

Won't be long now, old dog!

By Graham Price

She would sit on the long wide verandah, rocking on her cane chair and peering intensely down the dusty rutted track that led to town, looking for any sign of life — for any sign that one of her boys was coming home to her. The intense heat of the afternoon brought the bush flies around and she carelessly brushed them away from her greying hair and lined forehead. *The Melbourne Argus* newspaper, two days old, carried some reports of soldiers disembarking at Port Melbourne, though that was nearly 150 miles away. She had read through the names again and again, but her boys were not listed.

Tom would come, Maggie thought, it will be Tom who comes first. And she saw his lanky frame and the quick crooked smile that he flashed at her each time he came back from droving. First born, yes it would be he who comes home first. But this time it was not the droving he would come back from, it was that terrible war that he and his brothers James and Perry had gone off to in 1915.

Don't worry about us, ma, they had laughed, we're invincible. We'll give 'em hell and be home again in a few months. The old dog stirred beside her, the flies were worrying him. He snuffled and brushed them away with his paws, but they settled again on his nose and around his weeping eyes.

Poor old Josh, she thought, he'd been thirteen when the boys went away and was now seventeen. How the old blue heeler had survived that long she didn't know, waiting perhaps for the boys to come back, waiting for what seemed an eternity.

Is that what keeps you going, old dog, she thought, and also what keeps me going too I imagine? It was 1919 and still her boys had not come home. Won't be long though, she thought, won't be long me old Josh. They're still over there cleaning things up in France.

Winter came and the biting winds swept down from the high plains, yet still she sat out on the long verandah with its canvas blinds faded and patched, wrapped in a woolen shawl that had seen better days, waiting for her boys. She looked out into the fields, blinked as her eyes rested on the wooden cross out there under the old blue gums — her husband John's grave. Oh, she must go and tend to it, plant more bulbs for the spring. Or was it too late? No, only early winter, there was still time. Jonquils, she thought, yes, jonquils this time. Must remember to get some bulbs when I go to town.

The old dog lay beside her, curled up against the cold; every now and then he would shiver and give a small whimper and once in a while he would wearily raise himself to his feet and stare down the now muddy road with her, looking..... just looking..... ears pricked up for the sound of footsteps or horse's hooves and his cloudy eyes watching for any movement, but there were only birds splashing in the rutted pools and the watery tracks made by Maggie's buggy.

And still they did not come, and another year went by. The heeler had very bad arthritis and found it difficult to get up

and down the steps of the verandah, though when Spring finally broke he did not care all that much and simply stayed on the verandah most of the time watching her knitting. She was finishing off a pullover for Perry. Inside, near her old Singer treadle sewing machine were the two finished pullovers for Tom and James. She would have this last one finished by the time the three boys came home, that was for certain.

Years ago the old dog had sired a litter, and one of the bitches, Maud, had been given to Maggie's farmer neighbour. She hadn't seen that bitch, Maud, for several years and then one day it turned up on her verandah, came over and nuzzled at old Josh in recognition. The old dog became excited and in spite of his bad arthritis, jumped up and ran around Maud, barking loudly.

Strange, Maggie thought, that after all these years the bitch had come back to its old home? Must have had a litter recently, she considered, looking at the swollen teats. She rose from her chair and went inside, intending to get the bitch some food, but when she returned Maud was gone and old Josh was lying down as if nothing had occurred. Funny that, she thought. I must have imagined it.

The jonquils bloomed. She had been lavish in the planting of the bulbs and it was a joy to see them at the head and foot of her husband's grave. She knelt on the damp earth and carefully pulled the weeds from around the grave, leaving the yellow flowers dominant on their stalks and glowing brightly in the sunshine. A horse and jinker was coming up the road. Oh, she thought, it would be Daisy, her daughter. Time for a cup of tea.

"You should sell this place, mum, and move into town," said Daisy, brushing several flies away from the freshly cooked scones on the plate. Maggie paused from pouring the tea.

"Oh no," she said, looking distressed, "What will the boys have when they come? I can't do that. This is their home."

Daisy looked at her and shook her head. "Mum, you have to face up to it, they're not coming home. They're gone. Don't you remember the cablegrams?"

The tea-pot fell from her hand, smashing on the brown linoleum-covered floor and hot tea splashed her black boots.

"Oh mum, mum....."

After Daisy had gone she lay down on her bed for a rest. The boys will be coming home, she thought, the boys will be coming..... and she fell asleep. When she awoke the sun was close to setting and she heard old Josh barking. She went out to the verandah and there was the bitch Maud holding a small heeler pup by the scruff of the neck. When Maud saw Maggie, she dropped the pup to the floor and ran off.

My goodness, thought Maggie, what's this then? Oh, poor little thing..... poor baby..... Oh, and it's a boy! She retrieved an old wicker basket from the laundry, lined it with one of Josh's blankets and popped the puppy in it. "A present for us, Josh, look that that? A grand-child for you and a son for me,

aye? Let's call him Tom after our own Tom."

There was still a certain warmth in the sun, so she sat in her rocker on the verandah and fell asleep. Something woke her, she was not sure what, but there was the bitch Maud again with another pup. She dropped it onto the verandah floorboards and ran off. Oh, thought Maggie, this is really weird, another grand-child for you Josh. Another one. Let's call him James, and she placed the second pup in the basket beside the first. With that she went inside to set the fire and prepare herself some dinner. She'd had the vegetables simmering on the stove and the beef sausages grilling for some time when Josh barked. She pushed the fly-wire door open and could not believe her eyes. The bitch Maud dropped a third pup on the verandah boards and again ran off. When Maggie picked it up she saw that it was also a male. She smiled. She would call him Perry.

She took the basket inside with the three pups snuggled together on the blanket and placed it before the glowing coals of the open wood fire. She sat down at her kitchen table, looked at the pups again and again, and wondered. They seemed very healthy and she was sure they would grow up into fine strong young men. Her three boys had come home at last.

She stared into the basket with moist eyes as the old dog, Josh, nosed open the fly-wire door and walked unsteadily down the steps of the verandah out into the crisp early night air. He settled himself down under the big blue gum by the fence with his head nestled upon his forelegs, and fell asleep. Everyone was home.

LEST WE FORGET!

Some images from 1914-1918



No picnic. The Sixth Light Horse Regiment, 2nd Division, flooded out on the way to Jerusalem.



Turkish Red Crescent (equivalent to Red Cross) attending to wounded prisoners while un-armed Australian 6th Light Horse troopers casually look on. Would the Taliban of these days be as merciful?



The first casualty in war is truth and often not far behind that is the loss of or mis-direction of mail. This mail sent from Geelong in Victoria, Australia in 1915 (according to the stamped rear) arrived at Holdsworth Army Base in New South Wales, forwarded to the dead letter office, then to Egypt, back to Sydney, again sent to the Middle East and finally arrived in the hands of the recipient. W.H. Price certainly got his penny's worth.



With the Sixth Light Horse Regiment in Palestine.

In Flanders Fields

In Flanders Fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

McCrae, John (1921). In Flanders Fields. William Thomas Manning, Ernest Clegg (illustrations) (limited edition ed.). William Edwin Rudge.