

My Life in the Army

by

Fusilier Joe Longson

Lancashire Fusiliers and No 1 Commando



The Lancashire Fusiliers

Through e-mail I am in constant touch with Dave Platt, when I mentioned to Dave I had served most of my army career in the Commandos, Dave asked me to write about my army service, I was reluctant to do that because it would be going out to ex-service men who possible had seen action some where. On reflection I thought I would write something and anybody who thought it was rubbish could always delete it.

I have always considered myself to be a Lancashire man even though my family come from Cheshire and further back Derbyshire. I was born at 21 Peter Street in Leigh I went to Bedford church infants from age four until I was eleven. In those days at age eleven if you were a bright kid you sat the eleven plus examination. If you were considered academic you went to the grammar school if not, to the secondary modern school, I never sat the exam I didn't think I could have passed it. I still think that was good system I just think eleven was too young, I think fourteen, the leaving age in those days would have been better. So I went to Manchester Rd secondary modern, it was a beautiful school it is still there, I believe now amalgamated as a comprehensive with the former grammar school. The secondary school was a segregated school boys on one side girls on the other, that is the way it was which I think was a bad system.

Of course by now the war was on, it was an exiting time for a young boy there had been Dunkirk, Dunkirk was caused by the king of Belgium telling his troops to lay down their arms which allowed the Germans to sweep through and force our boys to retreat to the beaches from where the miracle with all those small boats took place. Then there was the battle of Britain, we were desperately short of pilots it was not unusual for a shot down pilot who had bailed out, to get straight into another aircraft and go back straight up. There was that famous quote from that great speech maker Sir Winston Churchill "Never in the history of human conflict has so much been owed to so many, by so few".

Of course once the battle of Britain ended the bombing did not, as most of you will know Leigh is about half way between Manchester and Liverpool, luckily we never got many bombs only the odd one or two but I could stand at the front door and hear the bombing going on in either one or the other but mostly Manchester. In those days they had the search lights and they would probe the sky and if one picked up an aircraft all the rest would lock onto it so it was very difficult to escape.

In 1940 I left school at the age of fourteen and started work in the Leigh spinners cotton mill, it is still there but that was short lived, after only a few months the mill closed down because of the war, I am not sure just what happened as young lad it did not bother me I did not like working in the mill, however I did it because I had to have a job. The mill is still there, Dave sent me a photo of it and up in the top right hand corner of the photo is the Manchester Rd Modern School. I bummed around doing what job I could get, I did a spell picking potatoes, there were no mechanical pickers in those days, a machine pulled by a horse drove along the rows and the momentum of the wheels geared to a spinner caused it to throw up the potatoes and a group of us would walk behind and pick them up and put them into cane hampers which were then picked up and emptied into a horse drawn tipper cart and they would be carted away and stored. I eventually got the job of lifting the hampers into the cart, the farmer offered me a permanent job but I turned that down although I liked working out side the pay was pathetic.

After the temporary job on the farm I bummed around doing what jobs I could get and ended up as an apprentice brick layer I liked the job but eventually threw it in because the boss had the other apprentice and I doing labouring work, mixing concrete by hand for the roofs of air raid shelters. We mixed all the concrete and then using staging or a gantry we would throw up or wheel the concrete up the gantry onto the roof while the man would lay it down, looking back, giving up that job was a bad decision but I did not think so at the time. So I finally got a job as second man on a truck and trailer, in those days it was compulsory to have two men on a truck and trailer and the boss got over that by hiring boys. The reason for two men had been because in the early days the brakes in the trailer were cable brakes controlled by a ratchet system operated by the second man but by the time I worked on the trucks the ratchet system was gone there were air brakes but the legislation was still in force. I was sixteen then, I liked the job, despite the fact that the speed limit was only twenty miles an hour we travelled all over Lancashire, carting cotton to the various mills. We would go to the docks at Liverpool and pick up the cotton and take it to the mills which were still operating, some times we would go to dumps of cotton out in the country side covered simply by canvas sheets.

I eventually I came to my seventeenth birthday and then things changed, the day I turned seventeen I was given a two ton truck to drive, I had never actually had any instruction at driving I knew what to do of course I had been sitting alongside the driver for few months, he gave me an hour or two's instruction behind the wheel and that was it, then later on I ended up driving a three ton coal truck. This was really hard work, in Leigh at that time was a firm called Sutcliffe and Speakman, I believe in peace time they made brick making machinery but now they were on war work, every day hail rain or snow we would go to the railway goods yard and there would six or seven full wagons of coal and we would load the truck eight times with over four tons of coal, take it to the firm and tip it, over thirty two ton's of coal a day, the fact that I drove the truck and spent those months shovelling all that coal is relevant later on.

As you can appreciate I eventually got fed of this, I knew when I was eighteen I would get called up and I wanted to pick my regiment which of course was the LF's so on the 4th of April 1944 I joined the army I did not turn 18 until the 24 of May the following month. I am getting ahead of myself a little because I never mentioned that late in 1941 the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour and the Americans were in the war. What the Americans did then has never been given the credit it should have, instead of launching the full force of their armed forces against the Japanese which they could have been fully expected to do, they split their forces, took the on the Japanese's with one hand and came to Europe with other, President Roosevelt said "these are our brothers" and when I joined the army, Britain was full of American forces with the American bombers going over Europe as well as the RAF, the Americans flew by day because their bombers were more heavily armed than ours were and they flew in formation so any attacking fighters had to penetrate the fire power of the whole formation, despite that they lost over fifty thousand air men. Our big bombers went by night so it all worked out well. Meanwhile the Allies were gearing up for the invasion.

So I joined the army, I was given a travel warrant and sent up to Stranraer up in Scotland we had to go from Stranraer to Larne in Ireland by Ferry. The train was absolutely packed we had to fit in any where we could. When got to Stranraer we were allowed to go into the services canteen although we were still civvies, it was full with a lot of Americans in there then there was this fight between two Americans these two men were BIG men, what caused the fight I do not know but an American Sergeant went to stop the fight and one of the fighters whacked the sergeant and the sergeant and he went for it hammer and tongues until the American military police came just two of them and they stood no nonsense they both carried a long baton and were quite prepared to use them, they wore white painted helmets every body called them snow drops but anything less like a snow drop would be hard to imagine.

Any way there was group of recruits we caught the ferry and when we got to the other side we were taken to the Palace Barracks which was in Hollywood near Belfast in N Ireland. It was a peace time barracks and would have been good then but now where there would have been one bed there were two bunks, which of course meant that every thing else had to be used twice as much as it was designed for but we were all young lads and it did not matter. We trained as a group, then once the training was over we would all go to our own regiments. This place was bit different from the normal training camp, there were a lot of cadet officers with us and all us young lads were volunteers and because of the cadets our training was six months rather the normal four months. The training was tough but it did not bother me too much after all I had, had a tough job and I had a pretty tough constitution but some of the boys who had, had soft jobs found it hard but we all got through it. I have enclosed a photo of our platoon, the sergeant in the middle was a scot as you can see from his cap, he was tough little guy not much more the five feet high, I guess he was in his late thirties but he kept up with us young fellows and we did quite a lot of running with our gear on and rifles so it was pretty hard, in fact we had to pull some of the young fellows in, but not him.

I was only into the training a month or two when D -Day happened, a lot has been written about D Day but there were a couple of things which were not mentioned much, one was the floating harbours which were towed across, one of them was wrecked by the weather but one survived and did Stirling work getting vehicles and equipment onto the shore. The other was "Pluto" pipe line under the ocean, this was a huge drum wrapped with flexible pipe which was towed across the channel unwinding as it went, it was to supply the trucks and tanks with fuel but the interesting thing for me was that I was told the pipe was made at the Cable Works in Leigh. None of this of course interfered with our training and apart from a seven day leave we just carried on as normal to the end of our six months. The sergeant major we had, had only one eye the story was that he had fired a two inch mortar under a tree and hit a branch and through it lost an eye, he was very tough but fair and at the end of the course some of the boys hoisted him up on shoulders and carried him around he parade ground.

Then came a notice on the notice board, asking for volunteers for the Commandos or the Paratroops so being young and silly I put my name down for either, in the event the commandos came up first, a couple of officers came down to give us a once over, one was a medical officer but it was only a formality really because we had all just done our six months hard training. So we were shipped off to the holding commando which was in Wrexham in N Wales, I cannot remember whose barracks it was I think it was the Welsh Regiment but I cannot be sure. We got really nice food there, the cooks were marines, the food we got in Ireland was not the best but occasionally we would get a really nice meal and just by coincidence the CO would come around asking how the food was. Once the barracks filled up with enough people we were shipped off by train up to Scotland to do our training. I cannot remember were we got onto the train, we had all our gear including our rifle's the standard Lee Enfield's, we eventually got into the Scottish country side and then we saw some deer in the distance, next thing there were rifles poked out of the train windows with some idiots blazing away at the deer, if they hit any I do not know and I do not know where they got their ammunition from because we did not have any.

As soon as we got off the train at Spean Bridge we started training, marching the seven miles from the bridge to the Commando training site at Achnacary which in peace time was a private estate, there was a large castle type house and all the trainees were in Nissen huts in the grounds. On the estate were two Lochs, Loch Lochie and Loch Arkaig I think that is the correct spelling but is 70 years ago since I went up there, these Lochs were we did our

training with the landing craft. Practising in the landing craft was a regular thing usually in a morning we would go out in all battle order and then we would start to come in, the sailors who drove the boats had it off to a fine art as we were coming in they would drop a kedge anchor with a cable and when they got to the right spot they would shut off power and start to wind back onto the kedge so that we always landed in the water up to our waist. This was Christmas time 1944 and if you think being dropped into a Scottish Loch up to your waist in the middle of a Scottish winter is nice, I suggest you go and try it, as we came ashore there were aiming points and marksmen using these with live ammunition and thunder flashes to make the landings as realistic as possible. After the landings we carried on with normal training still wet through until knocking off time, we did have some drying rooms so we did have some luxury we would not have had in real action. All the Nissen huts had just one big pot belly stove in the middle that was the heater if you wanted coal for it you had to go a nick it from the coal dump and not get caught; it was all part of the training. We had some training in things like unarmed combat and how to use a knife on some one, various holds you could hold a person in while you frog marched them away. We were taught to abseil down the side of the big house, this was just a straight wall and we did not have any fancy gear we just took off our gaiters and fitted them under our groin and tried to keep the rope on them so it would be more comfortable which was waste of time because they always slipped off.

Most of the training was physical I can only remember one twenty mile hike all the rest were running and marching, run and march, run and march, speed marching it was what we did, it was to run and walk none stop, twelve miles non stop was the normal test, any one who could not do the training was (RTUD returned to their own regimental unit) and then go over a deliberately muddy assault course and you had to be able to fire your rifle once you were through, obviously if your rifle would not fire you were no use. Part of the training was to march over Ben Nevis but it was so deep in snow we could not go. Christmas dinner. I do not know if they still do it but during my time in the service it was traditional for the officers to wait on the men at Christmas dinner and our officers did in fact do that for us, which of course which we all loved. Up there we had the best food I ever had in the army before or after, we did have good food in Wrexham of course but not as good as up there. The course came to an end they cut it back a week or two, the weather had been so bad which had made it harder than normal they must have thought we had, had enough and we were issued with our prized green berets, I still have mine.

The boxing match.

We all arrived back at the holding commando at Wrexham we then learned that they always held a new intake boxing championship, so I thought I do not mind watching boxing; I did not know then that I was going to be part of it. They must have been short of volunteers because the PT sergeant lined us up in two rows to see what we could do, I had chap much smaller than I opposite me, I had seen boxing matches there was no TV then of course, you either saw it on the news reels or live, my dad had taken me to boxing occasionally so I had an idea what they did, so I stuck out my left against the smaller man the sergeant saw me and he said you know what to do and he put me in the tournament, no chance to refuse. There was no such thing as asking what experience you had, no getting weighed to make sure you were matched, no giving you a bit of tuition, you went in the ring cold turkey. The night of the tournament came it was Friday night and it would carry on over the week end, the hall was packed, all the guys from Scotland all the guys from around the barracks, in the front rows the officers with their ladies, the fights started and went on, mine was the last fight of the night.

My name was called out and I hung back I really wanted no part of this, boxing apart from watching was some thing I had never been interested in, wrestling was a different story I would not have minded doing that. Any way I reluctantly made my way to the ring and climbed up into it then my opponent climbed in, as soon as saw him I thought oh gosh what am I going to do with him, you only had to look at him to know he was scrapper, big tattooed arms and a flat scrappers nose that had obviously taken a battering. Well there was nothing I could do but get on with it, I thought when the bell goes I will go out prance around and use a left jab until I can get a right hander in, simple really,---- if only. I tried that, pranced around then Wham! I was on the canvass, I never even saw it coming but I wasn't hurt I got up and tried again, went on for a bit, then wham I was down again, not hurt,, got up and went again, I managed to get through the rest of the round without being knocked down again. I thought this prancing around is not working, so when the bell went I went at him with both fist going as hard I could and we stood there toe to toe and slugged it out and I gave as good as got, no more prancing around, it was pretty brutal. I gained confidence in the second round I felt now I could at least hold my own but I had a plan, as soon as the bell went I would fly across the ring and catch him off guard and get a few good ones in and I did fly across, only to be stopped by the ref and brought back to the centre of the ring to shake hands, so it was back to the toe to toe routine.

Of course he won the match he had knocked me down twice but at one stage in the third round there was a brief interlude where for a few seconds we stood looking at each other.

I could read his mind; he was wondering what on earth did he have to do to stop me, I was getting more and more confident I felt I was getting on top I could see he was getting tired, I was fitter than he was, I reckon if I had more time I could possibly have beaten him. So there was no argument he won but I was not bothered about losing I had a 36 hour pass for the next day and if I had won I would probably have had to stick around because the pass I had was quite illegal but I will come back to the story of my illegal passes later on. That was not the end of my boxing career, as I got out of the ring the PT sergeant who had put me in said good fight lad and a mate of mine a Yorkshire lad said "I didn't know tha could feight like that Joe" neither did I, it was pure self defence. How ever as I said it was not the end, from time to time the troops (we did not have platoons) we had troops, they would have milling contest this composed of two teams of fighters starting with the biggest men, down to the smaller men, you went into the ring for one minute no boxing, just slugging which is what I had just done, they made me have two fights and they were both draws, which was not too bad because I was fighting their best men and I did not consider myself a fighter.

I later learned that the man I fought in the intake championship had won it, it he had three or four more fights and had knocked all his other opponents out. I did not see him fight because I snuk off on my pass. The fact that he had knocked his opponents out did not register with me at the time he had knocked me down twice and twice I had got up and carried on I didn't even feel hurt. However later on in life I had to see a doctor I think it was with a crook shoulder and he commented on my huge neck muscles something I did not even know I had but was obviously the result of shovelling 16 or 17 tons of coal a day during my formative years with the biggest shovel you could buy a number ten and I think that us why he could not knock me out even after two goes.

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My 36 hour passes, I was quite friendly with the troop clerk, he got more money than I did, we only got three shillings a day, I sent a shilling a day home and they stopped us sixpence a week for hair cuts and sixpence a week for barrack room damages there was something else to and I cannot remember what but I ended up with twelve and sixpence a week. I did not smoke and that was a big item the boys who smoked and that was just about all of them, they got paid and bought their cigarette ration and they were just about broke for the rest of the week, I did not smoke so I could make my money spin out. One day the troop clerk said to me "lend us a couple of bob, Longson" so I lent him the two bob he did pay me back but the next week it came again and then again, it became his two bob he always paid me back but he would slip me a pass when no one else was getting any, I think he must have slipped the pass in amongst the officers papers and then officer signed it without looking at what he was signing.

They finally got around to allocating all the ones who had come down from Scotland all the boys I had trained with went to Yugoslavia to fight with the partisans, I would not have fancied that very much, I had trained for beach landings and that is what I was expecting but this business of skulking behind the lines was not to my taste at all but I needn't have worried I got a holiday instead, sort off. Because I was a driver I was sent on a six week driver mechanics course, in those days driving was a skill not to day of course, any way where did you think they sent me? To a garage in Farnsworth six weeks in civvie billets a short bus ride from home. However before that happened there was an incident, I was in the barrack room one night when an officer came in he said grab your rifles and bayonets and come with me, so did as we were told and just as we were, we went out side and were loaded onto trucks and driven off into the night it was a long way, we finally got where we were going, got off the trucks and billeted down for the night, next day we were taken to a prisoner of war camp housing Italians.

It appears the Italians had been acting up, had attacked the CO and beaten up the RSM they were housed in long barrack rooms with double doors in the centre, us young fellows had rifles so we had to go in and drive them out side through the double doors in the centre and the ones who had been giving the trouble were sorted and sent back into the barrack rooms and as they went through the doors they were grabbed and given a bit of rough justice the same as they had given the RSM. I cannot remember just how long all this took not more than a day or two but the upshot was that we arrived back at camp very late at the night before I was due to go on my course at Farnsworth. It had been a couple of rough days and I was dog tired so I just tumbled into bed, I got up the next morning washed and had a shave and put on my uniform, the one I just slept in for two nights and went on parade. Before we could go on the course we had to be inspected by the RSM, he walked down the line and when he came to me his eyes just about popped out of his head and he blew his top, he berated me, would not let me speak and brought me out in front and said this is what a soldier should not look like, I have a mind not to let you go. Any way he did let me go and I suspect he did know where I had been and was just keeping up standards.

We arrived at Farnsworth I cannot remember how we got there it is so long ago now, I know I was really looking forward to it I wanted to learn as much as I could but the course was a real washout we never had any real classes, for the most part we just bummed around killing time the best way we could picking up what learning we could off our own bat. The only good thing was, I was near home in a civvie billet and could just catch a bus home every weekend. When we got back I was assigned to the motor pool, it was all in a very big garage some of us were given trucks I did not get one and there was nothing much to do so I kept pestering the sergeant to get me a truck, finally out of sheer frustration he gave me a 15 hundred weight chevvie, problem was, it was stuck in a corner with no engine. We would go on parade and the sergeant would say all those with trucks fall out so I would fall out and

I would go out with my mate with whom I had been billeted with in Farnsworth, he had been given a truck and we would go out and pick up supplies such as a truck load of bread but it was boring and I was losing all the fitness I had built up the last couple of years. Then the war in Europe ended and the country started to swing toward the Japanese and just about then I turned 19 and I was scheduled for the Far East. Those of us going east were given the sailing date and confined to barracks but there was a hole in the back fence and we would just sneak out. The night before I was due to move out,

I sneaked out through the back fence as usual and coming back I walked around the corner of the hut straight into the arms of the Provost Sergeant, I and all the others who had been caught were put on a charge and paraded in front of the captain but he could not do anything, so we were remanded for on board ship and we never heard any more about it.

We embarked on the ship, it was called the Cape Town Castle and I believe it was normally on the England, S Africa run as the name implies, it was a lovely ship but now it was a troop ship, it worked on the old fashioned system of hammocks and mess tables, the way it worked, we had hammocks which we slung under the ceiling rather like sardines in a tin. Below was a long table with a bench at each side designed to hold a set number of men, when the food came, it came in bulk with enough (in theory) food for all the men at the table and the poor NCO at the top of the table would try and give each person a fair share of what was there. It worked in a rough and ready kind of way. With every one in the hammocks slung so close together the air got pretty thick and coming down from the clean sea air up on deck to below decks was not pleasant. Once we got into a warmer climate we abandoned the hammocks and slept up on deck. We finally reached India, I think it was Bombay (Mumbai) and disembarked.

I finally got to my unit the 3rd Commando Brigade which had 4 Commandos two army and two marine, a commando was 600 men, I was put into number 1 Commando the other army Commando was number 5, I was not in the motor pool I was just back amongst the rest of the boys and back into training which suited me better than driving a truck. When we went on parade we only wore boots gaiters shorts and berry's, I got sunburnt on my back and then we were training with big packs on and it was jolly uncomfortable I was continually shifting the weight from one shoulder to the other to get comfortable. Once I got browned up it was all right then but things were hotting up every thing was switching to attack the Japanese and it looked like we were going to see some action, we were going to land at the top of the Malaysian peninsular, form a bridge head, the infantry were to come in and we were going to with draw and do it again further down. The landing ships were in Bombay harbour with landing craft like the ones we had trained on in Scotland slung around the sides in place of the lifeboats, it was all systems go.

It never happened, the atom bombs were dropped and the Japanese surrendered, some thing which no one thought would happen but the atom bombs proved to tough to resist. For a while they did not know what to with us, the planners had been suddenly presented with this problem far earlier than expected, how ever we embarked on the ships our ship was an old Castle line ship the Llanstephan Castle we were absolutely packed in, once again we had hammocks but we all slept on deck . Even after we embarked they did not seem to know what to with us, for a long time we were parked in Trincomalee harbour in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) what a beautiful harbour, golden beach, palm trees a real tropical paradise but sadly we never got to go ashore we were just stuck there in the middle of the harbour. One thing we had to do was sling over board bags of potato's, they had been loaded on deck in pouring rain in India and they had all gone rotten. No-one worried about polluting the sea they just went in bag after bag all our fres h potatoes. From then on we got dried potato's, not like the ones you can get today these had been sliced and dried and when reconstituted they had a hard rind they were quite awfull but it was eat them or go hungry.

They tried every thing to try and make them edible used all the tinned milk we had on board to mix with them, all to no avail. There was also the bread, this was a very old ship and the bread was full of weevils, it was like current bread, we had to pick all the weevils out before we could eat it. After languishing in Trincomalee for some time we finally set off for Hong Kong. With the ship being so crowded and the poor food, it was not a pleasant trip but there was not much we could do about that, there were several other ships as well as ours, one of them was a big French battle ship and as we went through the Straits of Malacca the story was, that it hit a floating mine which just bounced off it, if it was true I was just glad we had not hit it, we would have gone down like a lump of lead, any way we got through in a good state apart from our existing poor conditions. We finally arrived in Hong Kong scrambled down the nets on the side of the ships into the landing craft and were ferried to shore. We formed up and marched along the sea front to a pre war barracks it was in poor condition but better than the ship. We heard a story that they had not seen such smart troops for a long while, seeing they had not seen any British troops at all for four years I think any British troops would have looked pretty smart.

The next three weeks were hectic we did 4 hours on and 4 hours off for the full three weeks, the whole place was a mess chasing looters and doing guard duty to make sure every thing was safe, it was a transition period from the Japanese administration period back to British. By the end of three weeks we were all getting pretty knackered and grumpy. However things were getting under control and we were then able to take it a bit easier. We had regular patrols in the hills the Chinese people were very short of fuel for cooking and they would go up into the hills and cut down the trees for fuel, they carried a pole across their shoulders with a large bundle hanging on each end, I tried one of these on my shoulder and they were really heavy but the small Chinese seemed to manage them without too much trouble. Cutting the trees down caused erosion and Hong Kong has a great catchment system deep trenches are all around the peak all the way down so no drop of water goes to waste. Problem was, once they cut the trees down it causes erosion and would fill the trenches with soil and ruin their performance. There were quite a few nice houses standing empty temporarily and the looters would take off the roof tiles just to cut out the purlins for fire wood.

Looters were a big problem, up on the peak was a beautiful crescent shaped hospital, I think it was called the Queen Elizabeth Hospital but after all this time I am not quite sure about that, as far as I know it is still there, it had been completely gutted by looters we spent a lot of time there. Most of our time however was spent patrolling the hills, there is a big reservoir it is called the Tai Tam Tuk reservoir and one day we up there on a bright sunny day we all stripped off and went skinny dipping one of the boys had a camera and took a photo, I sent a copy home and my Dad cut the bottom off, he said it wasn't decent. At one stage we had to mount a guard on the Hong Kong, Shanghai bank, by now things were beginning to pick up and there were officers of various rank bobbing in and out all the time we only had rifles so we were there at the stand easy position, then an officer would come by we had to slope arms and give the proper salute, slope arms salute, then slope arms present arms, it was crazy if they had given us side arms it would not have been too bad but with rifles it was crazy.

There were still a lot of Japanese prisoners and a Liberty ship came into the harbour, it must have had a cargo of some kind. For the benefit of any one who does not know Liberty ships were they were _____→

mass produced by the Americans to counter the German U boats which were taking a toll on our ships, they were built in sections and taken to assembly points at various ports and then all the pieces fitted together, they were about ten thousand tons with a steam engine and one screw would do about 9 knots flat out. I mention this because it was decided to get rid of some of the prisoners by putting them into the holds of that ship and taking them back to Japan and I was one of the party assigned as guards, in all there were eight hundred prisoners. While the prisoners were forming up to go on board I saw something which would never happen in the British army. There was a group about the size of a British platoon one young fellow in the front row did or didn't do something he should or shouldn't have done, I do not know what it was but the NCO in charge just balled up his fist and gave him a hearty whack on the side of the head and no-one batted an eye lid.

At the same time I spoke to a young Japanese soldier, he spoke excellent English I think he was more the clerical type rather than a fighting man, I said to him what is the story on these Kama Kazy pilots, he shrugged his shoulders and said, If you don't go you get shot. So I suppose it was better to go out in a blaze of glory rather than get shot for cowardice. Once every one was on board we set off, the name of the ship was called the Samlamu it had a plaque on a bulkhead which said it was built in Baltimore in 30 days. I thought to put that huge ship together in 30 days was tremendous, I have read since that they actually put one together in less than 5 days. What the conditions were like in the holds I do not know but they all seemed happy enough after all they were going home and I suspect most of them were conscripts who were only too happy to get out, no more whacks on the side of the head, they put on wrestling displays for us.

During the war merchant ships had a gun on the stern the gun had gone but the gunners quarters were right up in the stern underneath where the gun had been, the position of the quarters is relevant later on, we did guard duty but really it was a formality, as I have said they were going home. I was on guard duty one evening it was a fine clear night and I saw some thing quite wonder full, it was a full moon coming up, this huge silvery ball coming right up out of the sea, I had never seen anything like it, I have seen the moon come up before but always on land never like that, I have read recently that there is some thing called a super moon when the moon appears much larger, I think that is what I saw, It was fantastic. We eventually reached Japan and dropped off our prisoners' I cannot quite remember where we dropped them off but I know we ended up in a place called Sasibo it is a large port, we sailed up the fiord type passage between high cliffs until we reached Sasibo. We anchored in mid steam and went ashore in boats, from mid stream we could see the warehouses along the banks, they all looked pretty good but when we walked through the opening between the buildings every where was flat, the roads had been cleaned up so you had clear roads between piles of rubble, where the people lived, to this day I do not know. We were told that when the American bombers went over if they did not find their targets they dropped their bombs on this place and it sure looked like it. On shore every scrap of land that could be cultivated was cultivated, hill sides were terraced nothing was missed.

We picked up 4 thousand tons of coal to take back to Hong Kong and set off home it was not to be the same nice trip we had going, we overtaken by a typhoon , typhoon is the anglicised Chinese word for big wind Tai Fun, I think that is the way it is spelt but not too sure. It was absolutely dread full, the ship was rolling also pitching fore and aft we were not allowed to go forward of the bridge, it was rolling so badly it seemed as it rolled one way you almost reach over and touch the water. I mentioned before, our quarters were right aft, right over the propeller shaft, when the ship pitched forward the prop would come out of the water and go clonk, clonk, clonk it was so rough even some of the crew were sick. I cannot remember now just how many there were of us 8 or 9 I think, we were all in the same bunk

room and most of us pretty sick. Then some one started to vomit over side of he bunk then others did the same, I was sick but manage not to vomit, there was all this stuff all over the

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hard floor and one of the boys had picked up somewhere, a big jar of pickled gherkins it was on top of a locker and with all the rolling around it slid off and smashed on the floor , it was a real mess with vomit and pickled gherkins all swilling around as the ship pitched and rolled. The weather eventually quietened down and some one cleaned up all the mess I cannot remember who did it, I do know it wasn't me. At one stage we were stationed on an island off the coast I think it was called Ping Chau we got on quite well with the locals we would exchange some of our rations for things like fresh eggs and on one occasion we played them at football. I was in the team but I had not a clue about soccer, in Leigh, Rugby league was our game even at school and that was all I had ever played, so they stuck me in goal, every time they got near the goal they scored, I think they won by a million to one, my NCO said next time they would play a man short. We eventually went back to the mainland to carry on with normal duties, I got a trip to Singapore, we had to take two of our own people who were prisoners for something they had done wrong (do not know what their crime was), must have been pretty bad to have to got sent to Changi jail in Singapore but they gave us no trouble there wasn't any where to go out at sea, I had a bit of a smile, we were out on deck miles out at sea, I was in charge of the prisoners, the sergeant came to me and said " Keep your eye on that fellow he is a frog man" he would have had an awfull long way to swim to shore.

It was a lovely trip the weather was good both ways we ate the same food as the crew they were very good, they took our rations and mixed them in with their own, they took our hard tack biscuits and shared their fresh bread with us they were New Zealanders, the ship was the New Zealand shipping line, we had the same ship both ways, I think the shipping line does not exist any more but we got things like nice NZ butter and nice fresh bread without weevils. Once we got back things began to deteriorate we were not getting any more recruits, commando training in Britain had stopped and the long service men who had done their time we going home to be released from the army, so were getting smaller and smaller, they finally amalgamated the remnants into 1/5 commando. We were still losing men; we were finally disbanded and were to be sent back to our regiments. The system they had for releasing us from the army was a number based on the age you went in, plus length of service, so obviously the long service men were gone, my number was 60 and I had just over three months to go, but as following events will tell you I did not get out easily.

We were finally shipped back to India to join the LFs who were out there, there were only about six commandos and we had to change trains a place called Jhansi and our party grew a little bigger there were two LFs going back and some ex airborne troops as well, I think they had been misbehaving so they sent them to the LFs to be rid of them. We had several hours to wait, the train was in the station but no engine that was to come later, we were able to load our gear onboard and then we had several hours to kill, I think we were able to get some thing to eat on the station so we did not go off the station. There was myself, a lance corporal and a full corporal we were together on the station all the time, it was getting late so I went and made myself comfortable on a pile of kitbags which were already in the carriage and tried to get some sleep, I never quite managed it, there was all of a sudden a huge hullabaloo we hadn't a clue what was going on, the police were all around and were rounded up and confined to one bit of space. What had happened was, some of the boys had gone into Jhansi and got a load of booze down, then as the engine was backing onto the train, (it was a steam engine,)they had kicked off the driver and fire man and tried to drive the engine onto the train and instead had crashed it through some stops at the end of the track. Next thing a big detachment of LFs came and stuck us all in jail, it was convenient that there was an empty, disused army jail just close by so we were all stuck in there.

So began my last three months in the army. There was a line of cells and we were all stuck in there two to a cell except me, I was the odd man out I had a cell to myself which was fine by me, I was happy with my own company. From time to time we were taken into a large room and the various witnesses were brought in to pick out the culprits and every time the Indian witnesses would pick out some different except one Anglo- Indian who picked me out every time, we all knew who had done it but no one would let on. Then some how I picked up a bug of perhaps a bit of Malaria, I became quite sick vomiting all over the place so they carted me off to hospital, while I was in there I had two guards assigned to me, they propped their rifles against the wall behind my bed and spent all day playing cards. I soon recovered and went back to prison but by now they had taken us out of the small cells and put us all into one large one. Every day we would go for a walk under guard of course and on the site was a concrete swimming pool we got in and cleaned it up and it was filled up and now we were able to go swimming, so with the swimming and walking. Time was going on, I was quite happy because it was better doing this than being in the regiment doing training I did not want to do because my time was up. Of course we were still having these interrogations but nothing ever came of it.

Then finally we had a trial, I think they were clutching at straws, I think they did not have a clue who had done it, they put two men on trial one of them was one of the culprits and the other was the lance corporal who had been on the station with the corporal and I, all the time, every time were questioned we told them the same story we had all been together all the time on the station so why they picked on Jimmy I have no idea. The two of them were charged jointly so they both had to found guilty or neither of them, in the event they were found not guilty and immediately they were whisked away back to England as fast as they could be. I suppose as far as Jimmy was concerned at least he got away home quicker than the rest of us, he had got a pretty raw deal as he was completely innocent while the other culprit who got away with it completely, the one who did not go on trial, was the only one of us who had not been picked out at some time for some thing. While I was in hospital there was a major in at the same time and once I was allowed up I was talking to him and I told him Jimmy was innocent so whether or not it made any difference at the trial I do not know. If he had been found guilty I do not know what we would have done I am pretty sure we would have turned the other fellow in or forced him to give himself up.

So I finally made it to the LFs with one week to go, at that time government had brought out a new system for paying the soldiers it was a three star system, we got the three stars straight away, when I got talking to boys in the LFs they asked how many stars have you got I said three, they were amazed none of them had three stars, did you have to shoot for them, no, more amazement. That is one thing about being in the commandoes we got the best of everything we had far more fire power than the infantry twice as many Bren guns per head, and us ordinary fellows had American semi automatic Garand rifles, they had a clip of 8 rounds you opened the beech and slipped in the whole thing and after you fired the last round the clip flew out and you were ready for the next clip, I think they were not as accurate as the Lee Enfield's but you could blaze away much faster, the only problem with blazing away, you had to carry all that ammo. Gas masks were assault mask just clipped on to your belt in a pouch not the ones you carried on your chest which were standard in those days. We had American steel helmets, the commandos never wore helmets in action but the helmets were good, they had an inner liner which came out and left you with a bowl and on the ships at sea we had salt water showers with special salt water soap which left you feeling sticky, so we would have our shower then fill the helmets with fresh water and wash the salt water stickiness off with the fresh water.

I finally went on parade with my Regiment after almost four years , we never got put into a platoon as it was not worth it, we just went on parade behind all the other troops there were just six of us, so originally there must have been eight. What is not commonly realised that the commandos were never a separate unit we were always part of our various Regiments we wore our own cap badges except no 2 commando who adopted the fighting knife as a badge the marines of course already had their cap badge. We received our pay from the regiment, in those days to get your money, your regiment was called out, then your name and we had to march up to desk salute, the officers gave you your pay, step back salute again, and march away I do not know what the system is these days I suspect it is not like that. At last I was on my way home, we went to Bombay and got onto the ship it was a proper troop ship, it was called the Empire Windrush we did not have hammocks we had canvas bunks, not very luxurious but adequate and for food you picked up a stainless steel indented tray and filed past the food delivery no choice, you ate what you were given or you didn't eat but it did not matter we were going home just like the Japs on the liberty ship.

When we got to England we were taken to a demobilisation centre where you picked out a suit and enough clothes for a full out fit, shoes, under clothes ECT and then you were on the way home. The suits were not very nice, mass produced but they gave you a breathing space to have time to buy clothes that suited you, I did not have any civilian clothes that fit I had grown out of them all so I needed the suit. So I was out of the army, I was twenty two, no trade, no job, no money, all I had in the world were the clothes I had on and a hundred pounds, the army had gave me thirty pounds gratuity, I had the rest because I had been in prison for three months and that was my back pay. So ended my army career, I took off my uniform and only put it on to go to work in, I gave my great coat to my dad, he had it dyed brown and it looked nice and he wore it for a long time.



Fusilier Joe Longson

Lancashire Fusiliers and No 1 Commando