

Alex MacLean Born in 1921 and interviewed In 1997

Marched Forty Miles and never saw the Rugby Match in Colombo

I was born on November 1921 in Longpool, Doodleshire as it was known in those days. I had a brother, a step brother, a step sister and a younger sister. It was only a little two-bedroomed cottage so we moved up to Underley Road. The Education Act changed and we were all transferred to St Thomas' School and when we were eleven Kendal Green School became Senior Girls School and Castle Street School became the Senior Boys.

When you went to school you were actually taught. No playtime no making paper planes. The moment you started school you were taught your ABC and were taught to count. I can distinctly remember being taught how to read the clock and I was only five or six years old. Then I went to the Senior Boys school. Edmund Brockbank was the headmaster. My last school reports from 1935 showed the range of subjects that was taught. Arithmetic, algebra and geometry were in the mathematics section. Then in the ordinary section we had composition, spelling, literature, grammar, French history, geography, science, drawing and music. Apart from those subjects in the last two years at school we had to go along to the Allen Technical College for woodwork and metalwork.

They did arrange a couple of trips to France, but it was only boys whose parents could really afford to send them. Two teachers used to take about six or eight pupils at each time.

I sat for my scholarship and I told that I had passed but again you needed to be funded because there were other things that had to be bought – rugby boots, cricket whites and so on but they had to be paid for and lots could not afford them.

Mr Fred Wilcock taught us mathematics and he came into class one day and he said "I've been teaching for more than twenty years and I have never been caught out yet by a boy. The first boy that catches out me out I will give him half a crown." So I took him up on this and in the next lesson I asked him "What do they call that stuff that deaf and dumb men read?". He answered immediately "Braille you fool. You stupid boy. You should know that." "Oh" I said, "I thought that was what blind people read". His face lit up and he said "You've earned yourself half-a-crown".

I got a job at K Shoes. The hours were half past seven in a morning it was a 48-hour week for the magnificent sum of nine shillings and ten-pence (50 pence in today's money). In 1938 the war was imminent and K Shoes, or Somervell Brothers as it was known then, put out a notice encouraging young men to join the Territorial Army and if I joined they would give me £10. So I went along to the Drill Hall to make enquiries and the man said "You are supposed to be 18, but if you get your parent's permission you can come in at seventeen and a half". So I got this form and took it home and my father, being a time served ex-military man, signed right away.

I had been at a T.A. training camp and was back at work for just a fortnight when the Second World War broke out. So on Friday night 1st September 1939 we were all told to go to the Drill Hall. I was sent firstly to Silloth of all places acting as guard to an aerodrome that was being built there and we were there until April, 1940. I spent my 18th birthday there on a cold, wet, miserable night.

I left home in September 1939 and didn't get home again until October 1946. We were moved around the country quite frequently and ended up on the Kent Coast, on the Isle of Thanet. We were shown these picks and shovels. It was all marked out where the trenches had to be dug, and we had to dig proper trenches. They were eight feet deep with a big step in and all

sandbagged. One day along came a big redcap brigadier. He looked at these trenches, we had been digging them for nearly a month, then he took one of the officers to the side and the next thing we knew the officer came back and said "Right, you can fill all these trenches in again". Apparently they were facing the wrong way. They should have been facing the Channel and were actually facing into the Thames Estuary.

We were sent to Kirkby Lonsdale to join the Sixth Battalion Border Regiment then moved to Carlisle then from there to Liverpool and, being the first there shoved on 'D' Deck right in the bottom under the waterline. We pulled into Durban, South Africa and told we could have five days leave. But not us 120 of us were put on another ships and ended up in Bombay. From leaving England to arriving at Bombay had taken thirteen weeks.

Our Commanding Officer was a Kendal man called Terry Hodgson, a very keen rugby player, and at Christmas he put a notice up saying "If anyone would like to see the inter-division rugby match in Colombo put your name on the board and you can spend Christmas Day and Boxing Day in Colombo". Everybody put their name down. Little did we realise we would have to march there! It was about forty miles away. When we got to Colombo there was no accommodation lined up for us you had to find your own. A friend of mine went to the Salvation Army because they had a holiday hostel for troops. It was all booked up. But he did say come back in half-an-hour. When we went back he said if you are prepared to sleep on our veranda and my wife and I will put you up. We went out into Colombo and never saw the rugby match. He had put two charpoys as we called the beds and we had mosquito nets up and we had three nights and then we had to march back on Boxing Day. This march back was a nightmare and the state of most of us having been on the beer, native beer.

We then moved up into India transported through Assam to the town of Imphal. Then out of the blue the adjutant, a Kendal man again, told us "You and you are going back into India as instructors to teach jungle training to officers". I almost finished the war off there. V.E. day and V.J. day arrived and it was time to go home.

I got back into England about my birthday in November

I have had some happy times with my music. I was in the Kendal Operatic Society for forty years. I've always liked singing – at school with 'Daddy' Escort's choir, then singing at the Zion Chapel and of course when you're in the Army you always made your own entertainment. We used to sit in a circle and then we used to have this concert. Everybody who was in the circle had to do something. They had to sing, tell a joke or they would forfeit a bottle of beer. Of course I used to sing, without music unless someone had a harmonica, I used to sing two special songs. One was called 'Mother'. I don't know where I learned it or here I got it from. It's a sentimental song about a man's mother you see and of course, when the lads had had a few bottles of beer, it used to bring tears in their eyes thinking about their mothers at home. Then when I came home I was at a party and at the party Mr Crossley who used to own the brush factory in Sandes Avenue he come up to me and he says "Why doesn't thou join t' Operatic Society" so I did. The first production I was in was Called 'Countess Maritza'. In those days the opera was held in the St. George's theatre. It was rather grotty at the back but it was a lovely theatre from the audience point of view and the acoustics were good.

When the pictures finished they got the repertory companies. We still had the Operatic Society week. Then bingo came but that was all right as we still had the Operatic and the Mary Wakefield but then they brought in this machinery which was a computerised thing screwed down on the stage so they moved to the Leisure Centre and the Town Hall.

We did Oklahoma, I was 'Curly' in that – The New Moon, Wild Violets, New Moon, Brigadoon (twice) The Dubarry.

I was also a member of the K Shoes Male Voice Choir with Mary Powney as our conductor and we sang in Germany a couple of times

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