

## Gunner George Sanders of the 51st Coast Observer Detachment Royal Artillery, No. 11001989



George Sanders,  
circa 1930

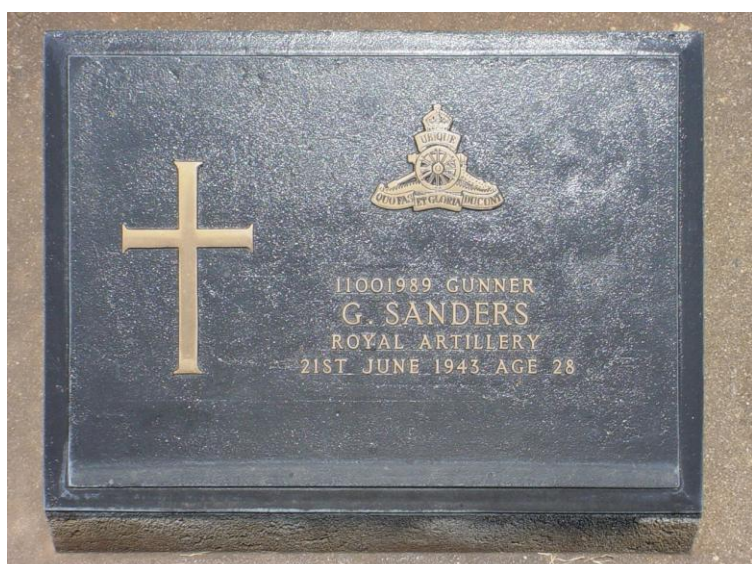
George Sanders was born in Northampton in 1915. His parents were Frederick George Sanders from Newport Pagnell and Edith Mary Panter who lived her early years in the family home in Harrold Road, Lavendon. By 1881 Edith had left home to live and work as a Servant in Northampton where she eventually met and married Frederick Sanders in 1913. The family evidently returned to Lavendon sometime after the birth of George. Sadly Frederick died in 1922 at Harrold Road, Lavendon, when George was still only 7 years old.

According to later newspaper reports, George went on to work before the war for Mr J Tusting, the leather merchant of Harrold. George also met and married Ethel Lucy Elizabeth Wright in late 1937. Ethel was the younger sister (by 16 years) of William Charles Wright who died at the age of 18 years in Flanders in November 1918.

Following the outbreak of WW2, George Sanders enlisted with the Royal Artillery – ultimately joining the 51<sup>st</sup> Coast Observer Detachment. According to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) George seemingly went on to serve in the Malayan theatre of war before finding himself in Singapore/Thailand. In March 1942 the Bedfordshire Times and Independent carried a report that George's wife Ethel had been notified that he was missing and it later emerged that George had been captured by the Japanese on 15<sup>th</sup> February 1942. On 14<sup>th</sup> July 1944 the same newspaper reported that his wife had received a card from her husband, Gunner George Sanders, *"who is a prisoner of war in Japanese hands in Thailand. He states he is well"*.

However, on 9<sup>th</sup> November 1945 the Northampton Mercury contained an appeal on behalf of relatives seeking news of missing men taken prisoner by the Japanese, including:

*"SANDERS, G., Gunner (11001989), 51st C.O.D., Royal Artillery, No. 2 Camp, Thailand. Believed have died from malaria June, 1943 Information to Mrs. Sanders. 77, High-street, Lavendon, Olney, Bucks."*



A military incident report dated 29<sup>th</sup> June 1945, and presumably released some while later, confirmed that Gunner George Sanders died on 21<sup>st</sup> June 1943 at the age of 28 years. Curiously the report indicated that he died *"from a cardiac arrest"* rather than from malaria. As noted below, it is possible that his final demise actually resulted from a cholera epidemic which occurred in the PoW camps during May/June 1943.

On 9<sup>th</sup> March 1946, Gunner Sanders was eventually re-buried from Nanchon Yai Cemetery to the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery, the largest of three main

'concentrated' cemeteries in the area. The CWGC records that:

*The notorious Burma-Siam railway, built by Commonwealth, Dutch and American prisoners of war, was a Japanese project driven by the need for improved communications to support the large Japanese army in Burma. During its construction, approximately 13,000 prisoners of war died and were buried along the railway. An estimated 80,000 to 100,000 civilians also died in the course of the project, chiefly forced labour brought from Malaya and the Dutch East Indies, or conscripted in Siam*

*(Thailand) and Burma (Myanmar). Two labour forces, one based in Siam and the other in Burma worked from opposite ends of the line towards the centre. The Japanese aimed at completing the railway in 14 months and work began in October 1942. The line, 424 kilometres long, was completed by December 1943. The graves of those who died during the construction and maintenance of the Burma-Siam railway (except for the Americans, whose remains were repatriated) were transferred from camp burial grounds and isolated sites along the railway into three cemeteries at Chungkai and Kanchanaburi in Thailand and Thanbyuzayat in Myanmar.*

*KANCHANABURI WAR CEMETERY is only a short distance from the site of the former 'Kanburi', the prisoner of war base camp through which most of the prisoners passed on their way to other camps. It was created by the Army Graves Service who transferred to it all graves along the southern section of railway, from Bangkok to Nieke. Some 300 men who died (most from a Cholera epidemic in May/June 1943) at Nieke camp were cremated and their ashes now lie in two graves in the cemetery.*



As an interesting post-note, George's wife Ethel Sanders subsequently remarried one Alfred James Bowyer in late 1949. Alfred Bowyer lived in the Pump House on the High Street in Lavendon until his death in 1995. Alfred's brother Freddie and half-brother Frank perished in the Great War. It will also be recalled that Ethel's brother died in WW1. Perhaps for those and other reasons the Bedfordshire Times and Independent of 29<sup>th</sup> November 1940 carried a brief report that "At the Eastern Tribunal last week, Alfred James Bowyer, a gardener of Olney Road, Lavendon, was registered for non-combatant duties." George's former wife, Ethel, died in 1990.

**Left and above:**  
The cemetery at  
Kanchanaburi in  
Thailand where  
Gunner George Sanders  
is buried.