

# Victory over Japan Day (VJ Day 75)



**Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> August 2020** is the **75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of VJ Day**, marking both the surrender of Japan and the end of World War Two.

Whilst VE Day marked the end of the war in Europe in May 1945 many thousands of Armed Forces personnel were still involved in bitter fighting in the Far East. Victory over Japan would come at a heavy price, and Victory over Japan Day (VJ Day) marks the day Japan surrendered on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1945.

Fighting in the Asia-Pacific took place from Hawaii to North East India. Britain and the Commonwealth's principal fighting force, the Fourteenth Army, was one of the most diverse in history – over 40 languages were spoken and all the world's major religions represented. The descendants of many of the Commonwealth veterans of that army are today part of multicultural communities up and down the country, a lasting legacy to the success and comradeship of those who fought in the Asia-Pacific.

This year we remember the contribution of all Commonwealth and Allied Forces, without whom victory, and the freedoms and way of life we enjoy today, would not have been possible.

The conditions during the Far East campaign were very different from those during the war in Europe. British, Commonwealth and Allied troops fought across oceans, in monsoon drenched jungles, on snow-covered hills, and in scorching tropical heat on remote islands.

But for the British and Commonwealth forces, the war against Japan was marked by extremes. The surrender of Malaya and Singapore constituted arguably Britain's worst defeat of the Second World War in 1942, when approximately 9,000 British, pre-partition Indian, and Commonwealth troops were lost and around 130,000 taken prisoners of war. While in 1944, at the battles of Kohima and Imphal, the Fourteenth Army inflicted on the Japanese Army its greatest ever defeat, a battle that was voted by the British public as Britain's greatest ever battle.

## Offwell Remembers

Three Offwell residents still living in the parish have family connections with those who served in the Asia-Pacific war. And a memorial plaque in St. Mary's is for the nephew of Offwell rector, Frederick Copleston, who died in Malaya in 1942.

**Brab Hallowes'** cousin 'once removed' was SOE officer, **Geoffrey Hallowes**, one of the last men to escape from Singapore. He was the third husband of World War II heroine, Odette.

**John Tristram** is Bell Captain at St. Mary's. His distant cousin, **Major William Barrington Tristram**, of the Welch Regiment, was killed in Burma in March 1942.

**Dick Erith's** brother, **Doug Erith**, survived three and a half years in a Japanese POW camp and returned home to Norfolk in 1945.

**Lt.Col. J. Hugh Copleston Wooldridge**, died in Malaya in January 1942. His uncle, Offwell rector Frederick Elford Copleston, had served in World War I.

Here are their stories...

## Geoffrey MacLeod Hallowes



Geoffrey Hallowes was an officer of the Special Operations Executive (SOE) during WW2 but had initially served with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, the Gordon Highlanders, in the defence of Malaya against Japan in 1942. His unit was one of the last to escape into Singapore before the causeway to Malaya was destroyed. When Singapore surrendered on 15<sup>th</sup> February, 1942, Hallowes joined Major 'Nick' Nicholson to form one

of two pairs of officers who were sent to carry the order to 'cease fire' to garrisons on the islands of Pulau Blakang Mati and Pulau Brani. They were given permission to try to escape from the Japanese after the order was delivered. They took a boat to the east coast of Sumatra and walked to Padang on the west coast, from whence they were rescued by a Royal Navy destroyer which called in to refuel after the Battle of the Java Sea.

The 350km walk took them through swampy plains in the east to the Barisan Mountains in the west.



Hallowes became a staff captain in Bombay in May 1942, and it was then that he volunteered to join SOE. After a Special Forces training school in Haifa and then Cairo he was assigned to Peterborough to join an SOE 'Jedburgh' team. 94 of these three-member teams were parachuted into France after D-Day to assist the French Resistance with sabotage. He later received a Croix de Guerre for his activities in France. In 1956 he became the third husband of World War Two heroine, **Odette**.



Odette Sansom, an SOE agent working in France, was arrested in April 1943 and spent the rest of the war imprisoned in Ravensbruck Concentration Camp. She endured brutal interrogation and was one of the few SOE agents to survive Nazi imprisonment. Odette was the first woman to be awarded the George Cross (the highest non-military decoration for gallantry) and receive France's Legion d'Honneur.

After the war Geoffrey Hallows joined the family wine importing business while Odette received extensive hospitalisation and treatment to recover from her Gestapo torture and imprisonment. In 1946 she married Peter Churchill but they divorced ten years later in 1956. Geoffrey and Odette were married the same year and moved to Surrey where they spent an uneventful country life well into old age.



## Major William Barrington Tristram



A regular Major in the Welch Regiment Major Tristram was attached to the 1st West Yorkshire Regiment when he was killed in Burma in March 1942. He is buried in Rangoon War Cemetery.

Both the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalions of the West Yorkshires served in the Far East during the Burma campaign, a series of battles in what was then the British colony of Burma. It primarily involved forces of the Allies, the British Empire and the Republic of China with support from the United States. They faced the invading forces of Imperial Japan, supported by the Burma Independence Army, which spearheaded the initial attacks against the country.

It was the only land campaign by the Western Allies in the Asia-Pacific Theatre of War which proceeded continuously from the start of hostilities to the end of the war.



The initial fighting in Singapore lasted from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> February 1942, resulting in the largest British surrender in history. About 80,000 British, Indian and Australian troops became prisoners of war, joining 50,000 taken by the Japanese in the earlier Malayan campaign.



John has few details regarding Major Tristram's death apart from the fact that he was 'killed in action':

*“One company of the West Yorks. was part of the ad hoc brigade that attempted to halt the Japanese advance but most of the troops in the country from January 1942 were chewed up in a series of holding actions before Rangoon was given up by the 7<sup>th</sup> March and later, as British forces withdrew westward into India or north to join up with the Chinese Nationalist Army....*

*A good many years ago I was contacted by a man who had been one of Major Tristram's subalterns. He told me that Tristram was the bravest man he had ever known.”*

John's own father was in the Nigeria Regiment, Royal West African Frontier Force, serving as a company commander with the 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion. Despite petitions by him to the Governor and Colonial Office he was released to return to his job as a District Officer. The 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion subsequently served with the Chindits (special operations units of the British and Indian armies) in the Burma campaign, where the West African troops played an important part and sustained significant casualties.

### Prisoners of War and forced labour



During the war in the Far East thousands of soldiers taken as prisoners of war were treated badly by the Japanese because they saw the act of surrender as dishonourable. They believed, if captured, it was a soldier's duty to take their own life.

Held in appalling conditions the prisoners were subjected to brutal treatment, in established jails, mines and in makeshift jungle labour camps throughout South East Asia. The Japanese viewed the prisoners as expendable labour for their war effort and thousands died building roads, bridges, and working on other Japanese projects. The most notorious of these was the Burma-Thailand railway or 'Death Railway' - opened in October 1943 it covered over 1,250 miles and cost the lives of 15,000 prisoners of war and 80,000 native labourers.



The conditions, punishing climate, and lack of adequate food and medicine also lead to thousands more deaths from diseases such as cholera, dysentery and malaria.

On 26<sup>th</sup> July 1945 the USA, Britain and the Allies issued an ultimatum to Japan, demanding the unconditional surrender of Japanese forces or face "prompt and utter destruction". The Japanese ignored the

ultimatum, refused to end the war and with Allied consent the USA dropped two atomic bombs on Japanese cities: one on Hiroshima on 6<sup>th</sup> August and one on Nagasaki on 9<sup>th</sup> August. Six days after the bombs' fell Japan announced its surrender on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1945.

Tom Boardman (who died in 2018 aged 99) survived three and a half years in Changi prison and worked on the Death Railway. He wrote the following:

*“Luckily I survived the hazards. It was a grim life and I consider myself very lucky to have got through it, and especially to have survived so long. My life is full of remembrance of the war and not a day passes without me thinking about it...”*

*“I think it’s not just a case of remembering in November. For me we should remember every day and every month, and that’s what I try and do.”*

In August 1945 the repatriation of all Prisoners of War became a priority. One of the major missions was to locate all POWs and internees and provide them with adequate food, shelter, clothing and medical care. They were evacuated by sea and air for rehabilitation and it would be two to three months before POWs finally arrived home.



## Private Douglas Edmund Erith



Dick Erith's brother, Doug, joined the Royal Norfolk Regiment and was taken prisoner by the Japanese early in 1942. Already married with a young daughter Dick describes his brother, Doug, as 'a great survivor':

*"If it had been any of my other brothers I don't think they would have survived, but Doug was tough. He had scars on his back from boiling water being poured over him in the POW camp but he seemed to recover quite well after his return home. He was little more than a skeleton and my mother fattened him up with endless plates of potatoes. Nothing ever fazed Doug; he became a pig farmer and survived many mishaps including falling into a cess pit when he was well into his 80's. A neighbour happened to hear his calls and got him out."*

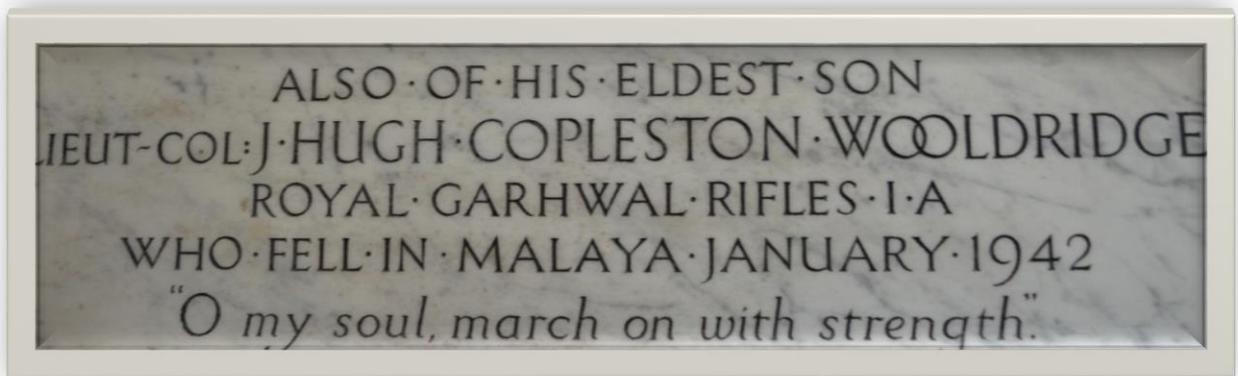
Doug died, aged 89, and it was only in the last two or three years of his life that he referred to his time as a POW when he would dream of being at home with his family. (Dick's own memories of the war are featured in 'VE Day 75 Offwell Memories').

## Lt.Col. J. Hugh Copleston Wooldridge



J. Hugh Copleston Wooldridge was the eldest son of Alice Wooldridge and Brigadier-General William Hugh Wooldridge of the Indian Army. Alice was the second daughter of John Henry Copleston, Rector of Offwell between 1880 and 1918. (In this picture he is leading the procession through Wilmington for Beating the Bounds.)

Hugh Copleston Wooldridge was commissioned into the Royal Garhwal Rifles in 1916 (aged 18) and was 44 when he died in 1942. He therefore saw action in both world wars.



The attack on Pearl Harbour took place on 7<sup>th</sup> December 1941, followed immediately by the Japanese launching attacks against British Burma. Lt.Col. Wooldridge was a fairly elderly staff officer to be fighting in such a demanding jungle environment and his gravestone at Kranji War Cemetery, north of Singapore, has the inscription 'Buried near this spot'. It is not known if he died in battle, in a POW camp or as a result of disease. Neither is it known where he 'fell'.

Kranji is the final resting place for Allied soldiers who perished during the Battle for Singapore and the subsequent Japanese occupation of the island from 1942 to 1945. There are 4,461 World War 2 casualties buried or commemorated at this cemetery, of which 850 are unidentified. After the fall of Singapore the Japanese also established a prisoner-of-war camp at Kranji. In 1946 it was decided that Kranji would be designated as Singapore's War Cemetery so the small cemetery was developed into a permanent war cemetery and subsequently war graves from Buona Vista, Changi and other cemeteries were removed and re-interred there.

### VJ Day 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary service in 2015



On the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of VJ Day, in August 2015, a service was held at St. Martin-in-the-Fields church in central London. Attended by the Queen and Prince Philip the service was organised by a federation of organisations representing Far East Prisoners of War, their widows and families.

**Bishop Nigel Stock**, Bishop to the Forces and Bishop to the Falkland Islands, gave the following sermon:

*“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

*(Romans 8: 38-39)*

*In October 1946 Bishop Leonard Wilson preached on the BBC Sunday service. Leonard Wilson was Bishop of Singapore at the time of its capture by the Japanese Imperial Army, and was eventually interned in the notorious Changi prison camp.*

*Accused of being part of a spy network within the camp, he was interrogated under torture and in the BBC broadcast said this:*

*“In the middle of that torture they asked me if I still believed in God. When, by God’s help, I said, ‘I do’, they asked me why God did not save me, and by the help of his Holy Spirit, I said, ‘God does save me. He does not save me by freeing me from pain and punishment, but he saves me by giving me the spirit to bear it.’”*

*You have to read the whole passage to know that this was not easily said or achieved and as with any human being, Leonard Wilson had his moments of doubt and despair. He longed to be able to exercise the Christian virtue of forgiveness but that was a grimly difficult task:*

*“I looked at their faces as they stood around and took it in turn to flog, and their faces were hard and cruel and some of them were evidently enjoying their cruelty. But by the grace of God I saw those men not as they were but as they had been. Once they were little children playing with their brothers and sisters and happy in their parents’ love, and it is hard to hate little children.”*

*Such stories of human courage and moral virtue in the grimmest of circumstances abound from the conflict that we remember today on this 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of VJ Day.*

*The more I learn of that conflict the more I feel very presumptuous standing here and saying anything at all, as part of a generation that has not had to endure world war.*

*Yet I feel bound to speak, as my family was marked by these events, as I guess have the families of all those gathered here.*

*My father's brother was killed at Kohima; my father's brother-in-law fought with the 81<sup>st</sup> Division of the West Africa Frontier Force in Burma, and my mother's twin brother spent three and a half years as a POW in Japan.*

*It was only occasionally that one heard anything of this growing up, so reticent were people to speak, and often it was left too late for more detail.*

*But perhaps because of my relatives I have always been moved by the human stories and those human connections that make you delve deeper. So the priest who presided at my marriage was the brother of the officer who interpreted for General Perceval at the fall of Singapore. Cyril Wild, the interpreter, and son of the Bishop of Newcastle, went into captivity, volunteered to go up with his men to the appalling conditions of the Burma railway, and saved numerous lives because he could intercede with the Japanese commanders in their own language. He was called by the Japanese 'The Tall Man who never sleeps' because he was constantly pleading the cause of someone condemned to die.*

*He survived captivity as did the Union Flag that he carried at the surrender negotiation which he hid, and which was raised when the Allied Forces re-occupied Singapore.*

*All the stories of this conflict that I keep coming across deserve re-telling. .... But why tell any of them, why remember?*

*We remember because we need to be reminded of what the human spirit can achieve. It applies to people of all faiths and none. But the sacrifice should not be forgotten, not least of those who did not survive battle or imprisonment....*

*We should remember because we need to say that it is straightforwardly wrong and evil to treat human beings in the way so many captives were treated. It is right that profound apologies, such as that recently made by the Mitsubishi Corporation should be made.*

*We remember, because false ideologies stalk our world today and those too need to be stood up to, and denounced for what they are because of the suffering they inflict, such suffering as is being remembered today.*

*We should remember because of the terrible destructive power that lies in human hands.*

*We remember because the Christian Gospel calls us to a better vision as we follow Jesus Christ.*

*In Jesus God calls us not to be content with the sins and failures of this world. As Christ suffers for us and brings us the astonishing hope of new life in resurrection, he calls us to work with him for his Kingdom, for the hope of heaven that breaks into our world now, and never to be complacent in the face of human folly and sin.*

*We could just be overwhelmed with sadness, or despair – but those we remember today call us to something far better, and Christ, as we are reminded in that wonderful passage of hope from St. Paul, never abandon those whom he loves so much that he came to this fallen world to die and rise again.*

*“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

