

Straits Settlement Marine Police Launch (SSP4)

Escaped Singapore 13 February 1942 – reached Indragiri River, Sumatra

The invasion of Malaya and Singapore, from the time of the first landings in Northern Malaya on 8 December 1941, was swift and brutal. Within eight weeks the Japanese had taken Malaya and landed on the island of Singapore which had become intensely overcrowded by tens of thousands of fleeing civilians of all races from Malaya plus almost 100,000 servicemen.

By the second week of February 1942 the Japanese army was advancing across Singapore Island and a chaotic evacuation of mainly Europeans, Eurasians and a small number of influential Chinese was underway from the port in front of what is today's CBD.

Literally any ocean-going vessel of any size remaining in Singapore harbour was ultimately enlisted by the authorities to evacuate people, under what had become almost constant bombing and machine gunning by Japanese planes. Singapore itself was ablaze, columns of black smoke rose thousands of feet in the air and the streets were littered with the dead and dying.

People desperately clamoured for departure passes from the Colonial government authorities (men under 40 years of age had been banned from leaving the Island for months and women had not been publicly encouraged to leave because it would '... adversely affect morale ...'!) to board any ship leaving the Island. By 11 January 1942 even the rather hidebound men in authority saw the absurdity of their bureaucratic incompetence and more passes were issued for civilian men and women to leave, so finally some real urgency entered the situation.

About 50 vessels of all sizes - from the quite large refrigerated cargo ship "SS. Empire Star" (525 feet and 12,656 tons) through a range of mid-sized merchant vessels down to some small craft like the "SS. Tandjong Pinang" (which at 97 feet only just qualified in the definition for a 'ship') – were assembled to leave as a convoy during the 48-hour period of 11 – 13 February 1942. There were also several Naval ships of varying sizes identified as evacuation vessels.

The naval ships, apart from a couple of destroyers, which briefly escorted the bigger merchant ships like the 'SS Empire Star' and 'SS Gorgon' after their departure from Singapore, included auxiliary (i.e. merchant ships which had been requisitioned) patrol ships, auxiliary minesweepers, flat bottomed ex-Yangste River gunboats and ex Yangste river passenger ships, RAF fast launches and even a large tug like the 'HMS Yin Ping'. Some of these Naval ships had almost exclusively a complement of service personnel on board – but also a few civilians.

There was also an assortment of smaller launches, private yachts, junks, twakows and even tiny praus which would be used to escape the island before 15 February 1942.

Of the 50 or so ships leaving in the last window of opportunity, as many had thought, only about ten or 15 would make it to safety in Batavia and up the Indragiri River on the east coast of Sumatra. The other 40 ships would be sunk, run aground, or captured at sea by the Japanese navy with many hundreds (in fact estimated to be around 2,000) of their passengers and crew killed, or taken prisoner to face three and a half years of extremely harsh, malnourished and medically deprived treatment in Internment or POW camps in Sumatra and elsewhere. Many of these women, children and men would die during the remainder of the War in these cruel camps.

This account is of the escape of a small Straits Settlement Police launch of about 30 feet which was commandeered by seven British servicemen – six RASC or Royal Artillery and one RAMC man – which made it through the islands south of Singapore to the Indragiri River.

Straits Settlement Police Launches

Singapore in 1942 was part of what was classified as the Straits Settlements – this comprised Singapore, Malacca, Penang & province Wellesley, Christmas Island, Dinding, Labuan and the Cocos Islands. These territories had come under direct British control in 1867 whilst the remainder of Malaya was classified as the Federated Malay States where the British were officially advisors to the Malay Sultans.

The Straits Settlements Police – Marine Division were based at the mouth of the Singapore River and possessed a small number of small/medium launches for the policing of smuggling and water borne crime.

One of the launches was SSP4 which appears, from its capacity for passengers, to have been some 30 feet in length.

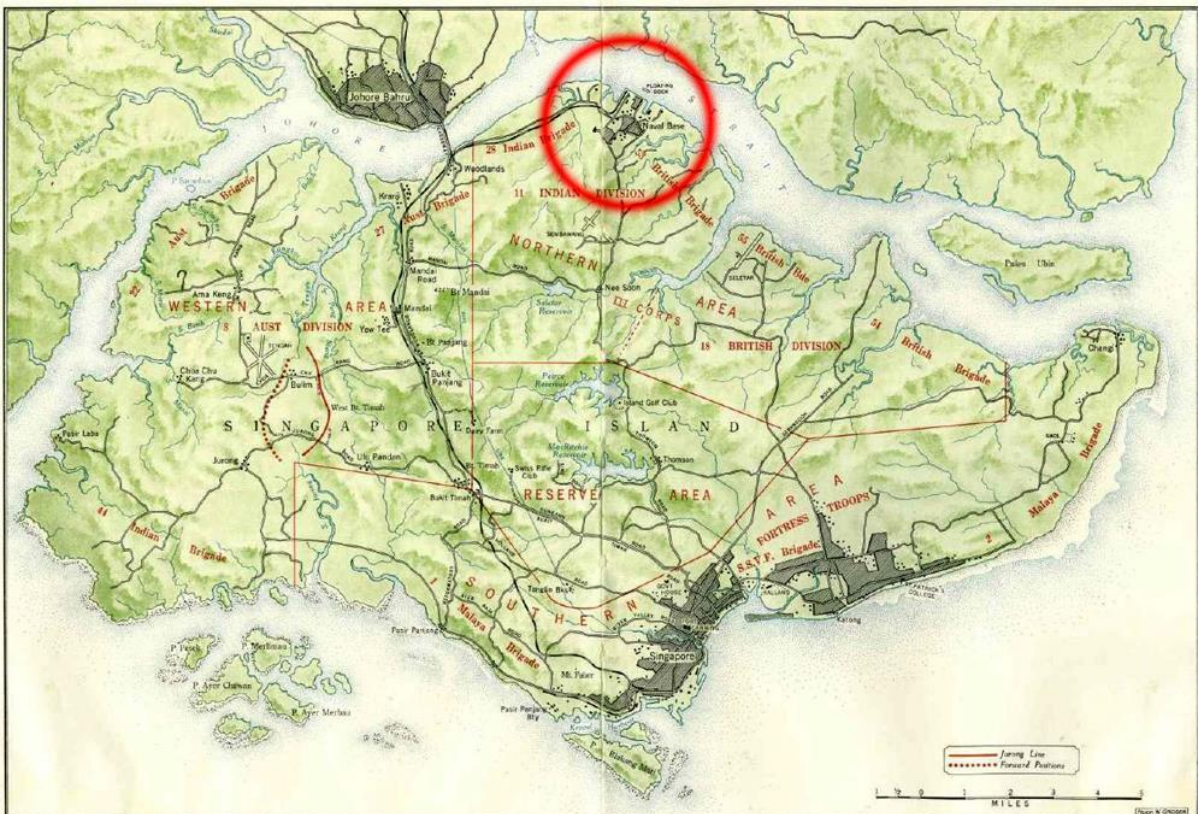


Straits settlements (Singapore) Marine Police Station

Also mentioned in this memorial document to the men who made the escape, will be the area known as Tanjong Rhu, on the south side of Singapore Island, which was in 1942 at the mouth of the Kallang River where there was also a major boatbuilding company that operated in Singapore prior to the Second World War. This was the British firm, Thorneycroft Ltd, which had a sizeable shipbuilding yard. Tanjong Rhu (named after the Casuarina trees which grew along that part of the coast) was essentially not much more than a large sandspit at the mouth of the Kallang River.



This area was occupied by small fishermen houses and a kampong [it is now well within the reclaimed area of Singapore CBD but retains its original name]. Thorneycroft built and repaired many small craft for the Singapore authorities and constructed the flotilla of Fairmile design Royal Navy patrol boats ranging from 72 – 112 feet (HDMLs and HMMLs) for the Royal Navy in Singapore. It also serviced larger vessels such as tugboats and tankers.



Map of Singapore at time of Japanese invasion – IGNORE RED CIRCLE - Tanjong Rhu is on the south coast and is the grey horizontal piece of land just to the right of the main harbour ‘indentation’.



Tanjong Rhu (top of photo) in 1945 (Kallang Aerodrome at top left)



Tanjong Rhu in 1964.

Escape on SSP4

For the story of the escape of this group of servicemen on SSP4 we are indebted to Stuart Morgan - the son of Acting Sergeant Albert Morgan, RAMC, attached to the 1st Malayan Motor Ambulance Company - who has provided the following description written by Albert in the 1990s of his joining up with a group of either RASC or Royal Artillery servicemen under the command of a Lt R. Gow for their escape on Thursday 13 February 1942 .

From handwritten names on the rear of a photo that Albert Morgan kept with him during the war the names of the men who began the journey from Tanjong Rhu were,

- Lt. R. Gow
- Bert Serjent
- Jack Glen
- Taffy Grey (could be Opey)
- Eddy Edmunds
- Topper Brown
- Albert Morgan, RAMC.

From post war conversations with his father Stuart learned that during the Japanese invasion of Malaya and Singapore, Albert had been placed in charge of a unit of four ambulances with Chinese drivers transferring the wounded from the front in northern Malaya back across the Causeway to Singapore and then on board departing ships to safety. Albert's Commanding Officer had said *"...I understand you're planning on getting away on a boat Morgan – well you're a married man – good luck – I shall stay here and look after the wounded..."*.

Also "... anticipating the Surrender he [Albert] and six others [from what is understood to be a Royal Artillery unit] had located a police launch under repair - this they guarded with drawn weapons (a Tommy gun?) when patrols came along the shore under orders to destroy all craft to deny escaping soldiers...".

Albert related that the *"Chinese drivers took off their uniforms and melted into the crowd..."*. With the benefit of hindsight of what was to occur after the Surrender during the awful pogrom and massacre of Chinese who had a record of loyalty to the British – known as the 'Sook Ching' - some 15,000-25,000 Chinese were summarily rounded up and massacred by the Japanese Kempetai (their Gestapo or Secret Police) this had been a wise action by those Chinese Ambulance drivers.

So, in the words of Albert Morgan the situation was,

"... For some days we had worked day and night evacuating hospitals and moving back all the lame (or line) towards the sea, now we could move no further. We were on a narrow isthmus(sic) the Tanjong Rhu, we had only sixteen ambulances and no petrol. On Thursday Major Many (Marry?) visited us and told us that in a few hours it would all be over, now we were cut off from HQ by a blazing airdrome and on the evening of Friday the(sic) 13th Feb1942 we received the word every man for himself.

A police launch was lying in Thorneycroft's yard under repair, we took a chance, pushed our provisions and gear onboard and cast off. We were afloat on SSP4 but not for long, we immediately ran on a mud bank and spent an uncomfortable time until we were able to get off. The steering was decidedly erratic, and Edmunds had to employ himself permanently holding the wires to prevent them getting tangled. We held our breath until safely out of the harbour and about a mile from shore encountered three sampans loaded with troops, we stopped to give them a tow, this necessitated cutting loose our own sampan and in transferring the stores we lost a case of milk. Taffy insisted on saving the beer but lost a model yacht he treasured. Poor Taffy, his sole kit now consisted of one shirt and a silk scarf. We towed the Aussies to the nearest ship and let them go while we threaded our way through the islands, Pearl Island was blazing fiercely and provided us with a landmark for some distance. I was violently sick, my usual reaction to the sea and then I felt a lot better..."

Albert later related that as they left Singapore Harbour he was called by men on the docks he had previously known, asking if they could also board the little launch but he recalled it was "... Impossible – they were too many and would have sunk us ...".

Also he recalled that whilst going out across Singapore Harbour the launch broke down and became a target for Japanese aircraft which were appearing regularly and strafing the many boats and vessels trying to escape - at that point one man on board (Taffy Grey or Opey) began praying in a loud voice on the foredeck " Please Lord save me – please Christ save me" until a voice down below tinkering with the engine shouted "... Don't be so bloody selfish Taff, say 'us'..."

The little launch then resumed its journey heading south amongst the myriad of hundreds of islands that lie to the south of Singapore and the east of Sumatra forming the Rhio (Riau) archipelago,

"... Oh those islands! There were literally hundreds of them and in spite of, or perhaps because of our map we got hopelessly lost among them. As dusk was falling we stopped at a little island where a crowd of rather shy natives offered us guides to show us an island where a white man lived. Rather foolishly we accepted. Now I've no doubt that in a sampan our guides could have taken us anywhere but our launch was too much for them, after twice running aground, we found ourselves in a narrow channel with our nose stuck in a mangrove swamp. There I commenced my duties by providing supper, did I say that I had been appointed head cook, QM, and general factotum. Our first night aboard was strange, the trees meeting overhead, the bushes all around brilliant with fireflies, the swish of the water in the mangrove roots was all rather uncanny.

At high tide SSP4 floated free and the night watch was able to anchor her in mid channel so that next morning [we were] able to make an early start. We put ashore our two guides and took on two more who wished to go to Sumatra, however we got no further than Buli Bula [possibly an island named Pulau Buli or similar]when we were frantically hailed by eight policemen who had rowed so far in a yacht so we took them aboard. With seven of (us) space on the launch was restricted, with eight additional people it was hellishly uncomfortable. Mid-afternoon we made an island where the natives cooked rice and eggs for us and insisted on us taking away several tins of xxx (indecipherable) That night we looked in vain for somewhere to tie up to, we were guided by fishermen past rocks and mud flats to a safe mooring, we had great difficulty getting anywhere as the steering went completely early in the evening and it now took three people to keep an even reasonably straight course. We bought fish and made a fine supper ashore – the police slept in the kampong and came back complaining of bugs. I slept onboard – did I say slept? I was awakened by the pulsating of the engine; we had pulled our anchor and were drifting. It was an experience I don't want again, a dark night, mudflats on one

side, jagged rocks on the other, a strong tide and an almost useless rudder. We had two nasty moments when we scraped over rocks with a... [and the account sadly ends there].

But, with the researcher's knowledge of the events and geography, we have been able to work out much of the remainder of the escape from conversations Albert had with his sons over the years and a newspaper article featuring Albert Morgan and a letter Albert received from one Antony Watson about 1990 who corresponded after also seeing the newspaper article featuring Albert.

During the days of 13 – 20 February 1942 the seas and tiny islands south of Singapore were interspersed by dozens of small boats, junks, sailing craft, patrol boats and small coasters trying to get to safety – many had been sunk and men floundered in the water, wreckage covered the seas and many, many bodies of the dead were being carried south by powerful sea currents down the coast of Sumatra to the Sunda Straits. Through this scene of horror amongst pristine natural beauty, Albert and the group on SSP4 would have spent up to three or four days struggling to navigate their way to the Indragiri River on the east coast of Sumatra, up which they could navigate to the small towns of Rengat and Tembilihan which were on the prepared official 'escape route' which had been established by the British Army weeks before the Surrender. Money and provisions had been ferried down to the islands and then up the Indragiri River and across Sumatra to the Port town of Padang on the west coast.

Many years later Albert Morgan, in his conversations with family, confirmed that the launch reached the Indragiri River but sank soon after, so they were picked up by some British naval people. At the coast, the river runs through a long distance of flat land with few trees.

The towns on the Indragiri River used on the escape route were – firstly the little village of Tembilihan at the mouth of the river with its small jetty and under the administration of a Dutch Controller, then Rengat, again with a wharf and a small village hospital, then Ayer Molek (today Air Molek) and finally Taluk almost at the head of the River. It was either at Rengat or Padang when the group finally arrived that an historic photo of the group was taken.



Rengat on the Indragiri River in pre-War years

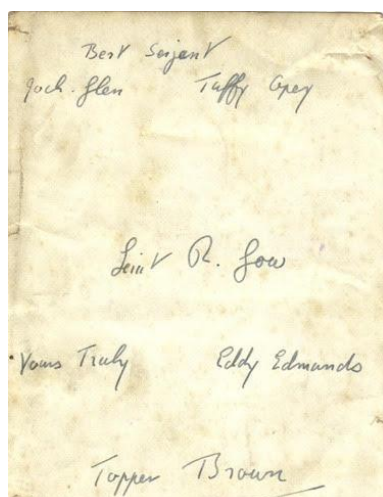
Albert Morgan describes the situation “... On arrival in Sumatra [probably at Rengat] we absolutely stank – we had been wearing the same clothes for six weeks. We found some ragged overalls on a barge which we are wearing in the photo. It was Lieutenant Gow (pictured centre) who suggested we had our photo taken. I can remember clearly. We knocked on the photographer’s door and inside was a Chinese family sitting having their dinner. They were quickly shushed away...”.



Group photo taken in either Rengat or Padang

The men in this photo are,

- (back row) – Topper Brown, Eddy Edmunds, Taffy Grey/Opey and Bert Serjent.
- (front Row) – Albert Morgan, Lt R. Gow, and Jack Glen



From there the group, which had apparently grown with others they had picked up closer to Sumatra, would have reached the hill town of Sawah Lunto/Sawa Loentoe by truck and from there caught a train over the magnificent mountains to Padang. Another escapee , a civilian nurse , described the vista around that time as *"... Huge trees stood out on the thickly wooded slopes and in places , there were lianas falling down the mountainside like waterfalls..."*.The gradient here is often so steep that two engines would have been required to pull the train and there was ratchet between the lines to prevent trains from slipping back. From the cool of the mountains Albert and his group would have descended to the plains on the western side of Sumatra again skirting the great lake of Singgorra/ Singkarak before rolling into the small town of Padang.



Padang in the years before the War

At Padang Albert Morgan was separated from the group after being ordered to take packages (either money to pay locals for assisting the waves of escaping soldiers and civilians or some other valuables) back 'down the lines ' possibly to one of the towns mentioned. It was his service in backtracking, whilst others were being evacuated from Padang by ship, that he received the British Empire Medal in 1943 for Gallantry.

A letter Albert received around 1990 from an Antony Watson (who was presumably in the half dozen or more other servicemen who became part of the group just before they arrived at Sumatra) describes how the others in the group were taken by bus – presumably to the port named Emmahaven at Padang – where they boarded the ‘HMS Danae’ to Java (in fact it would have been to Tjilichap on the south coast of Java) before there boarding the ‘SS Wu Chang’ a China Steam Navigation Co vessel originally trading around China before being requisitioned by the Royal Navy. The voyage of the ‘Wu Chang’ from Tjilichap to Colombo in Ceylon is an adventure story in itself - for the purposes of this account it may be suffice to say that the old Yangtze steamer had virtually no armament apart from a dummy gun on the upper deck made from a wooden frame with a tarpaulin over it and a spar thrust through a hole!. A self-appointed ‘gunner’ made a show of ‘closing up to’ and ‘clearing’ the gun for action to amuse himself on the voyage across the Indian Ocean. Almost at Colombo a Japanese submarine fired three torpedoes at this very shallow bottomed river boat, which all missed, and the submarine then surfaced to the astonishment of all on board the ‘Wu Chang’: before suddenly submerging. One passenger, Lance Bombardier Dare recorded he had been looking over the side all this time and questioned his pal Lance Bombardier East whether the line in the water [made by a passing torpedo] was where the Equator was! The ‘Wu Chang’ arrived safely in Colombo with Antony Watson and presumably all others from the original escape party – apart from Albert Morgan – on board.

Albert , on his return to Padang recollected that he finally got away on a “... *Dutch tramp steamer...*” – receiving one meal of rice a day and there being insufficient crockery and cutlery for all, so he had to wait for someone else to finish before taking their bowl and spoon. The Dutch Captain of the vessel on which Albert Morgan finally escaped Sumatra – which the researcher presumes was either the ‘SS Palimar’ which left in the early hours of 1 March 1942 or the ‘SS Palopo’ (photo below), was the last rescue ship to call into Padang and it left again between 5 – 7 March 1942 - proved to be quite a character.

The ‘Palopo’ had originally left Batavia and had been detoured to Padang, picking up 50 people (38 servicemen and 12 civilians). It was described by other passengers as “...*unattractive...*” but “...*a grand faithful old tub...*”. It was covered in coal dust and could only manage 9 or 10 knots. As they were leaving Emmahaven (the port at Padang) Albert recalled that the Dutch Captain poked his head out the window of the wheelhouse and bellowed at the British servicemen in his thick Dutch accent “... *Is the sky black with your planes overhead to keep us safe? I cannot hear for the noise of all the planes! Where is your bloody RAF...*”.

The ‘Palopo’ sailed through the Siberut Strait, about 100km to the west of Sumatra at night (‘When Singapore Fell’ by Joseph Kennedy, p.130) and then two thirds of its way on its voyage across the Indian Ocean came across the wreckage – and two surviving Malay or Javanese crewmen - from the ‘SS Rooseboom’. The Dutch vessel owned by KPM, the ‘SS Rooseboom’, had been sunk by a Japanese submarine a few days previously with the loss of 250-300 people.

Some passengers of the ‘SS Palopo’ later recorded that there was only room to sleep on the decks and the hatches and twice a day there was a dish of rice and herrings together with a mug of tea.

On reaching Colombo it was after the curfew hour and the boom had been lowered preventing ships entering the harbour that night. This caused the Dutch Captain to again become apoplectic with rage, screaming and shouting at the patrol boat till presumably they let the ‘Palopo’ or ‘Palimar’ enter. The ‘Palopo’ did enter.



'SS Palopo'

Anyone who has corrections, amendments, clarifications or additional material on the events or passengers of 'SSP4' is most welcome to contact the researcher and compiler of this document: Michael Pether, 2/23 Sanders Avenue, Takapuna, Auckland, 0622, New Zealand. Email is mncpether@gmail.com. Telephone number is New Zealand 09-4865754 or mobile New Zealand 0274543695.

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Thank you.

Michael Pether.

SSP4 Group:

- **BROWN – Topper Brown**
- **EDMUNDS – (Corporal? From photo) Eddy Edmunds**
- **GLEN – (Sergeant? From photo) Jack Glen**
- **GOW – Lieutenant R. Gow**
- **GREY (or OPEY) – Taffy Grey/Opey**
- **MORGAN – Acting Sgt Albert Morgan Albert Morgan** born 26.5.1911 in Cuckfield, Sussex, to Albert Morgan (born in 1877 St Issels, Pembrokeshire, d.1925 in Banbury) and Violet Clarke (1880 to 1965). Albert had a rural / country upbringing in what we now regard as a beautiful Sussex village but which in his day was a strictly class divided society – he remembered the lovely properties of ‘Nymans’ and ‘Borde Hill’ as where the then rich owners had bought up all the local supplies of coal for themselves during WW1 leaving the villagers to want. His father had run away at 13 to join the Royal Navy and rose to be a Petty Officer Stoker so was mostly serving away from home as he grew up. His mother had been in service but then “charred” and cooked round the village – Albert loved telling the story of how one of her new employers, a local vicar, would hold prayers for all the family and staff at 10.00 each day but when asked whether Mrs Morgan should join them said “*well no, she’s paid by the hour*”. Albert loved the countryside and scouting and spent many hours hiking, boxing, tumbling, wielding Indian Clubs, acting in amateur dramatics and then joined the Red Cross – educationally he attended local schools and progressed well. It was thought that he had sufficient intelligence to continue his education further, but at the age of 14 his father died suddenly. He then felt he had to leave and gain whatever employment he could to support his mother and baby sister. He worked in local shops and stores, Hiltons and the Co-op – at this time he met his future wife Beatrice May Harrison, a nurse at what was then called the Brighton Mental Hospital, Haywards Heath, later named St Francis (now luxury flats !) They both loved dancing, quickly fell in love and married in 1933. Albert by now was an insurance agent, touring the countryside collecting premiums – his socialist roots prompted by much general and personal injustice lead him to be active in the local socialist party and he stood, unsuccessfully, in council elections. By the outbreak of the Second World War he had three children: Doreen, 1934, Peter, 1935, and Valerie, 1940. He enlisted in the RAMC and was sent to Singapore. After his escape from Singapore and on reaching Ceylon, Albert served at the main hospital in Colombo. Over the lengthy period of being adrift during his escape he had retained the rank of Acting Sergeant long enough for him ask to be confirmed at this rank – the authorities did not like this and tried to break him – “*Ok if you’re a sergeant take over xxxxx*” . Albert in response constantly referred to the Army Regulations handbook which covered and explained every known process in the service – he remained a Sergeant. Volunteers were then asked to undertake Emergency Officer Training – Albert applied – his commanding officer took him aside “*...Morgan you are a married man, you do realise that are calling for young officers to form the new force to attack the japs in Burma ...*” and asked him to think again – which Albert did, but still applied. Training involved tactical exercises where the Indian Ordinary ranks would huddle and say nothing but Albert realised only “*bull*” was needed to get through – bags of shouting “*... machine gun over there – Sergeant*

lead the charge... “, in fact Albert realised that ‘bags of dash’ was required as well as in long marches where as you approached the end point, you offered to carry three men’s rifles to look good. As part of the training he was asked in which regiment you would like to serve – Albert realising that you had to look good said “Tanks” or “Infantry” ,when he passed they said, to his relief, “...*Sorry to announce Morgan that at your age we are posting you to the Service Corp...*” . Discharged from the army in 1947, Albert again had several local jobs before settling into being a telephone operator in the evening and a van delivery man during the day – he loved the Sussex lanes and by-ways and cottages and old inhabitants and the old way of life of his youth. Personal tragedy hit Beatrice & Albert with the death of their two daughters from separate illnesses but with new sons John and Stuart, family life continued. Albert was plagued with arthritis in his 60s, undergoing several hip operations and suffering months in the old Cuckfield Hospital but he remained cheery and good hearted, full of fun, and happy to engage with visitors, a voracious book reader and a great letter writer. After retiring he loved to tend his garden and vegetables, reading the Guardian newspaper through and through and doing its crosswords and always happy to engage with visiting grandchildren. He was infinitely patient, wise without displaying it, unselfish, and uncritical. Towards the end of his life his family wheeled him round his beloved Cuckfield often and he died there whilst he was read Kipling’s ‘Sussex’ poem together – the words engraved on his heart. A decent and good bloke all round.

- **SERJENT – Bert Serjent**