

My Parents, 'Fan and Den' Morgan
Denis Charles Morgan 1922-2005
Fanny Morgan (nee Beech) 1920-2015

My father never spoke about his wartime service, certainly not to me, though at some time he had told my mother a little about his experiences. As a child I was puzzled by his left arm. Where the elbow should have been, there was a hollow with puckered skin drawn over it. This was a neat piece of sewing, covering the space where the humerus met the radius and ulna, the ends of these bones missing. Dad could not flex this joint and over time the left side of his body became atrophied. Occasionally, small pieces of twisted metal made their way to the surface, 'Shrapnel', he said. In my early years, fevers sometimes laid him low, which mother told me was 'Malaria, picked up in the East'.

All his life my father would never buy any item made in Japan. His opinion of the Japanese was far from complimentary, though he never explained how this had come about or attempted to justify his opinion.

Father, 'Den' to Mum, but 'Charlie' to his siblings, was born in Cardington, near Church Stretton, Shropshire, a county which he loved, but left for my mother, who was equally attached to her home and family in Wolverhampton. My father's parents were separated, and this domestic situation, together with the limited opportunities which a rural environment offered, probably encouraged the teenage Dennis to embark on a career in the Royal Air Force. Aged 17, he enlisted in the service for a period of 7 years in August 1939. An early group photograph shows him smiling proudly and confidently in the uniform, his hat at a jaunty angle. Snaps sent home depict Singapore and India, a country where he was impressed by the Taj Mahal. Some images show him kitted out for the tropics in shorts and broad-brimmed hat. A souvenir cigarette case bears his name and rank – L.A.C. Morgan. At some point whether under the influence of alcohol or in a fit of youthful bravado, he acquired an entwined snake tattoo on the left arm, uninjured at this time. He disliked snakes and loathed this tattoo for the rest of his life.

By July 1941, Denis was stationed at Kallang, Malaya. Photographs record the station and aircraft based there. Later Discharge papers record him having been employed as an armourer working on guns. Up to this point it seems to me that my father had enjoyed many of the new experiences he had, and not been touched by the horrors of war to any great extent.

However, December 1941 took him to the station of Mingaladon in Burma. It must have been at some point in the subsequent 18 months that Dad sustained his injury and experienced traumatic events. Mother told me that one night there was an air raid on Dad's station. When the attack died down, Dad was at first relieved to find he was alive and, he assumed, uninjured. It was only when he looked down at his left arm that he became aware that shrapnel had sliced into the elbow, shattering the bones and almost severing it at the joint. On seeing the wound, a surgeon considered it would be best to amputate the lower part of the limb. He could not restore its mobility and thought it would cause my father further problems in years to come. Nevertheless, Dad was adamant-whatever the outcome, he did

not want to lose it. The surgeon did as he asked, and the limb was fixed at the joint. Over the years it caused Dad intermittent pain, but he never regretted that decision.

However, before Dad left Burma, worse was to come. In the latter stages of his recovery, a Japanese land raid on the base led a group from the hospital, including my father, to flee for their lives into the surrounding jungle. Here they suffered starvation and dehydration, witnessed the death of a young, injured nurse, and discovered the corpses of victims of Japanese torture. When at last the weakened survivors found their way to the nearest British camp, they were filthy, disoriented, bearded and unable to speak. At first, they were regarded with suspicion but were eventually able to explain themselves. Following these events, his wound healed but his arm permanently damaged, my father was judged to be below the required physical standard for the Air Force and was discharged on 30th August 1943. On returning home I believe that he was ill for some time with what would now be termed post-traumatic stress.

Once Dad was able to work, he was directed to the industrial town of Wolverhampton, where he could find employment to suit his skills. It was while working as a toolsetter at Chubbs' Lock Works that he met my mother, Fanny Beech, a machinist in the factory. For part of the War, Mum had been employed on war work, making ball bearings to be used in aircraft such as Spitfires. This was at Fischer Bearings in Villiers Street, a factory German-owned when war began. I believe the Germans had to leave and it changed hands early on. Mum described how an official came to the factory to examine its manufacturing processes, to check that the level of precision achieved by the machinists met expected safety standards for use in aircraft. The management, clearly keen to secure a contract, made sure that the staff were aware of the importance of their visitor. Only the best machinists were to be selected for the task. Mum, a very conscientious person who approached any task with pride, was asked to demonstrate the process. Unnerved by the visitor's close scrutiny, but always outspoken, she exclaimed "Well I can't do a good job with you staring at me like that! You'd better stand back." The official did as he was told.

My mother came from a large family who lived in central Wolverhampton. Her father, Charles Francis Beech, was born in 1866. Already almost fifty at the start of the First World War, he was never called up and was seventy-three at the start of World War II. He had married late in life, aged 46, when his wife Lily was 24. The couple had gone on to have six daughters. In 1939 the family were living in a large semi-detached house in Thompson Avenue, having been rehoused from Ward Street when the slum terraces of the canal area were demolished. Charles Francis was a polite, dignified man, well respected in the community and by his daughters. Eldest daughter Ellen (Nell) was married to Les Brain, who in wartime became an army cook, serving in Belgium. Their first child, Terry, was a baby. They occupied the 'front room'. Three middle daughters, Lilian, Fanny -my mum, and Louisa (Lou) were all factory workers, while the two youngest girls, Joyce 13, and Audrey, 11, attended Graiseley Girls' Secondary School. As the War progressed, Lou, a very bright girl, was sent to work on the railway, a decision challenged by her father, but work which in the event, she enjoyed. It was one of the few benefits of war, extending Lou's experience beyond her less stimulating factory job. Eventually, Graiseley School was closed to students and Joyce and Audrey were less fortunate than their sister, losing the opportunity to complete their education.

The Black Country industries made the area a prime target for enemy raids and bombings

were anticipated. Mother has spoken of her father going from house to house, urging families to go to their shelters and to check that blackouts were in place. Probably he was an ARP warden, but I have not managed to verify this. He was insistent on his own family taking cover in the Anderson shelter at the bottom of the garden whenever the sirens sounded, whatever the hour. With eight adults and a baby it was extremely crowded and freezing at night in cold weather. It was hard enough to sleep as it was, but made more difficult as little Terry was a grizzly baby and cried each night. Nell found it impossible to find a dummy anywhere. In desperation my mother tried all possible shops along the nearby Dudley Road. Eventually she located one of a monstrous looking black design; despite its ugliness, it did the job. Immediately after the War, Mum remembered queuing to obtain a banana for her nephew, determined to provide him with an early taste of this exotic fruit, denied for so long.

Wolverhampton largely escaped the Blitz, unlike Birmingham and Coventry. However, Mum always remembered one night when she and Nell were upstairs when a raid began. As they made their way downstairs to get to the shelter, they heard the unmistakable rattle of a doodlebug, close by, they believed. As the noise stopped, the sisters stood still on the landing and hugged each other, waiting for a blast which seemed inevitable. Mum was sure she was about to die. When the explosion came, the sisters were amazed to find themselves still alive, not their turn this time, but some other unlucky family's. In the early fifties some bomb sites still remained, clothed in willowherb and buddleia by that time, and I would shiver as Mum told me how terrifying these attacks had been.

I think the Beech household coped quite well in respect of wartime food. My grandmother, Lily, had been brought up in poverty by her widowed mother, but had acquired that indomitable lady's skill in making an appetising meal from very little. Her skills were honed when the girls were young. For years her husband was happily employed as a wheelwright, loyal to an employer he respected but on a low wage. Charles always refused to leave this trade, despite Lily's urging that he could do better for himself elsewhere. The family had begun to enjoy more luxuries once some of the girls were working, but once these were lacking, they did not complain, having been raised to make the best of things. They actually quite liked the dried egg. The house also had a large garden with plenty of room to grow vegetables. I remember that in the fifties, my family always compared the food available at the time with that they had eaten before the war. The highest accolade was to describe an item such as ham as 'it tastes really pre-war'. Perhaps during wartime, the food they had eaten before the conflict became the stuff of dreams, fixing an impossible ideal in their minds.

For many years Dad worked as a compressed air engineer and enjoyed his work, driving to local assignments in the Midlands and travelling as far as Derbyshire. He was well known as a skilled mechanic in local factories, working long hours to get machines moving when their failure had halted production. He had adapted to his injury and the injured arm's limitations. He was a quiet person, unless there was something he really cared about, when he would talk at length. In particular, he had strong political views and believed in the importance of education. He had a cheerful personality and maintained a boyish sense of humour into old age. A sensitive man, he loved the countryside and enjoyed poetry and music. He was a person who loved life, a disposition which was enhanced by the awareness that he had come close to losing it. Though he rarely mentioned the war, I always thought it was often in his thoughts. He always kept a photograph of himself with an RAF friend, unnamed, but

thought to be Polish, in his wallet. In the last months of his life, memories seemed to surface which were troubling recollections of wartime events.

In 1958 my parents and I were allocated a council house on a new estate in Tettenhall, to the west of Wolverhampton. Many neighbouring families were those of people displaced by the War. My best friend's Polish family were among these, and she was immersed in the language and culture of her parents' homeland. Her parents were reserved, hardworking people, but never appeared light-hearted. I got the impression that they did not enjoy life in England but lacked the resources to return to their birthplace and re-establish themselves.

In our street we also had a couple where the husband had been a German prisoner of war. Even many years after the war, some neighbours were a little cold towards the pair and gossiped about the woman's choice of husband. Unjustified, for they lived quiet, respectable lives, giving no offence to anyone.

The home of another refugee couple backed onto ours. The man was Lithuanian I believe, his wife was originally from Eastern Europe, but I'm not sure where. They had one daughter, who was very much a typical English teenager of the day. The lady told us that her first husband had been taken away by soldiers one day and was never seen again. Later she was put in a camp, where the treatment meted out to her had damaged her mobility and general health. She was unable to walk far, but it was her great delight to sit out in the small garden on sunny days, usually wearing a brightly patterned headscarf. Despite her dreadful history, this delightful woman had a cheerful demeanour and was always friendly and smiling, a real testament to human resilience.