

As the 80th Anniversary of VJ Day draws closer, I have been reflecting on the short life of my uncle, Kenneth Mitchell Hughes, who served in The Manchester Regiment, later 65th Anti-Aircraft Brigade. He was taken prisoner by the Japanese during which he spent 14 months on the Siam/Burma Railway, the infamous route which ran alongside the River Kwai.

Born in 1913, after Malvern College, Kenneth joined The Manchester Ship Canal in Salford. He enjoyed many sports and, in addition to rugby and tennis, he was a keen walker and surfer. Wishing to serve the community, he joined The Manchester Regiment at the City's TA unit in Ardwick Green. He was appointed a 2nd Lieutenant in November 1936. When the 6th/7th Battalion The Manchester Regiment converted with the Territorial Army from infantry to artillery, he was posted to the 65th [Manchester Regiment] Anti-Aircraft Brigade.

Four years later, the Regiment was sent to Woolwich where Ken was promoted to Captain and assigned to the 3rd Heavy Anti-Aircraft unit of the Royal Artillery. On 24th March 1940 the men embarked at Southampton on HMS Dilwarra and six weeks later arrived in Singapore. Ken was given command of 21 Anti-Aircraft Battery. This battery protected the Naval base and civilian docks on the south side of the island. He was recommended for promotion to Major, but a senior colleague pipped him at the post. He is reported by his CO as commanding most efficiently earning the respect of both his men and fellow officers.

The invasion of Singapore was expected to come from the south, hence the protection of the Naval base. In early 1942, the unexpected incursion of Japanese troops from the Malayan peninsula was therefore a shock and caught the islanders and their protectors by total surprise. Following the unfortunate and mishandled surrender, all military personnel were captured and imprisoned so Ken found himself spending the next six weeks in Changi Prison. This is still the main prison in Singapore but, in 1942 the building was overwhelmed with the large influx of prisoners and so they lived under canvas. The portions of rice were insufficient and usually contained weevils and other dubious objects, but the principle problem was boredom. A fellow soldier in Changi recalls Ken giving a talk about The Manchester ship Canal Company. This gentleman was to be with Ken for another 2 years.

The Japanese realised the considerable wealth of labour they had at their disposal therefore in view of the difficulties of accommodating and managing so many prisoners, the men were dispersed. On 4th April 1942, 1,100 men, including 30 officers, were put aboard the Nisshu Maru, an overcrowded '*hell ship*'. Their destination was Saigon in French-Indo-China, now Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam, where they arrived six days later. As the prisoners were not permitted on deck, the journey was hot and cramped. The low headroom above the bunks meant they could not sit up, so they spent the entire journey lying down. With the metal ceilings becoming red hot during the day, they were relieved when the ship arrived in Saigon on 10th April. They were housed in a camp opposite the dock gates on Rue Jean Eudel.

The camp, which consisted of four large huts, eventually housed 1,664 prisoners. They were employed as dock labourers and were poorly fed. In spite of their situation however, they were able to make contact with the local French population. In one of his letters home, Ken wrote that it was the best part of prison life due in part to the French European people doing much to help them by secretly passing across food, medicines and news of the outside world.

Ken is mentioned several times in a diary kept by a Major Close, the Army Interpreter, and there are accounts of Ken being a victim of the aggression meted out to the prisoners by the guards.

The prisoners stayed in Saigon until 22nd June 1943 when a decision was made to move 700 men under Col. Hugonin from the docks to work on the Siam-Burma railway.

Before the war, a railway route had been planned linking the two countries. The British had first considered this but, due to the mountainous terrain, decided it was too complex. However, following the Japanese occupation, the project of linking Siam with Thanbyuzayat in Eastern Burma was vigorously pursued. This would enable equipment to be transported more effectively to support Japanese forces in the Burma campaign avoiding the longer and more dangerous sea journey. The Japanese had a captive labour force in the thousands of prisoners detained in South-East Asia. These included Dutch residents from the Dutch East Indies, Australians, New Zealanders, Indians and the many prisoners who were captured when the British surrendered Singapore to the Japanese in February 1942. So, when in 1943 the railway was falling behind schedule, and more labour was required, it was no problem for the Japanese to move the men from the Saigon docks to Siam.

The Saigon Party travelled in overcrowded boats along the River Mekong to Phnom Penh in Cambodia, then by rail in enclosed or open freight wagons. If the men were unfortunately ordered to an open wagon, they sat on top of rail lines and sleepers, trying not to fall asleep for fear of falling off. They spent two nights in Nong Pladuk, then travelled to Tha Sao a small town situated by the River Kwai Noi. They arrived in the middle of the wet season and Ken was assigned to Kinsaiyok Jungle Camp 2. He would work on the Siam-Burma railway for the next 14 months.



Looking towards the site of Kinsaiyok
Jungle Camp 2 and the River Kwai

The first task was to construct a camp. The general rule was that huts with customary atap roofs were built first for the Japanese guards, followed by the cookhouse and then huts for the workers. Housing for the sick was built last of all. The prime job for prisoners at Kinsaiyok was to drill holes in the rock to prepare for dynamiting, which would create a cutting along which the lines would be laid. This was hard enduring work supervised by Japanese railway engineers. In one of his letters home, Ken wrote: *"... this was the worst experience of our imprisonment as about 20% of our number died from cholera, dysentery or malaria"*. The appalling conditions in which the prisoners were kept meant that many died of starvation, as well as by the brutal treatment meted out by the Japanese, also by the Korean guards. If a prisoner was caught stealing food, probably a monkey or snake, they would face the worst of punishments, either being kept in a cage and left in the tropical sun, or crucified.

Following completion of the railway in April 1944, Ken was moved south to the Officers' Camp at Kanchanaburi and then later to Pratchai. The Japanese separated the officers from the men. Their reason for doing this was that, should there be an Allied invasion, the Japanese believed that the men would be unable to organise themselves without the supervision of their officers.

This was an inaccurate notion on the part of their captors as they clearly did not understand the way in which Allied military personnel operated!

It was only following the dropping of the second atom bomb that Japan surrendered and the war in the Far East ceased. Had these bombings not taken place, the Allies would have invaded and the Japanese would probably have carried out their threat to execute all their prisoners.

Prisoners of war were required to have a health check before repatriation, so Ken was flown to Rangoon, now Yangon, where he was admitted to the Indian Field Hospital 52 at Rangoon General Hospital. In his last letters home he states that he was reasonably well, in spite of having had malaria three times and losing a considerable amount of weight.



Ken [seated] with colleagues taken most probably in August 1945

In spite of his poor condition, he was cheerful and looking forward to coming home. In one letter to his parents he wrote: *'Please do not give me rice pudding, an apple pie would be something to look forward to'*

He had already been assigned to a ship due to depart Rangoon in November 1945, but his longed for journey home, did not happen. Regrettably he succumbed to Scrub Typhus shortly after the ceasefire. Scrub Typhus is still endemic in Thailand and Burma today and is caused by a mite burrowing under the skin. These mites live on rats which nest in paddy fields, and Pratchai Camp was surrounded by rice fields. One of Ken's close childhood friends gives another account of Ken's last days. Whilst in hospital Ken visited some of his men in another part of the building, and was caught in a deluge. He developed a chill and, most likely due to poor resistance and already incubating Scrub Typhus, his body could not combat the disease. He died on 23rd September 1945 and is buried in a Commonwealth War cemetery in a quiet corner of Rangoon. He was 32 years old.

Ken writes in one letter, *'How good it is to sleep between clean sheets'*. It must have been reassuring and comforting for Ken's family to know that he died in a comfortable bed surrounded by caring nurses, We will never know the precise details that led to his death, sadly, there were no anti-biotics in 1945, so death would follow swiftly.

In 'The Prisoner List' by Richard Kandler there is a reference to Ken. Richard Kandler's book consisted of a collation of comments by prisoners about their experience. In the narrative was this: *"Not everyone was well enough, unfortunately. I remember that one of our very best officers - his name was Captain Hughes - died there in the hospital at Rangoon, He'd been with us since the early days at Saigon and had always stood up for his men, time after time. He'd gone through it all, just to die at the last moment"*. When I read this, I wrote to Richard Kandler who remembered writing the paragraph and wishing Ken's family could read his words. He little thought that several years later his words would indeed be read by Ken's nephew and family.

Ken was issued with the 1939-45 Star, the Pacific Star, the Defence Medal and War Medal.

To conclude this account of my uncle's service and incarceration, it is appropriate to add that in recent years my wife and I have made several pilgrimages to the Far East, two of which have included visiting Ken's grave.

These pilgrimages have been to Singapore and the site of the battery emplacements that Ken supervised, as well as to the Chapel at Changi. We visited Ho Chi Minh City, and in particular the dock area where Ken and his fellow soldiers worked for the Japanese war effort. We also visited Kanchanaburi in Thailand where three enterprising Australians run a Museum about the railway. With their help, we followed the route of the railway, such as it exists, with remnants of railway archaeology in evidence and we stood on the site of Kinsaiyok Jungle Camp 2.

Ken's letters are now in the safe hands of the Imperial War Museum North.

There is an irony and poignancy to this story. As a young boy, Ken had a keen interest in railways. He won the Latin prize at his Prep. School and was presented with 'The Wonder Book of Railways', now in my possession. It would be in adulthood that he would endure the privations and hardship as a result of contributing to the building of the most notorious railway in the Far East and which would bring about his premature death.

Peter Edward Hughes. July 2025.