

The Constant Soldier

*Who would true valour see
Gainst all disaster.
Let him in constancy
Follow the Master.*

ARE YOU SITTING comfortably, my friends.

Well, I'll begin my story.

Once upon a time, roughly about now, there was a family in a wee clachan of houses in far north-west Scotland called Acharacle. Their name was MacDonald, which is a fairly common name thereabouts.

Meg had four big sons and braw they were, although Ian, her youngest, was short in his left leg. It was as if there just wasn't enough flesh and bone left for him. They were all loved well but Meg loved Ian the best.

They all flew the nest except the youngest. They had to. There wasn't much to do in Acharacle unless, like Robbie, Meg's husband, you worked for the Laird. Ian loved doing odd jobs for the Laird and helping Robbie with the shepherding. He was always a willing worker with a ready, bright smile. Nothing was too much trouble for Ian and, although he hobbled, the work was just as capably done in his hands.

It was one day when Robbie and Ian were down at Fort William buying fodder for the Laird's kine that soldiers were in town recruiting. Ian had always wanted to be a sodger like his Uncle Angus, and whilst his father was agreeing deliveries, Ian went to speak to the recruiting sergeant.

'Ye've got a pretty bad limp, son, but you look fit and willing otherwise. I think you could make a good TARA. My friend Willie is in the 402 Artillery. He is often looking for good TARAs. They guide the big guns onto their targets using artillery boards and plotters. Can I have your name and address, son?'

Join the Army and see the World. And so it was. When Ian was sixteen he went down to Perth and came back a sodger. Meg and Robbie were sad to see him go but everyone had to dree their ain wurd, and that's an end tae it.

The 402 were an active army unit and it wasn't long till Ian was out at war in Afghanistan. Ye might remember yon galoot, wee John Reid, explaining to folks it was just going to be a policing action in Afghanistan with little likelihood of anyone getting' kill't. Ah, that wis jist whit he an' thon Blair said. It wisna lookin' nice oot there. It never did!

It was late May when the 402 Gunners left Stirling Castle for Tilshead Base on Salisbury Plain, then after a week's shake down and drawing new equipment they were flown out with their guns. Ian's battery, P Battery, were first to reach Camp Bastion, a big barn of a place, in thon huge American transporter planes.

The camp seemed a happy place – full of *derring do*. There was plenty to get on with, mainly helping the Afghan Army knock the juices out of the Taliban rebels,

and especially their opium harvest drugs trade. It was daily patrols in Lashnagar and Musa Qala, where President Karsai's peace agreements were holding out well.

The 402 Commanding Officer was Frosty Armstrong, a big, tall mannie with ginger hair, kindly face and a moustache that looked as if Jack Frost had come to grips with it early on. Frosty felt so strongly about this policing action that he let his daughter Alice come out to Camp Bastion with the CSI entertainment group and please the jocks with her dancing and singing to her guitar.

Alice was a beauty and a dancer by profession. She immediately captured the hearts of all the jocks, and others besides. At the regimental smoker she wowed them by dancing parts from the Dying Swan in Swan Lake properly dressed up with her pointed ballet shoes. It was a wonderful *Great Wee Night* with men singing into the small hours, but Alice left early as did Ian who was not great on drink. They were one of several who watched the high jinks from the sidelines. Alice spoke to one or two of them including Ian, but Ian was shy and tried to keep his distance.

Two nights afterwards it was P Battery's turn to man their guns about 400 yards outside camp in chevron formation keeping watch for enemy movements. Ian was in the 3-tonner converted command post behind the guns, with the gunnery observation post at the top of the tower on the forward wall of the camp.

Suddenly around one o'clock all hell broke loose with gunfire including machine guns and rocket fire. Immediately the observation post was destroyed. The gun position was overrun by an unseen enemy, with the gun crews either shot or taken prisoner. An hour passed before the camp apron was fully secured by which time Ian and about 40 others had been frogmarched at gun and knife point at least two miles away.

As daylight filtered over the deserted terrain forty dog-tired soldiers, still bound and gagged, found themselves being screamed at inside an old boarded-up storehouse. They were beaten indiscriminately, then their bonds were loosened to allow them to eat from a steaming cauldron brought in. There was no movement that day but as night drew on three lorries appeared in the courtyard and the prisoners, now fully bound again, were thrown on board – all except Ian whose limp and short leg had been noticed. He was smashed up with a rifle butt, kicked, and left for dead.

Ian was not dead. He came round slowly with the dawn and managed to shoogle his back against an outhouse wall in the shade.

The day passed and at night some scavengers appeared to see if there was anything of value left by the Taliban. Ian was found, fed, and loaded onto a bullock cart together with other stuff felt to be saleable. The three bearded bandits kept him bound and gagged, dressing him up in a Waziri turban and rubbing earth into his face. They didn't try to speak to him. Ian realised that he was now just a commodity.

Sometime during the next three weeks Ian knew that they had slipped over the border into Pakistan. Later he knew that he had reached Quetta, as it said so in English on the signposts. Then they had reached the slave market and he was unloaded still bound, in daylight, and placed into what looked very like a small cattle-mart awaiting next day's sale. Ian counted the prisoners through the darkness that night. There were twenty one souls: eight men, nine women and four children. Pain was written on all their faces, and some could converse. None understood English.

Next morning they were sold off, prodded into life occasionally with a cane for the buyers to see. Five of them including Ian, three men and one woman, were bought by two Indian-looking men with beards and turbans, and that afternoon, bound, they were on the move south in an old, covered, gaudily-painted lorry. Both of these men could speak English and thus Ian learned that he was bound for a fishing port called Sommiani five hundred miles away where there was a demand for fishermen.

Ian now felt a bit better mentally. Hadn't Christ been a fisherman? His body, poorly beaten about, was mending, but they all were still bound and occasionally gagged when passing through some towns and villages.

It took them a further three days until they reached a hot, seedy port. Sommiani had little going for it. Money was passed and two of them including Ian, were unbound and put out of the back of the lorry with nothing but themselves and the clothes they stood up in.

There was a group of four fishing boats drawn up on the hot, dirty sand in the middle of a long, curved beach. The boats looked old and flimsy, and Ian understood why there was a turnover in fishermen. He would bide his time and ply the trade, going out at night and returning with the dawn. Piotr, the other slave unloaded with him, he never saw again.

In the daytime they repaired the thin nylon netting, and fixing or strengthening the boats, patching up sailcloth and checking engines as necessary. The boats were gaudy, rough, mainly wooden affairs. Much of the wood had dried up and shrunk with age, and the paint helped to secure and protect it. In the heat of the day they ate and slept in a large boathouse on the beach which was to be Ian's home for the next few months. After the evening meal sometimes they sang together, and Ian was a favourite, giving them *The bonny, bonny banks of Loch Lomond*, *Lochnagar*, and other songs he knew.

Ian was now underweight, tanned and skinny, but wiry for all that. The life was more boring than arduous. The fishing catches were abysmal as Sommiani Bay had been fished out for a decade. It was generally three to a boat. Ian tried to get them to fish further out for a better catch but it seldom worked that way. Food was a curry of the poorer fish that were unsaleable, with steamed rice. Ian was never allowed to take what fish there were to market, but he was able to pick up the variations of Urdu spoken there.

He found out that the seaport of Karachi was not far to the south and he could see far out, mainly at night, the lights of the vessels plying the trade routes.

Then the monsoons came with wild seas and everything warm, wet and steamy instead of hot and dry. On many days fishing was impossible but there was no money available to properly repair the boats so they had to face the sea to earn money to live on.

One night Ian's boat didn't come back. The sea was wild, and they were well out in the bay. The ship sank. It was lucky for them that a sharp watch officer on the *John Drake* saw a dim light to starboard and Ian and Lalgı were picked up. The other crewman drowned.

Captain Archie Keyes, a short florid man with sandy eyebrows over clear blue eyes, was intrigued by Ian's story. He was running his ship with an officer short at present so Ian was given the spare cabin, paper and a biro and told to write up his

story fully before he started to forget things. Lalgı was released to pier authorities when the ship called at Aden. The captain came in one day, looked over his shoulder, and made comment ‘Ye’ve had an interesting life, sonny.’

Over the next few days Ian had never been so happy in his life. He even stood watches. The small cargo ship seemed to wool-gather its way up Suez Canal and across the Med, calling in at ports with magic names – Alexandria, Herakleon, Pireus, Thessaloniki, Bari, Palermo, Naples. Sadly all came to an end at Marseille when he was placed in the charge of an army Captain Wooller who escorted him to Paris via TGV express, and thence through the Chunnel to Waterloo Station.

Ian then had a haircut, a glorious bath and slap-up meal in a London Hotel. Finally he got his train ticket back to Devizes once Wooller had delivered him to an army camp in West London for a day’s debriefing.

He was dined out at Tilshead Camp and heard the full story of the recapture of his P Battery comrades in a dawn firefight. Frosty Armstrong put in an appearance and even his daughter, Alice, sang him a special song that she had written for him. Then it was a full medical and a three-month furlough at home in Acharacle with his parents. First his experiences were drawn out of him by RQMS Fisher who was the current Regimental History recorder.

Ian got back to Fort William in the first week of October, just over 5 months after he left Scotland. He was only seventeen with his life still in front of him, yet he had matured considerably. Meg said he was cured like a chestnut and about the same colour. The wee three family were back again, and his brothers would catch up with him over the next few months.

But men of power liked the cut of his jib. The Laird, MacDonald of Ardnamurchan, had a vacancy for him. Ian had now been given the responsibility of looking after a large part of Ardnamurchan Forest under the factor. This was the territory of the famous 93rd of Foot. The Macdonald had already been in touch with Frosty Armstrong and, provided the lad was willing, his army signing on would be cancelled, he would be sent the Afghanistan ribbon and credited with a full combat mission. In short he would be invalided out, all if he was willing for this to happen. He was to think about this during his furlough.

A week later Ian was in the forest by himself one morning stripping out ivy when Alice Armstrong appeared on the path he was on. Her father had told her about Ian’s plight and she decided off her own bat to go and speak with him.

Ian blushed at seeing her, and Alice did the same. Ian took her to a small clearing and they sat down on a tree trunk. Alice looked into his eyes and immediately put her hands around his neck – more than Ian could stand, and it was almost an hour later when they stopped for breath that they talked about things. They had always been heavily attracted to each other.

‘Father says that it does make sense to leave the Gunners if you have the chance of a job you like. You do like this job, Ian, dear?’

‘Of course I do,’ said Ian. ‘This area has always been my life. Can I call you “darling”?’

‘Of course you can. We love each other. I’ll always know where to find you now, but I have my own life as a dancer and entertainer. We’ll have to break up, but let’s do it in style. I’m staying at the Loch Shiel Hotel. Let’s make a night of it.’

And so they did after Ian phoned home to his mum to tell her he wouldn't be home till tomorrow night.

And that's where I have to leave you, my dears. Ian and Alice probably met up again, but their lives would be very different. They will be pulled apart by life, but if their love is strong enough, they would see each other again. Such are the wonders of modern life.

*Our roses bloom and fade away,
Our Infant Lord abides always!
May we be blessed His face to see,
And ever little children be!*