

I started painting at eight years old, encouraged by my mother who had considerable talent. I built model stages and painted all the sets.

School days were entirely overshadowed by the arts. I studied voice production and deportment, fencing, dancing and painting. I continually played juvenile parts and during 1914/1918 war, was never off the concert platform helping to raise funds for soldiers in action. I won seven Eisteddfod gold medals for recitation, studying under Cecile de Bank who was the rival of Muriel Alexander but Muriel and I were always great friends.

At the age of sixteen, the Headmaster of K.E.S. informed my parents that I was simply wasting my time at school and, very wisely, they decided that I should leave. At this time I was painting hard, with encouragement from that fine architect, Frank Emily. Amongst his many achievements was the design of the main block of Wits University. He was also an artist of considerable merit.

One day, Frank Tyers, the scenic artist for African Theatres came along to see my work. He offered me a job on the paint frame as an apprentice saying that if, after six months I made the grade when put through a test, I would have a permanent job - if not - I was 'out'.

Marjorie, his daughter, helped me in every way. He was a brilliant scenic artist and could paint a forty foot canvas without referring to a note. He adored the sea and made an intense study of it all his life. He could paint any type of ship from memory and any part of it. It was wonderful experience. I had to study quite a lot of architecture, as in those days sets had to be 'real' and when painting on that scale, architectural detail had to be correct.

Incidentally, I passed my test with flying colours. This consisted of painting a "Palace Set" for the old Empire Theatre and I thoroughly enjoyed every moment of it.

Then tragedy struck! Frank loved his motorcycle and was killed in a crash. His daughter was really completely stricken and unable to work. I, at sixteen, was left on my own. That huge production, Chu Chin Chow, arrived from England and all the sets had to be retouched and much re-painted. I just had to get on with it. This I did and held the fort until a new artist, Ronald Docker, arrived from England.

I also formed my own theatrical company for which I painted the scenery, produced and played the leading rôles. A.A. Milne's "The Dover Road", was an outstanding success. Two of the cast of these plays eventually made a great success in London.

ENGLAND AND "THE OLD VIC".

Then came an introduction to Lilian Bayliss of the "Old Vic", London. I went to England, was given an audition by Miss Bayliss and Robert Atkins the producer. Never shall I forget standing in front of the act drop in the empty theatre, and delivering Henry VI speech before Agincourt. How fortunate I was!!! Not only was I accepted but was immediately a paid member of the cast. I did not have to pay them and was not required to go through the Old Vic School. For ten months I played small parts...feeling like an absolute 'Ham' with these fine professionals - was Assistant Stage Manager, and also painted scenery. I could write a small book on my experiences in this great little theatre. Eventually, the last production of the season...I have even forgotten its name... I had a very small part which I played with the lead Rupert Harvey. For the very first time I felt the stage - I knew I was walking well, gracefully - and every night on my exit I got a round of applause. This really meant something at the Vic where the audience really know their Shakespeare and were exceptionally critical.

On the last night I went to Rupert Harvey's dressing room to thank him for his help and kindness..... He walked upstage every night and left the centre to me..... I said, "Thank you Rupert - I have been here for ten months and only now am I beginning to feel that I know a tiny bit about acting." "Aubrey m' boy", he replied, "I have been acting for forty-five years and I am just beginning to feel I know a tiny bit about acting"! What a lesson to those who think that any of the arts can be mastered without a life time of study!

Then I made one of those terrible mistakes that only youth can make. Lillian and Robert offered me another season. They asked me if I would come back to them. I was homesick for South Africa, I was young, energetic and, feeling the restriction of London, fell to the persuasion of my mother who had to return to my father. I refused.

Back in South Africa I very quickly realised my mistake. Restless and lost I persuaded my father to give me £45, which at that time bought me a passage, Natal Line, back to England. The Vic was of course lost to me.

FILE STUDIOS AND CINEMA AND THEATRE MANAGEMENT.

With an introduction to Sir Michael Balcon, I got a job in the art department of Gainsborough Pictures where I again painted. I also went through the scenario department and ended up as an assistant director. I worked with Madeleine Carol, Gordon Barker, Ivor Novello, and his wonderful mother Claire Novello Davies. We made a short of her famous Welsh choir.

When 'Talkies' arrived the Studios eventually had to be entirely re-equipped and I found myself out of a job. Gaumont British offered me a job as an Assistant Cinema Manager. This started me on a long career of Cinema and theatre management for Odeon and Gaumont in England, and for Kinemas and African Theatres in South Africa, both of whom gave me contracts. My happiest periods were running Kings, Durban where I also painted extensively and was elected a member of council of the Natal Society of Artists. President Leo Francois, who was always my sponsor. The beautiful Plaza, Johannesburg and the fine old Opera House, Capetown. I never ceased to paint and did a heap of work in the Cape. I exhibited pictures in the National Gallery Capetown.

PAINTING.

Then back to England. I had married and my wife, who was not without means, had always loved my painting. She absolutely insisted that I go to London and paint. Thus started my career as a professional painter. Unhappy at the work I was doing, I called in Bernard Adams, a very fine and well known painter and wonderful teacher. Pupil of De Lauro, himself pupil of John Singer Sargent. He confirmed what I already knew - that I was 'Off the Rails', but he said that I was a Painter. He said he would give me eight lessons..... At a price..... and guaranteed that I would then be showing in all the London shows. Of course I accepted. He was as good as his word. I exhibited at The Royal Society of British Artists, The Royal Society of Oil Painters, Leicester Galleries, Leger Galleries, The Royal Scottish Academy, The Ashmolean Museum, Oxford where I was elected a Member of the Oxford Art Society, etc., etc.

I was booked for a one man show at the Peaux Art Gallery, London run by R.O. Dunlop A.R.A., when the war broke out and, having joined the territorials, I was called up at virtually a moments notice. This tragically ended what I know would have been a big career in art. Fortunately I was able to paint extensively right through the war and maybe the vast experiences gained, the countries visited... France, Germany, Holland, Belgium, Egypt, Syria, Crete, Transjordan, Lebanon, Cyrenaica, Malaya, Singapore, Ireland, Scotland, etc. - maybe all this had added dimension to my art - I do hope so

I must thank Bernard Adams. It is entirely due to him that to-day I can work to a definite plan, knowing that if certain rules are obeyed all will be well.... no longer is it a hit and miss technique.

I have forgotten to mention that Amsewitz, who was painting in South Africa had offered me his huge studio in Kensington, plus his house. Later on I moved to a beautiful, smaller studio in Notting Hill Gate. This was steeped in tradition. Amongst the famous people who had lived in it was Sir Henry Irvine. Not only did I go to Bernard Adams but, as I was far from satisfied with my drawing, I went to the Life class at the Regent Street Polytechnic, and later the Heatherley School of Art, both admirable institutions. I would not touch a brush for months but just drew.

THE WAR.

It was certainly ordained that war or no war I was to carry on with my art. I had applied to the Hon. John Cotterell, O.C. of 282 Battery, City of London Regiment for a job. He said, "What do you do?", I said, I was an artist to which he replied, "I like artists. Do you know Edourd Woolf". I knew him very well. He said, "Sgt. Major, can we take Mr. Fielding?"..... The answer, of course, had to be - "Yes Sir", I was "IN". He, of course, had a wonderful collection of pictures and at one stage I was requested to find him a house in the country which I did... a beautiful old Georgian mansion, then to go up to his London House and decide which pictures were to be brought down. He married Lady Roseberry and had a son. I, as Gunner Fielding, was invited to the Christening. Amongst the guests there were, of course, Lords, Admirals, Generals, Air Vice-Marcshalls and Gunner Fielding! All went wonderfully well, until the seargent discovered me amongst the guests... "Get in that there kitchen", he said, "and wash up them there glasses." "I'm bugged if I will," I said. I went into the Hall, put on my coat and hat and walked all the way from Elstree to London in a fury.... The next day Cotterell said, "Aubrey, what in hell happoned to you yesterday? You went off with not a goodbye to anyone". When I explained he laughed his head off.

One day he asked me if I thought I could camouflage our gun site. I said I could. He was so pleased with the result that he reported to War Office. I was asked to go up for an interview. Out of 600 applicants for the appointment of Camouflage Officer, eleven were chosen. I received an immediate Emergency Commission. One day I was Gunner Fielding and the next Lieut. Fielding R.E.

I left at once for a six week course at the R.E. Base at Aldershot. On the same course was the famous painter and stage designer Oliver Messel; the then world famous magician Jasper Mackeline; Hugh Stanton, son of Sir Hugh Stanton R.A.

At the end of the course I was posted to H.Q. 5 Corps Longford Castle Salisbury, Commanding Officer General Montgomery, where I joined Edward Seago.

After a few months General Havell called for camouflage officers and six of us left for the far East. Sitting in the ship waiting to disembark, Lord Haw Haw came over the air and, in his maddeningly sarcastic tone said, "it has just come to my notice that a small group of camouflage officers has arrived in Port Said. They are now waiting to disembark. Amongst them is the world famous Magician Jasper Mackeline. Presumably, he has come to help make the British army disappear - but it won't take a Jasper Mackeline to do that!"

To write a history of my war experiences would fill a sizeable volume so I give a short synopsis. After working with General Havell, training troupes in camouflage in the field, making dummy tanks, etc. I was posted to Crete.

One early morning the Colonel called me to his office... I was attached to Middle East Command H.Q.... He said, "how do you feel about going to Crete?" This was a good question!! Everyone knew that the Germans were all set for an invasion on a massive scale at any moment and the softening up process was then in full swing. The Luftwaffe sat above the Island all day and every day, dive bombing. As soon as they saw an aircraft about to take off or land - they swooped on it and either bombed, or shot it to bits. Malame Air Field where I was to land was littered with wrecks. However, he continued - "H.Q. wants a detailed report on the Island." I was shown a very very long questionnaire.... "and I also want you to take over Camouflage whilst you are there. You will not be able to stay long as the report is needed urgently. Well?" I of course said I'd go. I wasn't being brave - I really had no alternative. It was, I suppose, an order very nicely put. He gave me a beautiful camera and heaps of film and the next morn at daybreak we took off in an Anson. There were no other passengers... just the crew. It was a glorious, absolutely clear day just right for Jerry. We saw this extremely beautiful Island from a distance nestling in the very blue Mediterranean but I am sure we all wondered whether we would make it in one piece.

We did a perfect touch down and not a thing worried us. I reported to H.Q. and was given a royal welcome. They badly needed advice on camouflage.....

For about ten days I explored the Island taking endless photographs, advising gun crews and all formations on the best way to conceal themselves with a particular emphasis on not making vehicle tracks, or concentrating vehicles. At the same time I noted the beaches - whether they dropped sharply or shelved - the flat areas, the vast peaks, the food situation, the morale of the population, the countless things I was asked to report. Then I took to the air, in an old Walrus Flying Boat - one of the only craft left in Crete that could fly - I had to lean over the side with a big Air Camera and take my pictures. These were of such things as gun positions before camouflage, and after, and many many other things too numerous to mention. The old Walrus was so ponderous that the only way we could get into the air was to wait for a good swell and virtually bounce it off the water. The commanding officer on occasions lent me his fast fighter and this was a great help.

Well, after about ten days I went to H.Q. and said that I now had all the material for my report and that it was most urgent that I return to H.Q. Cairo immediately - how did I get back. The laconic reply came - "Well, you go down to the airfield where the last plane into Crete will land. You will find a few hundred people milling around all with the most urgent priority reasons for getting back to Cairo - Good-Luck." I got to the airfield and I saw the plane, an American Lockheed Hudson circling to land. It came in from Greece and we would be very lucky if there were any seats available at all. I was also told by H.Q. that it was entirely the pilot's decision as to whom he would take. I looked around the huge circle of people - full Colonels with red tabs, senior Officers of all ranks. I was a mere Lieutenant! So I stood disconsolately on the edge of the crowd. The plane touched down...up went the gangway...the pilot opened the door and looked around. "I have four seats," he said. To my amazement he pointed at ME. "I'll take you," he said. I charged up into the plane. Three others were swiftly chosen. The door was slammed and we took off, rising very sharply over the high hills before Jerry could find another sitting duck. I'm happy to say my photographs turned out very well and the report was extremely well received by Cairo. They called it a model report and said all officers should read it. I was destined not to die in Crete. The whole time I was on the Island I never saw a shot fired in anger. About a week later the attack was launched in full force. I am happy to say that in Churchill's War Histories he mentions that the Germans paid great tribute to the camouflage in Crete.

PALESTINE.

I was posted to Palestine under General Jumbo Wilson. My main work was camouflaging defences in Transjordan, practically on the Syrian border. The fear was that the Russians would come down over the Caucasus. Vast defence plans were set in motion. The high command would not move a step without a Camouflage Officer to site the pill boxes and general defences, maximum cover being required. Camouflage went hand in glove with construction.

I shall always remember the happy days spent with that remarkable body of men - the Transjordan frontier force - with whom I stayed. Their uniform was indeed romantic - black high boots with grey riding britches, red camabunds including pistol holsters, blue shirts and headgear, a high black Cossack hat topped with red silk - they were a fine crowd!

Then on into Syria itself, With 5th Indian Infantry Brigade we drove the Vichy French out and eventually captured Damascus, making the Damascus Hotel our Headquarters. Camouflage certainly came into its own during all this period. As the General explained..... "If the French hit my petrol dumps and food supplies we can say goodbye to our advance on Damascus one hundred miles up the road."

I threw all the petrol cases into a deep rough ditch surrounding a large field. In this the air view would give an effect of rocks. There was a churchyard with a high stone wall surrounding it. I piled the cases right round the walls, thus merely thickening the wall and I made one false wall entirely of cases.

During this period a troop of 25 pounders arrived. The officer commanding came up and asked if he could site his guns behind the wall.....I said, "With pleasure - if you are happy to be in the middle of a petrol dump." He was out of the place like a shot from one of his guns! Not a bomb dropped anywhere near the dump.

When we reached Damascus a vast camouflage scheme was got under way. All the defences being built had to be concealed. I said, "You are spending millions on constructing these defences, don't ask me to camouflage for a few pounds." I was granted all the money I needed.

DESERT WARFARE.

The Chief Engineer with whom I worked was Brigadier Perrott, the man who built the Alamein line. He told me he was given Hell for spending vast sums on defences so near Cairo. Little did they know then that his work would save the entire Middle East; maybe even total defeat! I asked him what War Office would say about my spending all that money. He replied, "You're in the same position as I am. If the Germans come down over the Caucasus, you'll be a made man.....If not - You've had it!" Well as is known they not come, but, by that time Rommel had almost reached the Alamein Defences. He was only about 150 miles up the road, so our completely untrained Corps, under General Holmes was rushed down to the desert to help stem the tide. We were in an utterly hopeless condition, guns were firing from our H.Q. and over it. We were overrun and the main road to Cairo cut by the enemy. General Holmes then called us together and said, "Sorry chaps, but it is now every man for himself, you will have to find your own way out of this lot. Good-Luck." Brigadier Perrott said goodbye to me.....got into his staff car with a rifle and compass to try and make his way across the desert. His last remark to us was...."They'll never get me out of here alive." He was killed. He was a wonderful and brilliant man. Our GII ran his car right onto a German 88 Pounder gun site. He leapt out of the vehicle and, whilst the gun crew stood open mouthed and speechless at seeing a British staff car, he shot the lot of them with his pistol and earned a DSO.

I could not see myself crossing the desert. I had a truck of my own and a driver, and I said, "Gentlemen, we're going right down this road. If we

get bumped it's just too bad." So off we set. We saw armoured vehicles, tanks, guns of every sort and hadn't the foggiest idea whose they were. We drove all the way to Alexandria without having a shot fired at us. When we got to H.Q., where the remnants were gathered, WHAT a welcome we received. They could not believe their eyes!

The Eighth Army was completely demoralised... in fact it was a rabble - not an Army.

On the scene came General Montgomery... and like lightening, everything changed. "We are not going to retreat another yard," he said, "and we're going to throw Rommel right out of Africa.... Get the Hell out of Cairo and Alexandria.... Stop digging ditches in the Delta area.... and get up to the front line - every one of you....." Back came self respect immediately, shoulders were squared again and heads held high.....

This was the beginning of the end for Rommel. It was then that I took part in the vast deception and camouflage scheme in which was reproduced in "Dummy" an entire army Corps. The Germans were caught completely on the wrong foot and misjudged the direction of the main attack. It was great fun seeing them bomb dummy dumps, dummy rail heads, etc., and watching the huge fires and explosions set up by electric switches pressed from a distance, making them think they were on target.

I went as far as Benghazi in the pursuit and then was posted to England.

IRELAND AND SCOTLAND.

On my arrival in England I was posted to Northern Ireland Command H.Q., just outside Belfast, where I lectured to troops on camouflage in the field. This was a very happy period. I thought Ireland was most beautiful and got in a lot of landscape painting.

Then on to Scotland....Edinburgh... that beautiful city. Once again I lectured at the school of camouflage at Murrayfield. From the painting point of view this was a wonderful period. I stayed at the St. Mary's Hotel opposite the Cathedral. Staying in the hotel was a Miss Chapin, a very elderly lady with a great face and bags of character. The manager of the hotel gave me a small lounge as a studio and I painted here. The picture, with two others, was accepted by the Royal Scottish Academy and I am showing it on my exhibition.

The manager asked me if I would paint his wife as a commission. I said, "Yes, on one condition. If you don't like the portrait when I've finished you don't pay for it." Reluctantly he accepted my terms. Well, the result was a good painting but not a good likeness. She was a good looking, well taylored woman but from an artist's point of view almost impossible to paint. There was nothing characteristic to grip on to.

Well I knew he wouldn't like it. I watched his face keenly as I showed it to him..... I never listen to what people say about a picture.... I just watch the face as they first see it. It tells me all I want to know. He looked for a long time and then said, I'm afraid it's not my wife as I see her." I said, "I'm sorry but I agree." "Our arrangement stands. I've thoroughly enjoyed painting your wife and I'm quite happy." He tried to persuade me to take something but I refused. I stayed at the hotel for about three weeks and when leaving went down to settle my account. I asked the receptionist for the bill. She said, "There IS no bill and it's as much as my job is worth to give you one."

They were the parents of the famous film star of that time Anne Todd.

Shortly after that I went to Inverness where I had a big job on hand. This was to give the Germans the impression that we were going to launch an invasion on Norway from the West coast of Scotland. I had great fun building dummy camps, dummy dumps, gun sites, guns, etc. We massed

vehicles and drove them all over the place making tracks which would be visible from the air. How successful this effort was, and whether it ever deceived the Germans, I never really learned but I enjoyed the experience very much.

Then I went over to the Continent in the invasion, landing on those ingenious Mulberry Harbours. Then a long, long trip right through France, and Belgium up to Antwerp which was still being shelled by the Jerry from the other side of the Scheldt.

My adventures in the city would fill a book. Once the V1's and V2's started it was a nightmare - and yet looking back on it all I enjoyed it. We danced, we wined and dined, I met wonderful and brave Belgian friends, took over a beautiful flat belonging to a collaborator whom we threw out and imprisoned. Never did I cease to paint....with the bombs raining down I sat in the streets with my drawing board and sketched. I very nearly sold the entire collection to the Belgian Government. It just did not quite come off. Someday I will approach them again. They should prove even more interesting today.

I saw "D" Day in Antwerp - painted it and exhibited it at the Leicester Galleries, London..... but I still went on into Germany before being sent home for demobilisation.

DEMobilISATION.

I was living in Worthing when I left the Army and, as soon as I had settled down, started to paint again. However, I had lost all my money in the war years and, although Leicester Galleries accepted my work, I soon began to realise that I had lost six years. No longer was I known and I would have to start all over again. This could be a very long haul in the art world. To my amazement, one day I was 'phoned by War Office..... Would I consider coming back to them.... They would send me to the School of Military Intelligence for sixteen weeks with the substantive rank of Captain and a five year Short Service Commission. I asked for the week-end to consider it. When I realised the security it would offer I decided to accept. I had also learned to love the army... the wonderful comradeship, etc. Never have I worked so hard in my life as on that course. From eight in the morning till six in the evening with a short break for lunch. When six came, the Chief Instructor would say, "That's all for today Gentlemen - provided I have the answers to these questions in the morning." This meant working right through the night in many cases.

I managed to pass and was posted to our H.Q. Nuneham Park, Nuneham Courtney, just outside Oxford, belonging to Lord Harcourt. The most glorious place stretching down to the Thames. The estate was thrown open to the public once a year so that they could see its Spring glories, under the very strictest supervision of course and the most elaborate security precautions. Thus began a very happy period of my life. In all that beauty I painted and had quite a lot of time in which to do so.

I was sent out to Malaya and Hong-Kong for two-and-a-half years. More rich experiences, fighting and routing out the Communist bandits in the vast jungles, at the same time enjoying the wonders of the East. I can never understand why people on holiday rush to the Continent when there is a wonderful, new colourful world to see in the far East... Something utterly different.

Then back to England again where I bought a 25' Cabin Cruiser... a fine boat which could sleep four and I lived in it for two years. It was moored at Sandfor Lock, just above Nuneham. And how I painted!!!! Two of these works will be on my show. One of the lock and the other, "The King's Arms" a very famous Pub frequented at one time by "Teddy Prince" - in other words the Duke of Windsor.

Then came retiring age. The Army Council granted me an extra two years... and then it was all over.

My parents were living in South Africa and my father had provided Lawrence Adler with some backing to enable him to start a small framing business and Gallery.

It was decided that I should join him as a partner. I knew a great many of the London Gallery owners intimately and, before leaving England, arranged for many shows to be sent to this country. When I arrived in Johannesburg, I found the Gallery and framing consisted of a small wood and iron shed on the roof garden of Pinn's buildings. The place had great potential however, and I am sure that all the artists and art lovers of this city will remember it with nostalgia. They will remember the tremendous things we did in that little dump. As many as a thousand people attended one Artists of Fame and Promise Exhibition. They were queued up right round the block. Then came our truly beautiful Gallery designed by Donald Turgell.... one of the finest private galleries in the world... What shows we had. Exhibitions from all over the world - and what stunts we got up to; and what a great number of artists we "made" - White and Black. To cite only one case - Lucas Sithole sold us his first carving for £15 - now he fetches thousands. Frank Spears sold for £30 and R45 - now his prices are R600, R800 and a thousand. But from the word "go" the Gallery was somehow a tragedy. I had hoped the artists would clamour to show in such a perfect setting - but they were most lukewarm. Expenses were enormous in that huge place and we did not have the capital. Nor could we raise a cent from all our wealthy patrons. They all said what a lovely Gallery it was, and that they would not go anywhere else. But when it came to saving it, not one person came forward. In the end, I found myself thrown out of the Gallery that I had created at virtually a minute's notice without even a month's salary. It lasted another few months and then had to close down. This great Gallery should have been in existence today. It would always have been a great asset to Johannesburg. There are dozens of galleries today, but I feel sure that none can equal the Adler Fielding.

..... and now after working and spending my life showing other artists... I am to have an exhibition of my own. I have never really been interested in showing. I have just wanted to paint. But I have been persuaded, and am glad to say I am going to show with Madame Haengghi. We have been friendly rivals for years and I am very happy about it. I hope art lovers will like my work. Although many years ago I showed a great deal in the country, most of my life has been spent abroad and I showed extensively overseas. However, I was born in this country and I think it's about time that I took my place amongst the South African artists.... I am not a modern, I am an Impressionist. I have always loved impressionism and I am sure one must paint as one feels and not try to be "Up-to-date". At any rate, when I take up a brush and paint with all the feeling of which I am capable - I am happy! We live in the most beautiful surroundings in a dream cottage. The owner of the property had made the place a life's work... and is to build me a Studio!!! Could anything be more wonderful? Gazing out of the huge window I will look out across the Klipriversberg... and "The Valley of Storms" as we call it. How can one fail to create in this atmosphere.

MAJ. AUBREY FIELDING.