

# remembrance2009

■ **LOVE TO ALL, JACK:** Letter home has become a treasured family heirloom

## The shadow of my uncle

PATRICIA CALDER

I hold in my hand an airmail letter, so fragile and brittle it nearly tears into pieces along the 64-year-old creases. It was written by Uncle Jack to my grandmother three days before he was shot down in World War II.

Part of it reads:

"Mom, a lot of the boys leave letters behind to be sent to their people if anything should happen to them. I never have written that sort of letter to you and never will.

"I feel quite strongly that I am not going to be killed; and, because we shall be travelling much higher and faster than I ever have before, we shall be 'safer.'

"But I don't want to preclude all possibilities and I know that you can be told these things now: That I am very happy. That if we should be attacked I am better informed and more alert than ever before about getting out of trouble. That if I should go missing then I would want you to be very quiet about it - particularly when the newspapers phone - because I probably would be walking back to you.

"And if I should fail to get clear, I would want you to think of me as walking towards you anyway, for that is what I would want to be doing.

"Love to all, Jack."



Flight Lieutenant Jack Calder

doesn't change with a different geography.

Three times my grandparents received the dreaded telegram that Jack was missing in action. Three times my mother was taken into a private room by a nun where she was told that her brother was missing, presumed dead.

Even though I never met Uncle Jack, a shadow was cast over my history; the size of his memory has shaped who I am. The personality of this larger than life hero mesmerizes me just as the legacies of today's servicemen and women will affect the lives of their sons and daughters, nieces and nephews.



The Calder brothers; (from left) Jack, Jake, Phillip and Gerald.

inform you your son safe in Great Britain."

Jack went back into service

where he had to retrain to upgrade his skills for the new faster aircraft. His plane crashed into a hillside; only two of the five fliers survived. Multiple surgeries for compound fractures left half his face scarred, one eye, and pins holding his leg together.

He said to his buddy, the pilot Keefer, "Don't worry, Bobby. One more graft and I'll still be better looking than you."

After a long recovery, he couldn't wait to rejoin his unit and navigated bombers for the next six months. As he wrote to his mother, "Well, I'm back because I wanted to come back to it. I wasn't born to failure and disappointment. Quite a bit of me was broken up last time. But the realization of what is within us all wasn't broken, thank God."

His legs were shot on a mission to Hamburg, and the plane went down.

Jack drowned in the North Sea.

His body washed ashore and is buried in the British Military Cemetery at Kiel:

Jack became a skeleton in the closet because neither my mother nor my grandmother could talk about him. The few times I tried asking, my mother's eyes would fill with tears and she would turn away or leave the room. My grandmother's eyes would mist over, her face would smile a certain special smile, and she would

rock herself in her chair.

My curiosity grew heavier with the years but their grief was so profound and enduring that I was prohibited from asking questions. I did not know my uncle, Jack Calder, personally, so I am surprised by my own emotion whenever I look at his writing.

I wonder what makes a soldier. I ponder whether the soldiers who have been repatriated are heroes not because they died, but because they were willing to go.

Three died just miles from the site on the same highway in Afghanistan where three of their comrades had been killed a few days earlier. Like Uncle Jack, they wanted to be serving with their fellow soldiers regardless of danger. Many veterans of Afghanistan have volunteered for a return mission.

The children of today's soldiers who die will grow up with ghosts, just as I have.

The code of the military is much more than team spirit. War is not a sport. These soldiers, male and female, make a total commitment, whatever the outcome, to obey senior officers and politicians who craft their fate.

Where does the courage come from? I can't even imagine.

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