

## APPRECIATION OF MY WAR-TIME PARENTS (in retrospect)

I never saw my father and mother hugging – not even once. They were not close. However, none of that sheds any light on their back story – one which I only came to appreciate as I got older and faced my own challenges.

My father was born in 1900 in India, the son of a British army chaplain. My grandfather was Scottish and when my father was still quite young, his family returned to Scotland and settled in Edinburgh. My father, his two brothers and two sisters were very close to their mother. They were devastated when she was killed in a car crash on a windy road in the foothills of the Himalayas. It wasn't long before my grandfather (who I never met) remarried. His new wife had been a missionary. She was very strict and disliked by the children. I know little of my father's upbringing. I do know that at the age of 18, he left school and joined the army. The year was 1918 and World War I had just ended. My father used to say how disappointed he was to miss seeing action.

After graduating from Sandhurst (the officers' training college) followed by a tour of duty in Iraq, my father asked to be posted to a regiment in northern Nigeria. Over the next decade, whenever he got leave, he would return to London for 'R and R'. "Life" he said "was good". It was the roaring twenties. He had money, job security, status - and he was single.

My mother was English and ten years younger than my father. At the age of 18 she went to the Royal Academy of Music and then in 1930 at the age of 20, she took up a position as governess with a wealthy family who owned a 'schloss' (castle) in rural Germany. Meanwhile elsewhere in Germany, Hitler was gaining power. In 1933, he passed a law ending civil liberties and at the same time authorized the Dachau concentration camp - intended for 'political prisoners'. The holocaust was underway.

By the mid-thirties, my father figured it was time to return from Nigeria and get married. Meanwhile, my mother was anxious to leave the increasingly dire situation in Germany. So around the same time, my parents-to-be both had the same idea, and that was to find a 'suitable' mate. Not an easy thing to do in war-time so they both applied to a dating agency – possibly the only one at that time.

My mother Katherine Eastwood married my father Douglas Brown in England, 1937. They look happy enough in the wedding photos. However, there was one problem. They could not have been more ill-suited. My father was a drinker, a smoker, an extravert who enjoyed social gatherings. My mother was shy, sensitive, creative, a pacifist who hated the subservient role of being an Army officer's wife. Perhaps more importantly, my father had at least fifteen years of 'worldly experience', whereas my mother was still a virgin at the age of 27 (so she confided in me – in her eighties).

Then the newly-weds were posted to Lucknow in India. Before long, my mother was pregnant and in 1938 she gave birth to Duncan, a healthy baby boy. However, within a year, Duncan died of malaria. Not long after, my mother became pregnant again and in 1940, my sister Joy was born. And then a year later, she had a third pregnancy and her second son, Andrew, was born. However, tragically Andrew suffered the same fate as Duncan. He died within the year.

1939: World War 2 was underway. I knew little of my father's military experiences in the years 1939-42. I do know that in 1942 a key event took place: Japan invaded the Philippines and then Burma (Myanmar) – still a colony of the British Empire. My father had the rank of Major and was told he would be promoted to Colonel and sent to Burma to command a battalion to face the Japanese invasion. But my father's call to action didn't transpire due to the fact that he became increasingly sick with dysentery, blackwater fever and malaria. His imminent promotion was revoked and much to his distress, he was ordered to return to England.

Meanwhile the Japanese advanced through Burma and the undermanned British forces retreated. There was great concern that the Japanese would next invade neighboring India. Women and children of army officers in India were ordered to move to South Africa, with a view to then getting them back to the U.K. Shortly after relocating, my mother (to all intents and purposes a single mother) gave birth to my brother Robin in Durban, South Africa. The year was 1944.

Later that same year, she was ordered to go back to Britain by sea. On top of the ongoing stress of losing two children, having to care for two others plus the forced migration from India to South Africa, the voyage back was perilous. Her ship was in a convoy and apparently the one in front and the one behind were both sunk by German U-Boat torpedoes. Fortunately, they all made it back safely. She was eventually reunited with my father in Northern Ireland where my father had been put in charge of a German P.O.W. camp.

But then more bad luck. One day, my father broke his back by falling off a tractor. Not only did he feel humiliated that as a professional soldier, he had missed action in both World Wars, but now in addition he had the burden of having to explain the unheroic cause of his injury. Meanwhile my sister had been traumatized by being put in an orphanage in South Africa while my mother was pregnant. Then when Robin was born, it turned out that he had a deformity – he had been born with a club foot and as a toddler had to wear an iron brace for some years. For both my mother and father, it was one thing after another, on a scale of which my generation knows little of.

In 1946 the war ended and my mother and father bought a house in Edinburgh. In November of that year, I was born, blissfully oblivious to all that had come before. I was a baby boomer. True, the fifties had the Cold War but it didn't affect me. The sixties? That's another story - as is life growing up in my family.