This is how my father, Sandford John, told me his story.

He was born in south Devon in 1908, the son of John Parsons, a farmer, and Charlotte Adelaide from County Cork. His earliest memory is of getting his finger caught in a mangle. The mangle tore the top of his finger off but a doctor managed to sew it back on. A year later his parents separated and his mother went to live in West Hampstead. She took Sandy with her. The rows were upsetting his health.

My father left school at the age of sixteen without any qualifications. He wanted to become an actor. He had little theatrical training but he managed to get a job at the Kingsway Theatre as a call boy. After a few months he was promoted to the level of understudy and eventually became a member of the cast. Later he joined a touring company as a stage manager.

After he had struggled on the stage for ten years, his mother persuaded him to abandon his acting career. “She didn’t think it was any good when you got older,” he told me. So he found a job working for a firm of landscape gardeners called Cutbush. About seven years later he was left money by an aunt whom he’d never seen in his life. He bought a shop in Willesden and became a newsagent and tobacconist. It wasn’t a very happy decision, but it paid for my private education. In his later days, he would confess his life-long devotion to the stage.

Tap-tap, tap-tap, tap-tap.

My father’s walking stick upon the pavement in his eighty-eighth year.

Small methodical movements, just as he eats.

Small neat bites.

Small neat steps.

Innocent, he is, of the means to complain.

Standing at my shoulder as I write, a presence, here in this room, reading a timetable, reading a brochure, reading a letter, anything, anything that catches his eye, halted, fixed, focussed, stalled.

Age stiffening into stillness.

Lived it he had, but still on the qui vive for a drink, for a guzzle, for a theatre, for an out.

All the livelong day.

My father was a Japanese prisoner of war for three and a half years. The Japanese despised all prisoners of war because they regarded surrender as contemptible. Soldiers, in their view, should die before surrendering. Other men had their spirits broken, or were unable to submit to the rigours of captivity, or became careless, or simply lost heart. They didn’t have the self-control that is needed to survive. My father survived because self-control and passivity can also be a source of immense strength.

He never talked much about the war. Even today almost all that I know about his experiences is what I have been able to wring out of him from his faltering memory this last year.

Sandy was called up into the army on 9th December 1940 at the age of 33. He could have got out of the war. He had varicose veins and poor eyesight. It’s typical of him that he didn’t use his health as an excuse. On enlisting he was asked whether he wanted to be an officer. He declined. That’s also typical of him. Despite his love of the theatre, he was never comfortable in the limelight.

Churchill wrote of this moment: “By the end of [1940] this small and ancient Island, with its devoted Commonwealth, Dominions, and attachments under every sky, had proved itself capable of bearing the whole impact and weight of world destiny. We had not flinched or wavered. We had not failed. The soul of the British people and race had proved invincible. The citadel of the Commonwealth could not be stormed. Alone, but upborne by every generous heart-beat of mankind, we had defied the tyrant in the height of his triumph.”

Three days after getting call-up papers my father left for Scotland. His heart-beat perhaps lay momentarily elsewhere. On the train he wrote this letter to my mother:

Beloved Darling,

 Can’t go to sleep just yet so thought I would have this little talk with you. Besides I must tell you how wonderful you were at the station. I have never felt so proud of you or loved you more. You are the most courageous girl I have ever met. What a lovely day we had together. I have kept turning it over in my mine (sic), living every precious minute again.

 You know I feel wonderfully happy somehow. I think it is because we love each other so much and something tells me for sure than (sic) it won’t be so very long before we are together again for always and this nightmare will be over.

 I was wondering if I have been as kind and as understanding as I should have been with you during the last few weeks. I’m sure at times I have snapped at you and being rather short. I’m so sorry if I have and was never intended (sic) as you know, my pet.

 Darling, I don’t think I’ve told you how really grateful I am for all you fussing over me, the lovely meals, warm fires and all the thousand and one ways you have always studied my comforts.

 And did I ever tell you how pretty you are and with what good taste you dress? There is not a man anywhere with a wife like I have got.

 You know when this war is over we have a frightful lot to look forward to. New home, new business, perhaps a kiddy, and everything fresh. Won’t it be wonderful?

 I don’t think I’ve told you how much I love you but you know that, darling, don’t you? So good night, my dear, cuddle up and don’t go away, precious.

 I adore you,

 Sandy.

After completing his military training at Inverness with the Cameron Highlanders, my father was transferred to Portsmouth as a member of the Royal Army Ordinance Corps where he worked for the Port Workshop. It was the duty of the Port Workshop to repair vehicles that got knocked about on board ship, he explained to me. I asked him if that’s what he did, repair vehicles, because I’ve never in all my life seen him so much as look under the bonnet of a car or even stand around purposefully with a spanner in his hand. So it didn’t seem like the kind of job that he was ideally suited to perform. He replied, “No, I ordered the food and looked after the men’s rooms, the toilets and the officers’ mess.”

One day the lieutenant whom he worked under in the Port Workshop took it upon himself without consulting his superiors to promote my father to the rank of lance corporal.

“Look, you’d better sew this on, Private Garland,” he told him, handing him a pair of stripes. “To work here, you have to have a little authority. Otherwise everyone will take advantage of you.”

My father didn’t complain.

In September 1941 he was sent up to Greenock, near Glasgow. On 8th December he set sail on the Empress of Australia as part of a large convoy of 70 ships that included the Warwick Castle, the Dunera and the Empress of Asia that was planning to land on the North African coast behind Rommel. The very same day, however, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour. The next day the convoy was re-routed to the Far East. On 24th December it docked at Freetown and on 4th January at Cape Town, where it stayed until 9th January. It then set sail in the direction of India. When it reached the Maldives, however, half of the convoy headed for Singapore, while the other half, including the Empress of Australia, headed for the Dutch East Indies. Sandy disembarked at Batavia Harbour on Java on 3rd February 1942. He probably stayed in the Dutch Army Barracks, otherwise known as the Cornelius Barracks.

Years and years later Sandy wrote to me, in his imitable style, of his first few days in Batavia as follows: “We were only allowed down in town from two until seven, not that there was much to do. It had one small cinema, a few bars, one or two cafés and not much else to recommend it. One could only go to the pictures and have a meal afterwards. We never paid for the pictures, just used to walk in and sit down. The meals one could get were not much better than you could get in camp, but there were girls to wait on us. Native, of course, and not very attractive but a change from having it pushed at you by men. They spent their leisure time trying to flirt with you but as none of them were pretty they did not have much success.”

It was on Java, shortly after he had been captured, that my father first met my godfather, Benjamin Drewery. Ben was later to become a Methodist minister and senior lecturer in Church History at Manchester University. He was Sandy’s constant companion during the war. They were together right to the end.

Theirs was, in Ben’s words, a somewhat inglorious campaign. “About a week after landing on Java we were ordered inland. Then two or three days later a British chap rode up on a motorbike with orders from H.Q. telling us that we had to surrender. The Dutch, who controlled the region, had taken it upon themselves to surrender on behalf of the British. There was nothing we could do about it. We were very disgruntled. We had to surrender without firing a single shot or even seeing a Japanese soldier.”

So this is how my father and Ben became Japanese P.O.W.’s and how, too, their military careers as combat soldiers came to an abrupt end. They were now officially part of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Sandy’s P.O.W. number was 653 and Ben’s was 651.

“Where were you when you learnt that you’d been captured?” I asked my father.

“In the office, interfering with no-one.”

“What did you do with your rifle?”

“We threw the rifles away into the bush so the Japs couldn’t get them. We threw the rifle in one direction and the bolt in the other.”

“Did you ever use your rifle?”

“No, it wasn’t necessary because I was always in the office. I had the rifle beside me.”

The British destroyed all the guns, radar equipment, rifles and ammunition that t hey could.

So Sandy and Ben never killed anybody. They never even fired their rifles in anger because they never saw any action.

My father said: “It must have been ten days before we saw our first Jap. They rounded us up and we had quite a long march to a camp. A few of them could talk English, which they were very keen to show off. But you couldn’t trust them. One minute they would be all right. The next for no reason they would give you a bashing.”

Bashing means hitting.

Soon after they had been captured, the British were questioned by the Japanese. According to the rules of the Geneva Convention the only information that prisoners are required to reveal is their name, rank and number. But the Japanese wanted to find out their civilian occupations so that they could make use of their expertise. Ben told his captors that he was a milestone inspector. All this was faithfully recorded.

“Why did you inspect the milestones?” the Japanese officer asked Ben.

“Because in England the winds are very great and the milestones are blown all over the country. It was my task to inspect them and to ensure that they were one mile apart.”

“I understand that you have a degree from Oxford University. We have heard of Oxford University. In what do you have a degree?”

“In milestone inspection.”

Another prisoner, a schoolteacher, claimed to be a wheel-tapper’s listener.

My father didn’t tell me anything about being interrogated.

Sandy and Ben were first held prisoner at a place called Tanjongpriok, about a mile to the east of Batavia. The prison was situated in a very large field within a barbed wire enclosure. It accommodated an assortment of British, Dutch, Australian and American prisoners who lived in bamboo huts, about twenty-four men per hut. Tanjongpriok was the most comfortable camp they were in throughout the war. Formerly it was a set of compounds for native dock labourers, known as coolies. Ben and Sandy also worked as dock labourers, mainly loading and unloading the ships. The camp commander was called Yamamoto.

“He was efficient and by Japanese standards fair. He was not a murderer,” Ben commented dryly.

Among my father’s papers is a scrap of paper entitled ‘Life in a Japan Prison Camp’ written by Lieutenant J. Lambert, a young artillery officer. The Japanese allowed him to broadcast his account in Batavian Radio to Australia. Lambert wrote: “Living accommodation in general consists of sound buildings, plentifully ventilated. There is at all times plenty of freedom to move about in the open, within the boundary wire of the camp area. The traditional genius of the British soldier for making himself comfortable was never more obvious than it is here. We brought in a good many tools with us and any sort of available wood soon became primitive furniture.”

Conditions were pretty good in Tanjongpriok, compared with what they became later. The prisoners were paid ten Javanese cents per day for their work. Once a week the Japanese allowed the local Javanese farmers in to the camp to sell their produce. A banana cost one cent and a boiled duck’s egg cost three cents. This meant that the prisoners were able to supplement their meagre prison diet. For 25 cents they could also buy a kilo of tobacco. They would use toilet paper to roll their own cigarettes.

My father said, “The camp they put us in was decent. We built the kitchens and even a church and an altar dedicated to St George and a concert stage. The best builders were the Australians. We had a parson, Padre Phillips, who was taken prisoner with us and he conducted the services. He was a nice chap and very popular with us all. We ate rice and spinach. You might get a piece of meat once a week if you were lucky.”

I asked Ben, who is a Classical scholar, if he ever learnt any Japanese. He said, “None of the men did. We only learnt the numbers so that we could call them out on parade.”

Lieutenant J. Lambert’s account continues: “There is any amount of recreation. Soccer and Rugby, limited to thirteen or twenty minutes each way, are played regularly, and inter-unit league games produce needle matches with roaring crowds on the touchline.”

On 3rd April 1942 Ena received a letter from the R.A.O.C Record Office in Leicester in respect of Lance Corporal. Garland S.J. (no. 2938637).

Dear Madam,

 In reply to your letters dated 11th and 19th March 1942, passed to this office from the War Office, I have to report with regret that I am unable to give you the present location of your husband, since information about personnel serving in the Far East is at present very meagre.

 No casualty in respect of him has been reported and I can only say that should any information be received you will be notified at once.

 (Signed) Officer in charge of R.A.O.C. Records

Six months later the Regimental Paymaster R.A.O.C. wrote to my mother as follows on Office Form 62:

Dear Madam,

 I have learned with regret that you have been informed that GARLAND, S.J. has been reported missing. You will doubtless wish to know without delay your position regarding the allowance payable to you until such time as further information about the soldier is forthcoming. The allowance at present being paid to you on his behalf will be continued until 12th September 1943 at thirty-five shillings and sixpence per week, subject to any adjustment that may be necessary as a result of further information concerning the soldier being received before the latter date. Should no news of the soldier be received by 12th September 1943 the rate at which the allowance maybe continued will be subject to review and a further communication will be sent to you. I am enclosing Army Form 0.1859 which you should complete and forward IMMEDIATELY to the War Office (F.4.P.W.) in the enclosed envelope. it is essential that you supply the required information AT ONCE as delay in doing so may result in your being without any allowance while the subsequent rate is being determined.

 I am, Madam, your obedient Servant

 (Signed) for Regimental Paymaster R.A.O.C.

Lieutenant Lambert: “The standard of stage and concert party entertainment is really amazing. In my own camp we have seen three colourful Shakespearean productions. We have a first class dance band, and at the moment we are revelling in a series of shows of the light musical comedy type. We even possess a startling pair of synthetic female beauties. Two R.A.F. boys transform themselves into a dazzling blonde and a skittish redhead. At a range of five yards you’d never dream that the blonde’s crowning glory consists of the combed-out fibres of a bleached sandbag, cunningly waved and set.”

At the end of June 1943 Ena received a letter from the R.A.O.C on Army Form B. 104 - 83A that read as follows:

Madam,

 I have to inform you that a report has been received from the War Office to the effect that (No.) 2938637 (Rank) Lance Corporal Garland is a Prisoner of War in Japanese hands interned in JAVA camp. Should any other information be received concerning him, such information will be at once communicated to you. Instructions as to the method of communicating with Prisoners of War can be obtained form any Post Office.

 I am, Madam, your obedient Servant

 (Signed) Officer in charge of Records

A month later Ena received a card that Sandy had written to her on 26th December 1942. It reads as follows: “I am now a prisoner of war in Java. The Japanese treat us well. So don’t worry about me, and never feel uneasy. I am always wishing that this terrable (sic) war would be over, and that I should return home again. Health is alright, food and accomodation (sic) satisfactory. Keep smiling, mother. I love you very much, Ena. Reply hoped for. Fondest love, Sandy (Garland, P.O.W. 66T).” The card had taken seven months to arrive.

Ben remembers the following scene which took place on Christmas Day in Tanjongpriok 1943. One of the prisoners, a certain Harry Cunningham from Huddersfield, who was sitting cross-legged on his bamboo bed, said: “It’s times like Christmas Day, they’re thinking of thee back ’ome, I mind me now of our Liza way back i’ ’Uddersfield, sitting bi’t fire in t’owd armchair, scratting ’er ’ead and saying, ‘Now I wonder where the bloody ’ell our ’Arry is tonight.’”

Harry, unfortunately, didn’t survive the war. When his wife Liza discovered she was a penniless widow, she enterprisingly turned their home into a brothel, as Ben found out when he went up to Huddersfield after the war to visit her.

It was on Christmas Day 1943 that the Japanese first distributed the Red Cross parcels which they had been holding in storage for some time. Because they wanted to spread ill-feeling among the prisoners, they only distributed parcels to the Americans. Spontaneously, however, each American took one item from his parcel and told the other prisoners to do likewise. So the Japanese ploy to weaken morale only strengthened the camaraderie among the prisoners.

Eventually Sandy and Ben were transferred to Glodok in Batavia. Before the war Glodok had served as a gaol in which the Dutch incarcerated their Javanese factory workers. This was the only occasion throughout the war when Sandy and Ben were behind prison walls. Their job was to make string out of sisal. “The job bored you stiff but at least it was safe,” Ben said. “It kept you alive and every day that passed meant one day nearer to the end of the war. After the Japanese, the greatest danger was boredom.” Their camp commandant was called Sony. Ben saw Sony beat to death at least two prisoners for trivial offences such as stealing food. After the war Sony was executed for war crimes.

Sandy and Ben remained at Glodok for about two months. Then they were transferred to a number of smaller camps to the south of Batavia, never remaining in any of them for more than a few weeks. Finally they were brought back to Batavia again. On 19th May 1944 they were put on board a Japanese freighter and transported to Singapore, where they joined a convoy heading towards Japan.

By this point in the war the Americans were all-powerful in the South Pacific and every morning when Ben and Sandy came up on deck and looked out to sea, they saw fewer and fewer ships in their convoy. By the time the convoy approached the coast of Japan, there were only three ships left. Theirs was the one in the middle.

At midnight on 24th June, when they were about fifty miles from the coast of Kyushu, all three ships were torpedoed by an American submarine called the ‘Tang’. One of the ships that was torpedoed was named the Tamahoko Maru, but I don’t know if that was the ship my father was on. There is no record of the loss of life but Ben told me that about three-quarters of his immediate circle of friends were drowned. Sandy managed to cling to a raft and Ben to a piece of the bridge. They both survived like this for twelve hours in the water. The explosion kept the sharks away. They were both picked up by a Japanese whaler around midday the following day. When Ben was hauled on board the whaler, the first person he saw was my father sitting under an awning. Ben had convinced himself that he would never see him again.

My mother said that the only reason the whaler picked the survivors up was because there was a Japanese soldier clinging to the raft. She told me that the other men wanted to drown the soldier, but Sandy wouldn’t let them. He knew that if they kept him alive, they’d be rescued.

Ben told me that the prisoners asked one of the Japanese for some water. Instead, he turned a hosepipe on them, dousing them in salt water, and said, “You have brought all this trouble on southeast Asia. You can drink the sea.”

Ben lost his copy of *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* when he was in the water and Sandy his silver cigarette case. It had been the gift of his grand aunt who had left him her money. They had traveled together throughout the war.

The whaler docked at Nagasaki on the island of Kyushu. The prisoners were marched through the streets to amuse the local people. They were interred at Camp #14 Fukuoka. After a few days of rest, they were put to work in the Mitsubishi Shipbuilding Factory as odd-job labourers. They were, in Ben’s words, “very unskilled”, doing whatever needed to be done. They were housed in two-story huts located in the middle of the steelworks. Now began their hardest year as prisoners of war. The winter was deadly cold. Prisoners were dying every week. The worst killers were beriberi, dysentery and malaria.

Ben and Sandy suffered constantly from dysentery, which was the reason why in their Java days they were never sent to work on the Burma Railway. They both had beriberi as well. Beriberi causes water to settle in the ankles and flow up your legs. Once it reaches your heart, you die. Its effect is like hemlock. But unlike hemlock beriberi could also take the skin off your testicles. The only cure for that is crude rock sulphur. The prison guards suffered from it as well. In fact they would come to the prisoners for medical assistance because it was a crime for Japanese soldiers to fall ill.

Sandy remembers with some affection the Japanese officer whom he worked under at Nagasaki.

“He wasn’t a bad little fellow at all,” he told me. “He wanted to talk about London. After the war he came to Cricklewood and visited me. He turned out to be extremely wealthy.”

In June 1945, after Sandy and Ben had been working a year at Nagasaki, the Japanese held a parade in order to examine the fitness of the prisoners working in the shipbuilding factory. Those judged to be sick, who included Sandy and Ben, were sent by train to a small camp attached to Camp #5 Omine. Omine was a small mining village situated in the hills near Kawasaki.

Omine accommodated about seven hundred prisoners – English, Australian, Canadians, Dutch and Americans. There were soldiers, sailors and airmen among them. It was described by the Japanese as a “recuperation camp”. In effect the prisoners worked down the mine. However, neither Sandy nor Ben did much work at Omine because they were too sick.

“Why did they move you from Nagasaki to Omine?” I asked my father.

“There was never any reason given,” he replied. “It seemed they were always moving us around.”

Six weeks after their arrival at Omine, on 9th August 1945, Little Boy was dropped on Nagasaki. The bomb, which weighed only half a pound, exploded in the air on the west side of Nagasaki, directly above the industrial district where they had been working.

Ben told me that he recently discovered that there were over two hundred British prisoners living in Nagasaki at the time when the bomb dropped. Their camp was about half a mile away from the epicentre of the explosion. However, only five of them were killed, thanks to the fact that they had been allowed to build trenches and cover them with paving stones. Before dropping the bomb, the Americans dropped leaflets on Nagasaki, urging the Japanese to take shelter. The Japanese thought it was cowardly to take any precautions.

In the first half of August 1945 a rumour had begun to circulate through the camp at Omine that a new ‘super bomb’ had been built. It was the interruption of the conventional air raids by the Americans on 15th August, however, that convinced the prisoners that something decisive had happened. Then on 17th August the Japanese began distributing Red Cross supplies. Henceforth the prisoners no longer had to sleep on mats. Instead they slept on beds, which they constructed out of a door or a mess table raised from the floor on Red Cross boxes.

This is how my father discovered that the war had ended. One of the men in his billet said, “I think the war’s ended. I’m going to find out.” On the wall of their living quarters was a roster on which wooden blocks were hung with each prisoner’s number on it. You had to take your block with you and hang it on another roster if you went to the toilet, or if you were working in the mine, or if you were in bed. Well, the man in his billet got up and knocked the roster off the wall. Instead of bashing him, however, the Japanese guard in the room simply got up and walked out.

When official news of the allied victory finally reached Omine, Ben was in the camp hospital suffering from pneumonia. He weighed exactly seven stone. As soon as he learnt that the war was over, he sent my father a note saying simply, “Dear Sandy, we made it.”

Sandy told me: “When they knew that we knew that the war had ended, the guards nearly all left. They didn’t want to get bashed in return.”

The Emperor Hirohito officially accepted terms of surrender on August 14th, though the Japanese P.O.W.’s didn’t learn about the end of the war until a week or ten days after V.J. day. The camp commandant summoned all the prisoners on to the parade ground and made the following announcement: “It has been decided by international arrangement that responsibility for your welfare hitherto exercised by His Majesty the Son of Heaven” - pause for salute - “has been transferred to the President of the United States.” The camp commandant did not take it upon himself to mention the fact that the Japanese had lost the war. Notwithstanding this omission, the British colonel promptly pushed him aside with the words, “Company, ’shun. National Anthem commence.” All the prisoners joined in, British and non-British alike.

The prisoners remained in Omine for about three weeks after the war ended, waiting for the arrival of the relieving party. It must have seemed very strange. They were now able to travel freely, though food was extremely short. Sandy visited two or three villages, travelling by train on his own. He exchanged his blankets and other supplies for chickens, eggs and fruit.

“I wasn’t prepared to take their chickens without giving them something in exchange,” he said.

“What were the Japanese whom you met in the villages like?”

“They weren’t resentful about losing the war at all. They were jolly glad it was over. They actually wanted it to end.”

The fact is their morale was breaking down. They, too, just like the prisoners, were beginning to starve.

In one of the villages he even saw a performance of a classical Japanese Nô drama, whose production the war hadn’t managed to interrupt.

When the American relieving party eventually arrived, the prisoners were taken to Nagasaki by train. I do not know what that moment meant to them. But what I do know is that Sandy and Ben saw the devastation caused by the atomic bomb only six weeks after it had been dropped. Up till then, they had had only a very hazy idea of the scale of the damage it had caused. Most of the population was in total shock. But not all. Ben told mean extraordinary story. As soon as the train came in to the curved platform at Nagasaki, a Japanese woman porter raised her skirt above her knees. She was showing off her legs to ex-P.O.W.’s who hadn’t seen a woman in years. It’s clear that she wasn’t thinking about the bomb or the devastation that it had caused. It’s clear too that she didn’t hold the ex-prisoners responsible for that atrocity. She wasn’t filled with fear and loathing. She wanted to be stared at by men. She was seizing this unique opportunity to show off her legs. Every head was strained out of the carriage windows on the curved platform to look at her.

“Did the Japanese guards ever torture any of your companions?” I asked my father.

“No. Bashed if you like, but not tortured. It was always a bashing we talked of. Tortured is a different thing, isn’t it?”

“Did they mistreat you?”

 “Not really. They bashed us, with a stick or the back of the hand, whichever came easier. The educated ones didn’t bash you. They wanted to get to England. That was their one desire. Quite a few of them had been to Tokyo but that wasn’t the same as London.”

Sandy once got bashed because he passed a guard without saluting him in the dark. He said, “I thought he couldn’t see me.” On another occasion he got bashed because he didn’t get off his bed quickly enough when a Japanese guard came into the room. He was late in saluting the guard and received two smacks for his misdemeanour. My father said about the bashing, “I don’t mind the pain. It’s the indignity.”

Ben told me, “The things that you remember are the things that made you laugh.” He said that all the prisoners had to learn Japanese numbers so that they could call them out when they were standing in line and being counted. If you got your number wrong, the guards would bash you. Most of the prisoners learnt the numbers easily enough, but there was one prisoner who just couldn’t get them straight, so he was constantly getting bashed by the guards. The easiest number in Japanese to remember is twenty-five, which sounds like ‘need-you-go’. So whenever there was a line up all the other prisoners made certain that he was number twenty-five in line, so that every time he could call out ‘need-you-go’!

I do not know what my father did with the things he remembered. I do not know where they have gone. When I came to look for them it was already too late.

When I was thirteen Ben sent me a copy of the New Testament in Greek together with a letter which began with these words: “You may not know who I am but I was the man who kept your father alive when the future of the British Empire depended upon us alone.”

Ben learnt later that there was a directive to kill all the Japanese P.O.W.’s on 17th September 1945 because the Japanese were expecting an American invasion by that date. So he and my father had three escapes from death.

Sandy sailed from Nagasaki to Manilla and then on to San Francisco. From San Francisco he sailed to Vancouver. On 3rd November he sent a telegram to Ena: ARRIVED VICTORIA BC HOPE TO BE HOME MONTHS END LOVE SANDY. He then traveled through the Rockies by train to Montreal. He returned to England on the Queen Mary and docked at Southampton within the month.

He spent two or three days in an army barracks where he was provided with fresh kit, interviewed, and given a medical examination. There was a concert in the camp on the evening he arrived. When he was finally discharged, he didn’t have time to ring Ena to tell her that he was on his way so he asked an unknown woman on the platform to ring for him. On arrival in London, he went directly to his shop in Walm Lane because he had never visited the flat that my mother had moved into. So that is where my parents met for the first time after the war had ended.

On 19th November my grandmother wrote him this letter from 33 Seaward Avenue, Bournemouth:

My Precious Darling.

 Your wire recieved (sic) safely. I am overjoyed with delight. Thank God you are home again. Ena must be wild with delight, you hardly knowing if standing on your head or heels - it’s all so lovely. Seems if we have all had a terrible dream, doesn’t it? Shall count the days to seeing you. My own dear Babe. Have now sent off the wire to Ena giving phone numbers of hotels near us... If you let us know time of arrival would get a taxi to meet you. A taxi, as you will find, is difficult to get. Things are different to when you left. There is nothing more to say, dear. Tell Ena I’m much better. A few days in bed does one good. With fondest love to you both - so excited can hardly write.

 Your devoted and loving,

 Mother

I asked my father what was the first thing that he did when he arrived in the new flat. He told me that he sat down and poured himself a long stiff drink. When Ben returned home to Halifax around midnight, he stayed up all night and next day, talking with his parents and sister.

I once came across a letter in the pages of a book that my father had written to my mother when he was travelling through the Canadian Rockies on his way back to England. It was a love letter. He said that he couldn’t wait to see her beautiful body.

Sandy, who has the dimmest memory these days, claims that he went down to a camp in Hampshire for a few days to be demobbed after returning to London but I don’t know whether it’s true.

“What did you do during that time?”

“Nothing.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean nothing. We just used to walk about all day, keeping away from any work that might need doing. We were very cautious about that.”

One of the officers said to him, “That stripe of yours isn’t official. You’ll have to take it off.”

So when my father returned at the end of the war, after being a prisoner of war in Java and Japan for over two years, an officer stripped him of his lance corporal stripe - the stripe that he’d been given by the lieutenant in the Port Workshop, to which he had brought not a little distinction as a result of having interfered with no-one.

Though he never complained except under the most severe provocation, he told me, “The War Office would have had to pay me more if I’d had a stripe.” He claims he received £90 from the War Office for being a prisoner. Ben received £260. There was even a rumour among the POW’s that the War Office would deduct the ten cents per diem for the pay that the prisoners had received on Java.

My father went back to work in his shop in Walm Lane about one month after he returned from the war.

“What did you do in the month before returning to work?” I asked him.

“Not much.”

“Did you go out?”

“No, not much.”

My mother said, “He didn’t talk much, he just sat in a chair, staring at the wall. It was very difficult. The doctor said, ‘He must never be worried about anything or he will go completely under.’”

No-one helped Sandy to get better or to adjust to being back after the war. In fact there was no program to help any of the P.O.W.’s recover. They managed it by themselves. They didn’t receive any counselling or therapy. The War Office even distributed pamphlets instructing P.O.W.’s not to talk about their experiences for fear of upsetting the relatives of prisoners who had not returned.

“Did you talk about your experiences to anyone?”

“Not really.”

“Didn’t you want to?”

“Not really. Besides people weren’t much interested.”

Not much interested!

Ben, on the other hand, gave his first talk about his experiences in the war in December 1945. And he went on dining out on the Japanese for nearly fifty years, lecturing all over the country about his experiences.

As I write this, it is exactly fifty years since these events took place. In August 1995 there was a celebration in the Mall to commemorate V.J. Day, the day of victory in the Far East. Many of the men who had been prisoners marched on that day in the heat. My father, who can scarcely get as far as the nearest pub these days, said, “Maybe next year I’ll march.”