

**Private CHARLES DONALD HEMMING**

5334431, Royal Berkshire Regiment

who died age 31 on 20 December 1943

Son of Thomas William and Alice Hemming; husband of Nora Hemming, of Forthampton,  
Remembered with honour at THANBYUZAYAT WAR CEMETERY

**Pte. Hemming** had disappeared soon after the Japanese forced the surrender of the "impregnable" fortress of Singapore on 8 February 1942, but nothing was heard until a report in the *Tewkesbury Register* of 22 May 1943.

**FORTHAMPTON SOLDIER P.O.W.: PTE. C.D. HEMMING.**

*Mrs Hemming, of Sanctuary Cottage, Forthampton, on Saturday received a notification that her husband, Pte Charles Donald Hemming, of the Royal Berkshire Regiment, who was reported missing on the 15<sup>th</sup> of February, is a prisoner of war interned in Malaya Camps, (far east). Pte Hemming is 30 years of age and is a native of Pendock. Five and a half years ago, at Forthampton, he married Miss Strawford, and there are two children. Before joining the Army in 1932, he was a gardener in Pendock. He has seen much service and was in the Dunkirk evacuation.*



From this report we can deduce the waste of soldier such as **Charles Hemming** because, no doubt he was driven into the army by need for work in 1932 and had been an experienced, professional soldier who had survived Dunkirk.

This experienced soldier would, no doubt, have been utilised as a slave labourer on the notorious Burma-Siam railway which "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. Two labour forces, one based in Siam and the other in Burma worked from opposite ends of the line towards the centre.

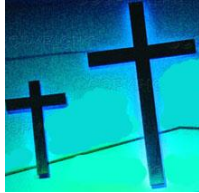
The Japanese aimed at completing the railway in 14 months and work began in October 1942. The line, 424 kilometres long, was completed by December 1943 [the time when **Charles Hemming allegedly died**]. The graves of those who died during the construction and maintenance of the Burma-Siam railway were transferred from camp burial grounds and isolated sites along the railway into three cemeteries at Chungkai and Kanchanaburi in Thailand and Thanbyuzayat. **Thanbyuzayat** became a prisoner of war administration headquarters and base camp in September 1942 and in January 1943 a base hospital was organised for the sick. There are now 3,149 Commonwealth servicemen buried here."<sup>1</sup> We can only imagine the horror of the last 22 months of his life and death. In 1996 permission was obtained from the isolationist Burmese Government for war widows to visit **Thanbyuzayat**. Mrs. Wagstaffe, daughter of **F.L. Key**, visited with her mother and the widow of **Charles Hemming**, then Mrs Randall. Dr. Shephard, brother of **Captain Shephard**, killed whilst fighting the Japanese in battle, was also there.

**Subsequent Research**

**PTO**

<sup>1</sup> CWGC website.

Assisted by his Great-Grand-daughter, Sarah Andrew [now a History Teacher]



THAILAND-BURMA RAILWAY CENTRE ON-LINE GRAVE SEARCH

PTE HEMMING CHARLES DONALD  
ROYAL BERKSHIRE REGT.

"F" Force

Death: 20TH DECEMBER 1943 at THANBAYA  
HOSPITAL CAMP,

Buried: BURMA THANBAYA CEMETERY,  
GRAVE NO. 732

Cause: DYSENTERY, BERI

Aged: 31

Wife: NORA HEMMING, of FORTHAMPTON  
War Cemetery: THANBYUZAYAT, BURMA

### A Very Moving Letter to the Widow by former POW, Sydney Roper

Singapore, 20 September 1945

My Dear Nora,

*The friendship which existed between Charles and myself lasted until his end, on the Sunday before Christmas 1943.*

*We arrived on 31st January 1942, just a fortnight before the Island fell.*

*The battle was very brief, and not particularly dangerous, Charles was with the Colonel and they both showed remarkable bravery and coolness.*

*At Easter 1943, a party of 18 divisions was moved North to Thailand to build the Railway.*

*For six months things were bad, nevertheless Charles and myself did fairly well. Amid much disease, we both kept very fit and comparatively cheerful.*

*We all went to a hospital camp in Burma, this was September 1943. We went on to hospital staff. However, at this camp we both developed dysentery and we were both very ill.*

*His body was cremated ....*

*It was done very charmingly for the Padre is a great man and loved Charles very much.*

*There was, however, little enough because it was all lost in battle or taken by the Japs. We both lost all our valuables, he lost his wallet, photographs etc.*

*I have therefore, in my possession only his spoon with his regimental number on it and the leather covered mirror.*



He prized it and I have kept it for you with one or two of your letters.  
God bless you and the children; you have my Love my Admiration and my Sympathy.

Sincerely yours, *Sidney Roper.*



Pte. Hemming's Rescued Belongings [Sarah Andrew]



Figure 1  
His

Regimental Souvenirs [S Andrew]

## The Professional Soldier: His Military & Home Life [S. Andrew]



*The Older Child is Sarah's Grandmother*

Monday or yesterday.

# Widows visit PoW graves in Burma

960423/4      960423/32

by Sarah Fitzgerald

Two war widows have made an emotional journey to Burma to visit their husbands' graves for the first time in 50 years.

Mrs Nora Randall and Mrs Gladys Newman, both 81, joined one of the first parties of Westerners to be allowed to visit the Burma graves.

Their husbands were both prisoners of war who were forced to help build the "railway of death" in Burma after being captured by the Japanese.

Mrs Randall, the oldest member of the party, said: "The cemetery was beautiful.

"The graves have been wonderfully tended, which was good because we didn't really know what to expect."

Mrs Randall, of Walkley Road, Tewkesbury, last

two children. Mrs Newman, of Hanover Court, Tewkesbury, lost her husband Mr Frederick Key in 1943.

Both men were 33 years old when they died.

Mrs Newman, who was accompanied on the trip by her daughter Mrs Barbara Wagstaff, said: "We have waited so long to go that I never thought it would really happen.

"It has been impossible to get there in the past and it was difficult this time.

"There was a lot of paperwork that had to be done. It was a very emotional moment when we found the graves."

Both widows laid sprays of poppies at the graves.

The coach trip of 59 people was organised by the Royal British Legion, which has been campaigning for years to allow veterans, widows and former prisoners of war to travel to Burma to visit its war cemeteries.

**Gladys Newman**      **Nora Randall**

saw her husband – regular soldier Mr Charles Hemming – when he left to help train reserves at the beginning of the war.

He died in 1942, leaving Mrs Randall and their

*A Tardy Post-Script: 1991 the First Opportunity for Widow, Mrs Randall, to Visit the graves*