

VE DAY

1945 - 2025

Cambridgeshire

capturingcambridge.org

Roger Lilley March 2025



Wisbech VE Day party (Lilian Ream)

VE Day Cambridge 1945



Cambridge Market Hill

Tuesday 8th May 1945 - This is VE Day. The bells rang while I was at work and as I came home; there were plenty of people about; and the day was delightfully warm, although not very sunny. The streets were decorated with flags, but the attitude of the people struck me as very sober.

Diary of Jack Overhill

VE Day Cambridge



My own beloved darling - I am writing to you in the afternoon of Victory Day before listening to Mr Churchill's broadcast ... Constance Markham as invited me to go down to her rooms on Parker's Piece to watch the celebration which are to take place there. I can't make up my mind whether I really want to go

Maida Bulman writing to her husband, Captain John Bulman RAMC, from Portrait of a War Marriage, Claire Wathes (Capturing Cambridge)

Mixed emotions

Although the region had escaped the worst of the Blitz, life had been severely disrupted by the war and many families were in mourning.

Tragedies such as the bombing of Vicarage Terrace in Cambridge, early in the war, were national news at the time, even though the precise location had to be kept a secret outside the town.



The bombing of Vicarage Terrace, 19th June 1940



Last night the siren went off about 11.30. About 12.30 I was awakened by a terrific crash. I called the children down into our bedroom. They got in the bed with Jess. I dressed and lay on the couch that is in our bedroom. Then we heard gunfire. The crash turned out to be a bomb. (I heard at the bathing sheds tonight that there were two bombs, as they had discovered two craters on some houses in Vicarage Terrace, killing nine people and injuring a lot more.)

Jack Overhill's diary 19th June

Remembering the death of five year old Lenny Palmer

... five-year-old Lenny Palmer, one of the fatalities of the bombing who was one of my mother's playmates in 1940.

Lenny lived at 8 Vicarage Terrace with his parents Leonard and Doris and younger sister Molly, all casualties.

Simon King, remembering his mother's life during a Kite Marks tour of Cambridge in 2024



Class at Eden School, Cambridge (MoC)



Föckewulf Condor - a plane seen in one raid over Arbury

Bombing of munitions factories in Cambridge: Pye Unicam Works under attack in Arbury Road in 1940

The raid opened with the launch of single-candle flares, then came Dorniers from the north-west dropping at 01:05 about 360 incendiaries, initially very close to the target, over Leys Road, Orchard Avenue, Arbury Road and college land adjacent, then more in Histon where a timber yard was set ablaze.

Michael J F Bowyer, [Air Raid! Enemy Air Offensive Against East Anglia](#) (1986)

Summer 1942: German plane shot at Oakington

My father, who was in the War Reserve Police, went to the crash, but all the crewmen were dead. He said the smell was like that of roast beef, the bodies being badly burned.

Ralph Warboys, witness to the crash, quoted in J. Evan- Hart, [War-torn skies of Cambridgeshire](#) (2008)

VE Day: celebrating the achievements of a nation in face of adversity

Everyone, man or woman, has done their best.

Everyone has tried.

Neither the long years, nor the dangers, nor the fierce attacks of the enemy, have in any way weakened the independent resolve of the British nation.

Winston Churchill, VE Day speech



The people of Cambridgeshire welcomed evacuees and refugees



The village women, feeling that their countryside spelt safety, had given gladly, both in hospitality and in objects for the furnishing of the requisitioned houses.

Wilfrida Leakey (Girton village), Cambridgeshire - A Chronicle of Country Women (1968)

Emilia's Story:

My sister and I came to Cambridge on the Kindertransports. I don't know who arranged our foster home - I vaguely remember the names Mrs Burkill and Mrs Hutton - but we really fell on our feet. They sent us to Church Street, Chesterton to live with Miss Maria Susan Rickard. (MoC)



Ely Jewish Boys School (UK Holocaust Map)

Children evacuees from London experienced life in the Cambridgeshire countryside

...most of the London school children stayed in the country, and many of them came to feel themselves as part of the “reception family”. Some evacuees remained “little terrors” and were always sore trials to their hostesses and to the village, but by this time the villages had become more confident of themselves as a community which had something to give, especially to the children.

Wilfrida Leakey (Girton village), Cambridgeshire- A Chronicle of Country Women (1968)



Photo IWM

Women worked on farms - the Land Girls of Cambridgeshire



Being wartime and dad being in the army, mum had to have a lodger which didn't please her at all. We had land girl named Kathleen from the north. I think she came from a better off family and rather looked down her nose at our lack of facilities - no electricity, water fetched in buckets from the pump quite a way up the road, and a bucket toilet (earth closet) across the garden in a shed which had to be emptied into a hole dug in the garden each week.

Brenda Matthews - Fen Ditton (MoC)

Land girls training at University Farm, Cambridge 1939

Children helped harvesting fruits and vegetables



Scouts helped harvesting the bumper fruit harvest of 1943, near Cambridge (Photos IWM)



Wilfrida Leakey
(Girton village),
Cambridgeshire-
A Chronicle of
Country Women
(1968)

Then the jam-making or canning went on all day. Many of the empty jars which had been collected were very dirty, and some of the women evacuated from London washed and scrubbed day after day alongside newly made village friends.

Women made tons of jam for the local population and the soldiers' rations

In one village alone four tons of fruit were handled in one kitchen and one hut. The fruit was brought in every evening, weighed, paid for, and washed, so that it was ready for the morning shift of voluntary labourers.



The laboratories of Cambridge University made plasma for wounded soldiers on the front

The wartime situation in 1939 led to a demand for plasma supplies to treat military and civilian casualties. Dried plasma was especially in need for use in the tropics, where it could be stored effectively without deterioration. The Medical Research Council established a Blood Drying Unit in the basement of the Department of Zoology building, which prepared and distributed 2,500 bottles of dried plasma each week.

(University of Cambridge)

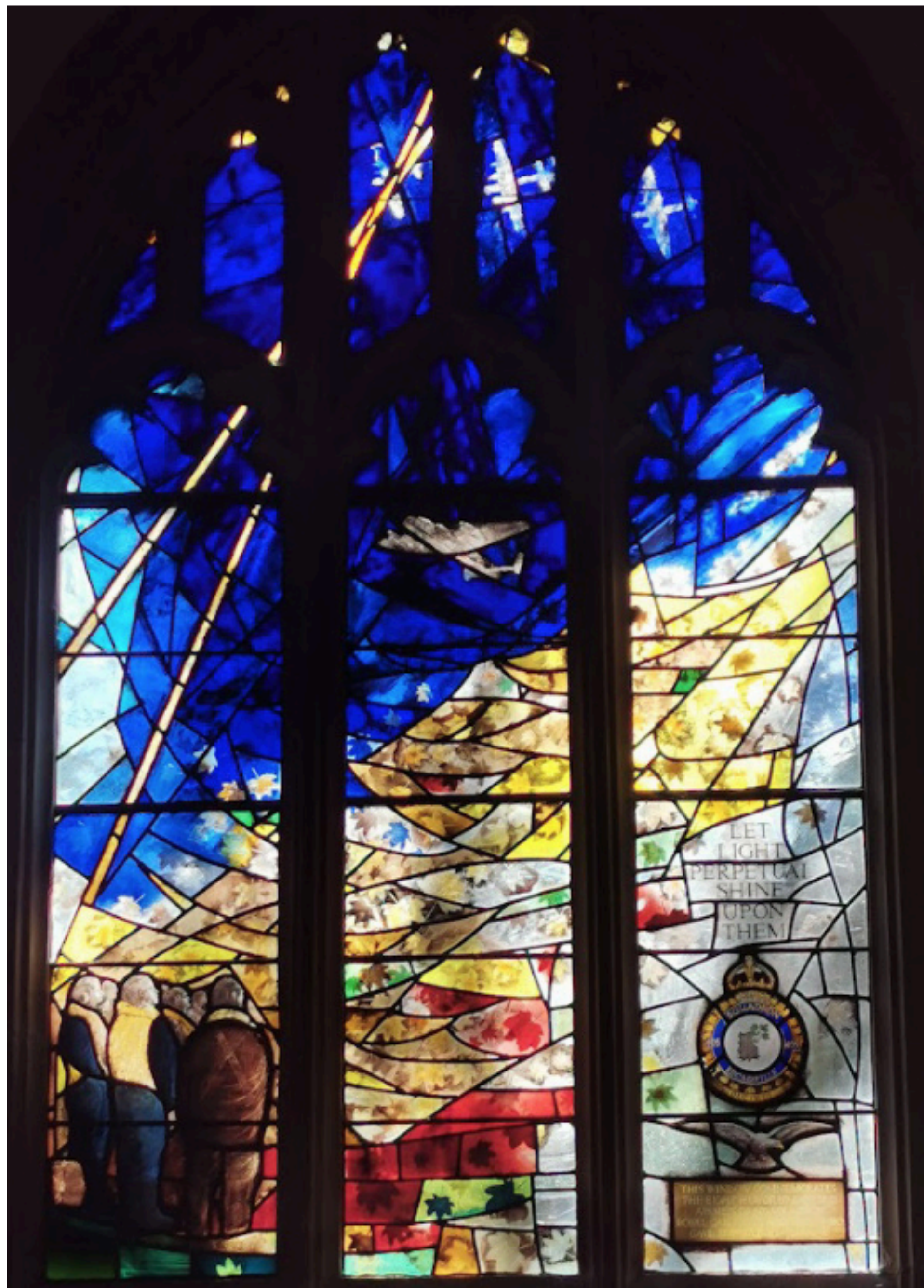


Cambridgeshire farmers gave up their land for the building of temporary airfields

Cambridgeshire saw the building of many temporary airfields on requisitioned agricultural land. These airfields were used by planes that both defended the skies of Britain and launched attacks over Europe.

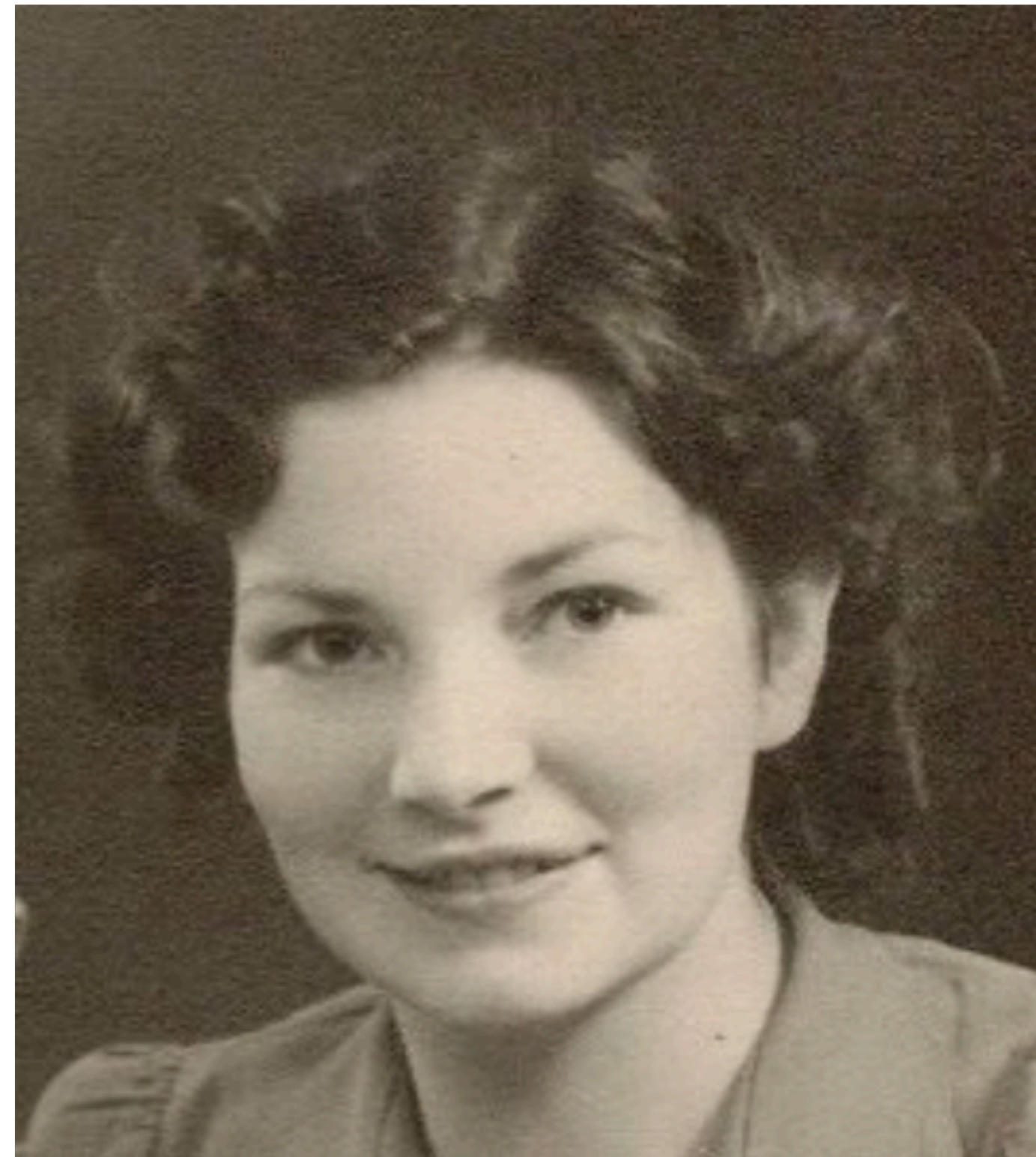
Whilst enemy bombers were a rare sight, as the war progressed, the skies were filled with more and more allied bombers - British, American and Canadian - heading towards Germany day and night. There were many losses among these flight crews. Planes would fail to return and often the fate of the men was unknown for months.

Royal Canadian Airforce memorial window, Great Gransden



Men gave up their lives - Michael, Avro Lancaster crew member from Cambridgeshire

Norah May Seager and Michael Stewart Layton-Smith were married in 1942. Michael's parents lived in Histon; she lived with her parents at 48a Eden Street. He was shot down in his Lancaster and died in August 1944 over the Netherlands. Their twin sons had been born in May. (Capturing Cambridge)



The Cambridgeshire regiment made the ultimate sacrifice

Churchill called the fall of Singapore the the Japanese “the worst disaster and the largest capitulation in British history.” Nearly 85,000 Allied troops were captured as well as 5,000 killed or wounded.

The Cambridgeshire Regiment was among those military units worst affected. In total, 784 members of the Cambridgeshire Regiment died in the Far East between January 1942 and August 1945, alongside hundreds of other soldiers from Cambridgeshire and East Anglia who served in the Suffolk Regiment and other parts of the British Armed Forces. Many died in horrific, sordid conditions.





Captain Frank Spencer Hockey

One of the many members of the Cambridgeshire regiment killed in action

Captain Frank Spencer Hockey (49 Barton Road), 1st Battalion Camb. Regiment, was killed in action on 13th February 1942 during the battle for Singapore. He led a small patrol with Sgt Wade down to the perimeter of the estate to spot and eliminate a Japanese sniper. Unfortunately soon after the two men disappeared into the gloom the area was targeted by an artillery barrage. Sgt Wade's body was found some months later. Capt Hockey was never found. Captain Hockey's name now appears on the Singapore War Memorial at Kranji. (Capturing Cambridge)

Children were born and orphaned...



VE Day on Natal Road

I was born in the Mill Road Hospital in 1939. In 1942 my father was killed in Singapore at the age of 28 when I was 2 1/2. As a result of his death my family were taken into care at various places in the country and I was taken to the children's home in Ross Street

Mrs Dethridge of Ross Street (Capturing Cambridge)

VE Day 1945: “the streets were decorated with flags, but the attitude of the people struck me as very sober...”

For many in Cambridgeshire VE Day will have brought little consolation. Many fathers and husbands were fighting in the Far East or held in captivity, their whereabouts unknown. When Far-Eastern prisoners of war did return they found that the public often seemed to ignore them. Many would never fully recover from the trauma of their experiences.

In 1946 on the formal return of the Cambridgeshire Regiment, the mayor, Lady Bragg, conferred the Freedom of the Borough on the regiment as a mark of honour.



Lady Bragg addresses the parade on Market Hill 1946 (Photo Pathe News)