

## *CELIA RUTH PEASE, neé GERRARD*

**Celia** was a truly remarkable human being and a very loyal friend. She spent her life in the service of her community, her nation and those for whom we all owe a debt of gratitude.

### **Early Life & Education**

Born in Friern Barnett in North London on 1<sup>st</sup> August 1928, she first attended school at St. Michael's Church of England Primary School in Wood Green, leaving there in June 1940, a matter of weeks before the Battle of Britain began. Her sole surviving sister, Rita, is with us today.

Celia entered Trinity County Grammar School in Wood Green as a scholarship girl just as the Germans shifted their air attack from military targets to the populations of London and other conurbations, and she often spoke of her memories of the Blitz which had a great affect on her and on her attitude towards the heroic airmen who flew overhead and staved off Hitler's attempt to bomb Britain into submission.

On leaving school Trinity County School in June 1943, she went to Tottenham Technical College, again on a scholarship, for a two-year shorthand & secretarial course, and on leaving in June 1945, just after VE Day, she worked for the Royal Air Force Association between 1945 & 1948.

## **Meeting Alec**

It was during that period that she met her future husband, Alec Pease, who had just come back from captivity as a Japanese Prisoner of War. He was a particularly sad case, having come back to his family home in Mitcham, Surrey, from the tropics in the winter of 1945, collapsing within days from malaria, jaundice, the long-term effects of chronic starvation, maltreatment & mental & physical abuse that he had suffered in 3.5 years of captivity. He was promptly hospitalised, and it took quite some time before he recovered sufficiently to emerge and sought to explore the world to which he had returned.

It was therefore fitting that Celia & Alec should meet at a NAAFI cafe in London, and after a long 2 year engagement, they were married at St. Michael's Church, Wood Green, on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1949, St. George's Day. St. Michael, it will be recalled, is the patron saint of the airborne, and the significance of St. George's Day as the patron saint of England is coupled with our regard for him as the saint who slew the dragon, an incarnation of evil.

The marriage of Celia & Alec was to be the bedrock of their lives upon which everything they did was built, and before she lost her struggle with life on the 5<sup>th</sup> of March, they were

looking forward to their 57<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary next month. They did not find it an easy life. Their only child, Edward, their pride & joy, was born after they had been married 22 years, when Celia was 42.

And marriage to a FEPOW is never easy: there are too many nightmares, too much dread of sleeping; too many flashbacks; too much remembering; too much impatience with life and adversity; too much consciousness that people who weren't there will never know just what it was like.

Celia had an early introduction to that life and its challenges. She and Alec went off to meetings of the Returned British Prisoners of War Association, where ex-prisoners of the Germans & Japanese gathered together before the FEPOWs broke away after a few months. And when they did so, Celia and Alec were at the meeting at Chelsea Town Hall where the London Far East Prisoner of War Association (then a club) was founded. They were so busy taking subscriptions on that first night that Alec didn't get his own subscription card until there was a momentary break. It was card number 29, and when he got it, Celia was there, just as she would always remain there. She was there at the 6 Bells Public House in Chelsea, at the Duke of York Barracks in Chelsea, at the Royal Albert Hall, at the Royal Festival Hall, at the Barbican. She went wherever FEPOWS went, and for the first 23 years she organized almost

all of their welfare work. And at the foundation of the National Federation of Far East Prisoner of War Clubs & Associations (NFFCA) in 1952, she was there, too.

### **Political activist/Campaigner/Fighter**

Celia turned her campaigning skills, her combative spirit, to other uses, too. She was very much a political animal, and she had good taste in her heroes. When my wife was in her prep school in Birchington, she had a crush on a rising local celebrity from nearby Broadstairs, “uncle” Ted Heath, told him with the earnestness that only little girls have that she wanted to marry him if he’d have her, one day.... Well, Ela has impeccable taste, even though her own politics whirl around like a weathervane. But Celia served as Ted Heath’s election agent, and she also later canvassed for Sir Cyril Townsend, her local Conservative MP until 1997. She was an inveterate campaigner.

And as late as 2002, at the age of 74, Celia became embroiled in one of her last major campaigns, an effort to forestall the breaking up of the bulk of Jack Chalker’s collections of drawings & paintings when they came up for auction at Bonhams. She wanted these famous FEPOW treasures saved for the nation, but on this occasion her efforts failed, the opportunity was lost, and the collection was scattered across

the planet, rasing £194,000, more than twice the £80,000 that the valuers had been predicted.

### **Bitterness & Resentment**

All of this, so much of her life, was coupled with an ever-present consciousness that the State had so often neglected, denied & dishonoured the suffering of so many Far Eastern Prisoners of War & Civilian Internees since 1945. That, fortunately, changed in the 1990s, and I can bear witness to the fact that Celia was part of that process. As it occurred, and as the attitude of Japan & Japanese society changed, so did she. She, after all, was a woman who made no compromises in her core values, her integrity.

**Forgiveness?** Not for those who had committed so much harm. But for the altered society of Japan? Celia did not believe in holding children personally responsible for the sins of their fathers & grandfathers. She did feel that there was a debt to be paid, but she accepted that there are limits to the extent that any nation can do more a great deal more than Japan did since the mid 1990s to express deep regret & remorse for the past. Nations always strive to behave with a certain dignity & decorum. To ask the children and grandchildren of a race and nation that had emerged from a nightmare past to debase themselves would amount to an unrealistic demand. And she welcomed, encouraged and was happy to play a part in the processes of change that did take place in official and

unofficial relations between Britain & Japan over the past fifteen years during which I came to know her so well.

**I turned to her and to Alec** when I worked with the Foreign Office and other Government Departments to try to establish a Pacific War Memorial Foundation, and it was thanks largely to her encouragement, and Alec's, and through them Harold Payne, Reg Dunne and Renee Cumberbatch, that I persisted in that endeavour and the British Government strove to work with HMG's counterparts in Japan and the Japanese Embassy in London to set that up to provide for the welfare of British FEPOWS & Civilian Internees.

Later, when that plan collapsed, the Japanese came back to ask me to sound out FEPOWS on whether they would be prepared to support a plan for a grassroots initiative that might send FEPOW grandchildren to Japan for trips of up to a fortnight, not to be confused with compensation (there were to be no strings attached), but to see for themselves what Japan is like today, and as a tribute to the sufferings & privations of their grandparents. It was to Celia & Alec that I turned, and had they not welcomed the idea, it is highly likely that the programme that I founded and named The Pacific Venture would not have come into existence in 1995, the year of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Pacific War. The Japanese agreed to support that project for ten years, but it is now set to continue until

2009, thanks in no small measure to Celia's constant support and advocacy.

In later years, Ela and I often used to visit Celia down at their holiday caravan in Herne Bay, very occasionally up in Welling, and sometimes down at our home in Margate. She & Alec used to come to orientations of our Pacific Venturers, telling them about what had happened in the past, and about how things now looked.

### **London FEPOW Post**

From the mid-1980s, and with the weight of advancing years, I fell upon Celia to shoulder the demanding responsibility of editing & compiling the London FEPOW Post, the successor of FEPOW Forum, a once bi-monthly and later quarterly newsletter that she put together for members of the London FEPOW Association. On a practical side, and through the pages of her newsletter, Celia also issued constant reminders & warnings about the importance of FEPOW illnesses, their diagnosis & treatment, including information about Tropical Disease Investigations that were made available to FEPOWS and Civilian Internees through special arrangements made at Woolwich and Norcross. At the same time, Celia monitored and told of us of every change in War Disability Pensions and Appeals processes, urging ex-prisoners and their families to avail themselves of these because it became very evident that

too many FEPOWS felt it was wrong to burden their own state when in their view responsibility for their privations ought to rest with the Japanese. Celia dealt with the world of reality, however, and was ever a pragmatist in her approach to life and the alleviation of suffering.

### **Treasure-Trove**

And throughout these past 60 years, every nook and cranny of the Pease home in Welling – even half of their kitchen cupboards – were filled to bursting with boxes & boxes of FEPOW records & memorabilia going back to the foundation of their movement – all of which shortly will pass to the Imperial War Museum in accordance with the wishes of the Peases and the long-time President of the National Federation, the late Harold Payne, CBE.

### **Danson Park FEPOW Memorial**

As another permanent memorial, Celia also organized the planting of 21 oak trees in Danson Park to commemorate the memory of Far Eastern Prisoners of War – those who died, all who suffered, and it will be there, too, for those who still live on, and for those whose sufferings & privations filtered down successive generations.

### **Agape**

Celia rarely took holidays that were not connected with her voluntary work for FEPOWs. She only ventured abroad twice during her life. First to India, where she visited her youngest sister, Rita, in 1979, and then, in 1989, when she & Alec accepted places offered on a trip to Japan provided by Mrs. Keiko Holmes, the Japanese widow of a British businessman, who was the organizer of Agape, another grassroots initiative supported by the Japanese Government and its London Embassy. Celia came back from Japan more determined than ever to do her best to contribute to the processes of healing as well as remembering.

### **Looking beyond the Dissolution of the London FEPOW Association**

At the 2003 AGM, the long-delayed dissolution of the London FEPOW Association, which had been in contemplation for the previous five years, came up for further discussion. Alec & Celia brought forward a proposal for the establishment of a FEPOW Fellowship or Club and set out a series of ideas about how it could be run when the existing charity had to be wound up. That may have been the first formal airing of the idea that has now taken root under the direction of Fred Ryall MBE and George Housego, MBE.

During the same period, Celia strongly backed the setting up in November 1997 of a new association for the children of

FEPOWS, known more widely, logically enough, by its acronym, COFEPOW. Much of the burden of FEPOW welfare was intended to pass into the hands of COFEPOW. It remains to be seen whether the high hopes that Celia had for that organization will be fulfilled as the years pass.

### **School Governess**

Unknown to most of the FEPOW community, Celia had another interest that was as much a constant companion as her welfare work amongst ex-prisoners of the Japanese. For more than 30 years, she was a school governess of two local primary schools in Welling, serving as their chairwoman for more than half that time. The first of these was Westwood Junior & Infant School, now Bishop Ridley Church of England Primary School since June 2004, and the second was Eastcote Junior & Infant School, praised by OFFSTED as one of the top 5% in the country.

### **My own personal tribute**

I haven't given any advance notice to Alec and Eddie, but this week I am sending off to one of my publishers the first of a four volume Narrative Summary of the Tokyo War Crimes Trial, the Far Eastern counterpart of the Nuremberg International Military Tribunal. I've dedicated that set of four volumes to Celia's memory – and to all that she stood for and fought for throughout her life of service to the FEPOW community. She

richly deserved that and every other public recognition that she might have had.

Celia was warm, tender, could be as tough as old boots, courageous, but with a soft, compassionate heart, in the best of all senses a carer.

We can all feel grateful for having known her.

Eulogy, St. Mary the Virgin Church

Welling, Kent

by

Dr. R. John Pritchard

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