

The Long Way Home

(in honour of the father who opened my original passage to the Otherworld with his passing, and who honoured my fictional re-telling of his wartime experience years later with the genetic memory of Empire C-Class engines roaring inside my head)



She sat in the chair that used to be his. You know, the easy one by the bookcase. Sat there, cosy with reminiscence, smoothing her comfortable lap, trawling her mind - the flotsam and jetsam of years of beach finds, searching for the record of then. Back then.

"But it was more than 60 years ago now!" she exclaimed in what was only a half-protest at the stream of questions from a persistent daughter. "I don't know," she blocked. "You'll have to make it up."

But wait. Ah yes. Slowly. Slowly, it began to emerge. The little snippets of memory, the tiny pearls, the scribbled pencil notes from between the pages of official war history. A short leave here, a snatched phone call there, a fragment of letter retained by retina alone.

"He just showed up at work one day. That's how I knew he was back," she said. A singular retort to a singular question.

"There was a phone call. The girl on the switchboard, now she was a nice lass. We weren't allowed to have personal calls. The lines had to be kept free, you know, for the C/O, the Commanding Officer, and his mob. But she said it sounded urgent, and then when I went over - oh, and heard his voice. Oh."

She had to stop there. Just for a moment. But the weight of telling kept it spilling out of her -

"After everything that had been in the papers, about the attack on Rabaul, and just not knowing! He'd write to me every week, and then the letters just stopped coming, and we were all so worried. But there was no information. Nothing!" she repeated.

"And then to hear his voice. 'What time does your shift finish,' he said. And, 'I'll pick you up.' That's all. And there he was, just sitting out in the waiting area. In a brand new uniform and cap and everything.

"What happened, what happened?' I was just bursting with not knowing," she said. "But just, 'shhhh. I want to kiss you.' And, oh. He'd come home. He'd come home. It didn't matter what had happened - here he was in front of me. All in one piece."

She shifted slightly in her seat. It really was hers now. He'd been dead so many years. Sent to an early grave by all those things that mark the right of passage into direct conflict - the debilitation of malaria, the coffee, the smokes, Log Cabin tobacco shared around so liberally to calm the nerves, pass the time. "Here mate, this'll settle you," a voice from the shadows offered. On and on. This is what came to those who went.

Comfortable again, she tapped into her joy at that first homecoming kiss.

"We just couldn't stop hugging and laughing and crying and kissing all in the same moment. There were people coming and going through that room, all so serious, but it didn't matter. And then we went out. Into the sunshine. Into that heat that just hits you like a wall. It was February, remember. February 1942. But he said, 'This is nothing.' And told of the heat up there. Heat so wet you could drown in it.

"I couldn't imagine it," she said slowly. "I still can't," and seemed surprised. "Well, after that we just walked," she continued. "Two blocks to Charlotte Street and up to a little wholesaling place to a man he knew. And all these rings were set out there on a tray."

She giggled like the teenager she was back then, 19, cheeky-smiled, cropped hair. "The fashion then was for square diamonds, square settings, you know?" she said. "But when I saw them, oh, I didn't want that! So the poor man had to go back and get a new selection. And then, yes. This one," she said, touching again the jewel that sat, now, on the daughter's finger, her own too swollen with arthritis. "So sweet. Simple."

"But when did he propose?" asked the daughter.

"Goodness, there was no need for that," her mother scoffed, with the practicality of time. "I said I'd wait for him, and I did." A gentle smile touched her eyes.

But - oh. Her mood changed as suddenly as a cloud blocking the sun.

"It must have been awful up there," she said, looking away. Out the window into the face of it, a dark looming cloud, heavy with death and fear, eyes wet with a memory she didn't have.

"We're shipping out," the C/O said. "Up to Rabaul to cover 2/22nd Battalion, Lark Force. We're to run reconnaissance missions, reccos, up to the Jap territories. No time for home leave, I'm afraid. We're off in four days."

"What - we're up there for Christmas?" someone interjected. "Bugger," another grumbled, "I'd arranged the Santa suit and all."

The C/O, Harry Landers, smiled. He was a relaxed squadron leader. The 24th RAAF had built a reputation on strict discipline and creative flying in less than adequate craft, but his leadership never missed an opportunity to mess down with the crew. Camaraderie on the ground led to camaraderie in the sky.

"Take it with you," he said to Santa. "I'm sure they've got something planned - there's about 1,000 blokes stationed up there."

Landers looked across to the 21-year-old sergeant who was his paymaster. Tousled hair, soft blue eyes. "O'Connor, the pays are coming in early this week - they need distributing before we ship out. So get cracking."

"Right you are, sir."

The meeting continued, but Tom O'Connor had his thoughts elsewhere. He was wondering if he could get a letter out tonight to Brisbane to tell his girl they were off.

"We re-group here at 2100 hours on December 20 for last instructions," Landers was saying. "We ship out at 0600 hours next morning. Now, enjoy your last few days on Australian soil," and headed out the door into the frangipani freshness of a Townsville morning.

It was a busy afternoon for Tom, calculating the pays, making sure the record in each book was accurate - deductions for smokes at the canteen, docking pennies and shillings here and there for unruliness or disorder as the officers had noted in one register or the other.

But no one seemed to mind. There was a buoyant mood. "Something is more exciting than nothing," one said. Even though it was understood that this was going to be real - real battle, real war, not just the playing at it from the safety of a Townsville airbase. When the Japs hit Pearl Harbour, the whole mood of the squadron changed. An unspoken demand, now answered. They were off to Rabaul, on the island of New Britain, north-east of New Guinea. Into the belly of war.

It was a busy afternoon, but Tom still had a chance to pen a few lines in between sips of tea and the slice of cake brought over by the mess cook when he came to collect his pay. The letter was brief - it couldn't say much, not about when they were leaving, why and where for. But he still wrote it anyhow:

17 December 1941

Dear Rose,

We'll be off soon so I just wanted to write and say have a happy Christmas - you and all the family.

Don't know when I'll have a chance to write again, but you know I'll be thinking of you every minute of the day anyhow. Hope it's not too hot at the moment down there. Here it's a bit of an oven.

*Love,
Tom*

Coming up from Wilston train station after her WAAAF shift at Edward Street's Brisbane Wireless Telegraph several days later, a girl with short cropped hair met a postman on his bicycle.

"Hello Mr Carey," she said brightly, "bit late for your rounds isn't it?"

"Yeah, lovey, but with all the troops moving out there's double the mail coming home to you girls to say 'bye. Yours is at the house now," he said.

"Oh." She stepped back, off the path. "They're leaving for overseas?"

The postman shrugged and pushed off with his bicycle. "Looks like it."

She quickened her pace and was at the front gate in a few minutes. It squeaked its usual greeting to her hurried push-through, but she had already run up the front stairs of the old Queenslander by the time it swung back into position.

Her mother was watering plants on the verandah - "You met the postman I presume" - as the girl rushed past and into her bedroom, first one to the left off the hall. There on the bed was Tom's neat handwriting, rounded and sweet, spelling her name, Rose Blair, with love. She hugged the thin paper of the envelope, treasuring this link to the boy she knew. It was as if handwriting alone could conjure him out of thin air, as surely as wishing on Aladdin's lamp.

"I'm going to try and call. You know, wish him luck," she told the family that evening at dinner.

"Wish I could go," her 16-year-old brother sulked at his mashed potato.

Her father drew thoughtfully on his pipe and then remarked, "They may have already gone you know." She looked down at her half-eaten meal. She knew he was right.

Her mother, on the way back from the kitchen with the potato pot, gave her a hug from behind. "You try," she said softly. "You just go ahead and try."

Next morning Rose caught the early train. The GPO in Queen Street opened at seven and she wanted to try and call before work. But the queue! "I didn't think it would be so busy this early," she said to the girl ahead of her in the line.

The other turned, her painted lips gripped in a half-smile of teeth and cigarette. "You got a letter too, did you honey?"

Still, the queue moved forward, steadily, and soon Rose was at the counter. "Where to," asked the clerk wearily.

"Townsville, 24th RAAF, Sgt Tom O'Connor," she said.

"Three minutes is your limit, missy," the clerk continued between scribbled notations for the switchboard girls. She paid the money with trembling gloved hands and then went and stood over near the booths.

"Blair, Booth 4!" a voice rang out, and she hurried to her allotted enclosure, snatching the black receiver from its hook at the first ring. "Putting you through," said the operator, and then -

"Hello?" said a voice.

"Oh yes," Rose breathed quickly, "is Tom O'Connor there?"

The voice smiled. "You're in luck, young lady. He's right here ... another coupla minutes and you would have missed him."

And then Tom's voice. His sweet blue-eyed voice. "You're leaving already?" she said.

"Yeah, we're late away actually, should have been in the air two hours ago. And I've really gotta go now, Rosie, but thanks for calling."

"I -I -I just wanted to say goodbye - and-and good luck," she hiccupped. There were tears somewhere in her throat. Somewhere.

"Thanks," he said. Oh, and "Happy Christmas."

The connection broke when there were still a million things in her head to say and tell. No, not tell, just listen. She just wanted to hear his voice, again and again. But there was nothing anymore. Just

dead air, and an operator's wheeze - "Sorry, sweetie, I don't have time to get that one back. Have you seen the queue?"

They came into Rabaul in the late afternoon glow of a tropical sunset, running up the island's pretty east coast of white sand beaches, coconut palm flats and dense green hills, rising sharply to the high blue ridge of the Baining Mountains in the interior.

Despite the war-time backdrop, the 130 aircrew and six ground staff were in holiday mood. It was, after all, only a few days till Christmas and Santa was down the back of one Catalina flying boat practising his ho-ho-ho's inside a stifling white beard. As for Tom, he'd sneaked upfront for a better look, and the pilot from 20th Squadron Port Moresby seemed in the mood for a chat.

"We'll bank around a second time over Simpson Harbour before bringing her down," he said. "It really is a pretty spot - see over there?" nodding to the peaks veiled by fleecy clouds behind the township. "They call those Mother and Daughter. And here in the harbour, that crater down below used to be Vulcan Island ... till it exploded in '37 and showered the place in ash. There's still an active one, Matupi, over there," he said pointing. "Every now and then she gives a bit of a spit - rots the tents, the blokes tell me."

They were brought round from the harbour to Vunakanau aerodrome, the main strip in town, by truck. The squadron's four Hudson bombers and 10 Wirraway fighter trainers had already come in. This was to be aircrew base camp, but Tom was instructed to set up AOB (Airforce Operational Base) in the township itself. The C/O wanted to be close to the 2/22nd's HQ as well as Naval Intelligence down on the Harbour at the Burns Philp wharf.

The Catalina pilot had been right, Tom decided. It was a pretty spot. An administrative centre of some note, the European population had numbered about a thousand before the war. But with the women and children evacuated the day after the squadron arrived, things "got quiet real quick," according to the publican at the Cosmopolitan where he was billeted. Still, you could see what they had made of the place - with plantation-style homes, iron-roofed on stumps, flanking the tree-shrouded streets. There was one, aptly named Mango Avenue, that Tom loved a turn down in his lunch break. Trees formed a shaded archway of pungent fruit along its full length, and one always seemed within reach of a hungry hand.

Meanwhile, the main shopping district of four streets was a lively place in the early mornings as he headed down to AOB. Everything smelt fresh and damp. Chinese stores threw up their colourful canvas awnings for the new day's trade, and in the centre, Bung Market was a trove of every kind of succulent produce imaginable. Tom liked to arrive at the office with some tempting treat wrapped tight in a satchel of woven palm.

One of the blokes said that the Burns Philp store had the very best of everything, but Tom thought he'd prefer to get Rose an exotic Christmas gift from one of the Chinese stalls. He settled on a delicate hand-painted porcelain tea-set in a sturdy wicker basket. It was a bit too precious to post, he decided. It won't make it in time for Christmas anyhow, so I may as well make it a homecoming treat the first leave I get, was his reasoning.

A pretty spot, yes. But in early January - oh, that's when it all changed. War came knocking as they knew it would. The drone of enemy night-reccos kept them awake and tense most evenings. Plus the occasional raid - sporadic, perhaps, but serving its purpose to show up the garrison's inadequacies. Leisurely bombings, cheeky acrobatics, a couple of planes rendered unserviceable when the Praed Point Battery couldn't get their anti-aircraft guns operational in time.

"They're smirking at us from behind those blasted slit eyes," the men complained. Each time. Each time.

Together with 20th Port Moresby, the 24th's assignment was recon missions up to the Jap territories. One of the blokes got back after a 20-hour job up to Truk and Guam, 700 miles north, with some sobering news. "He reckons they're massing up there for an attack - reckons he saw warships and flying boats in the harbour, and bombers on the airstrip. And they've been raiding Singapore and the Malay Peninsula the same way they've been feeling us over," someone told Tom. "It's only a matter of time."

It was January 20, payday, and Tom was on his way out to the different bases. He arrived at Vunakanau around lunchtime and headed into the mess, as much to let the boys know he'd arrived as grab a bite to eat.

"I'll be in the control room from one," he told one after the other that came to greet him. A bright blue skied day, prickly with heat, building to the ubiquitous storm they welcomed each evening to wash clean their sweat-soaked skin. Tom was glad of the relative coolness of the control room. Men wandered in and out, collecting their pays, relaxed and chatty.

And then.

An alert came in over the wire. Coastwatchers further north had spotted something serious. Something frightening. A sky black with planes. Jap planes. Too many Zeros to count. Escorting bombers. Direction Rabaul.

Landers came immediately. Time stood still. Later Tom would wonder why he didn't think to close up his books. But it was as if nothing else existed but that piece of information.

"We'll have to scramble," Landers was saying. "Get 'em all in the air," he ordered, referring to the paltry tally of planes at his disposal.

"But sir - the Wirraways are just training craft. They're too slow! They'll be cut to ribbons!" someone said.

"They're all we've got, and you know it," came the grim reply.

The sirens sounded over and over. The signals station ran hot with messages to each base and HQ. The 2/22nd Battery at Praed Point overlooking the harbour was on full alert, but it seemed meaningless to say so. "This must be the most poorly equipped garrison in the history of war," a voice said bitterly.

It was as if someone had turned off the sun, Tom thought.

One second bright light, then the control room went suddenly dark, cold with terror as the planes massed overhead, a heavy black thundercloud swollen with hate. And then the screams. The screams of those damned Zero engines as they dove, dove fast, to within a couple of hundred feet of the ground sometimes, intent on splitting your head open with a line of gun fire. No time to get to the slit trenches. "Hit the floor!" someone yelled as the first strafing attack peppered windows and walls.

You could tell when the fighters banked up and away - that change in throttle. That was the time to run. Men burst out of the buildings, sprinting for the trenches on the other side of the base, another quarter of a mile away in the bush. They ran blindly, wildly, flinging themselves down into the ditches, tumbling over and over, on top of each other, arms, legs flailing. But, gradually, a coming upright, a shifting and sorting of limbs, a semblance of order restored. And just silence except for heaving breaths and the occasional "Sorry mate, didn't see you in the rush."

Tom strained his eyes on the strip of blue above. The heavy drone of the bombers rumbling over. Oh God, the runway, as the loads were cut loose, whistling to their destination, pock-marking the tarmac in a tattoo of rushing noise.

The Wirraways were in the air by this time. The whole company watched, open-mouthed. Was it tears or sun-blindness that made Tom's eyes wet? For above him, each plane, each pilot was being sent to his death. Seven planes, 14 men. Outnumbered ten to one.

"They're like a bloody swarm of bees after a couple of lumbering papa bears," someone said as the 'rising sun' glinted on those too-shiny wings, winking its welcome to death. "We're just target practice for those bastards," a voice spat. "It's not a dogfight, it's the high wire at the circus," said another. "Carnival time," he continued, thick-throated with pain.

It was another hour before the all-clear sounded. They scrambled out to stand shell-shocked amongst the wreckage and debris and smoking hulks of what used to be planes, looked over at the strafe patterns on the buildings. "At least they'll let in a bit of fresh air," someone quipped. Field ambulance was there patching up whoever could be patched, till Landers arrived.

"You and you," he pointed. "Take a Jeep and see if you can track down Blackman. His is that smoking wreck out there to the west.

"And hurry!" he barked as they remained rooted to the spot. "He might just have survived this damned debacle."

"O'Connor," he turned now to Tom's blank eyes, "get the car and see if you can make her turn over. I need a ride into town. Now."

They were off. Each with his specific instructions, keeping mind focussed and forward-looking. No time for reflection on the tragedy just witnessed.

Landers was silent on the trip into town until they approached the wharf. Major havoc had been wrought there. Two ships ablaze. MV Halstead, loaded with copra at the Burns Philp wharf, was a firework in broad daylight.

"Couldn't have done better if they'd hit the volcano itself," the C/O observed.

It was impossible to sleep that night. The bunks were restless with anxious whispers and muttered speculation. Why hadn't they been sent reinforcements? Why was the garrison so poorly equipped? What the heck would they do if they had to withdraw? There were no plans, no supply dumps being established out in the bush.

Tom lay silent, smoking, listening, sighing with the futility of any kind of predictiveness. In the darkness, the burning end of his cigarette, trembling all the while with the memory of earlier, reflected the glow of the still burning copra load outside his window. He thought about how he came to be here. And if he'd ever get home. Rosie, oh God Rosie, wait for me, he prayed.

Next day, January 21, was quiet. "Too quiet," said some clown. "Remember those movies about Africa? With the last bloke always picked off by the pygmy blowpipe?"

That drew a laugh. Something sorely needed. The clean-up continued and the top brass maintained their own private war cabinet at the Cosmopolitan pub. Someone said that a recon mission from Moresby had seen a fleet of ships heading south. Naval Intelligence had even given numbers to the troop movement - cruisers, destroyers, aircraft carriers. "You name it, we're for it," said the source.

"Guess we'll find out what's what all in good time," Tom replied.

"Yeah," said another. "But whose good time - theirs or ours?"

Next morning, January 22 - 7ish, pub breakfast in what doubled as the 2/22nd HQ's mess hall. Suddenly the sirens. Oh God. Tom ran instinctively the two blocks to AOB. There was Landers pulling the message off the wire.

"Coastwatchers," he mumbled. "Another force bearing down on us. More than a hundred planes - heavy bombers, dive bombers, fighters. The first'll be here in around 30 minutes by their reckoning." He slammed his hand down on the table. "And there's not a damn thing I can do." A moment's silence was all he could afford.

"Come on, O'Connor. We need to be out at the 'drome."

And there, all burrowed in the slit trenches, they watched in silence as what remained of the base and its two disabled aircraft was rendered unrecognisable. There were some huge booms to the east, coming from Praed Point, Tom reckoned. They've taken out the battery well and truly this time, he thought.

"It must be a butcher's shop down there," someone said. "We've nothing left to throw at them except our shorts," another spat into the dry dust of the trench.

The all-clear sounded. Landers turned to one of his flight officers. "Bobby, go count the holes in your plane. I want this on record for those bloody idiots in Melbourne."

And so he sent the message to Allied HQ:

Another air attack this AM stop No resistance possible stop Only remaining plane holed 228 times stop Airstrip completely destroyed stop Japanese naval fleet sighted to the north stop Expected ETA 2000 hours today stop Request immediate evacuation of remaining personnel stop

And they all sat or stood around the radio receiver or smoked outside and waited for the reply. Tapped out in Morse, decoded by the signals lad, Landers standing over his shoulder reading it letter by letter. He had turned away before the tapping even stopped.

Remain at post at all costs stop Continue to attack Japanese stop

The C/O grunted. "They've got no bloody idea." Then - "I'm not losing any more boys to this madness.

"We're upping stumps," he told the assembly later in what remained of the 'drome's mess hall. "Destroy everything, follow protocol, but I want everyone gone at the latest by 1600 hours. At the latest! Rendezvous at Warangai River, 14 miles south."

The rumour soon spread of the wry message Landers had sent to Allied HQ in return for their fatuous order. "It's Latin," someone told Tom when he looked quizzical. "*Nos morituri te salutamus*" - it's what the gladiators had to say when they went into the Colosseum - '*we who are about to die salute you*'."

"They'll get a fright when we all show up at home then," another grinned.

Tom tried to smile but couldn't. Somehow his face had stopped working. And his stomach was turning and twisting all the time, all the time. Everything confused. Confused and confusing, all in a jumble inside. He no longer knew or even felt what was the right emotional response at any given moment. It was disorienting there, inside his skin, he decided, permanently dizzy like after that childhood spinning game. Swept along by events not of his making or choosing, bumped and bruised by unseen

river hazards, shifted and shunted like on one of those crazy ghost train rides at the Ekka, things jumping out at you at every opportunity.

It was best not to think anymore, he concluded. Shut it out, shut it down. Just stay alive and focus on getting out the other end. Smoke and mirrors, he told himself. Over and over. Smoke and mirrors, smoke and mirrors, none of this is real ...

"Come on, O'Connor," they called from the car. "You reckon the Japs'll have time to read up on who was paid what?" Or even be interested, Tom added silently, as he yielded to the uselessness of his task, grabbed Rose's tea-set from the desk, and ran out the door.

The township was quiet in the baking heat. Even the Chinese stall owners had closed the flaps on their bright canvas awnings and headed for the hills. They wouldn't want to be around when the Japs got in. Tom had some idea of how they would suffer, centuries of simmering hatred ready to be unleashed again.

Theirs must have been one of the last cars out of town along the coast road. The mined section across Ratal Pass hadn't yet been detonated and on the Boiler Road were parties of 2/22nd troops just standing around, not quite sure of their function anymore. "No matter what we do we'll be blown to smithereens," Tom heard someone say as the car inched slowly through.

At the Four Ways, they overtook the ambulance trucks shifting the field hospital up to Kokopo Mission, out of harm's way. The nursing sisters looked tired and one shrugged when the driver of Tom's car asked if they needed any help once they arrived. "What's the difference?" she said. "We've been on duty 28 hours already patching up all the boys from this last raid."

But another smiled brightly. "Thanks for the offer - we've got 80 patients here ... many hands make light work, they say!"

They passed the convoy on a wider section of the rutted track, the road cutting through metres of grey ash, crumbling and powdery. Once at Kokopo, it seemed that a fair few others, civilians and khaki, had decided to camp there overnight as well, so all mucked in with the erection of the tent hospital and the setting to of meals in the camp kitchen.

It was a fine clear night. For once the storms had skirted the coast and were rumbling far off, out to sea. Stars bright with innocence called Tom into sleep's cradle around midnight.

It seemed later that he'd only just drifted off when a particularly aggressive mosquito started whining in his ear. But as he came to, Tom realised the sound came from further hence, carried on the still night air to their high ridge position overlooking the harbour. Around him, everyone was rousing from their sleep sacks covered in netting. Murmuring. Apprehensive.

What looked like a firework show was going on down there. Parachute flares were being dropped from circling seaplanes, and the mosquito sound came from winches lowering speedboats mounted with searchlights into the water. White and violet streams of colour played over the Vulcan crater. Someone with binoculars said he could see Japs aboard the boats, black-faced, black-singleted. "Those bastards mean business alright," he muttered through clenched teeth. "They're using a bloody sledgehammer to crack an eggshell."

There was a collective decision to immediately move on as the first mortar and gunfire sounded. But the nurses refused to accompany them.

"We'll be alright," one said. "They wouldn't dare mess around with us."

"And if anything gets nasty, Father John from the mission has offered us his protection," another added. "But you boys need to get going - hurry now!"

The convoy started off, on the coast road south to Warangai. No headlights, just dark boxes on wheels moving slowly through the night. They're here, Tom thought. They're here. And we shouldn't be.

They made it to the river by daybreak. There, they were greeted by abandoned cars and trucks, civilian, army. Landers was already there, standing with some NCOs of the Air Signals.

"Right, you stragglers," he said. "Now we're on foot, only a light pack - water and a few rations. Ditch everything else. We'll see what we can scavenge en route. We've got 26 miles to cover to Sum Sum Plantation."

A dugout canoe took them across the river and then it was a case of following the khaki ant column along the greasy jungle-wet track, avoiding the relative sparseness of the beach environs. "I hope it's pretty obvious to you boys that you mustn't be seen," Landers had said.

Occasionally the vegetation thinned out in cleared areas where tall blady grass, brambles and thorns bit deep into arms and legs. Snaking their way across these patches became hurried ventures, especially when the low thrum of an enemy recco could be heard. Just past Put Put Plantation they watched as a seaplane dove low for a better look at what - them? - before heading back toward Rabaul. And not long after, explosions and machine gunfire could be heard from behind. Bone-weary, there was no choice but to struggle on. The forest sweated in the heat, and so did the men, stupefying the senses as they slipped and tripped through the dense jungle green. Past dripping ferns, stilt-legged palms and tall bamboo thickets, muddy and spongy with leaf litter, the track twisted between the roots of forest giants, lianas weaving lace skirts around their trunks. Only the dizzying noise of the bush, the crunch of boots a low base beat beneath the shrill of cicadas and the whoops of forest birds. While the buzz of mosquitoes a constant, rising to a crescendo scream the closer they approached the target.

Toward nightfall, some blokes from Put Put and another couple of civilians caught them up - more used to the terrain, the heat, and fresh from an anxious escape. "We just got out of the homestead before the bastards blew her sky-high," one said. "Then they strafed the surrounding bush hoping to rip our guts out. You're lucky you were this far ahead."

Together they crossed the neck of Put Put Bay in a canoe and ketch before rejoining the coast track south. They took a risk and lit a couple of hurricane lamps to help the slow laborious night-time progress. Often they heard the sound of native drums - "They're sending messages up and down the coast about the invasion," a Put Put man explained. There was an especially long flourish of sound nearby. One of the others smiled - "I reckon that bit was about the Japs coming ashore like a swarm of bull ants."

At one point, a sudden downpour had them all slithering and scrambling down a particularly steep patch of tortuous track as it turned into a spontaneous mudslide. "Should try that more often," someone quipped, mud dripping from hair, shirt caked with brown slime. "I'll never whinge about a Cairns summer again," another promised, spitting half the jungle out of his mouth.

And so it went on. And on and on and on. Putting one foot in front of the other, singularly, deliberately became Tom's only goal. And with each step, he started a chant in his head to block out everything else, the pain, the fatigue, the fear. In time with his footfalls, in time with the clink of porcelain in his backpack. Rosie, Rosie, home soon now Rosie ... Rosie, Rosie, home soon now love ...

They reached Sum Sum around 2300. There were blokes sprawled everywhere - everywhere, yet nowhere. All out of sight beneath the cover of forest canopy. Silent, watchful, tense. The haggard look of collective exhaustion told on every face. They smoked, they groaned. Some were ill, bellies swollen with dysentery. Others shivered violently as the noose-tight grip of malaria held sway as much as any external foe. Ahead, the beach and green-blue lagoon fringed by reef sparkled like a million coral

jewels in the moonlight, calm, comforting, soporific. How can paradise have a dark side? Tom thought. How can somewhere so beautiful be a killing ground?

They found the C/O, squatted down with some blokes speaking quietly. "Ah good," Landers looked up momentarily, "you made it. An Empire C-Class was here around dusk and took the first lot. We can't risk another flight into the same location tomorrow night, so we're heading round to Tol at Wide Bay."

There was a long slow groan in response to this news but Landers waved it away. "No, no, there's the mission schooner, Veilamoni, anchored out there and the padre will sail it round for us."

It seemed to Tom that he could barely move his legs in the water and merely floated out to the yacht in the lagoon. The water was cooling, fresh. Nothing left now except his shirt and shorts. Boots, hat, pack, everything else left on the beach. So much for Rosie's Christmas present.

They slept on the open deck that night as the boat sailed down the coast - a sharp shower just before dawn had them all wet as shags and cursing, but with first light they made it to Tol Plantation and then it was a case of getting wet again anyhow in the swim in to shore. The rest of the day was spent waiting. Waiting, hoping, and scavenging fruit from the plantation's mango crop.

"It'll be another Empire C Class," Landers was saying in answer to a question. "Everyone has to go on this one. We can't risk another flight tomorrow night. The Japs are already boring down on our position." He was firm. Tonight's would be the last mission.

As the sun went down, a storm building out to sea moved closer, dulling the sky of colour. But nevertheless, they heard the familiar drone of a plane circling to land, then the slap as she hit the water, and the roar as the pilot taxied to his waiting position just beyond the reef. Too risky to try crossing into the lagoon with the tides and unknown cargo weight.

They all stood on the beach, watching. And then. Oh God. Another plane's engines could be heard. It was a split second before anyone reacted, as if willing that it wasn't so. Silence as ears strained for confirmation of gut instinct.

"Find cover!" someone yelled. The beach became a spray of sand and coral splinters, as feet scrambled, stumbled, desperate for the cover of jungle. From crouched hiding places, all eyes trained to the blip above, a reconnaissance craft, circling once, twice, then off. Breath collectively expelled - had they been spotted?

"Maybe he was tailing the Empire," someone said.

"Yeah, but maybe he lost her in the cloud cover. It's getting pretty grim out there."

"We'll know soon enough if the Zeros show up," said Landers. "Come on, swim!" he commanded.

The flying boat was just a rocking shadow in the dusk, about 400 metres from shore. Hurricane lamps in the dugouts, carrying those who were too sick or injured to make it on their own, helped keep them all in a group, and occasional lightning flashes from the approaching storm gave fleeting perspective to the scene - a sea of bobbing corks, snorting, grunting bobbing corks, air sucked into overworked lungs, sheer will driving arms and legs. Two days of trekking, debilitating heat, snatched sleep and scant rations had taken their toll. Those in the dugouts called words of encouragement as best they could. It would end soon. Crossing the reef, coral clawed at legs and arms, slicing through already raw wounds. "We'll all be shark tucker at this rate," someone grunted.

But here, now, a great white wall loomed. The flying boat, solid and dependable, waiting to draw them into her bosom, white and tall as a house, it seemed. Clean. So white and clean and fresh to their sweat and salt and stench, the water gently lapping her floats. Welcoming, quieting their anxiety. Men were

hauling each other aboard. It was crowded but everyone went about his business with a calmness, a stillness, here in the belly of this white angel.

Tom saw Landers talking to the pilot. "We're taking everyone, it's too risky to come back another night."

"But sir, we're well overweight," the pilot protested. "I'll never get her off the water!"

Landers didn't flinch. It was as if he already knew the odds were stacked against them. "Either we all go or none of us go. I'm not leaving anyone on this reef ..."

Tom found an inch of wall, laid his head back and closed his eyes. All around him, men were doing likewise. There were more than 60 of them wedged into that finite space. Silent, accepting of whatever surprise fate might yet spring. As if now it was already over, whether they lived or died, stayed or went, it didn't matter anymore. Someone else had taken on the job of their survival, someone else and his calm white angel were now trying to get them out of this mess.

And try he did. The plane's engines started up, first the port engine, then the starboard kicked into life, and she began to rock with the motion of the whirring propellers. He pushed her out to full throttle and then they were rumbling, rumbling across that flat sheen of open sea, rumbling and grunting all the while, urging this bright white bird to fly.

"Oh God, fly. Please fly. Take me home," Tom murmured, eyes tear-stained with everything - there was not one emotion that was higher than any other now. Fear, pain, fatigue, longing. "Take me away, take me out of this mess. Please."

And, yes. Finally. Her nose came up. The flight deck was hushed. The pilot concentrating hard on pulling her nose higher, higher. Please, please, please, the silent cry went out. To whom? To where? But someone, something answered. With a shudder and a sigh, her floats wafted unsteadily above the smooth surface of the depthless ocean, and they were in the air. Slowly, slowly, but in the air.

"It'll take us four hours to get down to Samarai," someone said. The tiny speck off the east coast of mainland New Guinea that was to be their sanctuary from this place, this time. But no one was listening. To a man they were drifting off, into the arms of a white angel's sleep, her, a bird with shimmering moonlit wings.

Coming in to Samarai Harbour, the violence of the crash landing woke them all. The port float had broken off with a crunch, split clean through when she touched down. But nothing could shake them anymore.

"That's what happens when you're 2,000-pound overweight," the pilot grunted as he struggled to keep her level, steady in his resolve to bring them all back alive. It was midnight. On which day? Did it matter? It was the day on which they'd been saved, that's all. The Burns Philp store down at the dock handed out dry clothes. Hot tea and toasted sandwiches came next at the pub.

Thirty hours later, at 0600 on January 26, a Short Sunderland flying boat came through from Moresby to take them down to the mainland.

"You boys are off on immediate leave," Landers was saying as he farewelled them at the dock. "You'll be fully kitted out again back at AOB Townsville and then it's a case of 'go home'!" he laughed.

"And you, sir?" someone asked. Landers scanned the faces of his men and shrugged. "I'm glad I did what I did."

A young RAAF sergeant sat reading the previous day's Courier-Mail headline in the Sunlander bound for Brisbane. *Dateline: January 26, Port Moresby. Japs attack Rabaul. Our forces hold firm.*

He shook his head and folded it away.

An old man sat opposite in the rattly wooden carriage with push up windows. "Where you headed son?" he quizzed.

"Down to Brisbane, on leave."

"Gee, Townsville to Brisbane. That's a long way home," the man said.

Yes, Tom thought, as the train trundled slowly south. He turned to the window, eyes fixed on the wide space of sea sun-kissed by a Pacific morning.

The elderly lady with silver cropped hair smoothed her lap again and reached for the small photo on the bookcase. Sepia-ed with age, she looked anew at this boy in his uniform, face turned away from the camera, looking east, searching the horizon out there for something, what?

The sun on the sleep-out blinds of that Wilston Queenslander painted shifting patterns on a static background. It was a photo, nothing more. She placed it in her lap and sighed a long note for all those years.

"We'll never know what really happened," she said. "He never talked about it - you know that. You remember how he'd go quiet, stony, each Anzac Day, and we'd know to keep out of his way. And that time we went to the War Memorial and he just looked at all those names on the plaque. And never said a word."

Her eyes were wet. "You can't get inside someone else's head and know what they went through, how they felt, what they were thinking, no matter how much you try."

"No, you can't," the daughter agreed, searching her own eastern horizon. "No matter how much you try, you just can't."

Postscript: The men evacuated on the overloaded RAAF Empire C Class flying boat at sunset on 24 January were the last to leave Tol Plantation at Wide Bay alive. From 25 January until early February, more survivors of the Rabaul invasion arrived at the rendezvous point. Perhaps more planes would come, they thought. But no. Instead it was the Japanese who accepted the men's hopeless surrender on 3 February 1942 in the late afternoon. At dawn next morning, more than 160 Australians were murdered by gunshot or bayonet in what was officially described as the 'Tol Plantation Massacre'.

Endnote and selected bibliography

'The Long Way Home' is a fictional story based on historical fact. The character of Landers is based on the actual 24th RAAF squadron leader, Group Captain John Margrave Lerew, who commanded my father and his mates, and whose *'Nos morituri te salutamus'* telegram forms part of the Australian War Memorial (AWM) archive. His actions, for which he was awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross in April 1942, and the events surrounding them, are historically accurate, but the voice and emotions I have given him, as with all characters, are a work of pure imagination.

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