

Bert Mascall Prisoner of War

Theo van de Bilt

Some of my regular readers, may know that I recently collaborated on a book about the influence of the Second World War on our area here in East Hertfordshire. The book was published by the SLHS in May 2025 and I am particularly proud of the section devoted to prisoners of war. This article concentrates on one of them Herbert John Mascall - Bert (1917-2000) Some of you may remember him.



On the left Bert Mascall in 1940 at home on leave – On the right, same year Bert with his brothers in arms

In August 1939, Bert lived with his parents at number 3 Hand Terrace and just like his dad, worked at Rivers Nursery. As war broke out, he was called up and joined the 5th Suffolk Regiment. The first year or so of his time as a soldier seemed to have been relatively uneventful. In October 1941 however he set sail to join troops abroad, supposedly to the Middle East but the journey took longer than was foreseen. We have a letter from him to his younger sister Dorothy, or Dot, who in June 1940 had got married to Douglas Hanchett. From what he writes the soldiers on board were having a jolly old time. Let me quote from that letter.

“We are getting pretty good grub and plenty of sleep; we have been boxing and have concerts to entertain us, otherwise we play cards and do a lot of reading to pass the time away”. Also: “plenty of fags and they are very cheap, the price being twenty for threepence, not as good as those back in England but they are a smoke”. Finally: “Every day the sun pours down on the decks which have to be washed down continuously. The sunsets are marvellous; I often stand and watch them”.

That letter was dated 4th December 1941. Three days later, on Sunday 7th December Japan attacks the US pacific fleet anchored at Pearl Harbor on Hawaii. A day later Japan declares war on the US and the UK. So, a decision is taken to divert Convoy BM12 transporting the 4th and 5th Suffolks to Singapore. They arrived there on 4th February, just 11 days before Commonwealth troops under General Arthur Percival surrendered to Japanese forces under general Yamashita. Some 85 thousand British military surrendered on what is still considered the biggest ever defeat of British armed forces ever.



收容所 Camp	馬本 1941年2月15日	番 No.	馬本 12284
姓名 Name	MURPHY, HERBERT JOHN マコール、ハーバート ジョーン	生年月日 Date of Birth	1917. 6. 7.
国籍 Nationality	英 BRITISH	所属部隊 Unit	No. 65290 US 5 th Suffolk
階級身分 Rank	兵 兵	捕獲年月日 Date of Capture	昭和17年2月15日
捕獲場所 Place of Capture	シマラカエ	父ノ名 Father's Name	JOSEPH
父ノ名 Father's Name	JOSEPH	母ノ名 Mother's Name	MARY.
本籍地 Place of Origin	3. HAMB. TERRACE, SANDHURST, WIMBORNE, HERTS.	職業 Occupation	北工労働者 Rider LABORER
通報先 Destination of Report	DITTO.	特記事項 Remarks	

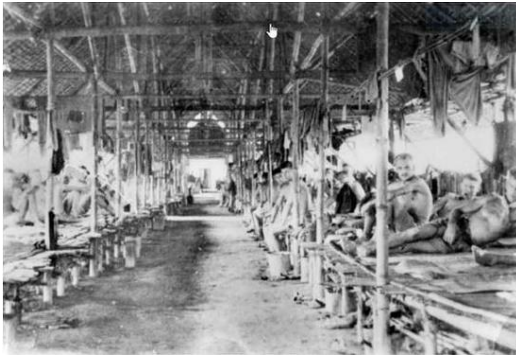
On the left soldiers from the 5th Suffolk Regiment held at gunpoint by Japanese troops. On the right Bert's Prisoner of War registration card.

For the next three and a half years Bert spent time in various Japanese POW camps. Sadly, it was only by the summer of 1944, so after two and a half years had passed that his parents were finally told what had happened to their youngest son. During that time and up till the autumn of 1945 when he was released, Bert was moved about rather a lot, spending time not just in Singapore itself but in Thailand, Burma, Vietnam and possibly Indonesia. In common with other returning POWs he did not talk much about his adventures after he came back which is understandable as it was a pretty horrible experience. Japan did not consider itself bound by the Geneva convention and maintained it could run its camps as it saw fit. Life in the camps was brutal, rations were scarce, disease rife and prisoners were worked hard. As a result more than 20% of British soldiers did not survive.

Upon their return from captivity POWs did however have to fill in a questionnaire which we succeeded in accessing. Thanks to information from that form and from information from the public domain it is possible to reconstruct what did in fact happen to Bert.

Initially, along with other soldiers from the 5th Suffolk Bert was interned in the Changi Camp on the South East of the Island close to where nowadays Singapore's airport. is situated. In the first 2-3 months the regime there was relatively easy. Prisoners were allowed their own disciplines with food distributed by the Japanese. At Easter however the Japanese demanded all prisoners sign non escape forms which initially most refused. By October Bert and many of his comrades were then moved to other camps where conditions were really bad.

Bert's POW questionnaire is hard to decipher as it was filled in in pencil and rather blurred. We can however make out the names of some of the camps he stayed in during his time in captivity: Bukit Timah No. 5, Chungkai, Ban Pong and Nong Pladuk to mention some. Nong Pladuk was in fact the starting point of the notorious Burma railway. From there prisoners were sent out to work at various points along the route. Yes, do think about the film of the Bridge on the river Kwai.



PRISONER OF WAR.—Mr. and Mrs. J. Mascal, of Hand Terrace, Sawbridge-worth, have been officially notified that their youngest son, Pte Herbert Jehn Mascal, Suffolk Regiment, is safe and a prisoner of war in Japanese hands in Thailand. This is the first news Mr. and Mrs. Mascal have heard of their son since the fall of Singapore two-and-a-half years ago.

On the left inside a typical POW hut on the Burma railway – On the right Bert's parents get told of his whereabouts.

As 1944 turned into 1945 the fortunes of war changed for Japan just as they had for Germany. The Burma railway itself became a frequent target for allied bombing campaigns. That can't have made life easier for the imprisoned soldiers! By the summer of that year vast allied efforts were committed to a possibly lengthy war of attrition over an enormous area against an enemy that fought with great dedication if not fanaticism. A conventional campaign was foreseen costly in manpower and material. The possible risk to the tens of thousands of POWs must also have been thought about so an alternative war-winning strategy just had to be considered.

On 6th and 9th of August then, two atomic bombs were detonated over the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki respectively killing more than 150,000 people, mainly civilians. Hardly a week later, on the 15th of August the country's surrender was announced by emperor Hirohito on the radio, the first time his subjects had ever heard his voice. In the months that followed the Japanese war machine was disassembled and the POWs were liberated.

The two last camp names mentioned on Bert's questionnaire are a bit mystifying Saigon docks are mentioned as well as "Red River Valley" the latter not being mentioned on lists of Japanese POW camps. Perhaps it was just a private name coined by the POWs themselves! It was at Saigon(now renamed Ho Chi Min City) that Bert and his comrades engaged in some small acts of sabotage. At the Na Bhe oil depot so he reported, oil drums could be leaky which was then helped along by POWs loosening the bungs! Prisoners also occasionally threw handfuls of ammunition away along the river.

After the War Bert returned to civilian life. That cannot have been easy. One thing he learnt was that his friend and his sister Dot's husband, Doug Hanchett, had been killed in 1944 in Sicily. Happy times did come along however and in 1946 in Islington he married his wife Lily and eventually moved to Wood Green where he lived for 30 years whilst working in London for a city building firm. In 1984 upon the death of his wife Bert moved back to Sawbridgeworth and lived in Station Road. He passed away in January 2000.

January 20, 2000

SAWBRIDGEWORTH NEWS ROUND-UP

War veteran Herbert is remembered

TODAY family and friends will meet for the funeral of Second World War veteran Herbert Mascall, who lived in Station Road, Sawbridgeworth.

Mr Mascall (82), a member of the town's United Services Club, had spent more than three years as a Japanese prisoner-of-war.

He passed away on January 9 in the Herts and Essex Hospital, Bishop's Stortford, after a long illness.

His niece Jean Wybrew said: "He was a very

quiet and private man who was well liked in Sawbridgeworth."

Mr Mascall was born in High Wych and after leaving school went to work in the office at Rivers Nursery and later took a job with the Rivers Authority.

He was called up for service with the 5th Suffolk Regiment during the 1939-45 war and set sail for Singapore in October 1941. In February 1942 and just 13 days after they arrived, Army chiefs there surrendered to the Japanese.

During his imprisonment Mr Mascall, who witnessed many horrors, was forced to work building roads in Thailand and Indonesia. He was set free in August 1945 and returned to Britain.

For 30 years he lived in Wood Green and worked in London for a city building firm.

Mr Mascall moved to Sawbridgeworth in around 1984 following the death of his wife, Lily. The couple had no children.

The funeral takes place at St James' Church, High Wych.

Above, Herbert Mascall's obituary in the Herts & Essex Observer.

The main source of information for this article was Bert's niece Jean Wybrew. My heartfelt thanks go out to her. I also learnt a lot from Ancestry co.uk., www.fepow-community.org.uk, the Herts & Essex Observer, the 5th Suffolk Regiment website, Wikipedia and Microsoft's Copilot