

Bert Warne

Bert Warne enlisted in September 1938, when the outbreak of war was imminent. He actually signed up in King Edwards VI School, which had been evacuated. He travelled to the Far East via Cape Town, where he celebrated his 22nd birthday on the 10th December 1941.

Unknown to Bert, the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbour on the 7th of December, and as a consequence, he was diverted to Singapore on the SS Asia. On the 6th of February 1942, during the journey, the SS Asia was sunk. Bert was in sickbay at the time, and fortunately, was slight enough to escape the sinking ship through a porthole. He was picked up by a lifeboat, after 30 minutes in the water, before being taken by ship to Singapore.

Whilst in hospital, Bert was instructed that all walking wounded were to make their way to Singapore as the Japanese invasion had begun. During its defence, Bert was injured, sustaining shrapnel wounds to the head. It was suggested that he should be evacuated; he chose to stay with 'the lads'. The next day, Singapore fell and Bert became a prisoner of war.



Bert and the men boarded railway trucks and travelled a considerable distance, through Malaysia to Bangpong, Thailand. This is when his work on the railway began. Travelling north through Thailand, Bert was instructed to build the railway embankments. It involved digging the earth banks beside the tracks – all by hand. It was awful work. During this time, Bert and the men lived in makeshift huts in the jungle. He spent 18 months on the railway.

In September, Bert succumbed to illness. He travelled many days on a barge to Non Pladuk. He weighed just 6 ½ stone. As luck would have it, a friend called Glen Smith saw Bert arrive, and he made sure that he was well looked after in the hospital for the next 9 months. Bert knew nothing of this until after the war, where he met Glen Smith by chance at a POW club in Buller Road, Southampton.

On release from hospital, Bert was allocated a job cleaning huts in the camp. In the early hours of the morning of the 6th of September 1944, the camp was bombed and ninety soldiers were killed. Shortly after, in November, they were bombed again. Thousands of incendiaries this time, although there were no casualties. Bert took cover in a split trench, and lay on his back, watching as they fell all around him.

At the end of December 1944, after travelling to Bangkok, Bert was then moved to Saburi. He was part of a working party, digging caves in the hillside. After a long day's work, he eventually returned to the camp to find that the Japanese had gone. Bert was told by his commanding officer that the war was over and he was free.

A British parachutist was dropped into the camp to brief the men. He told them about the atom bomb and told them not to celebrate too much, as they were in the middle of a Japanese division.

After the all clear, Bert was going home. The ship docked in Liverpool on the 20th October 1945. Dockers, who were on strike at the time, came to help when they heard the ship was full of POWs.

All the POWs, roughly 1600, boarded four trains. 'As our buddies got off the train at various stops, despite the fact that we had been so close for so long, there was just a wave and they were gone. By the time we arrived at Euston, there was only 12 left.'

When Bert arrived at Southampton Central, he was met by his parents and his girlfriend Freda. The taxi was waiting to take him home to Merryoak, where the neighbours had put out the flags to welcome him home.

Bert didn't let the grass grow under his feet, and just over a month after he had returned, on the 1st December 1945, he married Freda at Bitterne Church.