

HAROLD LILLY

FAR EAST POW HERO

by NICOLA RIPPON

When liberated Far East prisoners-of-war began arriving home in Derbyshire in 1945, one of them told of the stand made by Spondon-born Lieutenant-Colonel Harold Lilly, commanding officer of the Sherwood Foresters, during a forced march in which the prisoners had to cover 85 miles in less than six days.

'Our boys were dropping dead from exhaustion and Lieutenant-Colonel Lilly said, "My men are just too exhausted to march." The Japanese officer said, "Do you know I can have you shot for refusing to march?" Our CO replied, "You'd better shoot me then, because we are not marching." And we didn't march.'

It was a defiant and courageous act, and it was typical of the personal risks that Harold Lilly would take in order to protect the lives of his men. Much of his own life had been devoted to military service and, for Lilly, the responsibilities of command went far beyond the art of leadership. In the protection of his charges, his courage knew no limits.

Harold Hutchinson Lilly was born in Spondon in early 1894. His family lived at The Poplars on Sitwell Street, just a stone's throw from his grandfather's house in Church Street. The family earned a comfortable living from a colour manufactory in Derby, but for young Harold the outbreak of the First World War was to change all that, at least temporarily.

Lilly was commissioned into the Sherwood Foresters in 1915 and was sent to serve in France. At the end of June 1916, as the British Army prepared for an enormous and daring attack on the enemy along the Somme, Lilly's unit was posted opposite the settlement of Gommecourt at the northernmost reach of the British line. They were to begin an



attack on the German frontline on 1st July. At 7.30 in the morning the Foresters left their trenches. But a smokescreen, intended to disguise their advance from the enemy, disorientated many of the British soldiers, and did little to obscure the vision of the waiting Germans. Attempts were made to call off the attack, but for many it was too late. Row after row of British soldiers, many of them from Derbyshire, were wounded or killed by enemy artillery. Among them was the brother of writer Vera Brittain, who was wounded twice that day and awarded the Military Cross for his actions. Many more, like Harold Lilly, were captured and spent the rest of the war in captivity.

If it was a twist of fate that kept Lilly out of the trenches and in relative safety in a war from which so many did not return, then a quarter of a century later an even stranger set of circumstances conspired to place him right in the middle of one of the most humiliating defeats in British history.

In 1934 Lilly had been given command of the Territorial 1st/5th Battalion of the Sherwood Foresters, but the following year had been obliged to relinquish it when his civilian occupation as a director with the Bemrose printing company had taken him to Greece for four years. In May 1939 Lilly again took command of his old battalion, but was on a course in England when they were caught up in Hitler's blitzkrieg through France in 1940.

In October 1941, however, Lilly was back in command when the battalion left Liverpool on a circuitous route for deployment in the Middle East. As their troopship approached Cape Town, news broke of the Japanese attack on the US naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii and their simultaneous invasion of Thailand and British-held Malaya. The supposedly 'impregnable fortress' island of Singapore was now under threat and the Foresters were immediately redeployed to the Far East.

By the time they arrived in Singapore on 29th January 1942, the Japanese had already taken Penang, Kuala Lumpur and Malacca with extraordinary speed, and were preparing their assault on Johore Bahru – the southernmost tip of Malaya, separated from Singapore by only a few miles of sea, and ominously linked by a short causeway. Two days later Johore fell and Singapore came under almost constant aerial bombardment.

Although the troops, local volunteers >



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Left: Lieutenant Colonel Harold Lilly of Spurdur, one of the most courageous figures to emerge from the Far East prison camps of the Second World War

Above: a Japanese soldier stands guard near the entrance to a POW camp on the Burma-Thailand railway

Below: allied prisoners-of-war at a labour camp on the Burma-Thailand railway



and remaining civilians fought for every inch of territory, and all but destroyed anything of military interest, the Japanese advance was unchecked. The final attack came on 8th February and the Japanese seized control of the island in little more than a week. Lilly, most of his battalion and as many as 100,000 other troops as well as European civilians were taken prisoner, while those locals believed to be anti-Japanese, or assisting the Allies were rounded up and executed.

All military personnel were imprisoned in their former barracks, next to Changi gaol. There, Lilly took command, not only of his own men, but also of many others taken prisoner. Life in Changi was extremely harsh, with unsanitary conditions and a shortage of food and medical supplies, but for Lilly and his men conditions were to become even more appalling. They were to be sent to work on the Siam-Burma railway in the jungles of Thailand.

The men were marched for days on end, through mosquito-infested, unbearably humid and searingly hot jungle and it was on this march that Lilly made his courageous stand. He had pointed out to his captors that if they shot him, they would then have to shoot his second-in-command, and then his second-in-command until there were no more men left to shoot. And therefore, no more forced labour. The guards had little choice but to allow the men time to rest.

Eventually the prisoners reached their new camp at Wampo. They were billeted in overcrowded huts, a long walk away from their workplace. In order to

maintain supply lines to the Imperial Forces, the Japanese emperor had ordered that a railway be built between Thailand and Burma. Lilly and his men joined those constructing two viaducts where the Mae Klong and the Kwai Yai rivers converged, near the town of Kanchanaburi.

A lack of basic hygiene and a heavy reliance on food devoid of many vital nutrients, meant the ever-present threat of debilitating and life-threatening diseases and infections like malaria, dysentery, cholera, typhoid, beri-beri and tropical ulcers. Lilly made persistent requests for better food and eventually his camp was one of the first to be supplied with meat.

Again and again, Lilly risked his own safety to protect those under his command. He prevented several executions by his interventions, and volunteered to take numerous beatings on behalf of his men. But while Lilly would take personal risks, he tried to prevent his men from doing likewise. When his captain, Stanley Pavillard, discovered that a cargo of drugs captured from the British was being stored overnight in the camp, he hatched a plan to steal some of it. Lilly vetoed the plan on the grounds that, if caught, the men involved would surely be executed. But Pavillard and four of his men ignored the order and managed to take a large quantity of drugs from the store. When Pavillard told Lilly what they had done he replied, 'I had a notion you would do it, Pav. As a matter of fact, I haven't slept a bloody wink all night!'

In total more than 16,000 prisoners

died during the construction of the railway, amounting to around 38 men lost for each kilometre of railway built. Some 450 officers and men of the 1/5 Battalion, Sherwood Foresters were killed – around a third of their number yet without Lilly's intercession the rate would have been much higher.

After the war, Lilly – who in September 1946 was awarded the OBE for his courage and leadership during imprisonment – returned to Spondon, but even in peacetime he did not leave behind his sense of responsibility for his men.

During their captivity, Boon Pong Sirivejjabhandu, a captain in the Free Siam Army and former local mayor, had assisted the men at Wampo and several other camps in the area. He had helped to smuggle in food, money and medicine. He had often fallen under suspicion but, miraculously, had escaped detection. When Lilly and his colleagues learned that their old comrade had fallen on hard times, they raised some £35,000 in his honour, with which Boon Pong was able to establish his own bus company.

Even today, Lilly's extraordinary efforts to protect them are not forgotten by his men. Sadly, his wartime experiences had shattered his health and he died in October 1954. He was mourned by all those who had served with him, particularly in the Far East where, despite the horrors and deprivations of their captivity, as one of his men remembered, life had always been that little bit better when Lilly was around.

War cemetery in Kanchanaburi, Thailand, the final resting place of many Sherwood Foresters

