

Untold Stories from Singapore

Introduction

Some people who were involved in the war, such as Churchill, Montgomery and Roosevelt are famous and their stories are known to many. But when looking at the Plymouth Naval Memorial, you see thousands of names inscribed, though hardly anyone knows who these people really were.



My name is Jonathan Hibbs and I am 8 years old. I want to tell you the tale of Cyril Walter Tideswell, who is my great great uncle on my father's side. He was killed by the Japanese in Singapore. I learnt about him from my grandfather David Hibbs who calls him "Uncle Cyril", so that is how I will refer to him in this paper.

Uncle Cyril served in the Royal Navy as a marine. He was sent to the war in the Pacific on a battlecruiser called *HMS Repulse* to defend Singapore. His name is one of those on the Plymouth Naval Memorial. This is the first time his story has been told.

The War in the Pacific¹

The cause of the war in the Pacific was the Japanese allying themselves with the Germans who were fighting in Europe. The British were fighting in the Pacific because they wanted to hold on to their empire. If the Japanese had managed to conquer the British Empire in Asia, it would have given them far more power, resources and money. Then they would have been able to use these things to help them win the war.

Because of British action in Asia, the Japanese did not achieve their aims. However, the Japanese fought fiercely and showed no mercy in their prison camps. While not as well-known as the war in

¹ The information in this section comes from the book *The Second World War* by Dominic Sandbrook which I read before starting this report.

Europe, the death tolls were huge, and the British were defeated many times. Luckily, the Japanese miscalculation of attacking Pearl Harbour in Oahu, Hawaii, brought the USA into the war which tipped the odds against the Axis powers.

Uncle Cyril



I wanted to learn about Uncle Cyril, so I interviewed my grandfather about him. Here are the questions and answers he gave:

When and where was Uncle Cyril born

Budby (a tiny village of 2 farms and 13 cottages which housed farmworkers of the Thoresby Estate) near Worksop, Nottingham on 30 December 1922.

Who were his parents?

Arthur & Beatrice (Beattie) Maud Tideswell – Arthur (my Grandfather) was a farmworker on various Ducal Estates.

Would his family have been wealthy?

No, they were quite poor – Cyrils father was a farm labourer, living in a tied house. The wage was pretty small although they got free wood in the winter and got to attend the school on the Estate which was funded by the Duke. They did not have a car, telephone, free healthcare or holidays. The education they received was basic – considered adequate for somebody who was only going to be a farmworker.

Can you tell me what his childhood would have been like?

From all I have heard, all the children in the family (Norman, Nancy, Ray & Cyril) had a very happy childhood in a very rural society that had close family relationships. They enjoyed to play by the River Meden or by Thoresby Lake. The boys raided birds nest for eggs, which Nancy fried on an open fire using a tin lid. They lived by farms with animals and lots of wildlife.

Why did he enlist in the Royal Marines?

Nobody really knows this. Many young men joined up at the outbreak of war because they felt they had to help defeat the Germans. We do know some of what happened to him before joining. He was with Kathleen, the Dowager Duchess of Newcastle who moved with her household to Forest Farm at Winkfield near Windsor Park. Cyril was employed in the kitchens which were in the basement and under electric light all the time. When he tried to enlist he failed the eyesight test for the Marines. He spoke to the Duchess who moved him to an outside job. His eyesight then improved and he was able to enlist.

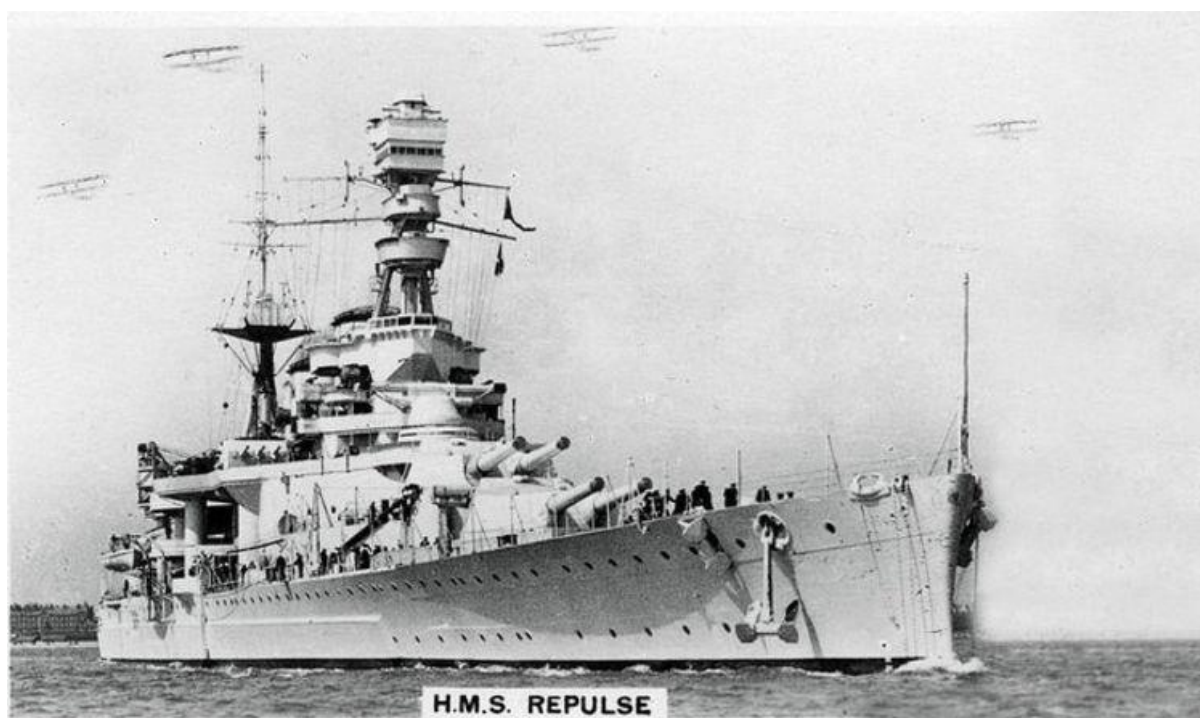
How did knowing that your Uncle died in the war affect you?

As a child I often saw Cyril's photo on the dresser in Granny's house. It was a larger version of the one in the folder. Granny often looked at it and spoke of him. He was just 19 when he died on 15 February 1942 and had only been a Marine for a short time. Uncle Cyril's death did not affect me as a child – it was only later when I began to be interested in my family history. I often thought of how I would have liked to meet him, what he could tell me about the war and his life. I often wonder what he would have done with the rest of his life after the war.

HMS Repulse

HMS Repulse was one of two Renown-class battlecruisers built during WWI. She participated in the second battle of Heligoland Bight in 1917, the only action seen during the war. Between the wars she was reconstructed twice.

HMS Repulse has the motto *Qui Tangit Frangitur*, or *Who Touches Me is Broken*. After her refits, she had a displacement of 35,200 tons, was 242 metres long with a beam of 27.4 metres. She could sail at 30.5 knots and had a range of 6760km.



She was equipped with 3 × twin 15 in (381 mm) guns, 3 × triple 4 in (102 mm) guns, 6 × single 4 in (102 mm) AA guns, and 2 × quadruple 40 mm (1.6 in) 2-pounder "pom-pom" AA guns.²

During the first months of WWII, *HMS Repulse* hunted for German raiders and blockade runners, including the hunt for *Bismarck*. She escorted a convoy of Canadian soldiers to Britain in 1939.

Winston Churchill was highly concerned that the British forces in Singapore and Malaya would be unable to defend the British territories. He formed Force Z, a group of ships whose job it was to prevent Japanese landings. Uncle Cyril was aboard *HMS Repulse* as a marine. His job would have been to man an anti-aircraft gun. Force Z arrived in Singapore on 2 December 1941.

During the afternoon of 9 December, Force Z was spotted by the Japanese Submarine I-65 while on a mission. Admiral Sir Tom Phillips cancelled the operation, but they were spotted again by submarine I-58 who fired 5 torpedoes which all missed. Based on the reports of these submarines, 86 Japanese bombers were launched to hunt Force Z.

The first attack began in the late morning, when *HMS Repulse* was hit by a bomb. The ship fought back, and managed to damage 5 of the Japanese bombers. Her captain Bill Tennent skilfully avoided 19 torpedoes and other bombs from the first wave of planes. However, she was then caught by a group of G4M torpedo bombers and 4 or 5 torpedoes hit the ship. Less than 2 hours after the first raid, *HMS Repulse* was sunk with the loss of 508 men.

Below is a list of radio signals received from the boats involved, copied from *Battleship* by Martin Middlebrook and Patrick Mahoney.

² [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Repulse_\(1916\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Repulse_(1916))

Log of Signals Received in Singapore from Force Z*

SECRET
MICROGRAM.
Non-Urgent.

The British Naval Commander-in-Chief, Eastern Fleet.
26th December 1941.

No. 741/4724.

The Secretary of the Admiralty.

LOSS OF PRINCE OF WALES AND REPULSE.
LOG OF MESSAGES.

In continuation of my submission No. 730/4742 of 17th December 1941, I enclose a log of the messages received in the War Room at Singapore in connection with the operations on 10th December 1941.

G. Layton VICE-ADMIRAL, COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF.

Time of receipt in War Room	From	To	Report
12.04	REPULSE	Any British Man of War.	Enemy aircraft bombing My position 134NYTW22X09. (11.58).
12.40	PRINCE OF WALES		<i>Emergency</i> Have been struck by a torpedo on port side. NYTW022R06 4 torpedoes. Send Destroyers. (12.20.)

* Public Record Office ADM 199/1149.

Time of receipt in War Room	From	To	Report
13.04	SENIOR OFFICER, FORCE Z	Any British Man of War.	<i>Emergency.</i> Send all available tugs. My position 003° 40' N, 104° 30' E. (12.52.)
13.10	ELECTRA.	Any British Man of War.	<i>Most Immediate.</i> H.M.S. PRINCE OF WALES hit by 4 torpedoes in position 003° 45' N, 104° 10' E. REPULSE sunk. Send Destroyers. (05.30z)*
13.17	COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, EASTERN FLEET.	CHIEF OF STAFF, Singapore.	<i>Most Immediate.</i> Am disembarking men not required for fighting ship. Send - ? - ? - fast as possible. (13.11.)
13.10	SENIOR OFFICER, FORCE Z.	Any British Man of War.	<i>Most Immediate.</i> H.M.S. PRINCE OF WALES disabled and out of control. (13.00.)
13.11	PRINCE OF WALES.	Any British Man of War.	<i>Emergency.</i> Send all available tugs. My position now is EQTW 40(?). (05.31z.)
13.17	ELECTRA.	Any British Man of War.	<i>Most Immediate.</i> My 05.30z send tugs.
13.21	ELECTRA.	Any British Man of War.	<i>Most Immediate.</i> H.M.S. PRINCE OF WALES sunk. (05.48z.)

* The 'Z' times are Greenwich Mean Time, 7½ hours ahead of the Singapore Time used elsewhere in these signals and in the narrative of the book.

Along with other marines³, Uncle Cyril survived and was rescued by *Electra* and *Vampire*, two destroyers. The men were taken to Singapore. This photo shows men from the *Repulse* aboard *Electra*.



³ We cannot find a source that accurately tells how many marines survived the sinking of the *Repulse*, but it would appear to be around 200 between the *Repulse* and *Prince of Wales*.

The Plymouth Argylls and Tyersall Park

The Plymouth Argylls were an amalgamation of Marines and the Argylls. There were 210 Marines and 250 Argylls. They named themselves the “Plymouth Argylls” after the football club, the Marines having left England from Plymouth⁴. Uncle Cyril was part of the battalion.

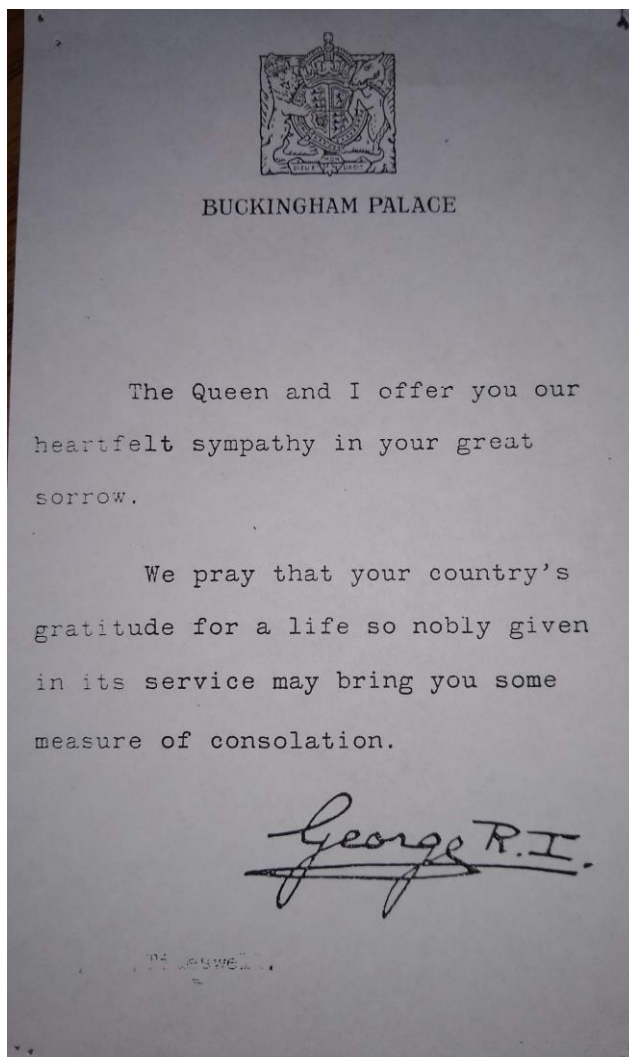
The Plymouth Argylls were stationed at Tyersall Park, and were meant to defend it as part of the defence of Singapore.

Before the war, Tyersall Park was a palace and polo ground. In 1893, Archduke Franz Ferdinand visited Singapore and stayed in the palace. During the war, it was used as an Indian Army hospital and training ground for soldiers.

The book *Moon over Malaya* tells that in the last days before Singapore fell, Tyersall Park was under constant artillery, mortar and sniper fire. Corporal Charles Miller remembered it as the most terrifying experience of the war, with “large fragments of metal flying everywhere.” The book records that “a young *Repulse* marine was killed in his slit trench when a mortar bomb hit a tree above the trench.” Though not named, this must have been Uncle Cyril, as he was the only *Repulse* marine to be killed on the 13th of February 1942⁵ in Tyersall Park.

Uncle Cyril was 19 years old when he died.

Here is the death notification that was sent to his parents:



⁴ This information comes from *Moon Over Malaya*, by Jonathan Moffatt and Audrey Holmes McCormick

⁵ The Plymouth Naval Memorial records his death as the 15 February 1942

Conclusion

Some years ago, relatives of mine went to Tyersall Park and hung a wreath there with Uncle Cyril's name on it. When they went back the next day, someone had attached this poem to the wreath:

A life so fleeting
A dark wet grave
Mysteries surround you
Like the creatures of the deep
A wooden cross with your name inscribed
Entwined me
Intrigued me
Who are you
Cyril Tideswell?
Why are still remembered till this day?
Who is the one remembering you?
Are you in heaven
Where Jesus prays?
This poem for a dead man?

The war in Pacific is far less known about than the war in Europe. The failed defence of Singapore less known than the bombing at Pearl Harbour. And the death of a 19 year old called Cyril less known than many of the heroes you read about in history books. However, each person who fought deserves to be remembered.

Jonathan Hibbs
March 2022