

GEORGE D TEMPLER

Born 9th October 1918

Died 21st August 1943 as a P.O.W. under the Japs. In Kami Sonkrai Camp, Thailand.

Grave No. 117

George was a sapper in the Johore Volunteer Engineers (Defence Force).

The Volunteer Forces of Malaya were like our O.T.C. and were promised that on the outbreak of war, they would be given commissioned rank and attached to the Regular Army Units, they being all of the Officer class.

But when the war with Japan broke out so suddenly the Colonial Government did nothing and these Volunteer forces fought in their own units and went into captivity as Rankers.

Owing to this, the casualties among the Volunteer forces were terribly high, as they were not physically fit to do the terrible "slave" labour on the railways and the men's rations were much poorer than the officers.

The Officers did not do any manual labour, and were better fed.

Grave dissatisfaction is felt among the survivors of these Volunteer forces who have survived, and who feel that so many fine young men who have died, would have survived under the better conditions they should have had. The Johore Volunteers fought in their unit in a line across Johore, until told to retreat across the causeway to Singapore Island.

George was interned with the other forces, Regular Army and Volunteers at "Changi" British Cantonment on Singapore Island. There they had the usual routine camp duties, quite light ones – growing vegetables, getting wood for cooking stoves, etc. They were under their own British Officers, and they had concerts and various entertainments among themselves and life was not too bad.

Later George went to Syme Road Camp outside Singapore, to cut grass for the Jap Cavalry horses, and the camp had running water and bedsteads as it had been a hospital during the fighting. George was in charge of a party on the vegetable gardens, and as such, had a fairly easy time and kept pretty fit. It is thought they received some letters b March 1943.

Starting from June 1942 detachments of British prisoners were sent from Malaya to work on the railway to be constructed from Bon Pong, Thailand, to Moulmein in Burma. Some went to Burma and some to Thailand, and the plan was for them to meet in the middle. The first camps near the bases were not too bad, but as they went further and further inland supplies of food and medicine failed owing to lack of transport and conditions became worse and worse. In April 1943 the Japs ordered a detachment of 7,000 troops to go to Thailand, from Singapore. The British O.C. told them he had only 3,000 fit men. However, the Japanese Commander said this did not matter, the men were not to be in working parties, but just to go up to a camp "for a health trip" and that they could take their sick men and all the gear they liked.

So, they all set forth, and laden with gear, musical instruments, anything they could think of.

This train journey took 3 days and nights, right up through Malaya to Bon Pong in Thailand.

George was on train No. 12 and they travelled in steel trucks (imagine the heat in a tropical country) 27 men to a truck, with all their kit. They had been told they might have to march 50 or 70 miles.

In cold fact, this force marched 200 miles, taking their unfit men with them, and all their gear which they gradually discarded. The route lay alongside the railway, near the river, and through all the existing camps of prisoners working on the railway up to and beyond, railhead, in the mountains, where the men working from Burma were to make contact and join up the line.

Then the monsoon rains came, torrents and torrents of it. This meant ploughing through mud up to their knees, and being soaked all the time. They marched by night and stopped at daybreak to make camp in muddy fields. This meant putting up bamboo (atap) shelters, and cooking their miserable rations of rice. Then to sleep for the few remaining hours till nightfall. Sometimes they fell asleep standing up in the mud, completely exhausted.

They arrived at Kami Sonkrai Camp up in the mountains one night at 10 p.m., made their camp, cooked their food, and were turned out to work at 6 a.m. the very next morning, after that 200 mile march.

Work was of the hardest, felling trees, building bridges, dragging the timber to build the trace. It started at dawn and went on till 10 p.m.

And with it all, this railway is of the roughest and will be of no future use, the climate will destroy it in a season.

If a man stopped work for a second, he was hit by a Jap with the nearest implement handy.

Huts were only of bamboo and the rain poured through. The men were always wet and muddy, and it can also be cold in the hills at night.

Then cholera broke out and their old enemy, dysentery. Medical stores ran out, and no more were sent up. Food was also short, and very poor. The men died at the rate of 60 per day, and less than half the Forces F & H came back from that terrible camp.

Eric Tokeley who was George's great friend, said that thro' all this horror of mud and dirt, that George kept himself immaculately clean and that he never lost his spirit of hope, and good comradeship, or gave up helping others. And this is where many failed.

He became down with dysentery in July, but he fought it off for weeks, he would not give up his hope of recovery and will to live thro' to freedom and only this kept him alive, so long, in surroundings where the poor spirited went out in 3 days, but in the end the lack of medicines and the wretched food were too much and he passed away quite peacefully, together with his friend Shirren, and Tokeley was with them both to the end.

Tokeley then went on to say something more:-

That he was so amazed, and so admired George's tremendous courage, his faith, his hope, and his Christian spirit which surmounted all the horrors and suffering and the evil spirit which developed in many – of every man for himself. It was so outstanding; it gave him strength also. This makes me sure that one can be with one's loved ones in spirit across all the continents and oceans, helping them. For I told him that from the outbreak of the Japanese war in Malaya, and right down thro' the years, I have sat, night after night, (and

during the days' pauses also) concentrating and "willing" my spirit to be with him and help him to encourage him to believe that he was not alone, that he must keep up his courage and believe that freedom would come and that he should not give up hope, and that I was with him.

Unsigned.