light duties for him from now on.

"I'll get it to the dispatch when I finish up here."

"No, no," Eddy admonished her. "You could post it yourself, for me, couldn't you? Please?"

"But all the post has to go through the dispatch over in convalescent. It's regulations," she reminded him. Then she saw a spark of personality, a pleading in his eyes.

"It's just that I've heard that letters get lost in there, that's all," he feigned concern.

But she wasn't convinced.

"You could post it when next in town... couldn't you? It's not urgent. I just want to make sure."

She briefly looked around, aware that she was biting her lip, hoping no-one would notice. Her heart raced. "I'll make sure it gets posted as soon as possible," she whispered, "... in Atherton on my next leave," she reassured him. She gathered up a handcrafted cushion, one of many courtesy of the numerous volunteer women's auxiliaries throughout Australia. Fluffing it up, she placed it beneath his leg, elevated upon an old timber crate. "Soon be on the mend," she tried to reassure him, if not herself. He was but one of so many others whom she knew would never be on the mend.

She looked around the ward again, her conscience checking for witnesses. Only Richard at the far end of the room doing no more than biding his time, and he showed no inclination toward incrimination.

Their eyes met but neither knew exactly how to respond. He sensed that she was about to progress further along the room toward

him. It was difficult to suppress his excitement at the prospect of having this young lady in his midst. He was never the overtly emotional being but he, none-the-less, felt those changes within that take place involuntarily when the chemistry seems right. Most of the other patients could read the unspoken communion between the two and had a bit of a snigger among themselves. All were envious but none so precious that they could not condone the apparent favouritism she displayed for this most handsome of men.

His cheeks flushed and the back of his hands seem to be exposed, emanating an undeniable radiance. And he could not ignore the prickling sensation in his nether region. Any other High Anglican might feel guilty about this involuntary obedience to the fundamental urges – penance, however, was the thing furthest from his mind. But then he suffered a minor cardiac arrhythmia when Thelma was intercepted by a senior matron who approached her with an air of urgency about her. Such is the debilitating consequence of a blow to the heart.

After a quick briefing and an understanding nod from Thelma, the pair rushed off, the young nurse hastily stuffing Lucky Eddy's envelope inside her tunic, nestled securely against her bosom that held promise of fulfilment in the future. Richard could not disguise his disappointment from the others in the room – but then nor could they theirs.

Chapter Two

A FULL surgical team surrounded Private Andrew Blakey lying anaesthetised on the operating table. For all the care taken and consideration given for their patients, it was inevitable that sometimes things went wrong. Blakey was one destined to re-educate the practitioners and add a small sentence to a small paragraph in one small chapter in the constantly revised medical textbooks. Bush typhus made

more than one soldier, healthy or otherwise, a grovelling, delirious mess. But sometimes it went beyond this.

“Obviously the stuff’s not the be all and end all, like they said it was,” muttered Col. Andrew Faldow, cursing the inefficacy of penicillin against the *Rickettsia* microorganisms. Faldow was not only the CO of 2nd/2nd AGH; he was also a damned fine surgeon, with credentials as long as the proverbial arm. But not even he could reverse the insidious devastation wreaked by the typhus-induced ulcer that had developed on Blakey’s mutilated leg. It had finally succumbed to the dreaded clostridium bacteria. Try as he did to delicately handle the affected tissue, orange-red like a red back spider’s armory, the subcutaneous gas bubbles crackled and hissed and wept the characteristic brown fluid, the distinctive odour most foul. Like rust, it never slept. There was no turning back. There was only one ‘cure’ left.

Faldow completed the arduous task of amputating the lower half of Blakey’s right leg. Everyone knew the prognosis was not good. Combatting the fever was one thing. The body’s reaction to mutilation was another.

“Get used to it girlie,” said Faldow, as Thelma screwed up her nose.

She’d experienced the nauseating smell of diarrhoea dysentery, the excrement from infants in the children’s hospital, the ever-present vomit, the fetid stench of traditional drop toilets that were at the mercy of the tropics, the humidity and the heat. But there was nothing to compare this with – this putrefaction. It defied all and any sensory codification, appalled the palate, fouled the olfactory and corrupted the memory, a sensation beyond the faculty even of poets and wordsmiths.

“There’ll be plenty more where this came from,” the surgeon advised, adding that it was either amputation or death for this young soul. “Must be the worst thing that God could impose on a young man

who should be home building a family!” he declared of gas gangrene that turned the stomach of even the most hardened surgeon. He handed the blood stained saw to one of the other nurses then handed the amputated leg to Thelma who, without flinching or further display of discernible emotion, accepted it.

“The lime pit, sir?”

Faldow looked at her, then at the once useful limb. “No, not this one. Keep it for the wet collection. See what those laboratory boys can make of it.”

She knew what to do with it and was thankful for the chance to step away from this abomination and clear her senses, if only momentarily.

“Here’s one the Japs won’t be getting their hands on,” said Faldow, more as an epitaph than declaration of victory. “Put him down as A class.”

Private Andrew Blakey, *‘Unfit for further duty’*.

A few moments later Thelma returned and went about her business assisting the others with the finesse of a seasoned medico.

TWO DAYS elapsed before Thelma took it upon herself to inform the ward. “They’re flying dear Blakey home tomorrow,” she told Richard. “There’ll be a few tears I imagine at the funeral.”

Nobody saw her for a few days after that. She did what they all suspected and took a well-earned break, orders of Colonel Faldow – he was determined she wasn’t going to become the next casualty.

IN THE nurses’ dorms, with their canvas walls and corrugated iron roofs, the bare earthen floors had been replaced a year earlier by concrete. The simple canvas partitions and a closable flap provided a

modicum of dignity and privacy for the occupants of each 'room' leading off the central corridor.

Private Edward 'Eddy' McIntyre's letter rested upon Thelma's small all-purpose desk and glared out at her demanding her attention. She couldn't recall putting it there. After hurriedly removing her soiled uniform following Blakey's ordeal, it had fallen from her bosom on to the floor where it lay for countless days. Thelma had been too exhausted to clean her digs to the standard she expected of herself. For some reason she had escaped the wrath of the fastidious matron. Perhaps allowances had been made. She picked up the envelope, about to review its contents, when her attention was drawn to the open canvas flap. A fellow nurse, Ada Levine, stood there in the aperture. Thelma clasped the envelope to her bosom, unable to stem the rush of blood to her cheeks. But her colleague's simple, compassionate finger to her sealed lips satisfied Thelma of her confidence. Ada lowered the flap leaving Thelma alone in her confessional.

There seemed little point now in sending the letter to its intended destination. Alice Springs seemed an eternity away and the news within might never be delivered anyway. She felt damned for not having sent it. She felt as damned for what she was about to do. It was breaking every rule in the book, military or otherwise – but she opened the envelope anyway. Eddy's intentions were clear in the shaky script. Someone should have known. The censors would have seen it, his death prevented maybe. A cry for help unheeded. A pity his lucky parents' second prize in Tattersall's lottery hadn't been able to buy him a more innocuous reprieve from the armed conflict before he signed up.

Another needless casualty.

WORD SOON passed around the AGH, via the "Rocky Creek telegraph". The Lee Enfield 303 was considered lethal over a distance

of 500 yards. But discharged at close range, it took considerable effort to clean the remnants of brain matter from the canvas wall of the tent against which the hapless Eddy managed to lean in order to carry out the deed. An enquiry would have to be held to determine how he managed to get his hands on the weapon. That would be no more than a formality. But other questions would be asked by individuals – questions that would not be directed at anyone in particular, nor answered by anyone in particular. These were questions, which did not necessarily have logical answers. Perhaps that's why The Almighty was invented – it had to be someone's will. And although they'd each in their own way find answers, the haunting question, the question of the eons, could never be answered. The question asked by all in times of conflict, the question beyond even an Almighty, the question that plagued Thelma, and her peers, and all the young men entrusted to their care – in war, just who is the enemy?

RICHARD LAY in bed, for all intents and purposes asleep. But his eyes remained open. His gaze fixed on the variegated shadows cast by the single distant light bulb on the valleys and crests of the corrugated iron roof above him. His thoughts ebbed and flowed with the gentle heaving of the canvas walls.

His eyes soon wandered toward Thelma, doing her rounds, checking patient charts. Catching his gaze, she responded with a blushing smile before moving further into the dimness, to the bed next to him, all the while conscious of the overt attention the young soldier was paying her. Finally she sidled to his bed and proceeded to check his charts, doing her best to ignore him – not out of malice or deference but simply because her professionalism told her that this was neither the time nor place.

But he was driven. His thoughts now focussed.

“Nurse,” he whispered with intent but mindful not to disturb the others even though few were actually fast asleep.

She rolled her eyes and, feigning innocence, went to his side. He held out his left hand and she took his wrist on the pretence of reading his pulse. In a deft move, he retracted his arm slightly and her hand nestled in his. She felt his fingers embrace hers. She rolled her eyes and teasingly looked away from him. She noticed a wristwatch on the small table alongside his bunk. It wasn't so much a status symbol, but she saw in that jewelry a man of distinction, a breed different from the majority of soldiers she had met. He was a well-proportioned man, considering, and that made him attractive. But there was something in his demeanour, his articulation, his manners, which set him apart.

He placed his other hand towards his lips. “It's quite painful, just here.”

She smiled obligingly as he indicated the other patients. She surveyed the ward and satisfied that all was quiet on the front, she moved closer to him. He sat upright, she leaned forward, but conscious of protocol, remained nestled on the edge of the bed.

He didn't persist. “I need a bit of help,” he sighed, leaning back against the not so comfortable flock-filled pillows.

She tittered affectionately. “Come on, I'm not that sort of a –,”

“I'm serious,” he interrupted. “... I'm sorry... I'm afraid...”

Her tone changed:

“That's understandable. Especially after what's happened these last few – ”

“No. No,” he interrupted again. “Not for myself ... but *of* myself ... the first man I ever killed...”

He broke off a moment... a silent plea to her... He found it so difficult now to face her.

“Suddenly I find... it's a *different* war....”

He checked himself. The last thing he wanted was to talk about 'war'. What to do to escape from all that.

She leaned forward, gently stroked his cheek, turned him to face her again, delved into his eyes. Her tender years had been hardened somewhat by her present circumstances and she found it difficult to comprehend his words.

"...not the one we're all meant to be fighting," he tried to explain, looking around at his comrades.

She assessed her young soldier, tried to appreciate his real mission but all she could do was offer her indulgence. Richard's hands reached out now and gently held her face, slowly drawing it to his. This time she had no desire to resist and a comforting smile washed across her mouth. They embraced. She realised there could be consequences but she did not feel at all threatened by the prospect.

THELMA AGONISED for some days over Eddy's letter. She kept it in her small drawer beside her bed hoping no-one would dare discover it. Although the room was regularly inspected judiciously, unless there was reason to suspect something untoward, the drawer would remain off-limits. And who would have reason to suspect anything untoward?

She did not betray her circumstance: she went about her business as she should, as she had been trained. She would re-read the letter in the hope that there might be a word of advice to her, some indication as to what she should do with it. But she detected nothing. All she realised was that neither harm, nor good would come with its declaration. She crumpled it in her palm, trying to squeeze from it any life it might have sustained, as if the ink would somehow run from the pages and drip to the floor, to be swabbed away. She toyed with the idea of tearing the letter, first in two, in four, in eight, in how many pieces she lost count. She imagined the same with the envelope then carrying the confetti to

the end of the building, to the newly installed plumbed toilet, pulling the chain of the overhead cistern, watching the soggy scraps disappear.

And with them the truth? No. No, there was no erasing the truth.

She laid the sheet of paper on the bedside cabinet and flattened it as best she could, folded it into its original shape, returned it to its envelope and held it to her bosom, a final act of comfort to a newborn that didn't make it. Accepting the futility of it all, she deposited it into the drawer, interred, hopefully never to see the light of day again.

Yet another needless casualty.

THE OPEN door bore a simple, hand-painted sign that read *Matron-in-Chief*. Thelma reached in and knocked politely. An authoritative voice responded simply:

“Enter.”

Thelma obeyed and stood before the woman seated behind her desk in the small, Spartan office. Matron Odin was a woman possibly in her mid-forties – it was difficult to determine. Her face was weathered yet it was not ravaged. Every line, every crease and fold in her skin, were but sulci in a cortex that held more memories than she cared for.

Without looking up from her chore, Matron beckoned the young nurse to be seated in a wicker chair, the only other piece of furniture apart from a bookshelf overloaded with folders and sundry papers. Thelma complied and sat upright, speculating the reason for her summons. Matron attended to the task in hand and only when her paperwork was completed did she look up. She displayed no smile but there was gentleness in her thin lips, a certain solemnity.

“Congratulations,” she uttered, her eyes examining the youthful face before her – a rare breed, she was sure, who would forego the recklessness of youth for her vocation.

Thelma sat a moment, bemused.

“...on your performance in surgery,” Matron enlightened the young nurse. “It was a difficult task for a novice.”

The small beads that had appeared on Thelma’s forehead lost their glint of guilt and assumed the role of nature in this warm clime.

“How do you feel?”

“Good,” the apprentice replied automatically. Then she appraised her true feelings and reaffirmed her response... “Good.”

Her superior nodded her satisfaction and reflected a moment without taking her eyes of her junior. But before she could cause unease for the young nurse, she continued:

“It’s something we all have to go through at some stage. Best to get it over and done with. It prepares us for our later years. But right now it is important we remain focussed. Unfortunately our calling sometimes demands that we throw away all our emotions. You understand what I mean?”

Thelma simply nodded.

“Keep in mind that our patients are soldiers. All of them.”

She let Thelma reflect on this advice a moment before continuing:

“You understand?”

Thelma nodded.

Matron raised an eyebrow ever so slightly, educing evidence of commitment.

“Yes Matron,” Thelma committed.

“Good, good. We all did silly things when were young. But then you open your eyes and let the light in.” She did a cursory appraisal of her surrounds. “I discovered this. It’s a wonderful vocation. But it demands devotion... and sometimes also indifference.”

Thelma acknowledged this sentiment. Her superior may have appeared at times a little too stern but there was no doubt that there was

a sympathetic heart beating. She stood and retreated to the door and as she was about to exit, Matron Odin added:

“When this war is over, there’ll be a place for you, you realise this?”

Standing in the confines of the office, Thelma felt as though she was a party to a covenant with the Almighty. She nodded, acquiescing to the call and gave her superior cause to assume that there was nothing that would set this novice on a different path.

“That’ll be all,” she declared and without further ado returned to shuffling more paperwork.

Thelma returned to her quarters and sat on her bed and her eyes were drawn to the drawer of her little cabinet beside her bed.

REFRESHED BY recent rain showers, the sandy loam of Rocky Creek was revitalised, the garden plots were radiant like ruddy faces on joyful toddlers, and the whole establishment was endowed with a healthier disposition.

Through this Eden, relishing their break from duties, Thelma walked arm in arm with Ada, two chums comforted by a confederacy of confidants. Ada being Ada, it was time to cherish all that the war could not destroy. And satisfied there would be no formal repercussions from her indiscretion involving the McIntyre letter, Thelma wanted no more than to celebrate life. She required little prompting from Ada to savour the moment – a gentle nudge in the ribs, a knowing nod and a perky smile saw them part ways.

A recuperated Richard relished the invigorating air as he sat at a small folding card table borrowed from the Igloo and busied himself reading a letter. He ran his hands through his dark wavy hair, massaging his scalp, preparing to undertake an onerous task. He wiped them on his blue hospital trousers before picking up his fountain pen again. He

pondered, a moment, pen in mouth, almost reluctant to commit himself. There was a certain gravity to the moment as if he was about to sign a warrant or decree. He finally made the decision and signed it, reciting as he did so in a *sotto voce*:

“I remain your loving son, Richard.”

He folded the letter and placed it inside an envelope and, in a beautiful, controlled copperplate, addressed it. From a well-worn leather wallet he removed a two-and-a-half pence red King George VI Australian stamp. Without sealing the envelope, he affixed the stamp, held it at arms length and stared a moment at the address before deliberately screwing the cap back on the pen.

“How's my hero today?” Thelma interrupted, looking off and acknowledging the cheery smile from the departing Ada.

His moment of solace interrupted, he looked at the young nurse in simple dungarees and khaki blouse hovering beside him, her face softened by the shadows of the eucalypts high above the row of tents that formed the ward.

The term earned a cynical scoff.

“You know there's talk of an award,” she added softly, encouragingly. But still Richard remained unmoved.

Laying an angelic hand on his shoulder, she did well to placate the young soldier patient as only a nurse could do. “They'll be pleased to get that,” she said referring to the letter.

His huff was barely perceptible but she was astute enough to not intrude into his private turmoil.

“That's a very attractive pen,” she observed. “Don't see many of those.”

“A going away present from mother and father,” he said. Then he managed a polite smile. “No excuse not to write,” he added, replacing the pen in the breast pocket of his white hospital shirt.

“Good to see you're showing a better colour,” she said, changing tack. “Our sunny land up here seems to agree with you.”

He raised his face and peered beyond the tree canopy to the warmth of the sub-tropical sky. “I think I could get used to it,” he responded as he turned his attention back to his attractive interloper.

“Sounds like you’re making plans. I like a man with plans.”

She gazed at him a moment... until she realised she was in fact flirting and flitted her eyes in another direction.

“Meanwhile,” she offered with a sigh, “in a few days we'll move you over to the convalescent depot and they'll soon have you up and at 'em again. There's talk of major advances by the allies in Europe but...” – she chose her words – “But it's not over yet.”

Her demeanour suddenly changed and her attention now turned from him and centred on the arrival of an Army ambulance in the grounds fronting the ward. Richard mechanically turned his gaze in sync and was unnerved by the sight of yet another young casualty being helped from the vehicle into a wheelchair. He looked off beyond the surrounding eucalypts, beyond the fluttering Australian red Ensign, beyond his known world as he heard Thelma reiterate:

“Not over by a long shot.”

THELMA'S WORDS had hung heavy on Richard's mind that day and those that followed. There was no denying there was a war still to be won. He wandered aimlessly about the Convalescent Depot where he'd eventually been transferred, avoiding contact with the other patients as much as possible. No-one regarded him as petulant. His behaviour was not considered unusual. He was merely meditating – a practice encouraged by the various padres as an adjunct to recuperation.

But the medical staffers were adamant that he exercise the body and the soul. As part of the programme in the Depot he attended to

various gardening chores. He was indeed adept at things horticultural. And he felt his physique improve over the days.

“Coming on the bus trip?” a hoe-wielding comrade asked Richard as he mounded the rich loam back up around the rows of sprouting carrots: those that had survived the overnight attacks from the plethora of invaders, the possums, the rabbits, the odd fruit bat that had wandered far from sweeter pickings on the plains below, nearer to the coast. The garden was one of the few havens for Richard, a throwback perhaps from his younger days on the family property.

He hadn't given the excursion much thought since he first saw the publicity for the event posted on the notice board in the Igloo and he was ignorant of any arrangements. But he soon satisfied himself of the benefits of a short journey away from the AGH.

Chapter Three

IT WAS RUMOURED that some years earlier a 'motor omnibus' in Cairo had been 'souvenired' by Australian troops following the Alexandria campaign. Mysteriously, it made its way, along with an official consignment of other army vehicles, to a new home in Australia. And even more mysteriously it made its way to Rocky Creek where, since its arrival, it had been 'commissioned' to serve as a touring bus under the captaincy of the local bus driver from the nearby town of Mareeba.

At 09.00 hours of the 12th of April, 1945, the rickety bus of non-descript make and indistinct vintage pulled to a halt outside the Hut. The driver operated a lever near the gear stick and the door creaked partly ajar before snapping to attention to its fully open position. He manoeuvred his way out of the seat and grabbed a well-worn, sweat-stained Akubra from on top of the gear-box cover. He eased himself down the steps to the ground below, dusty now following some rainless

weeks and waved his hat to clear the flies. In his late fifties, with ruddy, clean-shaven face, he had an embryonic paunch, the makings of the all-Australian beer belly. Foodstuffs were obviously rationed but the amber fluid seemed to be in ready enough supply for those who sought it. He was an outstanding civilian and a fully-fledged Queenslander to boot. It ensued that his skills were considered part of the essential public services that enabled the war effort to operate as efficiently as it did – a credit to the commitment of the Australian people and an example to the rest of the world that commanded superior physical resources, if nothing much else. What's more, he had an uncanny ability to procure a variety of goods that for most other people were 'hard to come by'. There were never any questions asked by either party, neither vendor nor buyer.

Within the space of a few breaths those eligible and willing filed from the Hut – some in full uniform, some in hospital ward garb, some with walking sticks that in many cases had been fashioned from windfall branches from the surrounding trees, and some on crutches and assisted by an Orderly and two Red Cross volunteers.

“Les Matthews at your service,” the driver saluted with a flourish of his Akubra. “Welcome aboard.”

Courageously the party ascended the three steps and made their way down the aisle to the seats of their choice.

“Back of the bus, please, everyone,” came the calculated command from Les, smiling authoritatively at the Sister and the youthful NCO supervising the excursion. It may have been an officially sanctioned outing for the poor souls of the 2nd/2nd AGH but this was, for all intents and purposes, Les's bus. Bringing up the rear, Richard, in his blue trousers and white shirt, ascended the steps and, rather than negotiate the various stiff legs and crutches protruding the aisle, opted for the vacant front seat by the door across the aisle from the driver. Here he would bear the full brunt of Les' discourse on the attributes of

this, the most wonderful land on God's earth, the Atherton Tablelands! In the small bay at the very front, beneath the windscreen, was a sturdy metal box, three feet by one and a half by one and a half. For all intents and purposes, a massive toolbox. And considering the state of the jalopy, this would seem an essential pre-requisite for any venture over and above ten miles.

The youthful NCO assisted Sister aboard, a gentlemanly act without regard for military protocol. This was to be a social occasion. She had with her a clipboard and, reminding those present that they were still in the army and some formalities could not be ignored, she proceeded to call the roll.

Satisfied that all was in order, they took their seats.

Les negotiated the first step up, grabbed the vertical hand-rail, and leaned back toward the Hut. "Everyone get aboard," came the final call for passengers. "If ya can't get a board, get a plank," he added setting the tone for the rest of the trip.

As he struggled to ascend the final steps, the question on everyone's lips was answered: it became evident why he was not an active member of the fighting forces – he had already fought his battle in his younger years and lost out to poliomyelitis. Before taking his seat he gave a brief rundown of the itinerary. They would head first to the township of Atherton via the main road fronting the hospital complex, the Kennedy Highway. Then head south-east for 'a bit of a mystery tour of the coast.'

"It's a bit of a drive but no trouble for the old girl," he assured the passengers, patting the engine cover. "Take us a couple of hours so we'll get there in time to give you a chance to stretch the legs, so to speak," he said in his inimitable manner, prompting jibes and threats via waving crutches, "while we set up for a nice steak picnic lunch and maybe some refreshments."

The passengers were duly placated by this prospect.

Without further ado he manoeuvred his awkward body into his seat, coaxed the engine into life and pulled out of the hospital complex and on to the highway.

He may not have been the picture of sartorial elegance in an oversized pair of Bombay bloomers, freshly polished elastic-sided RM William boots and a short-sleeve, multi-hued shirt that could best be described as 'Hawaiian'. But Les Matthews did a most commendable impression of a master of ceremonies and a music hall entertainer.

"All right, ladies and gentlemen, let's not just sit here and feel miserable for ourselves. Remember, plenty of others worse off out there." And with a voice reminiscent of the great bass-baritone Peter Dawson, he burst into the chorus of *'The White Cliffs of Dover'*. It did the trick and before long even the most depressed of the troops had found their voice.

This was Les's standard ice-breaker and from experience he knew there would be a few teary eyes at the end. But he was the consummate psychologist, although he'd never really understood the meaning of the term. "Ladies and gentlemen, give yourselves a hearty round of applause. Last time I heard singing like that was Galdys Moncrieff at the Brisbane City Hall."

Amid the cheers and jeers, they did indeed applaud themselves and before they calmed down, Les once again took the upper hand. "Any requests? Your requests please, ladies and gentlemen."

A foolish move, maybe. But he was no fool, was our Les. His invitation had the immediate effect of enticing the passengers into thinking of those things of value and he was inundated with requests for just about every popular tune of the period. But he was in charge, make no mistake about that.

“Righteo then, how about we start of with a bit of Frank Sinatra. Now there’s a name you’ll all be talking about in the next few years,” a comment that brought jeers from the males but more than a few cheers from the females aboard. “Let’s hear it for good ol’ Frank ...” and he burst into *I’ll Never Smile Again* with a commendable imitation of the bobby-soxer crooner.

Before long he had them all primed up in a sing-song with favourite tunes of the day. Not only did Les’s antics help take their minds off their individual sufferings, it certainly helped take their collective minds off the various close shaves their trusted driver engineered whenever he approached sharp bends in the road, often with severely critical precipices on one side or the other.

There were no complaints forthcoming even though the journey reminded many of the turbulent flights through the tumultuous thermals en route from New Guinea. Before too long, and out of voice, many had drifted off into various degrees of somnolence. For the most part they were content to just be away from all that reminded them of what they would rather forget. For many it was a trip into unfamiliar territory but one far removed from those other unfamiliar theatres of war.

As their journey progressed further away from Atherton they passed a couple of older men on foot, simple swag slung over one shoulder. The cooling moisture from a dampened canvas water-bag slung over the other shoulder camouflaged the membrane of perspiration that encased their torsos. Les sounded the horn, arousing his charges. Some implored him to stop and give the wayfarers a lift but the bus continued past them with another boom of the horn, sounding somewhere between an ailing foghorn and a mating cassowary.

Seated where he was might have proved awkward for most passengers but it proved rewarding for Richard, although at the time he did not appreciate the fact.

“Who might they be?” he asked.

“I-ties, mate,” Les replied.

“Do you mean, itineran -,” mumbled Richard.

“I-talians. Dagoes, mate,” Les interrupted before Richard could complete his response. “From the old internment camp. Allowed to roam free after Il Doochie got the boot.” He waved and yelled ‘bon giorno’ to the itinerants then turned back to Richard. “ ‘Bon giorno’. Dago for ‘g’day mate,’ he explained.

“ ‘Dago’?” enquired Richard.

“ ‘Dago’, ‘I-tie’. Bugger me, where’re you from matey?”

“How do you know they’re –?”

“I-talians? Look at the get-up. Roman sandals, hanky on the ol’ bald spot!”

“Unusual, I must say,” confessed Richard, impressed by the novelty of a handkerchief with a knot in each corner to form a kind of beret.

“Struth mate. Whereabouts *are* you from?”

Richard smiled politely. “Where’re they off to?” he asked.

“On the road looking for work. Probably find some in the cane fields closer to the coast where we’re going. But I can’t pick ‘em up ‘cos they’re civilians. Regulations, sorry.”

As they drove in silence for a few miles, Richard ruminated, looking out at the undulating terrain, passing from scraggly eucalypt into thick growth bordering on rainforest, back into scraggly eucalypt again.

“How long would it take them to get there?” he asked, breaking Les from his reverie.

“Who? Where?”

“The itinerants, the ‘I-ties’, wherever we’re going.”

“You mean Innisfail? Whoops!” he chuckled to himself. “No longer a mystery tour now, eh?”

Richard nodded.

“If they don’t get a lift and have to walk all the way, probably a day, day and a half. Maybe two days, if they sleep long. Either way they’ll be too exhausted for any yakka by then though, eh? Still, there’s bound to be someone there to look after ‘em. Plenty of their own kind down there, you’ll see.”

Maybe two days, if they sleep long. The words impinged upon Richard’s mind as if of some significance he didn’t register.

Throughout the journey, Les continued a running commentary on their route, making major turns, coming to intersections, passing various landmarks: along the Kennedy Highway;

Kennedy Highway:

left on to East Evelyn Road;

East Evelyn Road;

right on to Milaa-Milaa Road;

Milaa-Milaa Road;

through the township and further on to the Palmerston Highway;

Palmerston Highway;

and eventually into areas totally cleared of scrub ready for cultivation.

As the tour progressed, those who managed to stay awake, lounged and stared vacantly through the hazy windows that had obviously seen better days, the scenery dissolving into blurs of various hues, void of meaningful detail. Finally they emerged from the higher land and continued on through miles and miles of lush cane fields, ‘a paradise,’ according to Les, ‘worth fighting for.’

Without warning, he grated back through the gears causing the vehicle to stagger and lurch, generating annoyance and muttered

objections from all and sundry – and especially from an engine that seemed ready to toss in the towel.

“Roadblock, I’m sorry people,” Les called apologetically to those behind him as they roused themselves and sat to attention as best they could. They conferred among themselves as the vehicle crawled to the side of the Palmerston Highway and drew to a stop.

Richard could not tell if the thoughts going through his mind were shared by any others in the vehicle. He could not accommodate the notion that this part of Australia was, for all intents and purposes, on the edge of a war zone. The Battle for the Coral Sea may have been well and truly won by the allies years before but – there was always the ‘but’. There had been speculation that midget subs might well be able to negotiate the Barrier Reef. Townsville was still a potential target, having already survived unscathed from three earlier attempts. The Japanese hadn’t abandoned the region completely, that was for sure. Not to mention some of the rebel I-ties who still sided with the Fascist ideals of Mussolini! How many other scenarios could the various Commanders conjure? The fact remained, the fundamental fact that needed to be addressed – in any war, the ‘enemy’ came in all manner of guises. And in this part of the world, it fell to the Provost Corps to flush them out!

Les pulled the lever and the door of his bus, true to form, creaked partly ajar before snapping to attention to its fully open position. He welcomed the authority figures aboard his bus. Both the NCO and Sister rose and made their way to the front of the bus. The Orders for the day were handed over for inspection, as was the roll. The roll was duly called, each soldier accounted for. They were thanked for their cooperation and encouraged to enjoy the rest of their outing, with a sincere concern for their safe return to Rocky Creek.

It took Richard a few moments after they were on the road again to realise that his underarms, his palms and his crotch were moist with perspiration – and it had nothing to do with the climate. He leaned back in his seat and nestled his head against the window and allowed his visceral affairs to return to normal.

HIS REPOSE was short-lived. The bus arrived at an intersection with another, reasonably substantial road, the Bruce Highway, which Les duly identified for all:

Bruce Highway;

Duly noted by Richard.

Les turned right, headed south before calling everyone to attention. “Won’t be long now. There’s a picnic spot down along the river with seats, courtesy of the Rotary Club. It might pay you all to keep those chaps in mind. They’ll be able to help some of you, in some way or other. When this bloody war’s over!”

The passengers were by now alert and spent some moments orientating themselves.

“Now, if we keep heading this way,” Les continued, “we’ll end up in beautiful Townsville and beyond that, Brisbane. And beyond that,” he added sarcastically, “nothing much important.”

“Hey,” a number of his cargo shouted. “What about Sydney?”

“And Melbourne?” came another chorus.

“Anything south of Brisbane’s not important to people up here, us Queenslanders. Go down there and you’re in a different world!”

A different world!

But Les was up to the jibes and veiled threats to have him strung up, drawn and quartered, along with the odd invite to go down and *tell that to my mother!*

By which time they'd arrived at a generous expanse of roughly mown kikuyu grass that made a passable lawn and picnic area.

“Any able bodied young men among you back there,” he called as he applied the hand brake and shut down the motor, still groaning after the seventy mile marathon, “you might want to give me a hand.” He patted the metal crate alongside of him in the front of the bus. “Everything we need for a good time is inside here, courtesy of His Majesty’s government.”

When it came to a beef-steak and an ample supply of cool beer there was a more than ample supply of able-bodied young men it seemed. Their spirits were lifted even higher when they were greeted by a welcoming committee of off-duty nurses and other Red Cross volunteers.

As a priority, as in any critical military operation, the beer was carted to the river bank and placed in the cool water at the edge. Government issue Onkaparinga rugs were laid out on the kikuyu beneath the shade of the trees and made for a cosy haven for those still unable to ambulate themselves.

That mission completed, most of the men took advantage of their furlough and wandered throughout the park, by themselves or in small groups, pondering their families and loved ones, their plans for the future, or indeed if there was ever going to be one for them.

Richard distanced himself from the others. Being more concerned with what lie beyond the park, he took an interest in a band of labourers laying concrete on a property across the river. ‘I’ties’ he presumed, judging by the small kerchief berets adorning their scalps. He was captivated by their hearty, almost carefree demeanour. Here was a paradox – in this time of turmoil they toiled away seemingly oblivious to any discrimination, covert or otherwise. Perhaps there was none. Les didn’t seem to mind them. Richard posed himself the question – would

the locals accord the same consideration if these labourers had Asiatic eyes? There was much he didn't know about the locals.

Supplies of firewood stacked beside two open pits surrounded by whitewashed stones, were quickly mobilised into hearty fires by an eager group of Red Cross ladies. The smoke drifted over the little haven of invalids beneath the trees but they were not ones to complain. As the flames slowly tired of telling their tales and settled into beds of glowing embers, the women began placing the meat on rough frames of chicken wire wrought by the workshop boys at the 132nd Transport Company back at Rocky Creek. But the collective directives from the nearby invalids on how to achieve the perfect steak were in vain – Les Matthews assumed the role of supervisor and the thin slabs of rump were cooked the way he preferred them and bugger the rest of them.

Still, there were no complaints – pre-cooked damper courtesy of the mess kitchen and a swig of cool beer from the various bottles passed around complemented the fare and made for a social event that would set the agenda for many a back-yard in the post-war years.

And as a special encore, the lads were treated to a thrill of sorts as a number of the younger lasses donned bathing suits and went for a cool dip in the river. Many a virile young man thought seriously about shedding his clothes and joining them. So what if they got into difficulties – plenty of medical assistance immediately available and, if necessary, there was the Innisfail Hospital a short way back along the river bank. Unfortunately, the castigations of the supervisory seniors among the women soon dampened those thoughts.

WITH MENACING clouds gathering, a hang-over from the lately waned wet, by 15:00 hours the troops were on their way back to their 'home' at Rocky Creek.

The outing had been beneficial to these young soldiers in so many ways. For some it was simply to breathe a different sort of air – a wholesome affair that took them from bad memories to optimistic futures.

For others, it was the chance to show off their wounds to those not directly engaged in the conflict taking place in their midst, their pride elevated.

For Les Matthews, the cripple from Mareeba, it gave him the chance to do his duty as best he could while giving him purpose and, most importantly, companionship.

For Richard, it was a valuable lesson in geography.

