

BARTON Laurence

Name: Laurence Barton

Born: 29 August 1920

Rank: Captain

Service Number: 91990

Regiment: 88th Field Regiment
Royal Artillery, TA

Died: 16 January 1997



Pre-War:

Laurence left school at the age of 17 and joined the family cotton business in Bolton, Lancashire. He played rugby for Preston Grasshoppers at scrum half (and was recorded as the youngest at this position).

He joined the Territorial Army in 1939, being posted Gunner, 88th Field Regiment on 19 April and then commissioned as 2nd Lieutenant on 5 July 1939.

Wartime experience:

Laurence sailed from Southampton on 3 October 1939 and disembarked at Cherbourg, with the 88th Field Regiment now one of 20 Field Artillery Regiments with the British Expeditionary Force. The Regiment then moved up to the North Eastern frontier of France where the next few months were spent training, digging-in and more training. On 15 May the Regiment received its baptism of fire. Laurence, however, had been on leave and was struggling to return to the Regiment via Cherbourg. Unable to reach Dunkirk and the surrounding area where the main body of the Regiment was now fighting, he returned to Cherbourg and then back to England.

Laurence embarked from Gourock, Glasgow, on the Empress of Canada on 30 September 1941 and arrived in Singapore on 29 November 1941. He then boarded a train for Mantin Camp, in Malaysia, which lay some 210 miles to the north. The camp was new and, in a letter to his mother, Laurence wrote that the huts were raised off the ground, were well ventilated and he hadn't seen many snakes as yet.

Now attached to 464 Battery, Laurence found himself moving up and down the country with little effect until 10 December when the Battery was ordered to Kuantan on the east coast, to occupy defensive positions to cover the threat of attack from the sea.



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On 29 December the Japanese appeared at Balok. The Battery engaged, damaging two enemy vehicles and dispersing the rest. Further action ensued until 1 January 1942 when the Battery retired to Port Dickson.

A week later he was ordered to Kuala Lumpur and found himself fighting again. His battery then moved to Klang Bridge, Tampin and Buloh Kasap fighting at each stage. The Battery then retreated down the railway line to Singapore Island. His diary makes reference to some confusion ensuing during the return to Singapore.

He found himself occupying a position near Selatar Aerodrome and began shelling the Japanese who were fortifying the north coast of the island and returning fire. His main concern at this time was the difficulty of obtaining new equipment and stores. It seemed that while there was plenty, those responsible were still working on peacetime accounting and wouldn't issue what was required.

Early February saw heavy fighting, and in the days prior to the ceasefire, his Battery was firing over 1,000 rounds a day. Finally, on the morning of 15 February, orders were received that there would be a cease fire at 1600 hours. On 17 February he marched the 17 miles to Changi with his battery.

Laurence was initially held in Changi POW Camp (February – May 1942), then moved to Havelock Road (May – June 1942), Tanjong Rhu (June – September 1942) and Pasir Panjang (September – October 1942). On 30 October he left Singapore for Formosa/Taiwan on the Dainichi Maru, where he was one of 1,200 POWs on board. He was then held in Haito POW Camp (November 1942 – August 1943) and Shirakawa (August 1943 – February 1945). On 22 February he sailed on the Melbourne Maru bound for Japan. The ship struck a sandbank and had to return to port. He was transferred to the Winchester Maru/Taiko Maru and arrived in Moji, Japan on 9 March 1945. The following day he found himself at the Miata POW Camp in Fukuoka, where he remained until the armistice on 2 September. There were two occasions when all the POWs were marched in to the nearby drift mine. They were told that it was for their safety against American bombing. In fact it was in preparation for being machine gunned should the Americans attack the Japanese mainland.

On the 14 September 1942, Laurence left the POW camp for the last time and returned to England via Okinawa, Manila, Pearl Harbour, Vancouver, Nova Scotia arriving in Southampton on 27 November 1945. During his captivity he suffered from malaria and malnutrition, and experienced severe beatings.

Civilian life after return:

Laurence married Teazle in 1949 and they had four children and three grandchildren. He became a successful businessman but continued to suffer from claustrophobia, malaria and emotional problems caused by his captivity. He continued his association with the Territorial Army until 1970 when, having attained the age limit of 50 he was taken off RARO (Royal Artillery Reserve of Officers). Sadly, Laurence died on 16 January 1997, at the age of 76.



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