

Words of war: Moving poetry of Burma veteran which lay forgotten for 70 years

(Extract from a Daily Mirror article of 9 July 2017)



Dennis Leedham, 92, who fought in Burma as part of Britain's 'Forgotten Army', was compelled to compose poetry to help him through bleak, fearful nights in the trenches.

Terrified Dennis Leedham crouched in the trenches, listened out for the enemy and came up with the poignant words that helped see him through the war. It was pitch black and the 19-year-old was under threat of an attack by Japanese soldiers often just yards away. Brave Dennis helped pass those bleak, fearful nights by thinking of poetry.

He was in Burma, where British soldiers were known as the Forgotten Army because they were so far from the battlefields of Western Europe. Each morning, as light dawned, Dennis – now 92 – would scribble down the lines he had composed in the dark. His poems highlight the horrors of the war's longest and bloodiest campaign, in which 40,000 Brit troops died.

Dennis, one of 3,000 Burma veterans still alive, said: "At the end of every day we would dig in and take it in turns to keep watch for a Japanese attack.

"It was pitch black, but you'd know the Japanese were out there in front of you somewhere and you were frightened that at any minute they might attack...I was desperate for the time to pass quicker and had the idea of writing poetry in my head while keeping lookout. It was the distraction I needed to get me through the night."

Dennis, who grew up in Streatham, South London, travelled to Burma in October 1944 with the Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment, 4th Battalion, 5th Indian Division. He left behind his mother and sister mourning the death of Dennis' older brother John while in RAF Bomber Command. Girlfriend Gladys was in his thoughts too as he made the six-week journey to Burma on RMS Scythia.

He said: *"We were going into the unknown and had no idea what we would face...I recall thinking I was lucky because I hadn't been sent to the terrible battles in Europe."*

Dennis joined the Burma Campaign at a time when the Japanese Army was retreating, but still far from beaten. He said: *"One place where we dug in there was barbed wire all around us. We put cans on the wire and a stick in the can so if the Japanese approached, we would hear the tins rattle. The Japanese would creep up on their bellies, reach up and shake the tins. They were no more than 10 yards away from us. It was so frightening. You knew they were there, but didn't know how many or what they were going to do. Were they going to chuck mortars at us – or what were they going to do? They were rattling the tins because they wanted us to fire. We had to hold out, because if we fired they'd know where we were."*

When news filtered through that the Japanese had surrendered and the war was over, Dennis felt overwhelming joy. *"It was like when you are a kid and your birthday is coming, but much, much better. The feeling was indescribable,"* he said. But it would be another two years – and via Singapore for a stint in the Military Police – before Dennis finally got home to London. By then, things between him and Gladys had waned.

He explained: *“For a long time we exchanged letters. She always put a little present in for me. Maybe a couple of cigarettes or a toffee – to cheer me up. But three years when you’re as young as that is a long time to go without seeing somebody and eventually it fizzled out.”*

Dennis later ran of a number of garages and met his wife Connie at work. They were together six decades before she died seven years ago.

The father of two lives in Wallington, Surrey, and keeps his poems in a box, admitting: *“I never imagined they would be of much interest.”*

The original manuscripts perished over the years – but, thankfully, Dennis made a copy and helped ensure the Forgotten Army’s heroics are remembered forever.

Original newspaper article by Nicola Small



Men of the Queen’s Own Royal Kent Regt. in the jungles of Burma
(Image: Imperial War Museum)

It's God forsaken, nothing less
This jungle land, this wilderness
This land that nature's claimed her own
This land so very far from home.
These mighty hills and valleys below
These rivers roaring as they flow
Towards the far and distant sea
Like lost souls in eternity.
And everywhere this jungle growth
By nature's hand completely loath
To yield its secrets unto man
Secrets of a forgotten land.
Bamboo clumps, a stifling mesh
That rips the clothes and tears the flesh
That makes man curse and long to be
Away from all its treachery.
Malaria, illness, skin disease
Insect bites that never cease
Scorpions, snakes and leeches clinging
Monsoon bugs' incessant ringing.
Oh for the day when the hostile men
Are driven from this land, and then
We can leave this Burma and
Return to our own beloved land.

Poem by Dennis Leedham,
Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment,
4th Battalion, 5th Indian Division.
Aged 19 in 1944.

The jungle is dark my darling
And danger is ever near
But through it I hear you calling
‘Come back safe my dear’.
I hear those words you said to me
It seems so long ago
Before I sailed across the sea
Before I met the foe
Now as we are creeping through
The jungle’s dark and gloom
I whisper, ‘I’ll be back with you
My darling, one day soon’