

The Second World War

Reminiscences 1939-1945

Written by Lewis Lilliman

I was fourteen when the war broke out in September 1939. For safety there were lessons in our school corridors. There was Mr Chamberlain's speech and the first siren. I helped put the black-out material up every evening. Troops took over the local bus garage at the top of our road. An air-raid warden's post was built at the entrance to our local park.

Twice a week I did the fire-watching on the roof of my school. A few oil-bombs dropped harmlessly at the top of our road. The 'blitz' of 1940/1941 changed habits; it was early to bed, undressed. When the siren went I settled down under the stairs, where blankets were kept. The evenings and nights were spent playing cards, chess etc. when the 'all-clear' sounded I went upstairs to bed.

It was a bitterly cold winter. One day my father and I wheeled a barrow in snowy weather to the other end of the town to buy coke and coal. One night in December 1940 a high-explosive bomb fell in our garden, narrowly missing the garden path. The wardens arrived to inspect it and, later, bomb-disposal officers made it harmless. I remember being on a train during the Blitz which was halted just outside the railway station and we could see searchlights lighting up the sky and anti-aircraft guns flashing.

During the blitz I covered my bicycle lamps with shields. Cinemas and theatres closed. Double summer-time was one slight advantage and I remember my mother dealing with our ration books late in the evening in our garden.

I joined the local Youth Service Squad to collect silver paper etc. for the war effort. There were collections for the three armed services. Our garden railings were taken away from the front garden to be used to make Spitfires and other planes.

Our area was 'neutral' and there were no evacuees. I joined the Home Guard and went to Laleham on the Thames, throwing dummy hand-grenades. In 1942 I began a course at a teacher-training college. One afternoon while there I narrowly escaped being machine-gunned on the Great West Road. Cinemas re-opened and I went to see 'Gone With The Wind'. I did supply-teaching until I was called up in March 1945.

I went to St Albans and had a medical. As I had astigmatism I was classified C3. Then I was posted to Bury St. Edmunds. There I became Private L.J. Lilliman, Number S/1493/7427 of the 64th Infantry Division, Suffolk Regiment. I was at Bury St. Edmunds for six weeks at the Primary Training Wing and also had some medical injections. The favourite remark of my instructor was 'Your mother may like you – but I Don't.

My next posting was to Tunbridge Wells, where the billets were in a local castle. Our weekly training venue was at Haywards Heath. After a month I was posted to Leeds and our billet was in Headingly 6.

All our meals were taken on the cricket ground. In May 1945 I was posted to London and was quartered in Mount Street and Russell Square. Our unit received clerical training at Walthamstow Town Hall.

I watched the V.E. celebrations, the West End was crowded with military personnel of many nationalities. The Americans invited us to their Rainbow Club for meals and entertainment. Some of them had been in Normandy, others were destined to die in the Pacific.

In June 1945 I joined a unit going to Borneo to oust the Japanese and after another medical and injection we were taken to Lyneham aerodrome to board a Dakota for the Far East. Our first stop was at Malta for re-fuelling. I had a trip around the Island and visited the caves.

Our next stops were at Lydda and Bandar Sharpur, at the head of the Persian Gulf. Finally we landed at Karachi Airport. There was a vast encampment there and I lived in a tent. Our unit was to move to Calcutta, flooding had disrupted train services. So, with extra K rations we travelled through India to Madras. At every stop the natives clambered on and in the train, offering all kinds of inducements. At Madras we awaited a flight to Calcutta, where, after landing at Dum Dum airport, we were billeted near the racecourse in Chowringdhee Road.

Our unit then flew to Colombo in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). Our unit was issued with tropical kit and mosquito nets. While in Colombo I watched a film in the open air, it was 'Cabin in the Sky', with Paul Robeson.

The ex-hospital 'Dunera' took us through the Indian Ocean to Rangoon, Singapore and finally to Hong Kong. During this passage I got very sunburnt and was taken to the sick ward for a few days. I arrived in Hong Kong in late August 1945. The Japanese had surrendered and the dropping of the atom bomb had probably saved my life. We were now the Army of Occupation and, later on, HQ Civil Affairs Unit. I was stationed in Hong Kong for nearly a year. The climate was pleasantly warm and the monsoon rains kept in fresh.

Our base in Hong Kong was the Happy Valley racecourse. The Japanese P.O.W's in the Stanley camp were dispersed and the camp emptied. British troops were already on the island rebuilding damaged buildings. The Kowloon ferry was restored. Shops, restaurants night-clubs, street and water-markets opened. Trams and buses ran and the funicular to Victoria Park was re-started. For the soldiers a Naafi was opened.

Guards were placed on bonded warehouses etc. to prevent further looting. 'Souvenirs' were still going home. Legal and illegal brothels began business and were regularly inspected. V.D. parades were held in month.

I was promoted to Corporal. Early morning parade was at 7.00 a.m. Later, A.T.S. and W.A.A.F.'s arrived. A native police force was set up. In 1945 Hong Kong was Oriental and some streets were like China Town; the men wore pig-tails and smoked opium in clay pipes. Incense was burnt. The women looked wizened and the children were poorly clad.

Leave was sometimes taken at the Portuguese island of Macao and here the architecture was colonial.

Relations with the civilians were good. There were a few expectations when foreign navies arrived. I was taken to hospital once, after an argument with a rickshaw driver. When the combined fleets of the British, American, Dutch, Australian and New Zealand Navies arrived, the British Military Police and the 'Snowdrops', (U.S. Military Police) were kept busy maintaining order.

I was seconded to teach English at Wanchai Chinese school. I also helped service personnel to write letters home. Most of my time was spent in administrative work in Hong Kong, Kowloon and the New Territories. There was, however, a fair amount of off-duty time to meet local Chinese, Indian, Portuguese and Euro-Asian girls.

In August 1946 I was released early from the Army for 'essential' work back in England, (as a school-teacher).

H.M.S. Duke of York was a majestic sight when she berthed. Crowds lined the port, Ships sounded whistles in greeting, banners and pennants were hoisted. Admiral Fraser, C. in C. of the British and East Indies Fleet, was flying his flag, while Royal Marines played music on the quarter-deck.

There were six of us going home. We did chores and helped on deck. The Admiral's quarters were off-limits. I was to take part in most memorable six week's experience.

The first stop was at Singapore, (time to visit Changi Jail). On to Rangoon, (time to visit the prison where the Chindits were held). Through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea. Into the Suez Canal after passing through Port Tewfik and Port Said. The final stop was at Valletta Harbour in Malta. At every port of call the local dignitaries came aboard, the Royal Marines band played and all crew paraded on deck in full ceremonial attire. The whole company was inspected by Admiral Fraser and there were receptions and parties. It was like a royal tour.

At Portsmouth, six weeks later, there was a 'Welcome Home' atmosphere. I was going home!

My Army service had been dangerous, exciting and exhilarating and I would not have missed it for the world. Sometimes on a dark, cold English winter night, I look at memorabilia and photographs and my mind goes back over 57 years. I am off-duty at the very top of Victoria Peak in Hong Kong, looking at the sun shining down on the ships and islands around Hong Kong.

When I am asked for my most memorable experience I turn the question into another question 'Have you seen the sun rising and setting over the calm, empty waters of the Pacific Ocean?' This, then, has been the story of the life in the Second World War – remembered after 60 years.