

## **Return to Family Life**

The capitulation of Japan in August 1945 marked the start of my return to family life. I was 6000 miles away from my family but the end of wartime ordeals meant that it was just a question of time before I would be returning to England and to Dorothy and to the child I had never seen. Time dragged and I was determined to preserve my own skin and those of my men – so I tried to mollycoddle us all. Some resented this but I had long forbidden them to take undue risks (like manning supply planes and pushing supplies out on parachutes into dropping zones).

My troop was ordered to police the area around Chauk, the oil town in central Burma. Specifically we had to protect the oil supplies, recently restored by oil technicians of the Burma Oil Company. They had restored the oil pipeline which ran alongside the Irrawaddy River down to Rangoon. Burmese robbers were called Dacoits and some of them would cut into the oil pipeline and fit a tap from which they could run crude oil into a hollowed out boat which they had lined with tin foil (probably taken from stolen tea chests). Most weeks we would capture a gang and hand them over to the town police. They would then appear before the local mayor and always pleaded ‘guilty as charged’. They were then fined (a sum which they would meet from a wad of bank notes). They were always very courteous and would bid me farewell afterwards outside the court with the cheerful comment “See you next week, Sahib”.

By about Christmas time 1945 our Battery (my Troop and two other Troops) were ordered to Rangoon and from there to board a ship and go to Calcutta in India, which we did and without incident. We went into a tented camp in Calcutta to await orders. Meantime Muslim riots had broken out there. I asked my men (who were Muslims) what they would do if rioters attacked us. “Shoot them” said my men with one voice. “But you are Muslims and so are they” I retorted. One of my Havildars replied “But they are not soldiers, Sahib, so we will shoot them”.

In fact, the only shooting we did in that camp was of an animal as a mercy mission. In the few days we were in that camp I was worried by a horse that came into the site each morning. It was in a pitiful state, covered with sores, and my men wanted to put it out of its misery; but I was wary. In India it was not unusual for unscrupulous men to claim ownership of animals that were hurt by anyone (like motorists) who could afford to pay compensation. So we planned the operation with all the skill of soldiers. Some men patrolled the perimeter of the field to keep watching eyes away, others dug a big hole, some stacked turves from the hole ready to replace them. The rest kept moving about busily while someone led the horse to the edge of the hole. Swiftly someone shot the horse, others tipped its body into the hole, some filled in the earth, replaced the turf, trod the ground down and resumed normal activity just in time before several men arrived asking if we had seen their “valuable” horse which had strayed away from its “luxurious” home with them. My men, looking as if butter would not melt in their mouths, all shook their heads with sympathetic gestures.

While we were in this camp there were major moves in the world – Britain was about to bow to pressure and give India its independence; but there was a spanner in the works – the Muslims wanted a separate state from India, and Lord Mountbatten had been sent by the British Government to organise a peaceful separation. The leader of the Indian Muslims was Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Like every other officer with Indian troops I had to talk to my men about the future of the Indian Sub-continent. I started my first talk with them (some 90 men sitting on the grass around me) by asking if anyone knew anything about Muhammad Ali Jinnah. After much chatter one spokesman said “No one knows him, Sahib, but we don’t think he is in our Battery”.

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Our whole Battery moved across India to the Garrison town of Uruli and from there on 1 April 1946 I was ordered to embark at Bombay and go home to England to be demobilised. There was an air of bravado and nonchalance on SS Stratheden. A number of senior Army officers were quite happy to be accommodated in cabins of up to 10 beds – anything to be going home. I was the last of 10 officers to be assigned to my cabin. They were delighted to see me and to find that I was junior to them all. They appointed me as Officer-in-Charge of our cabin. Soon after we left Bombay the ship's Captain ordered boat drill which entailed everyone going to boat stations on the top deck. I called out "Gentlemen, please come with me to our boat station". "Get lost" they said (or Army words that meant the same). They did relent when the ship's Captain let it be known that he had the power to put them ashore, but he would "return in a few month' time to collect them".

This was a time for me of great excitement. The sea was calm all the way home, even in the Bay of Biscay, and I remember seeing the beautiful green countryside of the Isle of Wight on 17 April as we came into the Solent and into Southampton in the early morning.

By lunchtime we were in the Demob centre at Basingstoke. After lunch there I told the Adjutant that I wanted to get home that day because the next day was my wedding anniversary. He had me measured by the tailoring staff and I was fitted out with civilian clothes – hat, suit, shirt, tie, underwear, shoes – the whole lot, without trying anything on. Miraculously they all fitted when I tried them on the next day.

By 3 p.m. I was on a train for London. By about 6 p.m. I was ringing the bell at 10 Leigh Heath Court, the little 4th floor flat that Dorothy had obtained a few weeks earlier. Dorothy opened the door. I can still picture her in her green skirt and jumper, and with two tiny hands just visible holding onto her skirt. Then a face slowly emerged scowling at this strange man kissing his mother. I took no notice. It was hard not to sweep him up to join Dorothy and me in a welcoming embrace. I was home, but I had to get this little chap to accept me of his own free will.

I brought in my suitcase, my box of demob clothes in mint condition, and an armful of oddments, and sat down to enjoy a British bread, butter, jam and cake tea. There was so much to discuss and to marvel at, and this we did with hardly a look at John. Being unused to being ignored he decided to join in undoing the cases, and became quite animated as the goodies emerged. His joy knew no bounds when I produced four pairs of beautiful Indian slippers. He saw this strange man was worth cultivating. He sat firmly on my lap and did not move until Dorothy told him to kiss Daddy and go to bed. He slid off my lap, went over to the mantelpiece, lifted off the photograph of me, gave it a massive splodgy kiss and went to bed.

The next day he came for a bus ride alone with me into Southend. I had him on a pair of reins and he enjoyed being lifted in the air on the reins. It so happened that for the seven years duration of the war I had become used to having very little sleep at night, sleep coming to me in one hour bursts and leaving me always half awake. This proved useful to my domestic life. Dorothy got very tired caring for John so I quickly got used to tending the needs of this little two-year-old at night. His early recollections include my taking him to the bathroom and his standing on my slippered feet with my arms holding him while he vomited – and my telling him stories of my Army life while I washed his hair in the bath.

I was not only home, I was learning to be a good father. This art increased with the snow and ice during the winter of 1946–47 when I made John a little sledge and a harness of rope and pulled him for miles round Southend. He loved it and sat well wrapped up and cosy. We found a cake shop some five miles away in Shoeburyness where one could buy cakes consisting of a thin

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wafer biscuit with coconut ice an inch thick on it – marvellous for men with a sweet tooth, boys who liked sweets and a lady who had to be showered with treats to show her we both loved her.

I have often been asked what were my aspirations in those days. Without a doubt mine were to survive and to work to enable this little family of mine to survive. Nothing else mattered. I was given a few weeks' demobilisation leave, then returned to the Board of Control – still evacuated to St Anne's on Sea, Lancashire. I worked there until November 1946, then 'returned' to London with the others of my office. It was a time of change in so many ways but the start of a time of family stability for me when Dorothy and I shared many hopes for our own future and the future of the family. We decided Dorothy should not do a job other than be a full-time mother unless circumstances (like poverty) made it necessary.

In fact it was not until years later when our children were growing up and being away at university or school all day that prompted Dorothy to feel she could spare the time to do a job away from home. In 1969 she applied for a job as farm Secretary at Heathlands farm only a mile from home (we had moved to Crowthorne by then). At the farm she became a Girl Friday doing secretarial work, looking after the farmer's children and in her spare time running the 1st Crowthorne Brownie Pack, helping me in my job at Broadmoor Hospital where I was trying to fit into one of the senior posts, and as time went on helping me to run my Scout Group and the Natural History Group (we were founder members in 1968).

Dorothy joined the popular Broadmoor Choir (she had been a keen chorister since schooldays). It contained several staff of both sexes, patients of both sexes and friends who lived in Crowthorne. The Choirmaster was Mr Luther Brittain, a senior nurse who had been a bandsman in the Army. The choir was good and their performances well received.

Dorothy was called on to speak at functions and achieved local fame by a speech at the annual staff cricket club dinner when she confessed ignorance of how a man could have a square leg but that she could well believe that we men could be silly mid-on, silly mid-off and other ridiculous positions. I never did understand women!!