

Sanchia having confirmed that my father's name was indeed Herbert McGregor Carter from Whakatane, of course then made us determined to set out on the trail to find out more about him or any of his surviving family.

Jenny decided that as the telephone had previously got miraculous and relatively instant results in finding Kelly Dustin, she would now look up all the Carters listed in the Bay of Plenty telephone book, give some or all of them a call and see if any of them were related to 'Mac' Carter!

She eventually got hold of a few vague relations who did not seem very interested in "dragging up the past" and weren't inclined to be helpful, but she did talk to a rather breezy old boy who said "No. I'm not related to *those* Carters, but I did know of the family and the best thing I can do for you is to go down and make a few inquiries at the Golf Club!" I shuddered when I heard this, as I could imagine him marching into the Golf Club "nineteenth" and questioning rather grumpy old golfers about Mac Carter's son! "Mac Carter had a son?!!!"

Whichever way he did it, however, produced the desired result, because within the next few days he rang Jenny back to say that he had 'made a few inquiries' and that he had found out that Mac Carter, the son of Neil and Mary Carter, had been killed in the war but that his twin sister had married a farmer called Ron Gordon who had farmed in the Gisborne area and that one of their daughters was now a well-known potter called Gaeleen Morley, living, he thought, in Hawkes Bay. After a few fruitless attempts to find any Gordons in the Gisborne district or thereabouts, Jenny once again decided to "cut the Gordian knot" (if you'll excuse the unintended, inexact pun!) by finding out Gaeleen Morley's telephone number and ringing her direct.

"Hello, is that Gaeleen Morley?"

"Yes."

"My name is Jenny Spite and I have a rather peculiar request. My husband has recently discovered that his father was Herbert McGregor Carter and....."

"Oh my God!" Gaeleen cut in quickly, "Christopher! My cousin! I just knew he would turn up one day! How wonderful! My mother always told me about him and we always wondered what had happened to him. Oh, this is just so exciting!!"

Much the same reaction as Kelly's had been when I first got in touch with her. And it confirmed conclusively that my father was Herbert McGregor Carter.

Gaeleen went on as she walked round her house with her phone "Now I'm looking at a wonderful photograph of Uncle Mac when he was training as a soldier in Auckland, with horses in the background, before he went off to the War. And here's a photo of the two of them - Mum and Mac - when they were about eight or nine - they were twins you know. We really must meet and exchange photographs."

When we discussed this phone call with an old friend of ours, Muff White, - who had recently moved from Hawkes Bay to Wellington to live, and had taken great interest in my rapidly developing adoption story - she exclaimed "But I know Gaeleen Morley well - she's a wonderful potter!" It turned out Muff had been an Arts Reporter for one of the Hawkes Bay papers and had often reviewed her work. Muff was going up to Hawkes Bay the next weekend, so took some photographs of me and my family to Gaeleen to show her what her 'new cousins' looked like and

had quite a session with her from all accounts. She returned with the photographic portrait of my father and the one of the twins for us to have copied, and also photographs of Gaeleen's own family.

When I talked to Gaeleen, following up Jenny's initial phone call, she told me a lot more about my father's Carter family. Mac's twin sister, Gaeleen's mother, was called Myrtle but was always nicknamed Babe, and they had a much younger brother and sister called John and Jean with the nicknames Hookie and Bonnie. And their mother, Mary Carter, my grandmother, was nicknamed Dolly. Seems the whole family used anything but their own christian names! So it appeared I had a new Uncle and Aunt - John, married to Sue, with two step-daughters and an adopted son, living in Opotiki, and Bonnie, married to Jim Tregurtha with one adopted son, Peter, living in Auckland. Gaeleen, who had not really kept in close touch with either of them, now had a good reason to make contact again and advise them that a long lost nephew had come out of the woodwork! It appeared neither of them knew of my existence.

Gaeleen's knowledge of me came directly from her mother. Babe had apparently often talked of Mac's son, 'Christopher', and of course being so close to him as a twin sister and also having been one of Sanchia's best friends, would have followed my existence with some interest, at least until my birth and adoption, or even until Gaeleen's birth exactly eleven months later. Babe and Sanchia had apparently fallen out at some stage during this period, probably because Sanchia had refused to marry Mac. Mac had also moved up to Auckland to begin his army training in October 1940, two months before my birth in December. According to Gaeleen, her mother told her that Mac had always kept a close interest in Christopher up until he went off to war, but that this interest may have waned when his little niece came along after he had left.

All of this disproved Sanchia's belief that the Carters knew nothing of my birth. However it might well have been that the Carter parents were never told, or, if they did know, most certainly would not have talked about it in front of their younger children.

I later talked on the telephone to Uncle John Carter, and both he and Aunt Bonnie Tregurtha sent me wonderfully welcoming letters and enclosed many old family photographs, which I very much appreciated. These have helped me to make at least a pictorial acquaintance with some more of my ancestors.

I have also visited Gaeleen several times in her delightful house in Taradale, surrounded by her interesting and distinctive pottery and artwork, the last time to introduce my daughter Emily to her and to meet her daughter Kim, who rushed around when she heard we were there, to meet her new cousins!

Like the Martin/Wilson/Philson families, the Carters were also keen on the family genealogy and Gaeleen lent me a booklet entitled "The Carters of Springfield", produced for a centennial family reunion in 1959, showing the huge family tree back to the 1830's and the history of the family coming to New Zealand from Lincolnshire to farm in the Springfield Valley, at Mangapai, just south of Whangarei in Northland. At the 1959 reunion, Neil McGregor Carter, my grandfather, then aged 80, was the oldest member of the family present.

Gaeleen also organised the most amazing surprise for me.

A small parcel arrived at my office at work one day, which had been sent by Gaeleen's son Michael. The parcel contained a well-worn little book of the Banjo Paterson poems "The Man from Snowy River". Tucked inside the front cover of the book, together with a small photograph of my father, Herbert McGregor Carter, was a heartrending letter written by him in the desert in Egypt to his twin sister Babe which presumably had been sent home with his belongings after he was killed. I rang Jenny immediately to tell her what had arrived in the post so unexpectedly; the little book of poems very special as we both had enjoyed the Banjo Paterson poems ourselves for many years.....

*"When they reached the mountain's summit, even Clancy took a pull -  
It well might make the boldest hold their breath,  
The wild hop scrub grew thickly, and the hidden ground was full  
Of wombat holes, and any slip was death.  
But the man from Snowy River let the pony have his head,  
And he swung his stockwip round and gave a cheer,  
And he raced him down the mountain like a torrent down its bed,  
While the others stood and watched in very fear."*



*Signalman H. McG. Carter, 4<sup>th</sup> Field Regiment, 2<sup>nd</sup> NZEF.*

*The photograph tucked inside the Book of Banjo Paterson poems sent home with his belongings.*

And the letter – oh, that letter. Reading it to Jenny over the phone was the first real feeling of contact with my father that I had had - probably the most emotional moment of all - and before I was half way through, we were both in tears.

It was very moving, and quite extraordinary, to think that after a period spanning fifty-five years, the unknown son would be able to be reading the letter written by his unknown father, so long ago and so far away, and to be actually holding the little book that he obviously cherished enough to have taken with him to the war.

And to me the moment was all the more poignant because this was probably as close to him as I could ever get.

The letter was dated 22nd October 1942, and at this stage I did not realise the significance of the date of the letter. He had written it in pencil, sitting beside his Signalman's truck.....but let Mac's own words come alive again to set the scene:

NATIONAL PATRIOTIC FUND BOARD

**ON ACTIVE SERVICE**

*28232 Sigmn H M Carter  
E Signal Section  
Attached 4 Fd Reg.  
2nd N Z E F  
Middle East Forces*

*22 Oct 42*

*Dear Babe,*

*I received your letter with the snaps yesterday, & I think they are stunning.*

*Gaeleen looks such a little dear, & you & the hubby look well too, & as you say, you certainly seem to have grown sideways.*

*I'm so pleased that you were able to go through & see the folks for a few days, I'll bet it was good to get back to the old digs for a look round.*

*I can't imagine Bonny being a long skinny streak. Is she just as quiet as ever?*

*You and Olive must be a couple of top hands by now. Have you learned to swear yet? Or maybe you didn't have to learn very much in that line.*

*Yes I am back with the Div., but I'm not a foot-slogging signaller these days, I now carry the rank of Signalman, & am a member of the N Z Corps of Signals, sounds pretty good but actually a Signalman is just an ordinary private with his brains bashed out.*

*This outfit is better than the infantry, & as I am in a line party I don't do much walking. We have five in our gang & we do all of our line work with a truck, which is a hell of an improvement on the footsloggers method of doing the job. We also carry our tucker & all of our gear on the truck (in other words we live with it) so we are as independent as hell. When we are on the move or on a job we do our own cooking so we live pretty well.*

*The work is pretty solid at times, but we have lots of time to ourselves, & although the job has its thrilling moments, it's not a bad life at all. I can't tell you exactly where we are now, but its front*

*page news, so you'll probably guess. The line gang - that's us - came up a few days before the rest to do a job, & it was quiet enough except for a bit of shelling & a few hairy-planes. We were just going to have tea the other night when a few enemy planes came over & started to straff round our little part of the world, & yours truly was very, very, frightened, but the Ack Ack opened up & shot one down so we were quite pleased about it. It's a great sight to see a plane coming down in flames - when it's a Jerry - the only trouble is you don't know where the hell they are going to land as they sometimes do the craziest things when they are on their way down.*

*It's very quiet up here just at present though, & at times there's a lull for hours & you wouldn't think there was a gun within miles.*

*We had a few days rest at a beach recently, & I saw Red, he is back with the battalion again now. He is looking well & sends his regards to all of you. We had a swell time together when we were down in base, & we certainly lapped up plenty of beer. Just as well too, as we can't get any up here. So Doug is on final leave? I am just wondering whether he came over here with the lot that arrived just recently.*

*I had a letter from Frances a while ago but I haven't found time to answer it yet. I've sent her a Xmas card though. I'm well behind with my letter writing as paper was as scarce as hens' teeth till just recently & now that we have plenty of paper we haven't the time to write much.*

*Writing a letter is a hell of a job at times as it is either blowing a howling sandstorm, or it's as hot as hell & the flies nearly drive you crazy. I am sitting on an old tin by the side of the truck just now trying to write & swat flies at the same time, & it's pretty near impossible to do both. I've had a letter from Bub & Glad recently but I haven't answered either of them yet.*

*You had better send me your size & colour in stockings the next time you write & I'll send you some, when we get back to civilization.*

*Well Babe the flies are getting me down so I'll sign off & go to work on the little buggers with both hands.*

*Cheerio & lots of love,*

*Mac.*

There was the one sentence that intrigued me as to the timing of the letter '*...I can't tell you exactly where we are now, but it's front page news, so you'll probably guess.*'

I couldn't wait to get home that night to look up in Winston Churchill's World War II Memoirs to see what was happening in the war around 22nd October 1942 that was going to be front page news.

The chapter for that period was headed "The Battle of Alamein". The battle that changed the course of the war for the allies.

My father had written his last letter on the 22nd October 1942, the Battle of Alamein commenced on the evening of the 23rd October and my father was killed on the 24th October.

His truck had driven over a mine in an area that apparently was supposed to be clear of mines, and he had died of his injuries in hospital later on that day. And the ultimate irony was that the mine was reputed to be British. The battles had criss-crossed and waged back and forth across the deserts of North Africa between Alexandria and Benghazi from 1940 to 1942 and both armies had laid minefields as they went.

Perhaps the culmination of my father's part of this story is the visit Jenny and I made to Egypt and the Commonwealth War Cemetery at El Alamein in July 1997.

We had travelled through Turkey, Israel, Jordan and on down to Egypt and after a magical cruise down the Nile from Aswan to Luxor we flew back to Cairo.

One of the photographs that I had received from Bonnie Carter was a tiny little snapshot of Mac standing on the parapet of a minaret in Cairo with the notation on the back "Blue Mosque, Cairo".



I was determined to see if we could visit this mosque as I had actually found it listed and described in my guide-book - although the mosque itself seemed to have three names - 'Aqsunqur' or 'Ibrahim Ahga' or 'Blue' Mosque.

We ventured, somewhat tentatively, into what turned out to be the Islamic sector of old Cairo where most people could only speak and read arabic, including the taxi driver we eventually hailed in desperation. No-one seemed to have ever heard of the Aqsunqur or Ibrahim Ahga Mosque and could not direct us there even when we pointed it out to them on the map. We persevered, however, and eventually a very friendly and educated Egyptian and his bemused mother took pity on us and helped us to explain to our driver where to go.

Even then he had to ask directions from about five or six other people as we proceeded deeper and deeper into the depths of Darb al-Ahmar, one of the oldest and poorest districts of Cairo. We could almost have been - in fact were - in mediaeval Cairo in a street with the romantic name Sharia Bab al-Wazir (the street of the Gate of the Vizier) but what seemed to be a main street on the map was rapidly becoming narrower and narrower and more and more crowded. The taxi came to a stop quite suddenly, with the driver yelling "Mosque, Mosque!!" and, with a certain amount of relief on his part, he put us out in front of an extremely derelict looking building with huge mediaeval wooden doors and with a rather derelict and devious looking old man beckoning to us to go inside. The whole place was very dark and mysterious and smelt like a urinal, so after a very cursory inspection we lunged back out into the street. Some children seemed to have been watching this little episode with a certain amount of amusement, so as our taxi had hastily disappeared by then, we asked them somewhat desperately where the "Aqsunqur Mosque or the Ibrahim Ahga Mosque or the Blue Mosque" was.

They replied, laughing, "Blue Mosque there, Blue Mosque there!" and pointed right next door to a much more substantial mosque with a tiny little sign which stated 'Blue Mosque' !!

Jen said quietly "I think your father has set us up on some sort of endurance test!" We were finally ushered into the Blue Mosque by a very friendly and welcoming woman who promptly charged us 12 Egyptian pounds to show us around.

It was fairly dilapidated but was being extensively renovated. Built in 1347, the walls surrounded, unexpectedly, and I think, unusually, an attractive courtyard of palm trees, providing a welcome haven from the heat. In 1652 a Turkish Governor, Ibrahim Ahga, imported special blue tiles from Damascus and added them to decorate the whole of the end wall, thus making it a fairly unique mosque in Cairo - and from which it gained two of its names.

We then asked the woman if we could climb the minaret to see if we could match the photograph we had of my father, taken in 1942. She seemed to get quite a thrill when we explained my father had been there 55 years earlier. She unlocked the door at the base of the minaret and we climbed up the spiral staircase on to the roof of the mosque but we couldn't quite find the spot. I think it was further up the minaret, which unfortunately had been closed off after an extremely bad earthquake in this district of Cairo in 1992. (I later read in my guide book that you shouldn't climb *any* of the minarets in this district for this reason!) However, as we wound our way down the spiral staircase inside the minaret, I remarked to Jen how nostalgic it was to think that my father's hands would have brushed the walls as mine were doing as we descended.

I had set aside our last two days in Egypt to make a special pilgrimage to El Alamein. We had found out from the War Graves Commission before we left New Zealand that my father's grave was there and could even pinpoint the exact plot where my father lay on the Cemetery chart of over 7,000 Commonwealth soldiers' graves. I had also procured from the N.Z. Defence Force Headquarters in Wellington, my father's complete war records - with all his movements during the war, and the training beforehand, entered and dated.

(I also obtained his medical report in which the doctor had noted that he had 'moderate varicocele - left side' and on looking this up in a medical dictionary discovered this condition was some sort of swelling in the left testicle! Imagine finding that out about your father after 55 years! As Jen remarked "Imagine what your father would think if he *knew* you'd found out!")

We took the train north from Cairo, through the surprisingly lush and green Nile Delta, to Alexandria, where we spent the night at the Mekka Hotel, situated on the Sharia al-Geisha - the waterfront corniche that extends right along the beaches between the city and the Mediterranean. From our room's balcony, eight stories up, we had a magnificent view looking out to sea and along the waterfront and watched, spellbound, both a remarkable sunset and the huge hot orange sunrise the next morning.

That same morning we drove west for about an hour and a half to El Alamein along the excellent coast road next to the beautiful white sand beaches and the sea with its incredible colours of vivid turquoise and deep mediterranean blue. At El Alamein we turned inland into the desert for about a mile when quite suddenly the huge and beautifully kept Commonwealth War Cemetery and Memorial appeared before us, situated on a hill overlooking the barren and forbidding piece of desert, sloping away into the distant haze of heat, where the actual Battle of El Alamein was fought. The Alamein Memorial is a tastefully designed, triple-arched cloister commemorating and bearing the names of 11,945 soldiers and airmen who have no known grave and who fought and died in all stages of the Western Desert campaigns. Through the arches and beyond extends the cemetery

containing the graves of 7,354 of the identified soldiers. A twenty hectare sea of headstones in row upon neat row, set in the golden sand - far too hot for grass here - the stark lines softened by small, clipped, purple bougainvillea bushes, all flowering profusely, and aloes. But apart from the barren beauty and peace of the place, we were dumbfounded by so many soldiers buried here, so far from home in such a hot, hostile environment. Awesome and awful.



*Commonwealth War Cemetery at El Alamein.*

So many wonderful young men cut down in their prime by the complete and utter stupidity and futility of wars and the inane, inept and ridiculous politicians that start them. I have always maintained that when countries have disputes, and it appears they always will, and before those disputes escalate into war, the appropriate politicians and their diplomats should be locked up in a room and not released until their arguments are settled. Exactly the same way all the Catholic cardinals convene to choose their new Pope!

However I do concede that it would have been well-nigh impossible to have locked either Hitler, or Mussolini, or even Idi-Amin, Milosevic or Saddam Hussein, into a room at any one stage of their tyranny!

And then from the chart supplied by the War Graves Commission I went straight to the headstone of my father, and there he was:



28232 SIGNALMAN

H. McG. CARTER

N.Z. CORPS OF SIGNALS

24TH OCTOBER 1942 AGE 26

Underneath the wording, carved into the sandstone and superimposed on a cross, a silver fern was intertwined with the words 'New Zealand'.

I put my hand on his headstone and, with my voice choking, said "Well, here we are, Old Boy" and realised immediately, of course, that I was more than twice his age, and that *my* son Tim was now of a similar age.

An extremely emotional moment, I will never forget.... I had thought I felt close to my father when I

first read his letter, but perhaps this was an even closer moment.

For a while I was so overcome I felt speechless and thoughtless, so reverted silently and somewhat inadequately to the Lord's Prayer, before passing on the regards and thoughts of Mac's brother and sister - John and Bonnie Carter, and his niece Gaeleen Morley and all of our families - including, of course, Sanchia, my mother Sanchia, who once upon a time must have loved him. I hope so anyway.

Jen and I then laid the red silk poppies we had carried all the way from New Zealand beside my father's headstone, together with some greenery from a nearby tree not unlike the New Zealand Taupata.

After a visit to the fascinating El Alamein War Museum, nearby, we made a brief stop at the very germanic, stolid-looking German War Memorial on a point overlooking the sea a few miles further on. ('You lot are not getting my sympathy' I thought, rather unkindly, 'you are the buggers that started it all').

Then, considering the temperature had probably hit the 40's, we decided that we definitely deserved a swim in the gloriously inviting Mediterranean Sea. We found our way on to the beach and as we swam and wallowed in the brilliant turquoise water, I remembered the line in my father's letter '*...we had a few days rest at a beach recently*' and thought that this could well have been the same beach where the soldiers had their swims. Gaeleen had told me Mac had always loved swimming and I could only think what joy he, and the rest of the soldiers, must have had, swimming in the cool sea, during their brief respite from the horrors going on just over the hill in the heat of the desert.

I could not get out of my mind then, and the thought remains with me now, how completely devastating and heart-breaking the moment must be for parents to receive the dreaded news that their son was missing or killed at war. And I cannot imagine anything worse than a mother's grief in receiving her beloved son's few remaining belongings sent back from the battlefield some time later.

I was not only thinking of Dolly Carter, and I know it affected her for the rest of her life, but also all the members of families and loved ones of the tens of thousands of soldiers who did not return home.

If there is any consolation from the Battle of Alamein, it is the fact that the tide was turned with a resounding victory for the allies, - one of the decisive battles of history, it has been called - that led to the final expulsion of the Germans and the Italians from North Africa by April 1943. This allowed the Allies to regain control of the Mediterranean and free up the route to the East through the Suez Canal and the vital Middle East oil supplies, thus playing a pivotal role in the winning of World War II.

The winning of the freedom and peace that we have enjoyed, by and large, ever since. As Winston Churchill wrote in his memoirs: "Before Alamein we never had a victory. After Alamein we never had a defeat." Not much consolation for Mrs Carter though.

*“When the curtain falls on the sordid strife  
That seemed so splendid,  
Thou shalt look with pain on the wasted life  
That thou hast ended.”*

Banjo Paterson.

(From the book of poems Mac Carter had with him at El Alamein.)



*Tony Spite at the grave of his father, Herbert McGregor Carter, at El Alamein.*



This scroll commemorates  
**Signalman H. M<sup>c</sup>G. Carter**  
New Zealand Military Forces

held in honour as one who  
served King and Country in  
the world war of 1939-1945  
and gave his life to save  
mankind from tyranny. May  
his sacrifice help to bring  
the peace and freedom for  
which he died.