

Leslie Jagers' war: 1939-45

In 1995 my father, encouraged by my mother and myself, started to write a personal account of his wartime experiences in India, but left only this introduction and a few headline notes at his death in June 2002. However, my mother had also kept half a dozen of the letters he had sent home and two treasured photograph albums, from which more of his activities can be gleaned. The letters mostly on very thin blue Airmail paper are now becoming very fragile and faded, so I have transcribed them here exactly as they were written, in order at the appropriate points. **In the following text, his notes and letters appear throughout in blue**, with my added comments in black type. There were undoubtedly very many more letters, but they seem to have kept only those depicting some of the more significant or pleasurable events. There are none of her replies; I am sure that he would have kept them, but I recall he once said they were all lost in transit on his way home in 1945.

Keith Jagers December 2004

“It being the 50th anniversary of the year the Second World War finished I felt perhaps I should record some memories of those eventful days, or certain of the more light-hearted moments. Before doing so however I must mention that during all those years I never met anyone even in our darkest moments who believed otherwise than that ultimately we would win through. Whether or not we as individuals would survive whatever lay before us would, if it occurred to us at all, be pushed firmly to the back of our minds.

Connie and I were married in June 1939 after long years of courtship and two years engaged. Our home was to be a one-bedroom flat (rented) obtained only a few days before the marriage ceremony. It was nicely decorated in non-standard colours by my sister Grace's husband Harry who was a master craftsman in painting and decorating, much of his day to day work being in cinemas and palatial interiors. Wood grain finishes in those days were all the rage and experts like Harry could achieve some wonderful effects. Redecoration of the flat took place whilst we were on honeymoon. This was at Torquay in Devon, not only the furthest away from home either of us had ever been in our lives, but also the longest holiday we had ever had.

Returning from honeymoon, our main concern naturally was with our home, 39 Badlis Road, Walthamstow, off Forest Road and near Lloyd Park. Connie and I both worked in London City, Connie in the Moorgate area and I in Gracechurch Street, not far from the Monument. Not only were our hours of work different, necessitating different travel times, our work locations meant we couldn't meet for lunch. Connie started work at 9-30am and I had to be in the office by 9-15. I was frequently late. I had to do early morning post duty once weekly, an 8-45am start, and Saturday morning work was routine.

Two and a half months later on Sept 3rd 1939 Britain declared war on Germany and brought about a huge upheaval in our lives which was to keep us apart for five and a half years (totally for the best part of three years)

Our firms were soon evacuated from the city, Frizzells going to Staines, Middlesex, whilst Connie's firm (*Shawlands Securities?*) went to Arundel in Sussex. We agreed between us that we would go to Staines, and Connie soon got a job with Frizzells there as many of the male employees were already leaving to join the forces. When we gave up the Badlis Road flat after only 3 months, the owners Warner Estates insisted that, war or no war, redecoration back into their standard colours, drab dark green and cream, had to be carried out at our expense, thus covering up Harry's beautiful workmanship!

At Staines we initially rented a flat in the Broadway, Kingston Road, above the women's wear shop "Lesley", but soon found the house at 20 Fenton Avenue, initially rented but bought outright after the war, where we were eventually to stay until 1970.

(The story of Frizzells at Staines during the war years as recounted by Dad and his colleagues, is told in a separate note)

There then followed a series of false alarms (the “Phoney War”) followed by the London Blitz. I joined the R.A.F. Volunteer Reserve in May 1940. My call-up papers followed, for November 7th that year. I was more afraid of the Drill Sergeant than the Germans. There was a realization that it was to be a long war; we were sure we would win, but no thought of when. Postings to various training establishments followed, unlike the army we were posted as individuals.

(His initial call up was to Blackpool, where they were billeted at the Metropole Hotel and received basic RAF training at the Winter Gardens theatre complex. Periods at Torquay and then Wilmslow, Cheshire followed)

At Wilmslow, after a short weekend leave, we were kitted out with Tropical Kit. So we knew we were shortly to be posted overseas, but still had no idea as to where we were going. For some time we had been on standby to go to the Western Desert under Rommel, but with hindsight this was fortunately not to be; many of those there were killed as the Germans were able to break the radio codes. Instead, as it only afterwards became clear, we were to be sent to the Japanese theatre. At midnight on 19th December 1942 we were marched to Wilmslow station, then took a train to Gourock on the Clyde, where we were transferred by tender to embark aboard M.S “Britannic”. The train was packed full with navy personnel, and there were delays due to illness on the journey.

This was the 28,000 ton Cunard White Star liner’s maiden voyage as a troop ship, but we still did not know where to? We sailed on 22nd December. It was so rough we could not get out onto the deck until Xmas Day. The “Britannic” was heavily armed, and escorted by four warships. There was a dash across to the east coast of America, down the eastern seaboard at the turn of the New Year, then across to Africa west coast (Lagos), thence to Durban. We then spent a month there under canvas.

Durban

Dad sent a Lettercard home to mum from Durban, South Africa, undated (but would have been towards the end January 1943), on his outward voyage from UK to India; this was the first time my father had ever been abroad, and there is very little personal detail as he was probably worried about censorship):-

1202368 LAC Jagers, L. A. “On Active Service”

My own Dearest Connie,

This letter card will no doubt be held up for some time, but I thought you would like to see some pictures of Durban. Probably you will be surprised to see that the buildings are so modern and some of them are semi-skyscrapers. When we first came here I was amazed to see such a big town, but then I hadn’t really given much thought about it. After all, Durban is the third largest city in the Union, so it is really to be expected, and being a young city there are wide roads and some very fine buildings.

In the first picture is the City Hall which stands in the centre of the city and is a very fine building. Dances are held here two or three times a week and it is also the home of the art gallery and museum. I cannot tell you about the interior as I have not been inside. The top picture on the right shows the principal cinemas, known here as “Byascopes”. The Tudor style building between the “Princes” and the “Metro” is the “Playhouse”. This is the cinema which I like best of all, it is cool, comfortable and has up-to-date films. It was here that I saw Noel Coward’s “In which we serve”, a very good film. The interior decoration represents the outside walls of a castle with the lights shining through slit windows. The ceiling is artificial sky and is so real that it took me a while to convince myself that the cinema was not open to

the sky. The other pictures are more explanatory but you may think that the picture of a ricksha boy is rather strange.

Rickshas ply for hire in Durban in much the same way as taxis and have a set fare which is 6d per mile per person. They will take up to 3 passengers, although that's a tight fit, and it is surprising how fast they get along. The most surprising thing of all however is the weird and wonderful costumes they wear. You would think that with all the running about they have to do they would wear as little as possible. I have not seen the one shown in the picture but others have similar head-dresses. They are of course all Zulus and only know very little English but enough to get you where you want to go. I only rode in one on one occasion and then only for experience, the bus would have been cheaper and very much quicker. Besides rickshas there are of course other means of conveyance of which the chief are trolley buses. There are also trams, and of course taxis.

On the whole it is a very fine City, but there were many things I did not like, as for instance the colour bar which is very strict indeed and other things connected with it.

Space will not permit me to say any more so will close now Darling. Much love and may God bless you always, ever your own
Leslie

Onward to India

We then left Durban on the French ship "Lourenco Marques" and rounded Cape Horn. This ship was incapable of sailing upright, and fortunately the Indian Ocean was like glass (*according to the internet, this old tub was built in 1905 and at only 6300 tons was just 1/4 the size of the "Britannic". She was scrapped in 1951*) It was very hot. We had one bottle of water each which had to last 24 hours – for drinking, washing, shaving and early morning tea. We docked at Bombay then proceeded by rail to Calcutta. This train journey took three days but at least we were now able to make tea using hot water from the engine boiler during the lengthy stops.

At Calcutta the main memory is of famine and squalor, with open drains in the streets. Despite all possible precautions, after a few months I succumbed to a very bad attack of dysentery; my weight went down from 12 stone to just 8 in a matter of a few weeks. I was somewhat fortunately sent for convalescence to a Methodist hostel to recover. This was about a thousand feet above Kalimpong and on the border between India and Sikkim. The main activity here was mule caravans bringing wool down from the Sikkim Himalayan foothills in exchange for grain. On one occasion there was not enough wool to purchase all the grain required. Later that day the grain store was set on fire by persons unknown, and the flames spread rapidly towards the village. We were called in to fight the blaze, but having no water available we had to create a firebreak instead, which was successful. First turn right out of Kalimpong led to the slopes of the mighty mountain Kanchenjunga, 27002 ft, and silence.

We had other leaves spent in the Himalayas, at Darjeeling and Naini Tal, the latter near to the highest peak in the British Empire, Nanda Devi. The journey from Calcutta to both Kalimpong and Darjeeling was by the Bengal & Assam Railway overnight mail train to Siliguri Junction, a journey of some 400 miles taking 14 hours. From there, Darjeeling was about 55 miles further, by the famous narrow-gauge railway, taking 6-7 hours. A separate train ran up the Teesta valley for 30 miles or so, taking 3 hours to a terminus in the middle of nowhere called optimistically, "Kalimpong Road". From that point to the bazaar township itself was a gruelling 7 mile trek on foot, climbing 3000 feet in the process.

We spent most of the time at RAF Base Headquarters in and around Calcutta. This was a place of extreme contrasts – opulence cheek by jowl with extreme poverty. Wonderful buildings, and open drains. Mosquitoes and bed-bugs. One of my jobs was to interview civilian staff and check their educational qualifications. Many had failed to get in to the university, but all the locals had great pride in themselves. There was however a lot of racism – mainly between Hindus and Muslims.

By around July 1944, after 18 months in Calcutta, dad had evidently fallen ill again, probably another, worse attack of amoebic dysentery. This time he spent 2-3 months in hospital, and upon release was sent to Naini Tal, another beautiful town in the Himalayan foothills but some 700 miles west of Kalimpong, to recover. This was clearly his favourite place of all in India, and he kept most of the letters he wrote to my mother from there during his 2 weeks leave.

The journey from Calcutta would have been arduous, occupying some two full days. The letters do not mention place-names to avoid censorship, but from the description it seems that he and his friend Syd (probably also recovering from illness) would have first caught the Calcutta – Delhi mail train via Lucknow, as far as Bareilly Junction. This journey was around 800 miles and occupied about 20 hours. They then had several hours to wait as the route northwards only had two trains a day, one in the late morning, and one overnight.

They boarded the latter, meeting up with another friend, Jack, who has evidently come from Bombay via Delhi. The journey from Bareilly Junction to the end of the line at Kathgodam, just beyond the township of Haldwani, was only some 66 miles, with 10 stops, but took over six hours. No wonder dad estimated that it seemed more like 200 miles! From Kathgodam it was another 22 winding miles to Naini Tal by the cart road, the last 2 or 3 miles being very steep and rocky (there was a shorter option, only 13 miles, by a bridle road, negotiable only on horseback).

Once settled at Naini Tal, dad wrote two letters on the same day, dated Sunday 8/9/44 (but from the context, surely 8th *October*):

Firstly, a “Blue Triangle” Air Letter bearing postage 2 x 2 Annas, with a standard, signed declaration “I certify on my honour that the contents of this airmail letter refer to nothing but private or family matters”, stamped by the Field Censor #99 who, as we shall see, probably did not inspect the contents further! (there were 16 Annas to a Rupee, and at that time about 14 Rupees to a £ sterling).....

My Own Dearest Connie,

Please excuse pencil but I am afraid I have mislaid my fountain pen temporarily but I think it will turn up.

All our plans as regards the journey went completely haywire and looking back now everything went wrong that could possibly do so and yet all subsequently turned out for the best. We left not on the train for which we had reservations, but had to take our chance on the mail train and had to make do with “inter-class” berths. The berths were little more than boards covered with American cloth but we managed to get some sleep. Late on Friday afternoon we changed trains at a junction “in the blue” where we thought by the map we should get a connection through to the nearest station to here. The chance came off and on enquiry we found there was a train at 11 o’clock night, a wait of about five hours which is considered nothing in this country. Whilst there we had a wash and brush up and something to eat. Then an amazing thing happened; when the train arrived that night we found a carriage where all the berths were taken but there was room at a pinch on the floor to make a bed. After we had sorted ourselves out I had a casual look round and there in the berth beside us was Jack, sleeping peacefully and about the only one in the carriage who had not been awakened by our getting in. Naturally we did not disturb him, and you can imagine the shock he got when he woke up later and saw me on the floor asleep, especially as according to our reckoning we should not have met up until many hours later and at a place more than a couple of hundred miles away. To appreciate this incredible meeting you should take a map of India, put a dot somewhere in the middle of it, both of us having come about 1000 miles each from opposite directions, and you will see how incredible it was that we should have landed up not only on the same train but in the same compartment.

We eventually arrived up here at approx 2.30 after a torturous road journey of 22 miles during which time we climbed 6,350 feet. We contacted the chairman of the W.V.S. and she sent us off to the place we were to stay but when we got there after walking about a mile uphill

we found there had been a mess-up and the place was full. You can imagine our feelings at 3.30 in the afternoon after a two-day journey and nothing but two cups of tea in our stomachs since 7 o'clock the night before. Back we went to see the chairman of the W.V.S. who was most upset and insisted on letting us get a clean and giving us a super lunch. Not satisfied with that she has fixed us up with accommodation in a boarding house where I think the cost is approximately Rs 8/- per day and told us that she would pay the difference between that figure and the Rs 6/- as arranged. Needless to say we didn't mind that and set off up the hill again, but fortified by the lunch, quite happily. It was quite a climb (7,000 feet up) and we eventually arrived here at five o'clock and were shown into a little bungalow with three very nice beds and armchairs etc. It is very cosy and we all slept the sleep of the just last night. Of course it was very cold, but lovely and warm in bed. I got a shock this morning when I found my hair oil frozen solid but I don't suppose the temperature fell much below 50 deg and conclude it must have a high freezing point. Still it is quite a drop from Calcutta's 80 degrees. Incidentally I was mighty pleased that the other digs fell through as I did not like the way things looked there and feel sure we would not have stayed long. I have no room to say anything about the place, which really is beautiful but will tell you more when next I write....

(continued later that day, still in pencil).....

To continue my last letter, and with the intention of giving you a day by day account of our leave I shall write so much each day probably three days at a time.

First the digs, they are good and there are a number of very nice people staying here. The food is top hole although I don't know whether there will be quite sufficient after we have been here a week or so. Still maybe we can get more if we require it. We went to bed very early last night as we were naturally very tired as you can imagine. Although wearing our blue it felt very cold but it was lovely and snug in bed and I slept from 10 o'clock until 7.30 this morning when the early morning tea arrived. We did not rush to get up as breakfast is not served until nine o'clock.

After a very nice breakfast of porridge and fried eggs, toast, marmalade and tea we set off down to the village to have a look round and get our bearings. It was a lovely morning and quite warm in the sun, and we walked all round the lake, about two miles, and then popped in to a restaurant for coffee. It was a nice place and don't faint when I tell you what was served up with the coffee: chocolate éclairs, merranges and cream, and assorted pastries. I couldn't face the merranges (? spelling) but did very much enjoy an éclair. To round everything off there was an orchestra playing in the restaurant. We sat in this place for nearly an hour and by the time we left it was necessary to make tracks up to the digs for lunch.

Naini Tal really is a lovely place, far better than Kalimpong by having this beautiful lake on which there are yachts and other types of boats. It seems so strange to find a large lake so high up, but the hills form a sort of bowl and when you are here harder still to realise that the plains are many thousands of feet below, as the lake itself is surrounded by high hills. At least they call them hills, but I call them mountains, as the highest peak on the opposite side of the valley to where we are staying must be, by the look of it, ten thousand feet up. Owing to the altitude climbing steep slopes is a trying business and makes us pant like fury. Everybody is the same and it does sound so funny when you are going down to hear those coming up puffing furiously.

The afternoon was so nice that having had a top hole lunch we went to see if we could find the way up to a place called "Dorothy's Seat" just over 8000 feet up on this side of the valley. We not only found the way, we reached the top just about five minutes before the clouds swept in from the plains and partially obliterated everything. At first we could see the plains below us on one side, whilst in the opposite direction was the snow-covered mountains of the Himalayas partially obscured by clouds, but clear enough for us to venture a snapshot. We have a camera with us, and have managed to get five rolls of film between us, so I am certainly hoping that this time I shall be able to send you some photos of the place so that you can see for yourself how nice it is. The range of mountains are fairly high but there is nothing to

touch the range at Kalimpong where the terrific bulk of Kanchenjunga looms over all. It was very hot on this peak where we were so we did not stay too long as already our faces and arms are getting burnt. There is no way of stopping it as owing to the clarity of the atmosphere the sun beats down fearfully. I hope I don't have any trouble, but when your face and arms burn and then the temperature drops so low at night one is almost bound to get a bit feverish and chills are difficult to avoid. We have also done quite a bit today and the others want to go to the pictures tonight, 2nd house show, which means we won't get to bed before midnight. Anyway I shall have an hour's rest before a hot bath and dinner. Incidentally there is no sanitary arrangements up here as we know them at home, and baths have to be taken in an iron tub. As we get our bath between 6 and 7 in the evening, by which time the temperature has dropped considerably, you can bet there is no time wasted!

Monday.

By the way, in case you are wondering, my fountain pen has come to light, but I am continuing to use pencil as it is so much easier just to sit down in any odd corner and scribble a few more lines. So I do hope that you won't mind, Dearest.

We did not succeed in getting in the pictures after all yesterday evening as they were all full, and after wandering about for a bit we went into a bar and had a couple of rums to warm us up and keep the cold out on our way back to the digs. Dinner is supposed to be at eight but it was a bit late and it was nearly 9.30 by the time we got into town. Anyway we got back about eleven and the climb had so warmed us up that we went to bed feeling lovely and warm. We did not get up until quarter past eight this morning so we did not do so bad for sleep and once again I slept like a log.

Breakfast was very late and we were further delayed by the cobbler coming round to fit studs into our shoes. These are very necessary both as an aid to climbing and as a prevention against wearing the shoes out first on the flint like paths. Incidentally you are probably wondering how we got back in the dark last night but it was quite easy. There is no "blackout" here and even the paths through the woods are well lighted, although a torch is necessary at certain times. There are by the way many monkeys about here, and they sometimes startle us by crashing through the trees over our heads. On our railway trip we saw many kinds of bird life from the big "cranes" with rose-coloured collars down to the tiny love birds as we knew them at home. Camels were quite numerous as were of course monkeys, and we also saw a couple of elephants.

One other thing I forgot to mention is that Jack has discovered he cannot stand heights, and yesterday afternoon when we were on "Dorothy's Seat" he came over very giddy. From the peak on which we were standing there was a sheer drop of several thousand feet, and it was fortunate he had the sense to get away down the slope. We shall watch him carefully in future and he was a chump not to warn us in case of accidents. He will no doubt get used to it, as I did last year, although the heights are greater here.

To continue with my record of today's events, we eventually got down to town at 11 o'clock and as we had to go to the other end of the lake to post our letters for censoring, took a boat there. It was a lovely change to go rowing again, and it was beautiful on the lake under a cloudless blue sky, albeit somewhat warm.

Naturally I developed a few blisters and my bottom is quite sore so don't know what I shall be like when we start horse riding as well. We of course went and had a coffee etc and listened to the band, and then wandered back up the hill for tiffin. It really is an exhausting climb up from the village, we almost finished up on our hands and knees.

We were pretty well burnt up this morning, and as we have booked to go to the cinema tonight we thought we should have a nap after tiffin, and this we did. I woke up with a bad head however, which a cup of tea failed to shift. The others have gone out up to the peak again but I said I wouldn't go as it would be overdoing it a bit as it is not a fortnight yet since I came out of dock (hospital) and in any case I wanted to continue writing to you, so made a bad head my excuse for not going out. It is going off a bit now but I am burning pretty well on my arms and face.

Tomorrow being my birthday we shall have a bit of a do, and Jack wants us to go to a dance but I am not over keen. Anyway, we shall see, Jack so far seems full of life but I am wondering how long he will keep it up before his knees get him.

Well to sum up so far we are having a really grand time as you can see. This place seems to have everything that one can possibly want and prices are very reasonable. We have already completed one roll of films and have put it in for developing. I do hope they will come out O.K.

The "Mall Road" in Naini Tal encircles the Lake. "Snow Peak" is the name of a nearby minor peak and view-point.

Tuesday.

To continue with my chronicle of events as it were, today has been my best so far. I seem to have got my climbing legs now and am getting more used to the altitude. However I am getting on a little too fast and must first tell you about last night. We went down to the cinema after dinner for the 9.30 show and I am afraid we were not impressed. The main picture "Joe Smith America" was just 60 minutes of blatant propaganda and no story to speak of. Some very interesting shorts were shown, otherwise it would have been a washout. Coming out at 11.25 it was bitterly cold and as it was so late we decided to set off back to the digs straight away although we all felt a bit peckish. We are not very far from the cinema, barely half a mile, but 500 feet above it. Believe me, five hundred feet practically at an angle of forty-five degrees all the way is a hell of a pull especially in this altitude. Quite frankly I was blown completely when we reached the top, besides which the cold air had given me quite a pain on my chest. This of course died away as soon as I got into bed, and I slept the sleep of the just. This morning I woke up feeling fighting fit and even went for a walk before breakfast. As breakfast was not served until 9.15 not very creditable I suppose.

Immediately after breakfast we set off to see if we could reach China Peak, altitude 8300 feet and the highest point before the mountains proper. As we had to drop down almost to the town we climbed nearly 2000 feet, in places on our hands and knees, eventually reaching the top just before midday. The view was marvellous, even better I think than that from Kalimpong if Kanchenjunga is excluded. There were clearly visible 14 peaks all over 20,000 feet and not a cloud to mar the picture.

The highest of the range, "Nanda Devi" is 25,360 and is the highest mountain in the British Empire. Another famous mountain whose name I just can't think of at the moment was also clearly visible (Nanda Kot?). In general the range is about 70 miles away but unlike Kalimpong there are no intervening ridges preventing a clear view. A birthday view I shall not forget, or the climb either for that matter.

Coming down however was worse than coming up, and I arrived back here with a number of blisters on my feet; unfortunately my shoes are not very tight fitting and this I think was the reason as scrambling over rocks and boulders, one's feet get pushed up into the toes of the shoes. I have bathed them and strapped up the worst with "Elastoplast" and they should be OK providing I don't do so much climbing and not wear that pair of shoes.

Tiffin was as normal a very nice meal and after that we went to bed for a nap to sleep off the effects of our climb. You can bet we shall not be going to a dance tonight but just to celebrate will go into town for a few drinks.

Well Dearest I think I must finish here and get this letter off to you as letters may not reach you so fast as when in Calcutta. This is the second letter I have written to you from here, we are having a really grand time and my only regret is that it is not possible for you to be here with me. I know you would just love it, the scenery is really perfect, and grander than anything one can find at home, lovely as parts of England are. Syd comes from the Lake District, and he says it is nothing compared to this. The climbs of course are very stiff but for the shorter trips there are Sedan chairs whilst for the longer ones there are plenty of horses, although they have to be led down owing to the steepness of the inclines.

Take care of yourself my Dearest, God Bless you always, all my love, your own, Leslie

(from the context, there seems to be at least one other letter missing between these two)

Naini Tal, Saturday 14th October 1944.....

My Own Dearest Connie,

To continue where I left off in my last, when we eventually reached the path again and followed it up to the peak, it turned out to be only the matter of five minutes' walk and we had wasted over half an hour trying unsuccessfully to negotiate a "short cut". Because of this somewhat difficult scramble back I don't want you to imagine there was any danger of anything other than a few bruises and a scratch or two. I got a couple of scratches, and Syd by sitting suddenly and heavily got the bruises; he was in no mood for horse-riding that morning. Anyway we certainly shook off the effects of the drink and eventually got back here at 5.40 in dire need of some tea, which although late we were fortunate enough to get.

We had already booked for the cinema, but after a rest, a hot bath and a good rest we set off briskly to town in the keen night air. The title of the film was "Big Havoc" and it was very good although being a war picture of the grim type I can't say I enjoyed it. Anyway it made a pleasant change to get out and taking the hill slowly when we returned arrived back shortly after midnight and in less time than it takes to tell we were in bed and asleep.

We were up a little earlier this morning and Jack and I went for a brisk walk for about an hour before breakfast. As you can see I am fit as a fiddle now and it seems grand to be alive again after my illness. I have recovered that zest and my appetite which I lost months ago. I am of course having the usual trouble with my nose "shining like a beacon from afar". The sun makes it shine during the day and the cold keeps it going night and morning. Of course I am beginning to peel quite a lot but there is no soreness and I am really very tanned. Nobody would recognise me for the white-faced tired out individual who arrived here just a week ago.

We had a fairly quiet morning and went into town and spent an hour on the horses round the lanes. Now that I have broken the ice I find I like riding very much despite having a somewhat sore seat. Still we came round at a fast canter. In the meantime Syd went for a row on the lake. Then we had the usual coffee and wandered round the bazaar. Despite a very careful search however I haven't found anything here that I couldn't get just as cheaply in Calcutta.

In the afternoon we were very lazy and stayed in bed until after tea when we strolled into town to pick up the camera. Unfortunately however we discovered when we got back that it was not our spool that had been put back but somebody else's. Owing to Monday being a holiday we shan't be able to get the mistake rectified until Tuesday. I certainly hope our spool has not been given to anybody else as we have every hope that there are some good ones of the mountains on that film. Tonight the others went to bed after dinner while I wrote this and as it is now getting rather cold and late I think I will also retire.

Sunday

We were up very late this morning and only just made breakfast, but we were out and on our way up China Peak by 10 o'clock. This time we went the proper way and reached the top by 11.30 only to find nearly all the snow view obscured by cloud. There was a great deal of cloud too overhead and it was very cold on the top. We spent quite a while up there and took a number of snaps including one of the lake and town from almost two thousand feet above it. However it was so cold up there we were very glad to get back to the digs to a nice hot lunch.

After a short rest we were away again to tour Government House grounds which are only open on Sunday afternoons and although it was still rather cloudy and cool we enjoyed the walk, although for me it was marred somewhat by blistered feet. My feet have let me down this trip and I have some very nasty broken blisters which just won't seem to heal. Still, the grounds were very lovely and well worth a visit. Tonight I have bathed my feet very carefully and strapped up the worst blisters with "Elastoplast" so hope they will now be OK, especially as tomorrow we are going half way to China Peak to see the sun rise over the mountains. It will mean our having to leave here at 5.30 am but from what we are told well worth it. We are going with one of the civilians staying here and he is providing a large thermos of tea which

we will have when we get to the top. So here's to bed as none of us will otherwise be up in time.

Monday

We have a lovely log fire going in our room tonight and it is grand to just sit here and stare into the flames. There isn't enough wood to keep it going for more than a couple of hours, but is so good just to see a fire that's the main thing. Syd hasn't seen one for more than three years.

Well we made it this morning and were away into the black night. It wasn't too cold at all, not nearly as bad as we had expected and after a few minutes brisk walking we were soon warm enough especially once we started climbing and of course there was plenty of that. Somehow however climbing up when you could only see the length of the beam of the torch ahead did not seem nearly as trying as it might otherwise have been. We arrived just as the sky was turning a pale gold, and the silhouettes of the mountains seemed almost near enough to touch, then as the sun came up they seemed to recede. The sun first touched the highest peak of Nanda Devi and it looked just like a small ruby showing against the now pale blue of the sky. Gradually the rest of the peaks were tinged with gold and a mountain "Kamet" that we had never seen before came into view. It was very clear despite being over 90 miles away and we tried a time exposure of it. We took several other photos and we hope that some at least will be successful although owing to the experimental nature of things we may be unlucky. It was really wonderful up there and sights such as these I shall never forget and later will stand out in my memory against the drabness of the remainder of my stay in India. Very well worth the getting up very early and the climb.

After a hearty breakfast we went off to town and just rode around the lake for an hour. Although I say it myself I seem to have taken to riding quite naturally and although I haven't yet been in a gallop I feel quite confident that I could easily do so. My seat is not sore despite doing quite a bit of cantering, and have got into the idea of pressing with my knees and down on the stirrups and so rising and falling with the horse. Syd was with us this morning but his horse was so slow we had to go back two or three times to meet him. After the ride we had the usual coffee and then wandered around the bazaar, but I could not find anything at all that I liked so it rather looks as though I shan't be able to send you any particular memento of this place.

Jack went to bed after tiffin but Syd and I feeling energetic went for a row on the lake for an hour which was quite enjoyable. Since tea we have been lazy and just read, but did go out just before dinner to see all the lights on the hillsides. It is a big festival this week and everybody high or low has to have at least one lamp burning at the window. Most of course have dozens of fairy lights and there being no "blackout" here it was a wonderful sight seen from the hillside, especially all the buildings around the lake where the lights were reflected on the water. Please forgive me for any mistakes, as Syd is in one of his funny moods and sitting beside me making up "nursery rhymes" in mixed "pidgin English". I must say they are rather funny but somewhat distracting. The fire is going so I must get off to bed, it has been a long day but I have enjoyed every moment of it. It is grand to feel fit and full of life after the last two or three months.

Tuesday

We were up with the lark this morning and Syd and I took a brisk walk to "Land's End" before breakfast in order to get a snap of the place, it not being possible later in the day owing to the position of the sun. It had to be a brisk walk as each day somehow it seems to get colder, but it is grand.

We were in town soon after breakfast and found out times of trains etc. No reservations can be made for us and it seems we shall have to take our chance on getting back, as when we came up. It has been a grand holiday but it is nearly all over, time in fact seems to be going at a terrific pace. We managed to get our spool back from the photographers and later left it to be developed together with another we had completed the day before. Paper is not available any

more however and so we shall have to wait until we get back to Calcutta and try our luck there. It may therefore be some time before I can send some off to you. We were again round the bazaar this morning but beyond getting some handkerchiefs which I am in dire need of, once again saw nothing interesting.

Before we came up to tiffin we booked the horses for the afternoon and at 2-30 we set off. We did a round trip of "Lands End", Tiffin Tor and Dorothy's Seat, all of which places we have visited before but it made a very nice ride and took about 2 hours. Unfortunately it was very cloudy and cold most of the time. Poor old Syd is always in trouble and this time had a horse that kicked, and we had to make sure he was in the rear all the time as his horse would kick out at the one following. The horses that Jack and I had were grand and would run or walk just as we wished. Here is another thing I wished I had learnt to do years ago, it is great fun. One thing about this war, it is giving me a wealth of experiences.

After tea we rested awhile and then I wrote this, now it is dinner time and immediately afterwards we are off to the pictures. The film is called "Sahara" and looks as though it may be interesting. By the way, there will be some snaps forthcoming of ourselves on horse back.

I hope Darling you are finding these letters interesting reading, I have tried to give you some of the fine and grand experiences we are having. Would that it had been possible for you to have been with me. All my love Dearest and God Bless You, ever your own Leslie.

Now back in Calcutta.....

12th November 1944 – An XMAS AIR LETTER – Postage Free
"Christmas Greetings RAF South East Asia 1944" (they are now back at Base Headquarters, RAF Calcutta)

My own Dearest Connie,

Just a few lines to wish you a very Happy Christmas, and peace and good luck in the New Year. This will, I have every hope, be our last Christmas apart, the next will I trust be spent in each other's constant company.

At this time too I want you to know how much you mean to me even though such great distance lies between us. Essentially I am, I think, a home man and although I have had the opportunity of seeing some wonderful places, nevertheless I am always yearning for you and our own home. Absence they say makes the heart grow fonder but in my case I don't think that applies as I could not be more deeply in love with you than I was when duty sent me overseas. You have been my constant comfort in your letters and I now want nothing more than to devote my life to your happiness and comfort in the years that lie ahead. Until the joyful day of our reunion, good luck, good health and God Bless You always, from your devoted husband Leslie.

The photographs show that he was to enjoy at least one further leave period in Darjeeling, in June 1945. The quality of these, although still in black & white of course, is absolutely stunning, indicating that they now had the use of a much better camera, and supply of film etc was obviously no longer a problem.

The war in Asia finished on August 15th 1945. "We were then heavily involved in the logistics of repatriation – PoW's of Japan, and thousands of British troops, were brought home from India and Burma by rail, air and sea within three months. There were of course no computers to help us, just much mental planning and sheer hard work. No such thing as stress then, either"

H.Q. RAF Base Calcutta, S.E.A.A.F, 16th August 1945

My own Dearest Connie,

Is it really over, can it be true that there is no more war, somehow it seems almost unbelievable. After so many days of suspense it was great to get the official news that Japan had really given in. The news was received here at 7-30 yesterday morning but it was not until 11 o'clock that we were paraded and the C.O. told us the "gen". Owing to the late announcement today and tomorrow are pronounced V.J. holidays, one day later than at home, and so I am at the moment enjoying my first "48" since coming to India.

Probably you will want to know how this is likely to affect my homecoming, and all I can say is that it is unlikely to be any earlier than expected. It might even be delayed a little, although I sincerely hope not, but there are many many thousands of ex prisoners of war to be brought home, all of whom have been in the hands of the Jap since Singapore and Malaya fell. I know you will agree that they must be given first priority on all homegoing ships and I certainly hope Wilkins and Seaborne will be among them.

As will be appreciated all the incentive to struggle with the mass of work has gone but we must try to do our level best, so easy to say though if you are feeling off colour "Oh well tomorrow will do". However we had no compunction about taking these two full days off, we feel we have deserved a break.

Last night I went into town expecting to see great scenes of jubilation and to see the decorations and floodlighting but there were no signs of either. There were far less people about than normally and everywhere seemed very quiet. It seems as though everybody has been caught unprepared and hasn't time to do anything. The only organised entertainment on the unit is tomorrow evening, when there will be an E.N.S.A. band show followed by a "Smoking Concert", or "booze up" if you prefer. Before this there will be a Victory Dinner for which it is hoped something special will be obtained.

Owing to the monsoon we shall not be able to hold our celebrations out on the lawn but will have to hold them in the Rest Room. It will be crowded, hot and noisy and I don't think I shall enjoy it too much.

This morning I have been swimming and as there has been no sunshine for about three days now the water was really chilly, just like "blighty" where you had to plunge in quick and come up gasping. The atmosphere however was warm and close so it was very pleasant in the pool as you can imagine, there weren't many in so we had a very pleasant couple of hours. Tonight we are going to see "Henry V" and this afternoon apart from writing this I have been reclining on my "charpoy" reading.

I have just received your letter of 7th August and I am very glad you had such a very nice time at the Albert Hall on August Bank Holiday. It sounds as though it was a really good programme and I bet you were quite thrilled, it must have been very impressive. Glad your seats were quite good after all. On the whole the weather over the holiday has treated you kindly it seems and I hope that you felt better for the break, three days is quite a nice long time but I expect it soon went. I have been practising the crawl steadily ready for when we go swimming at Runnymede next summer. A little more practise and I shall get it. All my love and God Bless You always Dearest, it won't be long now, Ever your own Leslie.

H.Q. RAF Base Calcutta, S.E.A.A.F, 28th September 1945

My own Dearest Connie,

I am sorry to have kept you waiting four days for a letter but no doubt Dearest you can appreciate getting ready to come home is no light matter especially when as I have one remains in one place for so long. I had hoped to get all my stuff in one kit bag and a tin box but to my dismay I only just managed to get everything in by using a further kit bag. I don't know whether I have forgotten how to pack a kit bag but I didn't seem to be able to get so very much in and I shudder to think of what my blue will look like when I get it out.

Of course what has made a very considerable difference to my available space is the amount of room the tea service has taken up, more than I expected actually. However it is in and I only

hope it gets home safely as I shall be terribly disappointed if anything is broken. Incidentally I have heard that heavy baggage is also being flown home but not for several days after the owner leaves. It may be gen, it may not, I must hope for the best. This being the first to go has several disadvantages so in addition to having to write and tell my pals I have been asked by the Sen. Med. Officer to render a report on the conditions generally.

Talking about rendering reports, I am afraid I have to give you one as I have been very naughty and spent more money than I have. My friend John has been very kind in lending me a hundred Rupees and I have promised to ask you if you would send a money order to his wife. The amount in Sterling is £ 7-10-0 and the address is as follows

MRS D.M. KIRKMAN,
13, FARTHING LANE,
SUTTON COLDFIELD,
WARWICKSHIRE.

I hope you will forgive me for doing this and not tear me off a strip when I get home.

Well Dearest this is my last letter to you from Calcutta and I am hoping that it will be the last from India. That however remains to be seen but if we are held up anywhere I shall continue writing as normal.

Last night I had my farewell party and it went off quite well and I got to bed under my own steam which I think was quite creditable.

Well Dearest it is great to know I am on my way home and it won't be long now before we are in each others arms again. That is the supreme moment and that is all I can think about at present.

All my fondest love and God Bless You always, Au Revoir my Dearest, ever yours, Leslie.

By the next letter, they were evidently on the way home at last. This was probably written from Bombay, after another 3-day, 2000 mile train journey right across India from Calcutta:-

“In Transit” 6th October 1945.

My Own Dearest Connie,

Just a few more lines to let you know we are still waiting to start on our journey homewards. We are all ready, having been medically examined and handed our surplus kit and tin trunks into stores. We should have been away today but an hour before we were supposed to leave the move was cancelled and we have not been told when we are now likely to leave. It is all very disappointing but we do know that we are to go off as soon as there are planes available and we shall be on the first.

It is a week now since we arrived here and time has dragged badly but it is no use grumbling and we try to be patient. The camp is getting more organised and we are now getting some quite good meals. We have had a “bleat on” about the canteen prices and something has been done in that direction.

We have visited the open-air cinema several times but last night there being nothing on we went to bed very early. Most of us were in by 8-30 but I for one slept soundly until the usual time this morning. This seems to be quite a healthy place and personally I am rather enjoying the rest. The weather which was bad has now settled down to hot days and comparatively cool nights. The nights should begin to cool down quite a lot shortly but so far I have only found it necessary to pull the sheet over me during the course of the night.

Just to keep us occupied they moved us from the original billet to another a couple of days ago and of course we moaned like the very devil about it. However to be quite honest we didn't really mind as it passed an afternoon away and the new billet is if anything more airy than the other and otherwise there is little to choose between them.

Well Dearest, I can think of nothing else to say right now and I have every reason to think that this will be my last letter to you from India. Anyway I hope so and also that I will arrive almost as soon as you get this.

All my love Dearest, and God Bless You always, Ever your own Leslie.

The photograph albums show that they had reached Tel Aviv by air on 14th October 1945 and then spent 4 days there before the final leg home, also by air, direct to RAF Torquay. On the 16th October, they made a trip to Jerusalem and Bethlehem, which dad recalled as a beautiful place but was very disappointed by the amount of rank and blatant commercial exploitation prevailing even then.

I was finally demobbed in March 1946, after five and a half years in the service of His Majesty King George and Queen Elizabeth. I returned to my old job at Frizzells but sought alternative employment to avoid my wartime replacement losing her job. Also my time in the services meant that I was now too well qualified for the job in question.
