Stolen Valour

Adam Aitken

It is now a corporate business, this inheritance business, the ancestor game. I am getting better at it, digging up the dead, especially the victims. When I look for photographs of my ancestors I find that almost all the images are those of men killed in action and donated to libraries by their families. Through luck and persistence I have tracked down the odd military portrait of my great-grandfather – a vague, blurry shot of Light Horse cavalrmen parading in front of the pyramids. Although both my grandfather and great grandfather survived their wars, almost nothing was written by them or about them, and their letters home have not, alas, come into my possession. If their letters had been saved, they are lost to my father and me. Those kinds of documents do not now belong to us, or to be more correct, the full archive is never going to come down to us.

The last bit of family memorabilia my father ever owned was a digger’s hat he took to Asia. It was possibly his grandfather’s. A sister-in-law I have never met probably owns it now. She is, unfortunately, someone my father did not impress, when at his brother’s funeral in Melbourne my father charged him – her ex-husband – with being a racist. All this in front of her relatives.

‘I had a bit too much to drink, you see,’ said my father, when we recalled the event.

‘A racist who married a Sri Lankan?’ I queried, but felt I didn’t want to push it too far.

No wonder she hates my father. I want to make light of it so in a last gasp of paternalistic chauvinism I affirm that we are the legitimate heirs and last of the Aitken-Strong line, not her! (Well, not quite; there is another relative in Western Australia who will survive us, of whom little is known.) My father’s sister-in-law is the executor of his brother’s estate and she won’t give any of it to my father in a thousand years. But God knows what she wants with all that memorabilia. It isn’t lost, she hasn’t burnt the lot, none of it gone to compost. But it is not in our hands.

We joke about it now, that my uncle inherited my father’s Bradman-signed cricket bat when my father didn’t come home in ’58. Surely he has a right to that! Even though I’m keen to get my hands on memorabilia I haven’t had the courage to phone her. What would I say? ‘I am the son of your brother-in-law. He says he’s sorry he was a little impolite at the funeral and wants to make up.’

So I must begin where I can and work with the cards I’m dealt. Luckily some interesting facts have recently been revealed to me through the magic of digital technology. These are revelations about my Australian grandfather, my father’s father. I discovered he was a decorated soldier and had gone to occupied Japan. He’d witnessed the aftermath of the Hiroshima nuclear bombing and he’d been decorated in the military. I was surprised to feel a sense of pride about him, a man I never knew and whom my father despised.

As far as I know my father never inherited anything from his father except a propensity for hernias, the aforementioned digger’s hat and the cricket bat he left behind in Melbourne, and none of his father’s medals or other war memorabilia. After the war my grandfather Clive was unable or unwilling to return to his pre-war life. He abandoned his wife and three sons and eloped with an ANZAC nurse we believe he met in Japan. He died of pulmonary obstruction in the mid-80s. His legacy is all but lost to me, except for a couple of photographs my stepmother took when she visited him in Rotorua in 1981 or thereabouts. They show an elderly man with his wife standing...
on a verandah with a view of treeless hills and glacial lakes. He looks very much like my father, but is clearly a man of another time and generation, an unmistakable Australian of the 1960s and 70s. His portliness is enhanced by shorts, good shoes, and long socks. King of all he surveys, he seems happy to be showing off his property, his new life, and his second wife.

I had thought I would not learn more than this about my grandfather, but recently I found a website called medalsgonemissing.com. I discovered that someone called I.S. Wrights or Rights (it was spelled both ways on the webpage) had attempted to sell my grandfather’s Pacific War medals on Ebay: these included a 1939-1945 Star, a Pacific Star, a 1939-1945 war medal, and a 1939-1945 Australia Service Medal – for sale, all up, for $194.99. The advertisement was accompanied by some odd biographical details, no doubt inserted to add authenticity to the items on sale. I later confirmed these details with my father, and through some research conducted via the Australian War Memorial library. The war records show there was only ever one Major Clive Aitken, and that he had indeed served in New Guinea and Japan. My grandfather had enlisted late in the war, and had been sent to New Guinea after most of the worst fighting had ended. In the Directorate of Organisation and ‘Movement Control’ he’d been sent from an office in Melbourne to oversee the logistics of surrender in Rabaul. Then he’d gone to Japan as part of the Commonwealth Occupation Force; his New Guinea posting had furnished him with some expertise in the processing of Japanese prisoners-of-war. In Japan he would learn the business of occupying a foreign land.

Surely he had witnessed the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki? He’d served there from November 1946 to March 1949, but was it possible to learn any more? There are so many questions I want answers to. Was it possible that he had hated the Japanese and looked down on Asians? Did he decide to leave three sons and a wife because patriotism demanded it? Was he unhappy in his family life?

On I.S. Wright’s website the image of the war medal set was captioned ‘Court Mounted in July 1956 by F.W. Bedford of Wellington, New Zealand’. My father had already told me that Clive had ‘pissed off’ to New Zealand’, and the website’s biographical notes confirmed that my grandfather had emigrated there after the Australian occupation forces had been de-mobbed. It was satisfying to know that I had found a link to the old man. After my research and the discovery of his medals I began to sympathise with my father; I knew what it felt like to be abandoned, though I now know my father never cast me aside the way his father had abandoned him. But I struggled to feel sympathy for Clive, because he had ended the relationship with his wife and sons, having been out of the country for over five years.

By 1958 the old man was all but invisible. At that time my father returned to Melbourne from Bangkok, and was looking into bringing over his Asian fiancée, my mother. He called Clive to tell him he intended to marry an Asian. There was a terrible argument, my father hung up on Clive, and that was that. My father would never meet or speak to his father again, and as it turned out, he never did succeed in bringing my mother to Melbourne. Instead they headed for London and married there in 1960.

I spent some time looking at the image of the medals, and wondered what they could possibly mean to me now. But it was a flat two dimensional image: I could not touch the medals, smell them, or weigh them in my hands. Like a bowerbird I was attracted to the bright colours in the ribbons. I tried to ignore my urge to own them, my disgust for military rituals and mass-produced heraldry, but at the same time there was something seductive about the idea that I was descended from a participant and survivor of World War II, even though he was probably a racist and a fascist. I felt that he’d done his onerous duty and had come out with body and mind intact, and that was something. After all the horror of his war, he had a right to do and go as he pleased.
And New Zealand was just across the ditch and not exactly inaccessible to his children. Who was I to judge? In an era of nostalgia about ‘roots’ I struggle with the concept of being a descendant of a ‘warrior class’. It seems an absurdly anachronistic concept. After all, Clive’s father Alfred (my great-grandfather) was a Gallipoli hero, or what I call an agent of destruction, training men to fight on the Western Front. I imagine he had saved lives too. As for my grandfather, I have no idea if he had ever killed a man.

All this was on my mind as I searched the archives of the National War Memorial library in Canberra. Later I read books on the Occupation Force, which suggested a soldier like him might have been involved in surveillance, charged with sniffing out hidden arms caches and suppressing Japanese rebellion. He would have had a policeman’s eye for suspicious goings-on. He’d been a non-combatant and very good with office protocol due his accounting background. He’d been with the Directorate of Organisation. That was true, but was that all? He kept meticulous Army records. He was a record-keeper, an accountant, not a killer.

I speculated that he might have tried to learn Japanese. I wondered if his time in New Guinea had left him with an undying hatred of all things Japanese, if he was infected with an urge to commit some revenge on the old enemy. He’d suffered a hernia, chronic dermatitis and malaria, yet that was nothing compared to the victims of the A-bomb. But perhaps on his reconnaissance missions in search of resisters, hard-core Japanese nationalists and future anti-occupation terrorists, he had seen the orphans in the open-air schoolrooms of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and his attitude had softened. There was a chance that after all that suffering, he’d become an agent of healing and reconciliation.

One thing I will never understand is why he abandoned contact with my father and I don’t know if he ever did keep in touch with his two other sons. A smoker until the end, my grandfather died from lack of breath.

Recently I have been returning to the medal website and I think of hitting the link ‘Contact Seller’, but I always stop myself. Is the website authentic? Do I really want to buy the medals? Am I just being nostalgic? Is there more than a residual sentimentality, or do I finally need a memento to connect me with the grandfather I never met, a family deserter who’d cut ties with my father sixty years ago? But he had made a new beginning after so much horror, and for that so much was permissible. I dream of a new connection with him, even an indirect one.

I think about the name I.S. Wrights or Rights, and how fake it sounds, and the price seems absurdly cheap. Yet I have found a link. It has waited there on some server for years, along with a small jpeg of the medals. Hovering my cursor over ‘contact seller’, I imagine I might recover the stories my grandfather never told his son, and those stories my father has never told me. There are perhaps volumes of anecdotes, yarns, tall-tales, and more lies and half-truths. There would be biographies of uncles and aunts living on after war, living without anticipation of another terror to come. There, somewhere in the virtual world, is a key to a past that will grant me a thousand and one narratives. Stolen Valour. Living links and links to the dead. Perhaps that is all we need.

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My great-grandfather (second on the left) at the Pyramids, 1916 (Australian War Memorial Library).

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