

Title: Trevor Lancaster and Edith Couper's war in the far east.

Mum & Dads World War II stories.

Dad - Norman Trevor Lancaster – known as Trevor.

Mum – Edith Anne Davidson Couper.

Dad was born on 16th April 1924 in Great Horton, Bradford. The second son of Charles Raymond and Elise Lancaster. He was a tall and strong lad and enjoyed sports including Cricket and Rugby, excelling in these at school but like so many children in these times he left school at 13 and was accepted as an apprentice joiner, working his way up to being able to change sash windows in the terraced houses of Bradford. At the outbreak of war in 1939 he was only 15 years old and so was too young to join up but was keen to do his bit and served in the Home Guards September 1942 to July 1944.

Mum was born on 19th December 1919 in Dura Den, a tiny hamlet near Cupar in Fife to Bruce and Helen Couper. She was a bright and healthy child and enjoyed school very much. She wanted to be a tailor but her mother could not afford the indentured you would have to pay to secure an apprenticeship, so she went into service in a big house in London. It would have been when she was there that war broke out. She did not tell me much about how or when, but I do know that Mum joined the ATS (Auxiliary Territorial Service), the women's version of the army.

Dad enlisted at Bonhill Barracks in Scotland in July 1944 when he was 20 years old and did his primary training there and then joined the Duke of Wellington Regiment at n Castle in County Durham. He was drafted to the Japanese Campaign and embarked for India on the SS Tegleberg from Greenock, travelling in convoy. They landed in Bombay and then travelled on to Kalyan reinforcement camp.

Mum told me that she trained in Dingwall and Strathpeffer north of Inverness and then served on the Orkneys where there was a big naval base in Scapa Flow. I am not sure how long she was stationed on the Orkneys, but she described the midnight sun when it never really got dark and the Auroa Borealis in winter. She later was on a troupe ship on its way to Sri Lanka.

The 2nd Battalion of the Duke of Wellingtons had suffered many losses in Burma but by 1944 they were embarked on entering Burma to retake much of that territory from the Japanese. Dad told of the hardships and unsanitary conditions that they faced, and this is possible where he got malaria. He was requested by his CO to volunteer for special duties, and he did and was sent to Mhow in the Central Province's. Dad told me that he later learnt that many of his comrades in the 2nd Duke of Wellingtons went on to lose their lives in fighting or being taken to work on the death railway after he had left. I guess he felt he had dodged a bullet but also it left him with a sense of guilt.

Once in Mhow he was trained as a Cipher Operator and was promoted to Corporal in May 1945 and transferred to SACSEA (Supreme Allied Commander South East Asia) headquarters in Kandy. They were stationed in the botanical gardens at Peradynia and it was here that my Dad met my Mother who was serving with the ATS doing administrative work at the headquarters. During his time there Dad worked for Lord Mountbatten and handled many top secret messages between Mountbatten and Churchill and recalls that the atmosphere was very tense at this time. Dad has many photos of his stay in Sri Lanka then know as Ceylon and he remembered watching the elephants bath in the river. In 2017 I went to Sri Lanka with my sisters and we visited the botanical gardens, we saw the

building that would have been the headquarters and we saw the river where the elephants would have bathed. We also saw the temple at Kandy which looked just like the photo that Dad had taken.

It was August 1945 and my Dad had taken Mum to the tea plantations at Nuwara Eliya for their first date. He told me that while up in the mountains they heard a very loud bang and that later he wondered if he had actually heard the sound of the A-bomb. I have no idea if this is possible or true and also whether the dates coincided with the bomb on Hiroshima or Nagasaki but this was what he thought. The Japanese then announced their surrender on 15th August 1945. Dad tells of the celebrations that day and of being woken up at 3am to be taken to a secret airstrip near by and the was transported to Singapore at dawn.

On arrival in Singapore he travelled by road to Government House and he saw "The Japanese were lined up along the road with their rifles laid on the floor and their heads bowed; they had given up". He also told me of the horror he saw as the emaciated and broken condition of the POW's who were liberated from Changi Prison. It was here that Dad obtained a samurai sword. He told us that some of the Japanese officers committed hari kari and this sword was one which had belonged to them. We kept this sword in the living room behind the TV and it used to fascinate me, but it was no ornament and was sharp and dangerous. However, one day in the 70's our house was broken into, and it was stolen which is very sad and scary as this was all they took.

Dad watched the official signing of the surrender instrument at the Municipal Buildings on 12th September 1945 which ended the war. However, this was not the end of my Dad's work and the job of sorting out the mess that had been created by the conflict was to begin. Dad continued to work as a Cipher operator in Cathay Buildings which was to become the HQ Supreme Allied Commander SEA (Lord Mountbatten). Mum was transferred from Sri Lanka with the ATS to provide support for the headquarters here as well so her's and Dad's relationship had a chance to develop. I have a photo of Mum and Dad next to the sea in Singapore where they obviously fell in love.

Dad travelled in a Mercury Aircraft to various places in Southeast Asia to set up a communication network to facilitate the rebuilding of the area. He flew to Labuna Island off Borneo, Makassar in Celebes Islands, Balikpapan in Borneo, Batavia in Java and Palembang and Medan in Sumatra. He recalled a time when, during one of these flights, they had a terrible storm, the pilot was worried they would all be lost but in the nick of time he managed to spot a beach and was able to land the plane on the beach and wait out the storm.

Mum was demobbed and returned to the UK but Dad was Deferred Demob and was promoted to Sergeant, he was sent to Bangkok in Thailand, then Siam to take over as cipher operator to the British troops in Thailand. He told me that he travelled to Bangkok on the railway from Singapore, that the rail line had been severely damaged in the war and that he and his troop were tasked with rebuilding the railway as they went. He said that this was a long process and that they had to rebuild it bridge by bridge along the way but that the locals, who were also invested in the idea of re-establishing the rail connection joined the train and assisted with the reconstruction till they finally reached Bangkok.

It must have been difficult for Mum to have returned home to Kinghorn where her mother and father now lived with her new lover still out in the far east. Quite possible the communication between them may have been difficult and she may not have heard much from him. Unfortunately, if they did write to each other, we don't have any of these letters left.

Dad has many memories of his time in Bangkok, and he was stationed in a plane at the airport. He says that he had a relationship with a local girl who would sit watch while Dad slept and would call him "Trevi, Trevi" if any thieves approached so Dad could spray the area with machine gun fire to

keep them at bay. He also told me that they were barracked in the Royal Gardens and that the King died while they were there, he recalled that they had a tradition of preserving the King in a large bottle in the foetal position which would require them to break his bones in order to achieve this, he told us that they would ring a bell at the temple each time they broke a bone. Apparently, he also had a dog there called "comeback" which would attach itself to him, but sadly it got attacked by some other dogs and died.

Dad learned to drive here on the Airforce base using an army jeep and he frequently visited a local bar with the other soldiers and would drive back to the base with a "skin full" and a jeep covered in drunken soldiers. At some point Dad also went to Burma and stayed in Rangoon, we think this was to run the communication operation there when the person assigned was sent home. He mentioned the Pegu Club where they went to drink and socialise plus the Governors House and the Strand Hotel which may have been where they worked. Dad was finally demobbed on 8th October 1947.

When Dad returned home, he found that his parents had moved from Great Horton in Bradford to Coningsby in Lincolnshire. His father Charles Raymond had been a wool merchant and had been doing well before the war, but as the economy changed and he lost everything plus Bradford had suffered a lot with bombing. They moved to live with some relatives as Charles' grandmother Eliza Wilkinson was from that area and there were cousins that they turned to. However, as communication was less easy during the war my father was unaware of their move until he returned and only found out by talking to old neighbours.

Dad then went to Scotland where my mother lived and then proposed, they were married at Christmas 1947 in Scotland. Mum commented that it came as somewhat a surprise that Dad turned up in Scotland and he had proposed to Mum when they had visited the "Edinburgh Disgrace", a war memorial on a hill overlooking Edinburgh. Once married they moved to Coningsby where my sister Anne was born in September 1948.

Dad got a job at RAF Coningsby working on the construction of a new Airforce base and he also eventually managed to build his own house there on the land next to my Grandma's cottage on Dogdyke Road. However, before that the family suffered many hard ships. Mum and Dad lived in a corrugated prefabricated house with no running water. They lived on rationing and supplemented their food with eggs from their own chickens and rabbits shot by Dad. Grandma lived in an old cottage with no running water, using a well outside, no fridge with a cold shelf in the cellar, a horsehair mattress and a tin bath on a pulley in the kitchen.

Thanks much to Dad's hard work we managed to improve our family's wealth and moved to Scarborough where Dad eventually became a very wealthy man running a construction company. I don't think that it would be possible now for someone to come from such humble beginnings to rise to such a responsible position in a company without qualifications but in the void left after the war it was not unusual.

In 1995 Dad went to Singapore for the 50-year anniversary of VE day which he described as being very moving. He also went to the bridge over the river Kwai and that he knew some of those who were buried in the war cemetery there. When he returned, he said that he found it very strange that the Japanese now visit Singapore on holidays and mingle with the people rather normally. To him they were the enemy and perpetrators of extreme cruelty to the prisoners of war. Of course, we move on, and we forgive but the horror of those scenes in Singapore after the war were still very fresh for my Dad.