

Grace and Ken Rhodes - War history

I am sure you have obtained lots of information from Grandma Saunders, who lived through the war.

You specifically asked about my Mum and Dad's part in the war. I can give you small snapshots of what happened but, as I am sure you have found out, in the years following the war it was never discussed and one never asked questions. Indeed for me at school in the 1950's and 60's our history lessons stopped around 1900. What I did discover was mainly as a result of something on the TV (when there were programmes, often comedies, such as 'allo 'allo and 'Dads Army') which provoked some comment. I was also old enough to be present when friends of my parents who owned a record shop came to visit. The owner had worked in the development of radar and associated technology during the war with its application to ships etc. He and my Dad would sit exchanging stories with his wife, Mum and I sitting quietly trying to take it all in. So often I would have liked to ask questions but I felt this was not the time or place to do so. I guess this was a part of their lives I had no idea about. In retrospect I am not sure how much my Dad told my Mum.

Firstly the outline of their war. Dates and some information about this comes from their rather brief war records which I obtained this year.

Dad enlisted in September 1940 into REME (Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers), where he trained as an electrician and was posted to Croyden where he was promoted to Lance Corporal. On 4.11.41 he embarked to go abroad (to India) then on 30.12.1941 he embarked for 'M/E' which I think was Singapore to defend Singapore from the expected attack from the sea by the Japanese. Within weeks of his arrival the Japanese attacked but through the jungle trapping all the troops (from several countries) on the spit of land where Singapore was built. The Commander surrendered and all, the military and the civilians were taken prisoner. In the records it states "Missing in Malaya 15.2.1942" Then it says "Prisoner of war in Jap Hands" but no date (see later)

Dad's unit was moved to work on the notorious Burma Railway but he ended up working in the hospital and cookhouse. In practice the hospital had no drugs or any way to treat ill and injured men. No anaesthetics, antibiotics or any medicines. No medical or dental equipment. The cookhouse had minimal supplies of basic foods and all had to survive on so little that malnourishment was rife.

The next part says "Released by Allied Forces, 12.9.1945" There are no more formal entries and as far as I know the prisoners were brought back to the UK by sea in 'hospital' ships to allow time for the doctors to treat the many diseases and injuries they had. Your Grandma remembers him coming home in August of 1946 so he was nearly 11 months coming back. At that time he still only weighed 7 stone.

Like many of those he had suffered from Yellow fever, Jaundice and Malaria (which reoccurred several times up until the 1980's), had extensive leg ulcers and suffered with his teeth. He was lucky, many did not come home. The conditions in the camp also caused subtle but lasting damage to his heart.

Mum enlisted in October 1941. As a woman with no dependents, she decided to enlist rather go into the Ammunition factories or away as Land Girl.

Why the Royal Airforce I don't know but whilst she was in the recruitment office a Naval Officer came in and asked if the Airforce could supply them with drivers (why? Mum always said it was because the WREN's would not lower themselves to drive as they were the senior service!) When her turn came to register she asked if she could become a driver? They agreed and at the end of the war she ended up able to drive heavy lorries as well as cars.

I don't know where she trained but in June 1942 she was posted to Charmy Down near Bath, Somerset (about a mile from where Stephen went to University). Not only did drivers take officers and the pilots where they needed to go, they would collect and deliver items and stores etc. In addition in poor/foggy weather they would help the planes to land by lining up along the runway with headlights on to guide them in. She then transferred to RAF Colerne August 1943, another fighter command base. In August 1944 she was transferred to Broadwell, in Oxfordshire, (near RAF Brize Norton). She was discharged in October 1945.

At some point she was being transferred abroad but just before they went the authorities stopped it because they could not get her husband's permission for her to go abroad. This in spite of them making her Dad, Grandpa Foreshaw, her legal 'next of kin' when Dad went abroad. I don't think that would happen today! I think Mum was happiest at Charmy Down, she always spoke of that base not the others.

Mum made several friends in the billets. Many of the ladies were from European countries invaded by the Germans. Her best friend and fellow driver who I met on many occasions until she died in the 1990's, was 'Aunt Nell', a lady from Holland who worked in London as the Head Housekeeper in a couple of big London Hotels. But there were many others and I have some

photos. I have no idea of who they all were. In the records it says her conduct etc was excellent, though I remember Dad commenting that she was nearly court marshalled! She was seen handing cigarettes to some Italian PoW's in a camp next door to the base. The Commander asked her why and she said she hoped someone was doing it for Dad (she knew he was a PoW by then) and he just said "Never do it again, OUT" and she heard no more. Mum was about 10 years older than the majority of pilots and was more of a mother figure. I think she felt it greatly when many did not come back after sorties. The picture of a small wooden spitfire (attached) was carved for her by a pilot in 1945, possibly to commemorate VE day in May that year. It was always part of my upbringing and I have kept it. I also have her Autograph book with some signatures, poems, messages and even a cartoon! But it is not easy to read or copy.

She did comment to me how she did not appreciate how hard it was for the civilians to live on their rations. Although supplies were limited in the services, they did not go badly short of anything. She realised after the war that, when she went home on leave to her parents (as Mum and Dads house had been requisitioned to house a bombed out family), she ate probably the whole families butter ration etc in those few days, as well as other things!

Note:- Now this is where dates just do not match up as she was still in service when Dad arrived back in the UK as she was granted emergency leave to go home to him. That needs to be sorted. However that is not important here for you.

Some stories.

Dad did not hate the Japanese. In spite of everything he never condemned them. He did say the officers often treated their own soldiers nearly as badly as the prisoners. He spoke of a cultural difference where the Japanese could not accept surrender so the allies were 'cowards' for surrendering at Singapore. Indeed he said that when they were liberated his relief was tempered by the fact that the one Japanese officer, who had done his best to treat the prisoners well, had committed 'Hara-kiri' a form of ritual suicide (by the upper class Japanese). He was also sad when he went back to Burma in the 1980's, the tourists split cleanly into Japanese and British and Commonwealth groups each side of the room and there was little sign of forgiveness.

All the men suffered from ulcers, mainly on the legs. They would go to the fence round the camp and entice the local village dogs in to lick the ulcer with their rough tongues. This cleaned them and stopped infection.

However, 'Cleanliness' could be fatal! There was a Dutch POW camp nearby which was wiped out in three weeks by dysentery. The men washed their tin plates in the river and it was contaminated water. The British wiped them 'clean' by eating every last thing and not washing them.

A local Burmese man (village leader??) tried to help the prisoners, bringing such things as herbs, bits of food, anything which might be of use. Dad did know his name and his actions were part of a TV programme at one time. But I cannot remember his name or any more. We forget that the Japanese treated the locals in just as bad way.

The then Bishop of Singapore, Leonard Wilson, was captured and went at one point with the POW's. Mum said that he had confirmed Dad whilst in the camp. I can remember him, as the now Bishop of Birmingham, always leading the Remembrance Service at the Albert Hall on the TV in the 60's. I now realise why he took the service.

For one Christmas, the cookhouse tried to produce something that roughly resembled a Christmas Pudding! Dad would not say what they put in it! idea good, execution not so good!

The Japanese took anything of value from the POW's and carried out regular searches. However Dad kept his wedding ring safe all those years. I will leave it to you to work out how!

I fear other stories tell of the worst side of human nature. However looking back I think thinking of home and his family kept Dad going and helped him to survive after the war (research has since shown that married men were more likely to survive).

After the war:

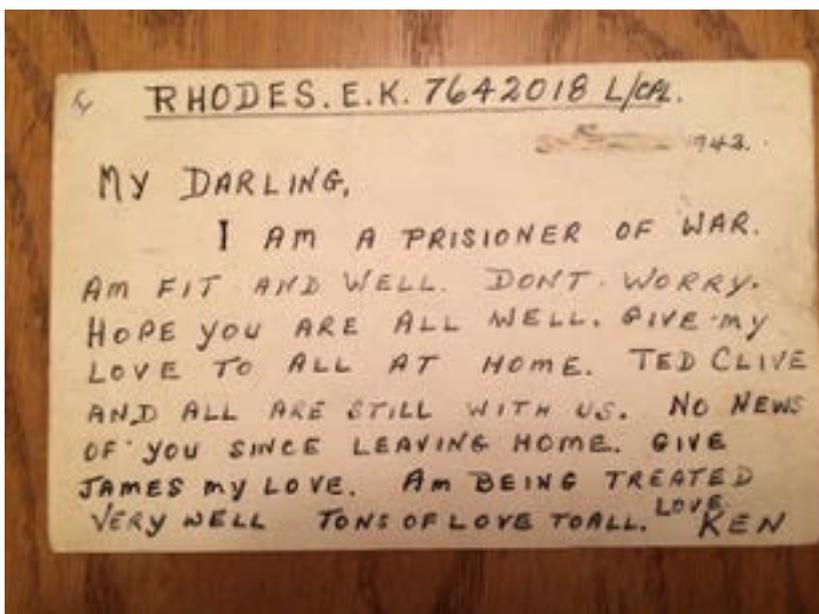
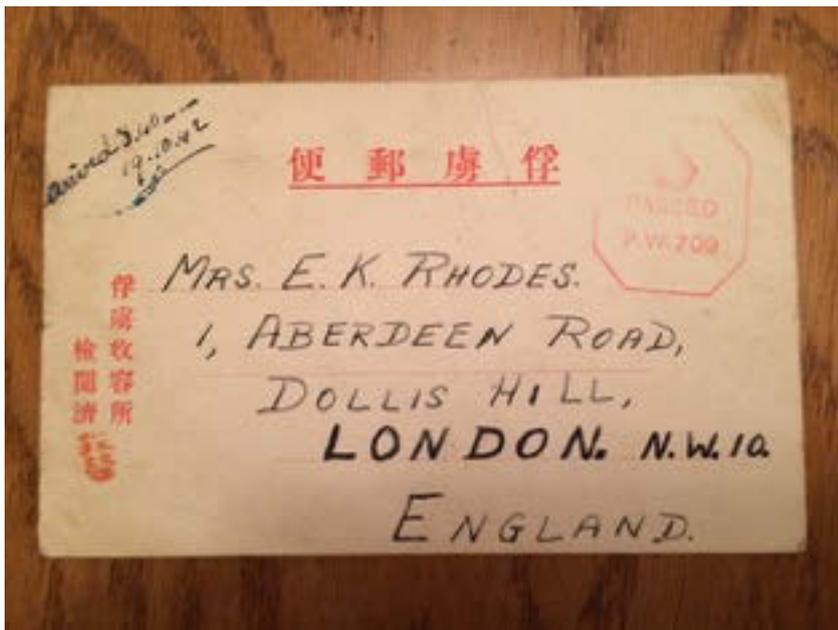
When Mum and Dad were able to get back into their own house after the war, they found it very difficult as rationing was even more severe than during the war. They were not part of that local community which helped each other and spread any surpluses amongst themselves. For example, all Dad wanted was a bottle of beer and the shop said he could not have one. Then the boss said "Bring me a bottle, any bottle, empty, dirty and I can let you have a bottle of Beer" Indeed Mum sent Dad out to do the weekly shopping as he was so thin, with yellow skin and scars, that the shop keepers took pity on him.

I hope this gives you some more information. I regret that I know no more. It is now lost for ever.

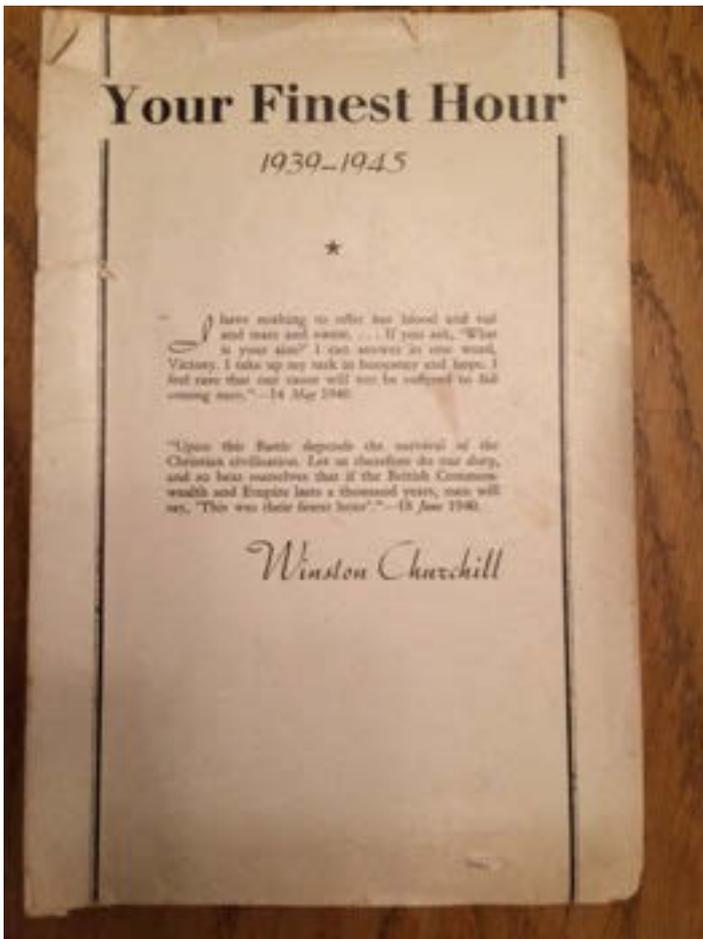
Annette

Photos

First postcard sent by Ken Rhodes as a POW.



This was one of the first cards that came back about the PoW's. It was delivered by several army officers and government officials who wanted to confirm that it was not a forgery. I don't know if they went to Mum's airfield or she went home but they wanted to know if there was anything in the message that might confirm it was genuine and from Dad.. There is, the comment 'Give James my love" proved it. James was the cat! The card was addressed to Grandpa Foreshaw's house as this was Mum's address at the time. Note that the details of the date had been partially erased. You may also note the comment about 'being treated well'.



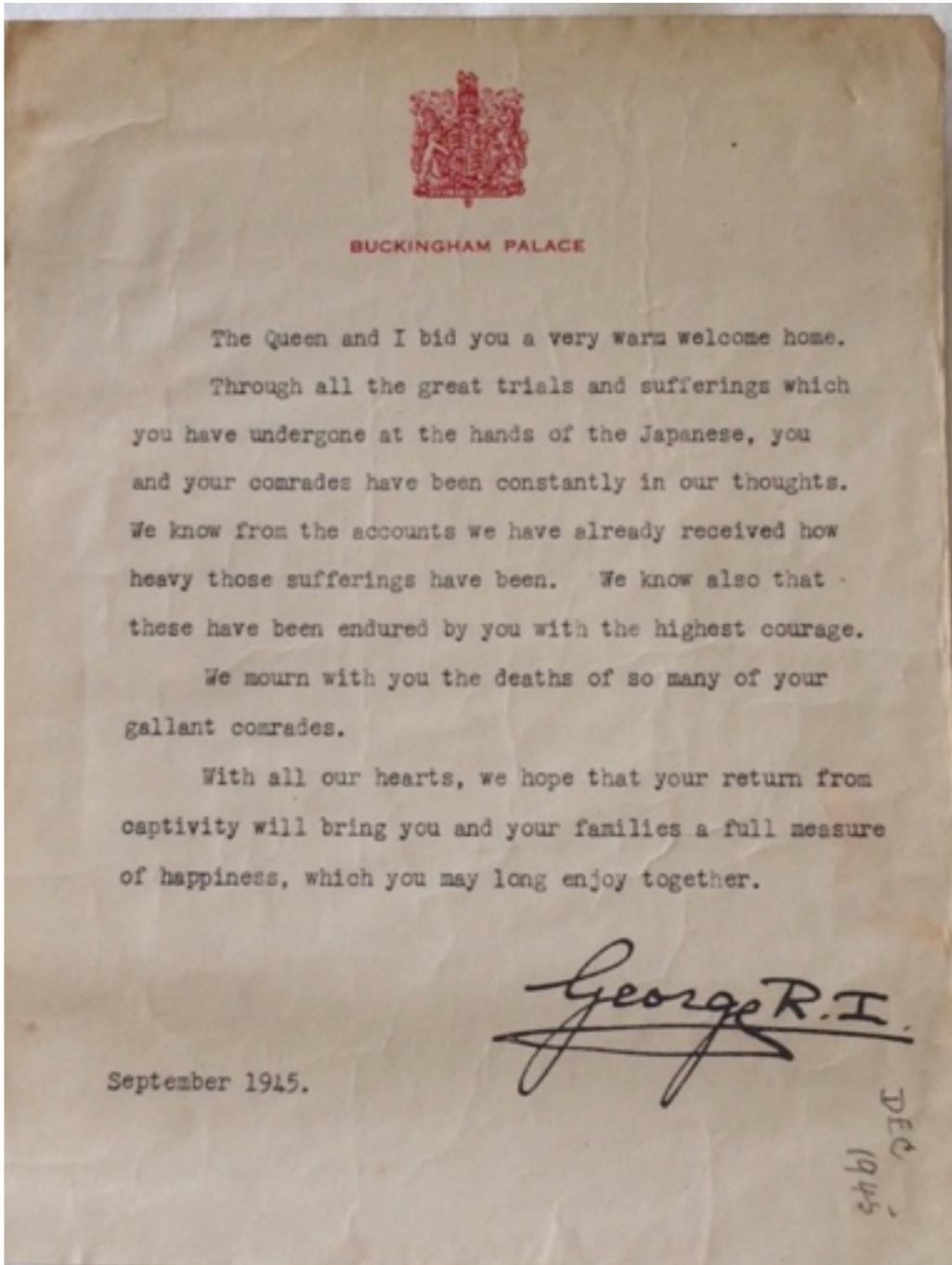
This is the front of an Souvenir Order of Service called your 'Farewell Service'. It contains words and and pictures of both Military and Political figures and a short service which I assume servicemen could attend. It was published two weeks after VJ day in August 1945. I know little about it and need to do more research. (Interestingly there is a copy on sale in the USA for 300 dollars!)



This is the Spitfire that I spoke of earlier. Starting to show its age after 75 years. The inscription is on the base. Note Mum's initials are where the identifying numbers would usually be.



This is a copy of the letter sent to all who were held as POW's by the Japanese



In looking for the photos I have found one of Uncle Wally in uniform serving in the First WW.
He was your Great Grandmothers brother in law, married to Alice.



Here are the photos of my Mum and Dad in uniform at the start of the war.



Compiled by Annette Payne (Ne. Rhodes) , daughter of Grace and Ken.
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