

A PILOT AND A NURSE: LETTERS

A radio play by

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(Adapted from the letters of Squadron Leader, Kenneth Pryce Wilson and the reminiscences of Betty Joy Wilson)

SYNOPSIS:

They met on a tram in 1938, fell in love and became engaged. Then war interrupted their romance. He joined the RAAF and she became a VAD. They exchanged many letters.

CHARACTERS:

Young Ken

Young Joy

Older Ken

Older Joy

Narrator

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SCENE 1: OLDER JOY AND KEN

KEN: I first saw you on the tram.

JOY: I know – you told me you’d been furtively peering at me for ages.

KEN: For weeks. I thought what a gorgeous brunette you were. I used to sneak looks at you while I was supposedly engrossed in my newspaper. Your hair was so thick and glossy - and your face ... like Ava Gardner!

JOY: Oh Ken! Anyway, I used to look at you too - when you weren’t looking. What a handsome man, I thought. That wonderful profile and dark hair. I was quite taken with your moustache too.

KEN: Wasn’t it lucky that our mutual friend Bessie was on the tram that day? We may never have had the courage to speak to each other.

JOY: The way you leapt out of your seat and came towards us! You coughed nervously and Bessie said “Oh, Ken, how are you. This is my friend Joy”

KEN: And your dazzling smile – that was the end of me. Such perfect teeth – straight and pearly white. I hung onto that strap and - the rest of the journey was a haze to me. Later I agonized – was my conversation intelligent yet captivating? I hoped my scintillating wit shone through! (*laughs*). But one thing I knew. I was already deeply in love with you. That hasn’t changed, Joy.

JOY: Oh, so long ago. 1938. We were so in love. Then along came the war.

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AUDIO: BRIEF EXCERPT ('Lilli Marlene' on accordion) TO DENOTE CHANGE OF SCENE

SCENE 2: OLDER JOY AND KEN

JOY: I was 21 and engaged to be married. I was eager to offer my services and applied to the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD), organised by the St. John Ambulance Association. Training covered first aid and home nursing. On graduation, I was posted to Heidelberg Military Hospital, working first in Medical Records, then the Dental Department - the latter closely affiliated with the plastic surgery unit. The surgeons of each department worked jointly to repair faces smashed in combat. Those poor fellows.....they had to somehow overcome their scarred bodies.

My fiancé's first posting was to the Middle East; mail was so precious . We wrote heaps of letters.

KEN: When war was declared, I was fired with patriotism and ready to "serve my country". I was accepted into the RAAF. I trained first as a pilot and instructor at Wagga, then attended Officers' School in Somers. I emerged with the rank of Flying Officer and on Good Friday, 10th April, 1941, I set sail from Sydney Harbour for my first posting. I left behind my fiancé Joy.

Many letters depicted the serious side of war – but just as many embraced the humorous and descriptive details of daily life – in the middle East and in Melbourne.

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SCENE 3: FOR REMAINDER: YOUNG JOY AND KEN

AUDIO: MUSIC “WHITE CLIFFS OF DOVER”

NARRATOR: 7th May, 1941. Cairo.

KEN: Dear Joy

I’m writing this from Cairo where I am spending 48 hours leave after many weeks at sea on the Queen Elizabeth. A number of chaps were sea sick but I appear to have been born a good sailor.

Days at sea followed a monotonous routine. I spent many days censoring letters. We hacked the indiscreet ones to pieces with a pair of scissors until they looked like doilies. It is amazing the foolishness of some of the men. They would have given the whole game away to the enemy if intercepted.

Yesterday I saw the Pyramids. They are colossal and it makes you think when you realise that 4000 years have gone by since they were built. In the evening we went to an Egyptian cabaret and saw the natives dancing. Sinewy writhing of arms, legs and bottoms – but not at all exciting. Everything stops at 12.30 because of the blackout. The natives pester us everywhere – post-cards, fly switches – we just bawl out “aibtaead ‘aw arhl!”, which means something rude I think.

As I look out of the tent, I can see ships steaming up the canal. The queer part is that you can’t see the water but just the hull and funnels moving across the desert. It is like seeing a ship in Sydney road.

I’ll be home soon. A holy man from Mecca told me so in the Mosque of the Sultan El Muskara.

JOY: Dear Ken

Thank you for your wonderful letters. I miss you so much but I am keeping busy and sharing a room with another nurse. We eat in the Mess; oh the food! The diet consists of boiled cabbage, white sauce (on everything) and hearty helpings of dumpling concoctions. So, unfortunately I came out in a batch of boils and was hospitalised briefly. Don't be upset, I'm perfectly alright now. I must fly.

NARRATOR: 30 May, 1941. Ismailia.

KEN: Dear Joy

I'm so relieved you have recovered from your boils! We have started training – Hurricanes and Wellingtons and they look pretty swell. It is terribly hot in Egypt and mostly no work is done between 12 and 4 pm. The temperature the other day was 128 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade – getting warm I thought. I've got a few things for your trousseau. A silk nightgown and dressing gown and some silver doodahs to go with your black gowns.

Today I started my conversion course into Blenheim twin-engined fighter bombers and I am doing cockpit drill and ground subjects again.

JOY: Dear Ken

I'm glad your training is going well. After the boils incident I've cut back dramatically on the stodgy food. We nurses save up our minute pay packets and as a treat, catch a taxi to Mollina's Restaurant, where we dine graciously. Papa Mollina treats us to a glass of vermouth. It is a little bit of heaven!

Anyhow, the other night when we arrived back late at the hospital, the main gates were locked and we had to climb under the fence. One girl got stuck and when we tried to pull her through we made so much din that all the lights came up. We escaped to our rooms, leapt into bed fully dressed, (apart from our hats) and feigned sleep. Torches were flashed upon our faces, but fortunately we got away with this deception. It has certainly cured us of overstaying our leave passes.

NARRATOR: 9TH June, 1941. Ishmailia

KEN: Dear Joy

Please forgive me if this letter is not very long but I am so tired that writing is an effort. We have been training and I've been getting up at 4.30 am. The flying is strenuous and we do about 4 hours a day in terrific heat, although this morning I watched the sun come up from 3000 feet over the desert where we were practising formation flying. It was a beautiful sight and down below was the biblical land of Goshen – green fields irrigated with canals and the old blinded buffalo treading round the water wheel as it was 2000 years ago

JOY: My darling Ken

Your long-awaited mail arrived today which made me very happy; no wonder you are so tired.

We had a big drama yesterday. You will remember “Bluey” – the soldier who had been at the front and arrived at Heidelberg with a smashed face. The plastic and dental surgeons had worked together for months to rebuild his features. This involved skin grafts – flesh grown from arm to face to provide sufficient tissue to mould his face. Finally, after painstaking and meticulous work, they were immensely proud of Bluey's new face; not perfect but as good as it could ever be.

Well, a high-ranking American plastic surgeon visiting Melbourne was keen to see the results achieved by the brilliant team of surgeons. Bluey's new face of course, was the perfect example.

Bluey, you'll remember, was a hot-headed young Aussie - a complete larrikin. Anyway, just prior to the American's visit, Bluey and another soldier went on a drinking binge and had a huge fight. When Bluey was presented to the American surgeon everyone had a dreadful shock. The new face was shattered and he sported a black eye and a myriad of other injuries.

Our Heidelberg team was absolutely horrified, as was of course their visitor. This was one of our worst days.....

NARRATOR: 23rd July, 1941. Palestine.

KEN: Dear Joy

I was overjoyed to receive a heap of letters today. How awful about Bluey!

Today I went with the Officers of the Mess to a Bedouin feast arranged by the Chief of the Palestine Police in our honour.

The Sheikh was a nice chap of about 30 odd. We had coffee and smoked the Hubble Bubble pipe where the smoke is drawn through water. It is a jolly good smoke too if you can forget who may have been using it last.

What a dinner! There were chickens, pigeons stuffed with olives and nuts, three whole roast lambs stuffed with rice, stews, savouries, beans, tomatoes and cucumber. No knives or forks - you hop in with both hands and tear off lumps of meat and thrust it into the mouth with the right hand. You squeeze the juice out of rice till it is tight ball and then flip it into the trap with a neat flick of the thumb. We also had glasses of cold water, which unfortunately swelled the rice and made me feel like a poisoned pup.

My eyes were filmed over and I was breathing hard with every button on my pants undone when we had finished. We belched happily all the time, which is the expected. etiquette. After mountains of fruit, we had a rest and a smoke and came home and had tea! And I am hungry now at 10 pm.

JOY: Dear Ken

You made me laugh at your description of the Bedouin Feast! But I just received your letter from Iraq where you talked about flying 550 miles in three hours from Palestine, following the pipeline. And it was the worst trip you've been on – how awful. And fancy you having 270 hours flying up! I was so glad to hear you are flying confidently, but I do worry about you.....

NARRATOR: 8th September, 1941. Iraq.

KEN

Dear Joy

We are stationed in Iraq at present, near the Russian and Turkish frontier. Just returned from a victory flight over the principal towns. There were 36 planes in all – a wonderful sight from the air to see dozens of them in tiers all over the sky, flying in regular formation. It is dreadfully hard work for the pilot, as he needs the strength of ten, and a hundred eyes. The passage of so many machines through the air makes it very rough and full of fierce, contrary currents and as I was at the end, I got the lot.

It's good to know that I'm doing something real at last in helping drive the enemy out of Africa.

JOY

Dear Ken

I'm so proud of you and trust you'll stay safe. Well, there are certainly all types in Heidelberg! I was very amused by my colleague, Beryl the other day. The dentist told the patient "now, spit". Beryl said to me later in her very superior voice "I thought Captain Jones should have said "please expectorate – not SPIT".

The class system is alive and well here. An incident in the dental surgery made me quite angry. Captain Smith said to a little army Private, "now what do you do in civilian life, my good man"? The almost inarticulate little fellow said "I work in the railways sir". "Oh", said the Captain, "in that case you'd know my father-in-law, Sir Henry Collins." "Oh, I don't actually know him sir, but I've heard of him".

Oh Ken, we went to a wonderful concert at the Palais the other night. One Vera Lynn song made me weep, as I thought of us, when we met, and our love, interrupted by this horrible war.

AUDIO: 'We'll Meet Again' (begin softly)

NARRATOR: 5th November, 1941. Lydda.

KEN: Dear Mother

Joy's letters are wonderful. Full of humour, love and encouragement. I'm the greatest fool on earth, I'm convinced, that we didn't rush off and get married before I left. I know she wished it, but. I couldn't bear for her to suffer such a blow as my wife, if I were to be killed. I know now it would have made us both stronger - still that cannot be arranged until I return, when everything will be put right. Such happiness as I know we'll have will surely be too much for one man.....when I am home

CREDITS

AUDIO: 'We'll Meet Again'