

SWITHENBANK John Arthur

Name: John Arthur Swithenbank

Born: 12 June 1914

Rank: Driver

Service Number: T/273562

Regiment: Royal Army Service
Corps., 18th Division

Died: 10 February 1972



Pre War:

John Arthur Swithenbank, known as Yorkie, was born on 12 June 1914 in Dewsbury, West Yorkshire. He married Hilda (nee Rigg) and had 3 daughters, Cynthia, Norma and Sheila. John was a knowledgeable and skilled gardener, much sought after by the landed gentry. Prior to enlisting, John worked for Lord Mowbury at Allerton Park, Knaresborough. He was also a member of the Territorial Army.

Wartime experience:

On 26 June 1941, John enlisted in the Royal Army Service Corps., 18th Division, as a driver, leaving his wife and daughters in Cleckheaton.

As part of the 18th Division, John was sent to Singapore. John became a prisoner of war, on 15 February 1942 at the fall of Singapore. His family were informed that he had been posted as Missing in Action (MIA). He and his comrades were forced to march to Changi Prison. During this period of internment over one-third of the Division's personnel died, including the Divisional Commander, Major-General Merton Beckwith-Smith. Some months later, John left Changi and Singapore, passing through Ban Pong, Thailand to commence POW forced labour on the notorious Thai/Burma 'Death' Railway. He arrived in the Tha Sao Camp on 11 October 1942, under the camp leader Colonel Knight.

Whilst captive here in March 1943, unbeknown to John, his eldest daughter, Cynthia, died of meningitis at the age of 8.



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Eventually, John was moved to the Muang POW camp where he arrived on 2 January 1944, again with Colonel Knight. The slave labour continued and on 2 January 1945, John arrived at Nakom Pathom camp and the main hospital for Thailand, which was under the Senior Medical Officer Colonel Coates. During John's enforced captivity he never attempted to escape as he knew it would be futile and certain death. Following VJ Day on 15 August 1945, John arrived home in the autumn of 1945, aboard the SS Corfu via Africa.

Civilian life after return:

After the war, John returned to his family and the job he enjoyed most, gardening. A fourth daughter, Ruth, was born in 1949. However, following John's POW experience he could never really settle and changed his gardening employment locations several times. John's gardening knowledge and experience was appreciated by the many titled people who employed him eg: Lord and Lady Burnham, at Hall Barn, Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire.

John's final employment was for Lord and Lady Hartwell at Oving, near Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire. Lord Hartwell (Michael Berry) was the Chairman and Editor-in-Chief of The Daily Telegraph for 33 years. During John's time in Oving, he was persuaded to model a hand knitted cardigan for a women's weekly magazine to advertise the knitting pattern. In the photograph he is proudly standing amongst his chrysanthemums in the Oving walled garden. In later years John and Hilda enjoyed regular holidays to Butlins and liked a flutter on the horses. John was proud of his 10 grandchildren and always greeted them with either a milky bar or fruit gums.



Above: John modelling the knitted cardigan in the walled garden at Oving.



Above: John and Hilda with their 10 grandchildren

John was diagnosed with lung cancer in his 50s and underwent many rounds of treatment but sadly, he died on 10 February 1972 aged 57, in Tindall Hospital, Aylesbury.



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