

The Letter WGCDR Mary Anne Whiting

In 1993 my dad, RAAF Navigator, Wing Commander E A (Bill) Whiting showed me a letter he had received from a former aircrew colleague and pilot, Group Captain John Pratt, when Dad and John were serving in Tengah with No 1 Squadron during the Malayan Emergency – it was 1952. Dad was 36 at the time, married for 10 years to my mother, Theresa, and father to two daughters.

Dad's early years were spent in Charleville, Queensland, learning how to ride horses and, I gather, having a great time especially when he attended Nudgee College as a boarder, where he got into sports, playing rugby, swimming and wrestling. He had too much of a good time apparently because he had to repeat Year 12.

After leaving school he travelled and worked for a time in China where he met a young Chaing Kai-shek who, was to go on to be Chairman of the National Government of the Republic of China in the 1940s.

Returning to Australia he worked as a stockman before joining the Air Force as a cadet at Point Cook. On the verge of failing his pilot's course, he discharged and returned to Charleville to attend to his grandmother's estate. Jessica Hughes was the first woman to hold a liquor licence in Queensland and ran a hotel with accommodation and meals in Charleville. She would employ local indigenous women as house keepers and cooks, paying them at the same rate as her non-indigenous employees, saving some of their wages for a dowry when the girls married.

Dad told me he often had to take his billy cart full of food down to the local convent for the nuns and to various other needy folk around town. The lawyer who assisted Dad to settle her estate told him she had given away more money than she earned.

Dad was greatly influenced by the Catholic faith of his grandmother and Ethel, his mother, both women having been deserted by their husbands. Jessie ran the hotel with the assistance of a very special friend, Michael Johnston. Known as Mick, he always referred to Jessie as Mrs Hughes, and Dad believed they loved each other very much. Mick could neither read nor write, but knew a good horse when he saw one. Buying and selling horses and livestock made Mick a wealthy man and he paid Dad's fees at Nudgee, handing over great wads of cash to the Christian Brothers, who were probably very grateful Dad failed his first Year 12 exam!

When War broke out Dad applied to join the Air Force again, and was rejected; so he joined the Army and, after some rudimentary training, sailed out of Sydney harbour on the Queen Mary, then a troop ship, watched by one Theresa Waugh and her sister Bertha from North Heads – little did Mum know her future husband was on aboard. He ended up in Syria with an anti-tank regiment fighting against the Germans and Italians, and was promoted to captain, in the field, but never got the opportunity to put his pips up.

Unlike the ill-fated 8th Battalion, which stopped over in Singapore on the way home and became prisoners of the Japanese in Changi and on the Thai-Burma railway, Dad's battalion made it back to Sydney. On leave in Charleville, his mother handed him a letter – dated before he left for Syria and calling him up for Air Force service – she hadn't opened it because it was addressed to Dad!

He then re-joined the Air Force, trained as a navigator, married Mum three weeks after meeting her at a dance in Sydney – her parents loved Dad especially as he was a Catholic – saw operational service in the Pacific on Catalinas, and eventually served with John Pratt on Lincolns, at No 1 Squadron.

As John outlined in his letter: on return from a bombing mission the crew were clearing their weapons, when one was fired accidentally by Andy Stapleton and John was shot on the right side of his head with the bullet going through his neck. Dad grabbed John and applied pressure on his neck. He then started to say the Act of Contrition over and over again for John. Dad must have been covered in John's blood and, from what I understand, Dad kept the pressure on John's neck in the ambulance until the doctors took over at the hospital. Until I read John's letter, I did not know about the incident as Dad never discussed it with me.



GPCAPT John Pratt and WGCDR Mary Anne Whiting

John's letter expressed so beautifully and generously his thanks to Dad and what John described as Dad's moral courage in saying the Act of Contrition, something John said always had a great effect on him. I treasured John's letter, and at Dad's funeral service, attended by a large group of people including the Nudgee Old Boy's Association, the RSL and the RAAF Association, I read out John's letter, and to this day it moves and inspires me – and I keep it near my desk where I work at the RAAF History and Heritage Branch.

I had tried looking for John over the years and even searched through the Defence telephone list asking anyone with the surname Pratt if they were related, with no success.

I recently lost the love of my life, Geoffrey, and asked the Military Ordinariate Vicar General, Monsignor Peter O'Keefe, to

say Geoff's funeral service for me. I had worked with Peter when we were based in Wagga and I had the great privilege again, when Bishop Max invited me to be part of World Youth Day to assist with looking after the military pilgrims. Bishop Max then invited me to be part of the Military Ordinariate Finance Committee.

A week before attending my first meeting last March, I came across John's letter again and read it; as always it brought tears to my eyes. I remembered Dad's courage, which I witnessed several times as a child: once rescuing someone who was drowning, helping a young boy who ran into a plate glass window, and confronting a parent who had mistreated a child – they never did it again. Like his grandmother, Dad was generous when it came to helping others; a long-time member of the St Vincent de Paul Society, he would team up with the Salvation Army to distribute groceries and deliver furniture to those in need. I remembered, also, Dad's love of family, his deep faith, his love of a good party and the company of friends.

Attending my first Finance Committee meeting, I was introduced to everyone. When introduced to one gentleman, he asked if I was related to Bill Whiting. 'Yes', I said, 'did you know Dad?' 'Yes', he replied, 'your father saved my life.' Then it hit me: 'John, I have been looking for you for years!'

I am a great believer, if you look for the right thing and keep an open mind, you will find it somehow. I believe, finding John and having my opportunity to thank him for his letter was more than coincidental – it was the jolt of faith I needed.