

Remaining true to yourself after times of war.

By Bob Hines

As Sergeant Sherrod—known to his platoon simply as GI Joe—stepped onto the ship bound for America and home, he paused at the gangway. Behind him, the heavy green of the Solomon Islands shimmered in the tropical heat. As he turned away to enter the ship, he thought that any beauty in this place was now spoiled for him by the memory of blood and death. The last three years of his life flickered through his mind like a film he couldn't turn off.

He remembered the friends he had lost as they fought their way across the Pacific, island by island. Battles where no quarter was asked and none was given, where Japanese troops refused to surrender and where every inch of ground was paid for in blood. One brutal engagement, the one that earned him the Bronze Star for valour, burned especially bright—because in that fight, too many good men never made it home. The war was over. He was one of the lucky ones heading home. Although he had been raised in the Southern Baptist tradition, he struggled now to see where God was in all the brutality he had witnessed.

But not all his memories were dark. His reminiscing turned to better times as he recalled the many months stationed in Auckland, New Zealand, where his battalion trained relentlessly for beach landings. And he remembered the small coffee house on Queen Street—a modest shop with warm lights, the smell of roasting beans, and a vivacious redhead behind the counter who changed his life.

Eve worked there for her mother, and the place had become a favourite haunt for U.S. servicemen from the nearby Fanshawe Street US Army camp. Joe wasn't the first soldier to flirt with her, but something between them caught fire quickly. Their courtship bloomed during his leave, and every time he returned for R&R, their connection grew deeper. When Eve discovered she was pregnant, Joe didn't hesitate—he asked her to marry him on the spot. With his commanding officer's blessing, the two wed, stealing a few precious months of peace together as husband and wife.

Their peace didn't last, however, and Joe headed off to war again. On his next voyage to the islands, his troop ship struck a Japanese-laid mine and went down. Joe and the surviving soldiers swam through smoke and oil to reach an Allied-held shore.

Some months later, Joe was shipped back to the American Armed Forces Hospital at Greenlane, Auckland, having caught a severe bout of Malaria. This again allowed the two newlyweds to spend some months together as Joe convalesced.

But eventually, the orders came again for Joe to rejoin his battalion in the Islands. Back to war.

Now, the ship carried him home at last—to Arkansas, to a family he had missed desperately and hadn't seen for nearly three years. His hometown welcomed him as a hero, complete with flags, speeches, and proud handshakes from dignitaries. But Joe felt strangely hollow. His heart was still half a world away with Eve and the baby girl he had barely come to know.

Back in Auckland, the U.S. military arranged transport for the New Zealand war brides, including Eve and the baby. Her journey was long and lonely—weeks at sea, then a train across America—but she finally arrived in Little Rock to meet her in-laws and reunite with Joe.

The reunion was joyful, but her disappointment came quickly. Arkansas was nothing like the America she had imagined from books and movies. No glittering cities. No glamorous shops. Just endless fields of cotton, the state's lifeblood. And she was pregnant again.

“No child of mine,” Eve declared, “is growing up working in those fields.”

Joe was torn in two: loyalty to his parents and homeland on one side, loyalty to his wife and children on the other. Unable to decide, he hesitated too long. So, eight months pregnant, Eve made the decision herself—she boarded a ship back to New Zealand with her daughter, not knowing if Joe would follow.

Joe felt the pull of two worlds. After all the years of war, he longed for home—but he had also made vows. His Christian faith was still in him somewhere. God had never left him, and as he thought back to the minister's question, clear as day, he recalled his vow to God: *Do you take Eve...?* And he remembered answering with absolute certainty. *Yes.*

That word rose inside him again. If he had meant it then, he must mean it now. His YES meant YES. So he bought a plane ticket, crossed the Pacific once more, and arrived in New Zealand ready to rebuild the family he had nearly lost. With a job arranged at the Penrose Freezing Works—necessary for his residency—he began the hard task of starting over.

Life was not easy. Joe battled nightmares, panic, and the invisible wounds now known as PTSD—though in the late 1940s and '50s, no one had a name for it. Aside from Eve, he had no support and no familiar faces. The freezing works were rough, the men tougher, and Friday night drinking was practically a religion. With bars closing at 6 p.m., the custom was simple: drink fast, drink hard.

Inevitably, Joe joined the crowd and started drinking. Eve and the children came to dread Fridays. Joe would stumble home, arguments would ignite, and Eve's mother—living with them to help—often got caught in the crossfire. The fights never turned physical, but the anger was a storm, and the children learned to vanish into friends' houses or hide in their rooms. Christmas was the worst of all: Joe drank heavily on Christmas Eve, and Christmas morning carried a silence so tense it felt like the house itself was holding its breath.

Eve tried everything. She urged him to change jobs, to escape the drinking culture. She eventually convinced Joe to leave the freezing works for the Auckland Harbour Board, becoming a crane operator. But the drinking didn't stop; neither did the fighting.

And then—suddenly—it did.

No drama. No intervention. No threats. Joe would say later, 'It was a God-given moment of clarity.' One morning, Joe looked at the wreckage he was creating and made a vow to himself. A vow as serious as the one he had spoken at the altar.

Enough.

He stopped drinking. Cold. When old mates invited him to the pub, he met them with the same firmness he had once answered his wedding vows.

“No,” he said—and meant it.

From that day forward, the fog lifted. Home became warmer, calmer. The laughter returned. The children stopped hiding. And though the scars of war and years of alcohol took their toll—Joe passed away at only 58—he spent his later years living true to the promises that mattered most.

Yes means yes.

And no means no.

In the end, Joe was a good man who had learned the hard way what he already knew deep down, that evil could not prevail when good men stood their ground.

As a result, Joe left a legacy through his children, some of whom became Christians, and then the grandchildren, who also now follow Jesus.

What the Devil meant for evil, God turned into good!