

JOH 25/5/23 14/4/06

Waddenhoe 3/5/06 - Michael's Memories of John.

Childhood in China



John was born in Peking when Giles and Joan had a mission hospital in Northern Shansi. I was born in Peking and lived in Da Tung Fu until marauding Chinese soldiery burned down the mission hospital and stole their wedding presents. Giles started in the PUMC (Peking Union Medical College) becoming physician to outpatients, chest physician and doctor to several Tb Sanatoria in the Western hills.

Michael and John Peking 1925



We spent summer holidays in Pei Tai Ho which was a small seaside village with large bungalows for the Western residents in Peking. We were neighbours there of the chief engineer of the PUMC. Now it is a vast communist enclave for the Chinese hierarchy.

Pei Tai Ho 1926

B was born in Peking. We came home on the SS Aeneas, a Blue Funnel Line passenger cargo boat. Peter was born in Wadenhoe.



The Family c 1929

We came back from China in 1932 on the SS Patroculus so that we could board at Chafyn Grove School Salisbury recommended by a lady who had been a Matron there and who had met Giles and Joan in Peking. I was 7 1/2 and John was 9.



Joan bought the “Holdall” a 1925 Bull-Nosed Morris Oxford and drove us from Lincoln, where we stayed at 1 Vicar’s Court, to Salisbury. She then took a house, Charlmead, in Medmenham for six months as Noel lived in Duffields.

When she took B and Peter back to China we lived with our grandparents in Lincoln (CG and CG Hall) supervised by Aunt Faith who inherited the “Holdall” and regularly drove from Clifton where she taught classics at a girl’s school to Salisbury to take us out.

John in Lincoln

John and I were shunted from family to school friends and spent many days with Uncle Noel in Medmenham and Uncle Humphrey et al (recently returned from Perth, Australia) in Ramsbury.

Mother Joan came back via the Trans Siberian Railway from Harbin via Vladivostock when her sister Margaret died and we spent some happy days with her.

John and I became very close – reliant on each other (now known as bonding). He was never academic or athletic but happy at school.

Joan B and Peter came home from Peking in 1936 met at Tilbury by Uncle Noel. Although John had won an exhibition to Marlborough the competition for places was such that they were only able to accept scholars - so John went to Bromsgrove. 2 years later when I had won scholarships to both Marlborough and Bromsgrove the decision as to which school I should attend was deferred to John and he decided that, although I would be in the same school year as him in a higher set (as a Classics scholar) he wanted us to be together so I joined him at Bromsgrove. He never complained and we continued there together and on to Llanwrtyd Wells when Bromsgrove was evacuated in the war. There we looked out for each other and I was frequently instructed to cover at roll call for his late returns from bird watching at Rhada some 30 miles away by bicycle – always the boss!



Michael, John, Peter and stilts Lincoln

I have written 2 separate accounts of his experiences of War in Europe and South Korea as I was the only member of the family he would speak to – swearing me to keep this confidential knowing that our bond was solid. The only time I broke this bond was at his 70th birthday when Elizabeth agreed that we should reunite him with his “Mentioned in Dispatches” which I had kept safe for him when he had refused to acknowledge that it was his.

Second World War

John left Bromsgrove after School certificate and lived in Madron with our parents. He had been a keen member of the Llanwertyd Wells Home Guard and knew the Brecon beacons well (Adrian’s ashes lie there). He took a bank clerks job in the Bolitho Bank (Barclays) and joined the Home Guard – full, as in Wales, with the local poachers and farmers.



He enlisted in the Royal West Kent Fusiliers (The Buffs) spent 6/12 in Bren Gun carriers training with his platoon and was sent to North Africa at the end of the campaign. His platoon had been sent 3 days ahead in error without him and so by the time he arrived he had lost his baggage and his platoon to another officer. He had to then take over the return of old sweats recovering from injury or returning from leave.



Landing craft took them to Palermo. The fixed gun positions and heavy infantry dug in above the beach should have been destroyed by American ships but they had gone to an unguarded port 3 miles away. Thus they endured 21/2 days of relentless gunfire ultimately all of his platoon apart from John, his sergeant and one other were lost. John took shrapnel in the knee but later explained to the family that he had injured it falling off a motorcycle.

A period of invalid recovery followed. He joined the 51st Division in Italy as Liason Officer arranging transport of American General’s Caravans from Alexandria. They demanded 3 each and, like Monty, John told them they could have just one.

At Monte Casino, John did forward information gathering (reconnaissance) with fighting troop commanders. Access was along a single road shelled by Germans from the mountains above. He had a driver in an unarmoured car with a radio and they worked out that the Germans shelled the road at regular timed intervals. The driver drove and John operated the radio to HQ giving information to Generals 8 miles behind the front. He was awarded a "Mentioned in Dispatches" and the citation was sent to our mother (JFH) as next of kin. He fought up the East coast of Italy keeping JFH informed as to his whereabouts using reference to Pei Tai He where we spent our holidays from Peking so as to confuse the censors.

After the Germans had surrendered he was promoted to Acting Major and made Adjutant to the British Officers Leave Centre in Klagenfeldt, Austria. The British Regiments were bored and inactive as they guarded Germany and Austria with the Russians so he coordinated the rounding up of thoroughbred horses stolen by the Germans from breeders in all countries and arranged race meetings and point to points to boost morale. He was teamed up with an Austrian civilian expert on race course design whom he dressed up as a Brigade Major so they could pass freely through Russian lines to complete their work unchallenged. The Leave Centre was idyllic - Chamois shooting, skiing, sailing great food – better than the Army rations.



When John came home on his first leave after the War he stayed with me in my digs at St John's Street Oxford (The Misses Tabor – breakfast and dinner – super!). He stayed 2 days and gave me all of the information I have just described about his war. Then he went to Roscadghill where mummy gave him his "Mentioned in Dispatches" but he refused to accept that one J.O.Hall of the Royal West Kent Fusiliers was him! JFH kept it and gave it to me before she died and asked me to find a way of giving it to him.

He went back to Austria for a further 6 months and on discharge leave came over to Oxford where B had started her nursing training and I was doing my clinical training at the Radcliff Infirmary. When he left Oxford for Penzance I was ordered / instructed to find the best train – always the boss and elder brother.

Jardines

Taken on by Jardines in London he spent many months in Dockland learning about cargo and sea routes. Jardines then sent him to their shipping department in Hong Kong where he learned Cantonese to speak to his shipping clerks. From there he was dispatched to Japan where Jardines had only one port agency so John created 5 more to deal with the vast amount of Marshall aid to Japan. He became an expert on Eastern cargo shipping routes and ports.

Korean War

The Korean War broke out and he was sent to organize ships carrying troops and ammunition based in Pusan. He was in Seoul when North Korea broke through but managed to escape back to Pusan once more losing all his baggage as in North Africa.

There were 4 Jardine's ships in the harbour at Pusan and the civilians needed evacuating. The American missionaries came down in vast Cadillacs with their belongings and fridges demanding passage whilst the American General in command of port protection was terrified and drunk. John gave him another bottle of whiskey and took over the running of the port. He prioritized the evacuation of women and children and, by putting Jardine's men on each of the ships ensured that corruption with US dollars did not influence the crew. The ships safely reached Naval protection. He then returned to Hong Kong.

Back in Hong Kong

Well done Hall! - now you can learn about air freight! Jardine's sent him home to England where he told me about all the above. He worked at Heathrow and had to take hated exams – miserable at them as always. Once through them he returned with Jardines as they were interested in the development of air transport in the East. He became deputy manager of Kai Tak airport (Hong Kong).

Anita and I saw a newsflash on TV when we lived in Manchester of the Duke and Duchess of York arriving in Kai Tak for a visit. There he was with the red carpet and organizing the handling of their luggage.

Then a wee Scottish air stewardess flew BOAC from Singapore – Elisabeth Cameron – eventually joined in marriage by RO.

Windsor

The rest is history. Full of sadness. Because of Simon's brain damage they had to come home and leave the well paid life that John had built up so that Simon could be looked after. Being the wonderful person that he was John never moaned or complained about leaving Hong Kong. Sadly his great knowledge of Eastern shipping and air transportation was not appreciated and he humbly took on non-managerial jobs.

Simons and Adrian's deaths set both John and Elisabeth back. As promised to my mother I decided, with Anita's help, to present John with his "Mention in Dispatches".

When staying at Windsor after Adrian's death John went to bed early and we kept Elisabeth up for hours, showed her the citation, and told her about his distinguished war history that he had never mentioned.

Bill their neighbour (with his wife Bridy) - an ex Blues and Royals - got John's war medals cleaned up and an Oak Leaf added for his MID. We decided to surprise him at his 70th birthday – many of the family and their special friends attended. Sadly I never showed Adrian the citation so that he could have known what a brave father he had. They both knew that Adrian died serving his country although the British press were not allowed to comment because of a schedule D notice, but his death was reported in the Swedish press. That Adrian's Para Colonel and wife came to his funeral service and then his memorial service in the Guard's Chapel indicated that he was a highly regarded and trained paratrooper.



Peterborough



John's long final illness in Peterborough saw him loved by the nurses who looked after him. Anita and I visited him when staying in Stamford on a historical society trip. We took him diabetic biscuits and jam from Nutters in Southwold and- true to form – the older brother instructed me to “put them down there on the floor – and fetch me that box of Kleenex”! I always did what I was told!

I was offered chances to visit him by the family – including Per – but I was never much good at visiting family in hospital. I wrote him a letter which, Jennifer had to read to him, saying that I would rather remember the happy times we had together – especially a trip we made to Lindos with him and Elisabeth when we were all relatively well.

We will all miss him and are glad that he has joined his three favourite people in peace.

Michael Hall
Southwold
May 2006