

HOOPER William H

Name: William H Hooper

Born: September 1904

Rank: Sub-Lieutenant

Unit/Regiment: Royal Navy
Reserve

Died: August 1993



Pre-War:

In William's own words from his diary

I was born September 1904 at the Military hospital in Wellington, Nilgri Hills, south India. My father, also William was a Corporal at the Cordite factory in Aruvankadu. Myself and three brothers, were looked after by an Ayah until we all went to boarding school at Lovedale, near Ootacamund. I left school at 16 and apprenticed for five years at the Cordite factory. My technical education was via The International Correspondence School in London. Completing my apprenticeship I became a Marine Engineer, at Turner Morrison of Calcutta on the SS Pasha as 5th Engineer. Travelling to England I studied at the School of Navigation and Engineering, Poplar where I obtained my Chief Engineers Board of Trade Certificate (Steam Ticket) in 1932. Returning to India, I worked for five years on dredgers enlarging the Port of Cochin. Then on to Singapore working for the Straits Steamship Company. After 18 months with them I obtained my Diesel Endorsement.

Wartime experience:

We heard over the BBC radio service that war had been declared in Europe. Preparations for war were being made in Singapore, so I decided to join the RNVR and was commissioned on HMS Laburnum on 5 December 1940, as Sub Lieutenant (E) RNR. I sailed on HMS Kedah 5 December 1940 to 7 May 1941. HMS Kedah, formerly SS Kedah a twin-screw turbine driven ship, used by the Straits Steamship Co., on the run from Singapore to Penang in competition with the railway. The Royal Navy commandeered and fitted the ship with ASDIC, guns, and a depth charge delivery system. A deck hatch was strengthened to take a platform for a seaplane. A seaplane would fly out to the Coaling Station at Sabang, on the northern tip of Sumatra, (Dutch territory) where six German merchant ships were taking shelter.



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Holland was not yet at war with Germany. At first a seaplane would fly out each morning, count them and return. The Germans, would burn oily rags to make plenty of smoke, giving the impression they were raising steam, and would, shortly, proceed out to sea. This became once a week checking they were still there. We patrolled mine fields off the west coast of Singapore, not covered by the 18" guns on the island of Blakang Mati or Sentosa Island. We were there to warn and if necessary, tow any friendly shipping away from the mine fields. Then to Miri, Borneo taking Indian troops over to guard the oil fields. I recognised the Army Major in charge as Arthur Davis a former pupil from the boarding school at Lovedale. I saw him after the war, on our way back to England, both having been released from POW camps. He had been captured in Borneo by the

Japanese. Our ship paid a surprise visit to an island leased to a Japanese tuna fish company. In spite of the captain getting sealed orders and only opening them when under way, there was a big banner with "We welcome you". We were there to try and find out where they stored their fuel and water. Back at the Naval Base in Singapore we were tasked with making sure cold rooms were fully stocked with provisions. All supplied by the Cold Storage Co of Singapore. Then to Kuching, Sarawak to 'show the flag'. Back for a complete overhaul in Singapore's Naval Base. I was then seconded to Department of Supply, Fullerton Building, Singapore 10 May 1941 and continued as an officer till the fall of Singapore to the Japanese on 15 February 1942. Duff Cooper, was tasked with coordinating the war effort in Singapore. I worked with the Inspector of Machinery to ensure idle machinery in Singapore and Johore, had vital war work channelled to them. Japanese forces landed at Kota Bharu. Their advance down the Peninsular was rapid. Aerial bombing and howitzer fire started. The Japanese used an aerial balloon to spot likely targets. Several bombs landed very close to Fullerton Building, where my office was, one fell in the Singapore river sending silt right up onto the roof of the building. I got a job of spotter on this building. When not there, I worked in the dock area looking through the godowns, which had everything a big city needed, for Crown Agents' property. Later the city jail was used as storage because the docks were being bombed. On one occasion I was asked to look out for carboys of ether and chloroform as hospitals were running short, these were located and with the help of the Chinese workers I had been assigned we managed to get seven trucks loads sent where they were needed.

Eventually we were tasked with destroying all cases of alcohol that were in the godowns, taking us over a week to complete, thus denying the Japanese soldiers any. About 10 days before the fall of Singapore, the dock staff were given orders to leave, so there was no one in charge, till one day I noticed British soldiers on guard at one of the entrances, they didn't stop us going into the dock area, but later I was arrested and for a moment thought I was going to be shot. I demanded to see their senior officer, marched back to the gate, others soldiers rounded up the Chinese with me and made them sit down with their hands on their heads.



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I was taken to the guard room where I told an officer that I had orders to do what I was doing. A telephone call confirmed this, apologies all round and I left to get on with my work. Word had got around that some people were cooperating with the Japanese, hence the arrest. Four days before the fall of Singapore I was again arrested by British troops, this time because the Chinese helping me, had left their identity cards with their boss, who was unloading lorries at the General Hospital. As I was being taken to Gate 3, I met a member of the Singapore Harbour Board, who said he would vouch for me and gave me a chit saying "Please allow bearer to pass with lorry loads of medical stores and equipment consigned to the Government", signed G Hatton SGHB 10.2.42. Mr Hatton then told me he was leaving Singapore the same day. I never knew what happened to him after that.

My youngest brother, Edd, Captain RNVR of HMS Jarak another Straits Steamship commandeered by the Royal Navy, happened to call in at Singapore the day before the fall. He said he was escorting the last ship to leave Singapore sailing about 2.00 am the following morning and needed a Chief Engineer (his crew mostly Malay were all signed off). I was unable to sail with Edd as I had been engaged by Mr Del Tufo, Director General, Department of Supply, Malaya, and ordered not to leave. Therein lies another story to be told by Edd.

Fall of Singapore and Internment in Changi and Sime Road Camp

The Governor, Sir Shenton Thomas and his staff moved out of Government House and came to the flats at Fullerton Building. The morning of 15 February 1942, Mr Dawson came on to the roof and asked if I would be spotting that day, I said I would be, he said we were surrendering at 4.00 pm, and would I tell him as soon I saw a Japanese flag flying from the Cathay Building (this building was the first high rise block built in Singapore). British troops were still firing howitzer shells till 5.00 pm, when at last the Japanese flag appeared and it was all over. I informed Mr Dawson. The silence was unbelievable. No Japanese appeared until the next day.

Japanese, with satchels slung over their shoulders containing black ink in bottles and paint brushes were busy writing on white sheets of paper in Japanese and sticking them to seal off offices etc. The notice apparently read something like 'you will be beheaded if you tamper or break this seal'. The British Tobacco Company warehouse was among the buildings being looted. A Japanese officer with a few days growth of beard and blood soaked uniform, ordered his troops to fire at the looters. On Connaught Bridge heads, stuck on bamboo spikes, served as a warning to looters.

Some weeks later, Edd with other prisoners passed through Changi, on their way to the military camp. I only found out after they were led away by their officers. Later on I saw him, with other military prisoners as they were on their way to Siam (Thailand) to build the bridge over the river Kwai. I tried to attract his attention but was stopped by Japanese guards. I was able to get a note telling him his wife, Dode and baby son, Michael, had arrived safely in Durban South Africa and got a reply from him.

I packed a suitcase just in case. All that day Japanese officers looking at maps were being driven around the area. Eventually we were told to parade on the Padang.



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I set off from Fullerton Building, coming across some Chinese, who had been crew on a Blue Funnel Line ship sunk in the harbour asking a merchant service office, what they should do. He said that all British personnel were to parade on the Padang by 10.00 am and as they were Chinese they would have to go to where the Chinese were told to parade. They said 'we are from Liverpool and couldn't speak the language'. I often wonder what happened them.

On the Padang we were told what would happen if we tried to escape and from now on we would eat rice and like it. We were marched off and housed, a 1,000 or so of us at a deserted police station at Kolong on the way to Changi. This police station had housed British troops on retreat and also used by the advancing Japanese and was a filthy mess, however, we were so tired we more or less lay down anywhere and got to sleep. The next day someone smuggled a sack of rice into the station, preparations were made to get it cooked. We realised latrine buckets would have to be used as there was nothing else that could be. A fatigue was formed to empty and take them down to the beach for a thorough clean. The beach was mined making it difficult to reach the sea. Sea water and cleaned buckets were brought to cook in. Preparation was made for fireplaces to do the cooking. This was the first cooked food we had had in four days just plain boiled rice, in sea water.

After a couple of days came the trek to Changi jail. People started off with suitcases, etc, but as we trekked out would go items to make the load easier. At last we passed the Japanese guards and into the jail by the main door. I was looking around for a place to rest when someone said, "Hello", it was the skipper of one of the Ross Island guano boats he said to the others that I was on the oil fired HMS Keda and was just the person to get the boilers going, and it was not very long before one boiler could supply steam to the prison kitchen. I and two friends, Coulson and Christie also marine engineers, with the Straits Steamship Co., stayed on and looked after the boilers, which we did for two years and two months, till we left the Zoo to go to Whipsnade in May 1944. The Zoo was Changi prison with its iron bars and Whipsnade was Sime Road camp which had been an annex RAF camp, built of poles cut from the forest and covered with coconut leaves called atap.

We switched to Tokyo time and each morning had to face west and bow to the Emperor of Japan. Our day started at 4.00 am Tokyo time till 10.00 pm Tokyo time. Looking after the boiler room, we were given a prison cell in the kitchen block, cell no 26. This cell was for one prisoner in British administration times, now three people had to share. The cell had a squat lavatory in one corner, length ways and in the centre there was a concrete block 2'6" x 7'0" and about 2'0" high with a fixed concrete block (at window end of the cell) for your head to rest on (Chinese fashion) on either side of this raised concrete block was a space for two to lie down and rest. We took turns to lie on the concrete bed. There were no rugs or blankets to lie on, just your clothing to keep you warm.

The Boiler House consisted of two vertical Cockran oil fired boilers with two Weir vertical oil pumps and two Weirs feed pumps 100 psi reduced to 25 psi for the rice galleys in the kitchen. Next to the boiler room there was a workshop where two engineers from up country, joined us as fitters. Mr McNab, was in charge of them, he had been Surveyor General of Ships, Singapore.



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It was not long before the oil fuel was going to run out, we asked if we could have oil fuel, but were told that we burned or destroyed it and that we wouldn't get any more, but could use wood, and were told which rubber trees to cut down in order to keep the boilers going, this now meant making a fire grate in each boiler. The only suitable material at hand was prison bars, so back to the Guard House to ask for permission to cut prison bars, with a lot of haggling we were allowed (under supervision) to cut the ones recommended by the Japanese officers. With these bars, building bricks and ordinary clay we built the grates on which to burn rubber logs and mangrove wood. Green rubber logs had to be split in order to burn properly. Mangrove wood made an excellent fuel and gave very little ash, rubber logs gave quite a lot of ash, which necessitated brushing the fire tubes frequently. What with very little food, internal boiler scaling was put off and off until it got impossible to produce the necessary steam to cook with. However, under very difficult and tiring times we managed to keep the steam going.

By this time the women of Singapore had joined us and it was decided to fix them up with a steam supply. Using junk lying about, and old oil drums, I managed to put a 2" pipe line along the prison dividing wall to their camp, the steam would be turned on at the boiler house, and you could hear the rumbling of the steam in the oil drum pipes, with this method they got hot water for washing, making tea, etc.

While in Changi prison I learnt that several rubber planters had been forced to travel with the Japanese frontline troops, they were there to eat food captured from British army dumps before the Japanese would eat it.

News came that the internees of Changi Road prison were to move to Sime Road camp, Mr McNab had to hand the boilers over to the incoming British troops. The evening before the camp moved two people from the army met us, when it was time for the evening meal they were surprised to see what was called an evening meal. Just a minute, one of them said, I'll see what I can get for you. He came back with some slices of bread and some gravy with real lumps of meat. We tucked into this with gusto.

In a way I was lucky, because I had work to keep me occupied. I was able to make things from items found in and around the camps. This included a canvas camp stool for a New Zealand lady. Medical supplies ran out and we didn't get any more throughout our internment.

Letters or Red Cross parcels were unheard of till about the last few months at Sime Road and, even then, articles sent were more or less useless. The few Red Cross parcels for the hut had to be shared. You were given a playing card, this had to be matched up with the card on the Red Cross item. Red Cross letters used to lie around in the Guard House for weeks before the Japanese would release a bag at a time, and these were usually heavily censored.

At Sime Road camp we used to see the B29 American planes fly over Singapore to bomb the naval base. We would take up comfortable positions to watch them drop their bombs, while the Japanese guards would be hiding in slit trenches. On one raid a Japanese battleship and several of her escorts were hit.



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There was nothing to do in the camp except go on to any fatigues that were going, such as mass planting of sweet potatoes and tapioca, sometimes down to the Singapore harbour to load tin ingots or oil pipe on to ships. On one occasion there was a German ship in the harbour. We were not allowed to make contact.

Post War:

In the words of Jennifer Hooper (daughter)

Dad came home to England after his release and stayed with his step brother's family. He met Mum and three weeks and four days later having obtained a special licence, they were married in February 1946.

Dad got a job at Binny Cotton Mill, Bangalore, they sailed to India later that year.

In 1951 they decided to return to England for good.

Dad got a job with the CEGB working at Loughborough and finally at Coventry power station, until his retirement in 1969. A nurse at Coventry had treated dad in Singapore after his release.

He never lost the love of making or repairing things.

Sadly, William passed away in August 1993.

*The information and wording above has been provided by Jennifer Hooper (daughter)
and from her father, William Hooper's, diary.*

If you would like to see the paperwork relating to William H Hooper, please click on the link below, this will take you to the appropriate page within the COFEPOW website.

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