

Arthur George Clarke

Army Service and Death 1941-1943

(Summary of events to be completed with further details which will be obtained from army records and from other published and unpublished sources)

George Clarke was conscripted into a locally raised regiment of the Territorial Army, Royal Artillery (RA) 48th Light Anti-Aircraft(LAA) probably in early 1941. Initially, the duties of the unit involved the defence of the Essex ports (mainly Harwich) from German air attacks. Late in 1941, the regiment was assigned to overseas service in the Middle East and, with Gunner George Clarke (242 battery), left Southend by train on a miserable foggy day in early December.

On arrival at Gourock (Glasgow) the regiment was to be embarked on a modern ex-Castle Line troopship but, because of engine trouble, the men were loaded onto "Duchess of Atholl" which already contained other units. The resulting overcrowding was sufficient to lead to threats of mutiny which was only prevented when promises of improvements in conditions were made.

The ship formed part of a convoy which eventually sailed on December 8th (probably around the time of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour). The "Duchess of Atholl" had a reputation for discomfort in heavy weather (she was variously described as the "Dancing Duchess" or the "Drunken Duchess" because of the excessive rolling). The situation was made worse by engine trouble which resulted in a decrease in speed (lagging behind the rest of the convoy for some time) which also made the rolling worse, with crockery and cabin furniture flying around and most of the troops suffering from severe sea-sickness.

The voyage included a brief stop at Freetown, Sierra Leone, (the troops did not go ashore) and instructions, at some point, for the convoy to be diverted to Singapore to support the defence of Malaya from the invading Japanese. The convoy reached Durban, South Africa, (on January ? 1942) and the troops were given shore leave, where they were well received by the South Africans who organised receptions and sight seeing. The regiment was then embarked on "Dunera", a much more comfortable troopship, and the convoy (DM-2) left Durban on January 13. Nearly all of the convoy was rerouted to Batavia, Java, (now Djarkata) as the situation in Malaya was considered to be hopeless. The forces to be landed in Batavia consisted of 3(?) regiments of Royal Artillery together with 3 RAF fighter (Hurricane) squadrons.

The convoy landed at Batavia on February 3 and the troops were housed in the barracks of the colonial Dutch forces where no provision had been made for food. Few preparations had been made by the Dutch for the defence of Java and life in Batavia carried on as normal, with bars and restaurants open. It was generally agreed that Java could not be effectively defended, and the decision to land the troops there (rather than send them on to Australia) was mostly political. Any resistance would, however, delay the Japanese advance which, at the time, presented a major threat to Australia. The forces on Java also included some American sailors from the USS Houston, a cruiser which was sunk off the Java coast, and a battalion of U.S. troops.

The first Japanese air attacks began on February 3 and 5 and the RA LAA regiments were initially mostly used to defend the airfields from which the assembled Hurricanes were flown. The troops were initially under the command of the regional British Army chief General Wavell, but on February 21 he moved his command to Colombo, Ceylon, (now Sri Lanka) and all British and Australian forces then came under the command of the Dutch Governor-General Dr. van Starckenborghder. The forces on Java also included some American sailors from the USS Houston, a cruiser which was sunk off the Java coast, and a battalion of U.S. troops.

The main Japanese force landed on Java early on March 1 and was opposed by Dutch and Australian infantry. The Japanese advanced easily with the only effective resistance coming from the Australian troops ("Blackforce") under Brigadier Blackburn.

The RA regiments continued to defend the airfields and then withdrew with the intention of possibly continuing the fighting as infantry, with the possibility of evacuation from the south of the island.

During this time, we know of the movements of 242 48th RA and it is likely that the only fighting that George Clarke would have been involved in would have consisted of strafing by Japanese aircraft. Following a number of movements, the regiment was ordered to surrender on March 8 when the Dutch authorities decided that further resistance was pointless. The British and Australian forces were also obliged to surrender at this time as further fighting, it was believed, could have compromised their eventual status as Prisoners of War (POWs) under the Geneva Convention.

It is likely that George did not encounter a Japanese soldier until a few days after the surrender.

The allied forces on Java were held in a number of prison camps and George was in a camp in Batavia (probably the old colonial barracks known as the "bicycle camp"). It is likely that conditions in this camp were not too bad, with much of the organisation and discipline left to the British and Allied officers. There were probably isolated incidents of brutality by the Japanese but, for the most part, the Japanese had other priorities and mostly used the prisoners in work parties to construct or repair airfields.

Following the initial Japanese conquests in South-east Asia, the Japanese then made plans for the redistribution of POWs as slave labour on construction projects, which included the Burmese railway, and in the mines in Japan and Taiwan. The POWs were generally viewed with contempt by the Japanese who considered surrender (rather than fight-to-the-death) to be dishonourable and that they should be considered as no better than "coolies" (native labourers).

After around 6 months in the Batavia camp, George was included in a group of POWs who were destined for labour in the mines in Japan and left Java on October 21 bound for Singapore, the distribution centre for POWs.

Conditions of the ship to Singapore (possibly the "Yosida Maru") were reasonable comfortable. The group was held in Singapore for a short time and it is likely that the men were tested for dysentery before the final stage of the long voyage to Japan, for which the group was loaded aboard an old ship, the "Dai Nichi Maru". The group would almost certainly have suffered a considerable amount of brutality while in Singapore and when embarking on the ship, when the men were crowded in the (3?) holds of the ship. Conditions in the holds were appalling, with the men crammed into the holds with no room to lie down, with virtually no sanitary facilities. The holds in the tropical climate of Singapore were extremely hot and suffocating with little water available and very small quantities of poor quality rice the only food. It is believed that some of the men drank water from ice loaded aboard the ship and this led to the rapid spread of dysentery.

The voyage took 3-4 weeks, with calls at Saigon and Taiwan, with the conditions leading to a great deal of illness and deaths among the POWs. George must have contracted dysentery during the voyage and, when the ship reached Moji, Japan, on November 25?, was carried from the ship. The POWs would have only had the remnants of their tropical kit to face the cold of the Japanese winter.

The sick POWs were left at Moji while the other members of the group were transported to labour camps in Fukuoka. Most of the sick POWs died in Moji and George was one of the last to die on December 19 1942. It is not known whether he received any medical treatment of any sort or whether he was looked after by any other POWs. The cause of death was recorded as "Acute Colitis" although it is not known, at this stage, who determined the cause of death or how it was possible to differentiate between acute colitis and dysentery.