

# Memories of VJ Day

August 2020 saw the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II, with Victory over Japan (VJ) Day on August 15th marked in various ways throughout the UK - albeit in a more muted fashion than would otherwise have been the case, due to the ongoing viral pandemic.

Alex McMurdo, born in Coalburn in 1926, served in WWII in the Far East and to mark the occasion he agreed to share some of his memories.

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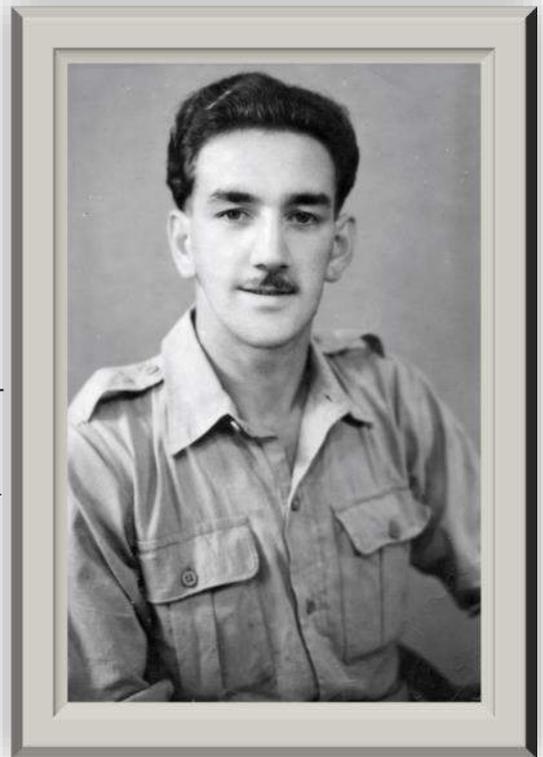
WWII ended in Europe in spring 1945 with the unconditional surrender of the German armed forces on May 8th. However that day saw me at training camp in Louth, Lincolnshire, preparing for service in the Far East, where I was to serve as a dispatch rider in the Motor Transport Section of the Royal Air Force, attached to the Medical Corps.

We duly set out on July the 26th, sailing from Liverpool on HMS Duchess of Richmond, a Glasgow-built ship that had no keel, having been constructed for the icy waters of the St Lawrence River in Canada. The journey began very rough, with a gale in the Bay of Biscay, and I was terribly sick until we reached the calmer waters of the Mediterranean.

We had not been informed of our destination. Years later I made enquiries and discovered that I had been *en route* to Japan. This had changed after the atomic bomb attacks on August 6th and 9th, while my ship was in the Indian Ocean. We were informed over the Tannoy about this offensive at the time, and warned that that we may notice “a rumbling”.

A day or two later we were advised of our destination: Singapore.

The journey took over a month. After 34 days at sea, eating and sleeping below the water line, I was glad to reach dry land when we docked in Singapore on August 28th. Technically the war was still in progress, but the Japanese had given notice of surrender on August 15th and this was formalised on September 2nd.



I was attached to RAF Mobile Field Hospital 81, which set up quarters in what had been a mental hospital prior to the Japanese occupation, when it was cleared of its patients in order to be used to treat Japanese.

Having secured the site, the RAF's next task was to assess a large number of Japanese who were wandering through the grounds wearing first aid arm-bands. Some were indeed hospital staff: others were simply masquerading as such. The 'pretend' medics were considered to be Surrendered Enemy Personnel and removed. Genuine medical and nursing staff continued in post, the hospital catering for Surrendered Enemy Personnel as well as sick and wounded British Servicemen. This dual function was facilitated by the premises having two wings, originally constructed to house male



Changi Prison Main Entrance

## The Hospital

'The Mental Hospital' (as it was known) was built by the British Colonial Government in 1928. Located on the Yio Chu Kang Road, it was a large facility - covering over 18 hectares of land and housing around 1,500 patients. In keeping with the custom of the time, the hospital ethos was detention.

The surrender of Singapore to Japan in February 1942 was a disaster for the unfortunate inmates, as the Japanese wished to use the premises as a Japanese Civilian and Military Hospital. Approximately 500 - deemed the 'quieter' patients - were taken to St John's Island (which had previously been used by the British as a quarantine station for incomers to Singapore). No longer detained, they were not supported and by the end of the war many had died of neglect. A fortunate few returned to family. However the vast majority - around a thousand patients - were detained in other locations such as the Central Mental Hospital at Perak, Malaysia: there too many suffered serious neglect.

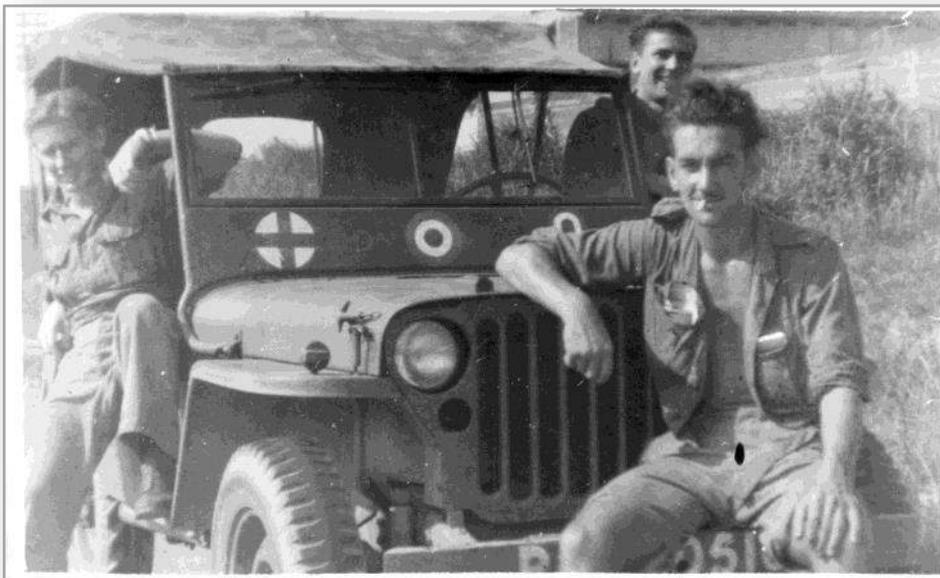
and female patients, respectively. The Japanese staff continued to care for Japanese patients, albeit under RAF supervision: from time to time British doctors would inspect the Japanese side of the hospital.

Another early duty was to open up Changi Prison. Among those liberated was a 14 year old Dutch girl called Louisa. She and her mother had been taken into custody by the Japanese following the fall of the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) in 1943. Louisa went on to meet George Rae of Coalburn, who like myself was in the Far East on military service. They later married and set up home back in Coalburn.

As a dispatch rider attached to the Mobile Field Hospital I normally had use of a motorcycle (BSA or Triumph), but during monsoon downfalls a Jeep was made available. My duties took me to various locations including Singapore General Hospital, RAF Seletar, and the flat in the magnificent Cathay Cinema building where Governor Lord Louis Mountbatten had his residence. I would also deliver dispatches to the Changi home of Sir Keith Park, who was in charge of all RAF personnel in South East Asia. I recall that his wife was mindful of my welfare and would instruct staff to “*get something for the officer*” by way of a refreshment whilst I waited in the heat for Sir Keith’s response.

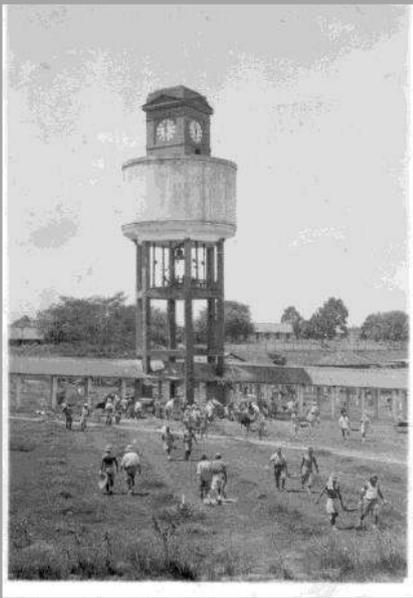


It was quite common for me in the course of these duties to have to stop and respond to Japanese servicemen who were giving themselves up by the side of the road. Many had journeyed a long distance, from as far as the border of India. Their transport - if any - was usually no more than a pushbike. Most didn’t realise that the war was over. My orders were to take possession of their arms (which they were surrendering freely), inform the regiment by radio, and remain there until staff arrived by jeep to take charge of the prisoners.



I also recall that there was a leper colony located nearby the hospital - once a week we would visit with sweets for the youngsters there.

Among the Japanese prisoners who were required to report to the transport department for daily duties was a 17 year old named Asai, who must have come of age while the war was in progress. Asai told me that he had joined the army from University, but he never spoke of the war. He became the regular person remitted to



Hospital clock- and water-tower, with Japanese prisoners employed in filling in foxholes in the grounds.

In April 1946 the hospital returned to its pre-war status and the RAF Mobile Field Hospital was gradually run down. However my dispatch rider duties continued into 1947.



A moment of light relief: 'wee Jock' and I swap uniforms.

look after my motorcycle and routinely went above and beyond, so that every time I went down to the garage collect the bike I would find it all clean and filled with petrol.

Asai was a talented artist and painted a picture of me that I have to this day.



When due for demobilisation I was posted to a Personnel Transit Camp by the Singapore docks. I spent about three weeks there as the troopship was delayed due to experiencing a cholera outbreak while *en route* from Hong Kong to collect us. Meanwhile we were inoculated against cholera, which made me quite sick at the time.

And so I left on the long journey home to Coalburn.

I have never left Britain since.

Alexander McMurdo,  
Glasgow, October 2020