

AFTER THE WAR

Rae Duncan Laurenson

1 Foreword

I knew Rae Laurenson quite well in his later years in Calgary as a Professor of Anatomy and as an emeritus. He was born in the Shetland Isles and, sadly, died recently at the age of 86. His wife, Barabara, showed me a file that Rae had developed in the 1990s about his travels and experiences at the end of WW2. I was fascinated - partly because these travels included Liverpool and Singapore which I knew well in the 1950s but, mainly, because they give a colourful glimpse of a time when decisions were being made that would shape the world from 1945 onwards. It also reminds me of the extraordinary mix of talented young people being recruited at the universities of Alberta and Calgary in the 50s and 60s.

As there are many U of C emeritus professors who can recall this era, I thought that others might also find Rae's diary interesting. With the kind permission of Barbara and of the family of Barbara and Rae, I present Rae's diary - verbatim - in his own words - but without the fascinating supporting documents, maps and photographs.

Peter Lancaster (March, 2008)

2 Preamble

Other influences included my parents' hopes that I might become a doctor; and their innermost desire that I not be called up for active service (my father's brother, known to us as Uncle Arthur, died of wounds at Gallipoli). Last of all the headmaster at the school in Rothesay, where my sister taught, thought that his widowed sister, Mrs. Ene (Euphemia) Mitchell in Glasgow, would take me in as a boarder (in 1940 room and board was difficult to get). Thus I enrolled at the School of Massage and Medical Gymnastics at the Glasgow Infirmary.

Having got my diploma (CSMMG) from the Chartered Society of Massage and Medical Gymnastics, London, England, I went to Berry Hill Hall, a Rehabilitation Centre for coal miners, for a ten week course given by John Colson.

Through John Colson and his boss Mr. Nicholl, surgeon, I was introduced by letter to Watson-Jones.¹ After I was in the RAF, Watson-Jones, in 1942, arranged my posting with the rank of sergeant to the RAF Rehabilitation Centre for Aircrew, at a boys' boarding school in Hoylake near Liverpool.

3 VE Day, May 8th, 1945

To be a member of a rehabilitation team, sometime in 1945, I was posted from Hoylake to Cosford, a Reception Centre for POWs being repatriated from Germany. However, since most of them just wanted to go home, I was unemployed. Meanwhile there were masseurs overseas for whom a posting was long overdue, and I was selected as a replacement. And so this story really begins with:

Embarkation Leave: from Cosford
from 30th June to 16th July 1945,
to Lerwick, Shetland Isles.

Then I was posted to 9 PDC Viceroy Court (London) mainly, I think, to get a Yellow Fever inoculation (July 26, 1945), which was ndonr4.4459Vtnr.(Y)81(ello)28(w)-259

Viceroy Court was a block of flats, virtually empty of people and furniture, except for an army "cot" I slept on.

August 6, 1945, Hiroshima

August 9, 1945, Nagasaki.

Aug.13, 1945. I went by rail to Poole, close to Bournemouth, to spend the night at the Sandacres Hotel.

Aug.14, 1945. In a Dakota, I think, along with several other "important" people on special missions, we flew from the UK to Bathurst (Gambia) on service 21W.131. We were all in mufti (plain clothes) because Portugal was a neutral country. Some of the other passengers were "upper class" (diplomatic corps, colonial officers, officers of the armed forces). They were amused and somewhat puzzled that I, an RAF sergeant, was a fellow passenger. I remember especially the long flight South low across the Bay of Biscay and the intense sparkle of the waves below. After the intense cold experienced en route (planes of that time were not pressurised or insulated) the warm sunshine of a clear dry day at Lisbon Airport was a relief. There was, however, an even greater treat awaiting us in the dazzling surroundings of the airport restaurant: on high stools at the bar, a novel experience for me, we were served freshly cooked bacon, toast, and real coffee! After four years or so of rationed meals, this "ordinary" breakfast was indeed a feast for kings and other ranks.

Aug.14, 1945. Our next stop was Rabat/Sale (on the African coast, north of Casablanca). I remember the crowd in the hotel bar as happy, but more relieved than jubilant.

4 VJ Day, August 15, 1945

Aug.14, 1945. On to a stop at Port Etienne, to see a real desert shimmering in the heat. Any moment now, Beau Geste, parched with thirst and clawing the sand, would crawl over a sand dune. (My father was a Beau Geste fan and had read the story to me as a bairn - more than once, childhood illnesses keeping me in bed sometimes for weeks.) (Years later I read "Wind Sand and Stars" by Antoine de Saint Exupery ...p.83 "where the Sahara meets the Atlantic". Years later I would recall one of my mother's frequent quotes "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings,...The low and level sands stretch far away.)

Then on to the Yun Dum airport, Gambia, for three nights. There is a photograph with me in it taken at Yun Dum VJ Day (this must have been the 16th). Watch out for scorpions, I was warned; tap your shoes before putting them on! I went for a *short* horse ride with the station MO (the horse threw me!). While sauntering through the market in Bathurst,

city at that time of solitary minarets with muezzins and not a whiff of oil. I was on the street one time when a muezzin called the faithful to prayer. Captivated by the spectacle, I stood still, feeling very conspicuous, while the Arabs around me gathering up their voluminous white skirts dropped to their knees in homage.

The take-off in the Sunderland for Karachi I do not recall, except being spellbound by the arcs of water raised by the floats and thrown past the small square windows. And since during these flights the plane was at about 6,000 feet "you could see forever". Impressed by the land to the north and the water below (Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, and the Arabian Sea) I recall that part of the flight vividly. We landed on Karachi harbour on November 28, 1945

7 Karachi

My arrival at the No. 10 British General Hospital Karachi was unexpected (the sudden end of the war and the first steps in demobilisation muddled the "paper work"). I joke that I might still be in Karachi, if I had not met by chance in the corridor an officer from SEAC, who suspected who I was and accosted me, confirmed my identity, "tore me off a strip" (one of the sayings of the war) and had me on a plane to Singapore next day!

It was the cool season in Karachi, sometimes too cold for tropical clothes. Despite the sacred cows lumbering through the crowded streets, the snorting and pink spit (betel nut), the beggars and the smells, I enjoyed my stay there, especially some excellent games of field hockey. I learned a lot from the Sikhs we played against, in fact I was lucky to have had that chance. I also learned from conversations with Indians on the hospital staff, that the British Raj would end soon. At St. Andrew's cathedral, where I attended Sunday morning service, I saw the last of the Raj clinging to the past. The Brits in their Sunday best, the ladies with hats gloves shoes frocks and handbags absolutely à la Jewel and the Crown. I think I was in Karachi until January 1945. My diary, alas, was stolen in Singapore and while I remember the places en route and highlights imprinted on my brain I do not remember the dates.

There were never more than about eight passengers on these flights from the UK. Because I was an NCO and because all the other passengers were either officers or Government officials (in wartime segregation by ranks was absolute) the entire trip was a very personal experience. Also

in those days there were very few planes in the sky (except over war zones) and they flew at about 6,000 feet.

That is the introduction to the highlight of my Cook's tour. As we headed for Allahabad, half way between Karachi and Calcutta, and came close to Agra, to the west of Allahabad, the pilot descended and circled

flitting about the corridors, it was on to Port Swettenham to the funniest incident of the entire trip. One of the passengers was a nurse (an officer in the regular RAF) and another was an RAF officer of the old school. Insisting that the lady should not have to walk from the dock to the terminal, he summoned a rickshaw. Disagreeing with the driver about the fare he collared the rickshaw, put the Nursing Officer on it then he himself pulled it to our abode. Per Ardua ad Astra.

9

The Brits had returned to Singapore in September 1945.

The Peace Treaty was signed there on September 12.

One day in January 1946, with cool rain falling from a leaden sky - the first rain for me for many weeks - Singapore was my journey's end. On the way to join the RAF hospital a big sign amused me. Dripping wet it advertised an amusement park called Happy Valley which was closed.

It would take too many pages to set down the milk of memories flooding my mind of a ten months sojourn in Malaya. Perhaps as I write the cream will rise to the top.

Conscripts and volunteers wanted to get home and get out of the armed forces as quickly as possible. Each service man was given a number determined by length of service ("first in first out"). In January 1946 they had reached 8-10 and my number was 46! The mood in general was lackadaisical and mildly antagonistic to superior ranks.

In 1946 there was no television or high fidelity radio saturating our minds instantly with brutal scenes from around the world. I never saw a newspaper either in the mess or in the hospital. Telephones were few and far between. Awkward to use, they were best for local calls. getting through on a long distance call was a miracle. Thus the troops were in the dark, except for gossip ("What's the latest gen?"). We had little knowledge about the Japanese occupation of Singapore. And we were not all that interested. The war was over, get us back home.

However, I did have the opportunity to see how we were treating the Japanese POWs, when I, on one occasion, as the Duty Sergeant, accompanied the Duty Medical Officer at lunchtime to inspect the wards crowded with Japanese wounded. Steam arose from the kettles of freshly cooked rice and of an appetising fish and vegetable stew. The patients (looked after by their own medics) were typical "Japs". Some of them

amputees, some of them with crutches, in laundered hospital linen, many of them wearing cloth army helmets, they looked well nourished clean and happy while they chattered incessantly just as they do today as they tour the world.

Now that I know how badly the Japanese treated the Chinese in Malaya, I wonder if the parade celebrating the Chinese New Year in February 1946, the first after the occupation, was especially significant. It certainly was a happy occasion, the happiest one of my tour. The dragon held aloft by maybe ten athletes with nimble feet, would stop and shake its head at the sun, then chase the sun from one side of the street to the other while the spectators laughed and clapped. The parchment lampshade featuring a hand-painted dragon and sun, which I bought to mark this cheerful occasion eventually crumbled to dust but the memory lingers on.

10

Flanked by porticoes a spacious empty room with large openings instead of windows was my domain in this new hospital built by the Crown just before the war began. My stock in trade, then, was "medical gymnastics and massage", which, in fact, became the specific therapy for the survivors of the polio epidemic. There was too much to do for one pair of hands and my health deteriorated...but to my advantage...I went on sick leave to a holiday camp adjacent to a deserted beach on the island of Penang, two overnight train rides north of Singapore.

But, before I write a note or two about Penang, there is this to say about the hospital. To cope with the worst victims of the polio epidemics iron lungs were flown to Singapore. The polio unit was out of bounds, but I went there one evening anyway to see a patient desperately ill, his life dependent on the lung. In those days an iron lung was a huge box bigger than a coffin with side windows and port holes through which the staff were able to attend to the patient's body and bodily functions. Only the patient's head was out of the lung. In that climate the air, even after dark, was always warm and humid. And I remember above all, the beads of sweat and the ghastly expression on the airman's shrunken face under the dim lights of the verandah, and the regular sound of the pump

The patients in the hospital, as we all were, were oh so far from home. It would take about two days for a signal to reach London to say a patient was dying. One evening while his nurse went for supper I sat in silence with a patient, my age, dying of amoebic liver abscess for which there was at that time no cure, and there were no life support systems, and there was no intensive care. Nurses took on the role of next of kin. At midnight it was decided to send the inevitable signal. His bed was empty

ered my health. To remember this wonderful holiday I bought two water-colours by local artists, one of a Malay house and the other of a Chinese house, because these were two main races living on the Malay peninsula.

The evenings were so pleasant, cooler than the day but warm enough for one to be outdoors. One evening I went for a long walk, and came upon an astonishing scene. On hearing a tune so like "Da Foula Reel" I could not believe my ears so I went down a path toward the shore to an even greater surprise: in the light of a bonfire villagers were dancing a dance so like the Foula reel I could have been in Lerwick Town Hall! I left although my soul - or maybe it was my feet - said go on join in. I was by then conscious of the nationalism that would surface a few years later.

Another perfect rose garden - this time on the top of a hill on Penang Island. Leaving the train near the top of the hill, I soon found the garden near a teahouse. This was an amazing sight to a Shetlander. Roses do not do well in Shetland, and whenever we went South, looking at rose gardens was a special treat. Even so I did not stay long on the hill. In tropics, I was chilled to the bone by the cool moist air.

Back in Singapore, my most emotional experience occurred in the Victoria theatre at a concert given by Welsh entertainers. The theatre was crowded to the rafters. Along with a Welsh Sergeant I was lucky to have a balcony seat. At the very end of the show one of the party said something in Welsh. Everyone in the theatre rose to their feet and in unison and in tune sang fortissimo Guide Me Oh Thou Great Jehovah to the tune of Cum Rhonda. Everyone wept. That's when I knew the war was over.

12 The Journey Home

According to the little brown diary I boarded HMT Otranto between 4

of Ceylon. The Arabian Sea was calm, the sky a brilliant blue, and the air warm and pleasant and humid, ideal conditions for leaning on the rail watching flying fish go by.

The diary says we were on Aden on 1 November (but we were a long way away), and that we entered the Red Sea the next day. Steaming through the Gulf of Suez we arrived at Port Suez on the 5th and having entered the Suez Canal at 11am we got to Port Said at midnight.

It was 2pm on the 6th when we left Port Said. The climate changed for the worse. Somewhere in the Mediterranean the Otranto ran into a mild storm which ended the on-deck camaraderie of this sunlit cruise. Below deck was a mess; I believe I swung in my hammock until the ship was once again on an even keel.

Passing Malta (in the distance) on the 8th, Pantelleria on the 9th, Algiers on the 10th the boat reached Gibraltar on the 11th, but the Gib, too, was a distant hump. At Cape St. Vincent 4pm Tuesday the 12th the voyage North to Southampton began. I remember how the mood aboard this troop ship became more and more sombre, partly because of the change in the weather, more because of the unknown that lay ahead. We docked at Southampton at 7.30pm on Thursday the 14th November 1946.

Because there were no trains that night to Padgate, where I would be demobbed, I spent the night on board virtually alone, my footsteps echoing through the empty hull; the passengers and crew had "vamoosed" as soon as the gangways were down. The air was cold and raw and a channel mist swirled around the funnel and rigging. Dim lamps cast an eerie light around the cranes and buildings nearby. I see myself in a UK uniform; if it was in my kitbag while overseas, I do not remember.

The train to Padgate from Southampton collected "demobs" on the way. As I recall, we were all very quickly kicked out of the Royal Air Force, and I went to Shetland probably by boat with a travel warrant, a ration card, a demob suit and some dough.

The paper trail of what happened next is blowing in the wind. Having completed at the beginning of the war the first part of my physiotherapy training at the Glasgow Royal Infirmary, I returned to Liverpool and completed my physiotherapy training with Miss Bartlett and Miss Gwen Davies, then entered Aberdeen Medical School in October 1947.

So be it.