

GARNHAM John (Jack)

Name: John Garnham

Born: 26 July 1920

Rank: Bombardier

Service Number: 2056838

Unit/Regiment: Royal Artillery

Died: 12 July 1994



Pre-War:

Jack, as he was known, was born in July 1920 to Jessie and Gordon Garnham who ran a drapers shop in Beckenham High Street, what is today part of south London. He left school at 14 and became an apprentice grocer

Wartime experience:

Jack was called up to the Territorial Army and was posted to anti-aircraft duties in Bristol Docks. He was then posted to an unspecified destination. He arrived in Singapore in November 1941 and was on garrison battery defence. He was stationed on Bukon Island and recalled, in an interview given to BBC radio Sussex, that the causeway on the main island was blown up on 7 or 8 February 1942, with the fall of Singapore and subsequent surrender on 15 February. Following capture, he was marched to Changi prison and was then transported to French Indo China, where he worked on the docks in Saigon. Around 1,000 men went to Saigon. Around 300 of them were later taken by riverboat up the Mekong River to Phnom Penn to help enlarge the airport. Men were then pushed up country to start work on the Siam/Burma railway.

Jack was assigned to be a medical orderly, working with captured medical teams and went with the working parties, travelling on foot over 140 miles, during the construction of the railway. He worked alongside an Australian surgeon 'Weary' Dunlop, 'a great man' according to Jack.

He gives credit to the Japanese engineers who designed the many bridges from the timber that had been cut down as they pushed the railway forward. However, faults had been built into them thanks to the captive teams building them. The men were organised in parties either cutting timber, building bridges, cutting embankments or laying tracks – all this with very primitive tools.



Above: Jack in the foreground



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Conditions were very poor, with little to eat and, in the wet season, mud was up to their knees, with hardly anything in the way of footwear. The Japanese masters treated the captives in the same way they treated their own soldiers, which wasn't well at all.

Trying to get medical supplies was very difficult, if not impossible. Red Cross supplies only became available in the last 12 months of captivity.

Jack worked on and alongside the railway for 2½ years before illness overtook him and he was evacuated to a hospital camp built to Red Cross requirements down river. Towards the end of the war, flying fortresses flew overhead dropping leaflets, which the Japanese banned them from picking up. Jack, whilst looking out from his ward building, recalls one leaflet drop when a Japanese soldier offered him a leaflet from the ones that were being collected!

Civilian life after return:

Initially, Jack worked in a psychiatric hospital but, it wasn't long before he returned to his grocer roots, working in stores along the south coast. He became a manager at Victor Value and then Tesco stores.

Jack continued to have poor health with tropical leg ulcers, until, finally, he had to have a leg amputated and he then became a resident of The Queen Alexandra Home for disabled ex-servicemen Gifford House in Worthing. He was a great supporter of the arts and in particular the Connaught theatre in Worthing, volunteering for 'front of house' when he was fit and later helping with market research.

Throughout his life he was positive in thought with a quick wit and a tremendous sense of humour. He enjoyed the comradeship that of Gifford House provided.

Sadly, following a further spell in hospital, Jack passed away on 12 July 1994 at the age of 73, just 14 days short of his 74th birthday.

The above information and wording has been provided by Andy Walters (nephew)



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