

Thor's War

Robbie's dad didn't come home from the war.

Two tall soldiers came first to tell Mom that Colour Sergeant Bamforth had been called to higher service in another army, and stood for a while watching her cry.

They looked uncertain, and then, when Mom turned away to go to her room, they saluted her in perfect time, and relaxed their stiffness.

Instead of going back to their jeep, they walked around the garden, examined the fence and gate and went round the back. Robbie followed them.

They looked over the back fence at the fields around the house and one was taking photographs. The other saw Robbie and said "You like dogs, son?"

"Yeah" Robbie replied "But my parents won't let me have one. My dad said it was because of Thor – one day he's going to bring Thor home."

"That right?" said one of the soldiers. "Well, I think your dad might have changed his mind about keeping a dog here – and your Mom will agree – now." He looked at the other soldier, who nodded his head to show he thought so too.

They finished their looking and photographing and left. One of them squeezed his shoulder as they passed and then turned to say "Another thing, son. You should start calling yourself Rob – instead of Robbie. Like your dad, you know? You're the man here now."

Robbie didn't cry. His dad had told him men didn't cry. He went inside to sit beside Mom, lying there face down on her neatly made bed with her face buried in the pillow. Robbie stroked her back and said nothing, because there didn't seem to be anything he could say. He looked at the framed pictures of Dad on the bedside cabinet.

The back-pack looked really heavy but Dad was smiling and the big brown dog beside him was smiling too, so this was what Robbie had imagined since Dad had gone off to join the military when Robbie was six.

In the three times Dad had returned home on leave, Robbie had seen photographs of Thor. Thor at work, Thor at play, like any other dog in the neighbourhood - chasing thrown tennis balls and bringing them back – like any house-pet But even at eight, Robbie saw a light in Thor's eyes that said "I'm a war-dog – beware! I do these things because that's what all dogs do – but I have far more important work."

And at long last Thor came home. Home, like Dad had come. In a military jeep, with one of the soldiers who'd come before, staring straight ahead as though he could see forever. And he looked just like his photographs, the ones Dad had shown Robbie so proudly that Robbie had been jealous. It was as though Dad had found another son.

The driver swung down from his seat and came round to open Thor's door. And with just the briefest of pauses, Thor turned and came down to the ground. And into Robbie's life. He looked at Robbie and he looked at Mom, standing there with her hands to her face the way she did when something wonderful was happening.

Only then did Robbie see that Thor had an artificial limb. It was cleverly shaped to fit over what was left of his front left leg with straps that held it tightly in place. Thor seemed quite comfortable with it. He stood, looking about him, occasionally lifting his nose to smell his surroundings and then he came to Robbie first, and then to Mom, sniffing at their clothing. The soldier who had brought him, cleared his throat and said, "Umm, he can smell Colour Sergeant's scent on you, son. You'll have been surrounded by his scent in the house. Dogs know."

This time, Robbie's dad hadn't been gone more than two months, and Robbie remembered that Dad had told him that a dog's nose was 100,000 times more sensitive than a human's. As if he was sure now, Thor's tail began to wag, slowly at first and then faster and his sniffing increased. It was scary at first and then when Mom started to cry again, Robbie gathered up all his courage and put his arms round Thor's neck. The big dog stiffened and then relaxed and his tongue rolled out, long and pink and happy. It was like he'd come home. And home was anywhere he could smell Dad.

The soldier reached into the jeep and took out dog things. Blankets, feed and water dishes, a harness and lastly a lead. He clipped the lead onto Thor's collar and said "C'mon son, let's go for a walk. Here take this, he's your dog now. Tell him "Heel, Thor!"

And off they went, along the sidewalk past the houses, past curious people watering their gardens, pretending they hadn't come out to see why an army jeep was outside the Bamforth house. Thor padded along at Robbie's left side, his false left paw making hardly more noise than his other three, never pulling on the lead, his tongue lolling happily. The soldier kept pace with them but then turned through the little gate that opened onto the open fields behind the houses and Robbie and Thor followed.

"I'm going to tell and show you what to do, Robbie – Rob, so that you can manage Thor. He's very highly trained, but you still have to think sometimes for him, see that he doesn't get into trouble – into danger – or cause harm. Always remember he's a war-dog. It will take time before he can be called a pet."

"What happened to his leg?" Robbie asked.

"He . . . lost it. Doing his job." Said the soldier.

"Was my Dad with him?" Robbie asked, although he thought he knew the answer.

"Yes" said the soldier in a voice that said "*No more questions*" and Robbie was silent.

For the next hour, the soldier explained and showed and demonstrated just how highly trained Thor was. But he let Robbie give all the orders, do all the praising and petting to reward Thor.

Robbie Bamforth learned many things that day and the soldier told him he was 'a natural'. Thor was only too happy to be working for someone again. His strap-on leg didn't seem to bother him at all. He sat or stood and lay down on command, easily found things the soldier or Robbie hid in the grass, went forward, turned left or right on command just like sheepdogs Robbie had seen on TV.

They sat for a while. From the top of the slope that overlooked the houses down below. Robbie could see his house, with Mom in the back yard, taking in the washing. He waved, but she didn't see him.

"Tell me about the war." Robbie asked the soldier.

"The war?" the soldier said, studying the end of the grass-stalk he'd been chewing. "Well, it's not a lot of fun, that's for sure. It's hot, you're scared all the time and tired, too. Comes from not sleeping well at night because you're scared."

Robbie looked at the badge on the shoulder of the soldier's uniform shirt. There was a dog on it – a black dog.

"Was my dad scared? And you – were you scared?"

"Oh yeah, your dad, me and all the others – all scared most of the time"

"And Thor . . . the dogs – them too?"

The soldier laughed and threw the grass-stalk away. "Never seen a dog that didn't think it was all a game. Something he was really good at. Something nobody could beat him at. It gave us courage, knowing they were looking out for us, would never let us down, as long they drew breath." And then he was silent again. Robbie left him alone for a bit, then asked.

"Do you have a war dog, Sir?"

The soldier shifted his weight and said softly, staring out over the houses "Call me Kevin, son. Yeah. Well . . . rather, I did."

"Like Thor, he was doing his job, looking out for me. And the others."

"And now?"

"Well, I'm here, aren't I? Two halves of two teams." Then Kevin stood up as a sign that the talk was over. "Actually, there's just me. You and Thor are a team, now. See you make him proud!" And although he grinned, Robbie thought there was a great sadness in his eyes.

“Heel, Thor!” called Robbie, and they set off down the slope.

“Can I come visit sometime?” asked Kevin.

“Course!” said Robbie, thrilled that the question had been asked. “You can come and help me work Thor”

“Don’t think that will be necessary, Rob. But if your mom won’t mind . . . we’ll ask her.” And Kevin winked.

Mom had laid out coffee and biscuits on the porch and Thor’s water bowl was full and standing in the shade.

Kevin looked pleased about the coffee but didn’t stay long. Thor was emptying his bowl, tail going busily, as he quenched the thirst he’d built up on the hill. It was as though he’d always been there. He glanced at Kevin, head on one side for just a moment as the jeep backed and then turned back the way it had come, then he lay down with his chin on his paws where he could watch Robbie’s face.

Mike Job