

BOOK REVIEW

Letters from the Burma Front: Dear Annie and Flo *by Kate Venables with Harry Walker*

Hardback, 224 pages

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This uniquely engrossing microhistory, 'of one young man's war' is set within the context of 'the longest war', the Burma campaign of 1941-1945. Its core is a series of treasured and nearly lost wartime letters, sent from various war-torn locations in South-East Asia by Kate's father, Harry Walker, to his adopted maiden aunts back home in Middlesbrough, then retrieved from an attic after Annie and Flo's deaths.

These letters were written over a two-year span starting in December 1943 when Harry arrived at a British military hospital in India as a newly registered young doctor and newly commissioned lieutenant in the Royal Army Medical Corps, on his first posting as a general duties medical officer; and ending at Christmas 1945 in Java, where Harry is impatiently waiting to be repatriated home while caught up in the Indonesian struggle for independence. Harry worked for most of this time as a replacement anaesthetist to the 5th Indian Mobile Surgical Unit, caring for casualties of the desperate fight to repel the Japanese – in the Arakan, Kohima, Imphal, Irrawaddy, Rangoon and Singapore, to name but a few places that should resonate with readers.

Annie and Flo were sisters, orphaned in their teens, who had been taken in by Harry's parents. They were 'women of the generation who never married, whose sweethearts died in the trenches in the First World War.' Harry protects his beloved aunts from the horrors of his war, referring obliquely to 'busy times', often focussing on the mundane such as receipt of cigarettes, the scenery, and gripes about politicians – but that adds to the appeal of his letters.

You can picture the surprise and joy when Kate, an Oxford historian of the war,¹ received this unexpected inheritance. She decided to publish her father's letters but to place them into their proper context of time and location by researching related primary archival material. She has done a superb job, producing an excellent and easily understandable resume of the Burma campaign and its post-conflict turmoil while retaining the immediacy and poignancy of Harry's letters. I wish such a historian could review my own letters from war zones, and those from more illustrious veterans – but that is another story.

Kate's enjoyable book is a useful template for other historians but is also a call to us all, especially if currently serving or veterans, to preserve our own letters for posterity. Thank you, Kate, for bringing your dad's letters into the light of day and for sharing them with us so splendidly.

David Vassallo

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Published online at www.bshm.org.uk.

¹ Venables KM. Captain George Blair RAMC: A doctor prisoner of the Japanese in Singapore and Taiwan in the Second World War. *Journal of Medical Biography*. 2025;33(2):93-105.