

Military Migrants: British Service Personnel in Ceylon during the Second World War

Ashley Jackson¹

Migration caused by conflict is a neglected aspect of the history of the British Empire and the Second World War. Hundreds of thousands of military personnel moved around the Empire and had a significant impact upon the territories in which they were based. In addition, hundreds of thousands of civilians fled war zones, sometimes in an orderly fashion, sometimes in blind panic as the enemy closed in. There were also numerous forced migrations in colonial territories conquered by the Japanese. A unifying study of the range of migrations that took place within the Empire is long overdue. These migrations included civilians fleeing enemy invasion in the East, and military personnel escaping from Greece, Malaya, or Sumatra as the enemy approached or moving in troopships between the various theatres of global operations. Civilian evacuees crossed the Atlantic or left places such as Egypt and Singapore seeking safe haven in Australia and South Africa. Jewish refugees escaping Nazi-dominated Europe managed to reach Palestine, some of them subsequently interned for the duration in Mauritius. The civilian population of Gibraltar was removed from the Rock and accommodated in camps in Britain, Jamaica, Madeira and Morocco. Tens of thousands of American personnel flooded into imperial zones such as West Africa, India, Burma, Iran and Britain's Caribbean and Pacific colonies. Meanwhile, African Americans were beamed into the remote reaches of Queensland, to the intense interest of Australia's Aboriginal population.²

1 **Ashley Jackson** is Professor of Imperial and Military History at King's College London.

2 See Daryl McIntyre, "Paragons of Glamour": A Study of the United States Military Forces in Australia, 1942–1945', PhD Thesis (University of Queensland, 1989). For Gibraltarians in

This article takes one of these themes and illustrates its potential for further investigation through the employment of a case study.³ The theme is the migration of British servicemen and women; the case study is their arrival in the Indian Ocean colony of Ceylon. It illustrates the potential for such studies to add considerably to our knowledge of the Second World War, by documenting the work of some of the many millions of men and women who experienced transformative periods of their lives whilst on military service in distant lands.

The war brought tens of thousands of temporary migrants to Ceylon. Military personnel first began to arrive in significant numbers as refugees from Malaya and the Dutch East Indies in 1942 having escaped capture by the Japanese, and then as reinforcements when Ceylon's defences were built up in 1942 in order to resist Japanese attack.⁴ After the fall of Singapore, Ceylon became its surrogate.⁵ William Cameron, a tea planter's son, was reassured by 'the fact that Ceylon seemed to be teeming with troops', its capital, Colombo, 'seething with the Military'.⁶ A new wave of military immigration washed over Ceylon later in the war as it became a training and rest and recreation base for troops serving in Burma, and when Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten's South East Asia Command arrived with a huge headquarters staff. Ceylon also hosted extensive intelligence-gathering facilities connected to Bletchley Park as well as American, British, Dutch and French special forces. Divisions of African and Indian troops also arrived, as well as Australian and British brigades. In addition, there were air force and Fleet Air Arm squadrons from Britain and Canada and thousands of sailors operating the ships and extensive shore bases and aerodromes of the Royal Navy's Eastern Fleet. The island's military population was further swelled by the

Jamaica, see <http://jamaica-gleaner.com/pages/history/story0069.html>. For African Americans in India, see Gerald Horne, *The End of Empires: African Americans and India* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2008).

3 A version of this paper was presented to the Department of Politics and International Relations Seminar, Royal Holloway University of London, 20 March 2012.

4 Tens of thousands of African, Australian, and Indian soldiers spent time based in Ceylon though this article excludes them because of its focus on British personnel. Civilians from Malaya and the Dutch East Indies also arrived in Ceylon, and over 300 members of the Malayan Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve spent several years based there.

5 For the role of Ceylon in the war see Ashley Jackson, 'The Indian Ocean' and 'The Islands of the Indian Ocean' in *The British Empire and the Second World War* (London, 2005); Jackson, *War and Empire in Mauritius and the Indian Ocean* (Basingstoke, 2001); 'The Evolution of Ceylon as a Martial Colony, 1760–1960' and 'Ceylon, Mauritius, and the Indian Ocean during the Second World War' in Jackson, *Distant Drums: The Role of Colonies in British Imperial Warfare* (Brighton, 2010); and Jackson, "'Defend Lanka Your Home': The Home Front in Ceylon, 1939–1945", *War in History*, 16:2 (2009).

6 William Cameron typescript 'Bits and Pieces', sent to A. Jackson, 26 May 1999.

arrival of Italian prisoners of war captured in North and East Africa and, at the conclusion of hostilities, by the arrival of released British prisoners of war breaking their journey home from camps in South-east Asia and the Far East.

Certain parts of the Empire became unprecedentedly busy because of their proximity to the fighting and their strategic position. One consequence of this was a surge in the numbers of British and imperial service personnel, documented in works such as Artemis Cooper's *Cairo at War* and the numerous books on wartime Malta.⁷ Such works document the history of the *places* and the *people*, rather than simply focusing on the military activity. Ceylon requires greater recognition as one the Empire's most important military bases, and the kind of historical study that offers a sense of the place and its people, both the indigenous population and the wartime immigrants.⁸ Recently there has been a flurry of publications of the 'forgotten voices' genre, the most significant of which, in terms of this article, is Richard Aldrich's *The Faraway War*, which addresses the experiences of British personnel stationed east of Suez.⁹

The material considered in this article illuminates several themes that are strongly represented in the extensive diary, memoir, oral and personal correspondence that has been reviewed, and provides examples of incidental and evocative 'travel writing' from wartime military migrants. They include official publications and films aimed at acclimatising personnel heading east and impressions of Ceylon as they encountered a tropical land and its people for the first time. These themes reveal servicemen and women's impressions of the oriental 'other' and his 'exotic' land, as well as racial stereotyping and British class value judgements. Another theme is the extensive recreational activities available

⁷ Artemis Cooper, *Cairo in the War, 1939–1945* (London, 1989). Also see James Holland, 'Recreating Wartime Cairo', at <http://www.secondworldwarforum.com/2011/02/11/recreating-wartime-cairo/#more-542>. For Malta, a recent work that captures the busyness associated with the war and the influx of service personnel is James Holland, *Fortress Malta: An Island under Siege* (London, 2004). Recent novels set in wartime Malta include Mark Mills, *The Information Officer* (London, 2009) and Joanna Trollope, *The Brass Dolphin* (London, 1998).

⁸ Ceylon already has its own fine but little-known wartime novel, Christopher Hudson's *Colombo Heat* (London, 1986), and Michael Tomlinson, *The Most Dangerous Moment: The Japanese Raid on Ceylon 1942* (London, 1976), is a compelling account of the Japanese attacks on Colombo and Trincomalee.

⁹ See, for example, Max Arthur, *Forgotten Voices of the Second World War* (London, 2004) and Julian Thompson, *Forgotten Voices of Burma: The Second World War's Forgotten Conflict* (London, 2009). Richard Aldridge, *The Faraway War: Personal Diaries of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific* (London, 2005). An oral account of the British Empire's war is Christopher Somerville's *Our War: How the British Commonwealth Fought the Second World War* (London, 1998). Aaron Moore's work examines the letters of service personnel. See *The Perils of Self-Discipline: Soldiers Record the Rise and Fall of the Japanese Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2012).

for wartime migrants and their tourist-like approach to leisure and the role of the colonial world as a playground for Europeans. The final themes elucidated in this article relate to sexual encounters, the erosion of colonial class stereotypes, and the perceived lessening of European racial prestige as a result of ‘declining’ moral standards.

‘Travel’ literature and information

British and imperial personnel posted to Ceylon were offered a variety of literature and films aimed at acclimatisation and orientation. Air Command South East Asia, for instance, published a special guidebook for servicemen and women posted to Ceylon. It offered advice on what and what not to bring, its warnings against shipping out motor cars, polo ponies and grand pianos reflecting prevalent attitudes about what colonial life meant for British people in Asia, and how affluent and ‘middle class’ were the views of those preparing the literature. Most British people had no practical experience of the Empire whatsoever, and working-class personnel were unlikely to have contemplated taking polo ponies or cars with them on their deployment overseas.

The guidebook, not exclusively aimed at officers, warned against checking off a ‘formidable list of tropical kit and accessories’, as, ‘you may very successfully be led up the garden path,’ by unscrupulous shopkeepers urging the unsuspecting serviceman heading east to get fully kitted out with sola topees, malaria belts and canvas washstands. It advised them to ‘travel as light as possible. There’s nothing you can’t get in India’. The booklet also told readers to ‘be careful what you buy [once in Asia] – what’s okay in an Eastern atmosphere is often quite unsuitable and utterly ridiculous when transferred to a flat in London, a cottage in Hampshire or a country villa near Oxford’. One wonders how they might have looked in a terraced house in Blackburn or a tenement in Glasgow. Curios and other items bought in India and Ceylon ‘will soon find themselves in the vicar’s jumble sale’. The publication offered advice on which clubs to join, language and the low down on unpleasant creatures.¹⁰

Orientation literature also offered advice on how to treat the local people – including the ‘colonials’. They offer insights into how very different the majority of Britons were to their British confreres in the colonies. The booklet *Ceylon and its People* was ‘published specially for and issued free to all Ranks and Ratings of the Fighting Services in Ceylon’. Among other pieces of advice, it said that Ceylon’s European population was more interested in the defence of Ceylon than

10 RAF Air Command South East Asia, Imperial War Museum, K. 02/1516.

the defence of the Empire (an indirect slur on their patriotism). Furthermore, it claimed that they were suspicious of 'superior' people, and 'must be treated with much more tact than, say, the inhabitants of Yorkshire or Wiltshire'.¹¹ This is an astonishing metropolitan view of Britain and a telling judgement on the British settlers of Ceylon.

In 1945 the RAF Film Production Unit produced 'Life in Air Command South East Asia' which introduced places such as Bombay, Calcutta, Delhi, Ceylon and Burma to RAF personnel posted to this expanding theatre of operations. The film offered alluring opportunities – betting on the horses, gaining the tan that completed a man's handsomeness, meeting members of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) and the opportunity to see and experience exciting places. It condescendingly warned against Indian shopkeepers and beggars ('all of them dirty, some of them even genuine') and proffered information about the different 'types' of Indians and how 'absurdly cheap' it was to procure Indian servants to cater for one's daily needs. The film showed airwomen shopping and sightseeing, personnel on leave in places such as Calcutta and Darjeeling and men working in Ceylon, 'where it is no hardship to live in tents' and where there was plentiful swimming and sailing.¹²

Impressions of Ceylon

The second theme is the impressions of Ceylon recorded by personnel normally encountering 'the East' for the first time. Following journeys round the Cape or through the Suez Canal aboard troopships, new arrivals were impressed by their first encounters with Ceylon. Its flora, fauna and scenery left a strong impression upon their minds and these were a standard feature of their memoirs, diaries and letters. In 1942 Alan Moorehead wrote that 'from top to bottom the Japanese dominated the bay of Bengal. The stage was set for invasion, fast, deadly and violent'.¹³ As a war correspondent Moorehead was following the action, and had dashed from the Middle East to Ceylon as the Japanese took the Malayan peninsula and looked set to conquer Burma and Ceylon. His account of his arrival captures the ebullient reaction to the island which dominates recorded evidence from wartime military visitors.

11 *Ceylon and its People*, 1944 edition printed by the *Ceylon Daily News*, Colombo, 1944, Imperial War Museum, K. 84.1437.

12 Imperial War Museum, APY37. See 'Colonial Film Database' website for a link to the film and a textual description. <http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk/node/5430>

13 Alan Moorehead, *A Year of Battle* (London, 1943), p. 146.

[Once over Ceylon] we went elephant hunting from the air. We had a wild chase over the jungle. It glowed with a moist lush greenness, the quintessence of greenness. Here and there the undergrowth parted into a little clearing around a waterhole and then we would go zooming down ... Wild birds and deer leapt up screaming. Then at last we sighted an elephant ... We kept on a strict route over the palm trees, for another Japanese attack was expected at any time, and came down outside Colombo.¹⁴

Though Moorehead had visited Ceylon before,

... it was still a shock to see the almost crazy fertility of the place – the natives carrying huge branches of bananas and sacks of pineapples. Coconuts, mangoes and pawpaws – they grew haphazardly anywhere, and the jungle reached down to the city streets as though it would suddenly engulf everything in a wave of green fleshy leaves.¹⁵

The vegetable luxuriance of Ceylon struck most visitors; Hugh Campbell, serving aboard HMAS *Tamworth*, wrote that ‘the whole country seems to me to be over-ripe. The trees are very luxuriant, flowers are bright, and everything is exotic, but always that musty smell of decay persists’.¹⁶ ‘The moment we reached Ceylon’, wrote the Labour Member of Parliament Tom Driberg,

... there was a magical change. The hills and the woods were as green as England’s with mountains grander than Scotland’s rising above them ... From Colombo to Kandy we were lucky enough to get a lift from a superbly furnished Dakota, the SAC [Supreme Allied Commander]’s private aircraft ... There was warmth and hospitality in our welcome, from the airmen at the airstrip ... to the ‘boy’ who made our beds in the excellently equipped camp at SACSEA [Supreme Allied Command South East Asia].¹⁷

14 Ibid., p. 152.

15 Ibid., p. 152.

16 Hugh Campbell, *Notable Service to the Empire: Australian Corvettes and the British Pacific Fleet, 1944–1945* (Garden City, New South Wales, 2000), p. 65.

17 Quoted in Alan Brundrett, *Two Years in Ceylon: The Diaries of a Navy Secretariat Member, 1944–46* (Brighton, 1996), p. 278.

Driberg's vignette captures the sense of exhilaration recorded by many Britons upon their first encounter with the island. It is further evidenced in the diaries of Alan Brundrett:

We caught our first glimpse of Ceylon through the mist early this morning in the shape of its majestic mountains, with Adam's Peak standing out conspicuously in the centre, a familiar silhouette to any philatelist as it is featured on the three-cent stamp ... Soon Colombo's interesting, low skyline becomes clear. The Secretariat, Town Hall, Cathedral and Galle Face Hotel can be picked out, and the sun's rays strike a slim white obelisk; a war memorial, no doubt. The island's mountains of green and purple, bathed in sunshine, provide a worthy backdrop to such a delightful scene. Westwards, along the coast beyond Colombo, lovely trees and feathery palms fringe the beach, and natives in quaint canoes can be seen ... As we near the fine breakwater one can see the spray thrown up by the breakers along the coast and hear the boom as they crash against the shore ... Many large ships are to be seen in port, as well as barges, tugs, sailing-boats and Maldive 'buggaloes', an altogether busy and fascinating setting ... We were bewildered by a scene completely alien to us. Rickshaw coolies stripped to the waist, their brown bodies glistening with sweat; some quite skinny, old before their time; people shouting in strange tongues; constant hooting of car horns and jingling of bells. Strange odours mingle with the scent of flowers.¹⁸

At a navy transit camp near Colombo Brundrett noted the 'heavy scent of flowers', fireflies darting about, 'their luminescent bodies easily seen' and a jungle road 'dusty and unlit ... It is a new experience to lie there and hear the weird noises of a tropical night, frogs croaking hoarsely, the sounds of bats and crickets, giving an overall continuous pulsating sound rather like that made by refrigerators'.¹⁹

After disembarking, Dennis Small of the Royal Marines was taken with hundreds of other men on a train journey into central Ceylon. Alighting at night they marched along a dirt track 'winding through towering palm trees, passing through small palm leaf built villages, with hurricane lamps hanging over

¹⁸ Brundrett, pp. 155–6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 157–8.

verandahs [sic]. Occasionally one would hear the sound of Indian music drifting out from within the huts, mingling with the croaking of toads, and the screeching sounds of the tropical forest'.²⁰ Arriving at the camp, stumbling over trenches dug to carry away the monsoon rain, he was issued with a blanket and a mosquito net and shown to a derelict hut, where he and the other occupants were 'too frightened to speak at night as two large pale eyes appeared and moved around the room'. Small and his fellow new arrivals were informed the following morning that these belonged to wild dogs.

The 'strangeness' of life in Ceylon, and the challenges of its climate, were a constant theme in the recorded experiences of British service personnel. Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS) servicewoman Freda Wade recalls mongooses in the rafters and baboons swinging from the trees and the risk of tarantulas in the loo. John Mills recalls his time at Natcheeconda, a naval base near the Fleet Air Arm station at China Bay:

Accommodation took the form of wooden-framed huts with coconut palm roofs. The huts were full of insects, and rigging mosquito nets, checking boots for scorpions and the bed for snakes became second nature. Outside, monkeys, squirrels, mongooses, armadillos, chameleon lizards, and spiders of all sizes were constant companions, and during the monsoon season clothing quickly became mouldy.²¹

Cecil Callis camped among coconut trees at Haragama near Kandy:

In the morning it was not uncommon to find that white ants had eaten your kitbag, or to notice blood coming from a leech puncture in the stomach, or a pair of scorpions squaring up to each other outside the tent flap, and the dull thud of coconuts being harvested in the background.

It would then be necessary, Callis recalled, to 'sit down to an alfresco breakfast wearing your tin helmet for safety'.²² Rowland Button was a radar operator posted to a radar station at Galle. 'It must have been one of the finest sites in the world for an RAF station, overlooking Galle harbour, right on a hill, in super scenery with a view stretching right across the hills into central Ceylon. Down below us

20 Dennis Small A8532489, BBC People's War archive.

21 John Mills A8888115, BBC People's War archive.

22 Cecil Callis A4428173, BBC People's War archive.

paths led to beaches where we could swim and laze about'.²³ He was then posted to Horton Plains in the central highlands where work was interspersed with pig hunting, curry-eating, long walks and visits to tea plantations.

Philip Skelsey was an Aircraftsmen 1st Class in an RAF control room linked to radar stations on the coast, from:

... where we plotted the course of British and American aircraft setting out on patrol over the Bay of Bengal or returning to base ... From the top of a hill near our camp you could see Hurricane fighters on the airfield at China Bay far below, like small moths in the distance. In the evenings, the sun dropping towards the sea, the sky was a mass of colour: turquoise, salmon-pink, deep crimson. At night, when we walked towards the town past red-brick bungalows, fireflies flitting among the palm trees, twin-engine Catalina reconnaissance planes came in low over the harbour, their headlights knifing the darkness.²⁴

Skelsey commented upon the challenges presented by Ceylon's redoubtable wildlife. His unit's accommodation:

... consisted of huts in jungle made out of dried palm leaves, and when we were out chipmunks and rats came out of the trees to chew any clothes or soap they could find. It was fatal to leave a piece of chocolate on the tables by our beds. We tried putting each table leg in a round cigarette tin and filling it with paraffin. Even this didn't work. Suicide squads of ants dived into the paraffin and constructed bridges with their dead bodies. Their comrades marched across these, up the table legs, and ate the chocolate. There was a corrugated cinema in town, and a monotonous diet of bully beef, stew and dehydrated potatoes and a canteen where the men could eat sticky buns and drink sweet tea.²⁵

Ken Potter arrived in Colombo with his division in June 1943. They moved inland, 'to Peradeniya [near Kandy] where divisional headquarters were billeted under canvas in the Botanic Gardens, surrounded by a fantastic collection of trees and shrubs from around the world'. Potter strung his tent under a tree growing six

23 Rowland Button A7495293, BBC People's War archive.

24 Philip Skelsey A3790343, BBC People's War archive.

25 *Ibid.*

inch-long pears. On one morning he was 'awoken by half a dozen enormous turtles thumping their way up from the sea to a spot just under his guy ropes. Their tracks were wider than those made by Bren gun carriers, and they dug deep holes and laid eggs like ping-pong balls'.²⁶

At play: Rest and recreation

Another theme strongly reflected in the memoirs of personnel in Ceylon relates to recreational activities when they were on leave or off duty. Beaches, town centres and areas of outstanding natural beauty were routinely visited for recreational purposes. There were then the hill stations, military rest camps and the homes of tea planters in the central highlands, all sites of troop recreation and entertainment.

Prince Philip of Greece was stationed in Ceylon early in the war and enjoyed periods of leave in Colombo, Kandy and Trincomalee. Working at HMS *Lanka*, the naval headquarters in Colombo, he acquired a car (now on display in the Galle Face Hotel's museum) with which to run around the island. A favoured pastime was fishing, 'which in practice meant blowing fish out of the water with small explosive charges and then presenting fifty or sixty of them to the Captain's table'.²⁷ He drove to Trincomalee through the jungle, and went minesweeping with the Ceylon Naval Volunteer Force. He also borrowed the Commander-in-Chief's barge, and went to Kandy to observe the festival of the Buddha's Tooth.

Edward Young, commanding the submarine HMS *Storm*, left a vivid portrait of life in Ceylon for Royal Navy submariners 'at play' between operational patrols:

We swam daily in the warm water, sometimes wearing goggles to gaze down at the brightly coloured fish darting among the coral formations. We organized swimming and sailing picnics with the Wrens from the cypher office ashore, and went surf-riding on the palm-edged beaches further up the coast. Swimming in the harbour had one minor drawback: as a deterrent to midget submarines, small depth-charges were dropped at the entrance to the boom whenever the gate was opened, and if you were in the water within a mile of one of these depth-charges the sound-wave hit you in the stomach like an electric shock. We had plenty of sailing. [The submarine depot ship HMS] *Maidstone* possessed four or five dinghies, and these were out on the water most days.

²⁶ Ken Potter A7473963, BBC People's War archive.

²⁷ Dennis *Prince Philip: A Biography* (London, 1991), p. 106.

We invented an exciting game of sailing battles, in which every resource of seamanship was needed to get up wind of your opponent and then soak him by scooping water over him with a bailer.²⁸

There is no doubt that for many of these service personnel, the colonial world was something of a playground. On the one hand this is understandable – these were young people, far from home and often engaged in extremely dangerous work, people determined to make the most of their leisure time, which they would have done whether stationed in Devon or Diyatalawa. But on the other hand, it reflects another theme common in the colonial encounter – that of assumed European superiority and control over colonial peoples and places, their capacity, almost without thinking, to command native people, to commandeer their lands and to make of them what they would. Be it the Egyptian Pyramids or the towns and beaches of Ceylon, Europeans enjoyed privileged access to them and treated them in an entirely proprietorial manner. Young wrote:

I was at sea when the jeep-hunts began. Phil May (commander of HMS *Tantivy*) and two or three of the others thought it would be good fun to take a jeep into the jungle at night, carrying with them an Aldis lamp which they hoped would mesmerize the game while they shot at it with their .303 rifles. They met with indifferent success, and one night the jeep was chased by an elephant. The sound of the great beast crashing after them in the dark was too much for them, and soon afterwards the new enthusiasm died a natural death . . . Sam Marriott, commanding HMS *Stoic* . . . paddled a canoe from Kandy down the Makaweli River until they reached the sea at Trincomalee. In the course of their trip they negotiated rapids, saw herds of wild elephant, and even shot a crocodile, bringing back the skin to prove it.²⁹

All submarine crews were given ten days' leave after every two patrols. Young spent his first two in Colombo, which was 'amusing, hectic, and very expensive'.

On one such occasion I flew back to Trincomalee on the mail plane; as always in air travel, the height flattened out all the

28 Edward Young, *One of Our Submarines* (London, 1952), p. 227.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 227.

natural beauty of the land, diminishing the vast tracts of jungle and forest to nothing more than thickly-grown parsley. Circling over Trinco before coming in to land, we peered down at the harbour full of toy ships of an extraordinary neatness; *Maidstone* and *Adamant* were easy to spot because of the submarines nestling alongside, but the flight-deck of the aircraft carrier *Illustrious* looked like an elongated ping-pong table.³⁰

The native people were of interest, though often blended into the landscape, as ‘natives’ often did in the colonial world. HMAS *Tamworth’s* crew went ‘for a trip to a little holiday resort and fishing village about twenty miles out [Negombo]’. Campbell’s description of the journey illustrates the distance between temporary military migrants and the indigenous people:

The road all the way was flanked with palms, many of them planted out in rows just like Tasmanian orchards, with houses built of everything from plaited leaves to plastered brick nestling amongst them. We made progress to the continual tooting of horns, as the natives swarmed over the roads like flies. They all raised their hands in a modified V-sign. I’m not quite sure whether they were wishing our war effort well, or just begging for cigarettes. Probably the latter from what I’ve seen, for even boys of nine and ten smoke whenever they can get tobacco. There was a delightful rest house at the beach; we stopped there for tea, and to cool off . . . In the city, filth and squalor are everywhere. Yet the natives seem to be happy enough living as they do, in spite of foul smells, acute overcrowding and ceaseless noise. Entertainment ashore is strictly limited – pictures seem to be the only thing. White girls are in a decided minority. That means we must find all our entertainment in the ship. We play quite a lot of cards, mainly crib and poker, and several times we have parties on board. We have a loud speaker rigged up on the fo’c’s’le for music while we work.³¹

There were many rest and recreation facilities in the central highlands, away from the heat of the lowlands and the coast. There was the hill station, Nuwara Eliya, and numerous military rest camps including Diyatalawa, originally

³⁰ Ibid, p. 228.

³¹ Campbell, p. 65.

established as a centre for Boer prisoners of war at the turn of the century. Alan Brundrett spent a week at a rest camp in Nuwara Eliya, surprised, like most people, by the cool climate and exhilarated by the rail journey. John Callis drove, the road snaking up 6,000 feet to the hill station that had been established in 1825 as a sanatorium for British soldiers convalescing from malaria. The European part of the town was built like an English country town, with gabled roofs, bow windows and cross-beamed walls. There were cottages with roses around the door, lawns and herbaceous borders. 'We even found a racecourse, with paddocks and some racehorses in the stables'.³² Several miles away was World's End, one of the great scenic wonders of the island, with a sheer drop of 5,000 feet with the sea fifty miles away in the distance. Leading Aircraftwoman Nancy Barnett wrote:

It was a relief to go on leave up into the hills at Nuwara Eliya, in a cool English-type atmosphere and enjoy the luxury of guest-houses run like a country house with log fires in the grate and other comforts. Then back to the damp heat of the palm plantations, the snakes and the minor dragons at Koggala, backing up the flying-boats out on patrol. The Sunderlands and Catalinas looked a fine sight on the lagoon.³³

Edward Young's last leave was spent on a tea plantation near Nuwara Eliya. He left Trincolamee in a naval lorry on a 'morning of oppressive heat':

At first the road was flanked by jungle on both sides, and monkeys swung in the branches arching high over our heads. We came out of the jungle and drove among bright green paddy-fields and through native villages swarming with wizened old men, bright-eyed women, and naked children, all very attractive until they smiled and showed teeth hideously discoloured by the blood-red juice of the betel nut. We saw oxen at plough, and from time to time a tame elephant hauling a log along the road . . . Presently the road began climbing more steeply among the foothills, and the vistas grew longer and more superb, and in spite of the August sun we found the air turning chilly and had to put on extra clothes.³⁴

32 Cecil Callis A4428173, BBC People's War archive.

33 A. Banks, *Wings of the Dawning*, p. 347.

34 Young, pp. 227–8.

In addition to the facilities offered in the highlands by the rest camps, it was common practice for planters living in the region to put their homes at the disposal of British servicemen on leave. John Banks recalls the hospitality extended by his parents to British servicemen:

[We] turned our house into a holiday home for soldiers and sailors and the tennis court into a vegetable garden. I remember Tim Aspinall of the Royal West African Frontier Force walking down the passage in a very starched pair of shorts, laid out for him by his African batman. He later went to Burma with his regiment and was killed in action.³⁵

At Hatton railway station the wives of tea planters served tea and buns to the many soldiers travelling up and down by the mid-day mail train. The lack of variation in Ceylon's temperature meant that rest camps were very important for the troops and that 'to prevent staleness, football, hockey and boxing tournaments' were held. Troops stationed in the jungle preferred town leave in Colombo, whilst those based in Colombo preferred 'cool nights and country life of Diyatalawa . . . Above all, there is EFI [Expeditionary Force Institutions – the NAAFI element deployed in officially designated' war zones], which ensures that beer, cigarettes and other essential items are available at reasonable prices'.³⁶

Entertainment

The previous section indicated the extent of the rest and recreation venues available to visiting service personnel, and just how important Ceylon was as an 'R&R' base. This section considers the provision of troop entertainment. Entertainment in Ceylon embraced impromptu activities such as street chess with Sinhalese players or bathing parties, perhaps at Mount Lavinia with its picturesque hotel and pretty beaches. There was then the more 'organised' type of entertainment, such as films shown at the New Olympia cinema on McCallum Road and other picture houses including the Regal, Elphinstone, National, Empire and Majestic. There was a RAF Theatre in Maitland Crescent where, among other things, Elgar's *Enigma Variations* was performed. The New Garrison Theatre opened in Racecourse Avenue, its first production being Terence Rattigan's play *While the Sun Shines*. Alan Brundrett joined a huge

³⁵ John Banks typescript, 'World War 2 Memories – Ceylon', sent to A. Jackson, 7 February 1999.

³⁶ 'Fan Tan', 'Soldiering in Ceylon', *Journal of the United Services Institute of India*, LXXIII (1943).

turnout for a George Formby concert on the recreation ground, with a Royal Marines Band as a warm up act. Other celebrities of the British entertainment world, such as Noël Coward, also performed in Ceylon.³⁷

For eating out, there was the popular Soda Fountain Café on Chatham Street and the Sundae Tea Rooms opposite the Nanking Hotel near the Clock Tower. In nearby Main Street there was a Servicemen's Welfare Organization Committee Cafeteria and Services' Club. Located in the Fort district of Colombo behind the *Times of Ceylon* building was a canteen for servicemen and merchant seamen. There was a servicewoman's canteen on Queen Street in the Fort district and a NAAFI Canteen on McCallum Road. Cricket was big in Ceylon for those servicemen and women who took an interest in the game. An All-India XI toured Ceylon and played at The Oval, Colombo, playing the Combined Colleges, then the Services XI, then an All-Ceylon XI.

With the assistance of one of the street guides issued to troops, Alan Brundrett toured its landmarks. These included the Clock Tower on Queen Street, the Noah's Ark-like building of the Colombo Club, and Galle Face Green, a very wide lawn over a mile in length with the fine Galle Face Hotel standing at the end. Here Sinhalese couples, families and servicemen and women would promenade. There were also the zoological gardens and day trips to the nearby beaches of Bentota and the 'delightful' Mount Lavinia Hotel, its terrace bar and swimming pool overlooking the beach. Service personnel experienced the city's contrasting districts, from the posh Cinnamon Gardens area to Pettah, Colombo's 'native quarter', where the intensity and colour of crowded street markets and the taste of unusual fruit left a marked impression on youngsters fresh from suburban Britain. Cargills, a well-known department store, was on York Street, Cave's 'extensive bookshop' was located on Chatham Street and there was a YMCA as well as reading and rest rooms run by members of the Caledonian Society of Ceylon. Entertainment was provided in the naval camps and barracks, including ENSA shows, table tennis, billiards, badminton and outdoor cinemas. Trincomalee buzzed with activity and Monica Hulme described it as, 'a town full of uniformed officers, and the social life was a whirl . . . It was all parties, dances, and picnics'.³⁸ Here service personnel received the *Trinco Entertainments Bulletin*.³⁹ The town boasted a Fleet Canteen, the Nelson Cinema, and the Chinese Globe Café. In Colombo upmarket facilities were

37 See Noël Coward, *Future Indefinite* (London, 2004).

38 Monica Hulme to A. Jackson, 21 May 1999.

39 Servicemen's newspapers were specially produced for African, British, and Indian, and Sri Lankan servicemen in the theatre, as well as general issue publications such as *SEAC News*, established by Mountbatten.

provided by establishments such as the Grand Oriental Hotel and the Dominion Hotel next door to Naval Headquarters, which had been taken over by the Navy for accommodation. At the Galle Face Hotel – out of bounds to other ranks and barred to women unless accompanied by officers – there was a nightclub that went by the enchanting name of ‘The Silver Faun’. This was one of the classiest establishments in Ceylon, visited by the great and good, including Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten and Prince Philip of Greece. J. Alan Thompson of the Royal Marines remembers ‘the crowded bars of the Galle Face Hotel, the sensuous gloom in the Silver faun, [and] the moon-white beaches at Lavinia’.⁴⁰

Women and sex

There were forms of entertainment in Ceylon other than those described in the previous section, such as romantic liaisons and sexual encounters. As in most war theatres, men far outnumbered women, and higher ranked men tended to dominate proceedings. This was particularly the case where there were major concentrations of British and Allied service personnel, such as Colombo, with its large Naval Headquarters infrastructure, or Kandy, taken over lock, stock and barrel by Mountbatten’s South East Asia Command headquarters.

Often, the relationships that developed were ‘whirlwind’ romances. One such featured the novelist Ian Fleming, who visited Ceylon to review the British Pacific Fleet’s intelligence structure. He enjoyed an intense relationship with WRNS officer Claire Blanchard.⁴¹ They danced together at the Silver Faun and enjoyed each other’s company before Fleming left for Australia. As Blanchard wrote to her brother, ‘since I last wrote . . . a beauteous being has swum into my ken – on an official visit – and I like him very very very much indeed . . . As the Wrens say, whose letters I censor so monotonously, he’s absolutely “It”’.⁴²

Given the imbalance between men and women, men were repeatedly warned about how to treat female personnel, and in most military establishments women had to ‘signout’ with a named officer in an effort to protect them. Leading Aircraftwoman Nancy Barnett joined the signals section at Koggala, the site of a large lake used by flying-boat squadrons. The move ‘led a handful of WAAF’s to a sumptuous style of life from the one we had left. Real food on real tables and so much we usually took gateau, wrapped in our serviettes, to the boys on board’.⁴³

40 J. Alan Thompson, *Only the Sun Remembers* (London, 1950), p. 3.

41 See Andrew Lycett, *Ian Fleming* (London, 1995), p. 154.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 154.

43 Arthur Banks, *Wings of the Dawning: The Battle for the Indian Ocean, 1939–1945* (Malvern Wells, 1996), p. 345.

Other WAAFs were in ciphers, or were WAAF nurses, even a WAAF hairdresser. As a small group of forty in a station of 2,000 men, there was a stern warning to the 'brutal and licentious soldiery' that these women were here to do a job – even 'wolf whistles' would not be acceptable. This was adhered to and the WAAF's got on with the job.⁴⁴

The women maintained a three-shift, twenty-four hour a day cover on the teleprinter. They suffered from fevers and tended to get run down in the high humidity, but the main relaxation was keeping cool in the water at the nearby beach and the occasional run into Galle 'in the 'passion wagon' which belied its name'.⁴⁵

WRNS Freda Wade was billeted at St Peter's College on the Galle Road. Here, the women were kept under guard, not to keep the inmates in but to keep amorous souls out. They were not allowed 'ashore' without a male escort, had to be back by 10 p.m. and had to sign a book saying where they were going and who they were going to be with. They were banned from sunbathing, and if they got burned were considered unfit for duty and could lose pay as a result. 'Our washing stank of woodsmoke and the dhobey [Indian Army slang for laundry worker] used to starch our dresses, which were made of thick drill, so that they were like a board to open up before putting on'.⁴⁶

Beauty was not only to be found in the Ceylonese landscape. Cecil Callis wrote that 'the dusky Sinhalese girls were very attractive and the Burgher girls, of mixed Sinhalese and European blood, were beautiful'.⁴⁷ This was a common opinion among British servicemen. Thomas Russell concluded that shore leave in Colombo 'revealed more female beauty in one place than I'd ever seen in my life'.⁴⁸ Alan Brundrett noted that 'the Sinhalese and Tamil women have a fine carriage and glide along in regal fashion, looking cool and graceful in their bright sarongs. Their ears and noses sparkle with coloured jewellery. Many of the husbands too are clad airily in thin white muslin'.⁴⁹ Tom Driberg also noted the physical qualities of the Ceylonese people:

We drove up to the camp at nightfall, past clusters of small shops painted in gay stripes and ablaze with light. The people of Ceylon, we noted, walk with the smooth grace of ballet dancers,

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid., p. 346.

46 Freda Wade A7011802, BBC People's War archive.

47 Cecil Callis A4428173, BBC People's War archive.

48 Thomas Russell A7358844, BBC People's War archive.

49 Brundrett, p. 187.

upright and dignified; their sarongs, in green or mauve or saffron, hang always with the inevitable perfection of the drapery of Greek statues. There was an aroma compounded of wood-smoke and spices and sandalwood. Certainly none of the British forces in Asia are more fortunate than those stationed here.⁵⁰

The surfeit in human beauty to be found in this 'island paradise', combined with the surfeit in young unattached servicemen thousands of miles from home, meant that many did more than just observe the beauty of the Ceylonese people. Ceylon had a reputation in colonial circles as an 'anything goes' colony, and had gained notoriety as a scene of sexual scandal with the death of the then commander-in-chief, General Hector MacDonald, in 1903.⁵¹ In the inter-war years the incidence of venereal disease among servicemen in Ceylon was among the highest in the British Empire.⁵² War increased the incidence of venereal disease and prostitution. In 1942, 49,586 cases were treated, rising to 87,433 in 1943 and 92,542 in 1944. A report by the Deputy-Inspector of Police on the 'Traffic of Women and Children' in April 1944 recorded many instances of servicemen being solicited for 'an immoral purpose' and being caught in brothels. Sinhalese men solicited the servicemen, for example two sailors in Colombo who were taken to a house and charged fifty rupees for sex with fifteen- and sixteen-year old girls. Both men, one aged eighteen and the other forty-one, had VD. The police sometimes employed undercover officers dressed in military uniform to catch those breaking the law.⁵³

Sex was available for imperial servicemen inclined to seek it. A cause celebre featured the naval officer G.F. Green, who worked in 'the public relations department of the commander-in-chief Colombo, and had sex with a Sinhalese boy on the verandah of the officers' mess, and was caught in bed with another, and the military police were called by vindictive fellow officers out to 'get' him – two years imprisonment [was the result].⁵⁴ 'Dick' Green was responsible for producing a magazine for Ceylonese forces entitled *Veera Lanka*, one in Sinhalese and one in Tamil. When not at his day job, Green found plenty of time for what he euphemistically termed 'verandahism'. According to his friend and fellow officer Ronald George, this was 'a compound of drink, sex, benzedrine,

50 Ibid, p. 278.

51 See T. Royle, *Death Before Dishonour: The True Story of 'Fighting Mac'* (London, 1982).

52 Ronald Hyam, *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience* (Manchester, 1990), p. 89.

53 Lot 5/439, Dispatches 442, Sri Lanka National Archives, Colombo.

54 C. Green and A. D. Maclean (eds), *A Skilled Hand: A Collection of Stories and Writings by C. F. Green, with Memoirs and Criticisms* (London, 1980).

and cigarettes'.⁵⁵ The term 'verandahism' stemmed from the fact that Green had colonised a section of the verandah opening from the main quarters of the Officers Mess 'and turned it into something special'.⁵⁶ Whilst most officers lived in spartan quarters, Green had turned his glory hole into a haven with a divan, easy chairs, Bokhara rugs, Hessian wall hangings and pictures.

Kenneth Williams, famous as a comedy actor in the *Carry On* films served in Ceylon with the 62 Map Reproduction Section in Kurunegala.⁵⁷ Here the unit lived in *bashas* – huts made of rush matting – in a coconut grove. It was in this camp that Williams' developed his skills as an entertainer: 'we held an impromptu concert at which my impersonations won vigorous applause. The Quartermaster Sergeant – who had written the scripts and put the show together – told me I should take up entertaining professionally'.⁵⁸ As well as having a formative experience as an actor and entertainer, Williams had a rare sexual encounter with a young Sikh boy, a story that later in life he would recount in his cups.⁵⁹

Racial attitudes

The romantic and sexual encounters described in the last section directly affected racial attitudes, the theme explored in this final section. The war wrought social changes in Ceylon as it did elsewhere in the colonial world, not least through the damage done to the image of the white man. Europeans were no longer seen as 'gods' by the indigenous population. As Ceylon hosted thousands of Europeans, moral issues were inevitably raised and it was these that often led to changing attitudes. John Banks recalls that 'Ceylon was invaded by hordes of WRNS, ATS, WRAF, and it was not long before doormen at hotels in and around Colombo had names and numbers of girls of easy virtue for persons on leave . . . At that time the Europeans in Ceylon were thought to be whiter than white'.⁶⁰ It appeared to many people in Ceylon that 'the troops had swarmed and discretion had been thrown to the four winds':

They had fraternized with the locals, made love in the streets,
got drunk in the hotels, and generally behaved in a most

55 Ibid., p. 106.

56 Ibid., p. 106.

57 Kenneth Williams, *Just Williams: An Autobiography* (London, 1993).

58 Ibid., p. 36.

59 'Giles Brandreth talks about Kenneth Williams', www.carryonline.com [accessed 25 April 2006].

60 John Banks typescript, 'Second World War – Ceylon Continuation', sent to A. Jackson, 24 April 1999.

‘un-European’ manner. There had been nothing of that British ‘stiff upper lip’ of the pre-war British period. Ceylonese had been trained to look up to the British as paragons of everything that was civilized and respectable. After the war the ‘white man’ would never again be able to lord it over the locals. The veneration, the respect, and the fear had gone for ever.⁶¹

Another factor contributing to changing attitudes was the arrival of working-class Britons: ‘It was traditionally the public school types that went out to Ceylon, as administrators or planters. Now locals got to see all sorts, often engaged in very public activities, be it performing manual labour or getting drunk. There was also the regular sight of exuberant and drunken Europeans’.⁶² John Banks recalls a large drunken Australian holding Captain C.J.P. Martin at arms’ length over Colombo harbour. He dropped him in with the words ‘Swim you bugger!’ Schoolboy John Banks was ‘greatly entertained on a visit to Colombo to see a race down Galle Face Green by two Australian soldiers, who had got down from their rickshaws in which they were being pulled, placed their rickshaw coolies in the rickshaws, protesting loudly, and careered down the Green to the cheers of their companions’.⁶³

Ivor Ferdinands describes the changing racial perspective in the following terms:

Before the war the British were a charmed race living apart from the ordinary citizens of Ceylon. They lived as an upper class, the rulers and masters in the administrative, commercial, and planting spheres . . . The war caused a temporary hiatus in this racial separation which ultimately had to be abandoned. The administrative sector had already been Ceylonized. In planting the shortage of young Europeans led to the first Ceylonese being engaged and gradual Ceylonization of the planting sector began. Military disasters at the hands of the Japanese destroyed the notion of European superiority, and the spectacle of Tommies toiling and working in the sun, often bare-bodied, destroyed the

61 Rodney Ferdinands, *Proud and Prejudiced: The Story of the Burghers of Sri Lanka* (Melbourne, 1995), p. 176.

62 Ivor Ferdinands handwritten script ‘Ceylon’s Strategic Place in the War’, sent to A. Jackson, 7 June 1999.

63 William Cameron, typescript ‘Bits and Pieces’, sent to A. Jackson, 26 May 1999.

assumption of pre-war days that Europeans were only masters and rulers.⁶⁴

The invasion of foreign troops also had an impact on the closed colonial world of the planters and the other people of British descent who had settled in Ceylon. The, 'arrival of British troops (and girls) opened our eyes. Up until then, we had to wear double-terrai hats with red linings or a topee if we went out in the sun but the military forces seldom wore anything on their heads and we colonials learned that we would not get heat stroke if we, too, went out without a hat!'⁶⁵ Leslie, a Burgher girl, described the impact of the influx of soldiery on 'sleepy Kandy':

If the British troops woke up Kandy, the Americans who followed took her by the throat and shook her violently. There were nattily dressed servicemen everywhere throwing their money around carelessly and dazzling everyone with their overbearing presence. Burly American military policemen whizzed around on their Harley Davidsons and the hotels throbbed to the music of the American dance bands. The jitterbug and the jive took over and the sedate waltz and fox-trot were forgotten. The Yanks had their own cinemas, canteens, dances, and transport. They even had ice-cream, chocolates, steaks and lots of other goodies especially flown in from the States. They lacked for nothing other than home cooked meals and female company. To the young girls in Kandy the war seemed remote and the excitement of the present was very real.⁶⁶

It is important to contemplate another angle on the war's impact on race relations – the attitudes of Britons to colonial peoples. Service personnel were confronted with the strangeness of living as an alien elite in someone else's land. Servicemen such as Brundrett distinguished themselves from the 'sahib' types, almost as alien to them as the Sinhalese and Tamil peoples among whom they moved each day. Though they fell in with customs such as calling waiters 'boy', they often felt uncomfortable and detached from the colonial world. This is an important aspect of the experience of British service personnel overseas, that contributed to the political shift in British politics wrought by the war and eroded tolerance for colonial rule.

64 I. Ferdinands, 'Ceylon's Strategic Place in the War.'

65 John Banks to A. Jackson, 26 July 1999.

66 R. Ferdinands, *Proud and Prejudiced*, p. 176.

Conclusion

This article has examined the reactions of British service personnel to Ceylon and its people, the manner in which they were entertained, and some of the issues that their presence raised vis-à-vis the local population. In doing so it has drawn on the words of people who were 'there'. The value of this material is self-evident; it illuminates themes such as race relations in a colonised world, attitudes towards the 'exotic' East and contemporary perspectives on class. But its real value lies in its utility for scholars seeking to build important new historical perspectives. The material develops the history of a neglected subject – the extremely large wartime migration of British service personnel and their encounter in the late colonial period with overseas societies. This is part of the history of the war, as eligible for study as are its military campaigns or its strategic direction. Without this type of research, there can be no record that these people were there. It is the history of a vanished colonial world, and of the British world at war. This is important in its own right, for we risk losing sight of the extent to which the activities of the British armed forces relied on the infrastructure of a long-developed imperial system, and of the reliance placed upon colonies as bases.⁶⁷

The article has suggested the need for comprehensive documentation of the experiences of this last and most significant wave of British military migration. Whilst research on the Second World War in the colonial empire has understandably concentrated on its impact on indigenous communities, the experience of these transient young Britons is equally worthy of consideration.

⁶⁷ See Jackson, "A Prodigy of Skill and Organization": Imperial Networks and the Second World War' and 'Colonial Governors and the Second World War' in Jackson, *Distant Drums*.