

Albert William John Archer



Albert Archer was born at Lubbins Farm, on Canvey Island in 1918 to Albert and Emily Archer. He was baptized at St Katherines Church, Canvey Island on 16th June 1918. In October 1940 he married Gladys Clare Baker at St Michael's Church Pitsea. Clare at the time was living at 19 Northlands Drive, Pitsea, Essex. This was approximately seven months after he had enlisted into the Royal Navy. Before enlisting he was working at Bata's at East Tilbury in their Department 402. His family were living at 2 Hill Crest Village, Horndon-on-the-Hill, Essex, at the time of the 1939 Housing register. Where Albert had been a member of the local scout group.

Following enlistment his initial training as stoker was aboard the shore establishment, HMS Royal Arthur at Skegness (10 April 1940 – 15 May 1940), transferring on 16 May 1940 to HMS Pembroke IV at the Nore then on 27 July 1940 he was transferred to HMS Pembroke II at Eastchurch. Finally, he was assigned to shore base

HMS Tamar at the Hong Kong Naval Base. HMS Tamar was an executive shore establishment on Hong Kong Island. It was the centre of the Royal Navy's operations in the North Pacific and Oriental waters, headquarters of the Commander-in-chief, Far East, and the military, social and welfare centre of naval activities and had been for a century and a half. It would appear that while with HMS Tamar he was transferred onto HMS Thracian.

His father also named Albert, had also been a Stoker in the Royal Navy, he was assigned to HMS Pembroke II a patrol boat at the time in which he served throughout until 27th February 1919.

Soon after declaring war, on the 8th December 1941 the Japanese's attack Hong Kong, initially attacking the RAF airbase Kai Tak destroying the few aircraft, the naval forces swung into action to support the army garrison on the mainland. The military put up strong resistance.

HMS Thracian was an S-class destroyer built for the Royal Navy during the First World War. The ship took part in the Battle of Hong Kong in December 1941. She was the only destroyer defending the colony after the departure of two other ships to Singapore. On 10th December 1941 She took part in a raid on Japanese crafts attempting to land on Lamma Island. On 13 December, she participated in the evacuation of personnel from Kowloon and Green Island to Aberdeen, Hong Kong Island. On 16th December, she attacked Japanese boats that were preparing for the invasion of Hong Kong, but ran aground at Uk Kok. She was refloated later that day and returned to Aberdeen dockyard. Further into the afternoon, she became the target of Japanese high-level bombing. Due to the damaged caused by running aground and the bombing the ship was deliberately run aground at Ngan Chau. The ships company including Albert left the ship and ordered to take up military duties to assist the Canadian Army Units, unfortunately it resulted in the deaths of many of the crew.

The old wooden depot ship HMS Tamar was taken out of the basin and sunk at a buoy in the harbour on 12th December. The Japanese attempted to negotiate a surrender on the 13th and again on the 17th but both were firmly refused. On the 18th, after a heavy bombardment, the Japanese landed in strength at several points and by the afternoon of 25th December 1941 the Allied army had surrendered.

There is no doubt that Albert was involved in the fighting but on the 26th December 1941, he was taken prisoner and he interned in one of the Hong Kong POW's Camps, prisoner number 4344. While he was a prisoner he wrote at least two letters:

"Dear Glad,

At last I am able to write and tell you that I am quite well and in the best of health as I hope you are. Please do not worry dear as I am alright, I only had a small ick on the back of my left hand but that was months ago and is better now. Give my love to dear old mum and all at Horndon, also gran nell and baby and all the rest of the happy gang.

So long for now darling, chin up – Love always ever yours Bill".

Some months later he was able to write again just before he was scheduled to leave for Hong Kong.

"Dear Glad

Once again sweetheart, I have the pleasure writing to you to let you know I am in the very best of health as I hope you are. I'm sorry there is nothing to write about but that I am leaving for Hong Kon. How is my dear little wife getting on these days. I wish that I could see you once again if it were only for a few minutes or at least get a few letters from home with a few snaps. As I am very sorry to say I lost all my photos. How is everybody keeping at Pitsea. Please give my love to dear old Gran and all the rest at home and please pop up to Horndon and let my dear mother know that I am happy and well. There are thousands of things I would like to ask you but I guess I will have to wait till that happy day when we are together again before I know the answers. Well darling I am sorry I must bring these few lines to a close wishing you good luck tons of love and kisses – Love to all Bill."

Two lovely but heartbreaking letters, especially what was going to happen to him in the following days.

It appears a few days later he was transferred to SS Lisbon Maru along with over 1500 British POWs to be transported to Japan.

On 1 October 1942, the ship was torpedoed by the submarine USS Groper while travelling through the East China Sea. The Japanese troops were evacuated from the ship but the POWs were not; Instead, the hatches were battened down above them and they were left on the listing ship. After 24 hours, as it became apparent that the ship was sinking, the POWs were able to break through the hatch covers. Some were able to escape from the ship before it sank. The ladder from one of the holds to the deck failed, and the Royal Artillery POWs in the hold could not escape; they were last heard singing "It's a Long Way to Tipperary". Survivors reported that Japanese guards first fired on the POWs who reached the deck; and that other Japanese ships used machine guns to fire at POWs who were in the water. Later, however, after some Chinese fishermen started rescuing survivors, the Japanese ships also rescued survivors.

The sinking occurred near the Zhoushan Archipelago, close to the islands of Qingbang and Miaozihu. Upon noticing the black smoke and debris from the wreck, fishermen from these islands spontaneously sailed out to rescue survivors, saving a total of 284 POWs. As more fishing boats approached the wreck site, Japanese ships, which had been shooting at the British POWs in the water, began to pick up survivors. The 384 British POWs rescued by the Chinese fishermen were taken into their homes and temples on the island, where they were provided with food and clothing. Three days later, Japanese gunboats landed on these islands and recaptured 381 of them, while three were hidden and protected by the local residents. They somehow eventually made their way back to the UK in early 1943.

Over 800 of British POWs died either directly as a result of the sinking, or from being shot or otherwise killed by the Japanese guards while swimming away from the wreck. The ship was not marked to alert Allied forces to the nature of its passengers. How Albert was amongst this 800 but we are unsure how he died, other than the date of being killed is recorded as the 2nd October 1942.

At the time his wife Gladys was still living at 19 Northlands Drive, Pitsea, Essex. He is remembered on the Chatham Naval Memorial, reference 61.3 and the Bata war Memorial, Tilbury.

There is a Lisbon Maru memorial in the chapel of St Stephen's College in Hong Kong. It was originally in Stanley Fort, but moved to the College with Hong Kong's change in sovereignty.

Albert was awarded posthumously the 1939-45 Star, War medal 1939-1945 and the Pacific Star.



Albert's Medals

27 November 2024