

Eulogy for Les Miles

23/3/10

I think it was my good friend Trevor Roberts, at the funeral of his dad, who found that he didn't really know his father very well. That probably applies to all of us to some degree. Over these last 3 months my father and I went on a journey together, which brought us a little bit closer. That journey ended here today. It was fairly bumpy journey, with no real steering, or brakes, and it went far too fast at the end, but I was glad to be aboard.

There was one fork in the road, where he chose between a long journey or a short one. Treatment or no treatment. That he chose no treatment is typical of the man he was. No illusions, no fantasies, no nonsense, he saw the world as it was – both good and bad – and he just got on with it. If you asked his religion, he claimed to be a devout coward. He dealt with death as he dealt with life, and even in death he could see the funny side.

In his final hospital stay, his speech was slurred and his hand was shaky, so I filled in a form for him as he lay in bed. I told him I had ticked off no social workers, no research projects, and no ministers of religion. He grinned and nodded, and then a large beige nun with an angelic smile rolled straight in the room, smothered him in God's blessings as he lay defenseless, and rolled calmly out again. He didn't need to speak – the look on his face said it all.

He was very much a physical man – a dancer, a golfer, a bowler, a tennis player, a billiards and snooker champion. The music we are playing is his own tapes of dance music that he played at home and in the car. The books he read were mostly crime fiction, and for entertainment he preferred watching English Premier league soccer on the TV. Failing that, he would settle for old-style UK comedy shows, or David Attenborough documentaries, but action was his thing. True to form, when war broke out in Europe, he ignored my Grandma's instructions to keep safe, and he enlisted in the RAF.

Peter has said he was an independent, adventurous man, and I think he decided if he was going to fight he would do it in style in the air force. No army route marches for him, or so he thought, but fate thought otherwise. Sergeant L. Miles was a gunner and wireless operator in Beaufort torpedo bombers, based at first in England and then transferred to the Mediterranean, flying out of Malta to attack Italian and German convoys. He survived 3 plane crashes in the course of service, including one where he was the only survivor, escaping through the gun turret as the plane sank. Finally his plane was shot down while attacking an Italian warship, and after 4 days at sea in an open life-raft, the crew was taken prisoner by the Italians. Eventually they were transferred from the Italians to a German camp in Poland called Lamsdorf. Then, as the war came to an end, the Germans pulled the prisoners out of the camps and

marched them east, away from the Russians. In the depths of a cruel winter they were marched from Poland across Germany almost to France, a distance of about 800 kilometres. It is described on the internet as the Lamsdorf Death March, and many men who had survived the camps did not survive the march. By the time he got home, I expect my father was a lot less adventurous.

His war experience is probably what made him so pragmatic. Just to be fed and clothed and sheltered was enough for him – anything else was a luxury. Anything he considered a luxury was “a dear little job” - it's become part of family folklore. A man of little sentiment, he couldn't see why my mother needed to buy cards and gifts and toys for the grandchildren. However, the same man told me to get my house painted and he would pay for it. When we put a deck on the house for wheelchair access, he loaned me the money and then waived the debt.

My mother had enough warmth and sentiment for both of them, and she was devoted to him. They were married in 1941 and until her death in 1988, only the Germans had ever managed to separate them. They were hard working, running a corner store in England, with my father also taking a job as a travelling salesman to help build the business. By the 60's, they had sold the shop and were settled and comfortable, but then a family next door emigrated to Australia, and sent back glowing reports. In 1965, he turned his back on everything he knew, risked everything he had worked for, and went to a strange place on the other side of the world. We landed on April Fools Day, and they took away our passports, so there was no turning back.

He took a clerical job in a State Water Resources Commission and a house at Acacia Ridge in Brisbane next to our old neighbours from England. The job was secure, the sun was shining, and we never went back to England. In 1972 he put my name in for a job at the same place, to get me that same security, and we became workmates as well as family. It was another gamble that could have gone wrong, but we worked happily side by side for over 10 years. We were labelled Pommy Number One and Pommy Number Two, and fake nameplates were put on our desks to prove it. Watching my father at work was an education. He was good-humoured, patient, persistent, always happy to let people think they had won. When a stocktake was due, he would get everything spot on, then walk along the shelves adding a bolt here and taking out a washer there. The auditors would find the mistakes and go away, and everyone was happy.

He retired in 1983, and they made a final move to the Gold Coast to enjoy the beaches and the fishing together, but it didn't work out that way. Three years later my mother had died, far too early, and his world had changed again. Self-sufficient as always, he carried on, but she had left a gap in his life which he tried to fill. The last chapter in his story began over 10 years ago, when he met a lady called Marg. A dancer, a bowler, cheerful and energetic and dryly funny, Marg put the smile back on his face. He told me recently that sitting with Marg on the cliff at Point Danger, laughing at the tourists and putting the world to rights, was his greatest pleasure in

these final years.

It was a long and happy life and a mercifully quick death. He said he was not in pain, and as he was a devout coward, I had to believe him. The photos show a tall, good-looking confident man with a big cheeky grin. He was a good man, a gentle and decent man, and a gentleman.

For his family – myself and Elaine, Alison and Andrew, their partners Neil and Danielle, Great-grandsons Daniel and Jacob; for his extended family – Marg and her daughter Diane; for all his friends and his workmates, I say farewell and rest in peace.