

# A world of wisdom from war's wounds

Jenny Walsh



**Major John Harper-Nelson** Soldier, newsreader and author **Born:** Cheltenham, UK, 1922 **Died:** Carnarvon, aged 100

John Harper-Nelson was born in Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, UK, on January 13, 1922, to Colonel John Joseph Harper-Nelson and Annabella Harper-Nelson, nee MacCormick, of Achaban House, Isle of Mull, Scotland.

John's father, John Joseph Harper-Nelson, graduated MBChB (Bachelor of Medicine and Surgery degree) from Edinburgh University with first class honours in 1907 and worked for the Indian Medical Service as a teacher of therapeutics and medicine and was principal of King Edward Medical College, Lahore.

John's mother took him to India when he was five years old. His sisters boarded at Cheltenham College. John was very close to his sisters — Annabel, who died in 1982, was the author of numerous books including the bestseller novel, *Kilcarraig*, and Margaret, his elder sister, played a significant role in the heyday of the British film industry in the 1950s as a casting agent. As a casting director, she was responsible for casting some of the best-loved British film comedies made in postwar Britain. In 1949 alone, she cast all the leading actors and supporting cast in *Passport to Pimlico*, *Whisky Galore!* and *Kind Hearts and Coronets*.

John returned from India and attended Cheltenham as a boarder for his education. In 1939, he gained a place at Trinity College Oxford to study English. John studied at Oxford University until his military call-up in 1942. He was commissioned as a second lieutenant into the King's Royal Rifle Corps. In 1943, he was posted to join the regiment fighting in Italy. On his arrival in Italy, he was reassigned to the 1st Battalion, Royal Fusiliers, which made up part of the 8th Indian Division which included British, New Zealand, Gurkha and Indian forces.

In May 1944, during the attack across the Rapido River at Monte Cassino, John was wounded by artillery shellfire. He was wounded again by German artillery shellfire landing next to his slit trench. John's war finished in northern Italy, when his platoon sergeant stepped on a mine next to him. The sergeant was killed and John was seriously wounded. John was repatriated back to the UK for the rest of the war.

On February 12, 1949, John married Gillian Whiteley, of Jersey, granddaughter of Colonel Sir Frank Johnson KBE, DSO, founder of the Pioneer Corps at St Peter's, Vere Street, London. After their wedding, they left for Kenya, where they made their home. By then, John had joined the British Crown Film Unit and produced and directed documentaries in the UK and East Africa until 1952, when the Crown Film Unit was disbanded.

On returning to Mull, there was a letter from the War Office with a request that he rejoin the army, which he accepted and he was commissioned as a captain into the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. He was based at Stirling Castle, Edinburgh, British Guiana, Berlin and Suez. While in Berlin, he was based with the British Army at Spandau Prison to guard Rudolf Hess along with seven other Nazi leaders, including Albert Speer and Karl Donitz.

He was later promoted to major and transferred to the King's African Rifles and the Somaliland Scouts serving in Uganda, Kenya and Somalia. It was during this time in East Africa that he met and married his second wife, Barbara Rigby (born 1925-2016).

In the early 1960s, when John was in Uganda, he got to know Idi Amin, whom he recommended for officer training in the new Ugandan national army. John said at that time, Idi was a very good soldier, reliable, diligent and well-liked by the men. When Uganda became independent, John resigned his commission in the British Army and he and Barbara emigrated to WA in 1962.

Upon arrival, he became an ABC newsreader and announcer. In 1982, he retired but continued to be a freelance scriptwriter and theatre critic. He was an accomplished author, publishing eight books. His books include *A Need for Glory*, *The Day They Came*, *Oxford at War*, *North of the 26th (Ed)* and *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire*.

In 1979, John and Helen Weller formed a publishing company to publish WA histories and biographies, originally under the name of Artlook and later Access Press. John married Helen on April 17, 1993, and they went on to publish more than 320 local histories and biographies.

In 2014, John and Helen moved to Geraldton, where they lived with Helen's daughter, Jenny, and son-in-law, David. Helen died in 2016. Jenny and David moved back to Carnarvon with John, who continued to live independently in his neighbouring flat. John died on July 10 in Carnarvon. He will be sadly missed by all his family and friends.