

Bombardier FREDERICK LEONARD KEY

1073700, 137 Field Regiment, Royal Artillery

Who died at the age of 33 on 3rd June 1943

Husband of Gladys Irene Key, of Tewkesbury, Gloucestershire

Remembered with honour at Thanbyuzayat War Cemetery, Burma (now Myanmar), B4 N.5.

Frederick Leonard Key was born on 5th August 1910 in Tewkesbury to William Arthur Key (also known as *Sailor Key*) and Ellen Annie Key who came originally from Plymouth; the family home was at 46 Church Street (now one of the restored medieval houses). He had two brothers, Albert William (born 1908) and Wilfred Thomas (born 1912).



"Sailor" Key and Family [BW]



Unidentified in a football team [BW]

Frederick was educated at the Tewkesbury Council School and, after leaving school, worked as a farm labourer.

At the age of 17 he enlisted in the Army in Bristol on 31st October 1927, by claiming to be a year older and back dating his year of birth to 1909. Frederick served as a regular soldier in the *Royal Horse Artillery* from 1927 to 1930. After completing his service, returned to civilian life although he was

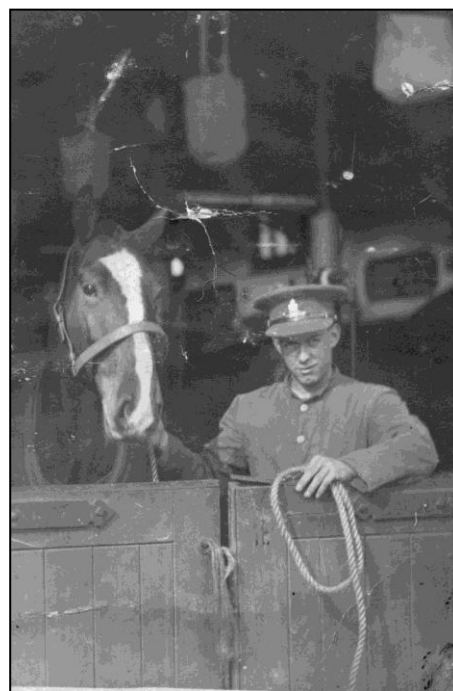


Working for the Catchment Board [BW]

retained on the Army Reserve List. From 1930 to 1939 Frederick worked for the *Severn Catchment Board* as a dredger operator.

Frederick married Gladys Irene Wathen on 26th February 1938 at St Mary's Parish Church in Tewkesbury; the occasion was recorded in an article in the Gloucestershire Echo on the same day. At the time Frederick was living at 34 St Mary's Lane and was working

as a mechanic. After the marriage the couple lived at



Pre-War Army Service [BW]

46 Church Street. Among those present at the wedding were Reginald John Victor Wathen (Gladys' father), Ruby Wathen (Gladys' cousin) and W Key (Frederick's brother).



"Courting" before 1938 [BW]

Frederick and Ellen had a daughter, **Barbara Annie Key**, who was born in the June quarter 1939 - although Barbara never really knew her father.¹

On the outbreak of war, Frederick was recalled to the colours as he was still in the Army Reserve. Access to service records for soldiers who served in the Second World War is restricted by the Ministry of Defence to next of kin or family. It is not, therefore, possible to identify his movements in any detail. However, evidence suggests that he was initially posted to the Royal Engineers but was then transferred on 3rd August 1940 to the Royal Artillery where he served as a Bombardier.

Frederick's *Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC)* record and other military sources confirm that he served

with 137 Field Regiment, Royal Artillery. The regiment was formed in Blackpool on 17th June 1939 as a Territorial Army unit. Being under strength, intakes from Lancashire, Yorkshire, London and other areas were added which probably explains why Frederick was posted to a Lancashire regiment. Much of 1940 and 1941 was spent in training when Frederick served as an instructor on Salisbury Plain; it is also likely that, during this period, Frederick was temporarily seconded to the Lancashire Fusiliers. However, on 27th September 1941, 137 Field Regiment embarked from Liverpool on the *SS Dominion Monarch*, bound for Singapore.

The regiment arrived on 28th November 1941 and, immediately after disembarking, moved inland to Kuala Lumpur to provide artillery support for the 11th Infantry Division (Indian). Soon afterwards, on 7th/8th December 1941, the Japanese invaded the Malayan peninsula. In a battle at *Slim River* north of Kuala Lumpur on 7th January 1942, two thirds of the regiment were cut off and captured when they were outflanked by Japanese forces. Nevertheless, some 200 men managed to escape and linked up with other regiments on the retreat to Singapore. However, all Allied forces on Singapore surrendered on 15th February 1942 and became prisoners of war of the Japanese.

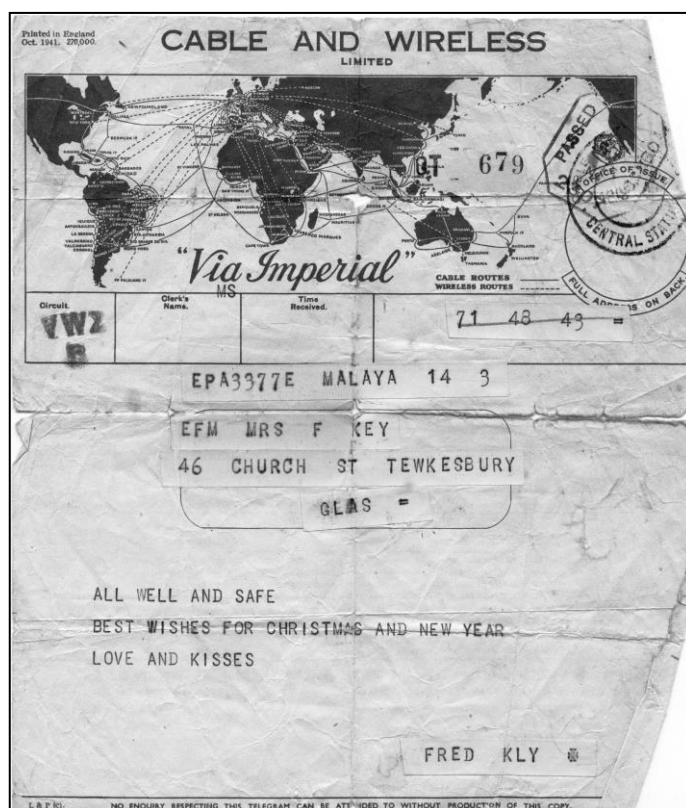
Frederick's date of capture is identified on his military records as 15th February 1942 which suggests that he was one of those who reached Singapore after the battle at *Slim River*. The evidence indicates that he subsequently remained in Singapore; in October 1942 his name appears on a list of prisoners of war being held in the infamous Changi Prison.

Another article appeared in the Gloucestershire Echo on 2nd February 1943 which reported that 'Mrs G Key of 46 Church Street, Tewkesbury has received information from the War Office that her husband, Bombardier Frederick Leonard Key, of an Army Field Regiment is a prisoner of war in a Malayan camp, in Japanese hands, after having heard nothing of him since Christmas 1941'.



A 1945 photo no doubt taken in 1939 [Register]

¹ She is now **Mrs. Peter Wagstaff** and lives in Newtown. In 2005 she supplied us with photographs below.



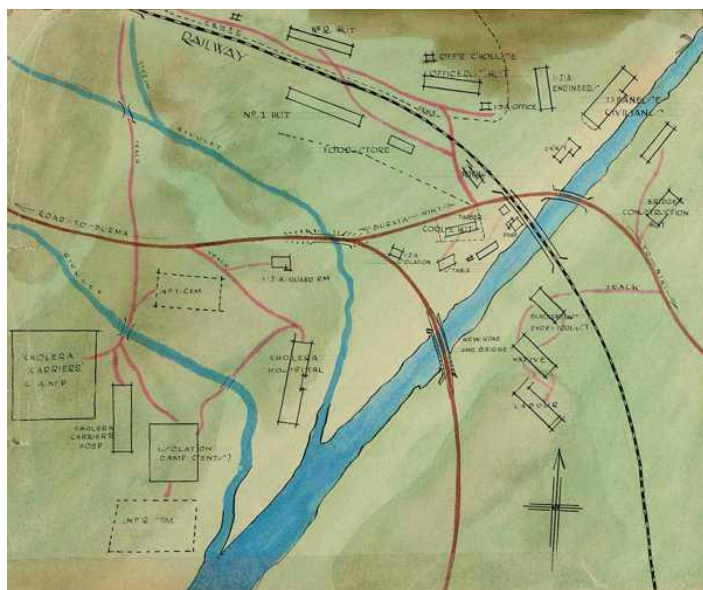
A Telegram perhaps soon after his capture [BW]

Shortly afterwards Frederick became involved in the construction of the notorious Burma (now Myanmar) to Siam (now Thailand) railway, commonly known as the **Death Railway**. The railway was built by Commonwealth, Dutch and American prisoners of war and was a Japanese project driven by the need for improved communications to support the large Japanese army in Burma. During its construction, approximately 13,000 prisoners of war died and were buried along the railway. An estimated 80,000 to 100,000 civilians also died in the course of the project, chiefly forced labour brought from Malaya and the Dutch East Indies or conscripted in Siam (Thailand) and Burma (Myanmar).

Two labour forces, one based in Siam and the other in Burma worked from opposite ends of the line towards the centre. The Japanese aimed to complete the railway in 14 months and work began in June 1942. The two sections of the line finally met near Konkoita towards the end of October 1943 and the completed line, 424 kilometres long, was operational by

December 1943.

The Japanese raised working parties in Singapore and moved them out of the Changi area by luring them on the proposition that those who volunteered would experience much better living and working conditions further north. It was a callous deception. One of those parties comprised 7,000 men made up of 3,666 Australians and 3,334 British and was named *F Force*; they were to suffer the highest casualties of any of the groups (the final death toll for the British prisoners was 61.3%). *F Force* left Changi on 4th April 1943 and reached Songkurai near the Burma border on 24th May 1943 after a long train journey followed by a forced march of 315 km. The majority of the prisoners were in very bad shape, suffering from malaria, dysentery, diarrhoea and general ill health, due to fatigue and lack of proper food.



Plan of the POW Camp [MW see fn3]

F Force had the job of constructing a stretch of about 60 km of the railway; the British contingent at Songkurai was divided into two camps and Frederick was assigned to No 2 Camp which accommodated around 1600 men. This group was charged with completing a 15 km length of the railway, including the famous wooden bridge across the River Kwai (the 1957 film *'The Bridge over the River Kwai'* uses the construction of the railway and bridge as its historical setting²). This area was in the most isolated part of western Siam near to its border with Burma. Around 600 men from this camp died during the construction work, followed by another 600 shortly after they were evacuated. Of the original

² The bridge used in the film, made in Sri Lanka [Ceylon] did not resemble the real bridge.

contingent only some 250 to 300 men survived.³

In late May 1943 cholera broke out in No 2 Camp after spreading from nearby camps and rampaged through the work force. **Frederick died from cholera on 3rd June 1943** in Songkurai No 2 Camp and was buried initially in **Senkrai (Songkurai) Cemetery**. [The Plan shows how important cholera was in its design]



The Temporary Grave



The Permanent Grave

After the war ended the graves of those who died during the construction and maintenance of the Burma to Siam railway were transferred from camp burial grounds and isolated sites along the railway into three concentration cemeteries at **Chungkai and Kanchanaburi** in Thailand and **Thanbyuzayat** in Myanmar (except for the Americans whose remains were repatriated).

Thanbyuzayat War Cemetery was created by the Army Graves Service who transferred to it all the graves along the northern section of the railway, between Moulmein and Nieke. Frederick's remains were exhumed from Senkrai (Songkurai) Cemetery in December 1945 and re-interred in **Thanbyuzayat War Cemetery**. There are now 3,149 Commonwealth and 621 Dutch burials of the Second World War in the cemetery.



CWGC Thanbyuzayat War Cemetery

³ For further study see https://www.britain-at-war.org.uk/ww2/Death_Railway/html/songkurai.htm

From an original establishment of nearly 700 men in 137 Field Regiment, Royal Artillery, 228 are listed as having died during the fighting in Malaya, in captivity and from wounds or disease soon after release.



Figure 1 The Least Tewkesbury could do - a reception for POW's families - is Babara front third from right? [BW]

For Bombardier's wife and daughter, it was 51 years later in 1996 before they could visit the cemetery in Burma [whose hostile government had previously forbidden such visits]. Barbara met Dr. Graham Shephard on this visit as he was mourning his brother, **Major K.J. Hopper Shephard**. [Mrs Key had then remarried and was now Mrs. Newman.]



Bombardier Frederick Leonard Key is remembered on the War Memorial in Tewkesbury and also on the Memorial Plaque for 137 Field Regiment, Royal Artillery in the Church of St John the Evangelist, Church Street, Blackpool.



Researched and Written by Malcolm Waldron [2020]
enhancing the 2005 biography