

FOREWORD

Lance Corporal Francis Herbert 'Sherry' Cooper, 4th Queen's Own Hussars

Brief Biography – from his son Cyril:

Archivist's Note: This biographical account is broader than the usual record of a Veteran's military career before, during and after the Greek Campaign. It is included here in full (very slightly edited) because it presents a greater understanding of 'Sherry' himself and glimpses into the world in which he lived his life. For purists, the paragraphs with a military relevance have been highlighted in yellow.

Francis Herbert Cooper was born in Little Haywood, Staffordshire, on 13th March 1908 to parents George Henry and Florence Nee Wetton. In 1911 he was farmed out to his father's brother, Francis Edward Jackson Cooper and his wife Clara Jane in Codsall who had (possibly) recently lost a baby of their own. When he returned to the family home is not known but always assumed to be when he was old enough to earn his keep.

As a youngster he was employed as a "Bird Scarer" on the Ingestre Estate of the Earl of Shrewsbury. He did talk of poaching on the estate and claimed to be very good with a catapult. As a youth he worked for Frank Gee the local hauliers. He also worked in Colwich Brickyard where his Father was either manager or working foreman. He would also have helped his father in grave digging as George Henry was the Sexton. Believed to be a hard taskmaster as the graves had to be in the correct orientation, perfectly square and sides vertical.

(circa 1930 . . .) He joined the Army where his brother, John William (Jack or Jonty) was already in training. After learning to ride etc he was posted to the 8th Hussars. He served in Egypt and Palestine and at some stage became an Officers Mess servant. Cavalry Officers at this time tended to be drawn from the peerage and gentry and so lived well. It was in the Mess that he learned about good living and how to conduct one's self in society.

He worked as a barman at a pub in the East End of London for a while but eventually in 1936 came to work at the BRC in Stafford. He rode a motor cycle for a while (Velocette MAC 350cc) and later graduated to a car, a Morris 8 Tourer. This at a time when few working-class people had a car. Photographs of the time show him as a sharp dresser in a good mac(kintosh raincoat) with the collar turned up and in a trilby hat, with a polka dot scarf whilst the locals were in cloth caps and mufflers.

As a Reservist he was recalled to the colours at the outbreak of the war and rebadged as a 4th Hussar and posted to Tidworth. Shortly afterwards the Regiment moved to East Yorkshire where the Reservists could be assimilated and the Regiment trained for war. The Regiment were equipped with light tanks. Dad's Squadron were billeted at Dalton Hall and he became driver-batman to the Squadron Leader Major Peter W Dollar. Maj. Dollar later became one of England's top Polo players.

The Regiment later moved to Northamptonshire where they were billeted at Sulby Hall, near Husband's Bosworth, Leicestershire (they had spent a night under the stands of Newmarket Racecourse *en-route*). In mid-November the Regiment moved to Liverpool and embarked on the RMS Orcades in Gladstone Dock bound for the Middle East, sailing on 17th November as part of Convoy WS4B. Their route took them via Freetown, in West Africa and Durban in South Africa ending at Port Suez.

They sailed part way up the canal and disembarked on 28th December 1940 and then entered camp and spent time preparing vehicles and training for desert warfare. In March they were detailed to become part of 1st Armoured Division and go to Greece as the Italian Army were attempting to invade Greece. They sailed on HMS Gloucester and arrived on March 7th.

The Division moved North where the perceived Italian threat became in reality a German attack. After a series of short battles, they retreated South harried all the way by the Luftwaffe, largely with JU87 Stuka dive bombers.

Regimental Headquarters of the 4th Hussars was part of a rear-guard defending the Corinth Canal when they were overwhelmed by German parachutists and the RHQ ceased to exist. Frank Cooper and two

comrades (Troopers Alcock & Harding) made a run for it but after just one day their hiding place was indicated to the Germans by a (Phantom) British Officer and they became Prisoners of War.

The next few weeks were very hard as, when captured, they had only the kit they were dressed in. The Germans were living off the land and had made no provision for the large number of prisoners they collected. After some time in Greek PoW barracks in Corinth and Salonika with little food and poor sanitation they were moved in stages to a PoW Camp near Wolfsberg in Austria. This was Stalag XVIII A arriving on 15th June 1941.

Life in the Stalag was disciplined and well organised and although the food from the Germans was very basic it was boosted by food parcels from the British and Canadian Red Cross. The supply of these parcels was irregular so there were periods of very poor living. Prisoners organised themselves into what they called combines of several men who pooled their resources and looked out for each other. Stalag XVIII A was a central camp supplying prisoners to work in factories or on the land; some were OK others not so. Frank was sent to work on the railway laying track in a tunnel through the mountains.

On returning to the Stalag he found that as an NCO he did not have to go out on work camps. In the Stalag he worked in the cobblers and post office known as the Kommandatura. Whilst in the camp he spent some time having a septic appendix removed. At one stage the camp was bombed by American B17s and a number of PoWs killed. He also took advantage of the sports which were available and played football and boxed. He seemed to have a number of New Zealanders as friends.

As the war progressed and the Russians became a threat the Germans started to move their prisoner West. Many made the march on foot over the mountains, Frank was lucky and made most of the journey on trains but did have to march the final few miles. Not pleasant, as this was in late winter. The arrival point was a Stalag at Mark Pongau (Stalag XVIII C) which became very crowded, with little food, poor heating and initially very poor discipline. Eventually the army system started to work and discipline was restored. The Americans arrived on May 8th and took over the camp. The camp was close to Salzburg and Frank was befriended by an English lady who had been there through the war, presumably there via marriage. He also attended an Opera in the Opera House.

He finally left Austria 29th May in a Lancaster bomber and returned to the UK via Rheims, after receiving a new uniform, cash and a travel warrant arriving home in Rugeley on June 1st 1945.

After demobilisation Frank re-joined the BRC at Stafford and became a company lorry driver, delivering the company's steel wire and rod products for reinforcing concrete all over the country. Initially on a rigid waggon and later on artics. In those days the larger waggons were limited to twenty miles an hour, they could of course go much faster so a company waggon was often hidden away up the common lanes. He later worked in other areas including the machine and carpenters' shops, he was also a trusted driver and drove senior company personnel around the area. His skill in avoiding an accident when conveying the Works Director's wife around Stafford was said to have been of a very high order. He was also used to park guests' cars when the Managing Director held parties at his Newport estate. The MD and owner was Mr Pat Hall, a petrol head and Monte Carlo entrant.

It is believed that Frank had been offered a job by his old army officer Peter Dollar who was associated with British Timken in Daventry. He toured the factory, but found machine tools labelled with costs and didn't like the atmosphere. Peter Dollar came home from the war and married his brother's widow whose husband, also a soldier had been killed during the war.

Frank had a lot of illness in the post war years, duodenal ulcers which may have been due to his war time experiences and Emphysema which was probably an hereditary problem but in later years made him reliant of portable oxygen cylinders. The whole family were chesty and were believed to be part of a study carried out by The Brompton Hospital. His father in later life did not go to bed but dozed all night in a large upright chair downstairs.

He was a keen motorist and the immediate need was a car. He acquired a Singer Bantam which was not the most reliable vehicle and later a series of Morris's and a Rover of which he was very proud. They were at that time caravaners and the caravan was repainted to match the two-colour Rover. Frank and Dora had a very busy social life post war, eating out, holidays and cruises. He was also a member of the Regiments Old Comrades Association and attended dinners etc in London, guests at these dinners included Winston Churchill (an ex 4th Hussar) and Prince Philip who was a polo playing friend of Peter Dollar and was in addition Colonel of The Regiment.

Col Dollar had been in Colditz where he was Court Marshalled for refusing to salute a German Officer. Frank was a very fashion-conscious dresser and was always well turned out, trousers the right length and always showing the right amount of cuff. He was meticulous in everything he did. He and Dora took up ballroom dancing and when preparing for medal tests would hire a room in which to practice. Like a conjurer or actor, he knew how to use his hands, probably came from training in the Officers mess. He was a very hard worker and everything he did had to be right to the last detail. His hand-eye coordination was very good and in other circumstances he may have become a sportsman. On the dart board in a pub he could stay on all night taking pints off the losers. He was also a good clay pigeon shot and could take the money at a shoot.

Poor health caused Frank to retire from the BRC in early 1973. His retirement was dogged by poor health and he died in Stafford General Hospital on 15th December 1985. His death was a result of his long-term chest problems. He was cremated and his ashes are interred in the Churchyard of St Michael's, Brereton.