Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges the generous support given to this project by Paul Elliott, Dianne's husband, whose assistance in locating and retrieving material from her archives after her death was invaluable. Thank you also to Derek Lawson for providing information and statistics on the construction of the Burma-Thai Railway; to Charles Lewis, Ron Lovett and Loris Fletcher for their input into the Tavoy Melbourne Cup; and to Claire Jordan, of Poppy Research, for her additional research in the UK.

The author particularly acknowledges the outstanding contribution by Di Elliott to the nation's military history in the compilation of the first accurate nominal roll of 2/19 Battalion, from primary documents known as Routine Orders, and also researching the members of the Tunnel Party. The author also greatly appreciates the support and encouragement of Libby Renney and Ian Webster at Sally Milner Publishing and the unstinting practical and moral support of her husband, Neil Silver.

Fred in uniform

Prologue

It is June 2008, and I am on a hillside overlooking the NSW country town of Boorowa, sitting beside the graves of my parents, who lie side by side under identical slabs of rather forbidding dark grey granite. It is a long time since I felt any need to visit the cemetery, but today I have come to talk to my father.

Despite decades of weathering, the simple epitaph on his headstone, etched with the Rising Sun emblem of the Australian Army, and the words 'Lest We Forget', is still clearly legible.

Frederick Howe
A loving husband and father, departed this life 7 August 1975 aged 69 years.
Erected by his loving wife and family

The grave, a few sepia-coloured photographs, his old and yellowing dog-eared exercise book, some small keepsakes and copies of articles he wrote for a local newspaper, 60 years ago, are the only tangible reminders I have.

The photo that captivates me most is the one of him in his army uniform, taken on his arrival in Malaya in 1941, more than seven years before I was born. It was sent home to his family in the form of a postcard and became my mother's most precious possession; her only link to her husband, the father of her four surviving children and now a prisoner of the Japanese. It was a talisman almost, giving her the strength to keep going, especially through the dark and difficult years that Dad was 'missing, believed prisoner of war'. The photo must have been kept close at hand, as Mum wrote a shopping list on the back.

The image that stares back unblinkingly at me from its wooden frame is one of a man in the prime of his life – a kindly, friendly face with dancing eyes that promise more than a hint of mischief. This was my father before he went into battle. Before his life, and that of his family, changed forever.

I am visiting my parents' graves today to talk to Dad about my experiences, disappointments and frustrations during a recent two-month stay in Thailand, undertaking research on the notorious Burma–Thai railway, where he spent almost all of his time as a POW. For the past 13 years I have been attempting to follow my father's footsteps as a way of understanding him as a person and thereby, hopefully, to understand things about myself. So far it has been a long and eventful journey with many highs and a good number of lows.

As a young girl, I heard no discussion about his being in the war or any talk of the effect it had on his health. I didn't really know anything about the Japanese, so was never taught to hate them, for what I was later to learn they did to him. The only thing he ever told me was that, during the fighting, his mates either side of him were shot and killed. At the age I was then, this didn't mean much to me. I just didn't understand. I never asked any questions, so I received no answers – answers that I would come to crave.

No one talked about anything much in our house. Dad went to work and, when he

came home, he went straight to the vegetable garden and worked there until 'teatime' – we didn't call it dinner in those days. Mum kept a spotless and comfortable family home; meals were always on the table at a precise time – always meat and the proverbial 'three veg', which sometimes stretched to five, depending on the garden. When Dad was called in for dinner, he would come in the back door, put his Akubra hat on the top of the dresser, wash his hands and sit.

If the resident boarder was not home for dinner, Mum knew how to get him to the tea table, quick smart. In those days the hotels had to cease trading at 6 o'clock in the evening; hence the '6 o'clock swill' when the pub patrons hurriedly gulped down their last schooners. Most households with a drinker knew that, soon after six, dinner would be served. Sometimes the pubs were a bit tardy at obeying the call of 'time, gentlemen, time', so Mum would make an anonymous call to the bar of the closest hotel and tell them that a police car was heading their way. The bar soon emptied. After dinner Dad read the newspaper, listened to the radio or, when we finally got one, watched television and went to bed.

I do not remember exactly when I discovered where Dad had been during the war, but I do know that it was many years after his death. However, it was not until 1995, the 50th anniversary of the end of WWII, that the government instituted a program called *Australia Remembers*, in which I became really interested and decided to learn all that I could about that part of his life.

As a child, I didn't know the difference between my father and anyone else's father. As far as I knew, all fathers were probably cranky old bastards. I knew that Dad had served in the war, as he marched on ANZAC Day and came home drunk afterwards. I also knew that there was a problem with the Japanese, because my mother would not allow anything marked 'Made in Japan' in the house. Perversely, Dad taught me to count to twenty in Japanese – ichi, ni, san, shi, go, roku, shichi, hachi, ku, ju, ju ichi, ju ni, ju san, ju yon, ju go, ju roku, ju nana, ju hachi, ju kyu, ni ju, but it was not until years later that I learned just what counting in that fashion meant to him. What I can't understand is why he wanted to be reminded.

My very early memories are of very loud, heated arguments between my parents that focused on Dad's drinking bouts, the primary cause of the bitter altercations. However, there were periods when he did not drink at all, and became very irate with anyone who did. This caused a great deal of friction with my brother, who was at that time a heavy drinker. Unlike Dad, he was violent, which increased my trauma. My father blamed himself for my brother's problems; because of the war, he was not there at a crucial time in his son's life. Tragically, my brother eventually committed suicide.

Dad rarely had a day off work, even when really sick, let alone took a 'sickie', but he was often ill and moody and locked himself in the bedroom. I was forbidden to go anywhere near him. We never knew from one day to the next how to approach him. What was said one day would be fine, but say it the next day and all hell would break loose. He never wanted us to have other people around the house when he was there. He wanted his home, and us, all to himself.

One visitor he certainly didn't like was Mum's elderly aunt, who lived a few blocks away. She had two Pomeranian dogs as companions and they always announced her visit by running ahead and arriving at the house before her – obviously they knew where she was heading. If Dad saw the dogs coming down the path, he shut the doors and we had to

Boorowa's ANZAC Day march.

stay as quiet as mice until we heard the front gate shut on her way out.

If anyone else called unexpectedly, Dad disappeared out the back door to either the garden or his shed, or took his fishing line and headed down the back paddock to the river. I always thought he went fishing to catch fish but I now think there was a lot more to it than that. It would have given him time to himself, time to think and maybe reflect on the things that still played heavily on his mind. Sometimes he went off for the whole weekend by himself to places like Taemas Bridge, Wee Jasper, Cavan and Childowla on the Murrumbidgee and Goodradigbee rivers.

As time passed, Dad's health deteriorated and the arguments with Mum mercifully ceased. He also stopped drinking and smoking, which was a great relief to Mum as Dad often spent most of the night puffing away, the glow of the cigarette waxing and waning in the dark. Their bedspread was fluffy pink chenille with a raised decorative pattern. Rather than use an ashtray, he simply brushed aside any ash that dropped, eventually wearing away all the pile on his side of the bed. For reasons I didn't know then, Dad obviously found it very hard to sleep.

My father also suffered from bouts of recurring malaria, which saw him confined to bed, but his health problems mostly seemed to be intestinal. He had a couple of operations, but his troubles persisted. I recall how ill he was about a year before he died and his look of embarrassment when my mother tried to care for him. He suffered from horrendous haemorrhoids, caused by the effects of severe dysentery, and the doctors didn't seem to be able to help him. Chronic diarrhoea plagued him, and on many occasions he couldn't make it out of his bed to the toilet. This was when Mum took over. I never once heard her complain. In fact, I can't recall her ever complaining, no matter what he did. I guess she understood.

This is where my pain comes in: if only I had understood. To me he was a cranky old bastard who was always sick and drank to excess. His heated arguments with Mum were accepted as a normal part of life. There was no physical violence, but the yelling and abuse was enough to scare a small girl and left an indelible mark. Our lives seemed to be

disrupted so often because of him and I wondered why I had such a miserable old father.

However, he was certainly not a shirker. In recent years, the men who worked for him in civvy street told me that, on occasion, he would be so sick at work that he would have to spend some time lying down in the lunchroom. We knew nothing of this at home: Dad lived away from Boorowa for the last few years of his working life, only returning at the weekend. He wanted to retire on a higher superannuation so he and Mum could do a lot of the things they had not had the chance to do previously. Sadly, he was forced to retire early because of his ill health and his plans came to nought.

For the last three years that I lived at home I worked for our family doctor. I do not remember Dad coming to the surgery very often in those days – perhaps because he didn't want me knowing what his problems were. It is most likely that, eschewing our GP, he visited a doctor in Crookwell, almost 90 kilometres away. By necessity, the visits would have been sporadic.

Not having continuity with one medical practitioner may have had an effect on his not receiving a better pension or treatment from what was then the Repatriation Department. Suffering loss of vision, caused by vitamin A deficiency from a woefully inadequate diet as a POW, he fought for years with public servants, who declared that his eyesight must have been defective before he joined the army – despite the fact that on enlistment everyone had to undergo an eye test, and his proficiency with a rifle was legendary. His delight in finally receiving a pair of unflattering round-lensed, government-issue spectacles was pitiful.

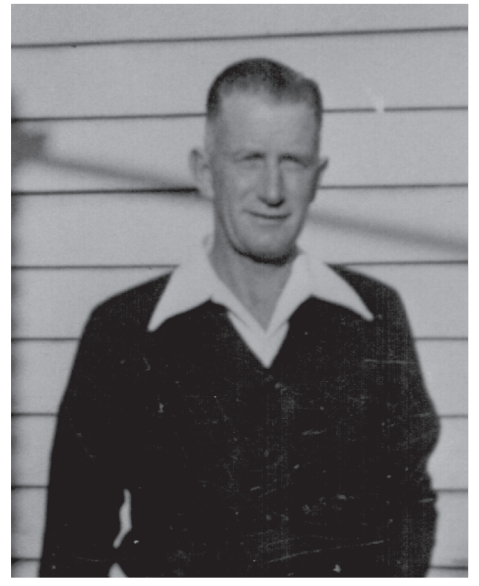
Early in 1961, Dad was sent to Sydney for surgery on a duodenal ulcer. I had no idea that he had suffered from the same complaint in Malaya, but I do remember vividly the family being summoned to the lounge room of my Aunty Doris, a very religious lady, where we all went down on bended knees to pray for his recovery. No one had explained to me just how ill he was, so this terrified me. My mother was not there to console me as she was with Dad in Sydney. In those days, adults did not bother to explain things to children – we were to be seen and not heard, as the old saying goes. I later learned he had haemorrhaged so badly during the operation that the medical staff thought he would not pull through.

After I left Boorowa to live in Sydney in 1968, Dad's health deteriorated further. When I married two years later, Dad gave me away, although he was far from well on the day and was forced to retire from work in early 1971. It was good in a way for Mum – she was alone with only my dog for company after I left – as Dad spent the last three years of his working life at Crookwell as the Goulburn and District Line Inspector for the PMG. He would leave home early Monday morning, board in Crookwell through the week, and not arrive home until after dark on Friday.

Not long after his retirement, Dad received a telegram from Prime Minister John Gorton, informing him that '*the Queen has been pleased to bestow on you the Imperial Service Medal for long and valuable service to the Commonwealth. Warm congratulations and best wishes for your retirement.*'

Naturally we were all very proud of him and, in October that year, the whole family gathered at Government House in Sydney for his investiture by the NSW Governor, Sir Roden Cutler. When Dad moved forward to receive his medal, the first thing Sir Roden said to him was, 'You haven't paid your subs this year for your RSL membership'. Dad had paid them but had failed to put the new clip on the top of his badge.

In the later years of his life, Dad didn't go to the RSL's ANZAC Day march and service in



Fred, the father.

Boorowa, or attend the lunch. Maybe he just didn't want to think, or have anyone remind him, about that time in his life. Or maybe he was afraid he might start drinking again. He didn't. I don't know if he had sworn off it or just felt too ill to drink. He spent quite a lot of time in Boorowa Hospital and also at Young, where he was often visited by his wartime Commanding Officer and post-war friend Colonel Charles Anderson. His eyes lit up and a smile appeared on his time-worn face every time the Colonel entered his hospital room – always with some gift in hand, more often than not a bowl of fruit.

Despite not touching a drop of alcohol for years, in 1975 Dad dragged himself from his sick bed, went to the ANZAC Day march and lunch and got drunk. On his return home, he went straight to his bedroom and shut the door. We didn't see him until next morning. What was it about this particular ANZAC Day? Maybe he knew it was going to be his last time for remembrance – remembrance of his mates who died in battle and as prisoners of war. He died less than four months later, on 7 August, eight days shy of the commemorations to mark the 30th anniversary of the end of WW II. *The Boorowa News* reported:

> The funeral service was held at St John's C of E on Saturday August 9th where members RSL carried out the duties of pallbearers and formed a guard of honour outside the church, together with members of the Women's Auxiliary. At the cemetery, following the prayers led by Canon T Whiting, an RSL service was held during which Mr Ron Bryce carried out the duties of bugler. Fred's CO in the 2/19th Battalion, Lt Col Charles Anderson VC, gave the Valedictory and spoke feelingly of Fred, both as a man and a soldier.

Frustratingly, all I can remember of that day is Colonel Anderson's gentle voice; I can't recall anything he said. However, I do recall Ronnie Bryce playing the Last Post with tears running down his face.

Dear Mum, my poor dear Mum, left alone again with no-one but my dog for company, and

Di with her father on her wedding day, 1970.

he could be a cranky bugger at times too, just like Dad. She continued to honour her husband's memory and his service to the nation by never missing an ANZAC Day commemoration. As a Life Member of the Boorowa RSL Ladies' Auxiliary – usually as secretary or president – she considered it an honour and privilege to help cater for the lunch for returned servicemen and women. It was her special day of the year but, later in life, when younger members 'took over', Mum was relegated to sitting in the corner buttering the bread; something they obviously thought she was now only capable of doing. She felt very hurt, and I think it was the start of her downturn in health because after that she seemed to lose her spark. As time wore on, she developed dementia and then cancer. Just before Christmas of 1988, she died.

I put aside these thoughts and look again at the last three words on Dad's headstone – lest we forget. Lest we forget indeed. My life is now consumed with his memory and of his time away from home during the war, a period I knew very little about when he was alive. I didn't ask him, and he didn't tell me. If only I could turn back the clock.

As a child, I remember an old battered suitcase that sat on top of my parents' wardrobe. In it were a few pieces of paper, old telegrams, a couple of photos, a few badges and some coloured bits of felt that I later learnt were his army colour patches. There was also a bulging exercise book, each page filled with Dad's neat and fluent handwriting – the catalyst that sent me on my quest for knowledge of my father. When my sister took possession of the suitcase after Mum died, one of her grandchildren transcribed the contents. However, the story was hard to follow as some of the pages of the book had become detached from the spine and replaced randomly.

Another sister discovered that, from December 1948 to May 1949, the local Boorowa

newspaper, in those days known as *The Burrowa News*, had published 27 weekly articles written by Dad, based on the notes in his old exercise book. At the time, the only copies were held at the State Library in Sydney but, thanks to modern digitisation, I now have a copy of the entire series and in correct chronological order. Two of the articles had been published earlier – one on 7 December 1945 and another on 18 January 1946, within months of Dad's return home and when his recollections were very fresh. Perhaps it was his way of trying to deal with what had happened to him.

However, as I had no idea of the historical context, his articles didn't really help me to comprehend in any way what it was all about, until I read my first book about the Burma–Thai railway, Hugh Clarke's *A Life For Every Sleeper*. From this book and Dad's articles I worked out that he must have been on a POW draft known as A Force. The book mentioned that a 'Tom' Morris, from Canberra, was also a member of this group. I found him listed in the telephone directory, under his real name, John Gilbert Morris, and he agreed to see me.

I arrived on Tom's doorstep with a bunch of flowers and a million questions. I was shaking so much it is a wonder the flowers had any heads left on them. Tom was very generous and actually loaned me a copy of his personal story about his time as a soldier and as a POW. He also suggested other books to read, and that was the beginning of my personal library, a library that would grow to more than 500 books about the war in the Pacific and, in particular, prisoners of war.

In the course of my search, I met dozens of former POWs, who related their experiences to me, both good and bad. Exploring the POW camp sites and walking along the trace of the railway with some of them has been a very emotional experience. I was in the company of men who were there and, as I listened to their recollections, I found myself imagining that my father was talking to me about his experiences.

These old soldiers had a quality not found in others. Having been to hell and back, they shared a special bond; a unique understanding of themselves, of life and of life's priorities. Thinking back, I realise that I should have recognised this quality in my father too, but I was too focused on his moods and illnesses. I now realise that at times there was an amazing gentleness and a far-away look in his pale blue eyes, the same look that I have seen in other ex-POWs.

How I envied those whose fathers were able to relate their experiences to family members. If only it could have been my father, telling me. I know now that I was not always the daughter he deserved. I could have been more patient with him. I could have even loved him more – if only I had understood.

Why is it that so many POW children were not told their fathers' stories? Did they want to protect us or was it their way of protecting themselves? What I also don't understand is why my brothers and sisters, all born before the war, didn't talk to me about what must have been a difficult time in their lives. I was not born until three years after Dad came home, so I was totally in the dark. Did my siblings not know much either or did they block out that part of their lives? In recent years, when I thought I had found out something about Dad and related it to my sister, I was told, 'Yes, I knew that'. Well, why didn't you tell me? The obvious answer is, I guess, I didn't ask.

My brother, who was only one year old when Dad went off to war, spoke to me of his memories when Dad returned home. Aged seven, he was terrified of this 'person' who was coming into his life, for what felt like the first time. When he saw his father alight from the

train, he was most relieved to see he just looked like any other man.

However, when I talked about going to Thailand, my brother-in-law Hilton, a POW in Singapore and Japan, was most upset. In an abusive phone call, he accused me of only wanting to go to Thailand for a holiday, a holiday that would mean absolutely nothing to me. Furthermore, he ranted, I would come home in two weeks' time, forget what I had seen and not understand what it was all about anyway.

I was devastated. I seriously considered not going at all, mainly for the sake of peace in the family. Then I thought, 'No. I know why I am doing this, and he is quite wrong. Damn it, I am going even if it means he never speaks to me again'. Well, he almost didn't. The silent treatment continued until he learned that we were also going to Singapore to trace some more of the story. From that day on, every time I spoke to him, he told me more about his own wartime history, which also included stories about my father as, at times, they had been together during battle. He spoke about the effect that being a prisoner of war had on both of them. He especially felt sorry for Dad following their return to Australia. Hilton was based in Sydney where there was a facility where ex-POWs could meet and talk. Living in a small country town, Dad had no outlet like this to provide relief from his frustration and trauma and sought refuge in alcohol.

It has at times been a lonely search but, for the past ten years, I have had an ally, Lynette Silver, historian to the then 8th Australian Division Association, the division in which my father served. She had spent years researching the Malayan Campaign and the fate of thousands of prisoners of war. I first learned about her work in 1993, but it was not for another five years that we actually met, after I heard her speaking about POWs in a radio interview and gate-crashed the launch of her most recent book. Drawn together by a mutual love of wartime history, we clicked and became best friends, soul mates, as well as research colleagues. Apart from being completely in tune with my thinking and investigations, Lynette has 'sniffed the ground' with me on the battlefields of Malaya and Singapore.

Now, sitting alone by my father's grave, memories come flooding back. Some are good, others are disturbing, darker. Like many soldiers who had spent years as a prisoner of war, my father came back a totally changed man. The person with the laughing eyes, whom I never knew, was no more. In his place was a wrecked soul, prone to bouts of heavy drinking, unpredictable bursts of temper and erratic mood swings, who ran the house like an army camp. Every morsel of food on my plate had to be eaten; rules were made to be obeyed, no matter what. I lived in a state of anxiety at times, not knowing how he would behave from one day to the next. I dared not bring friends home from school for fear that he might be drunk, or in one of his moods. Preferring to spend time on his own, he was often taciturn and uncommunicative. I did not question his behaviour and thought that all fathers were like that.

In these enlightened times, I now know that he was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, as was almost every other ex-prisoner of war. Not being diagnosed, it went untreated, leaving sufferers and families to fend for themselves, abandoned by officials who simply advised, 'forget about the war and get on with your lives'. But how could they ever forget?

Men returning from the horrors of prisons camps were told by the medical fraternity that they might not live to a ripe old age and possibly never father children because of the years of near starvation and vitamin deficiencies. Some ex-POWs took the advice very

seriously. I learnt of one man, who never married because he didn't want to leave a young wife a widow – a childless widow. He did not buy a home as he thought he would not be around to pay it off and enjoy it. Eventually he did become a homeowner, but never married. Like him, most returning POWs accepted the fact that they would probably be sterile. However, the number of babies born nine months after the prisoners returned home certainly put paid to that theory!

I was born in November 1948. By that time Dad had been home from the war for just on three years and had regained employment with the PMG Department. Prior to that he had been away from his family for five years and four months. Of the four years and eight months spent in Malaya, Singapore, Burma and Thailand, three and a half years were as a prisoner of war.

My arrival was one huge surprise to many, especially my parents. At the time Mum was 44 and Dad 42. Whilst they were not ancient, they weren't young either and had already had six children before Dad enlisted. By the time I made my appearance, the youngest child was aged10, and the eldest 18. My grandmother told me that Mum was too embarrassed to do the shopping because she felt she was too old to be pregnant.

I don't know if her marital relations with my father ceased around the time of my birth, but I do know that, when I was about six, he made his way to my bed at night. At that time. I was suffering from the effects of rheumatic fever and was sleeping in my parents' bed. Shortly after tucking me in, he would return, and climb in beside me. The abuse never progressed beyond fondling, but he groomed me to reciprocate. It continued for many months, until I was moved into my own bed. Although at the time I was too young to realise the implications, later this nocturnal activity was something I tried to forget for decades. However, I was forced to confront my demons in the winter of 1972 when I visited a psychiatrist, after my doctor could not find any physiological reason for pains in my legs and thought it might be psychological.

It did not take long for the specialist to realise I had unresolved anger and was troubled. My trauma at having these memories resurface so vividly was not improved by the fact that my father had volunteered to drive me to my appointments. However, I didn't ever confront him. Perhaps I should have, but in those days child sexual abuse was not spoken about and, in any case, the memory of it was too painful. It is ironic that, having laid my soul bare to a complete stranger, the pain in my legs was finally diagnosed as being linked to the rheumatic fever.

Although I was never close to my father in the normal sense, we enjoyed some happy times together as a family. There was not a lot to do in Boorowa, a small farming community, but I spent carefree days playing with my cousins. The entire family also enjoyed fishing for trout in the nearby Boorowa River and sometimes we would venture further afield to the Burrinjuck Dam on the Murrumbidgee River, about 90 kilometres south of Boorowa. In those days, most families, unless very well-off, did not go on interstate or overseas holidays. Instead, we visited my eldest sister in Dubbo on the western plains and at least once a year packed up the car and drove to Tilba Tilba, a picturesque town in rich dairy country near Narooma on the NSW south coast, where my uncle had a farm. I loved it. It was always so lush and green there, unlike Boorowa, where the paddocks dried out in summer and the grass crackled under my feet.

Trips away from home were usually limited to visiting family but, on one occasion, we travelled to Bundanoon in the rugged Southern Highlands south of Sydney, where Dad

showed me where he had lived for a period during his teenage years. We then ventured into the nearby national park and to Echo Point, where we let out a cooee that rattled around the sandstone gorges and returned to us, high up on the escarpment. The deep ravines, cliff faces and mountainous terrain, riddled with caves, are amazing, so it is no wonder the Aboriginal people of the Gandagara tribe called the area 'Bantanoon', now Bundanoon, meaning place of deep gullies.

As I look again at his headstone, I ask myself for the thousandth time: why did I leave it so long to learn about his time as a prisoner of war. I knew that he had been captured, but that was about it. I never asked, and he never volunteered anything. Although he was not the kind of father who invited cosy chats by the fire, I am so angry that I never raised the subject. He could have told me so much.

To date, it has taken me 13 years to reconstruct my father's life, in the hope that I might better understand his moods, his drinking binges, his unexplained flashes of temper, and his desire to spend so much time by himself. I also feel guilty that I never appreciated how tough life had been for my mother, who never complained, and just got on with it.

The abuse is something that can never be explained, as I was too young to be aware of the nuances of inter-family relationships. It is only years later, knowing of the torment my father went through, the indignities he suffered, and the physical and mental depravation he had to endure, that, like Mum, I feel that I may, in time, be able to forgive him.

I now realise why, for so much of my life, I have been at war with my father, literally and by following in his footsteps. I am also finally understanding the degree to which his experiences impacted our relationship.

Fred Howe was a prisoner of war for more than three years. I have been a virtual prisoner for sixty.