

## THE SOLDIERS COMING HOME

Dorothy woke up and glared over at the calendar. Her eyes were groggy as the sun shone through the curtain, making it hard to see. It was the 15th February 1940, she had one more day to spend with her brother before he left for war with his best mates, Frank and Peter. Dorothy trudged down the stairs.

“Hello! It’s about time you got out of bed!” chirped Benjamin, almost running through the house. Dorothy just rolled her eyes.

“How come you’re in such a hurry?” questioned Dorothy.

“I have to go see Father at the detention camp this morning and say my goodbyes. Frank, Peter and I are leaving first thing tomorrow morning” answered Benjamin.

“Oh, I was hoping we could go swimming in the river” Dorothy added.

Dorothy’s younger brothers were out on the farm but soon after Benjamin left, they decided to take a trip to Hautu Detention Camp to visit Father.

“Father is not very well at the moment, he is very malnourished and has become ill,” explained Mama.

“Dorothy you mustn’t tell Benjamin, Father doesn’t want him to worry, do you understand?” Mama asked in a very stern tone.

“Yes, Mama” replied Dorothy, too scared to question further.

Father seemed very dull during that visit, his health seemed fine though. Ever since he had been protesting against punishing conscientious objectors, he seemed to be a different person than the Baxter family remembered him as. Maybe that’s just what it was.

The 16th February 1940 was a day that Dorothy or any of the Baxters would never forget. Benjamin, Frank and Peter were dressed immaculately in their army green ready to defend their country. Dorothy had never seen Benjamin so happy and even though Father didn’t believe in war, she knew he would be proud.

“I will be coming back Mama” Benjamin whispered into Mama’s ear as he hugged her goodbye.

“Send me a letter as soon as you arrive at the training camp Benny-Boy!” shouted Dorothy. Benjamin said his farewells and disappeared into the army of ecstatic young men, marching along the wharf in unison, ready for battle. A tear trickled down Mama’s cheek.

“He will be OK Mama, he’s a fighter” Dorothy murmured while comforting her Mama.

Dorothy wrote a letter to Father and a letter to Benjamin once a week, sometimes it would take several weeks to get one back but it was Dorothy’s favourite time of the month.

Because of censoring, parts of Benjamin’s letters were crossed out but Dorothy didn’t mind, as long as her dear big brother was alive and reasonably healthy. Father said that he had met some nice men and that he was ok, he always asked after Benjamin and Dorothy kept him well updated.

The shrill tone of the telephone rang loudly, one cold winters night. 'Who would possibly be ringing at this time' thought Dorothy. "Hello, Mrs Baxter speaking" Mama grumbled, contemplating who she could be talking to. "Mrs Baxter I'm afraid your husband's health has decreased rapidly and you may want to see him within the next 48 hours while he is still alive" came the voice from the end of the line. They chatted for a while and then Mama became upset. "Thank you for your time," said Mama, almost choking on her words as they jumbled out of her mouth. Then she hung up the line.

Mama raced upstairs to tell Dorothy but she had already heard the conversation from upstairs and was sobbing into her pillow. "We will visit tomorrow morning once the cows are milked" Mama reassured Dorothy.

The next day seemed to last forever. Father was deteriorating quickly. It was their last chance to see him. The next call was to say that Father was taking his last breaths and they needed to get to the Detention Camp fast.

By the time Mama, Dorothy and the five boys got to Fathers room in the detention camp it was too late and he was already dead. The Baxters cried and grieved for what seemed like days, weeks even.

They would always remember their Father's fighting spirit, for that is the reason he didn't go to war.

"It's only fair that Benjamin knows, Mama. Please let me tell him" pleaded Dorothy, once they had finally got home.

"I do not want to upset him, he is doing so well. Dorothy, you shall not tell him!" instructed Mama. 'This isn't at all fair though' thought Dorothy.

"Benjamin should be here with us Mama" Dorothy added but Mama just ignored her.

Five weeks later, a letter from Benjamin arrived in the mail.

"Mama, there's mail for you!" exclaimed Dorothy.

"Coming!" Mama replied, almost jumping down the stairs, so filled with glee.

Mama read the letter slow and careful making sure she was reading it properly.

"Hurry up Mama, What's it about?" inquired Dorothy.

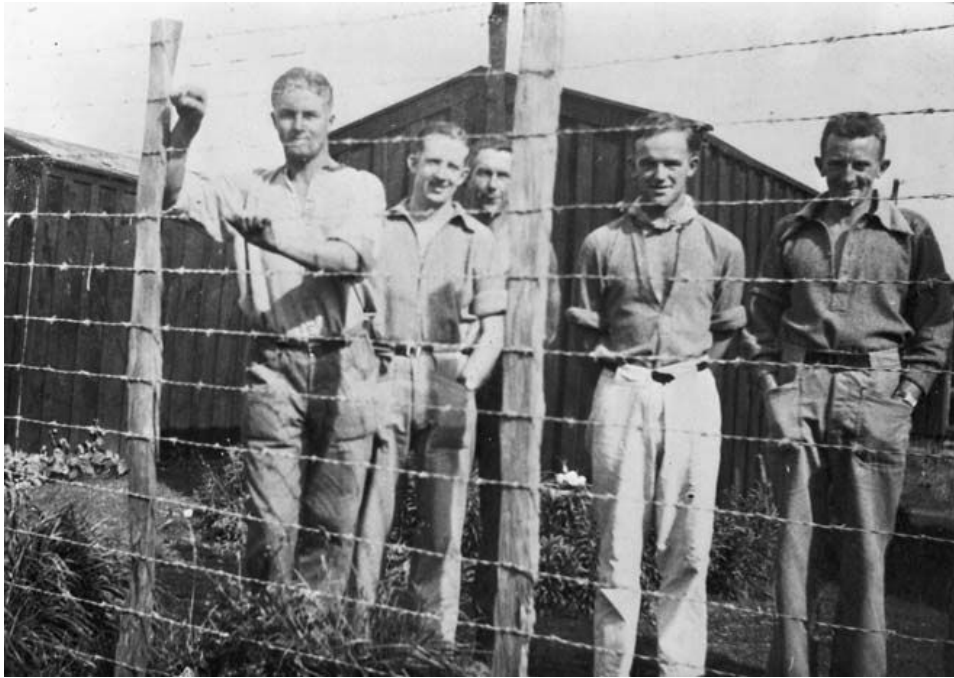
Mama snapped the letter shut, jumped up and yelled "Benjamin's coming home! He hurt his leg and is being sent back to New Zealand to be a member of the Home Guard."

The spirit of the house lifted as the news spread around the family.

"Benny-Boy is coming home!" screamed the Baxters. Everybody seemed to have some more hope that their lives would become somewhat normal again.

Benjamin still had a big voyage ahead of him, but he was on his way and that's all that really mattered.

**Written by Alice Miers**



*Hautu Detention Camp 1943.*