Padre John NOEL Duckworth

2nd Battalion, The Cambridgeshire Regiment



In the fierce fighting that took place at Batu Pahat in Jahore between 16th and 26th January 1942 many men from the 2nd Battalion, Cambridgeshire Regiment were seriously wounded.

The Battalion had to withdraw from the town and head for Singapore Island but reaching Senggarang on the 26th January, they came under heavy fire and with transport destroyed, about forty wounded men who could not be evacuated were left behind under the care of Padre (John) Noel Duckworth, two doctors and eleven orderlies. Eric Thake from Haverhill was one of these badly wounded men.

Those who volunteered to stay with the wounded were particularly brave as it was known that the Japanese had killed many wounded men previously.

Photo left: Padre Duckworth

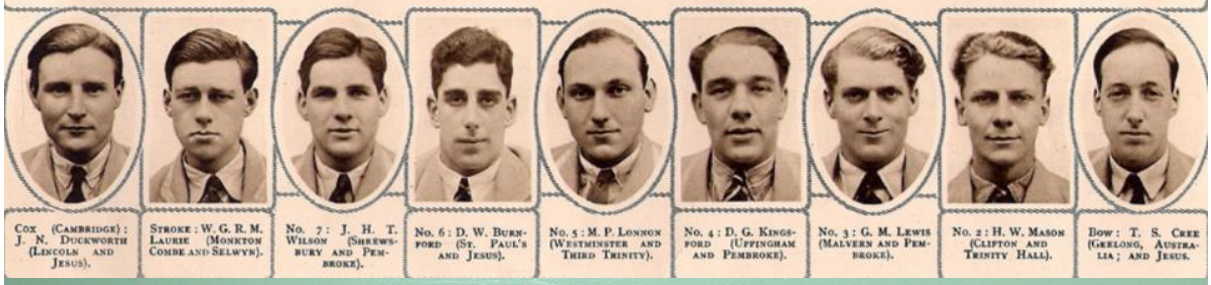
It was a stroke of luck that **Padre (John) Noel Duckworth** was with the men when they were captured on 27th January 1942 and his presence was almost certainly instrumental in their survival. Read on to find out why…

Noel Duckworth was born on 25th December 1912, the son of a clergyman. He and two brothers were all later ordained and all three became Canons.

In 1931, the 5 ft. 2 in. tall Noel went to Jesus College, Cambridge and was soon involved with the Boat Club. In 1934, he was selected to cox Cambridge in the Boat Race. It was perhaps the best crew of the era and they won easily, beating the course record by 26 seconds with a time of 18 minutes and 3 seconds. They went on to win again in 1935 and 1936.



CAMBRIDGE PRACTISING AT CHISWICK: (FROM LEFT TO RIGHT) DUCKWORTH (COX), LAURIE (STROKE), WILSON (7), BURNFORD (6), LONNON (5), KINGSFORD (4), LEWIS (3), MASON (2), AND CREE (BOW).



Cox (Cambridge): J. N. Duckworth (Lincoln and Jesus). Stroke: W. G. R. M. Laurie (Monkton Combe and Selwyn). No. 7: J. H. T. Wilson (Shrewsbury and Pembroke). No. 6: D. W. Burnford (St. Paul's and Jesus). No. 5: M. P. Lonnon (Westminster and Third Trinity). No. 4: D. G. Kingsford (Uppingham and Pembroke). No. 3: G. M. Lewis (Malvern and Pembroke). No. 2: H. W. Mason (Clifton and Trinity Hall). Bow: T. S. Cree (Geelong, Australia; and Jesus.



Noel was selected to cox the British eight in the 1936 Berlin Olympics. In the final they were placed fourth behind the USA, Italy and Germany.

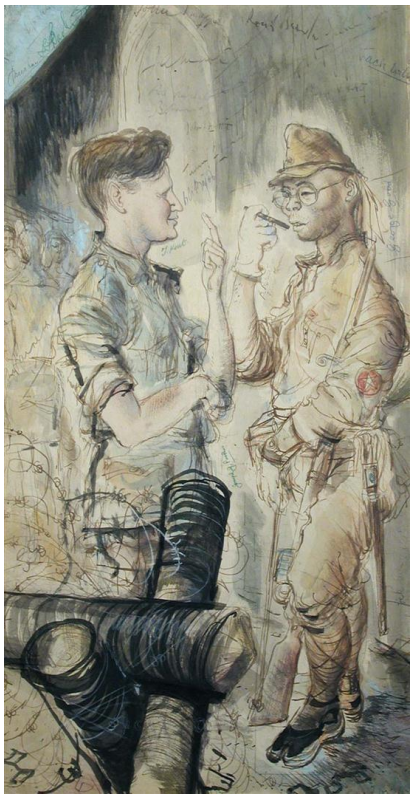
After the Olympics he was ordained and went to work at a parish in Hull, until he joined the 2nd Battalion Cambridgeshire Regiment as its Padre shortly before the Second World War and went with them when they were sent to the Far East in 1941.

1942: It was inevitable that the Japanese would find the wounded men who were being cared for by the Padre Duckworth and the doctors and medical orderlies who had volunteered to stay with him.

When they were captured on 27th January 1942, it is said that Padre Duckworth flayed the Japanese with such a harsh tongue that they thought twice about killing them instantly. They beat him for his verbal challenges but they did not kill the wounded men he had stayed behind to protect and they were all eventually brought to the comparative safety of Padu Jail in Kuala Lumpur.

One of the doctors who had also stayed behind later attested "I firmly believe that Noel's fame as a rowing man saved all our lives". This was a reference to the fact that the Japanese officer in charge recognised Padre Duckworth as the famous Cambridge cox. A Japanese crew from Tokyo University had participated in the 1936 Berlin Olympics, as well as Henley prior to that. Many Japanese Officers had studied at Tokyo University so it is entirely likely that they knew Noel Duckworth.

After the fall of Singapore to the Japanese, Noel was moved to Changi Jail and in 1943 was sent into Thailand and Burma on the construction of the notorious Burma Railway. There he tended hundreds of men dying from disease and starvation.



This ink and watercolor drawing by artist Ronald Searle (himself a Japanese POW) shows prisoner of war Padre Noel Duckworth selling a Parker Pen to his Japanese prison guard. It is remarkable that he single-handedly could run a black market in Pudu Jail and use the proceeds to buy food for his fellow prisoners of war.

There are many endearing stories told about Padre Duckworth. Here is one:

'His men sought solace in cigarettes, which they had to make themselves. Bible pages were ideal for this purpose and the soldiers asked their chaplain for permission to use them. Duckworth assented with the proviso that they read every word on the pages first!'

Immediately after the war, he was appointed Chaplain of St John's College, Cambridge. In 1948 he took a post as Chaplain and Dean of the then newly created University of Ghana. Here, apart from his university work he became a canon in Accra cathedral. He returned to England in 1957 to become Chaplain at Pocklington School in Yorkshire. He joined the newly founded Churchill College in 1961, where he helped found both the College Chapel and Churchill College Boat Club. He retired in 1973.

Noel Duckworth was the subject of This Is Your Life on 12th January 1959 when, taken to the BBC Television Theatre by his friend the rowing commentator John Snagge, he was surprised by Eamonn Andrews. He was also the subject of Desert Island Discs on 9 October 1961.

Following his death in 1980 his obituary in The Times noted one of his vital skills:

> *Padre Duckworth was one of those small men with a giant personality. The skill which he acquired in getting the best out of his oarsmen by exhorting, cajoling, and if need be, verbally castigating, he later employed during the bleak years in prisoner of war camps both to sustain his fellow prisoners, and to extract those small concessions from the Japanese guards which were so vital to survival.*

