



**STOBS MILITARY CAMP**  
HAWICK IN THE SCOTTISH BORDERS

**Transcript of Stobs Camp memories provided by Jean Beattie Oliver Laing, May 2018  
With the kind permission of Jean and her family**

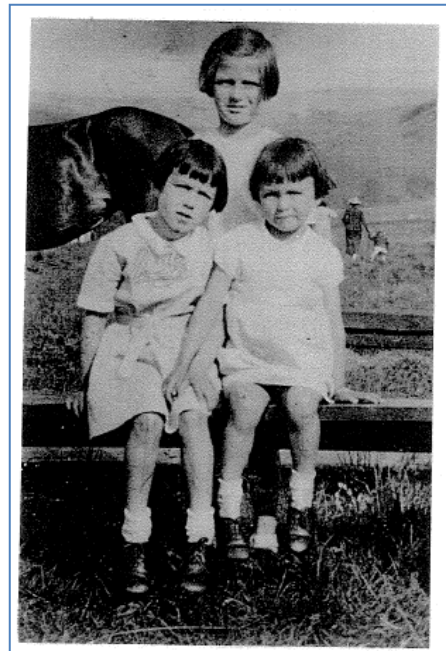
My name is Jean Beattie Oliver (married name Laing). I was born at Winnington Rig, Stobbs Camp on the Borders of Scotland on the 20<sup>th</sup> October 1933.

My family consisted of Walter (Dad), Margaret (Mum), Reene, Margo, Della and Walter and Ralph.

I first started school when we lived at Winnington Rig. Shortly after we went to live at the YMCA, again at Stobbs Camp, where Dad became manager just shortly before war was declared. There were lots of soldiers in the camp as it was a very good training camp. It was also a training camp during the First World War, owing to the wild and rough terrain.

While living at the YMCA we got to know a lot of the soldiers, as we had to walk straight down the middle of the camp to go to school. So the troops got to know myself and my brothers and sisters very well and that we were the kids from the YMCA. The guard at the gate would always say "friend or foe" as we passed and we used to laugh. We had to walk about 3½ miles each day to get to school, which was a long way but it didn't seem to bother us.

Now about the soldiers, I was a bit young to identify the different regiments. I do remember when the troops went on manoeuvres. Late at night Dad would arrange with the Sergeant to stay open late at the YMCA so that he could give the troops a meal when they came back. There was plenty entertainment in the YMCA for the troops



**Reene, Margo and Jean  
at Stobs Camp**

including darts, billiards and Mum would play the piano and the troops would gather around to have a 'sing song'. This is where I learnt all the army songs and we would have fancy dress parties and dances.

We got to know lots of the soldiers personally; I had more Uncle Bills and Uncle Johns than anyone I know. Now about the camp – there were tents and huts everywhere. When the war broke out they started sending troops overseas. It was sad to wave them good-bye. There were all different regiments and at one stage we had the French Canadians and a Scottish Regiment at the camp at the same time. These two regiments did not get along well at all. One night the French Canadians waited in the Avenue near the Railway Station and jumped out and a terrible fight took place between the British and Canadian troops.

We also had Highland Light Division (HLD) staying at the camp, this was just before Dunkirk. As it so happened my uncle was a Regimental Sergeant Major at this time. His name was Lewis Oliver – late of Winnington Rig. He served in Africa but was not too popular amongst his troops and they nicknamed him the 'brute'. Then the next thing we heard was they were going overseas, but no one was ever told where they were going. It was a long time after my uncle came back to Stobbs and to our surprise the soldiers that had fought under his command had nothing but praise for him. They all said he was the bravest man they had ever met. He was decorated with the 'Oak Leaf' and it was reported that he saved a lot of lives whilst serving overseas. It was also reported that he took over command of his soldiers (at Dunkirk) and held the boats back so he could pull some of his men out of the sea and into the boat. He was in the Army for 21 years and when he came out he became a preacher.

Now going back to the First World War – my father used to tell me stories about when he was a little boy and the way he would see the German prisoners coming off the trains. One time when he was at the station he saw a very tall German and he had a big red beard and as Dad went near him the German said, "Hello laddie". Dad was quite amazed and Dad asked him if he was German. This man said he was Scottish but that he and his two sons had all been taken prisoner for fighting for the Germans. The man told my father that he had been a farmer in Germany when the war broke out and had been called up to serve in the German army as a result.

There was a German cemetery at Stobbs and there were First and Second World War soldiers buried there. The cemetery was kept very well. The cemetery was just off the road near the Stobbs Railway Station. The graves were eventually dug up and I believe the remains were sent home. I don't really know what happened to the headstones.

Now another story about the First World War told to me by my father which occurred at Stobbs – some of the soldiers had been overseas and brought back a gorilla to be the regimental mascot. So they had him tied to a tree and gave him a hut, which he slept in. You could sit and talk to him but had to keep your distance. One day one of the officer's wives went to see the gorilla and she was wearing a fur coat. Well, Mr

Gorilla got a bit excited and urinated all over the woman. She then wanted the gorilla shot but the officers would not hear tell of it.

Just before war was declared, all the families on the Stobbs estate were asked to take in evacuees from the main cities. Our family took two sisters, Jean and Nancy. Jean was the same age as me (6 years old) but Nancy was about 15 years old. Mum and Dad had a hard time keeping an eye on her; she fell in love with all the young soldiers. Every family had to take at least two children and they were so different from the local kids as they were from all sorts of backgrounds and certainly not as healthy as us, poor things. Mum felt so sorry for them and she gave little Jean my new camel coat with leather buttons and I had to wear an old jumper to school. I cried all the way to school.

They had to close our school as everybody had lice, after the city kids arrived. Mr Birrell who lived in a big house at Stobbs, was an ex-Captain in the army who lived with his wife but had no children of their own. They had been given two boys, the biggest devils that you could meet. These boys drove Mr and Mrs Birrell crazy. When the Second World War came in 1939 the soldiers were training hard. There were two cement training squares where they would do drill. They had their own cook house and dining hut, hospitals and doctors. A lot of these soldiers went overseas to fight, it was very sad. We would get to like them and they would go away. They would look back and wave to us.



**Margaret and Walter Oliver with their daughters Jean and Della at Stobs Camp. Soldiers are playing football in the background**

Well as time went on and the war was at its highest, Dad was called into the army. He was called into the Artillery. The evacuees had to go home at this time; they had been with us about two and a half years. Jean and Nancy did not want to go home, but we had to move out of the YMCA, as Dad was now in the army. We moved in with a lady called Mrs Temple. Mrs Temple's husband was away in the army, which is why Mrs Temple took us in. Mrs Temple lived at the entrance to Stobbs Castle and it was much closer to school for us. We were about three quarters of a mile from the Castle.

One night, whilst staying with Mrs Temple, we heard trucks horns blowing and Mum asked the guard at the entrance what was going on. The guard said that they were looking for a spy, he was a young Lieutenant stationed at the castle. He was carrying messages to Melrose, which was

the next village on. In Melrose there was a big monastery that used to do all the laundry for the soldiers at the camp. So the soldiers would deliver the laundry to the monastery in Melrose. This Lieutenant was one of the officers who used to go to Melrose with the driver to deliver the laundry. One of the drivers had been told to keep an eye on this Lieutenant, they discovered that some of the monks were in tow with the Lieutenant and found a wireless hidden in the chimney in the monastery. They had been sending messages to Germany and one such message was that Stobbs was in very poor condition. They got the spy and found that he had been educated at Oxford.

We would stand at the window and watch the German aeroplanes going over to bomb London. The sky was sometimes black with planes. Well as time went on, Dad and Mr Temple would come home on leave. The camp was still the same, training and soldiers being sent overseas and some coming home. Now it so happened that Dad was discharged so he came home and we moved to a house called 'Fleety'. Dad worked for the army on the rifle range after his discharge.

My brother Walter was born at Fleety, and then Ralph was born in the town hospital, after which we moved to the Barnes Cottage, which was situated in the middle of the camp. This is where Dad worked on the bomb disposal squad, as did my brother Walter. At this time the Barnes was divided into two houses. Mr and Mrs Reavel were in one house and we were in the other. The Reavels decided to move and the government decided to convert it into one big house due to the size of our family. We had to move into Woodfoot in the meantime whilst the house was converted. Woodfoot was at the bottom of the railway bridge and close to the War Memorial, which had the names of the soldiers who had lived on the estate. We then moved back to the Barnes which was a much bigger house. By this time the Scotch Guards



**Walter Oliver at Stobs Camp whilst living at the YMCA**



were stationed at Stobbs, their huts were just across the road from our house. They had just come home from Italy and they were in a terrible mess, poor things. They were suffering shell shock and crying and many other nervous complaints.

We did have some happy times and went sledding down the steep hills and have snow fights. The moon was very bright in the sky and the ground was sparkling like diamonds. We had the Scots and Irish Guards, Coldstream, Welsh and lots of other regiments at Stobbs Camp. The German prisoners had their Officers, but were under British command. They spent most of their time making furniture and they made me a lovely chest of drawers. They also made toys and ashtrays and many other things. Some of the ashtrays were in the shape of peacocks and the toys were wooden dolls that would somersault when squeezed at the bottom.

The German prisoners were allowed to roam the camp but had to wear their coats with POW sewn on it. Sometimes we would have them up to the house. It was very interesting to listen to their stories. Some of them were just like our boys and did not want to be in the army. One of the prisoners was only twenty years old and tall and blond. He had been taken prisoner the first day at the front line.

When they held a dance at the Sergeants mess I would do some highland dancing for them. I remember the Pipe Major McDonald and his two sons who also played the pipes as well. He was the Pipe Major that piped the soldiers over the Rhine and he has a piece of shrapnel that had been taken out of his hip which he showed me. On the night they were leaving Pipe Major McDonald presented me with a beautiful sword that had been taken off an Italian Officer. Us kids had lots of souvenirs given to us by the prisoners.



**Cogsmill Primary School – where Walter, Reene, Della, Margo, Ralph and Jean attended whilst living at Stobs Camp**

When we were at school we had to take our gas masks with us and when we lived at the Barnes we had an air raid shelter, but the funny thing is Stobbs Camp was never bombed. They wondered how Stobbs had never been bombed by the German air force so they sent up a plane to survey the area, but there was nothing but fog and mist. The way the camp was situated meant that you couldn't see it from the air because of the fog. The huts and other buildings could not be seen.

When we lived at the Barnes my father was the head forester on the estate. He had everything in excellent condition. When my sister and I went back for a holiday years later after Dad left and saw the condition we could have cried. The railway bridge and the Avenue were in a terrible state.

The night the war ended we were still living in the Barnes. The soldiers had a big bonfire on the top of the hill and were having a drink. After that the prisoners and the refugees were sent home, but there were still soldiers left in the camp.



**Jean Beattie Oliver Laing**