

WW2 All Saints Memorial

Stephen Balfour



For my third article in this occasional series about the five civilian names on our war memorial, the scene moves to Hong Kong, where Stephen Francis Balfour died on 16th January 1945 at the age of 39. Stephen and his wife Anne married in 1934 and moved immediately to Hong Kong where he was working in the Colonial Service as a “Cadet Officer, Bureau of Chinese Affairs”. His subsequent posts included Southern District Officer, acting Northern District Officer, and acting Superintendent of Imports and Exports. Their first two children Nicholas and Veronica were born in the city and then in 1940, when the threat of Japanese invasion was imminent, Anne, by now pregnant with her son Sebastian, moved with her sons together with a number of other women and children to the Philippines, then under US administration.

Stephen stayed at his post in Hong Kong as the British government had instructed all colonial administrators to remain at their posts to avoid possible chaos. He was interned in Stanley Camp after the Japanese arrived at Christmas 1941 and the city surrendered. Whilst a prisoner, he lectured in Stanley on Chinese Civilisation and Russian Literature. On the day in question, fellow prisoner Mutal Fielder remembered that she was walking back from a lecture by Stephen and they were continuing their discussion about Pushkin.

“The path forked and Stephen turned to the right, walking towards Bungalow C, where he lived with a group of other internees, and I went to the left towards the Indian quarters. Suddenly there was the roar of aircraft and the sound of explosions as bombs were dropped. Two American aircraft collided and one pilot parachuted out in full view of the internees. Three bombs dropped on Stanley Prison from where a gun was firing”.

George Wright-Nooth remembered: “A fourth bomb landed outside the prison walls. While all this was going on, we had a magnificent view of the planes as they dived over. They each carried one long bomb underneath. A bomb hit Bungalow C by accident between the main building and the garage and 14 people were killed. One man, Mr. C. T. Bailey, was talking to one of the victims but survived because he was protected by a pillar”.

The bombing of the Stanley area by US Navy planes from the aircraft carrier USS Langley had begun at 8.30AM and went on for about four hours. Fourteen prisoners including Stephen died when the 500lb bomb hit Bungalow C. The official report states that “at least ten of the victims apparently died from the concussion of the blast”, so it’s probable that Stephen mercifully was killed instantaneously.



The belief at the time was that the bomb was meant for a Japanese ship or anti-aircraft guns positioned near the camp, and hit the bungalow accidentally. However, American Professor Stephen Bailey has inspected official US documents and concluded in his 2017 article that the pilots hit the camp intentionally, believing it to be an army barracks. A tragic example of a “friendly fire” incident, sadly made possible by the fact that the Japanese had not allowed the camp and its hospital to be marked out in any way.

The bodies of the 14 victims were buried the next day in a communal grave marked by three hand carved gravestones (see photo) and the entire camp attended a Sunday memorial service four days later.

Anne and the children remained prisoners in Manila for the rest of the war, and suffered great privations until they were liberated by US troops in early February 1945. It was only then that Anne learned of the death of her husband. After being repatriated by way of America, the family finally arrived in Marlow and moved into Dial Cottage in St Peter Street. Dial House and Dial Cottage had been owned for some years by Anne’s mother, Charlotte. When Charlotte died in 1937, the ownership of the two properties was separated, and Dial House became the residence of a Lady Buchanan. Sebastian Balfour remembers that “she was a charming neighbour and we enjoyed lots of tea and cake at Dial House”. The three children briefly attended the local primary school before being sent away to boarding schools. Ann herself re-married in 1952 and moved away to live in London but, as a postscript, Sebastian came back to live briefly with his own family at Dial Cottage in the mid-1970s when he took up a teaching post in Wycombe.

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