

# SWINGEWOOD George

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**Name:** George Swingewood

**Born:** 8 May 1913

**Rank:** Private

**Service Number:** 7523548

**Unit/Regiment:** RAMC

**Died:** 14 April 2002



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## Pre-War:

George was born in Farnworth, Bolton.

## Wartime experience:

When his daughter, Lorraine, asked him to write down his experiences, before it was too late, this is what he wrote in his own words.

“ I volunteered to join the Army, without being called up, so that I could choose where I would be placed. For me that was RAMC. First taste of Army life was at Bayce Barracks, Aldershot. After 6 weeks of parades, drills and lectures, I got only one weekend pass. After a further 3 months, more drills and lectures in field medical work, I was posted to a holding depot, which supplied Men to where they were required most. From there I went to Leeds. Then the War Office declared all A1 fit Men should go to Field Units. I joined the Field Ambulance at Macclesfield. Here it was only a matter of weeks before I left Macclesfield for Gourrock, Scotland to embark on the MV Duchess of Athol. The date was October 1941. We had been sailing about 2 days, when off the Coast of Iceland, we sighted warships, in great numbers and strength. However, we were very well protected by what turned out to be the US Navy. So, the US were conveying a full consignment of 18,000 men and they were not yet in the War! And so it was, that we steamed into Halifax, Canada in great style. Then in November 1941, we left our Troop Ship to join a US Troop Ship, the US Mount Vernon. A newspaper in Halifax read that the US flatly denied carrying British Troops! From Halifax we sailed south to Trinidad (Port of Spain) and then to Rio and across the Atlantic to Cape Town. Arriving around 16 December 1941. Unfortunately, a few days later the US lost her fleet at Pearl Harbour. Four days later, we left for Mombasa, with one Warship, and made a dash for Singapore. Our journey had been from October 1941 – January 1942. Once on Singapore Island we were to have 3 weeks jungle training before going up country into Malaya.



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However, this was shortened, and we were up country, in action, within 3 days. We weren't in Malaya long before being driven back to the island. The Japanese had control of the islands' water supply, so we knew our fate. Although the action continued, it was useless for us. We surrendered on 15 February 1942, my wife Mildreds' birthday.

We continued to run a hospital at Tan Tock Seng, until the Japanese ordered us out to march to a camp about 10 miles away. The Japanese were completely bewildered, they didn't know what to do with us, for by their own reckoning, there would not be any prisoners to take. For this alone they really despised us. In this camp we had to form some sort of quarters for the sick. Water and food was very short and, after only 3 days, we had the onset of dysentery (caused by flies feeding on decomposing bodies, war casualties). After much arguing and beatings from the Japanese, they finally agreed to us setting up a hospital in what were peacetime Military Barracks. In the first half of 1942 dysentery was one of our greatest enemies – Japanese apart of course! I nursed Men writhing with pain in the bowel & rectum. 40 movements a day was normal! So many deaths occurred. We tried to get them down to 20 with the help of magnesium sulphate and the like, and finally got on top of the dysentery. The next outbreak was diphtheria. We had little serum, which was soon used up, and here again we had a high death rate. Tracheotomy operations were given up after about 30 unsuccessful attempts, when sepsis set in. Again, after a time and many deaths, we began to win this one. I caught it myself, but fortunately recovered. Towards the end of 1943, quite a number of contingents had gone up country onto the Railway and we were left running still a very large hospital. Then Malaria started, drugs in short supply and deaths mounting up. Around February 1943 one Red Cross Ship was allowed into Singapore, carrying medical supplies of Quinine and Atabrine (for Malaria) and also, cans of bully beef! We decided to save the bully tins for Christmas, but alas at Christmas time the first batch of near dead and sick were being sent to us from the Railway and we had to forego our rations for these men, who were so very poorly. More deaths. I don't think it's an old wives' tale about smelling death, I feel sure this is so. Around late 1943, we had a real scare from Smallpox, brought from Bangkok. The MO's acted very quickly on this, erecting an isolation tent about 200 yards from the main body of the Camp and I was put in charge of the nursing. I am sure that it was due to the diligence of our own doctors and medical care that we kept on top of the smallpox. That and the help of Pot Permanganate baths. This was the only time I was free from the Japanese rape, torture and atrocities. They would not come anywhere near us for fear of catching smallpox. This isolation for me was about 3 months. They insisted that the dead bodies, from smallpox, were to be burned. We tried but we couldn't get enough heat. It was an awful sight and smell. Having rid ourselves of smallpox, something we hadn't overcome and, we never did, was malnutrition and then Beriberi began to take over in early 1944. Tropical ulcers were also a great problem. During this time the Japanese forced us to move Camp several times, ultimately to Changi. Not the Civilian Prison, which was very near to us and we saw a lot of, it was Changi Jail. Bishop Dr Wilson was jailed here, and Bombardier Stanley Warren. The Japanese soon moved us yet again because they wanted our Quarters. We were moved to a group of ATP Huts and all the work of making a hospital started all over again.



Our rations were 13 ounces of rice daily and very little else. In this Camp I had a nasty throat infection and an Aussie ENT Specialist had to remove my tonsils - no anaesthetic! I was very ill now, aspirins being my only hope but, then we received news of the first Atom Bomb being dropped, and ill or not, I felt better. We realised now that our release was near at hand. Our first taste of freedom was the Ghurkhas. Our difficult task here was to stop them massacring the Japanese Guards. It wasn't long before Lord Louis Mountbatten arrived. He brought and hoisted the 'Union Jack' and we were on the way to freedom.

On Thursday 21 August 1945 we arrived in Liverpool aboard a Dutch Luxury Liner and on 15 October 1945 I arrived home. The only letter I received from home was posted July 1942. It arrived March 1943. One month after our surrender. My wife received only 4 postcards, which arrived almost 2 years after being taken. All she knew during this time was that I was missing, believed dead."

## Civilian life after return:



On 12 September 1946, George was the recipient of the 'Oak Leaf Emblem' issued by command of the King, 'denoting a mention in dispatches'.

George went on to live a very happy and peaceful life with Mildred. Lorraine was his only child, born February 1951. They were sole mates in the very true sense of the word, but all his life he suffered terrible nightmares and fear of the dark. At some point, he found out that, because he was employed by what was classed an essential service, he would never have been called up! George was very reluctant to speak about the Japanese, other than to say that they knew no better and he forgave them. When our Government were seeking an apology from the Japanese Government, all he would say was, *'you can't blame the children for the sins of the Father'*. He was a deeply religious Man and kept his faith even though all around him were rapidly losing theirs.

Fortunately, Lorraine was able to give him two wonderful grandchildren, Claire and Mark, whom he adored.

When George, sadly died, on 14 April 2002 – just 3 weeks before his 89<sup>th</sup> birthday, his GP summed him up saying, *'George was a gentleman, a very special unique person and a privilege to know'*. But then Lorraine already knew that. So many have said similar words and she always said, *'if I could be half the person he was, that would do me'*.



*'I miss him to this day and always will'.*

*The above information and wording has been provided by George Swingewood, himself, and his daughter, Lorraine Boardman.*



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