

# 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

THE POSTING OVERSEAS OF  
SERGEANT RAE DUNCAN LAURENSEN, RAF 1695577.

Born on the 10th of September 1922, my choice of career in 1940 was a compromise beginning with my liking for sport (tennis, swimming, golf) - later on, however, I discovered I was a mediocre athlete. Also, the Laurenson family was interested in medical gymnastics (my brother had a scoliosis). Also my sister was a gym (phys ed) teacher and as part of her diploma she had passed exams in massage and medical gymnastics.

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. Effie (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.<sup>1</sup> 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 very painful.

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<sup>1</sup>Reginald Watson-Jones, later Sir Reginald, was a Liverpool Orthopaedic Surgeon, who was one of the first to transform the treatment of fractures from its passive form (i.e. absolute rest) to an active form which included exercise, and retraining, a form of treatment known as Rehabilitation. Observing the harmful result of the passive form of fracture treatment at the Glasgow Royal Infirmary I decided to attend John Colson's course at a Rehabilitation Center for miners. Meanwhile the RAF had set up the Rehabilitation Centre for Aircrew at Hoylake with Watson-Jones as the principal Consultant.

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 office, 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, I bought a silver bracelet from a silversmith sharp and jolly and bald. Draped in a loose white robe, seated on his mat, Abdul Abu-Bakari is still in my mind's eye: he was as fat as a walrus.

## 5 August 18, 1945

On Aug.18, on to Freetown, then on to Takoradi (in those days Ghana was the Gold Coast).

The night was as black as pitch when we arrived. Having told us the landing gear was stuck and that a crash landing was imminent, the pilot flew the plane in circles to use up the fuel. While immense bolts of lightning illuminated the jungle surrounding the airstrip, I could see the red flashing light surrounding the airstrip, I could see the red flashing light of a fire truck and perhaps an ambulance. What I remember most of all is the strange calm that came over me, what must be must be. Fortunately, after about an hour in The Shades, we heard a clunk or two, the wheels went down and we made a safe landing.

I had been sent out to replace the phyiotherapist at the RAF Hospital Takoradi. His re-patriation was long overdue, once the supply line from the West African Coast to Cairo was shut down after the German army's defeat in North Africa. The hospital was virtually empty, so I was given various jobs helping to close the hospital and despatch equipment back to the UK. Some of the furniture was made by local carpenters and I was allowed to send home personal effects in a big box made by one of them; it is now the base for the TV (January 1992).

On or about the 18th of November 1945 I was posted to SE Asia Command (probably to relief another physiotherapist up for repatriation). The first stop was Lagos; then north-west to Kaduna, then Kano, a stop-over. The plane flew low enough for me to see the immense Nigerian jungle, then the savannah of Northern Nigeria, then the endless desert before we reached Khartoum where we stayed for one night. Because of an early morning departure, we stayed at the airport and I have but a vague memory of this historic city seen as we arrived. A parcel post receipt confirms that I was in Cairo on November 22 1945. I was

there for about a week and managed a trip to the Pyramids; in these days of slick tourism, it is hard to trust one's memory that on that famous day there were but a few souls clambering up the mighty stones. As an NCO I was excluded from Shepheard's Hotel, but I went in anyway just to be able to say that I had been in one of world's most famous places for international intrigue.

I joke that I might still be in Cairo, if I had not run short of money, and been obliged to report to a control centre where the clerk eventually found my travel papers at the bottom of a heap two feet high!

## **6 November 26, 1945**

On November 26 1945 in a Sunderland flying boat we lifted off the Nile at dawn. The air was damp and cool. The morning light, the dhow wallahs and their dhows wreathed in morning mist, and the gentle peace of the river became a lasting memory.

We landed for a short stay around lunchtime on Lake Habbaniyah, east of Baghdad. Some day I will find out the altitude. After a flight over vast stretches of waterless land made up of barren clay and rocks, the type seen so often today on TV in reports on the Middle East, to come upon a small but perfect rose garden between the dock and the building that was the terminal was a remarkable experience. Was this the solace of some lonely Brit in Mesopotamian days? "...there's some corner of a foreign land that is forever England." Is it still thus?

Basra was our next stop. A British Overseas Airway's "arrangements for tomorrow" notice reminds me we spent the night of November 27 1945 there. A Wing Commander, a well-known ophthalmologist in civvie street in London (I forget his name) invited me to play a set or two of tennis on a hard court within high walls. He was very good (public school, no doubt) and I was hopeless; he was not amused.

In transit, we could not sightsee. The white marble Islamic buildings and the broad streets with palm trees were to be seen again, I thought, but never so, until CNN broadcast so much of the Gulf War.

The notice given us by British Overseas Airways said "the launch will leave at 03.45" ... So on to Bahrein and another brush with danger if not death. Just as the Sunderland flying boat began its descent toward the harbour, I saw smoke and flame coming from the starboard engine. We were warned by the crew to prepare for an emergency landing, but we made it. Awaiting a new engine, we stayed maybe two days in Bahrein, a

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 twice to give his passengers, us, a good view of the Taj Mahal. Seen from aloft through clean air, and against a landscape the colour of khaki, the Taj Mahal has shone for ever in my mind.

That a Sunderland flying boat could land on the Ganges at Allahabad, half way between Karachi and Calcutta, indicates the breadth of the river. The riparian scene near where the plane was moored was typical of India, incessant chatter and wallop of wet clothes being thrashed on rocks.

## 8 Calcutta

It was late afternoon when we got to Calcutta to find that our billet was some distance from the harbour, and that we would be taken there by truck. Our escort warned us to keep our eyes front and ignore the crowd. Undaunted the driver nosed his way through the seething mob past tram cars packed with passengers with less room than herrings in a barrel. This was my first experience of a multitude, and I was relieved when it was over. Then in the middle of the night, when the air was still warm and damp and still possessed of that unique smell that was neither bad nor good we sped back along the same route. The streets were clear but on the verandahs thousands of bodies lay side by side, for mile after mile, or so it seemed.

From the quiet sultry streets of Calcutta my memory leaps forward to the spectacular aerial view of Burma on the way south to Rangoon. On our left there was the variegated greenery of boundless jungle; below on our right the brilliance of the Bay of Bengal. To fly at about six thousand feet, at about 150mph, was an out of this world experience.

Another giant step along Memory Lane, to the Shwe Dagon Pagoda. If the Taj mahal was the zenith of ny trip, the Shwe Dagon Pagoda was the nadir. There were numerous natives lingering on the steps up to the pagoda, probably beggars. Afraid that one of them might steal my shoes if I left them at the entrance, which was the done thing, I did not see the renowned interior, an everlasting regret.

After a night in a "swanky" hotel in Rangoon, with soft footed bearers

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 in time with my breathing backed by the incessant chirruping of a host of cicadas somewhere in the night. The patient died during the night. He was my age.

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 when I passed by next day. Did his next of kin ever hear of the gentle way his eyes were closed for ever?

Going to and from the hospital we occasionally saw a leper. He had a tall imposing build, bright black piercing eyes, and grey hair beneath a ragged turban the colour of lead. The way he supported his frame on a staff as tall as himself, exposed the leprosy diminishing the flesh and bones of his hands. One evening, when the sky was, as usual, black and sprinkled with stars, and I was sitting on the steps of our billet, I heard a choir somewhere singing Abide with Me. The notes were so sure, so contained and so true, I was astonished to learn later the singers were lepers living in a colony on a hill nearby. As a child, restless with fever, this was the hymn I would ask Ma to sing to send me to sleep.

## 11

Although the train journeys from Singapore to Penang were over-night I got the chance to speak to several Chinese. For what-ever reason the rapport was good and so I discovered surreptitiously that nationalism was on the rise, and that the people wanted the brits “out”. I saw the other side of the coin. No matter how friendly I might be, I was an enemy.

In retrospect the holiday camp where I was billeted was more than likely comandeered from its owners, probably Chinese. The bungalows, not more than six or eight of them, simple and unadorned, stood among tall trees (palms?) on the fringe of a beach of silvery sand, and the temperature at that time of year was ideal for swimming. During my early morning swims I met a Chinese school teacher who was on holiday at the Chinese holiday camp next to ours. I seriously considered settling down in Penang after demob, but I decided it was too late for me to do so, after a long talk with the school teacher who foresaw oh so clearly the fate of the British Colonies.

Away from the sultry enervating climate of Singapore I soon recov-

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 and 5pm October 23 1946 for the journey home from Singapore. What a relief to get on board ship after surviving in a tent in an embarkation unit for about two weeks (maybe longer). The food was slop. I lived on bananas. There was nothing to do but wait (maybe that’s where I learned how to wait for buses!).

The ship was crowded, especially at night when the hammocks were occupied, but we were a cheerful mob, after all we were on our way home. The first night out the Otranto must have sailed north on the Malacca Strait, then at the northern end of Sumatra turned West in the direction

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 off 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.**