

Tha Sao, Tarsau 125k – Thailand



Tarsau became Base Camp for Group 4 made up of 'D' Force which worked in the vicinity of Hellfire Pass. Situated 130kms north of Non Pladuk, Thailand and 285 kms south of Thanbyuzayat Burma. Also known as Tarso, Ta Soe, and Tha Soa. The word Tha meaning pier in water. It was also a staging camp for Forces moving north to work on the railway.

S and T Battalion arrived from Kanchanaburi toward late March having departed Singapore by rail 14 March 1943 to Non Pladuk. They were trucked from Komna Transit Camp to Kanchanaburi for a brief stopover. The Battalions remained at Tarsau where conditions were quite reasonable, and were engaged on clearing the path ahead for rail laying gangs for several weeks. The two battalions then parted company – S Battalion head north and T Battalion south. Tarsau had not prepared the POWs for what was ahead of them. S Battalion moved to the 'D' Force Camp at Kanyu II – located on top of a plateau above the Kanu I River Camp they arrived on 25 April 1943.

The camp was surrounded by large trees and roads transporting supplies and Japanese troops north to Burma. Heavily used by trucks the roads were badly rutted and muddy. Vehicles were frequently bogged. POWs passing through on foot found the roads were little more than tracks with potholes, stumps, rocks, etc. and during monsoon the roads were impassable.

Located at the River edge and originally 'D' Force Base Camp it later developed as a large hospital camp for all of 'D' Forces. It had three cemeteries with 806 men buried here.

As a hospital camp, Tarsau was appalling. 'Lightly sick' POWs knew if they went there they would probably never leave. Patients ensured their names were on work party lists whether they were well or not simply to escape Tarsau and its illnesses.

Established November 1942 Tarso Hospital Camp remained in operation until April 1944 during which time 15,029 patients had been admitted. The hospital was poorly sited close to River Kwae Noi. Accommodation consisted of 84 atap huts all in the usual state of collapse and in fact some huts did collapse on top of their inhabitants.

From July 1943 this hospital grew from a camp hospital to a base hospital for all of D Force Thai Administration Group 4. Towards end of September 1943 and the end of the rail construction was the worst time for Base Hospital Camps with thousands of sick POWs evacuated by barge, rail and road to these crowded camps.

Tarsau was one of first 3 hospitals established at the southern end of the railway. The other two were Kanchanaburi and Chungkai. Supposedly these camps were in better condition than the jungle camps although accommodation was much the same and endured the usual overcrowding.

The 9th Battalion Royal Northumberland Fusiliers
by Govan S Easton

Following a recruitment drive in the early months of 1939 the 9th Battalion was formed as an offshoot of the 7th Battalion, both of which were units of the Territorial Army. At the outbreak of war the Battalion HQ was at Alnwick, 'W' Company was situated at Rothbury, 'X' Company at Amble, 'Y' Company at Ashington and 'Z' Company at Berwick upon Tweed.

Early in 1940 the Battalion was made up to strength by the addition of a number of soldiers who had been conscripted.

The Battalion saw active service in France from April 1940 to end of May 1940.

On 30 June 1940 the Battalion strength was:-

22 Officers, 5 Warrant Officers, 26 Sergeants and 462 Other Ranks.

The process of re-equipping and training was carried out over the next few weeks. Once this had been achieved, the Battalion moved to Crown Hill Barracks in Plymouth and thereafter coastal defence became a priority. The various Platoons, now possessed of new Vickers machine guns, were sited along the Devon coast.

In August the Battalion entrained to travel cross country to Norfolk. It had become part of the 18th Division. The Battalion HQ was at Coltishall and the Companies were situated at various sites along the coast from Wells to Great Yarmouth. Each Platoon, of which there were 15 in the Battalion, had four machine guns. The guns were mounted in sand-bagged emplacements, built by the troops, in dunes overlooking the coast.

In January 1941 the Battalion moved to the Scottish Borders and the HQ was at Bowhill House, a home of the Duke of Buccleugh. A period of intense training was now undertaken with visits to the Campsie Fells for field-firing exercises.

In June 1941 the Battalion moved by road to Cheshire, it was now equipped with transport. The Battalion HQ being at Whitchurch. Intensive training continued including visits to Trawsfynydd in Wales for further field-firing exercises. News began to circulate that a move overseas was imminent as all were kitted out with K.D. and the trucks were painted to match the colour of desert sand. Following embarkation leave the Battalion embarked aboard the 'Warwick Castle' at Liverpool on 24th October. The liner sailed at dusk and met up with other vessels out of the Clyde to form a convoy of troopships. In mid-Atlantic they met up with a convoy travelling East and its escort of American Naval vessels took over our convoy.

Arriving in Halifax everyone disembarked and re-embarked on American troopships. The Battalion was allocated to the 'USS Orizaba', a first World War troopship which, the story goes, actually turned turtle while laid up in Newport News. Everyone now had to adapt to changed conditions.

10 November - The troopships left the pier, the convoy bound for Basra in the Persian Gulf. Becoming accustomed to the American ways was achieved quite rapidly, the plentiful diet aboard was different but acceptable and the availability of cigarettes and chocolate bars, relatively cheaply and in quantity, made a change from conditions at home, one that everyone appreciated.

12 November - The convoy entered the Gulf Stream and temperatures rose into the 80's making life in some parts of the ship uncomfortable.

17 November - The 'Orizaba' docked in Port of Spain, Trinidad.

19 November - The convoy sailed across the South Atlantic to Capetown where it arrived on 9 December. The Battalion was told of the infamous attack on Pearl Harbour the previous day. Shore leave was granted.

13 December - Troopships set sail for Bombay, the American destroyers left the convoy which was now escorted northwards by 'HMS Dorsetshire'.

21 December - The 'Orizaba' left the convoy bound for Mombasa escorted by 'HMS Ceres'. The Battalion spent Christmas aboard. Training changed its format as each morning, wearing tropical kit and carrying water bottles and haversacks, the companies set off to march along a pre-determined route for about two hours. Most afternoons shore leave was granted until 18.00 hrs.

29 December - The 'Orizaba' sailed from Mombasa in Company with the 'Mount Vernon' which, with 'HMS Emerald' as escort, left us to sail to Singapore.

6 January 1942 - The 'Orizaba' arrived in Bombay. The Battalion travelled by train to Deolali, a hot spot even at this time of year. Training, in the form of route marches, began the following day. After a fortnight, European kit bags were packed and labelled to be stored. Leaving Deolali with no regrets, the Battalion returned to Bombay and embarked on a French troopship, the 'Felix Roussel'.

21 January - The ship sailed from Bombay. Now lectures on jungle warfare were given together with some of the myths concerning Japanese troops. During the voyage orders were given for machine guns to be mounted by lashing them to the ship's rails enabling them to be used for anti-aircraft fire. Emerging into the Sunda Straits numbers of Japanese aircraft flew overhead.

THE BATTALION ARRIVES IN SINGAPORE

5 February - Approached Singapore, came under attack from 27 planes swooping down to deliver their bombs and straffing the ship with machine gun fire. The effect of our machine gun fire was to deter many of the planes but three bombs hit the ship causing the deaths of two fusiliers from 'Y' Company. The main attack was being directed against the 'Empress of Asia'. The 'Felix Roussel' docked in Keppel Harbour at 23.00 hrs.

6 February - The Battalion was at Hill 85, near the Pierce Reservoir. From this time each Company would be acting independently of the Battalion. In spite of gunfire and bombing we found native traders on cycles offering us tinned pineapple and cigarettes.

8 February - At dawn, 15 Platoon of 'Z' Company (the Platoon of which I was Platoon Sergeant) moved along Upper Thompson Road to the Naval Base and then westward towards the Causeway to Johore. The most northerly point of the island was the site for the four machine guns. We had become support troops for the 11th Indian Division. Strict orders were given that on no account should we open fire. Our function was to give covering fire for the infantry should there be a frontal attack. That night was most eventful with gunfire and flares lighting up the night sky. In the morning we learned that all the infantry on our left flank had withdrawn and that we were in danger of being out-flanked by the enemy who had landed to the west of the causeway. Later that day we had orders to withdraw to Attap Valley Road to cover the area to the north west. In spite of incessant artillery fire from both enemy and the Royal Artillery behind us, we sat there inactive.

10 February - Enemy planes increased their activity with heavy bombing on our left flank and in the city. The Platoon was ordered to move to Nee Soon Village and we became the front line as infantry withdrew through our positions. Eventually another withdrawal, this time to Thompson Village, being strafed en route by enemy planes.

12 February - The Platoon took up positions in the Chinese Cemetery from which we engaged the enemy across open ground. We suffered casualties in the exchange of fire. We were part of the defence line which ran from Padan, north of the race course, to the east of the island.

13 February - The Platoon moved to the Swiss Cottage Estate just off Bukit Timah Road. Guns were mounted in the bedrooms of two houses and on the lawns with a field of fire across open ground to the north. We came under direct frontal attack with mortar bombs followed by artillery shells ranging fairly accurately on to our positions. When the machine guns opened fire the effect was that the mortar fire virtually ceased. Two

members of the Platoon lost their lives. Each time the Japanese Infantry emerged from jungle beyond the open ground, our guns opened fire and the enemy withdrew. Ammunition was beginning to run low and belts for the machine guns had to be filled by hand. The battle continued all through 14 February.

15 February - There was fighting on both of our flanks but no frontal attack. 'Z' Company suffered further casualties that day. In the afternoon we were told of tanks rolling along Bukit Timah Road and this meant that we were surrounded. Then came the order that we would cease fire at 16.00 hrs. We were to surrender to the enemy. Despair reigned. At 16.00 hrs we awaited our fate: 'Quo Fata Vocant'.

INTO CAPTIVITY

15 February - We were ordered to line up alongside Bukit Timah Road with such belongings as we now possessed. Japanese soldiers from the Imperial Guard appeared and, making noises and gestures, robbed us of any items of value. Watches and cigarette cases were prime targets. Reluctance on our part was greeted with a slap across the face or a thump with a rifle butt or even a kick on the shins. We learned that our captors would show us little mercy.

17 February - Groups of various units began the march to Changi. A number of the Battalion Officers were with sections of the Battalion on the march. When Changi was reached, the Battalion had been allocated an area in the open. Many of us thought we would be allocated some shelter but that was not to be. Lt Col Flower had become CO of the Battalion on 14th, Lt. Col. Thomas having been evacuated to join the campaign in Burma. British military discipline was to be the order of the day. As time progressed, tents were made available and soon we all had some shelter from the sun and daily rains.

2 May - Most of the Battalion marched to Singapore to be based in Godown 23 on Keppel Harbour. We became dock labourers. Now we began to experience hard labour for long hours.

October 1942 - Moved to River Valley camp. The Korean guards had a reputation for their cruelty.

7 November - By train, 20 per truck, to Thailand. The journey actually took until 1 December when we arrived in Banpong. On to Kanchanaburi and then we marched, or walked, across the bridge over the River Kwai and so to Wan Lung. Days and nights of toil lay ahead.

5 March 1943 - Many members of the Battalion returned to Non Pladuck, the base camp for the railway.

22 April - Left Non Pladuck, based at Wampo. We had become track layers. We laid sleepers, rails and hammered in the spikes. Great speedo. From here on the Battalion would never come together again as a unit.

29 December - Group of us taken by truck to Nakawn Pathom to build a large camp for those returning from the railway.

24 March 1944 - Returned with the group to Non Pladuck. Each individual or small group would have unique experiences in both their work and treatment.

5 July - By train to Singapore. Back to River Valley Camp. Still foul. Work on docks.

2 February 1945 - Boarded 'Friedstrummer', a ship of some 3,000 tons, with 1,300 others. No officers. Conditions grim.

6 February - Sailed up Saigon River. Work on docks and in oil storage at Nhabe. Also on airfield extensions at Bien Hoa.

17 July - By train to Nha Trang.

20 July - Left train. Based in empty French barracks. More relaxed regime. Work on pile driving to repair railway bridge, also construction of jetties on river bank.

22 August - Told by Japanese that the war was over.

25 August - By train to Saigon.

27 August - Arrived Saigon - walked to Artillery Barracks. Met up with some others of the Battalion.

8 September - Flew in Dakota from Bien Hoa to Bangkok, then on to Rangoon.

16 September - Boarded ship in Rangoon.

23 October - Arrived in Liverpool.

The Battalion was never to re-assemble.