



British Army Gunner Maurice Naylor, CBE

Maurice Naylor served in 53 Brigade of the 135th Field Regiment, 18th Division. He was captured by the Japanese following the surrender of Singapore and endured years in Japanese POW camps.

Soon after his release and return to Britain he wrote an account of his experiences using pencil diary notes made throughout his captivity, now held in the archives of the Second World War Experience Centre along with a waterproof pouch containing letters and cards sent to Maurice by his family.

A deluge of rain and a heaving sea greeted us when we stepped on deck on the morning of January 13, 1942. All that night and previous day we had been on the alert for submarines and enemy aircraft, but it was obvious that the present torrential rain would serve as an effective screen against air attacks. About nine o'clock the convoy split up - one part going to Keppel Harbour, Singapore, and we, on The Mount Vernon, proceeding to the Naval Base at the north end of the island. We docked about ten o'clock with the rain still cascading down. After a journey of 22,000 miles, lasting eleven weeks, we had at last arrived at our destination.

Disembarkation began immediately, and by 2pm the 135th Field Regiment, RA, were on the quay-side, soaked to the skin, clambering aboard trucks which were to take them to Nee Soon Cantonment. Preparations for our arrival were negligible, consisting merely of the erection of a number of tents in a rubber plantation in the cantonment. Soaked as we were, we set to, and diverted the numerous small streams running through the tents before they were in any degree habitable. At that time, as we cursed the rain, little did we know that ninety Jap planes had been over the approaches to Singapore, looking for our convoy which was so effectively screened by low clouds and pouring rain.

The next days were spent making feverish preparations to go into action; unloading stores and equipment: drawing guns and vehicles from ordnance, and overhauling signalling equipment. The Japs were advancing rapidly down Malaya, and we had to go into action as early as possible. The infantry of 53 Brigade went up on the 15th and by the 17th we were also ready. During this interim period we had our first unpleasant taste of pattern bombing, and it was woefully obvious we had no support at all. A(nti) A(ircraft) defences were useless against aircraft flying at such a height. The few Brewster Buffaloes left on the island were quite antiquated crates which soon disappeared. After leaving Singapore to go up country I never saw a friendly aircraft again until 1944 in Siam.

On January 18, "C" Troop went into action and took up coastal defence positions at Pontran Keckil in Jahore, about thirty five miles from Singapore. Meanwhile one



Maurice Naylor at his
Graduation from Manchester
University



officer and four other ranks, including myself, went to Kukup in order to occupy an island by the name of Pulu Pisang as a FOO to warn the mainland of the expected invasion of the Japs. Pulu Pisang was nine miles from the coast, and we maintained communications by helio and lamp; wireless was a failure. In the first days we had no means of retreat, when we were sent on this mission we were not expected to return.

The first attempt to reach this island on the night of the 18th ended in failure. The native driver of the small launch in which we set out either could not or would not take us to the island in the dark in spite of the threat of Lieut. Moser's revolver. After careering round the Straits of Malacca for over four hours, going aground on mud banks, and colliding with fishing traps, we eventually steered our way back to Kakup by means of the large fires blazing at Singapore, forty miles away. Lieut. Moser reported to the Commanding Officer of the Ghurkas, and we were told to leave first thing the following morning and occupy the island at all costs. Actually it was the following evening before we eventually arrived, together with a section of Ghurkas, and after bidding good-bye to the officer who had brought us over, we clambered up the 500 feet of the lighthouse, the top of which was to serve as an observation post and signalling station.

With an interval of two days, we remained there until January 29, waiting for the landing which never came, and listening to the rumble of guns coming nearer and nearer as our forces retreated down Malaya. From the lighthouse on a clear day we could survey fifty miles of coastline, and see across the Straits of Malacca to Sumatra. Several times we had alarms when unidentified craft appeared inshore and consequently we had practically no sleep. We had to keep up a constant watch and also maintain communications - no easy task for five men.

After the first three days we were joined by Units of the Royal Navy who, operating with shallow draught launches, took great risks in going inshore and evacuating troops cut off by the Japanese up country. We co-operated in this work and acted as liaison between the Army and Navy in making arrangements for evacuation. Altogether over 2,000 men were taken off by these means and sent to Singapore.

It was in one of these launches that we eventually escaped. On January 29, the situation was so serious on the mainland that a general withdrawal to Singapore island was ordered. On the night of the 29th we left Pulu Pisang, and apart from a hectic twenty minutes when we ran into a minefield; arrived without further incident at Keppel Harbour, Singapore, at 9.00 am the following morning.

When we arrived in Singapore everything was in confusion, nobody knew where different units were, and it took us two days before we at last contacted the Regiment. On the 1 February we arrived at "C" Troop Gun Position just off the Mandai Road. Our guns were covering the sector east of the causeway overlooking Johore Bahru. In the evening I went up to the OP to relieve the signaller there. Everything was quiet as the Japs had then occupied the town opposite. I spent the next day sending down fire orders - registering the guns - and fixing up telephones and an exchange. I was relieved in the evening and went back to the Gun Position to rest.



By the 3rd, Japs had been observed in Jahore and our guns fired intermittently all day. On the evening of the 4th I went up to the OP. Almost as soon as I arrived there, a gas alarm went but fortunately it was a false alarm. The OP had been heavily shelled that day and it was decided to move the OP to a wireless station further along the coast. The move took place that night. It was dark and we could see no light, and it was very difficult to move the telephones and exchange and install them in their new positions. However the job was completed by dawn and we sat down to await developments. They soon came. At 10 o'clock shells landed in front and behind us and we were soon receiving direct hits. The wireless station at first sight seemed to be constructed of steel and concrete, but to our dismay it turned out to be merely lath and plaster. Baulks of timber and plaster showered down on us and after about a dozen hits, and with the guns still firing Captain Crick decided to evacuate temporarily. Brown and I were detailed to make the first run for it. As we dashed out two shells landed within a few yards of me, and I was hurled to the ground and severely grazed my arms. However I had not been hit, and in a few seconds I had reached the shelter of the jungle. Several rounds followed us in, and as a plane was hovering around it was pretty obvious that the shoot out had to be controlled from the air. Soon after we had left, the firing increased and Captain Crick remained at the OP. Meanwhile Brown and I continued back to the gun position on foot as we had been ordered to do and reported the position.

I volunteered to go up again that night to clear the lines and everything was quiet then apart from the roaring of flames from an oil tank blazing nearby. I got back to the Gun Position early next morning after two nights without sleep. I slept all day and went up again at night to reel in lines at our first OP (Observation Point) which were no longer required. The following day, the 7th, was spent maintaining equipment. I received some mail, the first since leaving home, and sent a cable home.

The OP was moved again on the 7th, this time to the top of a hill a bit further away from the coast and on the 8th I went up there with Lieut. Gamble. During the night the coast was heavily shelled, fires blazed, and distress signals went up from the sector to the west of the causeway, held by the Australians. For some reason the Australians had withdrawn and the Japs landed practically unopposed. When dawn broke we could see many Jap invasion barges bringing troops across and although not in our sector, we opened fire with two guns and severely punished the enemy. We also fired on the causeway to prevent troops crossing.



Some of the pencil notes Maurice made whilst in captivity and later used to write his memoir.



We were relieved at 9am on the 9th and after reporting back to the command post, I went forward with Sgt. Edwards to reel in our lines to the coast. We contacted no Japanese though we were told by a Ghurka officer they were very close, apparently turning our left flank which the Australians had left unprotected. Guns were firing continually all morning, but when we arrived back at the Gun Position we were astonished to see the last gun out of action, and disappearing up the road. Reports had been received that the Japs were surrounding us and we were ordered to move immediately to a prepared position at Nee Soon.

We grabbed our kit, climbed on M2 and sped off down the road, rifles ready, with Jap planes flying low overhead. We arrived safely at Nee Soon but no sooner had we arrived then we were shelled again; we laid one line as quickly as possible, but almost immediately we were again ordered to pack up and we departed to Sembawang Aerodrome. Here we received orders to make a final stand, and fight to the last man, and we started digging feverishly. However in the confusion the orders were countermanded and we moved forward again into Nee Soon. It was now dusk and the Japs were believed to be actually in Nee Soon, but we got through safely and turned south for Singapore.

We had been in action for three weeks with practically no rest and we were feeling very tired, so that when we went into a hide, we dropped off to sleep at once and slept heavily until the morning.

We spent all the next day, the 10th, at this hide; our guns went into action for a short while and we were shelled occasionally and towards evening we moved up into Singapore itself and went into a cemetery. Up to this time we had believed we would be evacuated, and we envisaged another Dunkirk, but we now realised that there was no hope of this, and that we were doomed either to be killed or worse still, taken prisoner.

The final phases of the battle were now being enacted. The Japs occupied half the island, Singapore was blazing, and we were short of ammunition. Civilian casualties from bombing were mounting at an alarming rate. There was still, however, a determination to fight to the last and the next day fierce counter attacks by the infantry led to some of the bitterest fighting of the war on the Bukit Timah Golf Course.

During the night of the 10th/11th we were shelled in the cemetery, and we were very glad to move out next morning to our final position on the Bukit Timah road. It was a bad position and our guns were only able to fire in one direction; furthermore we could not get adequate personal protection as we reached water at 18 inches.

Our communications were continually being cut, and I was very busy on the wireless which seemed to work better here than in Malaya.

On the 11th and 12th we were bombed and shelled from time to time, and once we had to reload ammunition under shell fire with bombers roaring overhead.



The worst day of action was the 13th - Friday the 13th - and we were heavily shelled at night having four casualties. In spite of the shelling and bombing we were extraordinarily lucky as we had practically no casualties, though other troops around had many. The fact was that the enemy never really discovered our position and the shells we kept receiving were meant for a crossroads some 100 yards behind us.

On the 14th the Japs sent up an observation balloon and the shelling became more accurate. The fact that they could use such an obsolete method of observation showed the complete absence of air support. Jap planes flew around all day unhindered and as they knew all our movements and we knew none of theirs, we were severely handicapped. Added to this, observed shooting was almost impossible without planes because the trees obscured all enemy movements.

Towards dusk on the 14th some Indian troops panicked and for two hours shots were flying all around us until at last we managed to quieten things down. Nobody knew what was happening and we could get no information. About 8pm we received a wireless message that tanks had broken through about 1000 yards in front of us, and were coming down the road but nothing appeared, though we turned the guns up the road, preparing to fire over open sights.

The 15th started with the usual shelling at dawn, but nothing unusual happened until about 11 o'clock when we saw two cars going up the road towards the Japs, flying a Union Jack and a white flag. We were astounded as we realised it was all over, that we were going to capitulate.

All day rumours went flying around and about 4pm we were told to destroy our guns and equipment and cease fire. A final air raid took place at 6pm and we then moved back to the cemetery, an appropriate ending to the tragedy.

General Beckwith Smith in an Order of the Day to the 18th Division said that the Division had been thrown piece-meal into a battle that was already lost, against an enemy vastly superior in numbers and without air support or sea support. It never had the chance to prove itself as one of the finest trained divisions that had left England.



The Second World War Experience Centre
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On the 17 February 1942 we marched to Changi Prisoner of War Camp, prisoners of the Imperial Japanese Army. We arrived at Changi at dusk after a very gruelling march of some fifteen miles during the hottest part of the day, and we were absolutely dead beat. We were too tired to eat the good meal prepared for us by the advance party, and we went to bed and slept soundly. The next day we went into Roberts Hospital and started cleaning the place out. The barracks were not too bad; I managed to scrounge a bed and make myself reasonably comfortable, but the worst trouble was water both for drinking and washing. For several days we washed in one of the malarial drains in, to say the least of it, very dubious water. The food also was practically non-existent and we more or less starved for the first ten days until the Japanese sent us in some rice and a little meat. This was eked out by a very meagre supply of tinned foods we had managed to carry with us. It was obvious that the food was quite inadequate to maintain us in good health. The change of diet soon resulted in outbreaks of diarrhoea and a little later an epidemic of dysentery swept the camp. This was followed by diseases due to vitamin deficiency, particularly beri-beri.

On March 8th we moved out of Roberts Hospital and went under canvas opposite Changi Post Office. All the principal buildings were taken over as a hospital to house the hundreds of wounded who were being moved from the military hospitals in Singapore and to cope with the rapidly increasing cases of dysentery. The cemetery began to fill rapidly.

Meanwhile we had seen very little of the Japanese. Early on we had several parades and reviews by Japanese generals and photographs and film was taken, but after that they did not trouble us for some time. We began to think POW life might turn out to be better than we had expected, though we were very bored by the monotony and idleness. Classes of all sorts were started and a University opened, at which I agreed to lecture on local government and allied subjects. Then towards the end of April the Japanese asked for daily working parties to go down to Singapore. I went twice and had quite a good time. The Japs seemed quite reasonable, though they did not pay us for the work, and the future did not seem so bad. Then at the beginning of May the bomb burst; parties started moving out to different camps in Singapore as working parties, and on May 5th the 135th marched out of Changi. Our dreams were shattered.

We marched all day in terrific heat to Bukit Timah Golf Course, a distance of about twenty-two miles and we were very tired when we at last arrived at the camp.



A letter sent by Maurice's father.

TRANSCRIPT

All well and getting along alright. Hope you are well and cheerful. Frank still in England and well. Hope to hear from you soon.



The billets, formerly occupied by the RAF, were not too bad, with wooden floors. We had no beds or water for a while, but this was soon laid on as electrical lights and showers. Compared with later days it was palatial.

The work we had to do consisted of building a shrine to the fallen Japanese warriors and to construct an elaborate system of roads to reach it, and several bridges. We were mainly occupied on the roads.

The Japanese in charge here were not too bad; they kept us working but there were so few of them that they could not supervise us all the time, and we of course did not work when they were not about. Everything was very slack at that time but they were very quick to resent any laughing or ridiculing of themselves.

The first serious incident arose as the result of this inferiority complex. A party of the 135th was digging earth and loading it onto trucks and one of the British drivers had a slight dispute with a guard who alleged he had threatened him. The driver was taken along to the officer in charge named Aoki and another officer in charge who was supposed to be the Welfare Officer. They set upon him, knocked him on the ground, then one held him while the other kicked him in the face and body and eventually knocked him unconscious. He was later taken to hospital with a leg and two ribs broken and other injuries. Meanwhile the working party, because they had witnessed the "humiliation of a Japanese soldier" were stood to attention for six and a half hours in the blazing sun, being beaten and kicked if they dared to move an inch. Several fainted and were pulled to their feet again and beaten. When they were eventually released they were too stiff to move and it took some time before they were well enough to stagger back to camp.

Towards the end of September it was obvious that the work was coming to an end and there were many rumours of a move into Malaya. Parties had already left Changi for an unknown destination.

About this time the Japanese forced us to sign a declaration that we would not attempt to escape. They did this by herding all the troops at Changi on the square at Selarang and kept them there until disease broke out. They threatened to turn all the patients out of hospital as well, and in view of this we were instructed to sign the declaration which, signed under compulsion, had no moral obligations attached to it. The Japanese however were quite satisfied.

On September 1st Major Peacock spoke to the Regiment telling them that the worst time was over and that in the near future we would receive better food, clothes and medical supplies. This information was received from the Japanese Commander who had recently taken over the administration of Prisoners of War.

At Bukit Timah we received pay at the rate of 10¢ per day. We had a canteen where we could buy eggs, fruit and sometimes cigarettes. Obviously the money did not go very far. A black market sprang up and prices were exorbitant.



While at Bukit Timah I started the first of a series of attacks of chronic diarrhoea and I was still in hospital when orders were received to move. We had just received our first consignment of Red Cross supplies from South Africa and they were very welcome. Unfortunately a lot had to be left behind when we moved, as the Japanese would not give us transport to move it.

It is almost impossible to describe adequately the conditions on a journey of this sort. The trucks were less than six feet wide and about eighteen feet long. Consequently thirty men had hardly room to sit down hunched up, still less to stretch their legs. The trucks were made of steel so that the heat was terrific inside during the day-time. The Japs allowed the prisoners to get out about three times a day; otherwise we had to remain in the truck.

We were actually in the train for four nights and three days. We travelled about 1000 miles into Thailand. At dawn on October 26th we detrained at Ban Pong station. Here we learned that we were going to build a railway from Ban Pong into Burma; that conditions were very bad and there had already been several deaths.

We sampled the conditions at once. We marched about one mile to a most filthy camp, inhabited by about a hundred sick men. The camp was practically under water and the sanitary arrangements were deplorable. Food was scarce and badly cooked, the huts, made of bamboo and thatched with leaves, were broken down and overrun with rats. Refuse was scattered everywhere, in fact the place literally stank.

Fortunately we only remained there one day. We cleaned the camp as well as we could and the next day moved about thirty miles up country to Tamakan by truck. The camp was close to the River Mekron and the task was to build embankments and dig cuttings for about a mile each side of the bridge. The bridge had to be finished in six months.

We started work the day after we arrived, carrying huge baulks of timber. It was the heaviest work I have ever known; the Japs drove us on and by nightfall I was so tired and sore that I could not eat my dinner and just crawled onto the bed and fell asleep. The next day was spent carrying stretchers of earth, also heavy work and incredibly monotonous.

The Japanese on the work site were hard taskmasters; there were several beatings up, particularly of officers and there was always tension in the air. On New Years Day 1943 we stood to attention all morning on the parade ground due to some trouble the previous night.

Tamaken was quite a good camp compared with camps up country. Only six died in the first six months though illness mounted steadily. In April I became ill with malaria and diarrhoea and I was in hospital until June. During this time several parties left to go up country and I tried hard to get my discharge in order to go with the rest of regiment. Finally I let Fate decide and on June 6th the last party went. I was discharged on the 8th and was immediately employed in camp HQ as a clerk. A large percentage of the party I had wanted to go with never returned.



The next six months were the easiest I had as a POW. The food improved slightly though rations were cut as the camp was turned into a hospital. Sick men poured into the camp; they were horrible to see - mere skeletons - and they were soon dying three and four a day. Colonel Toosey and the administrative staff worked unceasingly to improve conditions and it speaks well of their work when it is realised that the proportion of deaths in the camp were less than any other camp in Thailand.

In September the Japanese began to split the Camp and in December it was taken over by a Burma group. On December 14th the last party moved to Nong Pladuk, near Ben Pong and on Christmas Eve I went into No 1 Camp there.

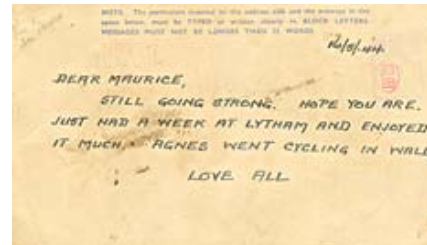
Next day I started work at Hamishotos sidings and from then until the end of February 1944 with a brief interval of malaria, I worked steadily. The work was hard and often very heavy, mostly loading rails, sleepers, cement and so forth, but the hours were regular and rest days fairly frequent. Between February and July I had several attacks of diarrhoea and at the beginning of July I contracted bacillary dysentery. Although serious, it responded to treatment but when the MO detected tachycardia, I was kept off work for several weeks.

Meanwhile activity by the RAF had been increasing. After several recs, bombers came over practically every moonlit night but we remained confident that they knew our whereabouts. The Japs would not permit us to dig slit trenches nor mark the camp in any way. We were right besides the junction of the Burma railway and the Bangkok-Singapore railway and other military objectives were all around.

The inevitable happened. On the night of September 6th/7th planes bombed the sidings down the road, several bombs fell in the camp, killing 92 and seriously injuring 200. Most of the casualties could have been avoided had slit trenches been available. I escaped injury, though shrapnel burst all round. After this raid everybody was very jumpy and nervous.

The work caused by the air raid casualties became so heavy that I was called into the office to help them out and there I remained until October 1st.

On December 3rd, about 6pm, twelve planes were observed heading towards the camp and we took cover in the trenches that had been dug. I was in the hospital at the time. The planes bombed the sidings outside and about a dozen bombs hit the camp, practically destroying the hospitals and killing about seven. The nearest bomb landed about ten yards from me but I escaped with a shaking.



A letter to Maurice from home.

TRANSCRIPT

Dear Maurice,
Still going strong. Hope you are. Just had a week at Lytham and enjoyed it much. Agnes went cycling in Wales.
Love all.



That of course was only the preliminary. I believed at the time, with smoke and wrecked buildings all around, that the camp was the target and when I saw another two waves of ten planes approaching I thought my last hour had come. I crouched in the trench listening to the bombs screaming down and it seemed hours before the last one had exploded. I looked up to see everything blazing fiercely, with an incendiary bomb about eighteen inches from my head with others scattered all around. I hurriedly moved myself from the vicinity of the bomb, seized buckets of water and tried to put some of the fires out. It was a hopeless job, bamboo and leaves burn at a terrific rate, and most of the hospital buildings and medical supplies were destroyed. By putting out several incendiaries under the main hospital block I managed to save two of the main wards.

Several huts were also blazing and as it was now dark we worked against time to put the flames out before further planes arrived that night. In spite of this raid the Japanese authorities still refused to move the camp away from the military objectives.

On Boxing Day I was sent to Nakom Pathom POW Hospital. This camp was the show camp of Thailand. Any visiting Red Cross officials were shown round here as an example of the care the Japanese Army took of their prisoners, though they were only shown selected wards in which there were proper beds and plenty of medical supplies.

The rest of the wards were acutely short of drugs particularly quinine, and while I was there several patients died of malaria. Surgical treatment was fairly good, as we had some very good surgeons, but medical treatment was very poor. While I was there I got no treatment at all except rest and for a month I felt rather ill but I picked up gradually. On February 28th 1945 I left Nakom Pathom en route for Ubon via Bangkok.

(from a recorded interview with Dr Peter Liddle):

We couldn't get to Ubon because the railways were bombed and they couldn't get any transport for us. We went into some warehouses on the banks of the River Chao Phraya, the river at Bangkok, and we were there for another two months. A lot of bombing went on at that time. Eventually they got transport and we went from Bangkok to Ubon which is about 400, 500 miles further east and the final camp I was in was at Ubon. There we were building an airstrip, an airfield and defence works of various kinds. Life had become easier then.

We were all pretty jumpy by now but the Japs were even worse. They ceased bragging and treated us with a bit more respect. They knew they were beaten six months before the end. The complete air superiority of the Allied Air Force convinced them we were right.

On the August 16th there were no working parties and rumours began to fly around that the war was over. On the 17th, the Major in charge of the prisoners in that area announced the war was over and we were free to go, and everybody cheered of course. But there were no recriminations. Some of the Korean guards had deserted by then and



we just locked up the Japanese in their guardroom and took over the camp. We had to wait until September before we were actually able to start on the way home.

Planes continued to drop supplies for us and it was very exciting. We were bewildered at the speedy methods of supplying whole armies, which had been developed in the Burma campaigns.

We at last received orders to move and on the 25th September we left Ubon and arrived at Bangkok Airport on 26th September at 9am. Some of the party immediately left by plane for Rangoon but we went into billets for the night.

The next day at 11.20am we left Bangkok and arrived at Rangoon two hours later. We touched down at Mingaladon Aerodrome at 1.10pm after a very comfortable trip.

Physically I was impaired, there were one or two things like stomach problems, but mentally, psychologically, (my experiences) had a very considerable effect I think. I became much more introspective. When I got home I couldn't talk to anybody, and it took weeks to be able to even have any conversation with anybody, I just wanted to go off on my own. I think it to some extent ruined my social skills and social abilities.



A recent (2003) photograph of Maurice Naylor CBE