

Chapter 7 One Year of Married Life on the Home Front 1943

Tony appears to have taken to the idea of marriage, indicating that in reality he has felt married for quite some time.

“I also hardly realise the fact of a marriage – it is really only an incident in 18 months of happily married life. However, whenever I am able to grasp the fact, I get terribly restless and want to burst these chains of army restriction and fly home to you... To start building a future – I suppose I have a terrific creative urge – all mixed up with a lot of laziness – but I know I want to build and build a future happiness and possibly for the first time I realise the full ghastrliness of this business – the reparations of man and wife.

Now poor darling, I can, I know make you but a very inadequate sort of husband and a very impecunious one too... That still rankles more than a little.”

The attitudes and feeling expressed in this paragraph seem very familiar to me, as may be explored elsewhere.

“Don’t worry about Yvonne and Maria, I will fix them with the letter, I hope. When I feel in the necessary eloquent mood. The Mater will I know be sweet... The rest my darling lies with you...”

You will have to try and understand and forgive them and remember that I am always with you in spirit and behind you in whatever you do.”

He was well aware of the issue of relationships in family life and was very strong in this view that he and Joan had to set up on their own despite the cost and inconvenience. In two sequential letters he makes the point quite firmly.

“Re. living at home my darling. I have never suggested that you should, in fact I think it is a rotten idea and the sooner we can get a place of our own the better.”

“I am rather worried about you staying on at home instead of taking a flat --- do you think it will work out alright.?? I should be looking out for somewhere all the time darling. I don’t want you to be tied to the Mater The awful in-law- business.. she will be a great pal, I hope, but that is all.”

Finally, during this period immediately after getting married he was quick to encourage Joan to get out of the ATS.

“There is one other thing that I was going to say and that was that all your officers are damn fools and don’t know their job, and that they don’t seem to look after their blokes at all; I was going to tell you to go to one of them and demand “sick leave pending discharge”.

And then looking forward to his new family’s needs, he demonstrated his ability to be ambitious, not because he loved army life but because of future family needs.

“... And I have applied and been accepted for an IFC course i.e. instructor of the control. I don’t know when it will take place or where... But if I can bluff my way through it... It means a Captaincy with staff pay. I am hoping to make you a present of it in March – who can tell?.”

His naïve distress that he and Joan were being judged for untimely conception is interesting bearing the renowned attitudes of the older generation. “Mrs. Middleton wrote a prosy sermon to me... In the best manner and no doubt terribly kindly meant... But I do wish that other people would not seem, by implication, so shocked at the so early, conception of the child ...There must be something very wrong with us. ...”

I do remember, very soon after Joanna and I were married, how an old lady with the witch like qualities of a Welsh mid-wife, making a similar judgement, unprovoked and in fact incorrect.

And now, an expression of Tony's hope for the future. The hope that must have been held by so many young men in the forces. "And when the war is over... Gosh I have got some terrific plans which should keep us amused for quite a year or three... And I hope to be able to repay you for these months of dreariness and loneliness. You poor darling!"

From a work point of view Tony must have been exhausted. He was being moved around from one camp to another, each time having to take on a management role, and taking a firm hand, site after site to getting them each one ship shape. By the end of October, Joan had left the ATS much to Tony's relief and also he had got his second "pip" giving him promotion to Lieutenant and on 23 November 1942 Joan had her first night in their new flat, with a warming party 2 days later which sadly Tony missed although had been down just before and had helped out with the move into the flat. All in all, he seemed very interested and pleased with the flat and very proud of all the work Joan had put into it.

Joan must have worked very hard to sort out the flat and letters from Tony point to his involvement with ideas. He was longing to get home on leave and help her with the settling in, but this was not to be.

On the 16th Dec 1942, Tony was at home for a day or so and then back to Scotland to sort out more mess that was continually occurring whenever he was not on a particular site.

Then rather abruptly:

"So I am off, meanwhile they had, without my knowledge, put me down for a PT course and suddenly at 11.00 on Sunday told me I was to be tested at 14.00 hours that same day, I was rather

annoyed! Had been smoking quite a bit and drinking and working too hard -- so that I was all strung up .. and feeling low about leaving my troop, when this damn thing turned up. However I did it and I hope failed, though I hate failing. The grass was wet, no cinder track and only same shoes and I had to do:

100 yards

1 mile

long jump

high jump.

Putting the weight.

Then in full battle dress, carry a man 200 yards, leap 9 foot ditch and climber a 6 foot wall... I did!!!

100 yards 15 seconds...

1 mile 6 minutes 50 seconds

jumped 4 foot long jump 10^{ft} 6 inches, carried my man in one minute 50 seconds and put the ball 50 feet.

Not good enough, of course they want athletic athletes! And I was supposed to be trained or in good training with only three hours notice rather shocked me!"

For some reason he had to go down to Cheshire but was only there for a couple of weeks at the most.

"There I have the usual business of taking over another site...

Come to work; much too much .. Learning new names, new faces, new habits and customs... However!! Let's hope it is only for another year or so... And when the war is over...

Gosh I have got some terrific plans which should keep us amused for quite a year or three... And I hope to be able to repay you for these months of dreariness and loneliness. You poor darling! Oh gosh, I wish for just one moment, I could tell you how much I love you my darling --- for and what a wonderful wife, I think you are, far far too wonderful really."

Peter was a considerable support to Joan and in a letter in January 1943 he wrote:

“I see from your letters things won't be long now and that you are very busy preparing baby clothes. I can't quite imagine it, it is not so long ago that you were so hopelessly undomesticated, and all in a year you changed so completely and are running a house and without doubt will be a splendid mother.”

Even within three weeks of her giving birth, Joan managed to put up Peter and his colleague for their leave and on the 5th March she was sending him darned socks and cigarettes.

The last year in the UK

Tony's last letter of the year and the last one from Scotland contained the following:

“I have had a damn awful Christmas, miserable as hell, leaving my own Battery and now I feel so depressed and hard done by for the last two weeks that I feel absolutely browned off... I can't understand it...

Do hope you had a fairly good Christmas darling.

There were so many reasons why I was so unhappy that it would take too long to tell you and must wait until I see you again.”

After a dismal Christmas up there, he left Scotland and moved to Oswestry Salop Officer Training, where life seemed to be extremely busy but rather academic. I get the impression that his work then was directed towards training to be an Instructor, so for a period of about 4 months he specialised in giving lectures (lecturettes) mixed in with firing range practice, a week at a time.

“However, in lecturettes and exams I came out top for some quaint reason and was passed as the Regiment Instructor. He

was continually worried about Joan, realising that she was having a progressively worse time with her unborn baby. However, he was pleased that developments in the flat and that Victor liked it.

In mid-February he was very worried about Joan who by now must have been about ready to pop. She seemed to be “in a most frightful bad state of nerves and depression”. He seemed to be very trapped and unable to get time off to see her. He was still in touch with Mrs Priest from Shetland and had bought a number of items for Joan and the baby including a shawl.

Regarding work he reported:

“Have most extraordinary weather here... Sometimes it is beautiful and sunny and then the next minute a most colossal storm of rain and wind. One of my height finders was blown over today and was damaged - - and they cost about £3000 so I hope they don't try and make me pay for it.” Just for comparison, rent on the flat was £55 a year.

Reference has to be made somewhere regarding Joan and her teeth. Throughout the whole period of the war and probably beyond Joan had problems with her teeth to the extent that there are entries in her diary for attending a dentist up to three times a week. After the end of the war we have reference to extractions and this explains why for as long as my memory goes back she had false teeth and by that time all the issues had settled until sometime in the 1980s when a newly manufactured set gave her trouble because she was allergic to Acrylic.

On 11th March 1943 Raoul was born. Tony did get down from Oswestry to Streatham a couple of days later.

A telegram on the 13th March suggests that he had just heard the news from Jean Irvine, Joan's very close friend, and he was offering to come down from somewhere near Holyhead.

After a fleeting visit he wrote to Joan
“God bless you darling it was marvellous seeing you again.
You do look very fit really considering your awful ordeal, and
the baby is simply terrific. I think he will be a marvellous
child... He’s got to be! Caused enough trouble already?”
Her brother Peter chased around for information about the birth
and was pleased to hear that Jean Irvine had been with her to
help and that the baby was 8 lbs 4½ ozs.
Two weeks after the birth Joan was still in hospital and Tony
was still in Anglesey, but was about to go to Larkhill Camp on
Salisbury Plain. Fortunately for Joan at that time her brother,
Peter, was able to get leave for 9 days.

At Larkhill Tony went for a month on Heavy Artillery Training
before going on battlements at Cherry Hinton in
Cambridgeshire. He considered arranging for Joan to come up
and stay and this may have happened as we have only one letter
from that period from May to August, and Joan’ diary indicated
that Tony was getting a reasonable number of leaves.
After a summer in the Cambridge area, hopefully seeing quite a
bit of Joan, he returned to Cheshire and was stationed for
August and September, in Meols, coincidentally where Joan’s
Aunt Christine and family lived. Tony was fully occupied as an
officer acting for some of the time as Site Commander and the
rest of the time planning all the social events such as films,
dances and sports. On arrival he found that the site was filthy
and nearly unoperational, so he had to set to and straighten
things up.
He had to rise early in the morning to check the men’s breakfast
an obligatory task that none of the other officers bothered to do.
During his stay, there was a gun competition and so as to
support his Major he and the men worked day and night on their
gun and won. All this in the name of keeping up morale.

It is noteworthy that a few months earlier Peter and his
detachment had won the “Best Bofor Cup for the fastest gun to
be put into action and taken out of action. In action 72 sec Out in
78 secs.”

In the middle of all of this on the 9th of September it was the
ATS’s fifth birthday so the officers decided:
“to give them a good birthday party the Battery men took over
the whole of the camp –spotting, telephony, guard, cooking –
everything not a single ATS moved a finger.
I cooked for the officers, a sergeant cooked for their mess and
the gunners cooked for the girls. It was a terrific do and took a
couple of days to prepare properly. Also we put on an entirely
male concert with half of us dressed as ATS’s.
We had the Major’s wife up for a day or so and of course she
had to be entertained - though she was very sweet and said she
realized what a damned nuisance she must be.”
The Major took them all to see Tommy Trinder. A few days
later it was the Major’s birthday so he organised another party.

Tony eventually realised that Meols was a seaside town and had
to spend some time looking for digs for Yvonne and possibly
Doreen a cousin, although he could not understand why they
should wish to go there.
On the domestic front, Tony was getting low. He was missing
Joan, well aware of the tensions between her and his sisters and
wished he could be around to shield Joan.

“I am terribly sorry to hear about your troubles with the family
darling... Suppose it is more or less inevitable!! Don't think you
or the girls will ever understand each other -- woman -like. I
suppose they blame you for Raoul's premature birth. Its all very
trying darling and I hate not being there to shield you”

He was obviously aware of the feelings within the family that Joan was to blame for getting pregnant and hence them having to get married, by so doing Joan had stolen their beloved.

This issue within the family must have been having a bad effect on Joan and in a letter to Peter she indicated how she was cutting ties with Pinfold Road:

“Doreen is still away with Terry and Vincent – I believe she comes back this weekend.

I haven’t seen anything of the others for about three weeks. The two girls used to ignore me when I went round there – then I had a little trouble with Mater one day when I bought her mattress from her and I finally gathered that she hadn’t much opinion of me anymore. So I decided it wasn’t much point in going round there anymore. Anyway I certainly shan’t without an invitation (which I don’t think I am likely to get) so that is that. I have always felt that Mater thinks less of me since I married her son and I sometimes think too that she really was only really pleased to see me because of Raoul - well I’m afraid it doesn’t worry me a scrap – but for goodness sake don’t mention to Mater if you write to her. I expect it will all turn out right after a time.

This sort of thing is always happening but it will never be the same again for me.”

It is interesting that Joan was sufficiently immersed in the family life to know what Doreen, Tony’s cousin and Terry Tony’s favourite cousin and her new husband Vincent a close friend of Tony before the war, were doing and yet felt somewhat ostracised by Tony’s immediate family.

It has to be mentioned that this issue surfaced again in the early 1970s when The Mater phoned Joanna, Joan’s new daughter in law, to tell her that her mother in law had stolen her son by getting pregnant on purpose.!

It is not wonder that Joan had left the area of Streatham within about 2 years of the end of the war..

Joan probably was never going to be able to understand the strange theatrical ways of the family and once told to me of her bewilderment at how, when she first arrived in the household, the family drew in any young fellow and the two young girls would flirt and tease outrageously, and then leave him, falling by the wayside, to their mother, who was recently widowed, as she swooped on their boyfriends. As pointed out by Tony in one of his later letter to Joan, the family seldom went out to other people but were always pleased to welcome them into their house and clan. Any young visitor was an excuse for a party and, under the circumstance of the war, feelings ran high and life was intense

Joan must have been feeling the load looking after Raoul on her own and probably having to make a lot of decisions at the tender age of 23. Tony was upset by her being a little snappy.

“We seem in some way to be quarrelling in our letters... You are quite severe...”

I love you so much that I just can’t tolerate the idea of this bickering.”

And later after a week of acting on site as the “Regimental Stooge” he wrote:

“I am so frightfully depressed that I shall only upset you if I write any more---I am jolly glad that you are getting out with Jean a bit. You must be rather lonely after all the leave I had at Larkhill and Cambridge.” Joan felt that he was not writing enough but he was in fact overloaded with work.

He was pleased to be able to tell her that his batman was making soft toys for Raoul.

Because we have so few copies of letters from Joan to Tony it is difficult to judge her conversations about life and her new family, however we get some inkling from the two letters from Joan to Peter from September 1943, two letters that we possess for the saddest of reasons.

About a week before expected, Tony got embarkation leave on 21st September before going to Asia Command.



Tony and Raoul
Oct 1943

It was so fortunate that he did as it means that he was at home when sadly Peter died in Lymington on 28th September 1943 after an army lorry accident. Apparently the lorry backed into him.

It seems that Peter had been taken, after the accident, to Lymington Hospital and that Tony was involved in helping to the extent of writing a cheque to the hospital as a gift for the sum of £10. He was also involved in sorting out details relating to Peter's car.



Lane Bombardier Peter Haycraft Dibdin
Royal Artillery
26th February 1913 – 28th September 1943

In a later letter of condolence to Joan, a close friend of the Dibdin Family, Ella Rowe, from Carshalton referred to speaking to Tony at Peter's funeral only what seemed like a short time before. "So many young lives cut short".

The following are the last two letters from Joan to Peter. Although recently married and now with a son to care for Joan showed a strong caring attitude towards her brother and some how felt that she did not do enough to help him. What the reality was, is a mystery but as a grown up, she must have been eternally grateful for all his help in those traumatic years after 1933.

Excerpt from letter from Joan to Peter 31st Aug 1943:

Dearest Peter

How are you? As a matter of fact I am a little worried – I have a feeling that it may be a very very long time before you get another leave (it you know what I mean). If it is so, always remember Darling, my best wishes go with you – God Speed and safe return. Tony will be home, I think at the end of Sept or beginning of Oct.....My fondest love

Letter from Joan to Peter 17th Sept 1943:

Peter Darling

Here are your socks. I'm afraid I can't get them any cleaner. It was so good to see you last Saturday; only wish you could have stayed longer.

Mater rang me up the other night to say that Mr Rayment is selling up all the furniture so of course she will have all her stuff back that we have here. I don't know how they are going to manage, because she only has two divan beds – no bed linen or towels and only about three or four blankets. However as always I suppose they will get over the difficulty somehow. I shall have to start looking around for bedroom furniture and we shall eat off the kitchen table. But now I have good news for you Raoul has a tooth. We spent the day at Mrs Midd's on Weds. And in the evening just before we left he put my finger in his mouth and I felt something prick. I was amazed because he has been so good. I should think it must have been breaking the skin on Saturday when you were here. If he gets them all as easily as that life will be quite peaceful.

Tony sent a little stuffed animal today that his batman made for Raoul. He is going to make an elephant and a bear for him too.

Well Darling, I'm afraid this must be all for now I have started to unpick my costume – its going to be a hell of a job. God bless you dear – My love Joan.

The last few letters relating to Peter can be seen in Appendix 12, including a sad couple of diary entries from Joan.

Meanwhile the war and the parties continued and it is at one such party that Joan remembered Tony enjoying the company of his favourite cousin Therese.

Joan did acknowledge that at the time she was something of a wet blanket having just lost her only brother and with a 6 month old baby to care for.

The date of Peter's death is the six month anniversary of when their parents died in 1933. Although, in later life, Joan seldom if ever made reference to such anniversaries, the mounting up of emotional events and grief in her life surely will have made all these anniversaries of considerable significance.

Peter died 28th Sept 1943.
Lionel and Cecily died 28th March 1933
The funeral was held on 2nd Oct 43

Peter has a war grave in Carshalton Cemetery in addition to his name being on the Family Grave.
A full account of Peter's early life and his time in the army during WW2 is covered in Vol 3 of William Joseph and Family



28th March 1944 from Joan's Special Diary.

"Tis eleven years ago today that Mother and Father died; tis six months today that Peter died.

Have been to the cemetery this afternoon. Met Beryl afterwards and stayed for tea. Everything is really the same at Carshalton but somewhat disappointing."

In the same diary the next day on 29th March 1944 there is another entry which in the overall context can be seen as significant.

"Had a painful time with the dentist this afternoon. Shall be glad when he has finished fixing my teeth. Called at no.4 to collect my watch and found Mater had just got home. She seems in a bad mood – can't think why. She could be so much happier if she would try to be more cheerful and not so much on the defensive. I have written to Tony tonight and have told him my fears of our reunion – that he will have changed and we at home will not have."

From Joan's Diary Sun 2nd April 1944

"Quiet day at home –turned out some of the boxes and cases. Was very harassing – going through Peter's things. Poor darling he must have had a miserable life & so lonely. I wish I could have been more help to him – wrote to Tony."

Tony had left for India in about October-November 1943, having helped Joan through the death of Peter and completed his embarkation leave. Short notes and War Office cards are all that he managed to write at that time and the full details of the journey to India at not really known. He did write one letter to the whole family when on board, indicating how grim he felt when the train pulled out; from where and to where we do not know.

It is supposed that he embarked on a troop ship bound for India somewhere in England and that this was due to sail through the Mediterranean and Suez Canal.



End note to Chapters 4,5,6&7

It is during the Russian invasion of Ukraine that some of these last four chapters were re-written and enhanced with information gleaned from 110 letters that surfaced from the archive during the last year. The overwhelming grief felt while writing about the demands on my family and others in World War 2, with all their hopes and dreams for when the war was over, which I, in hindsight, knew were not to be fulfilled, was further exasperated but watching, in real time, a repeat of the whole thing in a situation created by someone who, in effect, was behaving identically to Adolf Hitler. And since that World War, we have observed it again in Europe 1956 in Hungary and 1968 in Czechoslovakia. We are watching the extreme suffering of hundreds of thousands of people caused by one man. And this now is when the world is struggling with a pandemic virus and striving to solve a climate crisis. When will humanity learn?