



### **A VJ Day 2025 tribute to Harry Lucas Royal Artillery 1905-1949**

With the 80th anniversary commemorations of VJ Day nearly upon us I am completing a history of the outstanding war service of my grandfather Harry (born Henry) James Lucas - a staff sergeant in the Royal Artillery 79th Light Anti Aircraft Battery. After stalwart combat with their mobile bofors guns defending reservoirs, airfields and aircraft factories during the Battle of Britain the unit was despatched to the Far East to support Australian troops in the February 1942 defence of Timor as part of the "Sparrow Force". The heroic resistance of these troops, many from Western Australia, under Colonel Leggatt was credited with slowing the Japanese advance on the Great Southern Land and the service of the British and Australian comrades is well documented by Tony Paley in his 1991 book "The Sparrows" (ISBN 1-85421-145-5)

The force lost 82 soldiers with over 130 seriously injured and after surrendering in the face of insurmountable Japanese reinforcements, survivors of the 79th battery were imprisoned first on Timor before transportation to Singapore, then loaded onto the infamous hellship Dai Nichi Maru and taken to work camps in Japan. Harry survived the battle and the journey which saw so many deaths at sea and was lodged injured in a camp near Fukuoka after being thrown off the deck on disembarkation.

When he died tragically early at 43 years of age four years after the war his Royal Artillery commanding officer Major James Dempsey wrote immediately to my grandmother with his condolences telling her how Harry's logistics abilities and leadership had ensured the successful unloading - whilst under bombardment - of the guns, tractors and ammunition which had been used in the bloody defence of the Pengfui aerodrome and subsequent retreat under fire. Major Dempsey wrote to "higher authority" recommending recognition of Harry's service in Timor and in his recollection of life in captivity also mentions how Harry's songs and love of organising football games between the Allied prisoners had been vital in maintaining morale through the "dark days" of forced labour in coal mines and constructing airfield runways out of concrete girders around the City of Nagasaki. Harry, who was older than many of his comrades, must have seen much cruelty and death at the hands of the Japanese guards. There are records revealing he testified at the War Crimes Tribunal held by the Australians which led to the execution of his camp commandant.

On his return to Walton on Thames, Harry walked back quietly into his kitchen to greet his wife and 18 year old son and then promptly left for his beloved Walton and Hersham football club. He took on management of the team, purchased an open top Triumph sports car and led his players to four consecutive Corinthian League championships before he was rewarded with an inscribed Smith's gold watch which I now hold and treasure. He died four years before my birth from a heart attack on October 15th 1949 as the whistle blew

and he stood to clap his men from the field. It was almost 10 years to the day since he had joined the 79th Anti Aircraft battery.

A winner on the football field, against the Luftwaffe raiders, against Japanese dive bombers and overcoming the monstrous cruelties and torture of imprisonment, he won the hearts of his men and his superiors with his devotion to duty, sportsmanship and good humour. At his funeral 400 attended including Sir Stanley Rous, the famous secretary of the Football Association and later FIFA.

On VJ Day my family will look again at our photos of Harry, clasp the gold watch and read again the words of Major Dempsey as well as the letter Harry wrote to my grandmother on the eve of his departure for the Far East in December 1941 in which he poured out his love for her and promised to save his service earnings and have them sent back to help with the housekeeping.

I will then continue to try and learn how Harry and his comrades survived on Timor and in the Fukuoka prison camp as the Japanese Government's own records of those dark days have been flagged for release. I will also make contact with the Australian War Memorial and its historians to learn if their records show whether Harry ever received the famous army slouch hat and badge which was his entitlement as a soldier serving under Australian command.

The memory of his heroism, his sacrifice and that of his comrades will burn ever brightly.

Richard James Lucas

Ulverston  
7th August 2025