

SOLDIER BOY The Play

ANTHONY HILL

Adapted from SOLDIER BOY by Anthony Hill
First published by Penguin Random House Australia Pty Ltd

PASSWORDS

For permission to perform this play contact: Rights Department, Penguin Random House Level 3, 100 Pacific Highway, North Sydney NSW 2060 61+ 2 9954 9966
Penguin.Rights@penguinrandomhouse.com.au

Published by Passwords Pty Ltd, Unit 1, 56 Davey Street, Parkdale, Victoria 3195 ABN 92070488489

Text and *Soldier Boy March* and Song copyright © Anthony Hill, 2024

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, published, performed in public or communicated to the public in any form or by any means without prior written permission from the copyright holders.

The 21st Battalion Song. Author unknown. Anthony Hill would be pleased to hear from any valid copyright owner.

James Martin and Cecil Hogan letters. Permission to quote from the letters has previously been given by the Martin and Hogan families known to the author. Anthony Hill would be pleased to hear from any other valid copyright owner.

All photographs courtesy of the Martin family.

Cover and text design by Cathy Larsen Design www.cathylarsendesign.com

Marketing assisted by Kristin Gill of Northern Books www.northernbooks.com.au

Typeset in Minion Pro 11.5/14pt

Published with the assistance of Publicious Book Publishing www.publicious.com.au

National Library of Australia

A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia ISBN 978-0-9923277-5-0

The author thanks Christopher Bantick, Kristin Gill, Belle Hansen, Gillian Hill, Laura Iris Hill, Christine Husband, Michael Kakogiannis, Cathy Larsen, Andy McDermott, Sarah McDuling, Dr Michael McKernan, Jane Miller, Mordialloc Theatre Company, Monika Neusch, Beng Oh, Sarah Read, Dr Jeremy Salt, Andrew Sergeant, Robyn van Dyk, Robin Walls, Ali Watts, Julie Watts, Suzanne Wilson, and all who assisted with the reading and publication of this play.

www.anthonhillbooks.com

THE CHARACTERS

JAMES (JIM) MARTIN, a tall, 14-year-old boy who could pass for 18

AMELIA MARTIN, 37, his mother

CHARLIE MARTIN, 42, his father, smaller than Jim

MARY MARTIN, 12, his sister

ANNIE MARTIN, 10, his sister

AUNT MARY, Amelia's sister

LIEUTENANT-COLONEL McLAREN, Glenferrie School headmaster

DOCTOR on *Glenart Castle* hospital ship

MATRON FRANCES REDDOCK, an English nurse

NEWSBOY

SERGEANT

CEC HOGAN, 16, Jim's friend

SOLDIER 1

SOLDIER 2

DROWNED BODY

Eighth Battalion VETERAN

TURKISH SOLDIER

GERMAN OFFICER (voice off)

2 SAILORS (voices off)

ARMY OFFICER

[Smaller parts can be doubled]

The action takes place between June 1914 and October 1915 on board the hospital ship Glenart Castle anchored off Gallipoli; the Martin home and school in Melbourne; the troopship Southland; and the heights above Anzac Cove. In real time, it covers the hundred minutes between Private James Martin being brought aboard the Glenart Castle at 5 pm on 26 October 1915 – and in his memory – before his sudden death at 6.40 that evening.

ACT ONE

Joining Up

On one side of the stage a kitchen table, dresser, hat-stand and a few chairs represent the Martin family home at Hawthorn, Melbourne. On the other side an army stretcher representing the hospital ship, which stays throughout.

PROLOGUE

The house lights go down to the sound effects of a heartbeat, followed by a young soldier, PRIVATE JIM MARTIN, singing a few bars of It's a Long Way to Tipperary or Soldier Boy song (Appendix 1). He suddenly breaks off and begins to cough, becoming more acute.

CEC [off]: Jim!

The stage is in darkness. Suddenly the sound of gunfire – a shell whistling through the air – exploding in a flash vividly lighting the stage until it fades.

CEC [off]: Jim!

JIM [weakly, off]: I'll be right, Cec. I told you, old mate. Right as rain.

JIM starts to sing again, but it ends in a coughing fit. A short silence with only the heartbeat.

We then hear the plashing of waves and a ship's bell striking twice. Five o'clock in the afternoon. A bosun's whistle distantly.

SAILOR 1 [off]: All clear down there?

SAILOR 2 [off]: Aye, aye, sir.

SAILOR 1 [off]: On the order – cast your lines.

SCENE ONE

A holding bay on the hospital ship Glenart Castle, anchored off Gallipoli, October 1915. A glass of water on a ward table. JIM, covered by a blanket, is lying on the stretcher. He coughs briefly. A DOCTOR and MATRON REDDOCK, carrying a folder of papers, beside him. The heartbeat continues softly beneath the scene.

DOCTOR: Is this the last of the afternoon's casualties aboard now, Matron?

REDDOCK: For the moment, doctor. Until this evening. Beachy Bill's been firing again.

DOCTOR: I heard. What have we got? Bullet? Shrapnel?

REDDOCK: Enteric Fever I believe, doctor. Typhoid.

DOCTOR: Not another one. How long this time?

REDDOCK: At least a fortnight, his papers say. In the trenches above Monash Valley.

DOCTOR: Why do they do it, the young fools? Refuse to come down till it's almost too late?

REDDOCK: I believe they think it a point of honour not to abandon their companions.

DOCTOR: Madness. Let's have a look at him. What's his name?

REDDOCK: Private James Martin. Only eighteen it says here. From Melbourne. Hawthorn. His mother runs a boarding house ...

JIM: Mum ... Home ...

He coughs a little. The DOCTOR kneels to examine him as the light fades on the stretcher and rises briefly on the boarding house. Nobody is there.

After a pause, the light fades on the kitchen and rises again on the hospital ship. The DOCTOR gets to his feet having given JIM an injection. He puts the needle in a dish held by MATRON REDDOCK.

JIM: Please ...

DOCTOR: He's pretty far gone I'm afraid. All that filth up there. You'll have to cut off his clothes. I've given him a shot of morphine and you can give a little more if he needs it.

REDDOCK: Certainly, doctor. His pulse is quite "thready" – weak, but racing.

DOCTOR: Exactly. Sleep, cleanliness and decent food is what he needs away from the horrors of this place. As do they all. The rest is up to Private Martin.

REDDOCK: Looks as if he was a fine, healthy young man. Came to Gallipoli with his battalion fresh from Egypt only seven weeks ago, it seems. On the *Southland*! Now look at him.

DOCTOR: Quite. He's lost half his body weight and almost all his strength. Eighteen? I doubt he's much more than a boy.

REDDOCK: He's certainly very sick.

DOCTOR: Do what you can for him. But you know, after this summer at Anzac Cove our greatest enemy now is disease. Flies. Not the Turks after all.

DOCTOR *exits*.

JIM: Please ... can I have some water?

JIM *coughs once more*. MATRON REDDOCK *takes glass of water*.

REDDOCK: Here, my boy, I heard you.

JIM: The thirst is terrible, Mum.

REDDOCK: I'm Matron Reddock. Let me help you. [*She kneels and helps JIM to lift himself and sip a little.*] Is that better?

JIM: Thank you. [*He looks about him.*] Where ... ?

REDDOCK: You're safe now. On the *Glenart Castle* hospital ship.

JIM: Am I going to get well again?

REDDOCK: Of course you are, laddie. We'll have you up and about in no time.

JIM: Then that's all right.

REDDOCK: Try to get some rest now. [*She helps JIM to lie down.*]

JIM: Thank you ... Mum ... Sister ... Matron ...

REDDOCK: And think of the family waiting for you at home.

JIM: Home. Sweet dreams, then, like she used to say. Mum ... remember? Mum ... are you there, Mum...? Mum...

The heartbeat fades. Sound and lighting effects, as JIM slips into dream and memory: into a place where, as the effects of the drug and his illness take hold, he is in both past and present. A place where a character may emerge to speak a remembered line, then fade back into the unconscious – where characters can talk to each other across time and space, as the threads of memory briefly conjoin then part again.

SCENE TWO

The kitchen, June 1914. Visuals could include the house at 43 Mary Street, Hawthorn, still externally much as it was. CHARLIE, MARY and ANNIE are at the table eating porridge, CHARLIE reading a newspaper, AMELIA carrying toast in a rack, JIM'S schoolbag on a chair. JIM throws off the blanket, crosses stage and is now a 13-year- old schoolboy coming into breakfast.

JIM [*continuing from last scene*]: ... Mum! What's the time? I'm late for school, and I've lost my cap.

AMELIA: Cap's on the stand where it ought to be, and not on the floor. And there's plenty of time. You need your breakfast, Jimmy.

JIM: Just a bit of toast.

He grabs at a piece from the rack, AMELIA good-naturedly slaps his hand away.

AMELIA: That's for Mr Evans in the dining room. Take it in will you, please Mary. Number six.

MARY: Yes, Mum, I know. [MARY takes toast into the dining room, exits.]

AMELIA: Have you fed the hens, Jim?

JIM: Yes, Mum.

AMELIA: Brought in the eggs?

JIM: That's why I'm late. One of them's started laying in the outside dunny ...

AMELIA: Toilet!

JIM: Sorry. Toilet. And Mr Jenkins was in occupation ...

AMELIA: Must be the cold weather. You didn't have to wait for him. I'll get your porridge.

JIM: But...

AMELIA: Winter's here and you're a growing boy, dear. Look at you. Only thirteen. Your first pair of long strides just a few months ago, and already too short. I'll have to lengthen them.

ANNIE: Lanky-shanks!

AMELIA: Now then, Annie, I've told you not to make fun of your brother. It's a good skin he's growing into.

ANNIE: He's still a bean-pole.

AMELIA gives JIM a bowl of porridge.

AMELIA: Enough of that. You can help Elsie with the drying up in the scullery if you've finished.

ANNIE: Do I have to?

AMELIA: Off you go. I've got a house full of paying guests and only one maid.

ANNIE: It's not fair.

AMELIA: One pair of hands, too, since Esther and Alice left home. [ANNIE *exits as MARY enters.*]

Mary dear, can you bring in any more dirty dishes.

MARY: Oh all right! [MARY *exits.*]

AMELIA: Cheerfully, please! And that reminds me, Jim. The lawns still need mowing. You were going to do them last weekend.

JIM: Sorry, Mum, I forgot. I was with Albert looking at his dad's Boer War medals.

CHARLIE: He's got the Queen's South Africa Medal, I hear.

JIM: And the King's medal as well, Dad.

AMELIA: Came home with a wooden leg, too. And it doesn't cut my grass. It's getting so long out the back, old Miss Henderson could get lost in the undergrowth.

JIM: Saturday, Mum. Promise. Now, I'm off. [*He rises, AMELIA sits him down again.*]

AMELIA: Not before you finish eating. And what's so important?

JIM: School cadets.

AMELIA: All these boy soldiers. Everywhere ...

JIM: It's compulsory Mum.

AMELIA: I always thought you wanted to be a farmer, like your cousins at Tocumwal.

CHARLIE: And before that a tram conductor. Or a cabbie like your old man.

JIM: Well, I did. Then. But along came cadets ...

CHARLIE: And playing the school drum, eh, son? Marching them all into class.

JIM: I love it, Dad. Every day in the schoolyard to my beat. [*Perhaps SFX of the heartbeat.*]

MARY *enters with a tray of dishes, goes to scullery.*

MARY [*crossing the room*]: Just Mr Evans after this lot ... [*She exits.*]

AMELIA: You can help Annie dry, then. I say, Jim, what's this rash on your cheek?

JIM: Nothing.

AMELIA: It's all red and nasty. Have you been scratching it?

JIM: It's nettles ... up the back yard.

AMELIA: Rubbish. Have you been trying to shave yourself?

CHARLIE: Here, you've not been using my cut-throat, boy?

JIM: Albert's. His dad's got a safety razor.

AMELIA: It doesn't seem any too safe. Hang on, I've got some ointment here. [*She goes to dresser and gets a jar of ointment.*] You're too young to have to worry about that sort of thing yet, Jimmy.

CHARLIE: Believe me, boy, put it off as long as you can. Once you start shaving, there's no stopping.

AMELIA *rubs ointment into JIM'S cheek.*

JIM: It was only for fun. Just to see. Ouch! It stings.

AMELIA: It's your soft, young skin. And here's you wanting to be a soldier.

JIM: I've really got to go, Mum. Mr McLaren will be asking ...

CHARLIE: And I should pick up the taxi at the rank. Just another cuppa ...

JIM *picks up his schoolbag.*

JIM: Where did you say my cap was, Mum?

AMELIA: Where it ought to be.

JIM *feels the top of his head as if the cap might be there. Then he remembers, goes to the stand and gets his cap.*

You are a scatterbrain, boy.

CHARLIE: Not in everything.

JIM: Won't be late, Mum. And tell Mary and Annie to hurry. I can't play the drum all day waiting for them to catch up.

AMELIA: Goodbye, dear. [*She kisses him and calls after JIM as he exits.*] Shepherd's pie for tea. Mary, Annie, you'd better get a move on! [*Beat.*] I wish we could afford another maid. Breakfast. Now for the beds ... [*Calls.*] Elsie!

SCENE THREE

The schoolyard. Visual effects could include Glenferrie School in Manningtree Road, externally still much the same as it was in 1914. JIM enters playing his drum.

JIM: Come on you two!

[ANNIE and MARY enter hurrying with school bags.]

MARY: Sorry, Jimmy.

JIM: That's all right, Mary. I know Mum needs the help. Lucky if they don't keep us in, but. And I've got cadets ...

MARY: What will you be doing?

ANNIE: Marching round the playground with broomsticks over your shoulders.

JIM: No. We'll be at the rifle range over there beside the school fence. Target practice, with real weapons.

MARY: I reckon that's dangerous ... firing bullets near houses.

ANNIE: People could get hurt.

JIM: No. They're only twenty-twos. Couldn't hurt a fly. Well, not much.

MARY: You go shooting rabbits with them up at Aunt Mary's.

JIM: We put a red flag in the street to warn people. Besides, the sergeant from the local militia is coming to instruct us.

MARY: Still dangerous, having guns ...

JIM: Not "guns", sis. Rifles.

MARY: What's the difference ... ?

JIM: Guns are like artillery ... they fire shells. And there's machine-guns.

MARY: They all can kill.

JIM: Girls ... !

ANNIE: They're only silly boys.

JIM: It's the law, Annie! Boys have to start cadet training when they turn twelve. The new headmaster, Mr McLaren reckons it's important, and he's a colonel in the CMF.

MARY: Jimmy's right there, dear. You heard what the boss said on Empire Day at school assembly ...

Gun flash. If doubled, ANNIE exits. From the recess of memory McLAREN appears, wearing a gown and mortar-board over his officer's uniform. He is addressing assembly. CHARLIE and AMELIA also listen, and gradually move from the kitchen to interact with him.

McLAREN: Your junior military training at school is just the first step in building a strong Australia. At fourteen, when most of you begin work, you'll become senior cadets: wear regular army uniform, drill at night and go to annual camp. And at eighteen you'll enter the Citizen Military Forces to complete your training.

AMELIA: That's what I said, Charlie. Boy soldiers everywhere.

MARY: Not all boys go into cadets, sir. My friend Ethel has a brother who's started work in a boot factory. Night shift sometimes. And he won't go to senior cadets. Says he gets too tired, and doesn't believe in learning to shoot people.

McLAREN: What's his name, this boy?

MARY: Rex, sir. Rex Venables.

McLAREN: I'll make a note of it. [*Writes in notebook.*]

JIM: I know that kid. He was a year ahead of me. Wouldn't go to target practice. Said his parents won't let him. Weak, I say.

AMELIA: They're very religious people.

McLAREN: I don't care what they are. The law is to be obeyed. If I'd been at this school last year, young Venables would either have done his duty or been expelled after a caning.

CHARLIE: That's a bit harsh.

AMELIA: We all have our beliefs. Got to respect that.

McLAREN: It might sound severe, madam. But when it comes to the defence of our country ...

CHARLIE: We're in trouble if we have to rely on little Rex Venables!

Beat.

McLAREN: We may all hope international disputes will be settled peacefully. But until the world finds a way of preventing wars we – the Empire – must defend ourselves. Europe is spending millions of pounds every year on their armies and navies.

CHARLIE: We've heard that before, but the diplomats always settle every quarrel. I doubt we'll see another war in our lifetime, Amelia. With all that money invested, they've got too much to lose.

McLAREN: As they said in *The School Paper*: “In six years’ time – by 1919 – our fighting force will indeed be a worthy one.” But that depends on every boy – even Rex Venables – doing what his country requires of him.

JIM: Mr McLaren was right about that, wasn’t he Dad? Except that we didn’t get to 1919. Only a month later in June, and they were talking about war in Europe...

A distant rumble of thunder. The NEWSBOY enters, spruiking his newspapers.

NEWSBOY: Read all about it! “Royal Assassination ... Austrian calamity ... Heir to throne and consort killed ... Europe horror stricken!”

JIM: Remember, Dad? That’s when we first heard about it.

CHARLIE *takes a newspaper and starts to read, JIM looking over his shoulder. A drum starts beating distantly.*

JIM: What’s this place, Dad? Sar-a-jev ...

McLAREN: Sarajevo, boy. In Serbia. Geography! That’s where the spark was lit.

CHARLIE: Yeah. But it all died away again, didn’t it? Whoever heard of Sarajevo? Into July and the diplomats were fixing things again.

NEWSBOY: There was more to come, boss, by the end of the month. [*Spruiking.*] Read all about it! “Austria declares war on Serbia ... Russia mobilises against Austria ... Germany declares war on Russia and France ...”

CHARLIE *takes another newspaper. AMELIA joins JIM looking over CHARLIE’S shoulder. The drum beating louder.*

AMELIA: Show me, Charlie. What does it say ... ?

CHARLIE: It’s only Europe, ’Melia. Britain and the Empire are still out of it.

NEWSBOY: Bit more, boss. [*Spruiks again.*] “Germany invades Belgium ... Britain declares war on Germany and Austria ...”

CHARLIE *takes another newspaper. MARY with her parents and JIM. Bugles heard.*

MARY: Where, Dad, show us ...

Gunfire.

AMELIA: Poor little Belgium.

JIM: The alliances were dragging them all in, Dad.

AMELIA: Including us.

A shell exploding, off.

NEWSBOY: Too right, missus. [*Spruiks.*] "Australia to fight to the last man and the last shilling."

AMELIA: But what will it mean for the family, Charlie? The boarding house? Will we have enough food? The taxi?

JIM: What about the cadets, Dad? School?

MARY: And Rex Venables?

McLAREN: I'll make enquiries about him. [*Exits.*]

CHARLIE: It's a long way off, 'Melia. Other side of the world. Won't affect us.

NEWSBOY: Don't be too sure, boss. [*Spruiks.*] "Government raises Expeditionary Force. Twenty thousand Australians to fight for God, King and Country. Recruiting starts Monday."

JIM: Just remember, Dad. The excitement of it all.

NEWSBOY: "Tumultuous street scenes. Waving flags and cheering crowds. German steamer stopped at the heads ..." Read all about it! [*Exit, still spruiking.*]

CHARLIE: First shot for the Empire, that. Point Nepean battery fired a warning shot across its bows. Surrendered, too.

JIM & CHARLIE: Hooray! One for Australia!

MARY: Take that, Mr Kaiser!

Their cheers are taken up by the sound of marching bands and cheering crowds. Red, white and blue lighting effects. At the rear: flags, bunting and a big sign Australia Will Be There, which remains throughout.

AMELIA: Guns fired in anger on our beautiful bay ...

JIM: Everybody's there, wanting to do their bit. Men rushing to join the Expeditionary Force.

CHARLIE: Well, of course! It's the first good war for a long time.

AMELIA: First good war!

JIM: I bet Albert's dad is polishing his medals. Still full o' patriotism. Pity he lost a leg in South Africa.

CHARLIE: But for everyone else it's a great chance to go overseas.

JIM: And the government paying for it.

CHARLIE: They don't want to miss out.

AMELIA: Don't want to miss out!

MARY: It's true, Mum. All the boys round Aunt Mary at Maldon tried to get into the Light Horse.

CHARLIE: Your cousins at Tocumwal said the same.

MARY: And were very angry if they got knocked back.

AMELIA: I sometimes think they were the lucky ones.

JIM: Mum! How can you say that?

CHARLIE: They got their chance when they raised the Second Contingent. Then, they were only taking the biggest and best. Five foot seven ... now five foot six.

JIM: I could have been in it.

AMELIA: No you could not. I know you're a tall boy ...

CHARLIE: It's your age, son. Minimum to go overseas with the Force is eighteen. You've got five years to go. Even then, you've got to get our permission.

JIM: Lots of fellers are joining up and they're not eighteen. Albert's one of them.

AMELIA: I don't understand. Albert's not much older than you ...

MARY: He told the big lie about his real age.

AMELIA: What were his parents thinking ... ?

MARY: His Pa says if you're going to lie, make it a big one. You can't remember lots of little ones.

CHARLIE: I suppose with the old man's stump ...

AMELIA: Yes. He should know better. And his mother ...

JIM: Albert told her ...

AMELIA: She should have more sense.

MARY: Albert's afraid he'll miss out. Says it could be over by Christmas.

CHARLIE: They always say that Mary. But it rarely is. Tell you what though, I'll take you to the farewell parade in town when the First Contingent leaves next month.

SCENE FOUR

Band music, crowds cheering, perhaps shot of troops parading outside Parliament House, Melbourne. JIM, CHARLIE, AMELIA and MARY put on hats and coats, take small Union Jacks and Australian flags, and stand in the street waving and shouting Hurrah! Sound and lighting effects to suggest movement. The excitement dies down, and they go home.

JIM: That was wonderful, Dad. All those troops marching. And the Light Horsemen! We might have known some of them from Aunt Mary's.

CHARLIE: Could have, son. I was half-tempted to put my name down and join them.

AMELIA: Don't be silly, Charlie. You're too old. And you're needed here.

CHARLIE: Still very impressive.

AMELIA: It didn't look as if they'd be gone and back again by Christmas.

JIM: Mr McLaren's been helping to plan the Expeditionary Force, and he says the war could last years.

McLAREN *again appears from the well of memory, walking with the family. Instead of a mortar board he now wears an officer's cap.*

McLAREN: With so many of the world's rich, industrial nations pitted against each other, they can sustain the conflict for a very long time. It's money and machines against human flesh.

MARY: Our Dad thought they had too much to lose, sir.

McLAREN: We thought it might end quickly. But now, both sides are digging into trench lines that extend across northern France.

JIM: Sounds as if we'll be needing the Second Contingent soon, sir.

McLAREN: And the Third, the Fourth and all the ones after that.

JIM: My mate Albert among them.

AMELIA *tut-tuts.*

McLAREN: Good lad. I'm afraid many of our recent school cadets will find themselves in it before this war's over.

AMELIA: Not all of them. Mrs Venables told me only yesterday her boy Rex has been reported for not attending senior cadets.

McLAREN: Yes ... er ... I may have had something to do with that, madam. Now we're at war, I cannot ignore a boy evading his lawful duty to undertake military training.

AMELIA: But he has a conscientious objection to shooting people. Like all his family.

JIM: It's war time, Mum. He should realise ...

McLAREN: And he won't be shooting people. He'll be shooting at targets.

MARY: In time it could be people.

McLAREN: That's for the future. For the present, young Venables' refusal to enrol is in the hands of the military authorities.

AMELIA: But surely ...

McLAREN: Imagine if every boy thought like that. We'd have no more Contingents to send.

McLAREN *exits, as other memories come to the fore.*

JIM: Then the rest of us had better keep training extra hard.

AMELIA: You just listen to your mother, son, and study your schoolbooks extra hard. You'll be turning fourteen at New Year and going to work.

JIM: I'd rather be ...

CHARLIE: Attending to your lessons. Right?

JIM: And I did, Mum. Stayed at school to the end of Term ... Got a good report ... fed the hens ... collected the eggs ... every day...

End of Preview