Bernard ‘Bunny’ Bowers

Corporal, 570842

RAF



Bernard Ernest Bowers, known as Bunny, was born in Little Wratting on 8th November, 1920, the son of George Ernest Bowers and his wife Ethel. His father was employed as a gardener at Wratting Croft and his mother worked at the clothing factory at Chauntry Mills.

Bunny attended the school in Great Wratting before making the move to the secondary school in nearby Haverhill, however he no intention of following in his father’s footsteps in horticulture when he left school. Instead, he sat the RAF Apprentices Entry Exam in January 1937 and after a successful outcome, he became an apprentice at Halton, near Aylesbury. Following the outbreak of war

in Sept 1939, the three-year course was cut short by a few months and in the same month he passed out as a qualified Air Frame Fitter. Bunny was then posted to Henlow where he worked on crashed Hurricanes.

By December 1939, he had been posted to India. He travelled to Cherbourg followed by an overnight train to Marseilles where a troopship was waiting to take them on the final part of the journey and so it was that Bunny spent Christmas, 1939 somewhere in the Mediterranean Sea.

RAF Ambala is located in the north of India at possibly the farthest point from the coast but it was here that Bunny was involved with the maintenance of planes tasked with coastal surveillance. His next posting was with the Blenheim-equipped fighter, 27 squadron at RAF Risalpur on the North West frontier of India.

In February 1941, the squadron moved to Malaya. Their first job was to open up the civil Kallang airport in Singapore before moving to Butterworth, a settlement in Penang, for three months. At this time there was no hint of a threat from the Japanese and the squadron moved further north to Sungei Patani.

When the Japanese invaded Malaya on 8 December 1941, the squadron attempted to attack the invasion fleet at Kota Bahru but was foiled by poor weather. The Japanese struck next, destroying eight Blenheims on the ground on 8th December, and the squadron withdrew south to Butterworth, before a second move all the way back to Singapore. Bunny remembers his journey to Singapore was in a Chinese Ford lorry. To describe it as a Ford is rather a stretch of the imagination for the vehicle body was built of wood with additional seats on the outside of the driver's cab. Certainly not a comfortable, or safe, journey.

With the RAF depleted to a bare handful of aircraft and because he had an, albeit brief, experience of working on Hurricanes, Bunny was sent to Java. Initially at Yogyakarta working with the 153 Maintenance Unit, Bunny remembers they were supposed to catch a boat from Chilacap but by a stroke of luck they missed it. This was a lucky escape as it was sunk by the Japanese after it sailed. However, they were then taken captive by the Japanese on 8th March 1942, some three weeks after the Surrender in Singapore. He was assigned the POW number J/641 and the POWs assembled at the racecourse.

Initially the men were assigned to working parties on the land but then they were tasked with building an airstrip on a coral reef. This was the start of a bad spell for Bunny. There was no way to get materials from Japanese ships and the

men had to get into the sea and push the barrels that were dropped overboard to the beach and then roll them up the beach to where they were required. Bunny was not a strong swimmer so this was a terrifying experience. Coupled with this, over half of the 1000 men doing this work caught dysentery. After spending six months in the dysentery hut, Bunny was considered almost fit to return to work but he was included in a sick draft and sent to a camp at Batavia, still in Java, where he was able to further regain his fitness. On the 8th January 1945, Bunny travelled on the OSK Ferry back to Singapore and the River Valley Camp.

It was in the River Valley Camp that he came across several local men – Archie Pannell, Fred Baker and Cyril Turner, all from Haverhill and the first Suffolk men Bunny had met since 1942. One can only imagine how it must have been for this group of men to be able to talk to each other about places and people they all knew. Bunny recalls that it was very difficult to be optimistic about the future but this must have helped.

It was 2nd November, 1945 when Bunny was liberated, several, what must have been torturous, weeks after the Japanese Surrender on 15th August. He was 12 stones when he left home and returned weighing just five.

His journey home was by boat into Southampton. Bunny remembers how well organised his arrival was. Straight off the boat onto a waiting train which took them to Wolverhampton and then on to Cosford for processing. They were given telegram forms so they could send messages home. After receiving a medical, being paid, being interviewed and provided with clothing, they were issued a railway warrant for the final leg of the journey home.

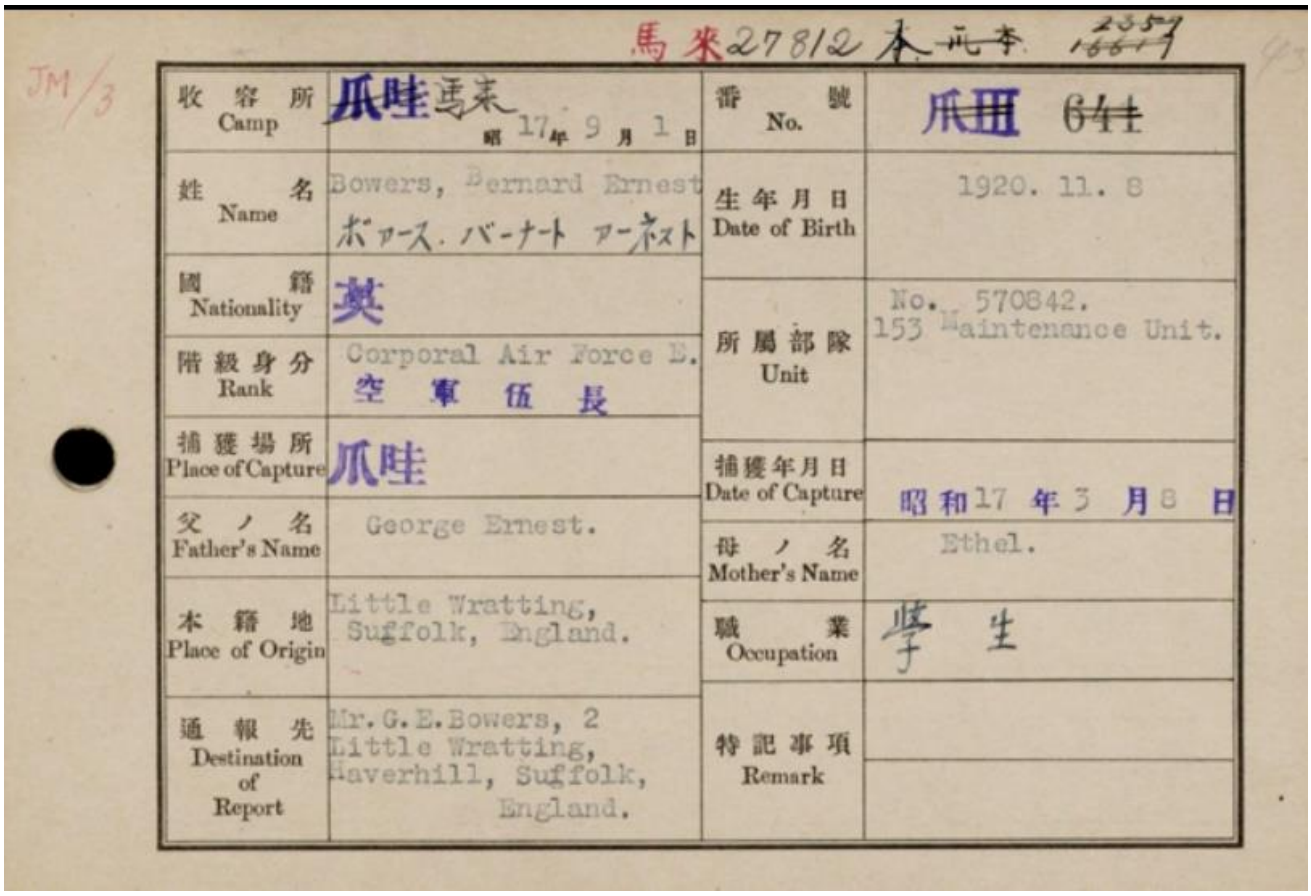
Of course, everyone was over the moon when he got home. During the first month he steadily regained his fitness, helped by the double rations he was entitled to, but perhaps more important were the daily morning walks when he met up with fellow FEPOW Jack Darking. They both took their dogs and ended up at the Servicemen's Club for a game of snooker and a pint of beer.

Life after being a FEPOW was not plain sailing and he remembers needing treatment for parasitic worms – a common complaint with many returning from incarceration in the Far East. He recalls having to undergo robust treatment that involved periods of 48 hours starvation and drug treatment. One course of treatment lasted 5 days and patients were allowed home for the weekend. When they returned the following Monday if the treatment hadn't been

successful they went through it all again. Bunny remembers he had to suffer this for thirteen weeks.

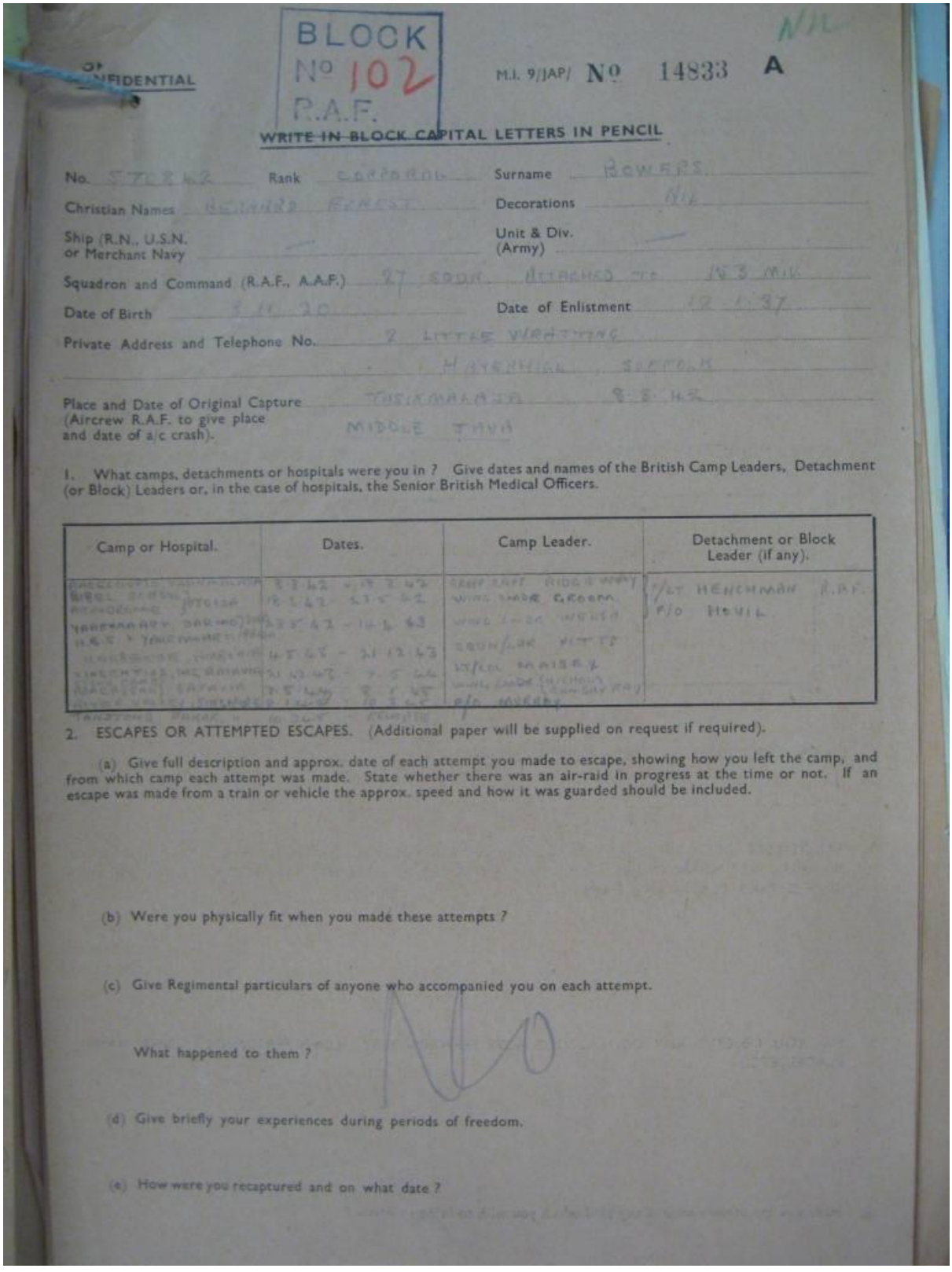
In 1946, Bunny married Gwen Shipp. He was to remain in the RAF, not retiring until he reached 55 years of age. Passed as fit for flying Bunny became the crew chief on V bombers.

Bunny's Japanese Prisoner of War Card



収容所 Camp	爪哇馬来 昭17年9月1日	番號 No.	爪田 641
姓名 Name	Bowers, Bernard Ernest ボァース. バーナート アーネスト	生年月日 Date of Birth	1920. 11. 8
國籍 Nationality	英	所属部隊 Unit	No. 570842. 153 Maintenance Unit.
階級身分 Rank	Corporal Air Force E. 空軍伍長		
捕獲場所 Place of Capture	爪哇	捕獲年月日 Date of Capture	昭和17年3月8日
父ノ名 Father's Name	George Ernest.	母ノ名 Mother's Name	Ethel.
本籍地 Place of Origin	Little Wratting, Suffolk, England.	職業 Occupation	學生
通報先 Destination of Report	Mr. G. E. Bowers, 2 Little Wratting, Haverhill, Suffolk, England.	特記事項 Remark	

Fellow dog walker, Jack Darking, served with the 5th Suffolks and had been liberated in Thailand on 30th August 1942, some 2 months before Bunny.



CONFIDENTIAL

BLOCK No 102 R.A.F.

M.I. 9/JAP/ No 14833 A

NIL

WRITE IN BLOCK CAPITAL LETTERS IN PENCIL

No. 577242 Rank CORPORAL Surname BOWERS

Christian Names REGINALD ERNEST Decorations NIL

Ship (R.N., U.S.N. or Merchant Navy) Unit & Div. (Army)

Squadron and Command (R.A.F., A.A.F.) 27 SQDN ATTACHED 7TH 153 MU

Date of Birth 5.11.20 Date of Enlistment 12.1.37

Private Address and Telephone No. 2 LITTLE WRATTING HAVERHILL SUFFOLK

Place and Date of Original Capture (Aircrew R.A.F. to give place and date of a/c crash). TOSIMA MAIN 9.8.42 MIDDLE JAVA

1. What camps, detachments or hospitals were you in ? Give dates and names of the British Camp Leaders, Detachment (or Block) Leaders or, in the case of hospitals, the Senior British Medical Officers.

Camp or Hospital.	Dates.	Camp Leader.	Detachment or Block Leader (if any).
			F/LT HENCHMAN R.A.F. F/O HEWIL

2. ESCAPES OR ATTEMPTED ESCAPES. (Additional paper will be supplied on request if required).

(a) Give full description and approx. date of each attempt you made to escape, showing how you left the camp, and from which camp each attempt was made. State whether there was an air-raid in progress at the time or not. If an escape was made from a train or vehicle the approx. speed and how it was guarded should be included.

(b) Were you physically fit when you made these attempts ?

(c) Give Regimental particulars of anyone who accompanied you on each attempt.

What happened to them ?

NIL

(d) Give briefly your experiences during periods of freedom.

(e) How were you recaptured and on what date ?

This is a copy of the questionnaire that Bunny completed after his liberation. It is not very clear as they were completed in pencil but it does provide a list of the camps that Bunny experienced during the 3 ½ years he spent as a Japanese Prisoner of War.