

Len Gibson

PoW of the Japanese who worked on the infamous Siam-Burma railway

As the Emperor of Asia township began to blaze, householder-occupying Len Gibson, commanding officer gathered the men on deck. Their convoy had been steaming for three days into the Java Sea, but those bombs had struck the port of a densely slow and rising wall. A thick oily stench spread as the ship sank, smoke on the horizon and men in the water. The confusion appeared total, with no instruction from the ship's command and return fire weak. Gibson could only wait. He had sunk with the ship and risen towards the smoke.

Gibson made it out of the water, and his companions behind followed and formed what would become the deepest bond of his life—one beaten in fire and war and the forced building of a railway. "We were just children, thrown into a man's war."

On February 5, 1942, 2 months after his 22nd birthday, and Gibson now found himself under arms. Indeed he was there purely by chance; by one of the happenstances of war, he had been assigned to an anti-tank unit and, upon having kicked the enemy into reverse, walked into the most unforgiving battlefield of the 20th century.

When he had left England in October 1941, Gibson had been in fine form. His unit, the 125th Anti-Tank Regiment Royal Artillery, had been among those bound for Southeast Asia, where the convoy reached Cape Town. At the time, the Pacific war seemed distant. But Japan struck at Pearl Harbor and invaded Malaya, a British colony, and the troops found themselves suddenly bound for Singapore. The port city, as Churchill knew, lay to the other side of the **Far East**.

Remarkably, almost all of Gibson's regiment got ashore safely, although some were killed or wounded in the landing. Gibson himself (only four of his platoon survived) was struck and taken to hospital. "The bombing never paused," Gibson later said, "and the nurses stayed."

On the evening of the 10th, all the RAF planes and pilots were gone. Gibson's troop was redeployed to the Bukit Timah Road, four miles from the causeway to the city, where they would remain for several days. On the 14th his troop commander was killed and his sergeant wounded. Gibson recalled how, the following day, all became quiet. "Staff cars carrying white flags went up the road towards the Japanese and down came their officers to drive the rest of us into captivity."

By some fluke, he walked up the road to meet the convoy and one officer had the temerity to ask him what he had thought the bombing was. "What do you think it was?" Gibson, still in shock, replied. "Frankly, soldier, I don't know."

The orders appeared. The entire garrison was to surrender. The men were marched into captivity. Gibson, even now, cannot explain how or why he survived. "When Gibson came back, he had lost so much weight and was so thin, it was like we hardly knew him at first."

It was indeed the largest capitulation in the army's history. Some 80,000 troops, including 15,000 Australians, were taken prisoner, of whom nearly 10,000 would not survive the brutal months to come. Gibson would be among the lucky few—though he would lose many friends.

Leonard Gibson was born in Sunderland in 1920. His father, who had been blind for most of his early life, worked in a furniture shop. His mother was a seamstress. Gibson later said: "My mother taught my three sisters and I to say our prayers."

Gibson became a chorister at Holy Trinity Church (now Sunderland Minster), where he developed his natural talent for music. He left school in 1935, the year before the Jarrow March, at the onset of the Depression.

Determined, he went to work for a builder's firm. His ambition remained to train as a teacher, and as soon as he could he enrolled at Bede Teachers' Training College. He studied for 4 hours a week for the London matriculation, paid for the lessons himself, sang in the church choir and studied at night.

At the cinema in early 1939 he saw the propaganda film *The Gun*, with its scene of a lone British artilleryman making a last stand. He was inspired to enlist because of a shortage of volunteer signallers for the defenders. Shortly afterward he joined a new Territorial Army artillery regiment that was being formed locally.

On the outbreak of war in September, Gibson was incorporated into the 125th. The following years included intensive bombardment training in the deserts of North Africa, exercises in India and jungle survival techniques in Ceylon. He applied for pilot training and passed initial tests, but a letter from the Air Ministry stated that he had failed to meet the required standard of vision for a navigator.

Having taken Singapore, the Japanese started the forced march of the men en route to India. They were eventually moved by lorry and cattle truck to Thailand. It was here Gibson's true ordeal began: as a PoW and Burmese-Malay slave labourer building the infamous Siam-Burma railway.

Gibson, who had survived against all odds, suffered with diseases like malaria, dysentery and tropical ulcers. He underwent an appendicectomy with minimal painkillers, was forced to work barefoot in unbearable heat, often beaten by their captors, sometimes with pick handles.

That the Japanese had not signed the Geneva Convention made little difference to the regime, which had no interest in humanitarian support. Gibson helped form a prisoners' choir, which he later described in his book *A Wearside Lad in World War II: A Gibson Memoir* as his lifeline, especially the singing.

Eventually he came home, in September 1945, and resumed his teaching career. He met his future wife Mary while working as a supply teacher in a girl's school, and they were married in 1949. She died in 2006. They had a daughter and son together.

In later years, Gibson achieved his ambition to become a teacher and for 17 years taught at Jarrow Grammar School. He retired in 1982. In July 2020, he was awarded the British Empire Medal for services to the community. He was described in the citation as a man "who provided decades of musical joy, particularly for cancer patients."

Gibson remained active in his community, his music and with writing to fellow veterans. While a PoW, he had learned to play the guitar by stringing together bamboo and palm twine. Dave Stewart of the Eurythmics, who saw him perform, remarked after hearing him playing: "It seemed to be a mixture of so many things I had heard as a kid. I can't put my finger on it, but at the time I just sat in amazement."

While a PoW, Gibson's music had been Gibson's lifeline.

Len Gibson BEM, teacher and former prisoner of war, was born on January 2, 1920. He died on July 31, 2021, aged 101.