

LANCE CORPORAL HAROLD LETTS

Service Number: 4863375

*Enlisted: 1ST Battalion Leicestershire Regiment,
attached to 3rd Corps Provost Company of Military
Police (India)*

Born: 18th September 1914

Died: 9th October 1943, Aged 29

Memorials: Kanchanaburi War Cemetery, Thailand, Plot 8, Row B, Grave

12

Burbage War Memorial



Harold Letts was the son of the late William Henry Letts, who was killed during the First World War whilst serving with the Grenadier Guards, and Annie Maria Letts of 11 Salem Road, Burbage. Harold was employed as a Counterman by Bennett Brothers Hosiery Manufacturers and Dyers of Southfield Road, Hinckley. Harold married Lorna Phoebe Farmer in July 1939 and they were living at 111 Clarendon Road, Hinckley.

Harold joined the Leicestershire Regiment and was attached to the Provost Company (Regimental Police) of 3rd Indian Corp. To defend the British Empire against internal threats against British rule and external threats from Afghanistan and tribal forces. During 1936 - 39 the British were involved in the Waziristan Campaign with the aid of India Forces defending territory against the regions fiercely independent tribesmen, most notably Mirza Ali Khan known as the Faqir of Ipi.

It is likely that Harold was transferred from defensive duties in India to the British Battalion taking part in what is now known as the 'Battle for Malaya', a campaign fought by Allied Forces against the Japanese Army. The British Battalion being formed from the 2nd Bn East Surrey Regiment and the 1st Bn Leicester Regiment. The Battalion being commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Esmond Morrison of the Leicestershire Regiment.

The Japanese forces landed in the North East of Malaya on 8 December 1941 the day after the attack on Pearl Harbour. In 1941 Kota Bharu in North East Malaya was the base of operations for the Royal Air Force and the Royal Australian Air Force. The Japanese landed 5,200 troops, over 300 were killed and 500 wounded before the Japanese finally took Kota Bhari town on 9 December.

The battle is notable for the Japanese use of bicycle infantry, which allowed troops to carry more equipment and swiftly move through thick jungle terrain. Royal Engineers, equipped with demolition charges, destroyed

over a hundred bridges during the retreat, which did little to delay the Japanese. The retreat of Allied Forces through Malaya ultimately led to their presence in the defence of and ultimate capture at Singapore.

When Lieutenant General Arthur Percival, the British Singapore commander, surrenders to the Japanese on 15th February 1942 Harold Letts became a Prisoner of War and was probably detained in Selarang Barracks in Singapore. Harold was then transported to Thailand.

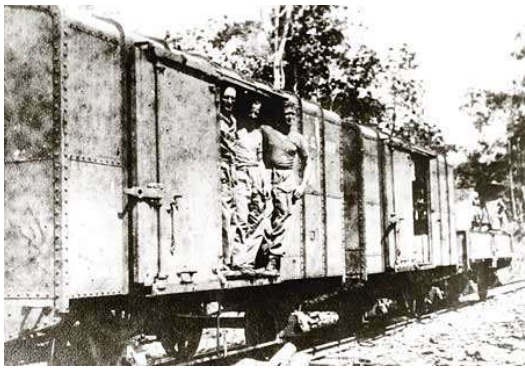


The British Surrender to the Japanese on 15th February 1942

Eventually arriving at a station called Bam Pong and the realization that they are to build a railway to provide a means for the Japanese to expand through Thailand across Burma and into India.



Ban Pong Station, Thailand



From an account by Sidney John Stebbeds of 5th Battalion, The Suffolk Regiment:

We are taken to Singapore railway station where we are crowded into steel cattle wagons. On average about 35 men to each of these wagons; about 30 of these made up a train. So, around 1000 men, plus guards with machine guns at the ready, we were on the move to Thailand.

What we are taken there for was anyone's guess. It took about four days to get to our destination. A journey I will never forget.

Most of us now were suffering from dysentery, and with no toiletry facilities being available, most of us were experiencing a very hectic time.

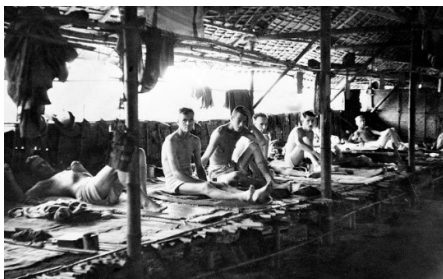
A lot of stoppages occurred as regular trains took priority over our train. So, when we stopped in a siding, nine times out of ten it would be in full sun, and being steel trucks, you can imagine what the temperature is like.

A railway from Thailand to Burma had previously been surveyed pre-war and it had proved too costly in both time and labour, it was estimated that 60,000 labourers would be needed for 5 years. The Japanese did not have 5 years to dominate the region but they did have 250,000 prisoners of war for free labour.

At this time the line ended a Ban Pong and from here you would march to the section of the railway you had been allocated to often marching at night because it was cooler.

Kanchanaburi: 25 miles
Nam Tok: 67 miles

Finally, after the march we were housed in bamboo Huts.



Harold would have been employed on the Railway until the time of his death on 9th October 1943.

Reported in the Hinckley Times:

"News has been received by his wife, Mrs L Letts, of 111 Clarendon Road, Hinckley, that her husband L/Cpl Harold Letts, died in a prisoner-of-war camp in Thailand on 9th Oct. 1943. The cause of his death was not stated.

L/Cpl Letts, who lived at Burbage before his marriage, and was a son of Mrs. and the late Mr W Letts, of Coventry Road, Burbage, was employed at Bennett Bros., Southfield Road Hinckley, before joining the services. His father gave his life in the 1914-18 war."



Kanchanaburi War Cemetery, Thailand

The graves of those who died during the construction and maintenance of the Burma-Siam railway (except for the Americans, whose remains were repatriated) were transferred from camp burial grounds and isolated sites along the railway into three cemeteries at Chungkai and Kanchanaburi in Thailand and Thanbyuzayat in Myanmar.



Kanchanaburi War Cemetery

Kanchanaburi War Cemetery is only a short distance from the site of the former 'Kanburi', the prisoner of war base camp through which most of the prisoners passed on their way to other camps. It was created by the Army Graves Service who transferred to it all graves along the southern section of railway, from Bangkok to Nieke.



This old photograph was taken at the rear of the Wesleyan Day School in Windsor Street, Burbage.
Back Row: Eunice Truslove, Phylis Paul, Connie Ghent, Evelyne Ghent, Edna Buswell, Rose Pither, Mabel Starkey, Mabel Mason, Miss Parsons (Teacher), Mabel Haddon, Elsie Chamberlain and Lily Fletcher.
2nd Row: Evelyne Green Phylis Wormleighton, Doris Starkey, Rene Reynolds, May Booth, Marjorie Howkins, Joyce Smith, Phylis Smith, Maud Cheney, Mabel Handley and Dorothy Chamberlain.
3rd Row: Arthur Johnson, Maurice Harvey, Frank Garner, Charlie Baum, Harold Letts, Fred Wright, Jack Farmer, Philip Pither, Gordon Wood and France Cook.
And Bottom Row: Joe Porter, Reg Yates, Dick Pay, Andrew Farmer, Ned Farmer, Ken Foxon, Reg Brandrick, Reg Wormleighton?, Les Moore and George Atkins.
The picture has been kindly lent to us by Mrs A. King of 40 Sketchley Road, Burbage.

Burbage All Blacks (left to right) (back) Herbert Moore, Harold Letts, Reg Buswell, France Cook, Albert Puffer and Eric Letts (front) Danny Merrick, Harold Cooke, Arthur Payne, Arthur Green and Tommy Woodward.

