

The Life of
Marion Islay Ashe
(née Johnston)



The Ashe Arms



Fight

Not for ourselves but for everyone

The Life of Marion Islay Ashe

11 November 1920 (Port Said, Egypt)

to

31 July 2008 (Godalming, U.K.)

The Life of Marion Islay Ashe

2008: First edition printed privately

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Other books by Robert Ashe:

From Phnom Penh to Paradise – Ghost-writer (1987)
Flying into the Unknown (2008)

Other publications:

Collected Poems by Robert Pickering Ashe (2008)
Short Stories by Robert Pickering Ashe (2008)
Sermons, Articles and Stories by Rev. P. Ashe (2008)

Preface

My mother, Marion Ashe, not only led an extraordinary life, but she was also an extraordinary person. Born in Port Said, she grew up in Egypt, where she married Captain John Bamber in Cairo Cathedral in June 1940. He was killed while serving in the war against the Italians in Eritrea. While in Egypt, she worked for British Intelligence and took the Official Secrets Act so seriously that she never told us exactly what she did.

In 1950, she married my father, Reverend Patrick Ashe, raised seven children, including two sets of twins, and helped found Project Vietnam Orphans. She has helped countless people during her 87 years, and perhaps the greatest tribute that can be paid to her is that she has been “adopted” as a mother by dozens of people, who recognized in her a caring spirit that thought always of others’ needs ahead of her own.

She had a heart of gold, and she will be missed – but we rejoice in the knowledge that she is now with our Lord in a special Mansion – our loss is Heaven’s gain.

Robert Ashe

For

Dad



MARION ISLAY JOHNSTON

Marion was the daughter of the Right Reverend Francis Featherstonhaugh Johnston and Gladys Katie Head. She was born on 11 November 1920, in Port Said, Egypt, where her father was Chaplain from 1920 to 1933. He was Chaplain in Cairo and Alexandria before he was made Bishop in Egypt in 1952.

As Marion's parents were living in Egypt, she was sent to Ashford (Kent) High School for Girls, where she boarded, and spent the Christmas and Easter holidays in England, only going home to Egypt once a year. At the age of sixteen she returned to Egypt and attended the English Girls' School, Cairo.

When the war started, her brother Noel was on holiday in Egypt before going to University. He joined the RAF and went for training to Rhodesia where he successfully got his 'Wings'. He was sent to West Africa in the Air Sea Rescue, as Captain of a Sunderland Flying Boat, and then to England to train RAF pilots. He married Monica Mary Allner, and their son Peter was born after his death in a flying accident in Scotland in 1945.

In Memory of
Flight Lieutenant FRANCIS NOEL JOHNSTON
D F C
75709, Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve
who died age 23 on 3 January 1945
Son of Francis Featherstonhaugh Johnston
and Gladys Johnston
husband of Monica Mary Johnston, of Parkstone.
Remembered with honour
Longfleet (St. Mary) Churchyard, England



Commemorated in perpetuity by
the Commonwealth War Graves Commission

In Cairo, Marion met and married (1) Captain Claud John Carnegie Bamber, (First Field Reg. R.A.) the son of Capt. C.C. Bamber, Ghurka Rifles. They were married in Cairo Cathedral on 18 June 1940.

The following year, February 1941, he was killed in an accident while serving in the war against the Italians in Eritrea. His grave is in the Military Cemetery at Keren.

*In Memory of
Captain CLAUDE JOHN CARNEGIE BAMBER
66028, 1 Field Regt., Royal Artillery
who died age 25 on 25 February 1941
Son of Claude Charles
and Dorothy Maud Carnegie Bamber;
husband of Marion Islay Bamber.
Remembered with honour
Keren War Cemetery, Eritrea*



*Commemorated in perpetuity by
the Commonwealth War Graves Commission*

While in Egypt, Marion worked for British Intelligence, and in 1941 went to England. The journey took over two months via South Africa, South America and Newfoundland. She stayed with her mother-in-law, Dorothy Maude Bamber and her father Claud Carnegie Cheales. She stayed also with her uncle-in-law Dr. Bertie Bamber, where she became interested in medical work. She worked for a short time at the Horley Cottage Hospital as an auxiliary nurse while waiting to go to Guy's Hospital for her nurse's training.

In 1945 she returned to Egypt, and took up her old job in Intelligence. It was while she was on her way to Egypt that several ships in her convoy were torpedoed, and her parents got the news of Noel's death.

It was then that she met (2) the Rev. Francis Patrick Bellesme Ashe. He had been sent to Egypt with Friends Relief Service, and while waiting at the camp at Maadi, helped at Cairo Cathedral under the then Archdeacon, the Ven. Frank Johnston. He met Marion just five days before being sent to Samos to do relief work.

After VE Day and VJ Day, she returned to England to finish her training at Guy's Hospital. Pat left

They moved to Blindley Heath Vicarage where Lois was born in 1951, and Robert and John in 1953. They moved to Otley, Yorkshire in 1956 where Islay Jane and Andrew were born in 1958. They adopted Ruth in 1959, and David was born in 1963.

In 1964 they moved to St. Mary's, Leamington Spa, where Marion had the vision of helping one child from Vietnam, and Project Vietnam Orphans was started. In 1972, they moved to Church Stretton. But in 1974 Pat resigned his Living, and they went to live in Godalming in the bungalow that Marion had inherited from her parents, in order to direct the Project. All the family of nine moved from a vast Rectory into a two bedroom bungalow, which had to be enlarged by the addition of two rooms in the attic.

Marion worked as a night nurse at Hydestyle Hospital until the Daily Mail Airlift in 1975, when a hundred children were brought from Saigon. In 1978, Project Vietnam Orphans became Christian Outreach with work amongst refugees on the Thai-Cambodian border, where both Lois and Robert worked. Getting children adopted into Christian homes, and arranging accommodation for refugees from Cambodia took up all their time until Pat retired in 1980.

Marion's self-effacing humility and out-pouring of love made her loved by all who knew her. She went through a hip replacement operation and, in 1996, a triple bypass and heart valve replacement operation. A wonderful wife, mother, and grandmother to the end, she passed away peacefully in her sleep on 31 July 2008, surrounded by loving family members.



Ruth Lois (Boullier) Marion Lois (Ashe)
27 July 2008



Pat & Marion Ashe
50th anniversary (21 February: 1950 - 2000)

Celebrated on 22 April 2000
Loseley Manor

Dad and Mum, Grandma and Grandpa, Pat and Marion insisted on no speeches. Therefore, this is not a speech – this is a life commentary.

This is a celebration for family, but the family is wider than just the Ashes – it includes so many branches of the family including our wider family of friends.

It's also a celebration of the lives of Pat and Marion, which started many years before they met. Pat was born in Turkey. Marion was born in Egypt. Both were born with a rich history. Pat's father was one of the first missionaries into Uganda, writing two fascinating books about his time there. Marion's father was the Bishop of Egypt and oversaw the construction of Cairo Cathedral.

Their lives have been full of incredible experiences – from Marion's two month journey

during the war by boat from Egypt to the UK via South Africa, South America, and Canada; to Pat's work in Cyprus working for reconciliation amongst the Turkish and Greek Cypriot communities.

Together they started Project Vietnam Orphans. Their concern to start by helping one child in Vietnam was a continuation of the love and care that they lavished on each of their own children, and which they continue to lavish on their grandchildren.

They taught us the meaning of the word JOY, and that service of others brings the greatest riches of all – a sense of peace and happiness. And the service of others is also confirmed in the Ashe Family motto – Fight, Non Nobis Sed Omnibus.

In this setting of the Great Hall, with its rich history, there is perhaps no better place to make a small presentation. In order to remember this great and once only occasion, we have commissioned an artist of international reputation to produce a work of art to help you retain the memory of this wonderful evening in

celebration of the last 50 years of your lives together.

Dad and Mum, Grandma and Grandpa, Pat and Marion – we love you both.



Designed and hand-painted by Aam Ashe with the names of all children and grandchildren in 2000



A Tribute to Grandma
11 November 2000

Dear Grandma,

Today we celebrate your 80th birthday. For us, your grandchildren, it is difficult to comprehend how anyone, except Grandpa, could live for such a long time! Your life has spanned a time period when so many momentous events have taken place in the world – England emerging from the Great War, the Second World War when it took you more than two months to travel from Egypt, your birthplace, to England, the Suez crisis when your parents had to leave Egypt, and the placing of a man on the moon.

You have seen changes of governments from Churchill to Thatcher and beyond, and you have been both amused and horrified by the antics of our politicians. You have witnessed the changes in travel from ships to planes to spaceships, and you have traveled to most of the four corners of the world. You have seen the results of the horrors of war, and have helped to heal the wounds of those who have suffered. You provided the basis for the vision of helping one child in 1966 which spawned Project Vietnam Orphans and which provided the basis for helping so many children.

You have survived the trauma of raising seven children, including two sets of twins, as well as a hip replacement operation and a triple by-pass and valve replacement heart operation – and, as Grandpa will assure you, you are still as beautiful today as the day he met you. Your beauty comes from within and shines out like a beacon as an example to all of us, your grandchildren.

As we celebrate your 80th birthday, we would also like to give thanks to God for the way in which He has shaped your life. We would like to thank Grandpa for marrying you, which resulted in our parents, and gave life to us. And we would like to thank you for all that you have done for each of us, for your kindness and generosity, for your words of wisdom, and for being there when we needed you.

Grandma, we love you very much.



Memories from the War (1939 – 1945)

Marion Islay Ashe

Houses

I lived in a house in Egypt when the war broke out. It was there that I heard the news of the outbreak of the war. There were no televisions so we were all huddled round the big Radio in the corner of the sitting room when we heard the announcement from England. I remember my Father shaking his head in disbelief and saying: "People don't realise the awfulness of what war means, and what is to come." He had been through the First World War in 1914 - 1918 and had lost a lot of friends. We (my brother and I were young at 17 and 18 years) and it seemed exciting. We were soon to learn the hard way.

When I was in England I was either living in Nurses' Homes or with friends. I spent a year with the family of Turlough Bamber's Father in Southampton. I also based myself with Dorothy Bamber and her Father, Carnegie Cheales, in Rowledge near Farnham. When I first arrived in England in 1941, I went there, and the house had no electricity, but was lit with oil lamps or gas lamps. We would go upstairs to bed by candlelight, and I

would read in bed with a candle on the bedside table. I soon ran out of candles, so I would go to the Village shop and buy a packet of spares. I loved reading!

Air Raid shelters

I saw quite a lot of air raid shelters, but I never actually used one. During 1942 I was living in London at Guy's Hospital. It was my first year of training to be a Nurse, and I was living in the Nurses Home. We had a lot of studying to do, and also a lot of Exams. However, London was being bombed night and day - but mostly at night. The Air Raid Sirens would go off and we would have to get up, and go into the underground where there was a maze of underground passages linking the wards together. We put warm clothes on and we would stay there until the "All Clear" sounded - then we would go back to bed. This often happened two or three times a night, so we would get very little sleep. However, in the morning, if we had an exam at 9am - we still had to be there to take it.

Rationing

I did not actually cook a lot, as I was living in the Nurses Home. Though, on the Wards (if we were

on Night Duty) we had to give (and make!) the patient's breakfast. This often consisted of making scrambled eggs with powdered eggs. Everyone hated it. I used to go round the patients at night before they went to sleep - asking if they had any 'real' eggs. Often visitors would bring their relatives a precious fresh egg. If they had, I would collect them in a bowl, and write the patients name on it, and ask them if they would like them boiled, scrambled, poached or fried. It was a lot of work, but we were rewarded by seeing the look on their faces the next morning.

If we went away and stayed with anyone, we would always take our food rations with us. We would either give them the actual coupons for the week, or buy 2 oz of butter, 4 oz of sugar, 2 oz of tea, and about 2 oz of meat. I can't remember if that was the exact amount, but I know it was very little. It was always a red letter day, if you stayed in the country and knew anyone who had a few chickens - and if they gave you one or two eggs to take back to London - wow! It was like receiving the crown jewels!!

Fashion

There wasn't much time or money to worry about fashion! But we did our best! We had a book with

clothing coupons in it. You were only allowed to buy so much material or clothes. So 'fashion' told you how to make the most of what you had. We would use old curtains to make clothes - or even unpick old clothes and make them up again in a more modern style. It was quite a problem if there was to be a wedding, and the bride would often be given or lent extra coupons for a wedding dress! Children's clothes were often made from unpicked old clothes. Women became very clever at making all sorts of things out of old material.

Cars

I had two different cars while I was in Egypt. The first was a "nash" - a two seater with a hood over it. Outside, at the back there were two further seats that you could pull out. We didn't have it for very long - about 8 months. Then I bought a little car from my brother who was leaving for Rhodesia to train as a Pilot in the R.A.F. The car was a brilliant little "Austin 7 ", and I was very sad when I had to get rid of it to come to England.

When I was a child my Father had one of the first cars imported into Egypt. It was a "Chevrolet". Its number plate was just 37! I always remember this because my Father was 37 when he acquired it!

Music

I started learning to play the piano when I was a child living in Port Said. Later when I was in my teens, and returned from Boarding School in England, I had all sorts of music round me. There was a very nice couple, who were German Jews who had escaped from Germany because of Hitler's policy of exterminating all the Jews. They found a haven in Cairo and the Egyptian authorities were kind to them. The husband, Gerhard, was a brilliant pianist, and my Father appointed him as Organist of Cairo Cathedral. Many of the thousands of Soldiers, Airmen, and Sailors will remember his wonderful playing. His wife, called Dora, was a lovely singer. She had a beautiful voice. They lived in a little house on the edge of the desert, and I often went to visit and Gerhard would play all the Beethoven Piano Symphonies and a lot of Mozart. His wife would sing, and it was like being in Heaven.

However, it was also wartime and there were quite a lot of social dances, etc, as the troops were far from home. We danced Waltzes and Foxtrots and "Excuse me" dances - and a host of others! Cairo had an Opera house and we had various operas. Once, as a group of friends and I were going up the

steps to the Opera House, I looked at the man walking up beside me, and realised it was Paul Robeson - later to become very famous. He used to sing some lovely Negro Spirituals. "Down by the River" was one of them. The War and hard work put an end to all this - sadly.

Entertainment

The only entertainment was a rare visit to the Cinema. It was a great event!

When I was in London nursing, some of the Theaters used to give us free tickets to their performances. That was a treat and greatly appreciated. At home in Cairo we used to make our own entertainment. We would have a dinner party, and either play charades, or dance, or sing or play games.

Traveling in war time

This was difficult. When war broke out, I was in Egypt. In 1941 I wanted to come to England to do my Nurses training. The journey by ship would normally have taken about 10 days going through the Mediterranean - or about 7 days going overland (i.e., by ship from Alexandria across the Mediterranean Sea to Marseilles) and then by train

up to Calais, and then across the English Channel by ferry to Dover. However, because Italy had joined Germany in the War the Mediterranean Sea was closed to shipping. So, I had to get on a ship in Suez (a port on the Red Sea), and sail to Cape Town. On the way we stopped in Port Sudan and picked up 2,000 Italian Prisoners of War. They had to stand out in the sun all day waiting to get on board, and I felt so sorry for them. In the evening they came on the ship and they were put in the "Hold" (where the cargo is kept). We set sail, but in the night the two or three Nurses who were traveling with us, were woken up and asked to go and look at the prisoners, as they were ill. They found that it was so hot in the Hold, that the prisoners were all suffering from 'heat stroke' and had high temperatures. So, the prisoners were all brought up on deck and, for the rest of the journey, they stayed in the open air.

In Cape Town the prisoners were transferred to POW camps where they lived for the rest of the war. I believe a lot of them were used to build the very good roads in South Africa. We were put on another ship and sailed across the Atlantic Ocean to South America and landed in Trinidad. After two days we left and sailed north to Canada and landed in Halifax. There we took on 5,000 Canadian

troops and sailed across the North Atlantic to England, and landed in Liverpool. That journey over the North Atlantic was the most difficult part of the journey. At this time the war in the Atlantic was at its worst. In fact, it was called "The Battle of the North Atlantic." The Germans were trying to stop the supplies of food, ammunition and men from reaching England. One night when we were half way across the Atlantic, five German "U" boats started attacking us. We knew an attack was going on, because all the ships of the convoy were sailing in a zigzag way so that it was difficult for the torpedoes to aim accurately at us. When the attack started, this zigzag movement became much more erratic. When the ship turned suddenly, we would fall out of our bunks. We all had to sleep with our doors open in case we were hit and couldn't get out. In the morning we saw that one of our ships wasn't with us and we knew that it must have been sunk.

From Liverpool I got a train down to London - and I was very shocked when I arrived because London was in darkness. No lights were allowed anywhere. All I could do was to find a taxi and ask to be taken to the nearest Hotel! This journey had taken me over two months. Another problem about travel was that you could never tell anyone where you were. When I was on the ship on my way back to

England, and I got as far as Canada, I sent a cable to my parents in Egypt. I could only say I was well, and they were so pleased to receive it, thinking that I had arrived safely in England! They were very surprised to get another cable 10 days later to say I had reached my destination. There was strict censorship, as the Germans might know what ship you were traveling on. If they heard that you were stopping at various Ports on the way, they would be able to plan where your ship would be, and then go and bomb or torpedo it. So, we had to be very careful. There were posters everywhere saying: "Careless talk costs LIVES." In London, no lights were allowed to be shown at nighttime - so Railway Stations were all in darkness. We got used to carrying a dimmed torch round with us at all times. The Underground was good as lights were on down there.

Four years later I returned to Egypt towards the end of the War - and this time the Mediterranean was open. We joined the ship at Glasgow. I remember ringing my brother up to say I was going to Egypt - but, of course I couldn't say on the phone where I was going - So I said "I am going to see our Parents." and that gave him a clue! Our ship joined some other ships and we sailed towards Gibraltar in a convoy with two destroyers protecting us. As we

were sailing into the Straits about 4pm, we heard the bells ringing for Lifeboat Stations - that meant that we had to go to a special part of the deck near a lifeboat, and we had to put on our life jackets. As we waited there, we saw the ship traveling right behind us was hit and had stopped. Then we saw rope ladders thrown over the side, and men climbing down into lifeboats. We had to sail on as quickly as possible as we had a lot of women and children on board, but we hoped that the shipwrecked people would be able to row to safety. Tangier, on the coast of North Africa was in sight so I hope they made it.

We sailed on into the Mediterranean Sea to Port Said. On the way we picked up two rafts of people who had had to abandon their ships. I think they must have been in the sea for a long time as they all looked ill and emaciated and had grown beards.

It was wonderful to meet my Parents in Port- Said, but also sad as they gave me the news of my brother's death while flying in the North of Scotland. Because there was no communication with land while at sea, I was not to hear about it until a fortnight after it happened. War disrupted all our lives - but good often came out of evil, and

many heroes were made. Love and Compassion was the other side of this evil.

War work

For most of the war I was nursing, but for a short while at the beginning of the war, and for a short time at the end of the war, I worked in an information division where we processed documents in a host of different languages – German, Italian, Arabic, Persian, French and other languages.

What changed my life

Undoubtedly the War changed everyone's lives. We were young and had to grow up very quickly. My brother, at the age of 22 years was not only a Pilot, but also Captain of a Sunderland Flying Boat with 11 men under him, and great responsibilities in West Africa. For myself, I found out very quickly about the Eternal Love of God. If there had been no war, I might have taken longer to find it.









3 August 2007

Dear Mum and Dad,

Jane recently wrote to me a very nice email about a diary she wrote in 1982 in which she gave thanks each day for things that God or others had done for her, and saying that she planned to read you extracts from it. I'm afraid that I have no diary, but I do have memories – wonderful memories – and Jane's email made me reflect on some of them, and it came to me that I should share them with you while you are still with us.

Age is a wonderful thing in that it helps to refine memories and to either distance us from those which were not good, or to tint them with roses and help us to understand how those experiences shaped us into what we are today. If I am anything today, it

is because of you both, and thanks to you both that you took the time amidst your busy schedules and all the other children to be patient with me, to guide me, and to help me in times of need.

I remember:

- ✓ Falling off a gate in Blindley Heath and badly cutting my leg, and being lovingly bandaged up.
- ✓ Being sick in Otley and staying home, but having to go in the Bedford van to collect a number of children at the end of the day, when they all teased me, but you (Dad) told them all to pipe down, sit down, and leave me alone.
- ✓ Going on countless toboggan rides with you (Dad) in the snow, getting wet, but laughing with the joy of it.
- ✓ Going through the big freeze in Otley when the water pipes froze in the ground and we were without water for weeks, but you (Mum) somehow managed to clean us, feed us, and keep loving us.
- ✓ Leaving for boarding school at Dean Close for the first time, and hating the thought of leaving

home, but receiving “care” packages through the mail and loving letters to encourage me.

- ✓ Going to a Billy Graham Crusade with you and giving my life to Jesus and, later, going with you to the Lady Chapel in Otley to rededicate my life to Him.
- ✓ Receiving the news of Grandpa’s death in the study in Otley, going outside to cry amongst the nasturtiums, and you (Mum) coming to cheer me up.
- ✓ Coming home from buying eggs in Leamington and falling off my bike (without breaking an egg), but getting badly scraped in the process and being lovingly put back together again.
- ✓ You (Dad) taking the time to drive us back to school at Christ’s Hospital because we hated to travel by train in our uniforms.
- ✓ You (Mum) driving down to take us out of Christ’s Hospital for the day and going to Grandma’s where we had her delicious beef stew in the Godalming kitchen.

- ✓ Agonising over what I should do after school, and you taking me to see Wallace Haines so that he could give me advice.
- ✓ Almost failing my final exams at Cirencester, but being encouraged by you both, and finally passing.
- ✓ The sadness of Grandma's passing, but the pride of driving you to St. Martha's for the funeral.
- ✓ Going off to Viet Nam in 1973, falling sick, coming home in despair, being nursed back to health, and being encouraged by you both to move forwards.
- ✓ Going to Thailand in 1975, making lots of mistakes, but having a wonderful relationship with you both through letters, tapes, and phone calls.
- ✓ Being awarded the MBE, and feeling that it should have been given to you both for all the love that you bestowed on people in your work for PVO and Christian Outreach.

- ✓ Talking to you both on the phone after being released by the Vietnamese in 1980, and feeling so happy to have parents like you.
- ✓ Peter's birth and your joy at seeing your first grandson.
- ✓ Your visits to see me in different places over the years, and the happiness in being able to proudly introduce you to colleagues.
- ✓ Starting to put together the Ashe Family website, and including your (Mum) "war memories", and realizing what an incredible mother I have.
- ✓ The look of astonishment and joy on your face (Dad) at your 90th birthday when you saw your book in print, but more importantly the pride that I felt in editing your book as I read about all your exploits and realizing what a wonderful father I have.
- ✓ The happiness that you have both given to Aam and me through the way in which you have welcomed her into the family.

- ✓ The sense of pride and happiness that I have each time I come to England and are able to stay with you to keep learning from you and to bask in your love.

I have so much to be thankful for in life – my faith in God, Peter, Aam, our home in Lombok – but most of all, I am thankful to God for you both. I was not able to choose my parents but, if I could have, I would certainly have chosen you both – you gave me life in more ways than one. You have helped me so much in times of need – you gave and you never counted the cost. Without you, I would not be where I am today – able and more than willing to help others – perhaps the most important lesson that you taught me.

You are both incredible people, full of love for God and for others – God’s very own special creatures.

Thank you both so much.

With all my love,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Robert", with a horizontal line underneath.





