



## LAST OF THE BOY SOLDIERS

by

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### Synopsis

In 1959, any young man aged between 18 and 21 could expect a brown envelope through the post marked with the letters OHMS, and Joe Tramp was no exception.

Realising that a last minute reprieve was too much to hope for, 'Gunner Tramp' begins his 2-year national service with the Royal Artillery. Vague hopes of travel and adventure are soon shattered as he gets off to a bad start and the reality of army life is quick to sink in.

*Last of the Boy Soldiers* is the first in a three part series - *The Two Year Call*. Hilarious and hard hitting, yet touching, the story tells of how six very different young men adjust to the harsh regime of life in the British Army, the constant bullying, monotonous routine and a daily diet of baked beans. And having survived twenty-one years without a close friend, Joe finds himself saddled with five, making the prospect of actually finishing his national service not only bearable but also enjoyable. The poignant relationships that develop between the six men bonds them for life.

A must for all those who 'did their duty' and for those today that should.

### Chapter One

All young men between the ages of 18 and 21, capable of naming three European countries, allowing their testicles to be fondled without either returning the compliment or punching the doctor and correctly assembling a four piece jigsaw, could expect a buff-coloured envelope stamped with the letters OHMS.

Mine arrived at 7.28am on a damp, dismal morning, delivered by an overweight postman wearing a uniform made for someone smaller and the kind of smile suggesting he knew something I didn't.

"Is this what you've been waiting for?" His reluctance to release the letter produced further clues. "Looks like you'll soon be in uniform."

"So long as it fits better than yours!" I snatched the letter unable to think of a more suitable insult, slamming the door in his face – anxious to discover the army's plans without interruption. We all knew what to expect having watched friends and workmates disappear

as innocent young men, returning two years later men of the world, extolling well-rehearsed stories of travel, adventure and the occasional visit to the MO.

Only the choice of regiment and posting held any real mystery. Far East, Middle East, Gibraltar, Germany. Logically I should be joining the REME or Royal Engineers - but I would soon discover logic wasn't part of army policy. With an air of resignation I tore open the envelope, no longer dreaming of exotic locations – just hoping it would be within a fifty-mile radius of Wolverhampton, my home town. I read it through with a growing apprehension – reminding me of a young lad about to lose his virginity. You wait years for it to happen, planning, fantasising, and then when the opportunity arrives you're still not ready. A similar feeling preceded the much debated medical examination, where stoney-faced doctors looked, listened and felt an assortment of anxious males, growing even more concerned at the realisation we were clearly not all born equal.

This stark foretaste of joining an organisation where modesty is frowned upon and imperfections ridiculed – prompted many a quivering wreck to complain of burst eardrums and fallen arches. The more desperate confessed to child molesting or a preference for wearing women's clothes – while bed-wetters were reassured with the knowledge most new recruits do it during training.

The vast majority of lads went at 18, reducing the risk of having to leave a young wife either pregnant or rampant – neither of which were acceptable grounds for avoiding National Service.

An apprenticeship in machine shop engineering delayed my call-up for three years, during which time talk of ending conscription became a real prospect. We were no longer engaged in warfare, just the occasional skirmish by tin pot dictators, overloaded with medals and a desire to rule the world. These spasmodic outbreaks could easily be contained by the regular army supported by upstanding territorials, available most weekends throughout the summer.

As each day passed it soon became clear there would be no last minute reprieve, and, barring accident or illness I was destined to become Gunner Tramp of the Royal Artillery.

Living at home allowed the kind of freedom married lads of my age soon began to envy. I never had to explain my whereabouts, hand over a wage packet or apologise for something I hadn't done. Neither did I have a 25-year mortgage around my neck or the worry of struggling to keep up hire purchase payments on goods I couldn't really afford. Not that I hadn't considered flat sharing – all night parties and loose women featured high on my list of priorities, until dad died, and then I had ma to consider.

I would be about seventeen at the time, two years into an uninspiring apprenticeship – thanks to an instructor whose flat, black country voice forced many a young lad to reconsider his career. Then again Mr Fisher, the only white coat in a sea of dark blue overalls, never did get excited – which no doubt accounted for his wife's infidelity with anyone remotely interesting.

Even the arrival of a grim-faced policeman, complete with bicycle clips and gloves, failed to divert my attention from the scantily clad young ladies posing seductively amongst

the pages of Spick and Span – many a young lads introduction to the mysteries of women's underwear.

A nervous cough announced the instructor's silent arrival, before I could slide the well-thumbed magazine across the desk towards Barry Brookes, a bespectacled train spotter, more interested in the figures 4-4-4 than 36-24-36.

"It's his!" I replied nodding in Barry's direction. "I keep telling him he'll go blind."

"No it isn't!" He exploded, face turning crimson as a chorus of "Yes it is!" echoed around the room. The instructor wasn't interested, although he did allow himself a cursory glance at the offending item, before lightly touching my shoulder. "Joe, I wonder if you would mind stepping into the corridor. Constable Riley wants a word with you."

"I bet he's been flashing his todger around," sneered Sid Price, whose obsession with exposing his own had already earned him two cautions and a bloody nose. "Either that or he's put some tart up the stick."

"Probably Fisher's wife," whispered Sid's mate, rubbing his testicles to emphasise the point - something no one had ever wanted to do, apart from a scoutmaster who insisted on sharing a sleeping bag during a three day jamboree alongside the River Severn.

The instructor's glare silenced further comments as twenty pairs of eyes followed my exit from the room, eager to discover the reason for this sudden interruption.

"Joe, I'm afraid I have bad news for you." PC 354 removed his cap, placing the gloves inside before gently ushering me away from prying eyes. "It's your father!"

I waited as he struggled to find the words, short, stumpy fingers sliding slowly through the greying hair. "He's had an accident."

His face ruled out the possibility of a sprained ankle, while the recurrence of an old back problem hardly warranted police involvement.

"What sort of an accident?"

Constable Riley hated three things - arresting drunks, working with policewomen and conveying bad news, unlike many of his colleagues who revelled in all three. "Serious I'm afraid."

Somewhere in the distance a door opened and closed, sending a gust of wind swirling along the deserted corridor. The disturbance prompted him into action, confirming my worst fears in a rush of words.

"There's no easy way to say this, Joe. Your father's dead!" PC Riley paused long enough to wipe away the first beads of sweat gathering on his furrowed brow. "He was working at the pit face when it happened."

I waited for further details but either he didn't know or wouldn't say. "Has ma been told?"

My question clearly surprised him, or maybe the lack of emotion as I tried to make sense of it all.

"Er ... yes. WPC Walters is with her now. She's very good at these sorts of things. "He replaced the cap, gently easing the strap over the beginnings of a double chin. "Is there anyone I can contact to collect you – neighbour, relative?"

“No thanks, I've got my bike!”

I left him standing in the corridor a forlorn figure looking nearer to tears than I did. Having delivered the bad news he pulled on the bike clips and gloves, hoping the Raleigh Roadster was still in one piece. His last visit to Collins Engineering resulted in two flat tyres and a missing bell, the replacement of which didn't have the same impact in an emergency. No one spoke when I returned to the lecture room and collected my things. If they did I wasn't listening, acknowledging Mr Fisher's concern with a brief nod – giving the impression I understood when I didn't. The sun warmed my back on the way home, and then as a mark of respect disappeared behind a black cloud. I reached the front door in a state of confusion, legs trembling and heart pounding, unsure of how I would cope or ma's reaction.

Inside, the drawn curtains changed everything to colourless shapes, and yet it was the silence that finally overwhelmed me. As so often in the past she was there to comfort me, brushing away the tears with soft, soothing sounds, and suddenly I was a child again. Women of ma's age were not given to emotional outbursts. Having lived through two World Wars they were expected to maintain a stiff upper lip and just get on with it.

The last time we were so close she tried explaining why granddad had been taken from us. For three years I thought he was in heaven surrounded by angels - until I discovered he was actually in prison surrounded by netting, serving eight years for misappropriating union funds. We both found the funeral something of an ordeal, prolonged by the Yorkshire vicar's sermon explaining why dad wasn't really dead, just resting and one day we would all meet up again. His theory appeared much less convincing the following day when he presented us with the bill and a box of ashes.

Ma did her best after dad died, skimping and saving in order for me to complete an apprenticeship. I wanted to find more lucrative employment, one that would ease the financial pressures, but she dismissed the idea, insisting it was dad's wish I should qualify as an engineer.

“There'll always be a need for skilled craftsmen,” he would say, emphasising the word skilled. “So don't end up like me, digging coal for a living.” In those days the men had very little choice, either down the mines from dawn to dusk or in the army – fighting for king and country in a foreign land for a cause they never really understood.

At least I managed to continue piano lessons, unknown to anyone but ma and Miss Drew, a highly respected music teacher who saw potential in my weekly visits, with her unwavering encouragement

I was able to use the well-polished Steinway to express feelings I could neither say nor describe. A far cry from the coarseness of factory life, where any spark of artistic ability is constantly ridiculed.

Although I disliked the boredom and discipline for learning piano scales, it had its reward when I eventually mastered Debussy's *Clare De Lune*. Later additions to my repertoire included *Sindings Rustle of Spring* and the haunting *Hebrides Overture* by Mendelssohn. Further musical glory ended when Miss Drew suffered a series of strokes,

each one paralysing a different part of the body, until she could do little more than move her head and feet.

Her successor a thin hatchet-faced spinster with a great beak of a nose on which hung a pince-nez had neither the time nor patience to maintain my interest against the growing attraction of the opposite sex.

Although the piano lessons had to go I never lost my love for classical music, thanks to the efforts of Miss Drew, who sadly passed away just a few short weeks before my call-up papers arrived.

Ma cleared the breakfast things in her usual brisk manner, disappearing into the kitchen amidst a series of plate scraping and saucepan rattling, suggesting some kind of stew for later.

The customary cup of tea arrived, but this time without the smile as she considered my imminent departure.

“Where did you say it was again?”

“The Royal Artillery camp in Gravesend, Kent. It's on the River Thames, opposite Tilbury Docks - just south east of London.”

She remained unimpressed with my geographical knowledge, leaning forward to adjust the tablecloth so that I could see how thin the greying hair lay over her head. “At least you're not going abroad.”

“I'm only there for basic training - then I could be posted anywhere in the world, Gibraltar, Hong Kong, Germany.”

“Germany!” She made it sound obscene. “Oh, I don't want you going there, it isn't safe.”

“Ma, the war's been over 15 years. I don't think they want to start another one.”

She clearly didn't share my confidence, wringing her hands, as the prospect of World War Three loomed ever closer. “That's what they said in 1918, the war to end all wars. Twenty years later they were at it again.”

No point trying to argue the situation - ma's generation would never trust the old enemy, so I finished my tea and prepared for work. “See you later!”

“Don't forget your sandwiches.”

I accepted them with a brief nod, pausing in front of the hall mirror to remove a persistent black head. “Cheese again?”

“Well I know you like it.”

I also liked liver and onions but not every bloody day. I shoved them into my duffle coat pocket, wishing she would be a little more inventive with her culinary skills. Workmate, Bernie, a highly respected pigeon breeder at war with the neighbours had different sandwiches every day of the week. If he worked Saturday it messed up the sequence and he had to sleep with the pigeons.

I stepped into a world of half-empty cars and over crowded buses, edging their way past grim looking pedestrians, coughing and spitting as they inhaled the first cigarette of the day. There certainly wasn't much to smile about at 7.30 on a cold, damp morning - faced with the

prospect of working nine hours in semidarkness, listening to a sixty year old lathe operator explaining the technicalities of the female orgasm.

During the second break of the morning with machines temporarily silenced, the lads took advantage of a well-earned rest, debating world issues and how they should be solved. While I read the news in common with everyone else, I had no intention concerning myself with Fidel Castro's strong-arm tactics, using the time to notify management of my impending departure to pastures new.

Bill Parker, ex-apprentice, who mysteriously rose to the position of departmental manager, rarely ventured from the safety of his office, having lost all credibility amongst shop floor workers when attempting to reduce the number of tea breaks and dictating who should work overtime. At the strike meeting shop stewards called him a 'control freak,' insisting we made a stand before he tried to impose even more restrictions. Fortunately, the board of directors understood our concerns, insisting he made a public apology over the newly installed tannoy system.

"What do you want, Tramp?" William Parker, more commonly known as nose, had no intention of returning my smile. "I'm busy!"

I hesitated, aware of the newspaper open at the racing page. "I can always come back when you've finished picking the winners?"

He didn't appreciate the comment, angrily sweeping the newspaper from his desk along with a leather-bound appointment book, unopened since January, two betting slips and a red bakelite telephone, shattering upon contact with the concrete floor. "You stupid bastard! Now look what you've made me do!"

He expected me to retrieve the items but I remained standing, awaiting his next outburst.

"How the bloody hell can I do anything now the phone's broken?"

"Isn't there another one you can ring your bets through on?"

With his back pressed hard against the black swivel chair, he considered the consequence of an instant dismissal - recalling a similar incident, leading to a three day strike and another humiliating climb down. "Why don't you just piss off out of my sight!"

"I thought you'd like to hear my good news, Mr Parker!"

"Unless you've got an incurable disease or another job, I'm not interested."

"My call-up papers have arrived. I'll be leaving next week. Still if you're not interested!"

Having been disliked since leaving school, William Parker had no intention of trying to rectify the situation. "Saves me giving you the bloody sack."

"You can't sack me, I haven't done anything!"

"And don't think I haven't noticed." He lit the fifth cigarette of the day, inhaling smoke into his already congested lungs. "You're last to arrive in a morning and first to leave at night. Beats me why you bother coming in at all!"

"I enjoy the company."

"Bollocks. We can't have people turning up for work whenever they feel like it."

“Why not? Your secretary does. You're always giving her days off.”

“That's not true - well not exactly.” Mentioning Beryl always reddened his features, a condition Mrs Parker worried about. “Occasionally I give her one.”

“I know, we often watch you sneaking in to the stores together!”

For the first time in his life the manager did three things at once. Standing upright, kicking the chair backwards and thumping the desk with a white-knuckled fist. “You fucking bastard. You've done it now!”

Before I could discover exactly what I'd done, the door burst open and in walked Beryl – clearly in a better mood than her boss. “Is that right you've had your call-up papers, Joe?” She squeezed her ample backside between chair and desk, unaware of the tension as she half disappeared behind a cumbersome typewriter. “Harry's just been telling me.”

“Yeah, in a few days time I shall be a professional soldier - might even sign on for twenty one years.”

“We'll keep our fingers crossed then.” Bill Parker ignored Beryl's raised eyebrows, usually the sign for another trip to the stores. “In the meantime get your arse back to work - that's what we pay you for.”

I gave a wry smile before leaving the office, not anticipating a farewell gift from Mr Parker.

After the initial shock of being called-up, I actually began looking forward to the experience. An opportunity to escape the boredom of factory life whilst embarking on a career of travel and adventure. I even considered the possibility of promotion – Captain Tramp had a certain ring of authority, similar to a doctor or man of the cloth.

Not everyone approved of my growing enthusiasm to sample army life. Apart from ma I had to console Christine West, a 19 year-old part time barmaid with ambition to rule the catwalk and complete an elocution course.

Next came Susannah, a Woolworth's shop assistant who objected to anyone shortening her name. Her old-fashioned appearance and values left her determined to walk up the aisle a virgin, and nothing I could do or say would change her mind – although vodka almost did the trick. Another Black Country lass dreaming of stardom inherited her mother's good looks and her father's tendency towards exaggeration. Judy Biggleswade told everyone her dad was a brain surgeon who drove a Bentley Continental and owned a villa in the South of France. In fact he was a postman who had a BSA bike and a caravan in Wales.

We said our last goodbyes with scenes worthy of Romeo and Juliet, swearing undying love combined with promises none of us would ever keep. In a final act of passion I gave Christine and Judy something to remember me by. I just hoped they wouldn't return the compliment in nine months time.

On my last night of freedom, friends, workmates and a few complete strangers expecting to see a darts match, gathered at the Royal Oak pub for a farewell drink, the majority determined to give me a proper send-off, while others anticipated free food and drink. This touching gesture lost a little of its meaning when I had to settle the bill.

During a buffet of cheese sandwiches, pork pies and pickled onions, Terry Taylor, an old school friend, who managed to avoid national service by attending the medical examination

wearing a Norman Hartnell creation, complete with matching accessories, bored everyone to death reminiscing about our misspent youth before presenting me with a silver plated cigarette lighter, inscribed J Tramp. I thanked all of those involved, promising to begin smoking right away.

The first words of advice came from Arthur Rawlings, militant shop steward who began life sweeping floors. His uncompromising attitude and colourful language earned him an office, secretary and authority to halt production at the slightest hint of interference from management. Arthur's inability to read and write didn't prevent him lecturing me on the numerous advantages living under a communist regime. Quite an achievement considering he'd never travelled further than Blackpool for the Labour Party conference.

I soon tired of his admiration for Marx, finally shoving a cigar in his mouth and shouting 'now show us the funny walk, Groucho,' He responded in the usual way, calling for a sit-down strike until I apologised. Outvoted fifty to one he called me an imperialist puppet, promising to inform the Kremlin of my conduct, in order to ensure I never achieved Russian citizenship.

As the evening progressed with voices becoming louder and less clear, I was asked to have words with Charlie Turner, a bull of a man with uncontrollable hair and a temper to match. Charlie, a welder by trade wore his usual t-shirt, complete with burns and offensive sweat stains. He was banned from the majority of pubs in Wolverhampton, which would soon include this one if the barman had his way.

"I'm only carrying out orders, sir. If you want another drink you'll have to ask the gaffer!"

The nervous looking barman continued drying glasses, moving further back from the bar as Charlie leant forward.

"Pour me another drink you little turd, or I'll put this between your fucking eyes!"

Tony the barman looked around for help as a huge fist wavered before him. In his dreams he could handle any situation - unfortunately, he was now wide awake. "It's more than my job's worth, sir!"

"Hello, Charlie. Everything alright?"

He gave me a long bleary-eyed glare before deciding I was interfering. "Piss off and mind your own business."

"C'mon, Charlie – it is my party after all." I included a friendly smile, reluctant to close the gap between us. "You wouldn't want to spoil it for me?"

Charlie wasn't listening, swaying backwards and forwards on the balls of his feet, like an overweight boxer unsure where the next blow is coming from. His eyes settled once more on the unfortunate barman. "Now are you going to pour me that fucking drink, or shall I do it myself?"

Tony shook his head and continued drying the same glass, wishing his enrolment in unarmed combat classes had run its course. "I'm sorry, sir, customers are not allowed behind the bar!"

"We'll soon see about that."

I stood in the way hoping to avoid further trouble, aware of the barman slowly retreating. “Leave it out, Charlie. You know what the gaffer's like - he's probably ringing the police right now.”

Even as the words came out I knew it was a waste of time, you can't reason with blokes like Charlie even when they were sober.

With one brawny arm, accompanied by a suggestion as to what I should do with my reproductive organs, he swept me aside – but the panelled wall held me upright and I still beat him to the end of the bar. “You ain't going around there, Charlie!”

He lunged forward, making my blow to the stomach appear far more effective as it buried itself deep into the soft, rubbery flesh, turning the look of anger into one of surprise. I finished the demolition with a vicious knee into a delicate part of his anatomy, standing back in case he harboured thoughts of retaliation – but he simply sank to the floor, both hands clutching his throbbing testicles. “You bastard – I'll fucking get you for this!”

I stepped nearer fists tightly clenched, aware of the danger in letting him rise, but he stayed down, convinced his nightly jaunts to the red light district were a thing of the past.

“The gaffer should be here any second.” The barman glanced anxiously towards a door marked 'private' arming himself with a second tea towel. “He's only upstairs.”

Having temporarily solved the problem, I had no intention of hanging around for a possible replay, heading quickly towards the lounge and hopefully a more relaxed atmosphere.

With the earlier fracas forgotten I began to enjoy myself, even smiling at jokes that weren't funny the first time around.

“Charlie's looking for you, Joe. Doesn't seem very happy!”

Before the speaker could be located the brawny welder came into view, one hand entwined in his groin, the other carrying something shiny and cumbersome. Having sorted him out once I was quite capable of doing it again - until a metal bar stool headed towards me at 30mph. My final recollection centred on the patterned Axminster carpet as it approached at a similar speed to the stool.



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