Naylor William Maurice

Name: **William Maurice Naylor**

Born: **20 December 1920**

Rank: **Gunner**

Service Number:

Regiment: **135th Field Regiment, Royal Artillery**

Died: **30 September 2020**

Pre-War:

William Maurice Naylor was born in Flixton, near Manchester in 1920, the son of Thomas Naylor, a senior local authority accountant and his wife Agnes (nee Porter), a teacher. He had a twin brother, Frank, and an older sister, Agnes, who both predeceased him. Maurice, as he was known, was educated at St Joseph's College, a Catholic boarding school in Market Drayton, leaving at 15 to work in the town clerk's office in Manchester while studying part-time for a BA in public administration at the Manchester University.

Above: Maurice, left with his sister Agnes and twin brother Frank at the start of the war

Wartime experience:

In 1941, at the age of 19, Maurice joined the 135th Field Regiment, Royal Artillery as a gunner. As twins he and his brother requested to be together – but that was not to be. He was trained as a signaller and celebrated his 21st birthday on board HMS Vernon bound for Singapore. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour on 7 December their ship was diverted to Singapore.

What follows is an account of the next three and a half years mostly in his own words.

"….the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour…so the 18th Division…was diverted to South East Asia to deal with them."

They landed in Singapore on 13th January 1942." I can remember our Battery Commander assuring us how easy this would be… How ignorant and complacent we were. We didn't deal with them." On 15th February 1942 he witnessed the surrender party "…we saw two cars going up the road flying a Union Jack and a white flag. We were astounded as we realised it was all over."

What then followed has been much written about. He spent time in several camps in Singapore and was then transported to Thailand. "We were marched to the railway station and put into metal trucks, thirty to a truck. The journey took four days and four nights". They arrived first at Ban Pong "We marched about one mile to a most filthy camp, inhabited by about a hundred sick men" and then went on to Tamarkan, a camp by the River Kwai (Kwai Noi) – working first on the wooden bridge and then on the steel and concrete bridge. "The Japanese on the work site were hard taskmasters, there were several beatings particularly of officers and there was always tension in the air"

When Tamarkan became a hospital camp he joined the HQ staff as chief clerk to Colonel Toosey and spent six months in his office. "Colonel Toosey and the administrative staff worked unceasingly to improve conditions."

Many of his fellow prisoners were transferred up the line at that point and a large percentage never returned. Maurice told this story of his friend John Browne. It is typical of dad that when asked to address a group he told this story rather than talk about himself.

"At the time I was ill with dysentery in an isolation hut. One evening he came to tell me that he had been ordered to move further up the railway and would be leaving the next morning. He was very pessimistic and had every reason to be. But, apprehensive as he was, his main concern was for me, he had brought me three eggs for which I was very grateful (equivalent of 10 days work). We chatted for a while and then he walked sadly away… I never saw him again – he was just one of the many thousands who died on the railway- and elsewhere – from brutality, disease and neglect. We must never let them be forgotten. John was reasonably fit when he left Tamarkan, I was ill with dysentery. Why have I survived to 90? Why did he have to die at 23? And for what?" (It was a very emotional moment when in 2013 on a Remembrance tour we located Johns grave.)

After Tamarkan he went to Nong Pladuk, where he survived the allied bombings where many were killed and injured, and then to Nakom Pathom POW Hospital before being moved to the Godowns in Bangkok and then onto Ubon there we were building an air-strip, an airfield and defence works of various kinds. Life had become easier then.

Then came liberation "I could hardly believe that we were free. There was something so unreal about it. Just the simple announcement that the war was over and that we were free. We were not even told who had won"

It was late September before they could leave, many vowing never to touch a bowl of rice again. They sailed on the SS Orbita to Liverpool, where Maurice was issued with a travel warrant and sent on indefinite leave with no medical examination. "Nor would I have wanted one," he said. "All I wanted was to get home."

There he found that his mother "had prepared as good a meal as the ration allowance permitted – part of it was rice pudding".

Naylor William Maurice (cont . . .)

Civilian life after return:

After arriving home, the following weeks were distressing. "I got the impressions that most people were uninterested in what had gone on in the Far East," he said. "There seemed to be a conspiracy of silence. People seemed to be embarrassed when they learnt I had been a prisoner and they changed the conversation."

Maurice could no longer socialise, had recurrent nightmares and could not bear trivial conversations. "Many a time I fled to the privacy of my bedroom and burst into tears," he said. "It was 20 years before I could bring myself to eat rice again and nearly 40 years before I could talk about my experience of the Second World War."

Maurice arrived home for his 25th birthday and in early 1946 returned to his former job at Manchester town hall, where he met Maureen Walsh, a secretary. They were married in 1948. "Gradually, I got back to normal," he said. They had three children: Anne, Mike and Liz, who have all held a senior positions in the health service. Sadly, Maureen died in 2016.

From 1955 until his retirement in 1981, he worked for the health service, including in later years as a key member of its strategic leadership, with responsibility for hospital supplies, patient transport services and reorganisation.

After that he spent three years as Director of the National Association of Health Authorities. Maurice and Maureen settled in Dore, near Sheffield, he had long been a Sheffield United season ticketholder.

When he retired in 1981, he returned with his twin brother and their wives to visit Thailand. Up until that point dad had never spoken of his wartime experiences. His family were probably told not to ask. As children we certainly were. Seeing all those graves in Kanchanaburi he said "I decided then that I owed it to those who had died and their families for the stories of those years to be better known".

He then started to give talks to professional organisations and speak at conferences. He discovered COFEPOW, the researching FEPOW history group and other FEPOW organisations. Many will remember his quiet assured talks, virtually always talking about others rather than himself and his memorable address in front of the Queen on the 70th anniversary of VJ day at St Martin in the Fields.

He has said that he felt he missed out on a very important part of his youth. He felt he couldn't socialise. In this I believe he was mistaken. Many of the tributes to him talk about enjoying his company and of course what a remarkable man he was. Speaking to *Witness History* on Radio 4 in 2013, he said: "You say forgive and forget. I think I've forgiven, but I can't forget."

He had 2 further trips back to Singapore and Thailand in 2013 and 2015. (Remembrance Tours) All his children and many of his grandchildren have been back to "The Bridge on the River Kwai".

He was married to Maureen for 67 years and selflessly cared for her in the years before she died of Alzheimer's in 2016.

Sadly, Maurice died peacefully at home on 30 September 2020 with his children around him. He was 99, just 12 weeks short of his 100th birthday. He leaves 3 children, 10 grandchildren and 3 great grandchildren.

We will all miss him.

The above information has been provided by Anne, Mike and Liz (Maurice's children).