

COATS John William

Name: John William Coats

Born: 30 January 1904

Rank: LAC

Service Number: 1044667

Unit/Regiment: 242 Squadron, RAF

Died: 5 October 1964



Pre-War:

Long before the war, John was forged by the hard-working communities of County Durham. He was born on 30 January 1904, and as a young lad of just 13, he started his working life down the pit, going on to work the coal seams at Littleburn Colliery and later spending time working as a sawyer (sawmill worker). Crucially, during these pre-war years, John gave his spare time to the St. John Ambulance as a volunteer. The first aid and medical skills he developed there would later become a lifeline, not just for him, but for countless men in the camps of Southeast Asia. He was married to Elizabeth Thompson in April 1929 and they had a son on 4 December 1932, who they called John.

Wartime experience:

With the outbreak of the Second World War, John stepped forward to serve, enlisting in the Royal Air Force. Because of his background with the St. John Ambulance, he was assigned as a Medical Orderly. He joined No. 242 Squadron, a unit that saw intense action in Europe before being redeployed to the Far East in late 1941 to reinforce Allied defences against the rapid Japanese advance. John was then posted to Java, where he was taken prisoner on 8 March 1942, when Java fell to the Japanese. As a medical orderly, he found his responsibilities multiplied under the worst imaginable conditions. On the 9 February 1943, he was transported onboard the Roko Maru, one of the "Hell Ships". There were many "Hell Ships" which were unmarked, overcrowded, suffocating cargo vessels used to transport prisoners across the Pacific under constant threat of Allied submarine attack. He survived the brutal transit, arriving in Singapore, on 12 February and was sent to Changi prison. He left Changi on 5 May 1943 as part of 'H' Force, Train No. 1, for Siam (now Thailand). Arriving at Ban Pong, Thailand on 9 May 1943, then walked via Kanchanaburi to the Hintock work area of the Railway.



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Medical Defiance: Amidst rampant tropical diseases—cholera, dysentery, malaria, and severe tropical ulcers—John used his training to treat fellow prisoners with virtually no medical supplies. When the railway had been completed, at the end of 1943, John, together with his colleagues were transported back to Singapore, where he remained for the rest of the war. He was admitted to Changi Hospital in November 1944 with malaria and discharged the following month, December 1944.

Post War:

John survived years of forced labour and severe illness, eventually being held in a liberation camp characterised by its bamboo huts and clearing grass. When the war finally ended in August 1945, the long road to recovery began. In late 1945, John boarded the repatriation ship SS Sobieski to make the long voyage back home to the United Kingdom. For his fortitude and dedicated service under fire and in captivity, John was awarded his campaign medals, recognising his vital role as an RAF medical orderly in the Pacific theatre. He returned to civilian life in County Durham, carrying with him the profound gratitude of the comrades he cared for in the jungle. Sadly, John passed away on 5 October 1972 at the age of 60.



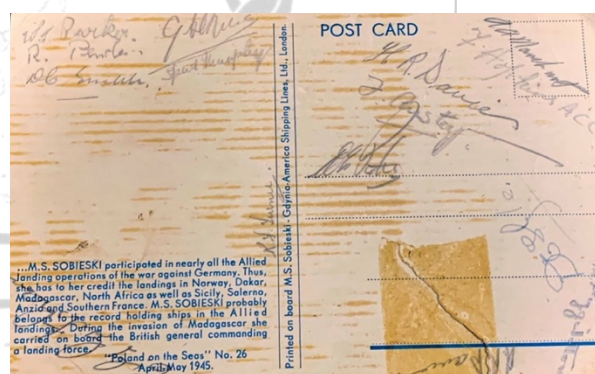
Left: John (3rd from left, sitting down) with colleagues and Thai friends at the end of the war.



Right: John in his St John's Ambulance uniform.



Above: Postcard of the SS Sobieski



Above: Reverse side of the postcard with signatures of John's colleagues

The above information and wording has been provided by Shaun Williams with additional information from Keith Andrews (COFEPOW Researcher) the above has been approved by John Coats (Son) and Carol (Granddaughter).



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