

Merv's War

My Dad, Mervyn Jones, hasn't left us any written memoirs, but I do have memorabilia.

There are:

- photographs,
- his WW11 Army pay book and release documents,
- a letter he wrote to my mother, his Darling Bet, five weeks before their wedding,
- his Post Office note book from the early 1950s
- poems, of various standards, that he wrote throughout adulthood, but mainly in retirement
- endless memories

So, I'm going to collect the whole lot, plus information that some additional research has turned up, and make the **Book of Pomp**, which I hope will be a much treasured part of our family history.

Early Days in Waunlwyd

My Dad – I shall call him Merv for the rest of this epistle, as everyone did – was born on 27th March, 1919.

His mother, Rachel, was reputed to be surprised to find herself pregnant again six years after the birth of her son, Leslie. Like me, Merv was a baby born in the first year of peace following a World War. I've no doubt that the Great War had affected the lives of Rachel and William Jones and little Les, and perhaps the peace had gone to their heads and led to the birth of Merv. Whatever the truth of the situation, decisions had to be made.

The Jones family were living at 27 Hillside Terrace at this time, but at the time of her confinement Rachel, [and presumably William and Leslie] were staying with William's mother at no. 40 Cwm Road, and here Merv was born. He was a small baby, but gave Rachel some trouble, and she made a considerable amount of noise producing him. According to Auntie Edie [William's sister] who still lived with her mother, and who disliked Rachel, you could hear Rachel screaming all over the village.

I know nothing else about Merv's babyhood except that in his first year the family bought the house they had previously rented. 27 Hillside Terrace, Waunlwyd, was to be the family home until 1963! They were already renting the terraced miner's cottage, but certainly in August 1919, when Merv was less than 5 months old, the house became theirs, subject to mortgage. The Co-operative Permanent Building Society provided my grandfather, William Jones, with £175 17s 0d, William paid £64.3s.0d as a deposit. The other £7.10s.0d that he had to find, covered costs. It strikes me that this was a lot of cash to find at that time and it suggests that they were not poverty stricken. Rachel and William had been married by this time, for 13 years. Their wedding certificate tells us that William was a coal miner – hard work but well paid. By the time Merv was born William was 39 and Rachel was 37. I'm sure this was rather old for a second child to be achieved at the time. No wonder Rachel was shocked. She may well have been embarrassed, as well!

As a child, Merv was reputedly spoiled. This is according to his Aunts and Uncles, Nana would never admit to spoiling anyone. 'The world will hurt them soon enough' was her favourite saying. I was told that Dad [Merv] would never eat a meal unless he was allowed to sit under the table with whatever he was playing with for company. What a vision. He remained a small child, and was probably babied as a result.

He went to school at Waunlwyd School, at the end of Hillside Terrace, until he was 10. Being a bright little boy, he was entered for the scholarship exam to the County School a year early, and passed. I expect this was hard for him, as he was small among his own age group, let alone older boys. Merv never talked about school with any enthusiasm and joy, so I assume he just went and got through it, as so many people do. The family could certainly afford the extra expense of the County School.

Leslie was 16 by this time and about to go to Caerleon college to do teacher training. William, as well as working for Richard Thomas and Baldwin, the Steelworks bosses, ran a milk delivery business. The house backed onto the mountain and the back garden had a gate straight out to the hill. Up there, William kept his pony and trap for delivering the milk. The milk was collected from local farms in churns, loaded onto the trap and taken round the locality. People would put a jug, or whatever container was suitable, outside the front door, and William would pour out the requisite amount. Merv often went on the round, as he grew up, and learned to love horses and ponies. After the milk deliveries, William would go to work proper.

You would think that William's two jobs would have provided sufficient funds for the 4 of them, but Rachel also contributed. She converted the front room of their little house into a shop. This wonderful little space sold basic groceries, sweets, cigarettes and anything else the people of Hillside Terrace wished to buy. Some of the stock was delivered; some was collected by William or the boys in the trap. Loose goods, like sugar and tea, were measured out into triangular bags with a silver scoop and everything was weighed on old fashioned scales with brass weights.

Nana [Rachel] liked her privacy, and so a heavy red velvet curtain was put up to prevent prying customers seeing the living quarters. Each morning Rachel would go out the front with a bucket of water and a scrubbing brush. The concrete steps up to the front door were thoroughly washed, and newspaper laid on them to prevent mucky customers from defacing them. This is interesting, because the rest of the house was far from scrubbed. The middle room was used as a sitting room and was in a reasonable state, but the kitchen was diabolical. Rachel never cleared the big central table and certainly didn't clean the sink. The draining board was wooden and impregnated with stuff; the dish cloth was slippery with bacteria; there was an odd smell. Rachel cooked on the range which had to be fed and lit each morning. She would kneel on the floor, cooking bacon to a crisp. The shop meant that they were never short of food, even during rationing.

There was no inside toilet or bathroom, so Merv would have bathed in the tin bath in front of the range on Sundays, and other business was dealt with by going out into the back yard and into the W.C. This back yard had a fascinating little stream which ran along the back of the entire terrace in a small concrete gully. I'm sure Merv must have played boats in it, as I did decades later. Rachel was an indulgent grandmother to me, and I expect she was the same with Dad, so maybe he played with great blocks of salt, as I did, or bags of ripe plums. I know he counted the money from the shop and the milk round every day, piling up the coins in shilling heaps – 12 of those lovely big pennies; or 24 ha'pennies; or 4 thrupenny bits; or 2 silver sixpences. And then the notes would be admired – red ten shilling notes, blue pound notes, and very occasionally white 5 pound notes. All this interest and fun must have led Merv to want his own business. It was what he was used to: a household where someone worked as a wage-earner or salaried worker, and everyone made as much money as possible in other ways.

It all paid off. The Joneses were the first ordinary family in the valley [not counting the bosses at the mines and steelworks] who had a car. I suppose William must have driven it, but I never saw him drive. He must have given up by 1946, when I was born. Merv, however, always loved driving. He had always driven the horse and cart with vigour around the village. On one occasion, he saw a local girl, Mavis Hendy, standing on her front doorstep in her curlers – not unusual in the valleys – and picked her up, well kidnapped her really, and put her on the trap. He drove hell for leather down the valley to Cwm, where he put her on the pavement and left her to walk home. She never showed her face in curlers again.

The Jones family were also great chapel people. Rachel and William married at the English Wesleyan Chapel, but were essentially Baptists. Merv was baptised, that is to say fully immersed, not Christened, and the family attended Chapel EVERY Sunday. William was a senior deacon of the Baptist Chapel, and after the original Chapel was demolished, was instrumental in raising the money for and organising the building of Caersalom, but this was later in the early 1950s. They were all believers and I'm sure this helped Merv greatly when he was tested to the extreme in the second war.

There was also time for considerable fun. William played the mandolin brilliantly and was part of a 4 piece band that played at any local venue that would have them. As soon as Merv was old enough, a drum set was acquired and Dad joined the outfit as chief rhythm man. William often played his mandolin to me into very old age and managed to teach me Ba Ba Black Sheep. At family gatherings music was inevitable, and my mother was soon co-opted

when it was discovered that she was a decent pianist. The Joneses were not great singers. Merv sounded like a frog in some distress.

When Merv was around about 15, Les married Iris Jennings. Rachel couldn't bear Iris, and made life awkward for Les. When it came to the wedding, William had been ill, and Rachel used this as an excuse not to attend herself. Iris and Les never forgave her. William's sister, Edie, aforementioned, was looking forward to the wedding and she and her husband [Bill Smith] got all dressed up ready and waited...and waited. They had the idea that a car was going to collect them, for some reason, and of course nothing happened, so Edie and Bill missed the service, too, and Edie sulked. Merv had the pleasure of being best man at this happy event. Now, this was interesting, too. The Jennings girls were all tall, gangly and horrifically plain, so that bride and bridesmaids left a lot to be desired and dear little Merv was stuck with having his photograph taken in this illustrious company. I love these hilarious photos. Hope you do too.

Around about this time, Merv was due to take his matriculation exams [O levels] at school. It was a very dodgy business in those days, since you had to pass the whole lot together, or fail the lot and take them all again the following year. [This happened to Bet, you may like to know] Merv chickened out. From what I can gather, he pleaded illness and left school 3 weeks before the exams. Actually, I think he panicked. Apart from taking some evening classes thereafter, Merv's formal education was at an end.

He carried on working the milk round, and also got a job as a stocker controller at the steel works. Uncle Les Williams [Hylda's husband] used to say that he walked around with a clip board all day, doing nothing useful. He also worked for a while as an expeditor, which I suppose is someone who makes sure that things get done.

And then there was Bet.



Above left: Rachel Jones, nee Lewis, Merv's mother
 Above right: Hillside Terrace, where the family lived
 Below: The Baptist Deacons, Merv's father, William Jones is 3rd from the right, back row.



Market Square.
Ebbw Vale.
Also at Cwm
and Tallystown.

18th August 1919.

Mr William Jones.
27 Hillside Terrace, Waunlwyd.

To R. E. Williams.
SOLICITOR.

The 27 Hillside Terrace

1919
July
&
August

Costs relating to attendance on you when you instructed me to act, investigating title, drawing and engraving Abstract of Title and plans on lease, drawing and engraving Assignment, obtaining execution thereof by Mr J. E. Griffiths the Vendor and yourself, attesting same, stamping same, correspondence with you and Messrs Church, Adams & Co who acted as Mortgagee Solicitors on behalf of the Co-operative Permanent Building Society acting as Mortgagee Solicitor, for copying Registrations on Title and answering same, for copying & sending draft Mortgage, obtaining you execution thereof, attesting same and completing between Vendor and Purchaser & Mortgagee and Mortgagee, &c. &c. Aforesaid charges as agreed.

Paid fee on notice to Vendor's Solicitors	10 0			
Stamp duty on Assignment	1 5 0			
for parchment for do	10 0			
Postages, paper & incidentals	5 0	2 10 0		
			5 0 0	

1919 August 19th
Received of the above amount
R. E. Williams. £ 11. 10. 0.

Documents left by William

Left: The purchase of 27 Hillside

Below Left: Solicitor's letter re purchase

Below Right: Headed paper for the 'Dairy'. Dr. for debtor, not doctor!

R. E. WILLIAMS.
SOLICITOR.
MEMBER OF THE INSTITUTE OF SOLICITORS.
BANK AT CWM AND TALLYSTOWN.
TELEPHONE NO. 35 EV
TELEGRAMS: WILLIAMS, SOLICITOR, EBBW VALE.

Market Square,
Ebbw Vale,
Mon.
19th August 1919.

Dear Sir,
re 27 Hillside Terrace, Waunlwyd.

As I told you when I saw you this afternoon I received £115. 17. 0 from Messrs Church, Adams, Prior & Salmer, balance of the sum of £150. 0. 0 lent to you by the Co-operative Permanent Building Society and this afternoon you paid me the sum of £34. 3. 0 which with the former amount makes up the sum of £149 the purchase money due to Mr J. E. Griffiths for the above premises. I return Messrs Church, Adams, Prior & Salmer's receipted account for their charges showing how the sum of £149. 17. 0 is arrived at and enclose copy of the completion account showing the apportionments and beg to acknowledge receipt of the latter sums. As promised, I will send the Fire Insurance Policy and the notice from Messrs Osborne Coleman & Lawrence to Messrs Church, Adams & Co as soon as I receive them.

Yours faithfully,
R. E. Williams.

Mr William Jones

HILLSIDE DAIRY,
WAUNLWYD.

19

M

Dr. to W. JONES,
DAIRYMAN.
PURE NEW MILK DELIVERED DAILY.

Bet and the Early Years

I think the only people who can really describe the love between Bet and Merv are themselves. This first extract was written by Bet after Merv's death in 1995. She is remembering how they first got to know each other.

1996: *about Merv*

Perhaps I had better go back to my teenage years and the beginning of my love for Merv. I was 12 when I started at the Grammar School, and Merv must have been fifteen then. I don't remember his being at school the same time as I was.

I remember a feeling of great happiness during my year in the 5th. By then I was a prefect and Hockey and Cricket captain. I used to sneak out after Chapel and meet Val, but he was not really quick enough for me. And by then Merv had his sights on me, although I didn't know at the time.

At Christmas 1939 Wyn and I were allowed a party between us. Merv was always at his Grandmother's next door and so was invited to the party. After the party he asked me to go to the pictures and to my amazement we went 3 times that week. He paid each time, and arrived bearing chocolates. After this we were together as much as possible. I was pupil teaching at Waunlwyd school and had been accepted at Dudley Training College to commence in September 1940.

My time at College was really a turning point in my life. It was the first time I had been in a proper bath, and the first time away from home. I was terribly homesick and Merv wrote to me every day and spent as many weekends as he could in the Railway Hotel in Dudley.

He was 'called up' for the army in January 1942. It was a terrible day – very heavy snow and Merv's father and I went to Abergavenny to put Merv on the train. We were all heartbroken. It was the beginning of 6 years of unhappy partings that Merv and I could hardly bear. He came to Dudley one weekend and we got secretly engaged. We wrote to each other every day with few exceptions for six years.

How we lived through the war years I will never know. Letters arrived 2 or 3 weeks late, so I never really knew how Merv was. It wasn't until after the war years that I knew that the 'Cathay' had been torpedoed and that Merv was one of the few survivors.

At about this time my Grandmother Charles used to spend a few weeks with us, and was constantly amazed that I received so many letters.

My life with Merv was joyous and full of fun. We had a few ups and downs, but eventually overcame them. He was a wonderfully kind husband to me and was always there to help me and our two children. Right up to a few weeks before his death we would put on a tape and dance round the room. Merv was the best thing that ever happened to me. My father had been a moody man and Merv was like a ray of sunshine in my life. Merv's mother always said she had never seen 2 people so happy.

From 1940 onwards it is difficult to talk about Merv without Bet coming into the equation. I know from Bet's own testimony that Merv was an attentive admirer, and spoilt her from the beginning. This never changed. Through 50 years of marriage he showered her with attention, affection, presents and love. Nothing was too much trouble. He cooked tasty meals, laughed, danced and mucked about all the time. He was, I think, the happiest person I have ever known, and the most loyal and reliable as a friend, husband, father and grandfather. He was also a jealous lover, and became very jittery if another man looked sideways at Bet.

Their courtship, which really began in 1939 was rudely interrupted by the world. Firstly, Bet went off to Dudley Training College to do 2 years teacher training. Merv felt threatened by this and spent a fortune travelling to this outpost of Birmingham [considered a vast distance in those days] in the blackout. He stayed in a hotel near the college and spent the weekends continuing his courtship. Mum, and indeed her college friends, said that he would turn up when Bet should have been studying, or when Bet could have been attending a social function, so there were times when she was less than thrilled to see him, but he never gave up, until the world interfered again, and he was forced to.

The Second World War took over everyone's life for 6 years and Merv's life, absolutely, for 4 years. He could, of course, have pleaded reserve occupation, as many people working at the steel works did. In fairness, they were doing an essential job for the war effort and the forces could not have functioned without the men at Richard Thomas and Baldwin. But Merv decided he should go and fight, so he accepted his fate when the call-up papers arrived, and volunteered for the Royal Signals in the misguided belief that it would be safer than the Infantry.

The Army

Dad had a terrible time in the army!! He hated every second, but got through it with some dignity and not a little courage. It all began with coming to terms with it at home.

Bet was home for Christmas when the papers arrived. Mum was always dramatic in her reactions, so I dread to think how she reacted to this. The 'secret' engagement we know about, and so did everyone else, because they bought the ring in Ebbw Vale and the women in the shop recognised them. Their great-grand daughter, Ellie, now has this ring – 3 tiny diamonds in a line. Actually one of them is missing. Fifteen years later Merv was teasing Bet unmercifully, as usual, and she lost her temper, pulled off her ring and threw it into the fire with some venom. I witnessed this in Nan's kitchen in 'Windsor'. Bet was immediately

remorseful and they frantically searched the hot embers and retrieved it, but it was minus one stone.

Merv's mother greeted the news of his call-up with terror. She was inconsolable and went around the village saying, 'what do they want our Merv for, he's only a little bit of a thing'. This was true. His army pay book, a precious document not to be lost or defaced at any cost, says that he was 5 ft 2 inches tall, weighed 107 pound [7 and a half stone]. He had a 'fresh' complexion, grey eyes [huge] and dark brown hair [which always looked black because of the Brillcream].

The sad goodbyes were said in the snow at Abergavenny station, as described by Bet. William went, too, but Rachel couldn't face it. So Merv got on the train and eventually finished his journey in Prestatyn on 15th January, 1942.

The Pontins holiday camp had been requisitioned for the war effort and many young men have mixed memories, but the general consensus is 'it was no holiday camp'. Presumably, these poor young chaps were knocked into shape in Prestatyn. There is a picture of Merv, with the others and mention in his pay book of him being tested in D.M. Gas on the 9th February. I found the following definition of D M Gas, which does not sound pleasant. **DM** - a nose gas - a yellow crystalline solid - usually recognized by effect - non-lethal, causes a burning pain in the nose, mouth and throat. Pains in the gums, sneezing and coughing. Pain and watering of the eyes. Running from nose and mouth. Headache and pain in the chest. Nausea and perhaps vomiting followed later by acute mental depression. - Gas mask affords complete protection

You have to admit, the whole business sounds less attractive by the minute.

Whatever life was like at Prestatyn, it was about to go downhill. Merv had 7 days leave from 21st to the 28th of May 42. His pay book also says he was 're-mustered' [a popular phrase at the time, which suggests beef sandwiches] on the 15th of May, as an Operator W/L. Perhaps the mustering caused him to apply to leave.

The next thing that Merv's pay book tells us, is that he had two more periods of leave. On June 19th 42 he began 11 days of Embarkation Leave. Merv was in the **15 Air Formation Signal, Royal Signals** and the Army website turned up the following entry:

1939: World War II

After the formation of a second unit at the end of August 1939, the two units, now 1st and 2nd Air Formation Signals were mobilised and despatched to France early in September. After the evacuation of British Forces from France in 1940 both units supported the Royal Air Force in the Battle of Britain and the preparations against invasion. At the end of 1942, both units deployed to North Africa to take part in Operation "Torch" (the invasion of North Africa); subsequently the units served throughout the Italian campaign with the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces. At the end of the war both units were disbanded. Members of the Squadron still wear a Beaufighter flash in recognition of the wartime Air Formation service of its predecessor units.

The 15 Air Formation was part of the now 2nd Air Formation Signals, so Merv went to France following his embarkation leave, but I have yet to discover exactly where they were, or what they did.



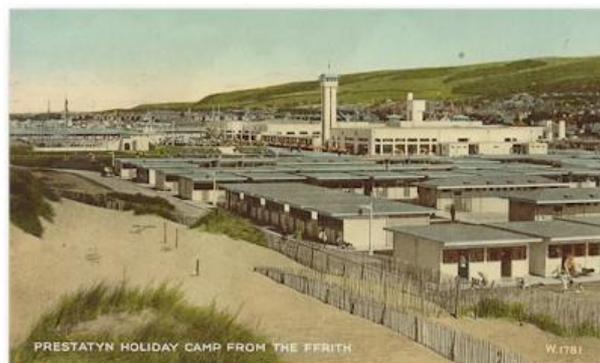
2384514 Signaman M. Jones

Dad is leaning on the arm of the sergeant's chair, 5th from the right, front row.

Taken by Harold J. Lewis, Summerfield Prestatyn, January 1942

Torch Landings

By October



1942, the powers

that he had plans for the men of 15 Air Formation Signal, Royal Signals, but first Merv took 6 days private leave, returning to duty on 13th of the month. He had realised that they were going overseas, so he and Bet worked out a code so that Bet would know where he was. If Merv asked how Mavis was, it would mean France, Bronwyn meant Italy, and so forth. They didn't think of North Africa. Bet waited and waited for the code, but it never came.

For many years Merv's war experiences were only talked about sporadically, and not in detail. Dad did allude to the fact that he was always a good sailor. Troopships were horribly crowded with soldiers sleeping in hammocks stung above one another. It was best to take a top one, to avoid being vomited on, and according to Dad, almost everyone vomited when sailing through the Bay of Biscay. He was never sea sick and was therefore able to help himself to the rations of many of his friends. This must have been so aboard the **Troopship Cathay** en-route to North Africa as one of the several hundred American and British vessels involved in the Torch Landings.

It seems that the Cathay sailed from the Clyde on 26th October 1942 in the Assault Convoy, as a Personnel Ship carrying part of the 'floating reserve' of troops, including my Dad, Merv. She was commanded by Capt. D.M. Stuart DSC. She was at sea until 8th November when she arrived off Algiers B beachhead. Many of the troops were put off at Algiers, but 1200 men, including Merv stayed on board and on the 10th November sailed for Bougie.

At 1 p.m. the Cathay was hit by a bomb. Merv always said that it went straight down the false funnel. Often ships were fitted with false funnels to store ammunition and the like and this was the case with the Cathay. Ammunition started going off terrifyingly. The air attack resumed 3 hours later. By 10 p.m. the ship was on fire, fore and aft. I have a photograph of the Cathay, on fire in Bougie bay. Merv was still on board when it was taken, although some sources say that troops were taken off at this point. Merv described events vividly.

First, the bomb down the funnel. Then hits from another air attack which caused fires. At this point Dad ran below decks to retrieve a picture of Bet and other treasures. He assumed his end had come. There were no opportunities to get off safely, then, so he was still on board with a large number of other men when a bomb exploded and finally a second explosion blew off her stern. With the ship turning over on her starboard side, men started jumping off port side. Merv watched many of them hit the water and not come back up. They were hitting the side of the ship beneath the water and dying. Merv persuaded 3 other men to jump off the

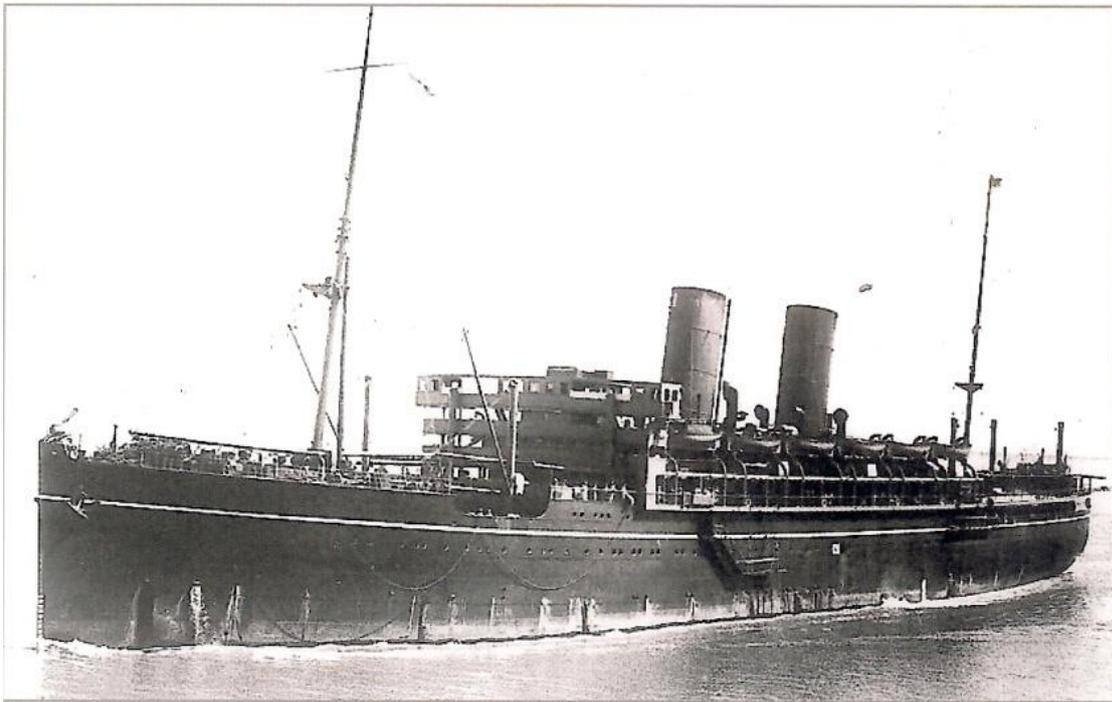
starboard with him. They took some persuading, but Dad felt sure it was the only hope. With only 3 cork life jackets between 4 of them, they jumped. By this time Dad's leg had been badly burned in the fire, and the agony he felt when hitting the salt water stayed with him in the nightmares he suffered for years afterwards. The salt also saved his leg from becoming infected and probably saved his life.

Reports say that the ship took 3 hours to sink and was left lying on her starboard on the bottom, completely gutted. They also say that only one man died – a Royal Navy gunner.

Merv said only the 4 of them got off in the final assault. I can't find any further information to sort this out, but will keep at it.

Anyway, to continue Merv's spoken version, the 4 of them were in the water for many hours, holding each other up in turn, as they shared the life jackets. Eventually they reached land where they were hospitalised at Souk-el-Charsiss until they recovered. Dad wrote an account of this to Bet in a letter, which is included in this little book later.

His troubles didn't end there. No-one could confirm their identities and until this could happen they were locked up by the Vichy French in a tower! The main diet was bread and red wine, so that must have been interesting. Merv said they were there for 3 months and that eventually one of the French guards was persuaded to 'look away' while they escaped. By this time their unit had disappeared and they were forced to walk eastward across North Africa behind enemy lines, until they reached a British camp near Tripoli, where the 4 of them were incarcerated again to be checked out by the allies this time. They were put in a concrete bunker. On the 3rd night, the camp was bombed and the bunker was hit. The concrete roof collapsed on one side, killing the other 3 men and leaving Merv again lonely and panic-stricken. He was only 24. Noone else knew the 3 dead men well enough to identify their remains, so Dad had to 'bag them up'. I'm ashamed to say that I don't know their names, but would dearly love to be able to tell their families that their only remaining friend looked after them with dignity and affection.



The Cathay, before and after it was bombed



This selection of photographs is from the little old blue album. They are not labelled, so I am not sure where or when they were taken, but they were precious to Merv, so here they are. I do wonder if the three boys, below right, are his companions from the Cathay.



1943 to the Peace

After the horrors of the Torch Landings, the Cathay sinking, being burnt, locked up and losing his 3 friends, you would think things would calm down. Well, they did to an extent, but not by peace time standards.

At this point in the story, I am short on detail, but I'm starting with Bizerta. I know that Merv was based in Bizerta for some time, and there are 3 photographs to prove it, one, which is my favourite, is of Merv posing with his arms folded and a cigarette in his left hand. He had been used to having free cigarettes from the shop and he was reputed to smoke 60 a day in the army. He also supplied Wyn, Bet's brother, before they both joined up. The forces were supplied with free fags, I believe.

My ideas of life in 1943 are vague, but Merv told me that the worst thing in his life was having to stab an Italian. He said there was no choice, and they both knew it: one of them was going to die. He said that for the rest of his life he could remember the knife making contact with the man's bones. The background to the situation is not known to me, but from then on other men called Dad 'Jonah' – a play on the Bible stories and his surname. They could not work out how he managed to get out alive.



Bizerta from Dad's little blue album again.



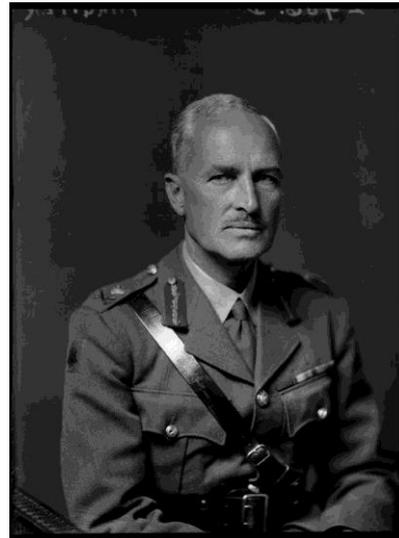
Bizerta in 1943. Merv has grown a moustache

The British Army was spending a fair amount of time in the desert and Merv was a tremendous wiz at Morse code – one of the fastest in the Royal Signals, so he was attached to Major General Robert Beverley Pargiter, as his personal communications waller. Merv spoke about this time with rather more enthusiasm than other periods of the war. He liked M-G Pargiter and they shared some interesting times. The incident that stands out in my mind is the story of the American Truck!

Merv and Pargiter were out in the desert one day in the old British Radio Truck, which had pretty much had its day. It was becoming harder and harder to keep it going and was a major source of annoyance and hilarity. Merv and the M.G. spotted a truck in the distance. Closer inspection revealed a very tidy, well equipped US truck, but no sign of any personnel, US or otherwise. There was a short, staccato conversation, followed by a snap decision. They fiddled with wires and started the US truck, abandoned their own vehicle and drove off triumphantly, telling themselves that you couldn't waste such things – there was a war on. They had only travelled a short distance when disaster struck. Someone had mined the bridge

they were crossing and the whole rear end was blown off the truck, destroying the wonderful equipment. Merv and MG Pargiter got out unscathed from the front seats. Somewhat deflated, they walked back and reclaimed their own old truck.

Now, the fact of the matter is that if they had crossed that bridge in their own truck they would certainly have died. The old thing was too fragile to survive the explosion, even in part. Pargiter told everyone this story and enhanced Merv's reputation as a Jonah. They were very fond of the old truck after this.



These two photographs are of Major General Pargiter, taken around the time Merv was working with him. I tracked the images down at the National Portrait Gallery, and am indebted to Constantia Nicholaides for sending them to me.

Throughout all this, Merv and Bet wrote to each other daily. Bet was now teaching in the local school at home. They had not seen each other for nearly 2 years. In September 1944 Bet went to the pictures in Ebbw Vale and saw what I assume was a documentary or news film about the goings on in North Africa. In her next letter to Merv she obviously expressed her misgivings and worries about his safety. Merv wrote back a long, reassuring and romantic letter. He told her a little more about his experiences [not all of it, just yet] and then talked about plans for their wedding and marriage, which they hoped was not far away.

Some years ago, before Bet died, I committed a theft of sorts. I went to Copley Gardens, where she lived, and took one of the hundreds of letters from the wardrobe; I photocopied it and then returned the original. Why did I do this? Because Mum had threatened to destroy them all before she died. She felt they were private and no one else

should see them. I tried to talk her out of it, but I knew she would burn them, so I took one for posterity. I have transcribed the letter to make it easier to read and I attach it now. This is Merv's, Dad's, Pomp's own voice.

The following is a transcript of a letter written by my father, Mervyn Jones, to my mother, Betty Charles six week before they were married. I shall re-produce it as near to the original as possible. It is written with every bit of precious paper used up, so don't expect paragraphing! Expect kisses.

Hope you can decipher 2384514 Sigmn M. Jones
this letter Sweet XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX H.Q. 52 A.A. BDE Signals XXXXX 28/9/44
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX C. M. F. XXXXXXXXXXXX

My Own Darling Sweetheart XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

XXXX Last evening I wrote you a letter telling you that today we were going out on the range to do a little firing. Well I was going to tell you about the day in this letter, but on my arrival back here two letters were awaiting me, one written on 21st and the other on 23rd and they were two beautiful letters and it will take all this air letter to answer them. In your letter of the 21st you said you had been to the Astoria and that you were full up with emotion and misery after seeing the picture 'The Way Ahead'. Will Kid, I'm sorry you saw it cos I didn't want you to know what it was actually all like. But now you have seen the picture, I may as well tell you the little I haven't already told you. Before I jumped into the water, Kid, I was burned, but not very badly. The side of my leg was bad for about three weeks. For 10 days I was in hospital at Souk-el Charros. My face and body other than my leg weren't touched although a lot of my hair was burned. However it didn't leave a mark upon me for which I am more than thankful. Of course the shock of jumping into the cold salt water made it almost too much for me to bear, but I stood it Kid, the only reason being that I knew you were loving me and waiting for me. I never intended to let anyone know about being burned, not even you, Sweet. But now that you have seen a picture, it is perhaps just as well that I told you. But, Kid, please don't let Mum know. I know you won't, but if she came to know about it she would break up altogether, and Darling, I must implore of you NOT to think about it and not to worry about it. It is over and past and Bet, you will make me forget it when I return, and you will make me happy XXXXXX XX Then, Darling, your letter went on to say that your Mum and Pop are quite agreeable to our getting married as soon as possible after I return, that it would be a good idea for us to move from Waunlwyd and for you to get a job in the country and me, too. Well, Sweetheart, it is a wonderful idea, except that the matter of you continuing to teach will be left entirely with you. Whatever you decide Kid, will be endorsed by me withal my love behind it. I know you don't intend to apply for a job away immediately, but what I want you to do is stay in Waunlwyd until I get b ack. Mind you, Sweetheart I am not saying I forbid you to or anything like it, but Sweetheart it is my wish that you remain in Waunlwyd until I return. After I return Bet, you can decide where you would like to go and you can apply for a post. Of course I'll have to get some position in or near the same place, that shouldn't be difficult and it shouldn't interfere with my ambitions. I do intend, Bet, for you to have everything, and I think I can give it to you after a while. I estimate that by the time I am out of the army I shall have about £350 pounds or more of my very own. Actually, it is only a small amount and only enough to provide but the barest necessities for a home. Therefore, as soon as I get out of the army I shall get a position somewhere whereby until I collect my thoughts and find out what England is really like, how much people have altered and business has changed, I can look after you and give you security. Bet, I intend to work for you and myself and no-one else, and I shall open a business of some kind and until the business is on a secure footing, work as well. I think that is the soundest and best plan. It is difficult to make any decision about anything out here, but as far as it has been possible to plan I have planned, Darling. With regard to your teaching Kid please understand Kid that every penny you earn will be YOURS. Please don't be upset about it, Kid, but when I asked you to marry me, I asked

knowing I will take care of you and look after you and provide for you. I am afraid I haven't expressed myself very well, Darling, but I know you will understand. I love you, Dear Heart, love you more than life itself and with my all. I want you and I need you Sweetheart, above all else I want to be married to you and for you to be Mrs. Mervyn Jones.XXXXXXXXXX

As soon as I get back, Kid, one of the first things I am going to do is have a long talk to your father about things. I should have done so, but it is difficult to say things in letters, so I'll do it as soon as I get back, immediately I get back in fact. A small amount of advice and guidance now will make all the difference in the world later on. There are a thousand and one things I want to ask and discuss, and the sooner I ask and discuss things the better I shall feel. Out here makes one feel away from everything and it is almost impossible for me to set my mind to planning in detail because I hate the army so much and other than writing to you, I cannot settle to anything. Anyway, I shall write a long letter to your father in a day or so. It will probably be so long that it will take two days to write but now that your mother and father have agreed that we can get married when I come back, I must write a letter. Please write and tell me Darling if you think it will be OK for me to write your Pop and I;I'll get down to it right awayXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX I am afraid I am not putting things very clearly Kid and this letter does not contain many actual words of love, but even by what I have written you must know that my love for you is greater, more intense and more ???than ever. I shall always be your very own Merv and only yours. I must write to my Mum and Pop telling them that as soon as possible after I return we shall get married. Of course, they already know it, but I must give them the whole of my plans so that when I return there will be no delay at all. You see Sweetheart, Father and I hold a joint account at the bank and although I can't get it transferred into a joint account for you and myself until I am there personally, there are certain things that can be done. Now I know that I can move, I will move, and fast, Sweetheart. XXXXXXXXXXXX I am thrilled to bits to think that you are preserving your clothing coupons until Xmas in case I get home. I shall find out if it is possible to some extra clothing coupons through the services for getting married. There may be some way.

Now Dear Heart, there is just one other thing I want to get straight. In your letter of 23rd you said that you would be desperately unhappy if you couldn't have children and couldn't give me a baby daughter, that you are scared stiff at the thought. Dearest Heart of mine, please understand this, that all I ask and want of life is you and you alone. I don't know why you should worry, but even if you can't have children, Darling it will not make a bit of difference and I'll see that it doesn't to you. Beloved, I give my life to you because I love you and no-one else. A baby would be but another part of us in our home, but first and foremost all through life will be you and I mean it, Kid. Even if I think there is going to be the slightest danger and hurt to you in having a baby then we won't have any. You are far too Dear to me Darling. YOU MUST NOT WORRY one little bit about it, if you do I am going to be hurt Darling. I love you. I love you *I love you*. XXXXXXXXXXXX I know you are still worried over your face but not quite as worried as you were, and again I ask you to try and put it from your mind! If not before, Kid, it will be OK as soon as I get back and everything in the garden will be lovely. There's lots more I wanted to say tonight Kid but my paper has almost run out. I intended to write to Mum as well tonight but this letter has taken me hours and it is almost lights out. I shall write Mum tomorrow and write a lot in it for you. On Saturday I'll write you another air letter. Two out of three of my future letters will deal with our marriage, Darling cos it may be upon us sooner than we think XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX This letter is poorly written, Darling cos my pen is hopeless and I haven't expressed things very well but I know you will understand and make due allowances Darling. Again, Dear Heart, I ask you not to apply for a post elsewhere until I come back, but if you really want to do so then it is OK with your Merv. Please give my regards and all the love I can spare your Mum and Pop, and tell 'Breadwinner' that a letter will be on its way as soon as I can write it and not to be surprised at its contents. I shall write Wyn his airgraph tomorrow, too. I don't think there is much for me to do so I'll have time during the day to get something written. XXXXXXXX I am proud of you Bet, prouder than I can say, you're a grand, lovely and pure woman and I shall love you all my life as a lover. I shall ever be husband and loverXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX Goodnight, Dear Heart. Please take care of yourself. Bless you – all my love – ever your very own future and adoring husband – MervXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

My mother and father were married 5 weeks later, on 4th November, 1944, sooner than they expected. Whether Dad wrote any of the promised letters before then, I do not know. I do wonder what he planned to say to Grandpa Charles. Those were the days.

I know from his pay book that the previous time Dad had been home was 6th October 1942, a month before his ship, the Cathay, went down at Bougie, so Mum and Dad hadn't seen each other for 2 years.

The Wedding and Demobilising

It's hard to imagine how Merv must have felt on 25th October, 1944. That was the day he knew that he was leaving continental Europe, the war zone, and going home to Wales for the first time in 2 years. He had 3 weeks, a precious 21 days, of disembarkation leave.

On a Friday morning, at 39 Cwm Road, very early, there was a knock on the door. I don't know who answered it, perhaps Nana Charles or Gramps or Mum, but someone screamed, 'IT'S MERV', and all hell broke loose. They ran up to the post office to phone Bet's school to say she would not be in. Amazingly, the headmistress [Pol or Ol, I can't remember] said she would have to go to work. Only married women could have a day off for returning servicemen and Bet was only engaged. So she went to work. I expect Merv went up to Hillside to see his frantic parents.

At any rate, all was happiness and excitement. Merv had put on 2 stone in weight on army food and looked quite well covered. He was also very deeply tanned, having been in the desert for ages. His poor nerves were shot to hell, and actually he felt lousy, but didn't say. All he wanted was to marry Bet before he went back to war – it's odd to realise that they didn't know they only had another few months of fighting to get through.

Everyone pulled their weight, and a wedding was arranged for 4th November at 9 a.m. Bet went shopping in Cardiff or Newport, I can't remember, and with her went her own mother, Merv's mother, Auntie Hylde, old Uncle Tom Cobbly and all. They took all the clothing coupons they could get and eventually found a peach coloured, long satiny dress for Bet to wear. They had FOUR bridesmaids: Ethel Preece, Christine Davies, Angela Jones and Kath Davies. The wedding was held in Bethel Congregational Chapel with a wedding breakfast in the schoolroom to follow. Bet's father got ham and other luxuries on the black market. Merv's brother was best man. The solitary photograph was black and white, but was hand coloured. Mum carried a huge bouquet of white chrysanthemums – those enormous ones which really smell strongly. Every year afterwards on 4th November, Merv bought her another bunch. At last Betty Charles was Mrs. Mervyn Jones.

Merv and Bet caught a train to Weston-super-Mare for their honeymoon. Merv was still not well and had started to go a strange yellow colour. He had jaundice. Most of the holiday was spent queuing for fish, which was supposed to be good for jaundice. There was very little to do in Weston in November in the war, anyway. What with Bet 'having the curse' and Merv being so ill, the poor chap returned to his unit on November 15th with the union unconsummated.

Training was an on-going thing in the army, and by this time Merv had passed his No. 5 medium wireless course at Royal Signal School C.M.F. B.A.T.s 1,2,3,4,5,6 followed in March 1945. What is B.A.T.s? I don't know and neither does the internet. I hope it wasn't Basic Army Training at this late stage. In the spring of '45 there was more training: a fixed musketry course which Merv failed and then passed. In between all this, leave was now more regular. There was mid training leave in January, a 48 hour pass in March and then 9 days end of training and VICTORY leave in June. This last leave is significant from my point of view, as that was when my parents had a proper honeymoon in Huddersfield!! I was born in March 1946!

With V.E. day and training over, suddenly Merv was given embarkation leave again, which meant he was going abroad once more. This time it was the German Occupation that took him away, and with small gaps he stayed in Germany until he was demobbed late in 1946 by which time he had a daughter to come home to. Me.

I actually remember the day Dad arrived home finally. He was a great surprise to a baby girl whose only experience of men had been tallish, fair, and a pale complexion. This person, whom everyone kept telling me was Daddy, was short, had very dark hair and, because of Africa and Italy, very brown skin. Also his eyes were bright blue. Mum's were green and all the men in the family had brown eyes, so these blue ones were new on me. He was fascinating. Once I overcame some initial shyness, I spent hours sitting on his knee watching him and eating his dinner, if I was given a chance. He took me fishing in mountain streams, sang me to sleep every night and was a generally good egg. Lucky old me.

Merv didn't apply for his 5 medals until he was about 70 years old, and he only ever wore them once. Merv, Bet, Peter [my husband] and I all went to the Remembrance Day concert in the Winter Gardens in Weston in 1992. Mum was singing with Shades of Harmony and Dad, Peter and I sat in the audience. After the concert, I took a photo of Dad wearing his medals, standing next to Mum. It was 50 years to the day since the sinking of the Cathay.



11th Nov, 1992: Merv, with medals and Bet on the 50th
Anniversary of the Cathay sinking

Round up: 1944 onwards

Much of the rest of Merv's life you will all know, but some highlights should be mentioned.

He went back to Richard Thomas and Baldwin after his demobilisation and worked as an expeditor. Merv, Bet and Raye continued to live at 39 Cwm Road with Nana and Grandpa Charles, and Wyn.

In 1949, Merv and Bet went to Weston for the day and returned announcing they had bought a house – Windsor, High Street, Worle, Weston-super-Mare. On September 1st the whole family moved to Windsor: Merv, Bet, Raye, May, Norman and Wyn. It remained the family home until 1977, when Bet, Merv and Andy moved to Copley Gardens.

Merv worked first for the G.P.O. as a telephone operator on the night shift. His notebook from that time is in the Merv Box and shows his lovely handwriting.

In the early 50s he went to work for Blundells, as a sales rep and became their top salesman year on year. Eventually he set up his own Tally business, which kept us all comfortably for many years.

Andy was born in 1958. Merv was overjoyed, rubbing his hands together characteristically.

Family, Chapel [he started the youth club], politics [Liberal candidate for the local council on one occasion], were all much in the forefront of his life.

Merv ran a garage in New Bristol Road for several years, but it was a struggle and went down the drain, so he went to work for Bristol Aerojet as a Critical Path Network Controller until his retirement, which was celebrated with a family trip to Blackpool.

In 1994 Bet and Merv had a lovely party for their Golden Wedding – there are endless photos with almost everybody on them. It was a happy, happy day. Eight weeks later he died. When I asked him shortly before the end, how he felt he smiled and said, 'Relaxed, comfortable, ready to go, Kid'.

Merv always seemed very fit and happy. He was great fun, solid as a rock, and hugely loved by his descendents, namely: Raye, Andy, Nick, Dave, Steve, Alexander, Sophie, Joshua and Abi. Ellie and Jacob didn't meet him, he had died before they arrived, but I'm sure they have heard about him over and over. Perhaps they will read this. I hope so.