



Rangoon Jail & the Durhams

One of the oft repeated statements about the soldiers of the Durham Light Infantry is that, though many became prisoners of the Germans and the Italians, none became prisoners of the Japanese.

The Durham Light Infantry website FAQ section actually states that "*no DLI soldiers were captured in India or Burma and suffered imprisonment in Japanese prisoner of war camps*".

Many Durham Light Infantrymen soldiers died in Burma, including men of 2Bn DLI who moved into Burma on 13 February 1943 as participants in the Arakan Campaign. Later, in April 1944, many more in fighting, what is now known as, the Battle of Kohima. Lord Mountbattan said of the Kohima victory, "*The Battle of Kohima will probably go down as one of the greatest battles in history. It was, in effect, the battle of Burma*".

Consequentially, many DLI dead are named on the various Burma (now Myanmar) memorials and a quick glance at the Roll of Honour in the book '*For Your Tomorrow*' by Harry Moses gives some visual idea of the number of men who paid the price for the successful reclamation of Burma - and without evidence to the contrary it was, understandably, always believed that no DLI soldier had been captured and been made a Japanese prisoner of war.

Now, evidence, in the form of scans of Prisoners of War Index Cards, has come to the Friends from Australia and may force a re-think on that issue as the Index Cards would seem to indicate that there were at least two DLI men who were, indeed, imprisoned by the Japanese.

The two DLI Prisoner of War Index Cards can be studied in this Bugle edition (see also the Inside Back Cover). They carry details of 4469229 Private Arthur Harvey Hobson (original colour scan) and 4469363 Private James Frederick Tomlinson (b & w scan, see below) of the Durham Light

收容所 Camp	馬六甲 昭和19年3月15日	番 號 No.	馬 VI 338
姓 名 Name	James Frederick TOMLINSON. ジェームス フレデリック トムリンソン	生 年 月 日 Date of Birth	1922.12.31.
國 籍 Nationality	英	所 屬 部 隊 Unit	No. 4469363. Durham Light Infantry.
階 級 身 分 Rank	Private. 兵	捕 獲 年 月 日 Date of Capture	昭和18年4月28日
捕 獲 場 所 Place of Capture	緬甸 モウイ	母 之 名 Mother's Name	Jeannie TOMLINSON.
父 之 名 Father's Name	John Leonard TOMLINSON.	職 業 Occupation	煉毛工
本 籍 地 Place of Origin	MIDDLESBOROUGH, Yorkshire.	特 記 事 項 Remarks	
通 報 先 Destination of Report	19, Hadden Street, MIDDLESBOROUGH, Yorkshire, England.		

Infantry.

Two other Index Cards sent from the same source carried details of soldiers of other regiments whose army numbers began "446..." - numbers which in 1920 were allocated to men of the DLI.

The cards, written in both Japanese and English were translated and authenticated by contacts at the Teikyo University Library in Durham. They appear to be identical to Japanese PoW Index Cards held by the National Archives at Kew in the WO 345 section of the catalogue.

In the words of the National Archives "*This series comprises some 50,000 pre-printed cards of uncertain provenance. They appear to have been compiled by a central Japanese authority which has not been identified. There has been some degree of Allied assistance in compiling, maintaining etc.*" The cards in 58 boxes "*came into the possession of South East Asia Command, which passed them to the War Office in London.*"

Looking at Pte Tomlinson's card, the box at the top of the card, to the right of 'Camp', contains the Japanese for Malay and the numerals '19 3 15' which correspond to our date of 15 March 1944. All the cards have the same date in that box and at the far top right contain stamps for 'Malay' and 'VI' as well as a number eg. 346. We believe that this is the prisoner number, Malay Camp VI being Rangoon Central Jail.

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姓 名 Name	James Frederick TOMLINSON. ジェームス フレデリック トムリンソン	生 年 月 日 Date of Birth	1900-10-15

Rangoon Jail was part of the Malay PoW Camp Group and its designation was established as 6B on 15 March 1944, only to change to 4B on 1 July 1944. It was a large complex which from above resembled a spoked wheel, the central hub being an exercise area with a building at the centre.

The inmates were a mixed group - some army, some air force and both British and Americans were held there together with men of many other backgrounds. It is probable that the DLI men, as others, had been held in other camps before ending up in Rangoon. For those interested in learning more there are a number of websites detailing the experiences of captives held in Rangoon Jail and some of those offer prisoner listings, too. Many are, even now, work in progress as descendants both seek and add information. The Wartime Memories Project website, for example, can be found at <http://www.wartimememories.co.uk/pow/rangoon.html>

Conditions were very harsh and it is possible to read accounts online in which individuals detail the starvation conditions of a repetitive diet of rice and dahl (split peas) or weak vegetable stew, a lack of water, medical experiments on prisoners who were injected with dengue fever, hard labour and unrelenting cruelty and deprivation. Unlike the situation in German prison, for example, Red Cross parcels were never seen.

Unsurprisingly many died - some summarily executed, others by starvation and many from diseases which wreaked havoc among the defenceless victims. With no medical support or proper hygiene provision, tropical illnesses found easy prey. Amazingly Allied medical officers carried out two successful leg amputations without anaesthetic. Allied bombing over a two and half year period made conditions worse as supplies of electricity and water were often temporarily interrupted.

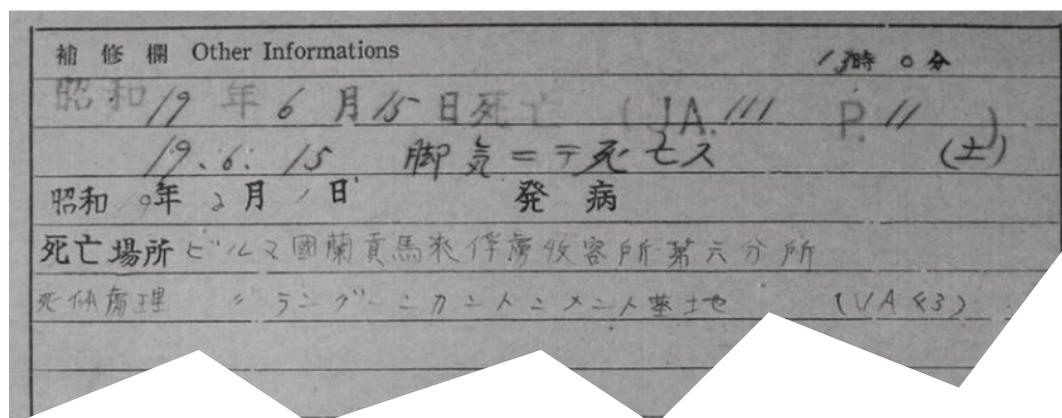
The two DLI men survived all that and a note, in Japanese, on the reverse of the cards tells what is believed to have happened next - "*The prisoner recorded in this card was presumed to be released at 10 km south west of Waw in Burma on 29th April.*" It seems that they were among about 400 men selected by the Commandant to march out of the Jail as Rangoon was about to be

evacuated in the face of the Allied advance.

One of the other prisoners reported that the going wasn't hard and that the men took turns to pull handcarts loaded with the belongings of the Japanese together with what few items they had themselves. He said they were never told the reason for the march and assumed that they were to be hostages to be used as a bargaining commodity should the Japanese run into difficulty. When they reached Waw, close to the town of Pegu, the Japanese abandoned them. They met up with the 14th Army shortly afterwards and were given food, clothing and medical care. Film of the group can be viewed on YouTube.

The 668 men left in Rangoon were liberated a few days later on the 2nd May 1945.

Of the other two cards, one is for 4464639 Private James Reeve of '142 Company attached to 13 King's Regiment' who was captured on 29th April 1943. The 'Destination of Report' address on his card was 220, School Street, Langley Moor, Durham. He died of beri beri on 15 June 1944, aged 32, leaving a wife, Gladys. He was buried in Rangoon War Cemetery.



The notes on the back of Reeve's card with the translation below

Other Information	13hr0min
Died on 15 th June 1944 (S19 stands for Showa Era 19)	(JA111 P11)
15 th June 1944 Died of beriberi	
1 st Feb 1944 Became ill	
Place of death	Rangoon Malay Prisoners' of War Camp No. Six branch in Burma
Burial place	Rangoon Cantonment Cemetery in Burma (VA 43)

The puzzle that remains to be solved is that of how the men came to be in Rangoon Jail - and in particular those DLI men. The date and place of capture detail on Private Tomlinson's card when translated tells us he was captured at Moyuien, Burma on 28 April 1943 while the date and place of capture detail on Private Hobson's card tells us he had been captured four days earlier on 24 April 1943 'near the River Chindwin'. Pte Reeve, incidentally, had been captured at 'Mounyua in Burma'. Could this be the same place as Moyuien? Accurate translation of the place names proved difficult!

Three thousand men led by Major General Orde Wingate DSO went over the border from India into Burma in February 1943 to fight the Japanese behind their lines.

Trained in commando methods they were trained to fight two enemies - the jungle and the Japanese. Trained in the jungles of central India, at Saugor near Jhansi, they were readied for

column and bivouac life, jungle warfare, river crossings and the care and handling of mules which were vital to the operation as they were to carry the heavy weapons, ammunition, medical supplies and radios. The men were reliant on re-supply by air drops. Wingate termed this Long Range Penetration. The army called it Operation Longcloth. [See <http://www.chindits.info/Longcloth/Main.htm>]

Drawn from a number of sources, many of Wingate's men were from 13 King's Regiment (a significant number of whom had 'DLI numbers' and came from the North East - Sunderland, Gateshead, Hartlepool & Blyth, for example). There is no record, however, of any being listed DLI men.

Wingate's force was organised into two groups.

1. Northern Group, consisting of columns 3,4,5,7,8 and Brigade HQ, totalling 2,000 men and 850 mules
2. Southern Group, consisting of columns 1,2 and group HQ, totalling 1,000 men and 250 mules.
(no. 6 column was broken up to replace casualties during training)

Having penetrated deep into enemy territory and arrived at the extremity of their supply range Wingate was ordered to withdraw on 24 March 1943. This proved difficult as the men were exhausted and suffering from malnutrition and tropical illnesses. Morale, though, was high and in their separate groups they made their way slowly out of Burma - some crossing into China, others heading back to attempt to cross the Chindwin River and falling victim to enemy ambush, illness, exhaustion and capture.

Wingate, himself, reached the Chindwin river on the 27 April 1943 and crossed later that day. Of the 2182 who made it back only 600 were fit for further service. Though many wrote the operation off as a waste of good soldiers, Wingate asserted, "*Some of us did not come back. But they have done something for their country. They have demonstrated a new kind of warfare, the combination of the oldest with the newest methods. They have not been thrown away*". After the war it was learned from the Japanese that their planning for 1943 had been significantly disrupted by Wingate's 1st Chindit operation and that it had been a far greater success than, perhaps, even Wingate realised.

Major General Orde Charles
Wingate DSO
1903 -1944



One website covering the history of the Chindits contains a posting stating that "*The main block of Army POWs in Rangoon Jail came in 2 distinct*

blocks. Firstly, there were the men captured during the retreat toward the Sittang Bridge in 1942. These men if they survived spent just over 3 years in RJ. The other group to arrive after this were the 1943 Chindits There were roughly 220 of these men captured. Only 65 came home from Burma."

Steve Fogden, who has a website 'Chindit Chasing, Operation Longcloth 1943', has been researching Operation Longcloth for years and tracing what happened to those men who were captured. He holds some answers.

He has recorded 239 Chindits captured, 60% of whom did not return. He explains that, "*The men who were destined to be POWs were usually captured alone or in small groups all over the area west and northeast of the confluence of the Irrawaddy and Shweli Rivers. One group of column 5 men found themselves trapped on a large sandbank in the middle of the Shweli and here around 40 men were taken prisoner in what surely was the single largest group to be rounded up that year. Others had made it all the way back to the eastern banks of the Chindwin River, the natural and unofficial border between Burma and India, only to be captured at this final hurdle*".

On the various listings on the website the names of Tomlinson, Hobson and Reeve can be found and, according to Steve Fogden, they had belonged, respectively, to Column 8, Brigade HQ and Column 8, also, of Wingate's expedition.

There is no known connection between these DLI men and other operations in Burma and they are not named in 2DLI histories as having been missing in action, killed or possibly being captured. The presumption, unless contradictory evidence is forthcoming, is that the two DLI men were possibly Chindits who were captured while trying to get back out of Burma.

Though that remains to be proved beyond doubt, what is clear from these records is that they were Japanese prisoners of war. They were imprisoned in Rangoon Jail where they were, according to Japanese records, members of the Durham Light Infantry - and their stories have never been published.

Hopefully, their families might be traced in due course, and/or additional information found so that the full detail of their historic experiences can be made known.

We'll reserve space in the Bugle to update you!

Peter Nelson

