

BANCROFT Basil William

Name: Basil William Bancroft

Born: 3 November 1918

Rank: Gunner

Service Number: 1470534

Unit/Regiment: 11th Battery, 3rd
Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment, RA

Died: 26 March 1986



Pre-War:

Basil was born in Cape Town, South Africa to English and Malay parents. After leaving school he joined the Merchant Navy to escape the Apartheid regime and frequently spent time in London on leave.

Wartime experience:

In 1938 Basil enlisted in the Royal Artillery 3rd Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment which was part of Malaya Command. The 11th Battery was based at Changi, Singapore with the mission to defend the Sembawang Airfield and Naval Base. They suffered heavy bombardment by frequent Japanese air attacks from 9 November 1941 to 14 February 1942. They were captured by the Japanese on 15 February 1942 and marched to the Changi Malai 1 POW Camp where they built their own huts and latrines.

On 4 April 1942 he was part of the 1,000 strong Saigon Battalion that was shipped to Saigon in French Indo-China on the hell ship Issyo Maru. Conditions on board were so bad that half of the men came down with dysentery. On 9 April 1942 they were interned in the Saigon Docks Camp and worked as slave labour loading and unloading heavy cargo by hand. They worked day and night sustained only by a meagre diet of rice and vegetables. They never received the parcels sent by the Red Cross. Basil was fortunate to avoid being sent to work on the Thai Burma Railway.

He risked his life countless times to escape under the wire overnight and bring back much needed medical supplies, money, and food for the camp, even though two previous escapees had been caught and executed. On 2 September 1943 he was the first of only three prisoners of the Japanese to successfully escape from the Saigon camp. Aided by French underground units, over a period of 8 months, he made his way through Indo-China to Hanoi.



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In April 1944 he escaped from Hanoi to China with the help of the GBT unit (Gordon, Bernard and Tan who assisted downed pilots and escaped POWs and liaised with Allied Intelligence). He was helped to escape to India by the British Army Aid Group, arriving on 30 April 1944. It is believed that he served with Allied Intelligence in India and Burma. The War Office reported him as "No longer a prisoner of war" on 13 June 1944.

Civilian life after return:

After the war Basil returned to the UK having recuperated from malaria at home in Cape Town. He was discharged from the Army on 22 September 1945 on medical grounds and for some time received treatment at Roehampton Hospital for Tropical Diseases. He married Daisy Phipps in 1947 and they had 6 children. In the 1970s Basil and Daisy worked at London House at the University of London and were honoured to be presented to HRH Queen Elizabeth II, the patron of London House. On retirement they moved to Stevenage, Hertfordshire where, sadly, Basil passed away on 26 March 1986, aged 68.

His bravery and resilience were never officially acknowledged, even though he was the first of only two Gunners commended for their bravery as POWs at the Saigon Camp and for successful escapes. He never knew that he had been commended as the document was not released by the National Archives until after his death.



Left: Photograph of Basil taken in London, after the war, with US serviceman, Sergeant Charles Heald. They were in Saigon together.

The above information and wording has been provided by Dena Jordan (Daughter)



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