

# MY FATHER – THE WARRIOR’S RETURN

*Mike Kean-Price*

Michael Kean Price has been the Town Crier and Town Serjeant of Tewkesbury since 1998. Before he retired he was a local government officer but as a youth he served in the British Army in the Royal Horse Guards (The Blues). Mike has bitter-sweet memories of family life in 1945-46 and has written this account in commemoration of the 70th anniversary of VJ Day.<sup>1</sup>



My earliest memory of childhood is that of not being like other children. This was especially so on the cold evenings in late autumn or early winter when all the other children would gather at the corner of Churchill Road and Bloomfield Road in Gloucester from half past five onwards to await their fathers’ return from work. My brother Chas and I would hang back from the others, talking to them from a distance, knowing eventually we would be left alone in the road. We would watch and wonder as lights came on in hallways, bikes were put away in garden sheds and the front doors finally closed against us.

Anyway, where was my dad? I wanted to wait with the others, to be hoisted up on to the bike crossbar and travel those final yards home in triumph – ‘king of all I surveyed’. After all VJ Day had been – and gone – a long time ago.<sup>2</sup> I remembered the bonfire and people saying “Daddy will be home soon”. Sadly my brother and I were never really close. So even at home with Mum there was not the closeness I sensed in my friends’ homes.

Every evening was the same. Final wash before bed; supper of sorts, sitting by the fire trying to put off going to bed as long as possible. Chas and I shared the big back bedroom. His bed was a very grand affair, all brass, one of Grannie Price’s auction bargains. Mine was a more modest one with cold black iron bed-ends. Our whispered joys and fears passed between those beds after Mum had gone back downstairs. “What’s our dad like?” I would ask continually. From Chas’s bed vague memories of a man in khaki with a big kitbag at Gloucester Station would tumble out, mainly ending in tears, choked into the pillow, and then the silence; always the silence.

My father was Jack Price, the rugby player, runner, boxer, who worked at the docks, and came

from Tredworth. Nothing good seemed possible until my father came back. When he did return, however, he spoke bitterly of “ungrateful Indians killing gallant British soldiers”, who had only recently saved them from ‘the JAPS’!<sup>3</sup>

It seemed the war was over in every house except ours. Most of the neighbours had not been in the fighting, but were engaged on important work in airplane production. It must have paid well because toys from uptown stores arrived for them at regular intervals.

Life was hard for my mother, formerly one of the Miss Rylands.<sup>4</sup> She came from the ‘posh’ part of town from a ‘good’ Cotswold family. Before meeting my father, she had lived in South Ascot as companion to Lady Stafford-Charles. Now life for her was in a ‘semi’ with two children in a totally alien environment, surrounded by people she could not relate to. I remember her tears, her hands red and worn by household chores which at South Ascot she had always expected others to do. Her gentle, polite ability to remain a lady despite her present circumstances drew admiration and envy from the neighbours.



1. Jack Price in the tropical uniform of the 10th Gloucesters

One day, however, I was to see another side of her character. I upset an old lady in the next road. Words were exchanged and things became rather heated. Suddenly the old lady started yelling about my father. I yelled back "I'll send him round to see you when he comes home from the war." Her reply chilled my soul and filled my nightmares for months afterwards.

"Yer dad's dead, killed by the Japs. It's turned your mother's brain. Everybody's sorry for her, he's never coming back." "Never coming back!" The words screamed in my ears as I crashed through the back door.

"Our Mam, our Dad's dead, never coming back, never coming back," as I lay before the fire tears pouring down my face. There was a terrible pain as I was dragged and half carried from the floor to the neighbour's front door. Like a cornered she-wolf defending her cubs, my mother raged, threatened, swore by heaven and hell that my father was alive. As we left the old lady trembling in her doorway, my mother's parting shot was "my husband will be home for Christmas".

After that there was no mention of my father being missing or dead. Indeed, word must have reached the vicar who arrived the very next afternoon to see us. On the following Sunday special mention was made of men of the parish still serving in far-off lands even after hostilities had finished.

My mother's family were very supportive. My grandfather, Henry Ryland, was my special champion. Though small in stature he was a giant in every other respect. I adored him and was at my happiest following him around. He, together with his sons – my Uncles John and Bob – were my heroes. They were both over six feet tall and dwarfed their father. Their prowess at rugby in the local area made them almost god-like to my friends. It was to them I turned for the things a boy needs from his father, even though I knew it hurt my mother to be referred to as 'only a woman'.

Christmas came and went – with no sign of my father. The snow was indeed deep, crisp and even. But carols, holly and the rest were no comfort to a boy without a father. Mother hid her disappointment from us, but her family were not so easily fooled. They planned a surprise New Year's Eve party to cheer her up. They arrived at our bedtime with food, booze and a wind-up gramophone. Later, full of all the wrong things like fizzy pop and real chicken sandwiches, my favourite aunt put me to bed.

However long into the New Year (1947) the party went on I do not know, but the sound of resounding knocking woke me with a start. Below

me the Glenn Miller Band had people dancing and singing. I was wide awake now and ventured out onto the landing. The door was being knocked fainter now, but I could hear feet being stamped against the cold. I came down the stairs on my bottom, bumping on each step. I finally reached the last step sitting on the cold polished floor. The letter-box opened and a voice hoarsely called my mother's name.

Somehow I dragged a chair from the front room and used it to put on the hallway light. It took me a few tries before the front door opened. The final effort of pulling it open dislodged me from my perch, the chair crashed back into the front room and I landed at the foot of the stairs.

Pulling myself up onto the bottom step, I looked up to gaze at my handiwork. The night was pitch black but, framed in the doorway, was a soldier. He wore a funny-looking hat sort of buttoned up on one side. He carried a great big bag and two canvas-covered suitcases. These he put in the front room and the front door was closed. I moved backwards up the stairs, hoping he would forget all about me if I kept quiet.

The parlour door burst open and someone went into the kitchen. I continued my retreat; the soldier just stood there, tears rolling down his face, holding his arms out to me. "Good God," yelled my Uncle John. "It's our Jack!"

People poured out of the parlour, hugging, laughing, crying and cheering. And then this gaunt, tall, sad soldier was kissing my mother. By now I had reached the top of the stairs only a few feet away from the haven of my shared bedroom.

The soldier had a gruff but quiet voice. "I've been knocking for ages. You lot were making such a din our Chas had to let me in." "That's not Chas, that's our Michael," said Mother as she climbed the stairs to fetch me. The soldier was crying again and holding his arms out. I shrank back against my mother, fearful of the stranger. "It's Daddy, your Daddy."

I remember the rough feel of the uniform, the prickle of a day's growth of beard against my face softened by streams of tears. Could this really be my Dad? I had always imagined him to be a giant, a hero dragging dead 'Japs' behind him, covered in medals. Later, in the safety of my mother's arms, I watched him across the room. A tall, hesitant man, he had sad eyes that pleaded for a smile from me. He was the centre of attraction now, the returning hero, master of the house. Now everything would be all right.

In the many difficult years that followed, I would often think back to the night I first met my father.

## The Historical Context [Editor]

“Our Jack” was born in 1914 and had been a member of the Territorial Army serving in the Royal Gloucestershire Hussars from 1930 to 1936. A 12st 5lb (78kg) rugby player and boxer, he was in a reserved occupation until he joined the 10th Gloucesters in 1942. It was a Tank Battalion and Jack had learned to drive armoured cars in the RGH. He was sent to the Far East and fought the Japanese at the battles of North Arakan, Mayu Tunnels, Pinwe, Shweli, and Myitson in Burma. He was lucky to be one of only 255, from the original 800, who survived.

Jack was seriously ill, suffering from dysentery, malaria and beriberi – plus fatigue after jungle fighting where he had been left for dead with shrapnel wounds until found by a ‘black GI’ and taken to hospital where he took a month to be de-loused. After some recovery, he was transferred to the Royal Engineers, after promotion to Staff Sergeant.

Mike’s father finally returned to Portsmouth on an aircraft carrier at the end of 1946 but was promptly sent to Aldershot for re-training along with former prisoners of war of the Japanese. It was on New Year’s Eve 1946 that he had suddenly returned home – when Mike was 5 years old.

It was not the end of the story since Jack then faced the problem of finding work. Jobs had been officially kept open for soldiers for six months after VE Day in May 1945. He therefore had, through no fault of his own, returned too late – and the fact that he did eventually obtain work was due to the intervention of the head of Gloucester Wagon Works. Even though the war was officially over, he still suffered from recurring malaria, requiring time off work when there was no sick pay. His health problems inevitably affected his moods and, for many years, relations between Mike and his father were strained. For so many, the war did not end on VE Day, 8 May 1945.



2. Jack Price in Kamilla Hospital when he weighed 7st (44kg)

## REFERENCES [EDITOR]

<sup>1</sup> It is historically significant that in Tewkesbury we felt constrained to mark this occasion on Armed Forces Day in June 2015 because, unlike with VE Day’s anniversary in May, so many of the leading members of commemoration were on annual leave in August.

<sup>2</sup> There is a little confusion over the date of VJ (Victory over Japan) Day. The Americans commemorate it as 2 September 1945 when the Japanese formally surrendered, but the British use 15 August 1945 – the date of the announcement of Japan seeking an end to the war, which was in effect a cease-fire.

<sup>3</sup> India was granted its independence from Britain on 15 August 1947, following a period of political turmoil. Gandhi had organised a ‘Quit India Campaign’ which intensified after the war against Japan ended. The new Labour Government had resolved to grant India ‘Dominion Status’ but British troops were caught in the cross-fire with those who wanted full independence. For historical accuracy, terminology used at the time has been maintained.

<sup>4</sup> Elsie M.C. Ryland married John E.C. Price in Gloucester in the summer of 1939.

### *The History of Tewkesbury*

(James Bennett, 1830, pp.43-44)

*Queen Elizabeth, in 1580, at the same time that she granted customs by letters patent to the city of Gloucester, made Tewkesbury an independent port, for the “loading and discharging of ships with merchandize to and from the parts beyond the seas,” which was thought at that time to be a privilege of no ordinary kind. Previously, all the ports on the Severn, from Berkely to Tewkesbury, were considered as belonging to the port of Bristol, and were under the controul of the officers of customs for that city. The corporation of Bristol became jealous that so many places should participate with themselves in the advantages of a free trade, and presented a petition to her majesty’s council in 1582 ... the Tewkesbury grant appears to have been soon afterwards either revoked, or its privileges considerably lessened.*