

## IN MEMORY OF SAM HODGES – A BRAVE MAN



**4859871 LANCE CORPORAL SAMUEL HODGES FROM GRIFFYDAM  
1<sup>ST</sup> BATTALION – LEICESTERSHIRE REGIMENT  
D.O.B. 01.09.1918**



**THERE FOLLOWS A TRANSCRIPTION OF THE DIARY SAM  
RETROSPECTIVELY WROTE IN 1995 / 96 ON HIS EXPERIENCES DATING  
FROM HIS CHILDHOOD IN GRIFFYDAM, THROUGH HIS EARLY WORKING  
LIFE AND HIS SUBSEQUENT EXPERIENCES IN THE 1<sup>ST</sup> BATTALION  
LEICESTERSHIRE REGIMENT DURING THE MALAYSIA CAMPAIGN AND  
THE FALL OF SINGAPORE WHEN HE WAS A JAPANESE P.O.W.**

## **PART 1 - SCHOOL DAYS IN GRIFFYDAM**

I was born 1/9/1918 the son of Thomas and Sarah Ann (nee. Hinds) on the Top Road, Griffydam, Leics.

I started school at 'Griffydam Council School' and left aged 14, in 1932. My school days were varied compared to present days. It was a hard life in the village in those 1939 pre War days. There was no electric and no mains water. Most of the village relied on water from 'Griffy Well' along the Bottom Road. The majority of people had paraffin lamps in their homes, and candles were very much in evidence.

Most people used to keep pigs to help with the family budget. My Dad used to kill one for pork, and keep the other one for bacon. He hung the 'Flitches' of bacon on the wall.

I used to play football and cricket with my pals in the 'cunneries' near Cart Brook. We were trespassing really as there were no playing fields laid on then. Reuben Nichols, the farmer used to chase us occasionally and that all added to the excitement. In the winter evenings we played darts at Mr. Hall's (Sooty) who was the local chimney sweep.

## **PART 2 - WORKING LIFE PRIOR TO BEING CALLED UP FOR ARMY DUTY**

On leaving school, I got a job (aged 14), at 'New Lount Colliery', pan driving on the coal face, days and nights. That only lasted for eight weeks, as the night shift cut into old workings from the old 'Newbold Glory' pit which consequently flooded New Lount out. Due to this, half the men were suspended, including me. I eventually got a bound apprenticeship as a bricklayer at Walter Moss & Son, Coalville at the corner of Melbourne Street which is now a block of flats. I worked through my apprenticeship, meeting up with some very influential people along the way, including my main tutor Mr. Alfred Taylor of Bridge Road, Coalville. During my time in the trade, I worked on some interesting jobs including the 'Rex Cinema', now a clothes store, the Palitoy factory off Owen Street, Coalville and the Coalville War memorial on the plaques on each corner. I finished my time at 21 years of age.

### PART 3 – FOLLOWING ENLISTMENT IN THE ARMY

Two weeks out of my apprenticeship, I was called up for enlistment in the Army on September 15<sup>th</sup> 1939. I went to Gen Parva barracks in South Wigston in the Leicestershire Regiment to do my training, which was known as 'The Militia' at that time. Every month there was a fresh intake, meaning we had to move on in different stages. In November 1939, my group was billeted out to a disused 'Boot & Shoe Factory' at the top of Park Road, Blaby. By this time, the weather was very cold and not very pleasant at all. I had embarkation leave over xmas 1939.

In early January 1940 we had orders to move, and were marched up to Glen Parva Barracks and locked up in the old gym for some hours to prevent us escaping. At midnight we were taken to Belgrave Road station and locked up all night. Next morning, we boarded a train for Southampton docks. None of this journey was very pleasant as we had been inoculated and we were very feverish. On reaching Southampton we were herded into a cattle boat which was used for moving cattle across the sea from Ireland. I can tell you that it was an education if you went down below. We crossed the channel to Cherbourg and we all knew by this time that we were going to India. After lying about for some hours on Cherbourg Station, we boarded a train bound for Marseille. This was a very slow journey, as the train never went very fast at all. On arriving at Marseille we boarded the troop ship H.M.T. Ettrick. The trooper was made up of drafts of men from all the British regiments serving in India. There were eighty men in our unit, the '1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Leicestershire Regiment'. We were young soldiers going out to relieve men that had been abroad for years.

The ship eventually left Marseille with everything under 'Blackout', the idea being to avoid the German 'U Boat' menace. We made steady progress on the high seas going east. It was very boring being on board for a long time. We called at Port Said and Port Suez, and then travelled through the Suez Canal, the troop ship travelling very slowly on its journey through the canal. We stopped at Aden at midnight to refuel before carrying on and eventually arriving in Bombay. That was our baptism of the east and quite an education seeing their way of life compared with ours in England.

There were two sergeants' from our Battalion at the docks who accompanied us to our new Battalion which meant two days train journey to Agra (United Provinces') of India. We arrived at our barracks

and were split up into different companies. I was sent to the carrier platoon of HQ company. We were equipped with 'Vickers Machine Guns'. Our transport was by mules (animal transport). The hot weather soon became a problem and it took a lot of getting used to, with a lot of the men going down now it was around 115 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade. We eventually settled down and accepted life in India for what it was. We went on church parades most Sundays which took a lot of preparation. The full band and drums headed the parade, with the Commanding Officer on horseback, it was quite an event.

During our stay at Agra, we were called upon to do guard duties on 'Agra Fort' a month at a time. The Fort was a few miles away from our barracks. When we got chance on a Sunday, we went to hire a bicycle and went down to the Taj Mahal which was not far from the Fort, one of the seven wonders of the world. I found it very interesting during that period in India. Everybody had to go up to the hills for five or six weeks where it was a bit cooler being 80 or 90 degrees there. The air was very thin and it took about a week for us to get normalised to it. The hill station was at Chakrata and was about twenty miles away from the Himalayas'. It was cold at night and there were Baboons and monkeys in abundance. It took about twelve hours to get up to the hill station on an old bus. This was after the train journey from Agra. It was lovely scenery up in the hills and I used to enjoy sitting in my spare time looking around through the binoculars. When we came down after one stay, a lot of men were sick owing to them descending too quickly. Overall, we had one year in India. We also went to Bonooks and camped near the old city of Fatehpur Sikri, where we carried out field gun firing.

When our year was up in early 1941, we were told that we were going to the Malay Straights. We had very little idea where the place was and it took us about a week to prepare for the move. In that week, the Ghurkhas moved in to take over as a 'Training Unit'. We were all amused that these young Gurkha recruits were carrying their boots around their necks instead of wearing them on their feet.

We eventually left Agra for a two day journey by military train to Calcutta. During the journey, it used to stop to take food on board, which was usually snake eggs and bread. We eventually arrived at Calcutta for another education. The place was packed with people, such a large population in those days.

We went on board another trooper ship which was not very well equipped at all. It didn't get far before it got stuck on a sand bank in the river Ugle heading out to sea, so we had to stay put for the high tide before making further progress and leaving India and Calcutta. During our journey we called into Rangoon Harbour (Burma) for a few days in dock. We were not allowed off on our own. We went to the cinema one morning as a Battalion, the film was 'City of Conquest' starring George Raft which proved to be very enjoyable. The only other time off the boat was a route march all around Rangoon and it was very hot indeed. This was 1941 with only two Battalions in Burma at this time - The Gloucesters' (aka Glosters') and the Royal Inniskillings Fusiliers'. Whilst we were tied up in Rangoon Harbour, there was an American Cargo Vessel next to us who thought we were Italian P.O.Ws from the desert as we didn't get off the ship at all.

After several days we set sail again by which time we had been told that we were destined for an island off the west coast of Malaya, by the name of PENANG and now known for being a holiday resort. We arrived at this island at dawn and what a lovely sight it was. The capital was Georgetown. Next day we disembarked and went to an established camp at the other end of the island. We went there to relieve the 'Seaforth Islanders' who moved to India. It was very nice in Penang, a lovely island, and we stayed there until June 1941, then we moved onto the mainland to Sunger Patani, 26 miles north of Butterworth where the ferries cross from there to Georgetown. We were sent to a rubber plantation at Sunger Patani where the trees were very close together and very little light infiltrated them. It was rather hectic here and we had to sweep the leaves away and sleep on the ground for a while until the 'Chorpois' (beds) were made. After a while, some huts were built which made things better, but we didn't get much sun on our backs in this plantation and when we were then sent on route marches, a lot of the men fainted. The canteen was situated outside and we used to run a 'Tom Bola' and 'Housy Housy' (Bingo) at night, but we only had an oil lamp to see the cards with.

Soon after settling in at Sunger Patani, we marched 80 miles north near to the Thailand border sleeping under canvas, a company at a time digging in positions in readiness for the attack by the Japanese which was anticipated. It used to rain every night. As the time of the attack grew closer and all the battalion had moved up to their respective positions at Jitra, it came through on the radio that the Japanese suicide bombers had bombed Pearl Harbour. The conditions were terrible where we

were situated as the monsoons had started and we had no clothes on at all, just a gas? Cape and boots full of water. We were just occupying the positions we had all prepared for the eventual attack by the Japanese enemy. We didn't have to wait long, as we had heard on the radio that they had landed in Thailand with very little resistance from the Thais. Their suicide bombers had sunk two of our ships in the Bay of Siam (The Repulse and The Prince of Wales)

The enemy lost no time in attacking us, and they broke through at midnight with their tanks and heavy mortar. Firing through the night, they broke through our right flank making it difficult for our commanders. My company 'B.Coy' had orders to withdraw in the afternoon to a position where we stayed overnight. It was rather quiet during the night but next morning we realised that the main body of the battalion had pulled right back and consequently they were unable to contact us. We were now left isolated, meaning we had to make our way across a big area of paddy field towards Alor Star. The party was made up of people from 'B Coy' with Captain Mitchell and 'D Coy' HQS numbering 32 in all. It was a gruesome journey as we had to keep off the road at all times, as the enemy were pushing reinforcements towards their front line and there was only one road down through most of the country. We kept moving south hoping to catch up with our troops and hoping they would push the Japs back to make it possible for us to join up with them again. Alas, this was not to be the case as our troops had made big withdrawals right out of our reach. Our party kept moving south as best we could through difficult country and swamps etc. We got down last thing at night and got away again at the crack of dawn. The natives were not very cooperative when it came to us asking for food, most saying that they had none. As the days went on, our party got smaller due to men falling out because they were unable to keep up. We eventually found ourselves in the jungle again at night where we made a big fire and slept around it. The idea of the fire was to keep the tigers etc away, as that area was known to have a lot of wild animals. One bright spot was when we came out of the jungle on xmas day into a clearing where we came across this Chinese family who were just getting ready to have their Christmas dinner. Instead, they gave it to us and put some more on to cook for themselves. After they had dined, it got dark, and they bedded us down for the night in their cow shed. We lay down on leaves from the banana trees. They gave us an early call and put us on a trail leading to Taiping, the nearest town.

We kept moving south, but on the last day of December 1941, we turned a native out of his 'Kampong' (village) in the afternoon and stayed until the next day 1/1/1942. There were only seven in my party by this time, and most of us had got something the matter with us, either Malaria or Ulcers etc. All of a sudden, this native belonging to the Kampong arrived with three lorry loads of Japanese soldiers armed to the teeth.. There was a lot of excitement for a few minutes, and they killed Hugh Pritchard in the commotion. The rest of us were tied up around the waist and hauled onto a big American Army truck. We were quite lucky in this incident as the Jap officer spoke English. Anyway, they took us to Taiping and locked us in a dark hole like a dungeon and it was dark outside by this time. There were some more troops there, and we got our heads down and had a good sleep. When dawn broke, we looked around and the other troops in the place were from the Leicesters, East Surreys' and Argyles regiments. This was my first encounter with rice when a sentry came and tipped a bucket full of rice and ashes on the floor which were left over's from the cookhouse. I didn't eat any of that. In the morning they shouted "all men big house" and they took us down to the Taiping Jail. After going through the main gate onto some lawns, they stripped us all naked, kicked us up the backside and then took us to the main cell blocks and locked us in the cells. They had a big bonfire with all our kit and we were several days without any clothes. They did eventually find us some of the native's kit and gave us some of these. The war was still going on down south and in Singapore and they never showed much relaxation until Singapore fell in February 1942. After letting us out of the cells to walk around the lawn areas, they started to take us out in working parties. One job I recall was pulling hand carts filled with big bundles of raw rubber from different parts of the town and taking it to the railway station on route for Japan. These early days of going on the roads with no shoes in bare feet was a terrible baptism. We had no footwear for three and a half years until VJ 20<sup>th</sup> August 1945. During these early days of captivity, vitamin deficiency started to show, as our diet was only rice and very little else. This affected my eyes for starters. After a short time, people were dying. I had to help to bury them in another part of the jail courtyard.

I and some others were transferred to Kuala Lumpur jail in June 1942. I had a rough passage whilst in there and went off my legs and could not walk. We were just on our backsides and I subsequently had to learn to walk again with two sticks. As we moved around trying to walk again, the Jap sentries used to take the micky and kept laughing at us. Anyway, we all improved as time went on. Whilst I

was in Kuala Lumpur jail, a mixed party of mostly officers of mixed nationality made a break to try and escape with an aeroplane, but after about two days they were back inside, all locked in a tiny cell for about a week with no food. Then they were executed! There were not a lot of working parties in Kuala Lumpur.

On October 3<sup>rd</sup> a number of us were sent down to Singapore to a place known as Roberts Hospital. After a while there, I was sent out to the battalion living in Changi Village. Of course, most of our unit by this time had been sent up country to Siam to work on the Thai / Burma Railway. I was in Singapore until May 1943, and by this time they had patched us up. I and others were not in too good a state, but that didn't bother the Japs. They packed us off to Singapore Train Station to follow our colleagues on the train to Thailand. They packed us in little trucks, 40 men at a time, and we were locked in at night. We travelled for six days and nights before arriving at Bang Pong rail head. There was no food on arrival and we had to march 15 miles to Kanchanaburi which was just a ploughed field. We stayed there for two nights on the bare ground with rain coming down every night. This camp was not far from the Kwai River bridge. After two days we were marched all through the night up to the railway tracks and we eventually arrived at this so called camp site which was on the side of the river. We were still lying on the wet ground to sleep with no tents at all. I was two hundred yards from the section of track we were to work on near the camp site named 'Hintok River'. It was terrible working conditions, cutting through a hill for the train to pass, which meant having to drill and blast the rock faces. It was terrible, with such a lot of men dying from cholera etc. We worked fourteen hours a day with no boots on our feet. It was 'speedo' all the time from the Japs. My pal D. Walton from Stoke died later in that camp. Each man was later exhumed and brought to Chungkai War cemetery. Speedo all the way till about Oct 1943 when the two parties met at at Konkuita. The other party had worked from the Burma end. The railway was now completed.

After completion of the railway, we were taken back down to Kanchanaburi camp where there were some decent huts to go into, which was an improvement on what was there when we went up. Still not much food and a lot of men were suffering from tropical ulcers and malaria. A lot of men were still dying and they were buried across the road in what became the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery. Surgeons were unable to operate on men as drugs were not available.



After a few weeks, we were taken by train again down to Singapore in trucks the same as we came up in, the journey again taking six days. They sent the group I was in to a camp in Singapore called Sime Road which was up the Burkit Timah Road. It was an open camp and after a few months we were moved to Changi Jail to exchange with the women and children there who were moved to our previous camp at Sime Road. I worked in the jail cookhouse for a while on the stew shift.

At the end of 1944, I was moved outside the jail, to live in huts where there were more men than in the jail itself. We were taken on working parties until VJ day arrived, quite suddenly really. The first sign of the war finishing was when an Airborne Lieutenant and two medical orderlies landed at Singapore Airport. They soon got the Jap officers running around and getting some extra food for the POWs. They organised some loud speakers so we could hear all the orders come through from Kandy, Ceylon S.E.A.C. The Jap sentries just left us and went to a certain area as instructed from Ceylon. It was very nice to feel free again. The Royal Navy eventually came into Singapore. There was one division of mainly Indian troops that came in.

About two weeks went by before we were sorted out ready for coming home. During that time, 'The Royal Marines' (Plymouth Band) came to Changi jail and played some sterling tunes which bucked everybody up. I was on the first ship out of Singapore. It was so exciting, one day before the hand over of Singapore on September 11<sup>th</sup> 1945. Whilst leaving Singapore, all of the crew of two of our aircraft carriers, the ANSON and H.M.S. HOLE waved to us. We proceeded on our journey towards Colombo (Ceylon), and we arrived there at midnight and all the ships flashed their search lights. Next morning we went ashore where we were able to send a cablegram home. After a while we went back to the ship and carried on our journey to home. Whilst passing Gibraltar I got a cablegram from home. We eventually arrived at Liverpool docks on 8<sup>th</sup> Oct 1945. We then went to a place called Moghue? And next morning we went by train to Manchester.

**Transcribed from the original diary by Trevor Stewart 31.07.2019**