The Last Soldier Video - Backgrounder by Lyn Vickery

Tales of My Forefathers - Episode Three



Born into a Military Family

Geoffrey Albert Vickery was born in the family hospital at Meerut, India, on 31 December 1915. His father Albert Edward was near the height of his military career and Alice now had three children: Stephanie, Harry and Geoffrey. Within four years that secure family world had vanished.

Albert and Alice died in 1919, leaving five children. Geof was only four. He was far too young to understand the details, but old enough for the loss to shape the rest of his life. Like Harry, he entered the care of British authorities and attended the Lawrence Royal Military School at Sanawar.

The military path that had shaped his father and elder brother soon became Geof's path as well. He joined the Royal Artillery, trained in India and later at Woolwich in England, and spent time in the Royal Horse Artillery.

Brothers, Albums and a Trail of Evidence

Harry remained the central figure in Geof's life. The brothers wrote to one another before, during and after the war and kept watch over their sisters Stephanie and Ivy in India. Family help crossed enormous distances whenever it was needed.

Harry became the family's photographer with his Rolleiflex, while Geof built his own visual record through photographs and postcard albums. Those carefully kept pages now provide a trail through the places where he served: India, Egypt, Cyrenaica, Cyprus, Crete, Syria, Palestine and Germany.

Geof was the quiet and contemplative one. He was offered promotion more than once and declined it. Family recollection presents him as a man less interested in rank than in completing the work in front of him.

Tobruk and the Western Desert

During the Second World War Geof served with forces of the Eighth Army in the Western Desert campaign. He was at Tobruk and became one of the men remembered as the Rats of Tobruk. The desert war moved back and forth across Libya and Cyrenaica as Allied and Axis forces fought for the route to Egypt.

His family later heard one story from those years. Geof stepped out of an army truck after a long drive and left the door open. An enemy shell passed through the vehicle and killed his companion. Geof never spoke about the event himself.

The desert albums also show quieter interludes: beaches, the Nile, ancient ruins and the pyramids. They are reminders that even in wartime there were pauses in which soldiers could briefly step outside the machinery of battle.

El Alamein

Geof was present during the period of the massive artillery barrage associated with the battle of El Alamein. The Western Desert had become a vast contest in artillery, armour, supply and endurance. For men such as Geof, the work was part of a larger machine whose outcome depended on thousands of individual tasks being done correctly.

He did not leave a written account of what El Alamein meant to him. The surviving record is indirect: service history, photographs, albums and the silence that followed.

Normandy and the Road into Germany

Geof was later posted back to England while Allied forces prepared for the invasion of Europe. His unit was not in the first waves to land on D-Day. It was held in reserve and went ashore later in Normandy.

From there the campaign moved through France towards Germany. By this stage the British Empire that had formed the background to Geof's childhood was exhausted by war and changing rapidly. He had grown up inside one world and was now watching another replace it.

Belsen

In April 1945 British forces liberated Belsen. The soldiers who entered found tens of thousands of prisoners, many desperately ill, together with mass death and a severe typhus threat. Units at the camp were drawn into the grim work of controlling disease, clearing the site and disposing of the dead.

Geof did not talk to his family about Belsen. Years later, Lyn remembered seeing a copy of Lord Russell of Liverpool's 'The Scourge of the Swastika' while Geof was visiting. Only after Geof's death, when his albums and photographs came into the family, did the connection with Belsen become clearer.

The camp was part of the Holocaust. Geof was not a victim of the concentration camp system, but he saw its aftermath and carried those memories away with him. His silence became part of the evidence.

After the War

Geof remained in the Army after the fighting ended and spent years in the British sector of Germany. The post-war period gave him something the war had not: routine without immediate combat, travel, hiking and skiing, and time to recover among people who understood the military life.

The Services had been his home since childhood. Civilian life frightened him. He had spent almost his entire life inside institutions built around order, comradeship and duty, and the transition away from them was difficult.

Eventually he left the Army and later joined Harry, Ivy and Stephanie in Australia. His journey had begun in India and run through the Royal Artillery, Tobruk, El Alamein, Normandy, Germany and Belsen before ending in a new country far from the world into which he had been born.

The Last Soldier

Geof and Harry had been shaped by the same family catastrophe but responded differently. Harry built a marriage, family and business life. Geof remained closer to the structure of military service for much longer. Neither path was simple, and both were marked by responsibility towards others.

Geof died in 1963 after a short period of civilian peace in Australia. Looking back, the family story stretches across an extraordinary historical arc: from Albert Edward's birth at Gibraltar in 1873 to the collapse of Empire, two world wars, the Holocaust and a new life for the next generation in Australia.

The final piece of the family mystery came from a recollection Geof had shared with one of Ivy's sons: Albert and Alice had been ambushed near Peshawar in 1919. Geof never told Lyn that story directly. He never told him about Belsen either. But over time the albums, letters and family memories filled in the gaps.

That is why Geof became The Last Soldier: not because he was the last man to fight, but because in this family story he carried the military thread to its final and darkest places - and then carried it into peace.