

Chapter 10 The final blow The Death of Anthony Benoit Guise 1916 – 1944

On 30th July, while in Meols, Joan received a telegram from the War Office to say that her husband had been drowned on 23rd July 1944 in Ceylon, now called Sri Lanka.



Tony was on military service but he did not die in action, but swimming in the sea at Mount Lavinia. Records suggest that he drowned trying to save someone else.

What is so ironic is that Tony was not in the thick of the battle but in a back water of the war working in Headquarters so it would generally be felt that he was, for the time being, in safe territory. He was living a full and active life both in work and socially.

This telegram from the War Office, dated 30 July 1944, seven days after he died, announcing that Tony had been drowned – circumstances unknown was the first she knew of his death.. It will be remembered that he had already survived one sinking in the Mediterranean on the way over to India in about December 1943.

Fortunately, as a result of the blitz, Joan had evacuated from London with her son and was living with her Aunt at Meols in the Wirral, so had some family support. Following this stark telegram was a letter from the Padre of the Regiment who knew Tony and was able to say more about the situation and how sadly he would be missed by his men and fellow officers. This letter officially should not have been sent since there was a War Office regulation insisting that no private correspondence should be sent until 14 days after a death. The Padre insisted to the Commanding Officer that he had not known of this regulation. This must also have been the case for the Hospital Matron who also wrote to tell Joan that they had done all they could to revive him, giving nearly two hours of artificial respiration, but that he had probably died while in the water. Bearing in mind the location of this Regiment and the Hospital at the time, Ceylon Headquarters, there is a likelihood that there had not been too many deaths at that time.

Transcripts of all the military condolence letters are in Appendix 7, with many of Joan's replies.

From Rev Murray Padre – Dated 25 July 1944

“As I know you will want all the details that can be supplied, I have tried to discover as much as possible. It appears that being free on Sunday afternoon, he decided to have a bathe at Mount Lavinia. He had been surf-riding some time when someone happened to notice that he was further out than most and was lying on his back with one arm thrown out to surf board. His general appearance suggested that all was not well and several men immediately swam out towards him, but before they could reach him he was swept out to sea, and it was nearly a quarter of an hour before he was brought to shore. He was rushed at once to the Hospital only about 200 yards away, and everything possible was done to bring him round.”

From the Hospital Matron - dated 26th July 1944

“I know every effort had been made to save him. I feel you may find some comfort in these few words – a bunch of pink and white lilies out of our garden, we placed in his coffin with your love. He was seen by our RC Chaplin.”
Joan’s letters in response, some time later, gave expression to



how she must have felt. Remember, she was only 24 years old with an unplanned son and had been married for less than two years following a passionate love affair with Tony which started in about June 1941 while he was on leave. She had been orphaned in 1933, at the age of thirteen and her only brother, Peter, had been killed in a military accident, at Lymington, in September 1943.

She must have felt devastated and emptied of all hope. The four immediate loves in her life were wiped out and all that was left was the responsibility of bring up a boy to the standard that would have been expected by her late husband.

Some time later she received letters from Capt. Don Courtenay and then Lt.Col. K.C.Sharpe who was Tony’s Commanding Officer and also a close friend. These letters give some account of how Tony was found in the water and how they had tried to save him.

From Don Courtenay -dated 7th Aug 1944

“I am the Adjutant of this unit and as you know Tony was on our headquarter staff. Naturally living together in the same Mess etc. we were very friendly and Tony particularly endeared himself to us. He was always so bright and cheery ... nothing got him down and was a grand example of an officer making the best of a job of work out here. He often spoke about you when we used have our little chats after dinner and, in fact, I have four photographs before me now.

About the accident I cannot say much as I was on the Court of Inquiry. He was drowned in the sea.. at a popular bathing resort .. and the circumstances seem to suggest that he went to the rescue of another person in difficulties.

The time was about 17.15 hrs on Sunday 23 July 1944.”

From Lt.Col. K.C.Sharpe-dated 7th Aug 1944

“I think he showed up best in running one sideline of Welfare, he used to worry the authorities for wirelesses or footballs, whatever it was, so long as he got it for the troops, by which actions I was always very proud of him and he was extremely popular with both officers and men, and in particular the Indian troops, who knew a kind and understanding European. I expect Tony told you that we shared a small yacht, we had a lot of fun with it, with the intention of making it faster than Brigadier’s.”

From 2nd Lieutenant Richard Souray – dated 13 Aug 1944

“I am hoping that you will remember me, if I remind you of the occasion when I had a drink with you and Tony in the Capt’s Cabin shortly before leaving England
Tony and I became good friends on our way out here and, as you know, we shared a variety of experiences. On our arrival in India we applied to be posted together to an Indian Unit and our application was granted.”

All the letters point to this young man of 28 years old who was cheerful and outgoing and loved and respected by all ranks. It is interesting that Tony should have had the job “Sideline” of Welfare and that he took this work seriously, while finding time for his own relaxation. In one of his letters to Joan as early as January 1944, while he was still in India he refers to the distress of his men with wives back home, some of these wives being disloyal.

Tony and the Lt.Col. had bought a sailing boat together and, in a later letter from Kenneth Sharpe, it is described how they were building it together on the cheap by scrounging components from various sources.

Joan was obviously aware of the quality of man she had become involved with and yet must have been bowled over by the letters

expressing his qualities and how much he would be missed by all around him.

Over the next 6 months, in her responses to these letters, Joan expresses very clearly her state of grief and in January 1945, six months after D-Day when the end of the war was in sight, she says

“It is like a fleeting dream that flashes through the mind and then is gone and you awaken with only a faint realisation and wonder what more there was. Although I have had your letters and the death certificate from the War Office, I still cannot put aside the thought that when peace comes and the men come home again for good – Tony will be amongst them.”

Don Courtenay, as Adjutant, and obviously a close friend of Tony’s, helped Joan a lot with details and tried to ensure that all Tony’s effects got home. Despite considerable difficulties they did meet up in London in late January 1945 and Don met the whole Guise Family and spent the night at 4 Pinfold Road, no doubt passing on information that could not have been written down because of War Office Regulations.

The final blow to Joan was that despite all efforts, Tony’s effects did not return intact. Letters and forms continued on until as late as March 1946 and it seems

that the majority of Tony’s belongings were lost. One small tin box is all that came through containing a few bits and pieces. Joan was particularly concerned that Tony’s “Sam Browne” a leather army belt, should be passed on to her son, Raoul, but this also was lost. A cause of much distress.





Photograph above from:
War Graves Photographic Service
Negative - CY 405
Cemetery - Livermentu
Plot 2 Row J Grave 1



Further Documents relating to Tony and Joan Guise
can be seen in Appendix 13