



Family History – You Must Remember This



During a recent visit to catch up with family in Melbourne, the subject of past history came up. It was the first anniversary of my sister's death and it was clear that her children were finding it to be a difficult time. Unlike previous reunions when conversation was very casual as we regurgitated the usual anecdotes and reminiscences, on this occasion there seemed an almost desperate need for specific facts. As I was their mother's brother, they expected me to be familiar with the details of: "...what really happened when..." I had a problem with that because most of what I could remember was based on second- or third-hand information; and the only ones who could have verified what actually occurred at the times in question had already passed away.

Perhaps this might seem irrelevant and unlikely to affect the way things are, or are likely to be. However, one only has to read the novel, *The Bridges of Madison County* by Robert James Waller, to realise that attitudes and lives can change when the true facts of a family's past are eventually unearthed. In this particular example, while going through the personal belongings of their newly-deceased mother, her children discover she had been having a long, secret affair with a man other than their father. As this seemed so out-of-character with the woman they thought they knew, they begin to delve more deeply into the evidence to satisfy their individual feelings on the matter.

Requiring a level of closure is often the reason behind research of this kind, but there is also the simple curiosity factor. For some, that casual interest can evolve into a passionate quest to revive old acquaintanceships and search genealogy websites for more information than memory and a few old photos can provide. This is how it was, and is for us. And we have come to realise the sad truth that we only have to pick up a book to learn more about the life and times of Mary Queen of Scots than we know about our own family history.

My advice to one and all is - don't let it die. Your own current deeds and experiences, your memories even, won't last forever. Maybe, at the moment, you are too young to care that stories told about you after you are gone aren't the whole truth; but someone might - surviving relatives and friends especially. Then there are those of us who are growing older and wish we'd taken more notice of Grandma's chatter. It's too late now, of course, for us, anyway. But there's no reason future generations have to miss out on the beginnings of their family, as long as we recall what we can and write it down now before we too shuffle off this mortal coil taking the early days of our family with us.

The notion of writing memoirs could seem daunting, even pretentious. After all, most of us are ordinary people who aren't likely to do anything which might change the course of history. But this isn't intended for publication, so it doesn't have to be a literary masterpiece. Neither does it have to be a chore. Treated the right way, the end result can be quite entertaining. As an example, I would like to share with you my first attempt at recording events which began to unfold just before I was born, and which set the stage for my own family's future. Needless to say, the story is not about me, but about my father, his aspirations and the turns of fate that shaped his life and ours. I believe it makes interesting reading. Please decide for yourself.

George's War - For King, Country, and a Dream



The story is set in the North of England which is where the family seemed to have originated. My father, George, lived in the small Nottinghamshire town of Worksop. Here was one of those places you either loved or hated. It was a mining town where the men would go to work on a cooked breakfast and return later covered in coal dust. Their home was a two-up two-down terraced house which smelled of soot and bacon fat. Each evening, they would go to the pub for eight or nine pints of warm, murky beer, eventually stumble home to bed, then start over again the next day. A few of the more talented would be members of a brass band. Most towns had one and Worksop was no different. Maybe this was George's problem - the sameness. Nothing ever happened that hadn't before, and anyone who remained there faced a lifetime of boredom and repetition.

Born in 1910, George decided from an early age that digging coal would never be his forte. Music, however, was in his blood, so to follow the family tradition by playing cornet in the town band wasn't so much a compromise, as it was a starting point for his career. Being unpaid, however, it didn't put bread on the table, so to keep himself out of the mines, he opted to work for a local printer. It was soon to be the day-job he would give up to follow his dream.

Dance bands were popular in those days and George started out like most musicians, moving from one established band to another, trying to make a name for himself. This took time, but he was achieving a fair amount of success, not just as one of the boys, but also as a feature soloist. His ability to perform a duet on his own by playing two trumpets at the same time certainly attracted the autograph hunters and the attention of the press, albeit the local rag. Then something that had been brewing for a while came to the boil and war was declared.

Despite the fact that it would most likely put his musical career on hold, George rushed off to join up. For King and Country was his excuse; Mum said he and his mates simply figured it would be fun, a great adventure. There was no thought of consequences, no fear of being killed or maimed. Not that he would be in any more danger than the population at large - the Army would see to that.



They had a policy: whatever may seem to be right and for the best, do the opposite. George didn't know this, of course, so when he was asked to state on his enlistment form where he preferred to serve, he must have been excited by visions of foreign climes, or at least somewhere different to the industrial North. The Army, however, took a more practical and selfish view when issuing his posting to the Royal Army Ordnance Corps, Chilwell. So much for the adventure of serving overseas. George was stuck in a military supply depot 2 miles down the road from where he lived!!

He wasn't the only one. Other musicians were caught in this particular trap, all ending up at Chilwell. Whether by clever military manipulation, or pure chance, the result was the birth of The Blue Rockets.



It was destined to become one of the top wartime show bands in Britain, performing in public as well as playing for the officers' dances. It would seem that fate had handed George the world on a plate. He could serve his King and at the same time stay in touch with his dream. But it wasn't what he wanted - it was too tame.

He tried various avenues to improve his lot. Mum mentioned a couple which Dad never talked about. Perhaps the memories bruised his pride. Flying fighter planes sounded pretty good, so he applied to join the RAF. They didn't want him because he had a couple of medical problems - a heart murmur and flat feet. It seemed strange that the Army hadn't picked up on these. Not to be deterred, he decided to become a dispatch rider, one of the "Death or Glory Boys" as they were called. He could ride a motor bike, so he was half-way qualified, and he almost made it. This time, he scuppered himself. Maybe he was practising for his new role, who knows? But he was caught breaking some road rule or other, possibly speeding, and lost his licence!

Some of the tales he did tell certainly smacked of dissatisfaction, but they were related in such a way that it was hard to know whether he was being serious, or simply exercising his dry wit. It seems the band boys had an obnoxious sergeant who tried to make their lives more miserable than most. He would have them painting coal, then re-painting it in a different colour, apparently so that it didn't attract German bombers in search of a target. It remained a mystery why the enemy would bother with a small pile of solid fuel at the barracks when there were huge heaps just down the road outside the mine. That was always assuming they were really after the coal and not the surrounding military establishment which no amount of paint in any colour could have disguised. Theirs not to reason why, they followed instructions to the letter, but added their own protest by giving the regimental mascot a khaki make-over. Not to be outdone, the Army went one better and placed the poor bulldog on a charge for being out-of-uniform while on parade!

This was the kind of blind stupidity which provided a wealth of material for comedy skits in the shows. Everyone needed something to raise their spirits and as the war dragged on, The Blue Rockets continued to deliver, on stage, radio and vinyl records (78's, of course). A recording of "Ma - I Miss Your Apple Pie" was a classic example of a light-hearted protest about NAAFI meals. The introductory dialogue between a soldier and his sergeant makes sarcastic reference to baked beans which, according to George, was the staple diet at Chilwell and would eventually turn him off them for life. Then there was Company punishment, usually for some petty or fabricated charge, which had the miscreants cleaning things that were already spotless. So, the boys put it in the show,



going down on their knees to scrub the boards in the comedy sketch "Jankers". The Army couldn't have failed to figure out it was the butt of these on-stage jokes, but it chose to turn a blind eye, perhaps also being in need of comic relief in the face of global insanity.

Back in the barracks, the lads continued to go through the required motions, obeying pointless orders, needlessly shifting boxes of parts from one side of a warehouse to the other, then back again. In a fit of exasperation, George's mate Tommy kicked a crate from the top of the pile. It splintered on impact, scattering pins for tank-tracks all over the floor. The fact that these had been missing presumed lost forever did nothing to quell the sergeant's ire, and they were on jankers again.

According to George there was a solution to this senseless waste of energy. Obviously refusing to obey orders, especially in wartime, was not an option; however, there was a better way. He claimed he could spend an entire day in the barracks doing absolutely nothing and not get pulled up for it. The boys challenged him to prove it. The bet was on. He achieved the impossible with a clipboard which he tucked under his arm and marched around looking like a man on a mission. He saluted all the officers, attended

every meal session and on the odd occasion when he thought he might be under suspicion, he would consult the clipboard, frown deeply, then march away at the double to deal with whatever it was that apparently required immediate attention. George won his bet, but he was still in the Army.

Even so, there were ways to make life a little easier, and a spare quid, if one utilised available resources. Obviously the band members must have gained some concessions, especially with regard to time off for regular rehearsals; but for a canny individual like George there was another pie to stick a finger in. Reviving his former occupation, he ran a print shop, producing advertising material and tickets for official functions and dances. No doubt there were a few private jobs in the mix and, though knowledge of these might have raised the odd eyebrow, officers having their private business cards run off at a bargain price were unlikely to say anything. One surviving example of a Christmas card testifies not only to the existence of the print shop, but also to the diverse talents of the lads who designed and produced it.



Another perk was spending time in town in an official capacity. This contribution to the war effort helped foster public relations and gave the boys a break from constant and overbearing army discipline. Generally it required standing guard on "things of National importance", like the odd bomb crater, an easy enough job considering the bomb had already exploded and it was just a matter of minding a hole in the ground. But it did mean doing the night shift, and not for any penalty rates. George was okay with this, having the amazing ability to sleep standing up. Supper was even provided by the locals who would sneak the sentry a serve of fish and chips - wrapped in newspaper, of course. The closest any of the band boys probably came to military action was during one such assignment when failure to answer the call: "Halt, who goes there?" resulted in a shot being fired into the dark, killing a cow!

The incident would have seemed hilarious at the time, except to the farmer, but it would have added to a particular growing reputation that The Blue Rockets could have done without. They were being labelled "Toy Soldiers" and although the jibes could seem mild enough in retrospect, at the time they cut so deeply that it was almost the end of the band. Perhaps the Army knew of this, or maybe they were just being beastly again, but it was decided to cast the boys in a propaganda movie for the Americans, showing the British Tommy in training. The "real" soldiers had only to complete the gruelling assault course once. The director, however, needing everything Hollywood perfect, had the band boys repeating it many times over, cut after cut until he was satisfied. Not bad for a bunch of musicians.

They did finally make it to Germany, but not until after peace was declared. Entertaining the troops overseas, they were able to witness first-hand the terrible consequences of war, a sour taste of the harsh world their talents had so far shielded them from. There was nothing glorious about cities reduced to rubble, and they weren't issued enough chocolate to give to every orphan wandering among the devastation. The experience certainly laid to rest the notion that war was fun. Now it was time for the Toy Soldiers to do their bit to help ease the situation with their music. This they did until they were returned home and the members of the RAOC Blue Rockets were eventually de-mobbed.

This was the end of George's war. No more stupid orders, no more jankers, no more baked beans. It had definitely not panned out the way he'd imagined, but no-one, not even George, could deny that it was responsible for a dream coming true. The Blue Rockets went on tour around Britain, continuing to delight audiences for a few years until it disbanded and the boys went their separate ways. George carried on playing until he retired from music at the end of the 1960's. To my knowledge, he didn't play another note after that. He never told us the reason. I suspect he only ever had one dream, and he had simply lived it to the full.



Dedicated to the memory of
George Vincent Hawkins
1910 – 1982