COMMITTEE OF MANAGEMENT
2017/18

President
Mr Hermann Loos - 03 9827 4455
hermann_r_loos@yahoo.com.au

Vice President
Mrs Tamaris Lourensz - 03 5981 8187
tamaris1@tpg.com.au

Secretary
Mr Harvey Foenander - 03 8790 1610
bfoenander1@bigpond.com

Assistant Secretary
Mrs Rosemary Quyn - 03 9563 7804
rosemaryquyn@gmail.com

Treasurer
Mr Bert Van Geyzel - 03 9503 4841
bertvangeyzel@gmail.com

Assistant Treasurer
Ashley Henricus - 03 9561 6212
ashleyhenricus@hotmail.com

Editor
Mr Neville Davidson - 03 97111 922
ndav@optusnet.com.au

Public Relations Manager
Mrs Elaine Jansz - 03 9798 6315
bd8cerjansz@optusnet.com.au

Premises Manager
VACANT

Customer Services Manager
Mrs Breeda Foenander - 03 8790 1610
bfoenander1@bigpond.com

COMMITTEE
Mrs Carol Loos - 03 9827 4455, Rita Van Geyzel 03 9503 4841
Mrs Fallon De Zilwa - 0414 096 774, Mrs Dyan Davidson - 03 97111 922
Mr Hans De Zilwa - 0419 292 939
The Burgher Association Australia Donations Pledge

The Burgher Association Australia Incorporated (BAA) is passionate about supporting the community and is proud to be helping make a difference in the area of health and wellbeing. It is our goal to empower wellbeing and healthy lifestyles across Australia and Sri Lanka. The BAA is pleased to have considered charitable contributions, donations and sponsorships to children's education in Sri Lanka and other charitable donations/sponsorship based in Australia.

The BAA has just announced following their November 2017 Committee Meeting that for the current year donations and sponsorships will be granted to the following.

- **Sponsorship of education to children via the Dutch Burgher Union of Sri Lanka for up to 21 Children doing year 11 and 12 studies**
- **Donation to the Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children in Australia**
- **Donation to the Fred Hollows Foundation Australian Aboriginal Fund**
- **Donation to the Brighter Futures**
- **Donation to MiLife Victoria**

The BAA has approved via the general committee meeting to contribute up to 30% of its net profit per year to satisfy the commitments of the above.

The same procedure will be adopted annually at the AGM to set up a budget for new/continued sponsorships to be adopted in the following year.
A pledge to all BAA members

The General Committee of the Burgher Association Australia Inc (BAA) is taking on the challenge to better member benefits.

In addition to what is currently been enjoyed, we wish to work on the following:

- At least one or more free lunches for Members ONLY at the BAA centre annually. This will be notified in advance via the issue of a future Bulletin.
- Work with the government authorities within the region that we live in to ensure we get funds to create more fun activities for all ordinary members.
- To recognise the generosity of members and their support in attending our functions to raise funds required for the BAA to fulfil its obligations towards donations and sponsorships.
- To recognise the difficulties ageing presents to Members trying to attend functions at the BAA.
- Do what is expected by our membership to ensure a good time is had by all members attending and, ensuring a great meal and music for listening & dancing is provided.
- In this edition of the Bulletin we enclose a new membership card. This confirms your membership details with the BAA and also highlights at the back of the card entitlements of being a member and what others could be entitled to by you being a member.
The Lone Ranger and Tonto went camping in the desert. After they got their tent set up, and had supper, they fell sound asleep. Some hours later, Tonto wakes the Lone Ranger: “Kemo Sabe, look towards sky, what you see?” The Lone Ranger replies, “I see millions of stars.” “What that tell you?” asked Tonto.

The Lone Ranger ponders for a minute then says, “Astronomically speaking, it tells me there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, it tells me that Saturn is in Leo. Time wise, it appears to be approximately a quarter past three in the morning. Theologically, the Lord is all-powerful and we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically, it seems we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. What does it tell you, Tonto?”

“You dumber than buffalo dung. It tells me someone stole the tent.”

“Do not touch!” must be one of the scariest things to read in Braille.

Do not wear headphones whilst vacuuming; I just finished the whole house without realizing the vacuum wasn’t plugged in!

“Yes Officer, I did see the speed limit sign ... I just didn’t see you!”

The first computer dates back to Adam and Eve. It was an Apple with limited memory, just one byte. And then everything crashed.

She wanted a puppy. But I didn’t want a puppy. So we compromised and got a puppy.

Why is the day that you do laundry, cook, clean, iron and so on, called a day off?

A healthy sleep not only makes your life longer, but also shortens the workday.
Thurgood 34 years on ….

Des O'Keeffe  
Victorian Jockeys Association

As Elvis "Ricky" Thurgood left for Caulfield races on Easter Saturday in 1980, life couldn’t have been better for the 21-year-old. He had just completed a successful apprenticeship with the leading Caulfield stable of Angus Armanasco. He had ridden 58 winners in a career spanning five years. Tragically, Easter Saturday at Caulfield 34 years ago would leave Ricky facing certain death. Ricky suffered every jockey's worst nightmare when Taras Regent collapsed and died on the home turn in the Easter Cup. It was a fall without the slightest warning in a big field. Later that day at the Alfred Hospital, his parents, Noel and Doris, his brother Derek and sister Debbie were told that their son and brother was not expected to survive the night. Not only did Ricky survive the night, but he survived the next day, the next week and the next month. In the best of faith, doctors told Noel and Doris that Ricky’s life expectancy would not exceed one year. Today, 34 years later, Ricky is still being cared for by Noel and Doris at their home in Caulfield.

His survival meant the start of a lifetime of commitment by his parents. These two-extraordinary people are a unique example of love, care and attention that has been unconditional, without boundaries and unending. Ricky's injuries were genuinely catastrophic. A massive brain injury has left him unable to communicate at all. Physically, Ricky is a complete quadriplegic who requires 24/7 care every day of his life. In Ricky Thurgood’s case, the greatest of all privileges associated with my job is that I have got to know him and his parents well. I'm proud to say that Noel and Doris, along with Derek and Debbie, are close friends.

It is impossible to understand the grief experienced by the families of Victorian riders who have paid the ultimate price. The emptiness felt by the families of Andrew Gilbert, Mark Goring, Adrian Ledger and Gavin Lisk is impossible to describe. The incredible sense of loss felt by the families of Ben Smith, Harry Hillier and Adrian Lechmere lost at such a young age in tragic circumstances can’t be understood. The challenges faced so bravely by Lonagan Milham, Brenton Primmer, David Taggart, Danny Brereton, Billy Herman, Louise Cooper and so many other injured riders is what makes jockeys unique. Each situation is different, heartbreaking and challenging… but to the families of riders we have lost and to those riders who have suffered life-changing, career-ending injuries, the industry does remember you. To Noel and Doris Thurgood, please pass on to Ricky that the racing industry remembers him this Easter, 34 years on.
A burst of gunfire and all hell broke loose

The Cocos Mutiny, 66 years on, as recalled by (Donny) Vincent Ranasinghe, the last surviving member of the Ceylon Garrison Artillery (CGA) who served on the island

By: B T. Perera

At 84, (Donny) Vincent Ranasinghe is the last surviving member of the Ceylon Garrison Artillery (CGA) contingent that served on Cocos Islands during the Mutiny in 1942. On the night of May 8, 1942, Donny was caught in the crossfire of the rebellion, he recalled, when I met him recently at his home at Wattala.

Vivid accounts of the uprising which the military had sought to keep secret were recorded by the writer Noel Crusz in 'The Cocos Islands Mutiny'. Though all Donny’s comrades on Cocos were absorbed in what was happening around them during those far-off days, he had jotted down at that time in a little notebook his thoughts on the dramatic events with the detachment of an observer. After a lapse of more than six decades, memories and impressions of those traumatic incidents remain, but the fears and anxiety have melted away.

Donny enlisted as a gunner in the CGA when he was 18 and was among a batch of soldiers who had volunteered to go to the Cocos-Keeling Islands to defend a strategically important communications facility there at the height of the Japanese naval advance. They sailed on the Kelantan from Colombo in early 1942. But a warning signal about hostile enemy activity on the high seas made the ship turn back to port. It was an inauspicious start for the 40 young soldiers on board.

After several hours delay, the warship resumed its voyage to the idyllic Indian Ocean isles off Australia’s northwest coast. The Cocos (Keeling) Islands, a score of atolls - lie stretched across the ocean between Australia and Sri Lanka. The Clunies-Ross family dynasty had ruled the isles since the 19th century and had brought in Malay workers to tend their coconut plantations. In 1978 Australia bought the islands from the fifth John Clunies- Ross for $ 6.25 million. The population of 665 Cocos Islanders opted in 1984 to integrate with Australia.

During World War 2 CLI and CGA contingents - about 75 personnel - served on Direction and Horsburgh Islands to man and defend the vital cable and wireless station and surveillance base. Both islands are now uninhabited.

cont’d ..
On December 7, 1941, Japan struck Pearl Harbour and the US declared war. With the fall of Singapore, the largest British naval base in the Malay Straits in February, 1942 Winston Churchill, Britain's wartime premier acknowledged "it was the worst disaster and the largest capitulation in British history".

The debacle was followed by the Japanese occupation of Malaya, Burma, Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Christmas Island. Japanese planes also made an air strike on Direction atoll on Cocos. In February, in enemy action in the Bay of Bengal several Allied vessels had been sunk. The occupation of the Andaman Islands brought India and Ceylon and its strategic bases located in Calcutta, Madras and Colombo within range of Japanese bombers. In the enemy offensive the Indian Ocean islands were now targeted for capture.

The Japanese juggernaut which was on a roll with the occupation of Korea and swathes of China was to culminate in the subjugation of the Far and South East Asia. Christmas Island was bombed in early March and captured eight days later. Thirty-seven Indian soldiers stationed there had mutinied, killed their British commanding officer and surrendered to the Japanese: With war clouds looming over Ceylon, the British war cabinet appointed Admiral Geoffrey Layton as Commander-in-Chief.

On Easter Sunday April 5, 1942, Japanese aircraft bombed Colombo and Trincomalee, the naval dockyard, the Air Force base and the oil depot there. The invasion of the island was imminent. Meanwhile on another island outpost in the distant reaches of the Indian Ocean mounting fears of Japanese air strikes gripped the Ceylonese soldiers serving there and their morale was flagging by the day. George Gardiner, a British expatriate employed as an accountant in an export firm in Colombo, who had obtained an emergency war commission, was the commanding officer on Cocos. He ruled his men with a heavy hand. Bombardier Gratien Fernando, an ardent nationalist, who resented the brusque ways of his British superiors, was Captain Gardiner's formidable foil and was preparing to create trouble.

With the Cocos increasingly vulnerable to Japanese attacks, Fernando began conspiring with a group of disgruntled CGA colleagues. He had a plan to make overtures to the Japanese on Christmas Island. He expected that Japan would help win Ceylon's independence and get rid of the British. Fernando who held the rank of guard commander was in charge of the sentry roster and had access to the ammunition stores. He had already won the sympathy of 30 out of 56 soldiers of his unit for his audacious plot.

cont'd ..
In the CGA contingent were soldiers who had been sent on to Cocos from Seychelles where they had faced discrimination from white officers. They nursed their old grudges against the colonial military establishment. They were to form the core of the mutiny's ringleaders.

A crucial part of the plot related to the Rowe Battery with its two six-inch guns on Horsburgh Island; the observation post on a sixty-foot tower; and at its base a building with war shelter, duty officers' room, an artillery store and a guardroom where off-duty men slept. Near the big guns were ammunition pits and trenches.

The battery entrance was to be guarded by a mutineer. Bombardier Fernando had carefully planned the uprising; a rehearsal had even been staged a week earlier. The first move was to disarm and lock in all off-duty guards. The conspirators would then remove the rifles from the guardroom. Fernando would then seize Gardiner and his deputy.

On the night of May 8, gunner Donny Ranasinghe felt something amiss and tapped on the window of the guardroom to alert his comrades. "I remember this incident vividly. Suddenly there was a burst of firing and a bullet grazed my left eyebrow. Blood was streaming down my face," he recounted. His vision blurred, he was dazed.

His colleague gunner Samars Jayasekera came to his aid and rushed to fetch him a glass of water. Then a shot rang out. Samars hit at close range by a bullet, fell dead. Fragments from the broken glass lay around his body. Donny was devastated. To this day he cherishes the memory of the kindly comrade and his parting gesture. Donny who had received medical treatment for his injuries from Dr. Menon Kumaran of the Ceylon Medical Corps, also testified at the court martial held on Horsburgh isle to try the mutineers.

Donny Ranasinghe (aka R.A.V. Perera - his given name as a wartime soldier) is referred to several times in Crusz's book but there is no eyewitness account by him. To take the narrative forward, Lieutenant Stephens, Gardiner's deputy disturbed by the commotion ventured to find out what was happening; firing occurred again and he was hit on the leg. The camp now awoke to gunfire. It may have signalled the start of something ominous: a Japanese landing? But the mutineers knew that the game was up.

When Fernando saw Gardiner advancing, he turned his gun on his commanding officer and pulled the trigger but the weapon failed to fire. The mutineers were now confronted with the rifles of soldiers and Gardiner's revolver pointing at them. Unnerved, Fernando

cont'd ..
moved towards the battery, picked up a white towel, fixed it to his rifle, and surrendered. The mutineers were immediately arrested.

The funeral of 23-year-old Jayasekera was held with full military honours on Horsburgh Island on the evening of May 10. A dozen troops selected to attend were present, as were some Malay inhabitants from a neighbouring island - friends of the dead soldier - who were allowed to attend. The simple boxwood coffin was lowered into the grave near a grove of palm trees. At the end of the 1950s, Jayasekera's remains were taken to Singapore for reburial in Singapore's Kranji War Memorial.

Gardiner proceeded to conduct a court martial on Cocos in May 1942 - to try the 15 mutineers. The court martial verdict: 7 men who were found guilty were sentenced to death; and four soldiers received terms of imprisonment. As Noel Crusz notes, "... but for the intervention of General Archibald Wavell, Commander-in-Chief, Allied Forces in the Far East" the seven convicted men "would have been executed at dawn".

There was a complete blackout of news in Colombo about the mutiny because of wartime censorship. But word had reached the parents and relations of the convicted men, and they were frantic for information. They appealed to Sir Oliver Goonetilleke, then Civil Defence Commissioner and a member of the War Council to save the mutineers. Lieut. Ivor Van Twest of the CGA was entrusted with the task of bringing back on the Sutlej the ringleaders of the mutiny. It had been a turbulent passage from Cocos in the submarine-infested seas, and on arrival in Colombo the prisoners were marched under guard to the military jail in Flagstaff Street. Desperate for a reprieve the convicted men sought the assistance of Major Mervin Joseph, CGA, who helped draft their petitions.

Two well-known political figures - H. W. Amarasuriya and Susantha de Fonseka, members of the pre-independence State Council, also made representations to the Governor Sir Andrew Caldecott and Admiral Geoffrey Layton, requesting clemency. However, their pleas failed. On August 4, 1942 at 7.45 a.m. the prison van from the military detention barracks at Hulftsdorp took Gratien Fernando on his final journey to Welikade Prison's death row. He was hanged on August 5. On August 7, Benny de Silva was executed and on the following day Carlo Gauder, just seven days after his 21 birthday. "These were the only executions of British army soldiers for mutiny in the history of WW 2". As for the hanged men, "none of them has been commemorated by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. This was not the case when British servicemen were executed," according to Crusz

cont'd ..
The words spoken by Gratien Fernando and his indomitable courage on the way to the gallows were on everybody's lips for weeks to come, both amongst prisoners and staff. "I have been to scores of executions but never did experience a disposition of such a nature," said R.J.N. Jordan, a retired Deputy Commissioner of Prisons, recalling the execution of the leader of the mutiny.

Donny and his mates after their tour of duty on Cocos returned home on the Somawathie just before Christmas 1942. The gunners were detailed for duty at the coastal artillery batteries at Galle Face, Battenberg, Mutwal and Colombo Harbour. Donny was posted to the Battenberg battery. But the stormy events on Cocos weighed heavily on the returnees; those memories still rankled. They also felt frustrated that promotions had been suspended. At the end of WW 2, the Cocos veterans were even denied the campaign medals for active war service.

In 1943 Donny left the CGA on medical grounds and served a short stint as a book-keeper at the old Times of Ceylon newspaper company. He later served as an accountant in the plumbago/graphite mining companies: Bogala, Ruwanwella, Kahataagaha and Kolongaha, Dodangaslande. He now lives in retirement with his wife Anna, his daughter Thalindra and his son-in-law Lal. Donny and Anna also have three sons Ajantha, Ryle and Saliya who inherited Donny's athleticism and represented St. Benedict's College at cricket.

After the war, several Cocos veterans migrated to Australia. In 2001 Crusz published his well-documented study of the Cocos mutiny.
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Burgher Association (Australia) Presents

A BURIYANI LUNCH

at

Burgher Association Centre
358 Haughton Road, Clayton 3169

Sunday 24 June 2018
12.00noon to 5.00pm

Menu

Buriyani Rice
Chicken Curry
Mutton Curry
Cashew & Pea Curry
Tempered Potatoes
Mango Curry

Sri Lankan Badun
Eggs
Raita
Pineapple & Tomato Salad
Dessert - Watalappan
Tea / Coffee

Music
for your pleasure.

TICKET CONTACTS
Tamaris Lourensz - 5981 8187,
Elaine Jansz 9798 6315
Breeda or Harvey Foenander - 8790 1610
Carol or Hermann Loos - 9827 4455
Rosemary Quyn - 9563 7804, Ashley Henricus - 9561 6212
Rita or Bert VanGeyzel - 9503 4841,
Hans De Zilwa - 0419292939, Fallon De Zilwa - 0414096774
Dyan or Neville Davidson - 97111 922
The Burgher Association of Australia Centre is available for private hire (Dances, Birthday parties, Anniversaries etc). The BAA Centre is located within a short walk from Clayton railway station. The hall is licensed to hold 150 people. Tables and chairs for this number of attendees are provided. There is usually plenty of parking across the road and a few spaces on the property. Disabled access via ramps is available to both the front and rear doors and a disabled parking space is available. There is also a 'horseshoe' driveway permitting the dropping off of attendees under cover.

Commercial kitchen facilities are available including stainless steel splash walls, a commercial glass washer, dishwasher, stove, oven, hot water boiler, large freezer, refrigerator and a bain-marie. There also is an alfresco area at the back that can be used for making the famous Sri Lankan Hoppers, BBQs or other activity that requires a shielded outdoor space. There are multiple reverse-cycle heating and cooling units servicing the main hall and kitchen. There are separate male, female and disabled toilets. More pictures are available on our website http://burgherassocn.org.au/baa-centre/

How to make a booking: Call Breeda Foenander on 0423 844 101 to enquire whether the date, you wish to hire the hall for is available. If you are a member of the BAA, the price of hiring the Centre costs $350 per day; Non-members $400 per day. Minimum booking is 5 hours $300. Hours of operation Friday/Saturday 11AM to 12 Midnight, other days 10AM to 10PM. All bookings require a bond of $250 that is refunded if the centre is handed back to management clean and undamaged. ($1000 for age 21+ and under). A payment of $100.00 will be deducted from the Security Fee deposit for cleaning of the premises, for the next day’s events. Hiring Agreement. NB: To book the hall, payment has to be made via the BAA Bank Account – details available on request. Depending on whether you are a member or non-member the full fee plus the deposit of $250 must be paid to secure the date booked.
SING ALONG

Come along and enjoy a fun-filled afternoon with Dance, Song, Games & Prizes!

Then tickle your Tastebuds with some gastronomic delights!

WHEN?
9 September 2018

WHERE?
BAA Community Hall
258 Haughton Road
Clayton 3168

2.00pm to 6.00pm

Book Early Please

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Rita or Bert VanGeyzel - 95034841,
Dyan or Neville Davidson- 0419 880 329
Fallon De Zilwa - 0414 096 774,
Hans De Zilwa - 0419 292 939,
Some of the happy faces at the recent lunch on 27th May 2018
Smart Aleck Quotes

How does Moses make tea? Hebrews it.
Venison for dinner again? Oh deer!
He designs bras for a living...apparently it is an uplifting job
A cartoonist was found dead in his home. Details are sketchy.
I used to be a banker, but then I lost interest.
Haunted French pancakes give me the crêpes.
England has no kidney bank, but it does have a Liverpool.
I tried to catch some fog, but I mist.
They told me I had type-A blood, but it was a Typo.
I changed my iPod's name to Titanic. It's syncing now.
Jokes about German sausage are the wurst.
I know a guy who's addicted to brake fluid, but he says he can stop any time.
I stayed up all night to see where the sun went, and then it dawned on me.
This girl said she recognized me from the vegetarian club, but I'm sure I'd never met herbivore.
When chemists die, they barium.
I'm reading a book about anti-gravity. I just can't put it down.
I did a theatrical performance about puns. It was a play on words.
Why were the Indians here first? They had reservations.
I didn't like my beard at first. Then it grew on me.
Did you hear about the cross-eyed teacher who lost her job because she couldn't control her pupils?
When you get a bladder infection, urine trouble.
Broken pencils are pointless..
What do you call a dinosaur with an extensive vocabulary? A thesaurus.
I dropped out of communism class because of lousy Marx.
All the toilets in New York's police stations have been stolen. The police have nothing to go on.
I got a job at a bakery because I kneaded dough.
Velcro – what a rip off!
Don't worry about old age; it doesn't last
OBITUARIES
Compiled by Victor Melder
(E & O.E.)
(APRIL 2018)

MAHADEVA–PARAMESWARI (MANI), daughter of late Mr & Mrs Rajah Thangamman, wife of late Mahadeva, mother of Udayasiri, Vijayasiri, Padmasiri (Pappu), Kushari (Kukku) and Layasiri, mother-in-law of Mathygunapahan, Bhanu, Kalaichelvi, David Selvakumar. daughter-in-law of late Mr & Mrs Eliyappa & Visalach. Sister of late Maheswari, Mahendran, Bhuvananthrian, Rajeswari, Rajendran, Ramachandan, Balakrishnan and Sivaneswari (Kunchu), grandmother of Abilash, Abishan, Dr Abhishekh, Dr Aberam, Abisaini, Abidev, Abinayeni and Aginesh, in Sydney on March 31, 2018. (Daily News 4.4.2018)

LEITAN – Derrick, husband of Tressie, father of Dr Gehan (Aust) and Shamera (Can), father-in-law of Nalinka and Nayantar, grandfather of Shanika, Shevaan, Shenuka, Shermark and Rayan, in Sri Lanka. (Daily News 5.4.2018)


 EDMONDS – RANDOLPH (RANDY), son of Teckla (Aust), brother of Franklyn (Franky), Rudolph (Aust), Hazel and Ophelia, brother-in-law of Shirley, Vernon and late Sandra, in Sri Lanka. (Daily News 7.4.2018)


JAYASURIYA – ANIL - son of Agnes and late Edward, husband of Shehana, father of Shayam and Shiralee, brother of Hiran and Dilshad, brother-in-law of Dilrin and Pam, Dhanitha and Kithsiri, Nilanka and Reshan, Hiran and Inoka, Samantha and Nayana, in Melbourne. (Daily News 19.4.2018)


cont’d ..
BATCHO - CHRISTY - Son of Mr & Mrs J.W. Batcho, brother of late Lionel, late Paulina, late Prescilla, late Renton, Doreen; Margie, Mercy, Lucian, Hazel and Enil, in Sri Lanka. (Daily News 23.4.2018)

JAYASURIYA – LAKSIRI, EMERITUS - PROF., AM - husband of Rohini, father of Kanishka and Pradeep, brother of Nanil and the late Ranjan, In West Australia on 19th of April. – 30 Sutcliffe Street, Dalkeith, WA.6009. (Daily News 23.4.2018)

WILLIAMS – DIRK, (CAPT) - beloved husband of Marlene, father of Amanda and Denham, grandfather of Ava, father-in-law of Shane Walles. Son of Belle and the late Elmo Williams, brother of Peter, Charlaine and Karen, brother-in-law of Sriya, Charles, Johann, Charmaine and Mahinda, in Sri Lanka (Daily News 23.4.2018)

JOSEPH- SANDRA (San Micheile), 31.10.1960 – 18.4.2018, daughter of Eugene (dec) and Betty Joseph, in Melbourne (Herald Sun 23.4.2018)

SENN – SONIA CHRISTINE (CHERRY), wife of Justin, mother of Ivor (Qatar) and Adrian, mother-in-law of Shiroma and Patrina, grandmother of Anselm Kevin, Adel and Shaun, great grandmother of Aaron, in Sri Lanka. (Daily News 24.4.2018)


JANSZ – LORETTE (Nee Young), wife of late Gordon Richard Jansz (Cigar), mother of Richard and Andrea, mother-in-law of Eranthi and Alastair Stainwall, grandmother of Shermona, Yovaan and Jonathan. Sister of late Darell Young, sister-in-law of Gillian Young, Christopher (Cutty) and Ira, in Sri Lanka, on April 28, 2018. (Sunday Observer 29.4.2018)

FERNANDO-EILEEN, wife of Doug Fernando (dec). Called to eternal rest 20 May 2018.

Note: All spelling of names as taken from Sri Lankan newspapers
Quick Crossword

Across
1. Male relative (6)
3. Gem (4)
7. Chart (3)
9. Sagacious (7)
10. Challenge (4)
11. Relating to bears (6)
13. Accolade (6)
14. Children (4)
17. Long flag (7)
18. The night before (3)
19. Extinct bird (4)
20. Choice (6)

Down
1. Wanderer (5)
2. Not difficult (4)
4. Steep cliff (9)
5. Svelte (5)
6. Drama set to music (5)
8. Pilfered (9)
12. In front (5)
13. Lukewarm (5)
15. Rear part of a ship (5)
16. Pace (4)

Solution
The Most Remarkable Fortress in the World
In Collaboration with R P Fernando
Introduction
Sigiriya
The Lion Rock

This 1898 article tells the remarkable story of the archaeological excavations at Sigiriya in Ceylon. Sigiriya was a large rocky outcrop that could be seen for miles around. It had long been thought to be out of bounds and haunted by demons by the local population. The chief archaeologist in Ceylon, H.C.P. Bell, directed an archaeological survey in the 1890s that helped unearth fantastically preserved frescoes and a significant settlement on the summit of the hill. It really was like uncovering a lost city that had been hidden in plain sight of the local population at least for many years.

The team learned that it had initially been built as a fortress of last resort before being converted into a Buddhist monastery. The sheer quality of the artefacts and artwork discovered stunned those who witnessed it and added greatly to the appreciation of Sinhalese art and culture. Perhaps the most remarkable rock in the world is to be found in the centre of the Island of Ceylon, and its story is full of romance. It was fortified 1,400 years ago to shelter a cowardly parricide, and when he died it became a Buddhist monastery. But for centuries no human foot rested on its summit; it was the abode of silence; its walls were buried beneath the dust of ages, birds built their nests on it and the beasts of the field haunted the jungle which grew about its base. Now, British officials have scaled its walls, excavated its ruins, and revealed the ancient splendour of the place, and so doing have discovered that this rock fortress is one of the most wonderful pieces of engineering of ancient times. It is called the ‘Sigiri’ or ‘Lion Rock’ and lies fourteen miles north-east of Dambulla. It is cylindrical in shape and rises up nearly 600 feet sheer from the ground, while the area of the summit is little over an acre. Its scarped walls are nearly perpendicular, and in some places, they overhang their base.

Recent excavation shows that all round the foot of the rock there was a fortified city, surrounded by a moat. But the most wonderful feature of this fortress was the terrace, ornamented with lions, which ran around the north face of the rock at its smallest diameter. At one part it stood upon the rock which projected below, and at the same time was protected by that part which overhung it. The terrace then zig-zagged up the rock at an easy gradient, and so gave access to its otherwise inaccessible summit, to which, in the last resort, the fugitive intended to flee.
One hundred yards of this terrace still remains, and its structure of several courses of brick can clearly be seen in one of the photographs, while the grooves in the rock show where the rest of it ran. Professor Davids says that the path was on the top of a solid brick wall, four or five feet broad, which was carried along the face of the cliff. "The cliff being perpendicular, this wall had to descend far below the path before it found a resting place on the edge of the rock. As the path was gradually carried forward and upward, a line was dropped from it to the rock beneath, and where the line first touched the cliff - however far below- a flat place was scooped out, large enough to support a single brick. This was done along the whole breadth of the path, and then the solid wall was built up to the requisite height, while some of the other rows of bricks were carried high enough to form a wall breast high on the outer side." Half way up the rock, or 160 feet from the ground, was another extraordinary feature. There can be seen, by means of a telescope in two caves or pockets some vividly painted frescoes. How they were painted in such a position no one knows; but, despite their clearness of outline and freshness of colour, it is certain that they were painted by artists 1,400 years ago. But though we do not know how these frescoes were painted so long ago, thrilling stories can be told of how two artists made copies of them not long since.

Mr Alick Murray, of the Ceylon Civil Service, was requested by the Governor of the Island to make an attempt to reach these frescoes, and he succeeded in an amazing manner. The first part of the way lay through the forest, which was cleared with billhooks by the natives. At the outset the resident chiefs and local population would have nothing to do with the disturbance of a rock chamber which they believed to be inhabited and protected by demons, so Tamils had to be brought over from India. Three Tamil stone cutters bored holes in the rock face, one above the other, and therein placed iron "jumpers", which were secured with cement. To these wooden staging was lashed. "The man of lightest weight", says Mr Murray, "was selected to make the necessary holes", but after a while even he declared that it was impossible for him to ascend any higher. But he said that if he were allowed to devote three days to fasting and prayer to his gods, he thought he might succeed, and so he did. "But when the pocket was at last reached it was found that the floor was at too steep an angle to admit of anyone or even sitting on it. Iron stanchions were therefore let into the floor, and a strong trestle or framework made secure to them. On this framework was placed a platform, and from the platform the work of tracing thirteen of the frescoes in the biggest cave was carried out." Mr Murray's task was surely unique. From sunrise to sunset for a week he did his copying lying on his back. "Below me," he says, "was a sheer drop of 160 feet. The wind at times was terrific, and I literally held my breath as some blast swept into and around the chamber, and ruthlessly tore and carried off the work of hours. On one occasion a blast fiercer than the rest shook the platform to its very base, and the lashings slackened by the dryness of the atmosphere, allowed the platform to sink suddenly a few inches, when its downward progress was happily arrested by the bracing underneath. The only inmates of the chamber were swallows, who occasionally pecked at me resentfully."
The frescoes are life-size figures of women, arranged singly or in sets of two. Each couple represents a mistress and maid, the maid wearing in each case a jacket exactly similar to that used by Tamil girls today. When Mr. Murray had finished his work, it was suggested that it would be a good thing to leaving something in the "pocket", in the shape of a memento. A bottle was therefore obtained, and in it papers of the day and local coins were placed. As he was leaving with his companions a Buddhist priest asked to be allowed to pray for the preservation of the bottle, and while he prayed Mr. Murray and his companions sang "God save the Queen," by way of dedication - a characteristically British proceeding.

Mr. Murray's tracings caused so much interest in the wonderful Rock Fortress, that the Government of Ceylon instructed its Archaeological Commissioner, H C P Bell, to survey and excavate it - a work of much adventure. Hair-breadth escapes inevitably occurred, and all the time the work was in hand Mr. Bell declares that he was on mental "tenter-hooks". He first reached the top of the rock by means of jungle wood ladders and six-inch grooves cut in the rock. But once up, iron ladders and an iron rail were fixed so that constant ascent and descent could be made. During the first fortnight the workers were attacked by swarms of bees, which drove them from the rock. These had to be burned out before the work could proceed. But the greatest trial was the dreadful heat of the sun, from which there was no shelter. The work began at 6.30 in the morning and continued until 3 o'clock, and 8 and a half hours in the scorching sun, day after day, and week after week, was no light task. The whole day was spent aloft, for too much time would have been wasted if "lunch" and been "served" below. Fortunately, a big cistern was discovered at the top, from which beautiful water could be obtained.

When the first prejudice had died away, plenty of workers could be found, and sometimes over a hundred of them were at work and swarmed up the rock with as little excitement as English workmen pass through the factory door. The top was found to be covered with forest trees and a dense undergrowth, neck high, so a gang of Singhalese were engaged to burn them down. When the summit was excavated it was found that buildings covered it to the very edge of the cliff, and every basketful of earth had therefore to be spilt over the side of the rock - otherwise it would have to be moved twice over. The depth of earth cutting varied from five to twenty feet, and when the whole area was cleared the plan of the long-lost buildings was easily seen, virtually as perfect as when first laid out. The natives declared that there was a passage from the summit into the bowels of the rock, but that is not the case.

"The rooms and courtyards" says Mr. Bell, "stretch the whole length of the ridge, in generally ascending tiers, from the small chamber directly above the rock cistern at the south to the penultimate and uppermost room near the north end. All are oblong, and all - or nearly all - the chambers had corridors completely round them."
“Many passages were paved throughout with quartz slabs; though much of this choice pavement has been displaced by the waste of centuries, or from being deliberately put to other uses by Buddhist monks when the fortune of war found them located in the 'marble halls' of royalty” Even around the summit of this inaccessible rock a remarkable was built. It rose from the brink of the precipice, for its foundations were some feet and even yards below the level of the summit.

Accompanying Mr. Bell on this expedition was Mr. D. A. L. Perera, whose purpose was to paint in oils facsimiles of all the frescoes in both caves. Both were anxious to photography the two pockets at a distance, and as they could not stand in the air, a four-inch hawser was lowered from the summit of the rock to the ground, and a strong iron block bound to the end. Through the block a new two-inch rope was passed, and an improvised chair firmly tied to it, and in this case the photographer took his seat. The hawser was then pulled half way up to the west rock till the chair was over 150 feet from the ground and 50 feet clear of the cliff. Swaying in mid-air through the force of the wind, the photographer exposed his negative, but as the shutter worked too slowly the pictures taken were more or less blurred. Mr. Perera then decided to to an oil painting of the pockets to scale while swinging at the end of the rope, and after rocking in space for a week succeeded in his task. But the exposure day after day to the intense glare of the rock’s summit affected his eyesight, and he was compelled to take complete rest for some weeks.

One photograph shows Mr. Perera at work. Thirteen of the pictures were painted from the floor of the cave; to do the others "it was necessary to construct a cantilever of jungle timber firmly lashed to a stout iron cramp let into the rock floor. To the extremity of this projection was tied to a rough 'cage' of sticks; and from this uncomfortable and perilous perch the loftiest fresco was made." This was painting "in the open" with a vengeance. Enormous difficulty was experienced in painting the frescoes in the small cave (which was only three feet wide) and in getting to that cave from the other. The ledge between them was only a cubit in width. But by paying special remuneration Mr. Bell got some men to risk their lives in making a "stick shelf." One-inch iron bars supported the woodwork, which was banded strongly to thick iron cramped into the rock. But in addition, it was held up by a central hawser, and side ropes hauled taut round trees on the summit of the rock nearly 300 feet up. When finished this improvised platform stood out from the cliff 15 feet horizontally!

In these wonderful, dangerous, and eerie open-air studios, Mr. Perera spent nineteen weary weeks painting on canvas a complete set of the 22 frescoes which were first painted 1,400 years ago. These are marvellous in their faithfulness and colour. Before Mr. Perera began to paint the frescoes, iron standards 3 feet 4 inches in height, with a single top rail, were driven along the edge of both pockets and the connecting ledge between them; for without such handrail a slip on the smooth inclined floor of the pocket would have meant instant death on the rocks below.

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Yet another adventure was the outcome of this exciting survey, and Mr. Bell vividly tells the tale. "High up on the eastern face of the rock," he says, "May be noticed a dark streak betokening caves, and these we resolved to survey. But the rock scarp below them being nowhere less than 30 degrees in slope, and in places sheer, ascent without the aid of a rope was impossible. The four-inch hawser was therefore let down to the ground as before over the brow of the caves. "Up this stout rope half a dozen of the strongest and most sure-headed coolies swarmed to the apparent mouth of the caves. The measured distance was 294 feet, climbed hand over hand the whole way up. But arriving at this height they found that they were 50 feet distant from the caves and still below their floor, with no means of getting nearer, owing to the projecting crag above, and the rope's own weight keeping it taut."

"Ultimately a brave Singhalese lad with a light rope round his waist swung himself on to the rock as high as he could, and crawled crocodile fashion the rest of the way up the steep smooth slope while the men held the other end of the rope. Once in the caves he noosed the rope to a piece of fallen rock, and next day a strong iron ring was driven into the floor, and a hawser passed through it." "Then Mr. Perera and I made the ascent. The largest cavern was 197 feet long, with a floor width averaging 11 feet. No vegetation grows therein. But we did find under a rock in the cave three eggs of the peregrine falcon, which vary strangely in hue from chocolate to almost white. The eggs of this bird have never been taken in Ceylon before." "We were grievously disappointed with our search and had to be content with a bare negative gain - the absolute assurance that the caves contained no trace of previous human occupation. The foot of man never desecrated this sanctuary of the eagle and falcon before. Being virtually inaccessible, it was left to bird and bat and mountain bee. Overhead the beetling crag jutted out forty feet and more, while underfoot the rock floor was polished and slippery from untold centuries of wear by the feet of myriads on myriads of birds." If, however, in years to come an adventurous climber climbs to this chamber of the winds he will find in a niche a sealed record of its daring exploration, and in just such a way the buried buildings on the Sigiri Rock are the record of a crime of 1,400 years ago.

A king of Ceylon was buried alive with his face to the west by his brutal son, who became king in his place. This in its turn was said to be a punishment because the old king had buried alive a holy man who was in his way when building a great tank. But, dreading the revenge of his brother, the young king fortified the Sigiri rock. There he lived for eighteen miserable years, and at the end of that time his brother came and slew him. He happened to turn his elephant to avoid a pit, and, thinking he was running away, his people lost heart and the enemy cried out, "They're running away." Instead of hiding within his fortress when the critical moment came, the man it was to protect had lost faith in it, and in his misery went out to his last fight.
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