

A View of the River

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A VIEW OF THE RIVER

FOREWORD

In 1986 Pamela and I visited our son Stuart and his wife Elizabeth in Hong Kong. They had lived and worked there for several years - he as a civil engineer involved in the development of the colony and she as a teacher.

One evening we went out to dinner where we met some of their friends. One of these, who was a Royal Air Force Officer, sat next to me at table. Our conversation turned to the invasion and occupation of the Colony by the Japanese during World War Two and this naturally extended to my experiences as a prisoner of the Japanese in Singapore and Thailand.

Stuart, who was sitting opposite us, listened to this conversation apparently with interest. Later, he said that he knew nothing about that part of my life and asked why I had never talked about it. I suppose that the reason for my reticence was the fact that many of my experiences were not the kind of things about which one would naturally talk to children. Then, later, when my sons were older, it had lost its immediacy and was allowed to settle back into its place in history.

However, because of his interest, I said that I would try to put on record an account of those years for him. Before I could begin though, I had to make the decision as to the point in time at which to commence. After much deliberation I decided that, in order to present a balanced record, I should begin with an outline of the life and times of our family in that all too short period of uncertain peace, between two gigantic World Wars, in which I grew up. So, perhaps the title I have chosen refers not only to an obscure tropical river which achieved lasting fame, but also to the river of time.

C.E.T.W.

INTRODUCTION

The Japanese entered the Second World War late in 1941. This was, very much, an opportunist decision taking advantage of the total involvement of the British Empire, the European powers and Russia in the conflict with Germany, in which they believed that Germany would be victorious, to realise their dream of 'The New Order'. This great vision of the Japanese war lords was the creation of a mighty oriental empire extending from the western Pacific across South East Asia and the Indian continent.

They were already in occupation of Korea and Manchuria and had invaded China. The United States of America had shown disapproval of these expansionist activities by imposing an oil embargo which was creating serious difficulties for Japan due to her great reliance on imports for her supplies of oil. Breaking this oil stranglehold was vital to the realisation of her plans and for the maintenance of her massive war machine. Therefore, the prime objective in the strategic planning of the Japanese military leaders was to take possession of the rich oil fields and natural resources of the Philippines, the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia) and Malaya.

The powerful Admiral Yamamoto and others believed that, if Japan could strike in great strength with the element of surprise, there was reason to think that America would probably agree to a negotiated truce rather than engage in the long and bloody war which would be necessary to drive out powerful, and well established occupation forces. By the end of November 1941, Japanese sea and air armadas stood fully prepared and manned to launch a great wave of 'lightning strike' invasions.

However, before that momentous order to attack could be given, it was imperative to prevent or, at least, seriously to delay intervention by America until landings had been made and Japan's forces were firmly in occupation.

And so it was that a quiet Sunday, the 7th of December 1941, became what the United States President Franklin D. Roosevelt described as "A date which will live in infamy!" At just before 8.00 am., a powerful Japanese sea borne force made a shattering surprise attack on the great American Pacific Naval Base at Pearl Harbour, Hawaii.

Wave after wave of carrier borne bomber and torpedo planes, and a small number of midget submarines, wreaked havoc in the harbour, the dockyard and on the airfield. In a little over forty-five minutes they left the base an inferno of blazing, exploding wreckage under an enormous pall of smoke.

Eighteen warships - including eight battleships - were sunk, or so completely wrecked that they were fit only for scrap; three hundred and fifty aircraft were destroyed on the ground; two thousand five hundred United States Navy personnel were killed, and over two thousand injured. This tremendous destruction and carnage was achieved with the loss of only twenty nine aircraft and five midget submarines. For that small cost, Japan had rendered American naval power in the Pacific impotent. Her way ahead was clear.

The only stroke of good fortune, in what was otherwise a great disaster for the United States, was the fact that her two aircraft carriers in the Pacific - 'Lexington' and 'Yorktown' were not in port at the time of the attack. They were later to be instrumental in taking revenge.

Early on the following day, 8th December, Japanese assault forces, launched from ports in Indo-China, were storming ashore on the Kra Isthmus of south Thailand and at Kota Bahru in northern Malaya. On 10th December, the British battle cruiser 'Repulse' and the battleship 'Prince of Wales', steaming north to take action against the invasion fleets, were attacked by almost a hundred bomber and torpedo aircraft of the Japanese 22nd Air Flotilla. Both ships were sunk with the loss of almost a thousand lives. The catastrophe destroyed allied sea power in the South East Asia theatre of war and, by exposing their vulnerability to air attack, signalled the end of the era of the great fighting ships.

Two days later, with America still reeling from the attack on Pearl Harbour, the Japanese landed in a two pronged attack on Luzon in the Philippines and, in a little over two months, her apparently invincible armies were established in Java, Sumatra, Borneo, Thailand, Burma, Malaya, Hong Kong, Guam, New Guinea and the Solomons. On 31st January, 1942, Allied Forces in Malaya, driven south by the Japanese advance, made their last withdrawal, across the Johore Strait to Singapore Island, blowing up the causeway behind them.

Nevertheless, the much prized 'Fortress of Singapore' surrendered on 15th February, 1942 - a week after Japanese landings at four points on the north of the island had resulted in the cutting off of all water supplies to the city. There were no defence works on the north of the island, the builders of Singapore's defences in the nineteen-thirties not having envisaged the possibility of an attack through the Malayan mainland which was a part of the British Empire

The loss of this great strategic British base in South East Asia stunned the government in London and the families and loved ones of the tens of thousands of servicemen and civilians who became prisoners of war, or internees

Almost sixty years before these events, the Thai Government had considered a plan for the opening of a land link with Burma. This involved the construction of a railway to connect their existing line, west of Bangkok, to the Burmese railway at Thanbyusayat, south of Moulmein. The idea was abandoned upon realisation of the enormous problems, and danger to life, involved in driving a railway through two hundred and sixty miles of virgin mountainous rain forest and tropical jungle, swept by torrential monsoon rains for half the year. However, in 1942, the Japanese High Command, faced with the difficulties involved in supporting large forces in Burma, were urgently in need of a more direct and safer supply route to avoid the long and hazardous sea voyage through the Bay of Bengal. They saw, in the building of the railway, the solution to their problems.

As a result of their sweeping victories they had a ready made labour force of prisoners of

war and an immense pool of native labourers - not only on the mainland, but also in the islands of Sumatra and Java from where they could be shipped in to Singapore.

In Singapore, they were packed into steel railway box vans and transported, in their thousands, eleven hundred miles north to Thailand. Each truck was loaded with thirty odd men and all their baggage. There was no room to move and the walls of the trucks became too hot to touch in the tropical summer sun. There was a stop each night and morning at pre-arranged points for a meal of rice and watery soup. The journey took five days. In Thailand, they were formed into groups and then began the long march through jungle tracks to the labour camps spaced out along the route of the railway.

Many became sick. Some died and were buried along the way. Nothing was permitted to halt the marching columns. Those who fell from exhaustion or sickness were kicked to their feet only to fall again after a short distance. Their comrades combined to carry them along until the days march ended at dusk. Of one of these great columns of marching men, whose destination was northern Thailand, only half of them survived. At the same time as prisoners from Singapore were marching north, thousands more, shipped into Moulmein in 'slave ship' conditions, were marching south to Thanbyusayat to begin the construction of the line southwards from there.

In the labour camps, the men lived in long, low bamboo huts roofed with 'atap' - palm leaf thatch. The huts were infested with bed-bugs and mosquitoes were everywhere. Each morning, every man, including the sick, paraded for 'Tenko' - or roll call. All who could walk were marched out to work - clearing jungle, digging cuttings, building embankments and laying track until they marched back to camp at dusk.

During the heavy monsoon rains camps flooded, latrine pits overflowed and burying the dead became a macabre struggle against the mud. Clothing and footwear soon disintegrated and most prisoners lived and worked wearing only a 'fundoshi' or loincloth, held on with string, and home made flat wooden clogs. The Japanese supplied nothing.

Life was a constant struggle to survive. Worn down by long hours of grinding work, malnutrition and the conditions in which they lived, the prisoners fell victim to beriberi, malaria, dysentery, jungle fevers and skin disorders. From time to time there were outbreaks of cholera, the symptoms of which could appear in a man one morning and leave him dead the following day. Tropical ulcers of the legs were common. From a small scratch they could develop rapidly to become a great festering hole in the flesh which, in severe cases, could require amputation below the knee

Medical officers among the prisoners of war did everything possible, but they were always short of drugs and medicines to treat the sick. The Japanese pirated all the supplies sent in by the Red Cross and kept them for their own use, handing over just the barest minimum, to support the fiction that medical supplies were being used for the benefit of the prisoners.

Some sixty five thousand prisoners worked on the railway. Over twenty thousand died. The number of deaths among the native labourers - many of whom took families north with them on promises by the Japanese of good pay and accommodation - will never be known. It has been estimated that well over one hundred thousand of those poor people died.

Many of the prisoners of war who lived to see the Japanese defeated died later, some, most sadly whilst en-route home, some soon after repatriation, and some following a short span of years of ill health. Others lived on with disabilities.

It is now a matter of history that the fanatical and cruel Japanese drove the railway through before the end of 1943. Each one of its tortuous two hundred and sixty miles is estimated to have cost over four hundred and fifty lives. Now, apart from a section in the south, preserved as a tourist attraction, it has gone. The great cemeteries in the south are also tourist meccas and places of pilgrimage for the loved ones of those who did not return. But, further north and on into Burma, the countless dead lie in burial pits and graves, their resting places overgrown and hidden by the advance of the relentless jungle in which they lost the battle for life so long ago.

They were sacrificed to the fulfilment of an oriental dream of empire which ended in ignominious defeat under the mushroom clouds of Hiroshima and Nagasaki

I was one of the very fortunate ones who not only came back from the Kwai, but was able to take up life anew; to marry my fiancée, Pamela, who had waited through the dark years with an unshakeable faith in my eventual return; to make a successful career, and to have two strong and talented sons.

Now, with time to write and record impressions of that time, I find old friends - and enemies - unchanged by time, moving through these pages like characters in a play against a backdrop of tropical jungle scenery. The friends I recall with affection and gratitude for their great comradeship. The enemies I remember - apart from just a few - as bombastic and arrogant when power was in their hands, but later, as pathetic and servile in defeat; expecting retribution for the years of despotism. They had always taunted us for capitulating at Singapore, boasting that Japanese soldiers would have defended it to the last man. At the end, their code of 'death before defeat or surrender' was forgotten. All they wanted was to survive.

C.E.T.
W.

CHAPTER ONE

'The way things were'

In 1938, Thailand - or Siam as it was then known - was to me a small country in the Far East. I confess that I would have needed to consult the index section of an atlas of the world in order to be able to put my finger on it. My 1930 edition of 'Pears Encyclopaedia' describes it as a country bounded by Burma, the Malay Peninsula and French Indo-China (Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia). Its area is given as 198,000 square miles and its population as 8.5 million. At that time, the population of greater London was 7.5 million. It was not a place upon which a great deal of attention was lavished in school geography lessons, in spite of its proximity to Burma and Malaya - both then part of the British Empire. However, in the not too distant future, fate would rectify my ignorance and provide me with an intimate knowledge of that quite backward country and its quiet, gentle people.

Meanwhile, approaching eighteen years of age, I was the eldest of three children. My brother was fifteen and an apprenticed shipwright. My sister was five years old. Born late in 1932, her advent was a considerable surprise to my mother, who was then forty and totally without any ambition to increase the family. Most babies were delivered in the home by the local midwife and it was considered to be necessary for the mother, having been delivered of the child, to spend the following two weeks 'lying in' - a period of bed rest in which to recover from the effects of the birth. This practice, which would be deplored today, created a need for assistance to the family where there were other children and the husband was working.

My mother was, quite often, called in by families in the neighbourhood to look after the mother and baby and the rest of the family at these times. I have no doubt that our family finances benefited at the end of the two weeks.

Early in 1932, my mother attended upon a neighbour of ours at the birth of a second child. It was winter time and very cold and, in conversation, my mother mentioned that she was going to have to buy a new eiderdown shortly. When the neighbour was back on her feet, she insisted that my mother accept the gift of the new eiderdown which she had been using on her bed during her confinement. It was shortly after this that mother found she was pregnant. When she recovered from the shock, she often jokingly attributed her pregnancy to "those germs on that blessed eiderdown". I wondered later if she was really joking - my sister was christened Ida.

I was in my fourth year as an apprentice in an engineering works in Southampton. I worked a five and a half day week of forty seven hours. From Monday to Friday working hours were from 7.30 a.m. until 5.00 p.m., with an hour for lunch. On Saturdays they were from 7.30 a.m. until 12.00 noon. For this I was paid fifteen shillings a week (seventy-five pence). I had begun my apprenticeship at the age of fourteen for just half of that sum and working the same hours. When I achieved the age of twenty-one years I would be able to command the full rate for a craftsman, which was then about three

pounds ten shillings (or three pounds fifty pence) per week.

My father was a police constable in Southampton Docks, which were owned by the Southern Railway Company and which had its own private police force. He worked a six day week of forty-eight hours on three rotating shifts with night duty every third week. He had one week holiday a year and his weekly pay was about three pounds fifteen shillings (Three pounds seventy-five pence) That income, together with the small contributions of ten shillings from me and a small amount from my brother, had to pay the rent and rates of our house; feed and clothe all five of us; pay hire-purchase repayments and allow for a small amount each week to be paid into a Savings Club at a local general shop, to provide a grand feast and presents at Christmas, which was the highlight of the year.

The cost of family accommodation made holidays at the seaside impossible, but we were fortunate in one respect. Because my father was employed by a railway company, he was entitled to free passes for any rail journey for the family on four occasions each year. In addition, he could at any time obtain rail tickets at what was called 'Privilege Rates', which enabled us to travel at one third of the actual cost. This provided us with day trips, and a week's holiday in London. There we would stay with my mother's sister and her family. Aunt Jess and her husband, Uncle Alf, had three children - two girls and a boy. My sister had not been born then, so, in addition to the four adults there were five children - of whom I was the eldest - down to cousin Billy, who was about five years younger than I. There were three bedrooms. Two were occupied by the adults. The third, which contained just one double bed, had to provide for all the children. To achieve this, the bed was made up with pillows at both ends. The blankets were also turned back top and bottom, and the two girls slept at one end whilst we three boys slept at the other. To this day I well remember, at about the age of seven or eight, being obliged to endure the embarrassment and discomfort of those arrangements.

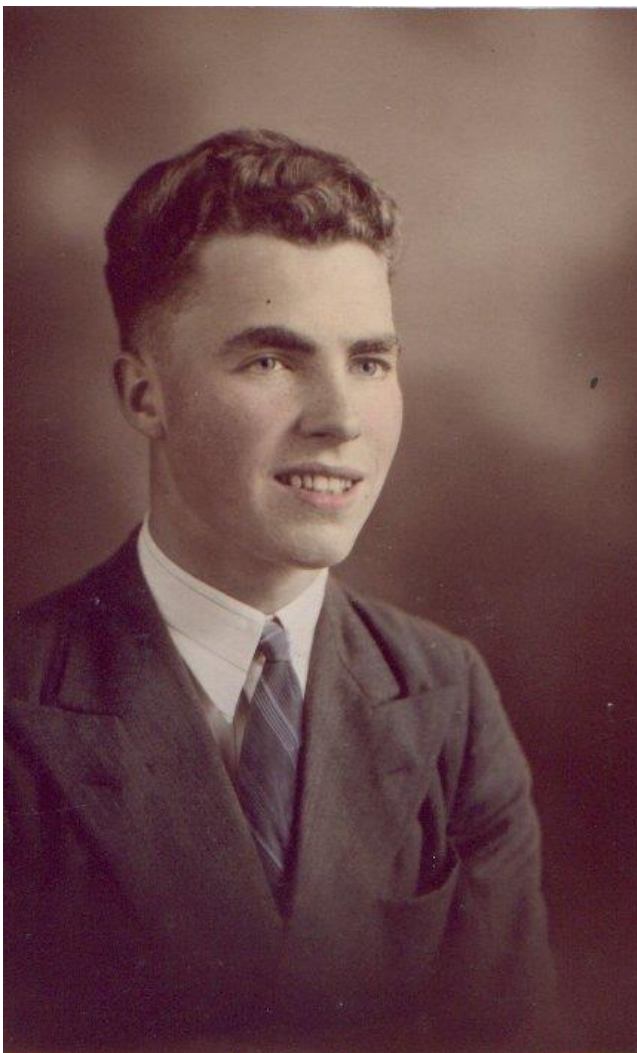
Of course, Aunt Jess and her family came to spend a week with us during the summer. When they did so, I was spared the communal sleeping arrangements. My mother made up a bed for me on a sofa in the sitting room.



Aunt Jess was short and very stout. Uncle Alf was also quite short, but he was very slim. He had dark wavy hair; a hooked nose; a loud voice, and a pronounced cockney accent. His conversation was liberally sprinkled with the expression 'bleedin' which he used at all times when speaking to any of us. To we children he would address such remarks as "Put that bleedin' thing down" ... "Go out and play in the bleedin' garden".....or, "Don't make so much bleedin' noise". To his wife, he would say "When are we going to have a bleedin' cup of tea?" However, apart from this addiction to sanguinary language, which caused much giggling by my

brother and me, he was a jolly man with a ready smile. He was a main line express train driver in that great heyday of the famous steam locomotives, and would talk about trains and railway engines – a fascinating subject for young boys. He also had a fund of funny stories about things that happened on the railway. Due to his manner of speech, my mother did not like him at all and, when they had departed, she could be heard to say that she could not understand 'how Jess came to marry that man'.

However, in spite of the fact that luxuries were very few indeed, and I was aware that my mother often had difficulty in making ends meet, I was quite happy and carefree. I did well at school and could have passed what was known at that time as the 'Scholarship Examination' to go on to grammar school. But, my parents could not afford to keep me at school, and so I had to leave and get a job. After three or four brief periods of employment in different occupations which I either disliked, or had no future whatsoever, father arranged my apprenticeship for me to learn to be an engineering blacksmith. I was fascinated with the atmosphere of the Blacksmiths Shop and found that I had an aptitude for the craft. Nothing pleased me more, as my skills increased, than to be allowed to use the powerful steam hammer to draw out and shape a glittering, white hot billet of steel, to fashion it into a replacement for some broken or worn item of equipment for a ship being repaired in the bustling, sprawling Docks, for which Southampton was famed world-wide in the late nineteen-thirties.



I had a bicycle on which I made the eight mile return journey between my home in the suburbs of Southampton and the town. The bicycle was bought for me by my parents, when I left school, to enable me to travel to work. It was new and cost three pounds fifteen shillings (£3.75). It was paid for on hire purchase at the rate of one shilling and sixpence (7½ pence) a week over a period of a year.

At the end of the working day and at weekends, it was my magic carpet, taking me to evening Further Education Classes; to the Church Youth Club and Boys Brigade during the week; to church on Sundays, and out with the Cycling Club on Saturday afternoons in the summer.

I had met Pamela, who would, one day, become my wife, and during those halcyon days of 1938, and through the summer of 1939 as war clouds gathered over Europe, we

spent each Wednesday evening and weekends together. Occasionally, we went to the cinema. There was always a programme running continuously at the beautifully appointed cinema theatres from 1.30 p.m. to 10.30 p.m. on each weekday. The programme was three hours long and consisted of two feature films and a newsreel. Television was only in its infancy, and the newsreels at the cinemas were the only source of visual news from which we could obtain a picture of events taking place throughout the world. A good seat cost one shilling (5 pence) for the three hour show. Some evenings we would walk miles and, on Saturdays, cycle down through the New Forest and perhaps swim at Lepe, riding back again in the evening.

I believed, even then, that we would marry one day but, at that time that thought was merely a pipe dream. We had no money and would have been very fortunate, indeed, to have managed to achieve a home of our own by the time we were twenty-five. I had certainly already decided that remaining a blacksmith was out of the question. There was no future in that. I wanted a career and intended to make an application to join the Southampton Borough Police as I approached the acceptance age of nineteen. If appointed, I would be on probation for two years, after which my appointment would be confirmed. If I took a course in Law, and studied hard, I could pass the promotion examination when I reached the service qualification at four years. I would then be twenty-three and well established, and we would be in a position to be able to marry and set up a home together. The Borough Police - Southampton had not then been created a city - had no police houses, but a 'rent allowance' was paid in addition to salary.

A three bedroomed semi-detached house could be purchased for, perhaps, seven hundred pounds in the 1930s, but it was not usual for young working class couples, getting married, to consider buying a house. In addition to saving for furniture, floor coverings, bed-linen, curtains, etc., there was the deposit on a mortgage to find. Secondly, and most important, there was unemployment and trade depression. It was common for firms to close down for lack of work, standing off all their staff. There was a very real and ever present fear that losing one's job could mean losing the home through inability to keep up the mortgage repayments. Buying a house was more for those with secure jobs and a regular income rather than young newlyweds.

However, there was a wide choice of houses to rent. Local newspapers carried many advertisements, and 'To Let' signs were a common sight in front of houses. A three bedroomed, semi-detached house with a bathroom could be rented for about one pound fifteen shillings (£1.75) a week, inclusive of the local authority rates for the property, which would be, perhaps, about five shillings (25 pence). But, of course, that rental would be half of a working man's weekly wage.

The older terrace type houses, built around the turn of the century, had no bathrooms. These were available for renting at about one pound a week inclusive. Millions of working people had a galvanised sheet metal bath hanging on a hook on the back garden wall. This had to be carried into the back kitchen; filled with hot water from the wash-boiler, and bailed out into the kitchen sink afterwards. During one period of my youth I lived in one of these houses and remember vividly, even into my 'teens', my mother

walking round the bath, with me sitting in it, because she wanted something from a kitchen cupboard. When I started work I finally managed to insist on privacy, and shortly after that, we moved to the suburbs and a bathroom. As the decade passed, inexorably, towards its devastating end, we became more and more aware of events taking place in Europe. Our parents, watching the political situation slowly deteriorate, viewed the future with foreboding. They had seen it all before. My mother's two brothers were both killed in the world War of 1914-18, and my father had served throughout amidst the mud and slaughter in France

We young men watched, in a curiously detached sort of way, as Adolph Hitler's Storm Troopers marched in triumph into the Sudetenland and occupied Austria. Czechoslovakia and Poland were the next to be threatened with occupation. Great Britain had a defence treaty with Poland, and Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain went to Germany to discuss the situation with Hitler, coming back to proclaim 'Peace in our time'. Later, we realised that all he was doing was playing for time. Britain was building up its forces and armaments as fast as possible. Mr. Chamberlain's Government was well aware that war with Germany, for the second time in twenty years, was inevitable.

There began to be discussion, among those of us who would be eligible for military service, as to which branch of the Armed Forces we would prefer to join. Eventually, it



was agreed that it would be preferable to anticipate the inevitable start of conscription, and to join the Territorial Army whilst it was still possible to choose the type of unit in which we wanted to serve when the time came. There was the additional advantage in this course of action, that friends could join together instead of running the risk of being split up in the General 'Call up' and sent to whichever regiment was being built up to strength at the moment. So, together with two or three friends, and many other apprentices from engineering works in the Southampton area, I joined the 43rd (Wessex) Division, Royal Army Ordnance Corps (T.A.) whose headquarters were at the Hamilton House Drill Hall, which, at that time, stood next to what is now the 'Mayflower Theatre', but what was then the 'Empire Cinema', in Commercial Road, Southampton. The R.A.O.C. was then the Army's mechanical and electrical engineering Corps, responsible for the maintenance and repair of all vehicles, weapons and instruments. The R.E.M.E.-

Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers - was not formed until about four years later.

We began intensive training, numbers continued to increase and, as the war began, old style vehicles and equipment were replaced by up to date workshop trucks and mobile machinery. We became the 6th Army Field Workshops and then, in a later reorganisation, we became part of the 18th Division with the title of 18th Division Workshops. By that time we had become an extremely well trained and experienced mobile military engineering unit servicing the concentrations of military vehicles and armaments, first in the south then, later, in the north of England and Scotland.

We did not know it then, but that last change of name would later precipitate us into one of the most infamous episodes of that long and dreadful war but, meanwhile, in 1940, Britain was struggling for survival. German Panzer Divisions had stormed through Europe. The forces of France collapsed and the defeated British Army had been swept back to a scrambled evacuation from the beaches of Dunkerque, where their deliverance was made possible only by the heroism of hundreds of small boat sailors and crews of small pleasure steamers, who braved all dangers to pick up boatloads of soldiers from the beaches, amidst continual German air attacks.

Following Dunquerque, the German Luftwaffe began that onslaught of bombing by high explosive and incendiaries which has gone down in history as 'The Blitz'. The attacks built up until waves of massive formations of German bomber aircraft roared across the Channel night after night, bringing destruction to towns and cities across Britain, and death and homelessness to the civilian population.

On the night of November 30th, 1940, Southampton was their target, and my parent's home was wrecked by the explosion of an aerial land mine close by. Fortunately, they had taken refuge in an air raid shelter, and, although badly shocked, they were not injured. I was with my unit in Bedfordshire when I received a message from Pamela telling me of this. I was granted leave immediately, and came home to find them and my eight year old sister, with just a few belongings, in a church hall on the outskirts of the town, where they had been given refuge with many other survivors, all very distressed and some weeping. I found another house for them to rent and we salvaged as much of their furniture, floor coverings, bedding and clothing as we could. To this day, I recall gaining access to the downstairs front room of their ruined home by crawling under the floor of the room above, which had fallen through and was supported on one side of the room by their piano. We moved everything to the other house by handcart.

Gradually, the indiscriminate and terrifying bombing raids lessened as the Royal Air Force gained control of the skies, and victory in the Battle of Britain. The German High Command, having found that their great aerial blitz had not defeated Britain, hastened the development of their new V1 and V2 rockets. These were fired from the continental coast. However, although they caused great destruction where they landed, they could not be directed with great accuracy and were quite random in their effect.

There had been several occasions, since our Divisional Workshops had been formed, when we were placed on 'stand-by' for service overseas, but these had come to nothing. This was, obviously, due to a change of plans by the General Staff. In view of the need for absolute secrecy about troop movements, we were never given any information. Therefore, when, at the end of 1941, we were again placed on 'stand-by', it was met with a shrug, and gratitude for the couple of days 'embarkation leave' which was always given to allow departing troops to say their farewells. So, I enjoyed my two days at home, said 'goodbye' to my family and to Pamela - to whom I had become engaged to be married in November, 1940 - and returned to my unit.

This time, however, there was no change of mind. Within a few days of my return we were entrained to Liverpool and, in early November 1941, I sailed out of the Mersey in a large military convoy, escorted by a number of ships of the Royal Navy, heading west across the North Atlantic. We were leaving behind a Britain battered by two years of total war, where all essential goods were strictly controlled; where food was scarce and tightly rationed or obtainable only after hours of queuing; where there was no glimmer of hope for any improvement, and where merely to survive was all that could be hoped for.

CHAPTER TWO

‘The long wasted journey’

In the 1930s, many famous shipping companies operated luxurious ocean passenger liners on regular scheduled passage routes across the world. The ships of Cunard, White Star, Royal Mail, Union Castle, Orient Lines and others from the United States, Canada, France and Germany, ran to strict timetables and had appointed sailing and arrival days at Southampton. Now, air travel has taken over the mass transport of travellers and the great fast passage making ships - often referred to as 'Ocean Greyhounds' - have gone. Those luxury ships operating today were mostly purpose built for the holiday cruise trade. The record for the fastest crossing of the Atlantic at the time of writing is held by a passenger catamaran.

Normal passenger traffic across the Atlantic ceased due to the war. All available ships were pressed into use - requisitioned by the Government - to bring food and fuel, and munitions, to a beleaguered Britain, and to transport troops and armaments to the theatres of war. Both the 'Queen Mary' and the newly built 'Queen Elizabeth' completed in 1940, were used as troop carriers and sailed unescorted, their speed making them impossible targets for German submarines.

I had been aboard many of the liners in the years before the war, and was well acquainted with their high standards of decor and furnishings. As we climbed the gangway of our troop transport - the Orient Line ship S.S."ORONSAY", a vessel of about twenty thousand tons - and filed down the wide stairways to the troop accommodation, the operation which had converted this once gracious vessel into a troopship became evident to me. Where there had been elegant corridors of cabins lined with polished wood, and floors covered with luxurious fitted carpets, there were now great open spaces of bare steel, rows and rows of rivet heads and floors of rough planking. The ship had been stripped to provide maximum space.

Overhead, the ceilings had been removed, leaving the metal pipe work, the steel overhead deck beams, and the rivet studded plates of the deck above, exposed. To the beams had been fitted lines of metal hammock hooks. The whole barn like space had been painted white and, at one end, rows of long wooden tables and benches were bolted to the deck. These were the sole furnishings. At the other end of this open area - known as a 'Mess Deck'- were racks of rolled up hammocks. Lighting came from bare electric light bulbs in wire cage bulkhead fittings and three small portholes.

The ship was divided into a number of these mess decks which could each accommodate a large number of soldiers. The object, of course, was to carry the greatest number of troops in the smallest number of ships. This was travel accommodation at its most basic.

There was no point in expending time and money to improve upon it. The life of a ship in the North Atlantic was hazardous and often short. German 'Wolf Pack' submarines were patrolling in considerable numbers and any ships - even those with an armed escort -

were in constant danger. Over a million tons of shipping had been sunk whilst running the blockade between Britain and America, and we were sailing at a time when submarine attacks on convoys were being increased, although, for obvious reasons, we were not made aware of that.

Once aboard the ship, each man allocated to himself a space at one of the long mess-deck tables and a hammock from the racks at the end of the deck. Each night, he had to 'sling' his hammock by attaching the rings at each end to the overhead hammock hooks. When all the hammocks were 'slung' they were suspended at about shoulder height at the centre and, in order to provide sleeping space for all the troops in the mess deck, they were extremely close together. There was just room to squeeze sideways between them.

In rough weather, all the hammocks would swing together in unison with the rolling of the ship, and, of course, when they were occupied, they each took up a lot more hanging space. Any man who found it necessary to go to the latrines during the night, would return to find that his hammock was now squeezed between those on each side of him, presenting him with the considerable problem of getting back in. This could be achieved only by quite forcibly shoving his neighbours away as he hauled himself up and scrambled in - a course of action which would invariably result in obscene complaints at being disturbed and which would awaken others to add to the chorus.

Finally, after rising to a crescendo of bad language and shouts for quiet, the uproar would subside to grumbling and, after a few more minutes, peace would descend once more.

At night, the air in the mess decks was stuffy and stale. The steel bulkheads sweated and there was a smell of urine from the latrines, which were partitioned off to one side of the deck. Although the ship was clean, cockroaches were numerous. They emerged from small gaps between overhead piping, and from the holes in the bulkheads through which the piping passed. Food was collected from the galleys by two men elected daily by each table. They were also responsible for clearing away the debris afterwards. Meals were wholesome but poorly cooked and uninteresting; basic ingredients put together and served up without a great deal of interest in the result.

Two days into the voyage the weather, which had been fairly calm, suddenly deteriorated. The equinoctial gales, which had held off for the beginning of the voyage, arose overnight, and, by morning, were driving heavy grey clouds and lashing rain across a heaving, dark green sea which broke into clouds of spray across the exposed decks. The ship rolled and pitched along, occasionally giving a shudder when she was caught, as if off guard, by a particularly heavy sea.

The popular press of that time, when referring to the people of the British Isles, often used expressions such as 'this sturdy island race' or 'sons of the sea'. These terms could, of course, be applied quite truthfully to the thousands of seamen and fishermen who crewed British ships world wide. It was also true of that very hardy breed known as the 'small boat sailors', who could be found anywhere between the coasts of Britain and Europe, in time of peace. However, although a large percentage of the population might take a trip

on the Thames, or the Norfolk Broads, or visit the Isle of Wight on a fine day, the stormy Atlantic Ocean in October was a very different scenario. Sadly, the weather conditions, and the pitch and roll of our ship, was not at all to the liking of a very large percentage of those taking part in our enforced voyage.

Consequently, in the mess decks, wan looking men sat at the mess tables with heads in arms, only coming to life at intervals to make a hurried visit to the latrines. In between these bursts of activity, one could hear the weather, the war, the ship, the Army and - most of all - the sea, described in the forceful and picturesque language which unhappy conscript soldiers developed to the level of an art.

This widespread seasickness, added to the already unpleasant atmosphere of the mess decks, made it impossible for me to stay below for long, and I spent much of my time wrapped in my greatcoat and scarf, with a balaclava helmet pulled over my head, in a sheltered corner of the open deck. To my great satisfaction, I found that I was not affected by seasickness. I was rather proud of being a good sailor and enjoyed the experience of being at sea. From my position, when the weather cleared, I could see the other ships which formed our convoy spread out under heavy cloud across a wide expanse of turbulent sea. From time to time there were alarms, due to the suspected, or perhaps actual, presence of an enemy submarine, when our Navy escorts circled us at speed like busy sheepdogs, and Aldis lamps flashed messages from ship to ship.

Nobody spoke of the possibility of our ship becoming the victim of a U-boat or a German surface raider, although, from conversations later, it became apparent that everyone carried that hidden fear with them throughout the voyage. Looking out over the cold, dark water with its spray flying in the wind, I tried to imagine what the likelihood of survival would be if we were sunk. In an open lifeboat, there would be perhaps, many days of hoping for rescue before hypothermia and exhaustion took their toll. However, the number on board far exceeded the capacity of the lifeboats and, on a life raft, soaked and chilled by having been in the sea, one's strength would not last very long. But, floating in a lifejacket, death was certain in an hour or two. Our great consolation was the presence of our escort ships. If we were sunk there was a good chance of being picked up in a reasonable time in daylight.

But the days passed uneventfully. We had no idea where we were bound, except that it was obvious that our course had been steadily westward since we had left England, and America could not be far away. Finally, after something over a week at sea, we arrived in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and received the order to prepare to disembark. Many years later, I learned that the S.S. ORONSAY survived less than a year after we left her in Halifax. She was struck by four torpedoes from an Italian submarine and sank off the west coast of Africa in October 1942.

Amid much speculation as to why we were in Canada and how long we were going to stay, we were formed up on the quayside. A chill wind drove a penetrating drizzle around ears and down inside collars but, in spite of that, it was good to be ashore and, as we were

marched across the docks, I looked forward to seeing something of the town. Then, to our consternation, we were suddenly on another quayside beside another ship and, very shortly afterwards, were filing up the gangway.

Disappointment at not being allowed shore-leave was very much tempered, however, by the spotless cleanliness and very high standard of the accommodation of the ship we were now aboard. She was an American vessel named "USS Joseph T. Dickman" and was of moderate size - much smaller than our previous transport - and had the appearance of having been purpose built as a troop-carrier. Substantial cargo loading derricks were in place fore and aft. Below decks, various levels were given over to troop accommodation consisting of banks of pipe-cots in tiers of three. There was a large dining area and food was served on stainless steel sectioned trays from a gleaming cafeteria by catering staff in immaculate 'whites' and chef's hats. Food was excellent, varied and plentiful - we had not seen the like of it. Even allowing for the fact that England had been at war for two years, it was apparent that the American Forces were used to a much higher standard than any of the British Services of that time. The crew were all members of the United States Coast Guard - a very professional and highly disciplined service akin to the U.S. Navy - and very smart in their 'blues' and 'pork pie' style hats.

On November 10th, 1941, with the weather still grey and cold at the beginning of the Canadian winter, our ship eased away from the dock and moved out to join the massive American convoy being assembled off the coast. (Appendix 'A'). Very soon, the 'Dickman' picked up the southward course which she would follow for almost three thousand miles down the coast of America, through the Bahamas and the West Indies to Port of Spain, Trinidad. The weather began to change, and soon the seas were calm and sparkling blue as we headed for the Caribbean. All troops were in tropical khaki drill whilst the crew were wearing their U.S. Navy style 'whites'

We still had no idea whatsoever of our ultimate destination, but a journey which had started so unfavourably had developed into something like a holiday cruise. We were prepared to settle for that and to enjoy it whilst we could. In the manner of soldiers the world over, we pushed to the back of the mind the possibility that we were heading towards battle and death, and lived only for the present.

Towards the end of 1940, I had been called in to the adjutant's office and told that our unit had received an order to the effect that we must have regular physical training. As there was, at that time, no one qualified to be responsible for that, I had been 'selected'. Accordingly, I was posted to a course at the Army School of Physical Training at Park Hall Camp, Oswestry.

I shall always remember the first few weeks of that course as the most excruciatingly painful of my life, but, as I became really fit, I began to feel on top of the world and eventually qualified as an Army Physical Training Instructor. Now, aboard a troop-transport loaded with soldiers who had no other inclination but to lie around in the sunshine doing nothing, I was ordered to combine with other P.T.I.s aboard 'to arrange regular periods of exercise for all'. Consequently, we were engaged each morning in

running a succession of classes on the foredeck throughout the whole of our very long voyage. I think that I was never fitter in my life than I was at that time, and firmly believe that this contributed greatly to my survival through the appalling conditions of the years ahead.

The convoy remained in Trinidad for several days refuelling and victualling. Again, we were confined to the ship, lying at anchor in the harbour which teemed with the boats of the native traders plying back and forth for the custom of the troops hanging over the rails. There was a continual shouting, gesticulating and holding up of wares by the occupants of the boats, and more shouting from the troops who were, not unexpectedly, offering only half the price. Finally the native boatman being satisfied with something of an increase in the offer by a soldier - which was still at least twice the actual value of the article - a rope would be lowered down the side of the ship with the money and hauled back up with the purchase. It was all very entertaining and against the background of that beautiful tropical island perched just a few miles off the coast of South America, it was easy to imagine the place as the pirate stronghold it once was, with square-riggers swinging to anchor instead of an armada of steel. In spite of the idyllic surroundings and the beautiful weather, it was frustrating to have to remain on the ship and there was much grumbling among the troops who were becoming bored with the inactivity. Then, quite early one morning, with shouted commands by loud hailer and bustling activity by the crew, we were moving again. Before long we learned that our course was south east, but again there was no information at all as to our next port of call. I realised that the mouth of the Amazon was somewhere to starboard¹ and ahead was the great expanse of the South Atlantic Ocean. Then came the announcement that on the following day the ship would be crossing the Equator.

The crew were hard at work engaged in some kind of construction work on the foredeck. The result of their efforts was a large canvas swimming pool surrounded by a wooden walkway. To one side of this was a platform upon which stood a very large wooden armchair under an awning decorated with painted shells and pictures of mermaids. On the other side, at the top of a flight of steps, was another large chair with its back to the pool.

That evening, it was announced by the captain that the following day would be devoted to the 'Crossing the Line Ceremony'. All those aboard who could not convince 'King Neptune' that they had previously 'crossed the line', would be required to take part, in order to receive their certificate. No excuse would be accepted. The following morning the 'ceremony' began immediately after breakfast and carried on all day. The American crew appeared dressed as pirates and the troops were rounded up and formed into a queue along the decks. They were then directed up the steps to the walkway. The chair under the awning was now occupied by 'King Neptune' - the Bosun made up with flowing beard, a decorated robe and a large crown on his head.

The scenario was that, before a man could be certified as a subject of 'King Neptune's Kingdom', he had to be properly presentable. That meant having a shave, haircut and a bath. So, one by one, they were grabbed by two very large and powerful crew members who held them down in the 'barbers chair' whilst a lock of hair was chopped off, and their

faces were 'shaved' with a large wooden razor. Following that, a lever was pulled and the chair tipped over backwards, depositing them upside down in the pool. Other 'pirates' were in the water to ensure that they were all well and truly 'dunked' before being allowed to climb out and receive their certificates, which were very well produced and printed in colour, with the man's name entered upon it. The 'Ceremony' - which had come down through the years from the days of the old sailing ships, when it was used to provide a diversion for crews who had probably been at sea for many weeks with poor food and appalling conditions - went on all day, with the crew taking turns and the troops being hustled up the steps as quickly as they could be dealt with. I shall always carry in memory a vivid picture of that day, when the war was forgotten for a few hours of crazy horseplay and laughter as the ship ploughed steadily along under the tropical sun. The generous lock of hair lopped from my curly head came from right at the front. There was nothing for it but to visit the ship's barber, who was doing a roaring trade trying to make victims look presentable.

I came out of his 'salon' with a 'brush cut'- all my hair on the top levelled off at about three quarters of an inch long. As many others looked very much the same, I was not too concerned about this drastic change in my appearance until we arrived in Cape Town on 9th December, 1941, and were told that, at last, we were going to be allowed shore leave. Then I began to feel conspicuous!

During the four days the ship remained in Cape Town harbour, parties of troops were ferried ashore in 'liberty' boats after receiving very stringent orders as to their behaviour. There was a particular area known for its brothels which was declared 'Out of Bounds', and about which dire threats of disciplinary action against any soldier disobeying the order were made.

At that time the drugs which today provide an effective remedy for venereal diseases were not available and treatment was said to be primitive and painful. Stories about unspeakable acts committed, with the use of weird instruments, upon the persons of sufferers, in the name of treatment at V.D. hospitals, were legion.

Although there was always a suspicion that these horror stories were propaganda circulated by the Army Medical Corps, in order to reduce the incidence of illicit intercourse - particularly in foreign ports - they did create a general belief among the troops that it would be very stupid to take any chances whatsoever, no matter how alluring the lady appeared.

I made two trips ashore with friends during the four days of our stay. The second occasion was on the last day. The convoy was sailing the following morning and there were strict orders that all personnel should be back aboard by 10.00 pm. On my return, just before that deadline, I was told that there were a number of men of our unit who had not yet reported back, and I was to take eight men and try and find them.

So, having been provided with 'Shore Patrol' armbands and truncheons, and now looking very official indeed, back we went in the 'liberty boat' to try and locate the lost sheep. It

took about an hour of marching round the city centre and visiting every bar. Quite a few of these were below street level and, in some cases, were populated by some very unsavoury looking characters indeed, who did not take very kindly to our peremptory removal of half-drunken members of the missing soldiery from their midst. Eventually, we 'shepherded' these to the quayside and the 'liberty boat' - 'marched' would not be the right word in view of the condition of one or two of our charges. We duly sailed out of harbour the following morning, 13th December, and my lasting mind picture of Cape Town was the magnificent view of Table Mountain over the stern of the ship as she headed eastwards into the Indian Ocean.

We had still not been given any information at all about our destination but, as we were all clad in khaki drill, and there was only one theatre of war where that would be appropriate, we had ceased to speculate. As far as we were concerned, we were bound for the desert war. The roundabout route we had been taking had been necessary because the Atlantic was the hunting ground for German U-boats. There was no other way we could reach the Allied bases in North Africa.

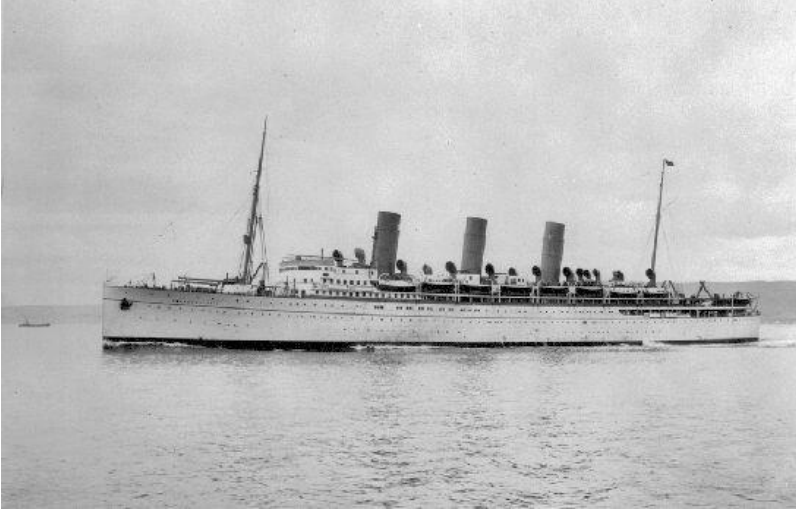
Now, we figured that there were two approach routes - the Suez Canal or the Persian Gulf. The first was quite close to the war zone and within range of the Luftwaffe; therefore, we must be heading for the Gulf.

However, what we did not know was that the east was already aflame with the Japanese attacks on many fronts and - following Pearl Harbour - what had been Europe's war had now become the Second World War with the entry of the United States into the conflict. But, the most significant event for us was the landing of Japanese invasion forces at Kota Bahru in northern Malaya. Even as we sailed out of Cape Town, orders were received diverting the convoy from the Gulf to Bombay. So, after a further two weeks at sea, the 18th Division arrived in India where my unit found itself entrained to Ahmadnagar, a small garrison town about a hundred and twenty miles inland.

With hindsight, it is clear that our arrival there was completely unplanned. We had neither vehicles nor equipment of any kind, and spent hours taking part in marches on the dusty plains of the area. However, this boring and apparently aimless activity soon came to an end. The Division had just been in the pending tray.

On 23rd January, 1942, we were back in Bombay boarding yet another troopship, in another convoy, bound for yet another unknown destination, with 2,235 troops and 416 crew aboard. However, a few days out from Bombay, we were informed that we were going into Singapore. We did not know that, even before our arrival, all British Forces in Malaya would have retreated before the Japanese onto the island, and Singapore would be under siege by the enemy massed on the mainland.

So, in blissful ignorance, and under glorious tropical sunshine, we sailed down the west coast of India and turned eastwards across the Indian Ocean to the Sunda Strait between Sumatra and Java, so as to approach Singapore from the south through the Java Sea. Our troopship on this voyage was an old and very scruffy converted passenger liner, of some 17,000 tons, named the "Empress of Asia". She had seen thirty years of plying the world's oceans and was used as a troopship in the First World War. We were thankful that the trip was not to be longer, for conditions and food aboard this ship were appalling, with filthy



crowded mess decks, permeated by the acrid smell of latrines, hammocks for sleeping, stale air and cockroaches - a very sad contrast to the spotless conditions on the USS "Joseph T. Dickman". We could tolerate the poor food for the ten day journey across the Indian Ocean but there was no need for the filthy, stinking state of the ship. However,

like so many of those aboard, she was making her last voyage.

The "Empress of Asia"

Once through the Strait, and because of the danger of air attack on a massed convoy, the Convoy Commander ordered two faster transports to leave the convoy and make all speed to Singapore. The "Empress of Asia" and the remaining ships were attacked by bombers some 200 miles south of Singapore but with only minor damage. The faster ships which had gone ahead were attacked by a formation of Japanese bombers on their run into the Harbour and one was hit by a bomb which killed five men. However, they were both successful in landing their troops and equipment and subsequently making a safe withdrawal from the area, back through the Sunda Strait to the Indian Ocean.

On the morning of the 5th February, 1942, the "Empress of Asia" was still some miles off Singapore. All troops had been ordered to remain below in the Mess Decks, and to stand by with kit all packed and ready to disembark as soon as the ship was in port.

I was sitting at one of the long wooden mess tables in conversation with some friends when, suddenly, alarm bells were clamouring and, almost simultaneously, the ship shook with a violent explosion. There was a pause, then gunfire and more explosions. The main lighting went out leaving only the dim emergency lights. For the next hour and a half this

attack by Japanese bombers continued and the ship suffered a total of five direct hits. There was a smell of burning. I had experienced bombing on a number of occasions before leaving England but had never felt such a dread of being trapped as I did then, below decks in a ship at sea, sweating in half darkness, imagining that the next bomb would come roaring down through the steel plates overhead and blast us into eternity.

Then, suddenly, it was quiet. Several minutes went by. Men began to talk - tense and nervous at first, then more volubly, but silenced again by the public address system: "All personnel on deck -- all personnel on deck"

The relief at being told to leave the steel trap, in which we had crouched for what seemed an age, was enormous. I went to the bottom of the companionway to control the evacuation, but did not need to take any action at all. The troops filed up the staircases quickly, but with good discipline. With a last look round, I followed and came out into the open on the after-deck. I was last out, after checking that the area was cleared. As I looked forward from my position near the stern of the ship, the sight before me was almost unbelievable. A great pall of smoke shot through with flames enveloped the ship's superstructure and drifted away in a black cloud, across the sea to starboard. The route to the boat stations was completely cut off and I could see smashed boats on the port side. There was no way forward. We were trapped on the after deck, which was crowded with the troops who had come up from below.

The bombers which had attacked the Empress of Asia had obviously decided that the damage they had inflicted had prevented the ship from carrying out her mission to deliver much needed ammunition, armaments, equipment and fresh troops to the beleaguered island of Singapore, and they had disappeared into the distance

I recall wondering what I should be doing in a situation such as that. In spite of the damage and fire - which it was clear was not going to be controlled - I did not have any feeling of being in danger. It was such a lovely day, with the tropical sun, its heat tempered by a light breeze, glinting on the calm, deep blue of the sea. After the attack we seemed to be in a state of suspended animation, watching a scene in a dream.

Then, suddenly, I was jerked back to reality. A loud-hailer somewhere forward of my position was giving us an order which I had seen in books and heard in films, but never expected to hear directed at me in a real life situation: "Abandon ship - Abandon Ship - every man for himself - every man for himself - Abandon ship"

This was repeated several times, then, after a pause, and in more sombre tone, "And may God be with you all."

I went to the rail on the windward side, away from the drifting, black smoke, and looked down. It was a long way to the sea - perhaps thirty feet. The ship was still moving slowly. In the distance, a long smudge on the horizon indicated land but this was obviously too far away to be useful. It seemed quite unbelievable that I was being told to jump overboard from a large ship in the middle of nowhere. Then a sudden upsurge of flame

roaring up through the smoke made up my mind for me. Clearly, the ship was finished, and the best thing I could do was to get off it as quickly as possible, whilst I was still able to do so.

I saw, hanging down the side of the ship, a length of rope about an inch in diameter. This was secured to a deck cleat and seemed to reach about two thirds of the way to the water. I stripped off my back pack, webbing equipment, boots, gaiters and socks, and arranged them all in a neat group on the deck. I then realised that, such was the strength of two and a half years of ingrained military discipline, I was automatically leaving my kit tidy before escaping from a blazing ship at sea!

Climbing over the ship's rail, I reached down and took hold of the rope. Then, leaning back with my feet against the ships side, I began to abseil down. However I had gone only a few feet when my hands came upon a patch of grease on the rope. Before I could do anything, I had lost my hold and somersaulted over backwards into the sea.

With the impetus of the long drop, I went down deep near the stern and close to the ship's side. I then realised that the engines were still running slowly and the propellers were still turning. Many years later, I can still hear the sound of those churning blades coming to me through the water, and can still feel the panic as I forced myself to the surface and frantically struck out away from the ship. I realised then I should have jumped clear. As I looked back, the side of the 'Empress of Asia' was a gigantic, rusty black, steel wall sliding slowly by a few yards away. As the distance between me and the blazing ship increased, so the beat of the propeller blades became less and, in a few minutes, I was left looking at her stern as she slowly moved on, under a great drifting pall of smoke, shot through with banners of flame.

My life jacket was a short distance away and I swam over to it. I had thrown it into the sea before leaving the ship. It was a very old type which was formed of large solid blocks of cork in a canvas cover with a hole for the head and tapes to tie it round the waist. We had all heard tales of the danger involved if this clumsy object was not tied down securely, before jumping from a height into the sea. The impetus of the body entering the water feet first could bring the whole jacket up under the chin with considerable force, and could cause a dislocated neck. So I had played safe. Now I trod water, as I struggled to manoeuvre the cumbersome thing over my head and find the trailing tapes and tie them firmly round me. That done, I was able to relax at last and look around. There were men in the water everywhere. Here and there one called to another but, apart from that, there was a dreamlike quiet over the glittering blue water

A few yards from me, a young soldier struggled in panic, making frightened sounds only - no words. He was wrestling with his life jacket, which he had got over his head, but which he had not secured. Unbelievably, he was wearing his steel helmet with the chinstrap under his chin. As he floundered about, his head slipped down through the neck aperture leaving only the helmet visible resting on the jacket. Then, once again, his face came up through, gasping and spluttering and still surmounted by the helmet. How he had come to be in the water still wearing the thing and without securing his life jacket, I could

not imagine.

I paddled over to him, relieved him of the helmet and lashed him into the jacket. Through the choking noises he was making he kept repeating "Can't swim - Can't swim" - then, as he found that he was floating safely and in no danger of drowning, he began to relax.

The ship was now about a mile distant, the great cloud of smoke billowing from her, carried by a light breeze, covering a wide expanse of sea and rising into the cloudless blue of the sky as she drifted on. Somehow, possibly due to sea currents, the hundreds of men and patches of debris which had been initially in the immediate area of the burning ship were now spread wide - some quite far in the distance, and my now quite calm companion, had become separated from others by three or four hundred yards. From my viewpoint at sea level I could not see land but, a very long way in the distance, I could make out what appeared to be a structure of some kind with a small tower - perhaps a lighthouse or a navigation beacon. Whatever it was, it raised my spirits considerably. There, at least was an objective to make for. I showed my companion how to lie on his back and use his arms to propel himself along, then, having tied his jacket lanyard to mine, began what proved to be a very long tow.

Having covered about half the distance I was immensely cheered to hear a roaring sound behind and, turning round, saw a large Air/Sea Rescue launch approaching us at speed. It was a great relief to feel that after all we had been through in the past few hours, we were now about to be picked up.

The boat swung in close to us. There were quite a large number of men aboard. It stopped with engines ticking over and a rating leaned over the side.

"Are you all right, mate?" he shouted to me. "Yes, I'm O.K. thanks", I replied. "Oh! Jolly good", he bellowed, then, to my amazement, the engines roared and the boat lifted its bow and powered away.

I realised later that he was concerned, primarily, with picking up men who really needed help. So we paddled on and finally arrived at the lighthouse platform and scrambled onto it.

I lay for some time flat on my stomach, recovering, but then, as I realised that I had survived that amazing episode without injury, youthful good spirits returned. Miraculously, only nineteen died in the attack on the "Empress of Asia". Later, the count revealed that among them were several of my friends. This was our first experience of death of comrades in war. Death in the aftermath of war would come later

Many survivors had already reached the platform before me, and we sat around talking and swapping stories of escape from the blazing ship, which was now just a great, black smoke cloud on the horizon. Other rescue boats had appeared and were picking men up out of the sea everywhere. Before long, a big sea-going launch arrived, took us all aboard and headed for the distantly visible land.

What an ignominious arrival that was, as we straggled ashore in Singapore. I had lost everything I possessed. Personal belongings, mementos, photographs and all my clothing had gone. At that time, however, I did not realise that, apart from injury, there could not have been a worse prelude to the years of hardship, deprivation, disease and death which were shortly to begin. We had travelled over twenty-five thousand miles in the past three and a half months, and had now arrived in a war that was already lost before we were diverted to it.

But, for the moment, I was just glad to be alive. Very soon after we were ashore we were issued with the basics of tropical uniform: shirt, short socks and boots and of course, rifle, bayonet, webbing equipment with ammunition pockets and bandoliers of ammunition, and small back pack. As we were a divisional engineering unit, our training had been limited to the use of weapons. I was a good rifle shot and was also quite capable with a Bren gun, but I had had no combat training at all on exercises as an infantryman in close contact with an enemy. However, here we were, deemed to be ready for war against one of the most ferocious and battle hardened jungle armies the world had ever seen. A couple of days later we were marched out to take up a position on the north of Singapore Island overlooking the Causeway. We dug ourselves in and waited.

CHAPTER THREE

‘The very brief war’

So much has been written by military historians about the bloody campaigns and battles of South East Asia and the Pacific that there is no need here for a catalogue of the mistakes and failures of British Governments during the nineteen-thirties which led to the defeat of the Allied forces in the Malay Peninsula.

As the troops defending the Island braced themselves for the inevitable Japanese onslaught, they became aware that they were already marooned, with no room for manoeuvre and with no defences against attacks from the air or by sea.

Flames from the blazing fuel tanks and ruined dockyards of the Changi Naval Base lit up the night sky to the east. On the airfield, only a few outdated Buffalo fighters remained. Every day, the squadrons of Japanese bombers droned unmolested across the island, their massive formations undeterred by desultory anti-aircraft fire.

The first waves of the invasion forces began their assault on their final objective after a tremendous barrage during the night of 7th February, 1942. Invisible in the darkness, they streamed across the Johor Strait in waves of plywood landing craft propelled by outboard motors.

The defending forces had been positioned in greatest strength along the north shoreline of the island, overlooking the Strait and extending eastwards past the Causeway towards Changi, but the landings were not directed at what seemed the most likely line of attack. Instead, they swarmed into the mangrove swamps on the west side. By dawn on the 8th, over fifteen thousand spearhead troops had been landed and they attacked ferociously, screaming their battle cries, in mass bayonet charges and driving defending forces back with complete disregard for their own losses. By the morning of the 9th February they had smashed through the defences at several points and were solidly established in the west of the Island.

At night, they would crawl close to the defence positions and, using loud hailers, would keep up a nerve-jangling propaganda campaign of calls and shouts designed to destroy confidence and prevent rest. On and on, repeated time after time would come the disembodied, metallic voices, always with the same message:-

"Hallo English sojah stop fighting. Tommies you are surrounded..., give up now or you will all die Japanese will treat you well and let you go home to your families If you keep fighting you will never see them again stop now and go home".

When first this verbal barrage started, the reaction was to open fire towards it. However, that would give away our positions and we would be subjected to a pounding bombardment. We learned to keep silent.

On 10th February, General Wavell, the Allied South East Asia Commander, realising that Singapore was in grave danger of being lost to the enemy, flew in from Java to confer with General Percival who was in command of the island. He brought with him a directive from Prime Minister Winston Churchill and issued a battle order embodying this which read as follows:-

"It will be disgraceful if we yield our fortress of Singapore to inferior forces. There must be no thought of sparing the troops or the civilian population and no mercy must be shown to weakness in any form."

"Commanders and senior officers must lead their troops and - if necessary - die with them. There must be no question nor thought of surrender. Every unit must fight it out in close contact with the enemy." By Friday 13th February, that enemy was in possession of over half the Island. Our unit had been moved back yet again into an area of scrub and woodland where we came under heavy mortar fire.

One of our men had been badly wounded and there were shouts for assistance. I crawled over to him and found him lying face down over the edge of a slit trench. He had a bad wound in his back where he had been hit by mortar shrapnel and his shirt was soaked with blood.

He was semi-conscious and groaning. I did what I could, staunching the wound with a shell dressing pad held in place with bandaging.

It was obvious that his only hope of survival was urgent surgical treatment. I located an officer. He had no idea where there was a casualty Station and we had no medics nor a stretcher party with us. He thought that, if there was some way of transporting the man about three miles to the city, there was the possibility of locating a hospital. He told me to do what I could.

I took another man with me. We made our way out through the trees onto a road. On the far side stood a large house with outbuildings. It was deserted and we searched around looking for anything which might be useful for moving the casualty. By great good fortune we found, in an outhouse, a two-wheeled flat topped wooden cart with rubber tyres. We dragged it to the road, loaded the man onto it face down and started off in the direction of the city.

A heavy artillery bombardment had begun, with shells from a battery of guns away to our right screaming across the road above our heads with that distinctive, ear-shattering roar of sound which, once heard, can never be forgotten. We had no idea whether they were hostile or friendly, but that did not matter much as long as they continued to pass over our heads.

During that trek, we saw a number of dead in the scrub at the side of the road, but no living person. However, suddenly, we came upon a tented Field Hospital and watched with great relief as the Medics relieved us of the responsibility for our injured comrade.

He was still alive at that point but I did not hear of him again, although I enquired whenever I came across any of those with whom he had served. He must have died from his wound or, possibly, have become a victim of the victorious Japanese. On that last evil day before the battle ceased many great atrocities were committed by their rampaging troops. They stormed through the Alexandra Military Hospital bayoneting the wounded on operating tables and in their beds and murdering medical staff. (See Appendix C). They also began rounding up hundreds of the leading Chinese in the population and slaughtering them with machine gun fire on Changi Beach. Bodies were still lying in heaps along the shore when prisoners of war were herded into Changi Prison Camp area days later.

Having left the Field Hospital we started to make our way back to our unit by the same route. We could now move quickly. I had no idea where the Japanese might be so we moved at the crouch in the monsoon drains, or through the scrub as we left the city outskirts. We had had no food all day and had completely run out of drinking water. Coming upon another deserted house we made towards it. I found the kitchen and turned on the taps. There was no water. I looked in a large refrigerator. I blessed former occupants who had been in the habit of keeping a stock of chilled water - there were several bottles full of water in a rack.

Thankfully, we drank what we wanted and filled our service water bottles before we resumed our journey. Shortly after this, my spirits rose as I recognised the wooded position where we had left the unit. We hurried towards it, relieved to be back with our friends once more.

Then came the jolting shock of realising that the whole area was deserted. The entire unit had gone. There seemed to be only two reasons why the unit had moved. Either they had been ordered out or, more disturbing, had been driven out by the enemy. If the latter was the case, we were now behind the Japanese advance and were in great danger. I shoved my friend into a slit trench and followed him in so as to keep out of sight whilst we decided what to do. About half an hour passed. There was no sign of any movement whatsoever. We could not stay where we were so, with great care and watchfulness, we set off for the third time along the road to the city. There was a difference on this occasion - there was complete silence. The artillery barrage had ceased.

I did not realise the implications of that - I just breathed a sigh of relief that the ear splitting noise had stopped and carried on towards the city. I was hoping to locate some Army command post to which we could report the fact that we had lost our unit. Then we came upon what looked like a large school set back from the road in extensive grounds surrounded by a park of bushes and trees. I walked along a path and came out on a wide expanse of lawns and playing fields surrounding an imposing red brick building. Even after the passage of many years I can still feel the breath-stopping shock I experienced as I took in the scene before me.

The Japanese had landed on Singapore Island only a week previously. In that time I had experienced being bombarded by their artillery and mortars, I had loosed off a

considerable amount of ammunition in their general direction and, during the night, had put up with their amplified, strangled English propaganda. But I had never seen one of them. Now, immediately before me, were a very large number of them. They were surrounding a group of several hundred disarmed British troops. To one side lay a haphazard heap of rifles, bayonets and ammunition. The whole scene represented a classic tableau of defeat.

My first reaction was to turn and run. Then, common sense prevailed as it became obvious that we had been seen. Several Japanese ran towards us. We would have been shot down if we had run. I dropped my rifle and raised my hands above my head.

The leading Japanese stopped in front of me, shouting, and stabbed at my stomach with his bayonet. I jumped back away from it. He lunged again - and I jumped back again, hands still raised high. Now, other Japanese had arrived and we were surrounded.

Then, pushed and struck at with rifle butts we were driven towards the main group of captive British troops. There, they finally left us and returned to their encircling guard positions. I was shaking and in a cold sweat. I had come close to being skewered by a bayonet and it took a little while for my breathing and heartbeat to return to normal.

Presently, I moved around among the crowd to see if I could find any friends, but without success. I did, however, have a piece of luck. Against the wall of the building I saw a pile of broken furniture and rubbish, and flung on this heap of junk was a blanket. It was dirty but quite sound. Nights out in the open in February in Singapore had proved to be quite cool. Although I had no idea what was going to happen to us in the near future, it occurred to me that the blanket might be useful, so I pulled it out of the heap and shook it out.

As I did so there was a shout and I looked round to see a Japanese soldier running towards me. He pointed at the blanket and shouted again. Obviously, he wanted to know what I was doing. In a moment of inspiration I put the blanket round my shoulders and made a dumb show of shivering. Perhaps he thought I was trying to tell him I was suffering from malaria for, after some more grunting noises, he walked away. That blanket proved to be the most fortuitous acquisition I could have made, and it served me well later, during the cold nights and half dark of early dawn roll-calls in northern Thailand.

CHAPTER FOUR

‘Into captivity’

There followed another day of aimless waiting about. Men went from group to group enquiring about friends they had been fighting side by side with, and with whom they had lost touch during the confusion of that last day, or swapped stories of the fighting and the surrender.

Suddenly, the waiting was over. We were ordered out into the road, and formed up in marching order where we were addressed by one of our officers. The substance of his remarks was that we were now prisoners of war and were going to march to a barrack area where we would be given accommodation. But, this did not mean that this march was going to be a dejected shamble. We were defeated but were not going to allow that to alter our bearing and behaviour. So, we would march with discipline and spirit and would not give the Japanese the pleasure of allowing our sadness in defeat to show.

And we did just that, covering a couple of miles towards the city where we joined up with thousands of others so that the great column of marching men extended ahead for as far as one could see.

So began the thirteen mile march to Changi barrack area and captivity, where the unbelievable cruelty and disregard for human life of the Japanese was soon to become apparent. As we passed by, groups of the native population stood and watched in silence. It was as if they could not understand what their eyes were witnessing. The beginning of the end of the British Empire in the east was unfolding before them and there was already a great fear of the tyrannical power which was taking its place. Many influential members of the native population, notably the Chinese, were already being rounded up and taken away by the 'Kempeitai', the infamous Japanese Military Police. Our first few days in the Changi prison camp area were interspersed with the sound of distant firing as these unfortunate people were massacred by machine-gun squads on the idyllic golden beaches.

On arrival in Changi we were allocated spaces in wooden huts and, initially, we had access to the beaches which were a short walk away. The picture before me on my first visit was a horrific scene of slaughter as bloated bodies lay on the sand and drifted in the water of this beautiful place which, so very recently, had been a holiday playground. A day or two later, on my next visit, they had gone. From the tracks in the sand they had been scooped up by bulldozers.

In the camp, days passed in utter boredom. There was no information, only rumours. After a time, classes on all sorts of subjects began to be organised. These ranged from talks on famous people, to languages and history. It became apparent that a musical society had been born when a performance of Gilbert & Sullivan was advertised and took place on a makeshift stage. I particularly remember the leading part being taken by a young man whose name - I believe - was Aubrey, and who had a very well trained and pleasing tenor voice. Later, when I was in a camp on the River Kwai, and myself singing

in a production of the pantomime 'Cinderella', I heard that he had died. By then, I was injured to death. Hundreds of men were dying there at that time. But I was very sad. It was as if the death of that voice made his death even more tragic for me.

Food in Changi was atrocious. The rice, which had become staple food accompanied by thin vegetable soup, was of the type which would have been fed to animals. Broken and stale, it was quite foul. After a while, it came with a yellow colour to it and a horrible sickly taste. This was called "limed rice". We never did find out what this meant, but it was obviously some form of chemical treatment - perhaps for agriculture. It was quite revolting but, as one had to eat to survive, this muck had to be forced down somehow. It made me feel sick every time it appeared.

There were a number of coconut palms around the prison camp area and many of these were bearing coconuts. There was a short initial period during which the prisoners of war considered the problem of getting the nuts down from thirty to forty feet up a round tree trunk, with no hand holds of any kind. However, that was solved eventually by using ropes to shake them down and, for a short while, coconuts became items of barter to augment the diet by grating, over the dreadful rice. Then they were gone.

Day followed day. Occasionally, there would be a demand for men to form working parties to clear the debris of war in the docks and other areas of the city. The chance to go on one of these 'outings' was welcomed as a break in the grinding monotony.

Then, in April, the Japanese announced that they were going to build camps 'in the north' where conditions and food for the prisoners of war would be excellent. They needed an 'advance party' of three hundred men to volunteer to go north to prepare the way for the others who would follow later. I, and many of my friends, wasted no time in deciding that we would volunteer

CHAPTER FIVE

‘Out of the frying pan’

Arrangements went ahead quickly, and an early morning in mid-April saw our convoy of military trucks grinding out of Changi en-route for the city railway yards. There stood a train of about a dozen steel railway box-cars of the type which were completely enclosed with a steel sliding door at each side. We were split up into groups of thirty and each group was allocated to a truck. With all the men and their belongings in the truck there was no room to move around whatsoever. We sat, in close proximity to each other, on the steel floor. We kept the doors open for ventilation. Fortunately, the Japanese did not object to that. It became apparent, later, that they recognised our group as willing volunteers, and allowed us a great deal more latitude than the thousands who were to follow enjoyed.

After much shouting, waving of arms, and running up and down the track by the escorting Japanese troops, we began our long, tiring and uncomfortable journey into the unknown. Twice each day - morning and evening - the train stopped at what were obviously prearranged stations. At each of these, food was ready at the trackside, and every man received a scoop of boiled rice and a small amount of soup. Drinking water was not available, but tea, pale golden in colour, in the Chinese style, was prepared by the side of the train in the ubiquitous fifty gallon oil drum. Each man received a mug full, served from a ladle improvised from a condensed milk tin on a wooden handle.

As this was all the drink available in each twenty-four hours, thirst, accentuated by the blistering heat of the steel wagons during the day, was a serious problem. However, I did manage to buy a number of limes from a native vendor and the juice of these helped out, but they were shudderingly acid and sharp to the taste.

There were no such things as lavatories at our stopping places, so, as soon as the train came to a halt, a large number of men would leap down and make off, at speed, for the bush at the side of the track. Initially, this was the cause of much commotion and frantic yelling by the Japanese guards, who obviously thought that a mass escape was in progress until they found the 'escaping' prisoners squatting in the scrub. However, when necessary, urinating was not a problem, as this could be achieved by standing at the downwind end of the open sliding door whilst the train was moving. But, due to dehydration, the need for this was very infrequent.

The train remained stationary during each night. Guards patrolled up and down along each side, occasionally calling out to each other. It was impossible to lie down properly due to the overcrowded conditions, so sleep was fitful. One would awake again and again and try to achieve a more comfortable position whilst trying not to disturb one's neighbours.

There was no provision for washing or shaving, and so it was a filthy, sweaty and unkempt company of men who, stiff and cramped, clambered down from the trucks on

the fifth day of that nightmare journey. We had arrived in Ban Pong, a small town in southern Siam on the existing railway to Bangkok. We had no idea why we were there nor what the plans of the Japanese were. That knowledge would come later. But this quiet, scruffy, rural native town was to become the busy southern junction for the projected Siam - Burma Railway.

To the accompaniment of much yelling and gesticulating by the Japanese escort, we formed up and marched from the station, along the rough road through the town. I recall dirty, under-developed small pigs, and a number of dusty, scrawny dogs, around the ramshackle dwellings and unsavoury looking small shops which lined what was, apparently, the main street.

My lasting mind picture is completed by a large tree, one of whose long and twisted branches overhung the road, and upon which sat several large vultures, watching our progress and looking like a row of Victorian undertakers anticipating work.

After a short distance, we arrived at a rough fence made of split bamboo and about two metres high. As we passed through an opening in this, I found that I was looking at a wide compound containing some very large huts, and a few smaller buildings, one of which was the Japanese guardroom just inside the entrance.

The huts were about seventy-five yards long and about seven or eight yards wide. The one to which I was allocated was well constructed, with a plank floor raised above ground about two feet. There were neither beds nor sleeping platforms - to which we would later become accustomed - one just lay on the floor. There were low walls and a roof of 'atap' - palm leaf thatch. I would look back later and regard that hut as the best accommodation I occupied in Siam during the next three years. It had probably housed Japanese troops. The other huts in the compound were all built on ground level and were constructed of bamboo. They had sleeping platforms, also of bamboo, on each side of a central alleyway.

I was not in this camp in the monsoon months, but I believe that it became a quagmire during the rains, when the huts flooded and the latrines overflowed. The Japanese authorities would do nothing about the problems.

However, Ban Pong was but a temporary home for me. Within a few days, working parties were being taken to a site about five miles to the east along the track to Bangkok. There we cleared acres of banana, scrubby bushes and Indian corn, the cobs of which were not fully matured, but they were edible. Food at Ban Pong was very poor - mushy rice and watery vegetable soup - and corn on the cob was a very welcome addition to the diet. The close covering of green leaf stripped easily and revealed the grain which could then be chewed off. In addition, the small plump bananas were also there for the taking.

So we husbanded as much as we could as we stripped and levelled the ground, built the first huts of Nong Pladuk Camp, and laid out the beginnings of what was to become the goods yards of the Japanese Railway Regiments and their supply depot in southern Siam.

I also learned a salutary lesson. Probably due to lack of care when eating the corn and bananas, I contracted dysentery.

Fortunately, this was Bacillary Dysentery and not the Amoebic variety which would prove fatal without the very scarce special drug, named 'Emetine' I believe, necessary for its cure. After about ten days of excruciating periodic abdominal pain, and staggering to the latrines over twenty times a day, I recovered, but much thinner and feeling pretty weak. If I was going to survive I would have to build myself up again and that meant that, somehow, I had to improve my diet.

By this time the Japanese were paying all prisoners, who were fit to work, a daily rate according to rank. As a sergeant, I was receiving fifteen cents a day. When out on working parties, we were permitted to purchase items from the itinerant Siamese traders during 'yasume' - or rest - periods.

Back at the camp, these traders would gather at the gate with their wares in baskets slung across their shoulders on a bamboo pole. It was possible to buy eggs - although not very large by British standards - for ten cents each. One could also buy a sticky, dark brown, molasses-like sugar. However, we were paid in periods of ten days. I would receive the princely sum of one dollar fifty cents. There was no way that one egg and some sugar each day was going to build me up again. I needed a fairly solid sum of money - and quickly.

Unfortunately, my assets were very few. All my personal belongings had either burned or were otherwise lost in the wreck of the ill-fated "Empress of Asia". The exception was my very nice gold signet-ring, which had been given to me by Pamela when we became engaged in 1940. I finally decided that I would sell that, feeling certain that she would not mind so long as I survived to return home again.

The sale of such an article was a very tricky operation. The Japanese frowned on such transactions and, if caught, both the seller and the buyer could receive considerable punishment. Nevertheless, I knew that there were local Siamese always ready to take the risk, and that they would make great point of the dangers to keep the price as low as possible. The problem was, to find one. It could only be a matter of trial and error.

Such were the demands of the Japanese for the maximum numbers to be on parade for work, that within a few days - although still feeling weak - I was again out at Nong Pladuk on the working parties. During a 'yasume' period I approached a native vendor on a pretence of buying one of his little cakes. As I stood in front of him, with my back to the Japanese guard, I held up my left hand against my chest and indicated the ring. The little man caught on quickly - clearly, I was not the first to approach him. He pointed to himself and shook his head. Then he pointed towards the town and nodded, making a gesture as of someone coming from the town. He shuffled away.

The following day I saw the vendor again near the same spot. I approached him and bought one of his little cakes for five cents. As I did so, another native joined him, looked

round very warily, then pointed to a ring on his own finger and held out his hand. I realised that he wanted me to hand over the ring so that he could see it. I knew that I had to hand it over to him. I also knew that he could walk off with it and I would be powerless to stop him. But, he was obviously an honest rogue. He examined it quickly, and then indicated the figure twenty five by opening and shutting his hands. I could not argue. It was cheap, but I had no alternative but to accept. I went back to the camp with twenty- five dollars in my pocket - with the price of eggs at ten for a dollar, a small fortune.

With this precious windfall I bought eggs - which I boiled hard in a tin held over a wood fire behind the hut - and crumbled two or three of them onto my evening rice at the end of every day. I also laid in a stock of sugar. I began to lose the feeling of weakness and, although much thinner, slowly recovered.

I had learned my lesson, however, and had been lucky enough to survive. From then on, I was fanatical about the possibility of picking up infection from food, and would throw food away if a fly pitched on it, even if I had nothing else.

Shortly after this, an incident occurred which always comes to mind immediately whenever I think of Nong Pladuk Camp. I was in charge of a party of twenty-five prisoners of war working on the beginnings of a railway siding. A Scottish sergeant also had a party there. We were unloading timber baulks and had begun a stack near the main track, when a Japanese soldier came rushing over to me shouting and gesticulating.

Although I had begun to learn the Japanese language in classes run by the Japanese in the camp, it was quite impossible for me to understand what he was saying. The little I had learned, however, did allow me to say, "Sumimasen - wakarimasen - motto yukuri" That was as near as I could get at that time to saying, "I'm sorry - I don't understand - a bit slower". This only seemed to infuriate him further and, without warning, he hit me on the side of the head with all his strength, knocking me several steps sideways. Before I could do anything, he had hit me again and swung his fist back to continue the attack.

Automatically, I put up my hands and held him off. The Scot tried to intervene. At this the Japanese became quite frantic, shouting to other Japanese who came running over. In a few moments we had both been knocked to the ground. Rifles were levelled at us. We were dragged to our feet and marched to the guardroom - kicked and struck with rifle butts, all the way - and made to stand at attention outside. We came to realise, later, that this was the usual beginnings of punishment for any offence whatsoever. Any action or inaction which could be construed as a breach of the rules; or any sin of omission; or not working fast enough, in fact anything which displeased the Japanese, could result in being dragged to the guardroom, and made to stand at attention in the sun outside. According to the magnitude of the offence, this could be for just one day but, it might extend for longer.

If a man collapsed, due to exhaustion and the heat, he would be kicked back onto his feet again. The only sustenance he was allowed was the occasional drink. The only break was

a visit to the latrines. The latter were few. The body had nothing to evacuate.

We stood outside that guardroom for two days and nights. Any movement to ease the cramps and aches caused by long hours of immobility was met by a shout of "Ugokanai - bakayaro!" - the equivalent of 'Stand still - bloody fool!'. My bush hat shielded my face, but my legs and feet swelled and my back muscles ached so much that breathing became an effort. But, I knew that if I did not stay on my feet, I would suffer a further vicious beating which would add to the cuts and bruises I already had. So I tried to think of happier times back home in England and hoped that I would be able to stick it out.

On the morning of the third day an escort was formed and, filthy, soaked in sweat, legs red and blistered, and barely able to walk on our swollen feet, we were marched to a large hut in the Japanese compound and brought to a halt before a long table. Seated at the table, under a suspended Japanese flag, sat a line of Japanese officers. In the place of honour in the centre was a distinguished looking senior officer with greying hair. Obviously, we were before some kind of tribunal and he was the presiding officer.

Immediately behind him stood the interpreter - a stocky little man in the uniform of an officer, but without the badges of rank, and wearing a wide armband inscribed with Japanese characters. With his thick lensed horn-rimmed spectacles he was the archetypal caricature Japanese.

The Presiding Officer spoke to us in Japanese. He assumed the strange official guttural form of speech, expressed in short staccato sentences, which, I later came to know, was adopted by those in authority to indicate the importance or seriousness of what they were saying. When he stopped, the interpreter translated.

The officer had said that the Japanese soldier had reported that the work party was not working hard enough; the timber was not being properly stacked; it was being stacked in the wrong place, and he wanted all this improved. When the work was not improved he had administered punishment for bad work. He had then been attacked by us.

He went on to say that prisoners of war who were guilty of attacking Japanese soldiers would be shot as an example to all. He then asked if we wished to make a statement about the incident. I most certainly did wish to do that. It was unbelievable that we were in danger of being shot out of hand as the result of what had been an inability to understand a bad tempered prison camp guard. The whole of the evidence appeared to have been rigged by the Japanese soldier to show himself as a diligent supervisor trying his best to get a job done properly and being attacked by us in the process.

Our situation reminded me - somewhat hysterically - of the trial of the Knave of Hearts in 'Alice in Wonderland'. It was as if this court, also, would rise up in the air around us like a pack of cards, and I would then wake up to find it was all a bad dream. I said I would make a statement, and then described the incident which, from its small beginnings, had blown up into a trial for our lives. I pointed out that the whole situation arose from misunderstanding on both sides and not from any intentional misdeeds by us. The soldier

did not try to show us what he thought was wrong and, when I could not understand, he had punched me about the head.

I had not attacked him at all, but had merely tried to protect myself by fending him off. My friend had only stepped in between us in an effort to prevent the situation from becoming worse. I finished by saying that I had started to learn the Japanese language and hoped that they would help me to understand in the future.

The Scottish sergeant also spoke, agreeing with me that there was only self protection against the guard's blows. The interpreter then conferred with the Presiding Officer and told us that we would be taken back to the guardroom while the court came to its decision. We were marched back across the compound to our position in the sun. There we stood for about another two hours before being returned to our position before the enquiry

There the Presiding Officer spoke for several minutes, after which the interpreter translated for us. He said that Japanese soldiers were subject to very strict discipline, and all learned to accept physical punishment without flinching. All prisoners must learn to do the same. In our case, it would be accepted that there was no retaliation against the guard. If there had been, then we would certainly have been shot. We would be taken back to the Guardroom and remain there until released.

So we were marched out, back across the compound to the guardroom, once again to take up our positions in the sun. But this time it was with a light heart. We had survived and learned a hard lesson. Many times in the following years I was beaten by sadistic Korean and Japanese guards. I endured it, riding the blows as much as possible, merely trying to stay on my feet.

Late in the evening, we were told we could go. Our ordeal was over. I walked slowly and painfully back to my hut where I was seen by one of our medical officers and listed as unfit for work due to the condition of my legs and feet. However, a week later, I was in an advance party going up country

Our task was to clear jungle and build huts at intervals along the Menaam Khwae Noi - the River Kwai. These would be the beginnings of a chain of labour camps for the thousands of prisoners of war, who would soon be slogging northwards on foot to form the work force for the construction of the railway to Burma.

CHAPTER SIX

‘River journeys and a disaster’

After an early breakfast of a scoop of rice - to which I added a sprinkling of sugar - our party of about forty were assembled near the gate to the camp compound and loaded into two Japanese army trucks. From there, we jolted and swayed along for the thirty miles or so to Kanburi.

The trucks turned into the open entrance to what had once been a fortified town, through a dilapidated and broken down perimeter wall, and trundled down to the river bank. En route, we passed untidy houses, and some unsavoury looking shops outside of which scrawny dogs scratched lazily. By the river's edge, there were moored two sampan-type barges. These were about twenty five feet in length and seven feet in the beam. Each had a tunnel-like shelter of woven split bamboo extending for most of its length except for an open space at the bow and the stern. Ahead of each barge, and attached by a tow rope, lay a hefty looking motor boat.

Our guards directed us to the barges and signalled us to go aboard. I hated the thought of being confined under the shelter and stood back to supervise, so that I could board last and travel in the open space at the stern. Sacks and boxes of stores were then loaded, filling the space down the centre of the boat.

That done, the engines of the motor boats were started - at first with a roar, then settling down to a steady pum-pum-pum-pum and we swung out into midstream.

Kanburi - a shortened form of the full name, Kanchanaburi - stands at the confluence of two rivers, the Mae Klong and the Kwae Noi, and we were heading north up the Kwae Noi - now known by its westernised name - the River Kwai. Although the south west monsoon had hardly begun, the river was swollen by rains in the north and the current was quite strong, however the towing boats had a considerable reserve of power and we made good progress.

The Kwai was quite wide at this point - perhaps almost two hundred yards - having completed its two hundred mile journey from its source north of the Burma border. As our towing boat's engine thumped away up ahead the river became a little narrower.

The jungle – a thick tangle of trees, creepers and tall bamboos - crowded the banks and overhung the water. Away to the left the mountains of the Bilauktaung Range rose out of the sea of green, shaking off the heavy vegetation, then the scrub, and finally emerged as bare rock up to craggy summits, to form the great natural barrier between south-east Burma and western Siam.

At intervals, we passed great rafts of bamboo and timber moored to the river bank. These were all surmounted by the small thatched huts that served as home to the native merchants who spent weeks at a time poling them down river to the docks and markets.

Occasionally, the river valley echoed with the whooping of gibbons, disturbed by the passage of our towboat thumping along up ahead. At one point an iguana, quite five feet long, was sunning itself on a large flat rock at the riverside.

In the midst of this brief spell of peace and beauty, after the squalor of prison camp life, disaster came, as it often does, completely unexpectedly. We were being towed on a very long rope, probably a hundred feet in length and had rounded a right hand bend in the river. Up ahead, our tugboat was beginning to negotiate a quite sharp left hand bend. Our native helmsman was holding our course out towards the middle of the river so as to avoid the left hand bank. It became apparent that the tugboat had encountered a strong current on the bend because its engine suddenly increased to full power. Then, without warning, the engine faltered and almost stopped. The tug immediately began to drift back rapidly with the current.

Bereft of its towing power, our barge lost steerage way and the bow fell away to starboard. Just at the point when the barge - now out of control - was broadside on to the current, the engine of the tugboat came to life with a roar and the towrope snapped tight with a tremendous jolt, hauling the barge to port against the current.

This caused a great build up of water against the port side of the barge, and it heeled violently to starboard throwing all the passengers, together with its load of sacks of provisions and boxes of Japanese stores, down to that side. Before we had time to think, the barge rolled over, throwing us all into the river. Unfortunately, a large box, sliding across the footboards as we went over, jammed my left foot, and I had the heart stopping experience of finding myself beneath the upturned barge, trapped by my foot and under water. After frantic moments of struggle I managed to free the foot - stripping skin down to the bone of the ankle in the process, as I was not wearing my boots - and came to the surface. I swam clear and turned to view the scene.

The barge, having been cast off by the tugboat, had righted itself and was wallowing submerged to the gunwales. A mass of boxes, sacks of stores, items of our kit and swimming men, was spreading across the river. Everything was being carried quickly downstream with the current. About fifteen yards away, a young prisoner of war - obviously a non-swimmer - was floundering about and gasping for help as the current carried him away. As I swam towards him he sank beneath the water. Once more he rose to the surface, choking and crying out in panic. Before I could reach him, he sank again. This time he did not come up. I shall always remember his horrified face, and his hand clutching above the water, as he disappeared for that last time.

After a short while, I reached the river bank. The upturned barge ran aground on the bend of the river and much of our gear was also washed up there. By great good fortune I recovered my haversack with my boots and few possessions, but my ankle was bleeding and very painful. I bound it up with a strip of cloth torn from the tail of my only shirt.

Then we had a roll call. In addition to the prisoner of war whom I saw drown, the

Japanese soldier who had been aboard as guard also died. Wearing uniform, leather boots, puttees, ammunition bandoliers and bayonet, his fate in those conditions was less unexpected. It was also less mourned by us, but the Japanese were as downcast by the loss of their comrade as we were of ours, and they mimed their sorrow to us in sad expressions and shaking of heads.

Our motor tug-boat had taken off back down the river as soon as we were all safely ashore. It was some hours later that it returned, towing another barge. We were embarked again and, in quite a short time, travelling quite fast with the current, we arrived back at Kanburi where we were put in a hut and given a meal of rice and soup from the prisoner of war cookhouse. The following day we started our ill fated journey again, to begin the task for which we were being sent up country. To build huts at day's march intervals along the route of the railway, to provide basic shelter for the marching columns now on the way from the south.

Time after time we were put ashore on the river bank, to cut and clear jungle and to make the beginnings of a camp. Then to prepare a small shelter and primitive cooking arrangements to boil rice and some vegetable - perhaps yams, sweet potatoes and maybe some dried fish. The fish was as hard as wood and had to be hacked at, to break off small pieces, like chips of wood.

The great rafts of bamboo - cut further north and floated down river by the itinerant native traders, who lived aboard them in makeshift shelters with their families - were moored at the river side. Also there awaiting us, were other large barges stacked high with 'atap' - woven lengths of palm frond thatch, with which our huts were roofed.

Our first task was always to cut the bamboos free and unload the atap. The bamboos could be sixty feet long and tapering from a base of four to five inches in diameter. They were very heavy and moving and stacking large numbers of them was very hard work indeed. Framework for the sides and ends of the hut was formed from young small bamboos, also covered with atap. The atap we moved on stretchers made up from two small bamboos stuck through two rice sacks.

The huts were very large - about fifty yards long by eight yards wide. We started the building by sawing the bamboos into lengths suitable for uprights, and digging post holes. With the uprights in place, the rest of the framework and the roof trusses could be lashed into position with ties made from long thin strips of bamboo, and fixed with wooden pegs.

The roof was approximately fifteen feet high at the centre, sloping down to meet the sides of the hut at a height of about five feet above the ground. Finally, the finished construction would be surrounded by a drainage ditch and the earth removed would be thrown up against the sides so as to prevent rainwater flooding into the hut.

Stretching the full length of the hut on each side of a central aisle, were the sleeping platforms. These were constructed of the ubiquitous bamboo and topped with split

bamboo slats. They were raised about two and a half feet above the ground and were about eight feet deep from front to back. Each man would have a sleeping space about three feet wide on this platform and, therefore, such a hut could accommodate about one hundred men.

Sadly, we learned later that many of the thousands tramping north through the jungle had no benefit at all from these shelters we built. In many cases, the Japanese used them for themselves - either for accommodation or for stores - while the weary and sick prisoners were forced to find what shelter they could in squalid leaky tents.

The shelter these huts provided was of a very good standard in the conditions. Constructed properly, they would withstand the torrential monsoon rains. But the winds of the violent tropical storms could cause great havoc, and I have seen these huge constructions collapse like houses built with packs of cards.

Their greatest drawback was that, within a short time of occupancy, they became infested with bed-bugs and mosquitoes. It was possible to keep the mosquitoes away if one was fortunate enough to possess a mosquito net, but, without insecticides, it was quite impossible to eradicate the bugs. They nested in the bamboo frames of the huts and any tiny crevices in the sleeping platforms, crawling out at night to seek their fill of blood and cause their dreadful itching.

Spreading out blankets and mosquito nets in the blazing tropical sun throughout the day was a sure way to kill off any pests lurking in the creases, seams and corners, but others would take up residence during the following night. So, it was necessary to carry out the treatment daily in order to obtain a reasonable night's sleep.

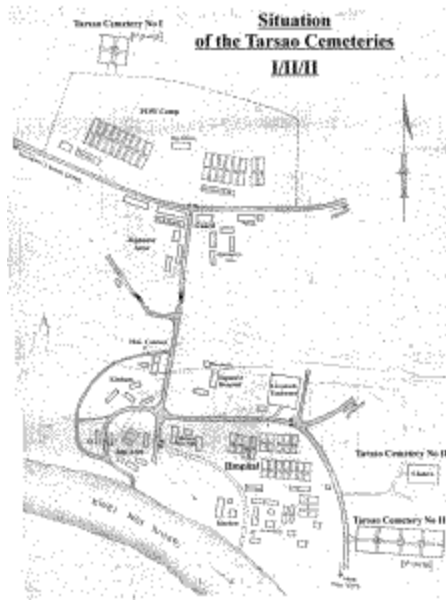
Unfortunately, that was possible only in the dry season. The sudden rainstorms during the monsoon period resulted in soaking wet bedding, unless the owner was on hand to rescue it, or had arranged with someone else who was available - perhaps through being unfit to work - to keep an eye on it for him.

As we moved north, the monsoon, spanning the months from May to September, gained in strength, and rain became more frequent. From time to time, thick layers of cloud hung across the mountain tops and much trodden areas became quagmires.

Battalions of prisoners, slogging it out on foot along muddy tracks through the steaming vegetation, were moving up towards the Burma border. Others, seventy miles north of the border at Thanbyuzayat, were moving south. All were driven onwards by the fanatical and unfeeling Japanese, whose only aim in life was to complete the two hundred and sixty miles of railway, regardless of the cost in human suffering.

My knowledge of the Japanese language continued to improve. I had notes from the classes in Ban Pong and added to these as I learned more. I began to be called upon by guards who could not make prisoners understand what they wanted. The reaction of the more moronic of the guards to any failure to comprehend was typical of them. The

unfortunate prisoner concerned was likely to be beaten up due to their frustration. This also proved hazardous for me, unfortunately. I would try to understand what the guard wanted and then relay that to the prisoner. Perhaps the prisoner had been unable to do what was required of him and wanted help. I would then translate what he had said for the guard. If this explanation was not to the guard's liking, he would probably fly into a rage and attack me for what I had said, as if the words were mine and not those of the prisoner concerned. This happened to me several times, but I could not think of a way of avoiding it, other than by stressing, initially, that the words were not mine but were those of the prisoner. I could not bring myself take that course of action.



CHAPTER SEVEN

‘Tarsao’

Towards the end of 1942, I was at Kinsayok, in the jungle on the east bank of the Kwai, about one hundred and ten miles north from the start of the railway at Ban Pong. The Japanese had told us that we were now going to work at 'Headquarters Camp'. This proved to be Tarsao, a large camp and still growing, thirty miles south of Kinsayok, at the eighty mile mark on the route of the railway.

Tarsao had expanded rapidly and now consisted of a number of prisoner of war huts, and a hospital hut, encircled by a two metre high bamboo fence. Outside the fence, and to the west of the camp, lay the Japanese No.4 Group Headquarters - a line of well constructed wooden accommodation and administration huts. Separating the two was a dirt road, some twelve feet wide, running north and south. A ten foot wide opening in the prison camp fence gave access to this road, and also to another wide track immediately opposite, which led past the Japanese buildings.

A guardroom, outside of which stood an armed sentry, guarded this access and the prison camp exit. Some three hundred and fifty yards along that track was the bank of the river Kwai. All prisoners of war at Tarsao were working on the construction of the railway, the route of which passed the camp about a mile to the east. The only exceptions were the sick in camp, or in the Hospital. Everyone, including the sick who could walk, had to be present at 'Tenko' - the morning roll-call.

Immediately after their breakfast of sloppy rice porridge, hundreds of bedraggled men, many of them with their shoulders wrapped in tattered blankets, or perhaps rice sacks, against the chilly dampness of the dawn mist of the northern jungle winter, stood and shivered while the Japanese carried out their interminable checking, to make sure that no one was missing.

We had all been taught to number off from the right in Japanese and, at the command

'Bango!" the front rank would shout out the numbers - "Ichi - Ni - San - Shi - Go - Roku...." and so on to the end of the line. Invariably, there would be mistakes. These would be greeted by shouts of "Baka yaro! Mata yare!" - "Damn fool! Do it again!". A repeated mistake by the same confused man could well result in a punch in the face from the irate and bad tempered Japanese in charge of the 'Tenko'. Having recorded the number on parade, the count would then move to the hospital to check the number of patients and then, into the huts to check any others who, through leg ulcers or some other injury, may have been unable to stand on parade. Finally, those sick men who had been able to parade would be inspected to make sure that they were really unfit for work. Invariably, one or two would be told that they were not sick or incapacitated enough to be excused, and would be ordered out to work whatever the conditions, perhaps in pouring rain, in spite of protests by the medical officers.

With the 'Tenko' completed, the Japanese officer present would then strut to a platform in front of the parade, mount the steps and stand facing the lines of prisoners. As each contingent was turned to the left and marched out to work past this saluting base, the command "Eyes Right!" would be given. The Japanese officer would then puff himself up and stand rigidly at the salute as the rag-tag columns went by. This parody of a military parade took place every day without fail, regardless of the weather.

Once clear of the prison camp and onto the mud road outside, someone would, invariably, start to whistle that famous march 'Colonel Bogey on Parade'. Every British service-man becomes familiar with the extremely obscene words which the services set to that great tune, and which make it a ribald tilt at authority. To the prisoners of war, struggling to stay alive under a cruel regime, it provided a great outlet for their feelings about the Japanese, and this was made all the more piquant by the knowledge that their hated captors had no knowledge of the meaning of it. However, after some time and unfortunately for the prisoners of war, the Japanese found out, by some means, that the tune the prisoners were always whistling, whilst marching to and from work, had a hidden meaning which was most uncomplimentary to the Imperial Japanese Army. All whistling and singing on the march was then prohibited.

Through the remainder of the monsoon and the closing months of nineteen forty-two, I worked on the railway, marching out each day. Before track could be laid, the route through the jungle had to be cleared to a width of about twenty-five yards and a level permanent way prepared. The Japanese Command were confident that, if the railway could be built and put in use in quite a short time, they could supply all the needs of their armies for the occupation of Burma and Bengal. Having achieved that objective, they would control the Bay of Bengal and could then ship in everything they needed for their proposed invasion of India. It can be said, therefore, that the railway was regarded from the outset as an adjunct to their plans - urgent, but not necessary in the long term. Because of that, speed of construction was more important than durability. The permanent way was prepared by beating down the earth with heavy 'bumpers' - a log of wood on end with two upright handles, one on each side. Two men worked together. It was grindingly hard work and involved work gangs taking turns at bumping and

shovelling. The track was not laid on ballast. Every scrap of earth was moved by hand - shovellers filled the wicker baskets of hundreds of men who trudged round and round in an endless chain, hour after hour, throwing earth onto the permanent way where it was spread by more shovellers and rammed down by the bumpers. Occasionally, there was a shout of "Yasume!" (Rest) but these were few and of short duration.

Food was brought to the site in a truck at midday and all the men queued for their rice and a scoop of watery soup. After this, work resumed, and continued until the end of the working day, when the long column of weary, sweating and dirty prisoners were counted again and marched back to the camp. The great consolation was the thought that, very soon, one would be able to get clean again.

When there was no cholera, prisoners were allowed to go out of the camp and down the path past the Japanese Headquarters, to wash in the river. The Japanese insisted, however, that prisoners must be in groups and, when passing the sentry at the Guardroom, it was necessary for the leading man to give the command "Eyes Left" and to salute the guard.

Bathing was the high point of the day. There was a large rock on the edge of the water from which it was possible to dive into a deep pool. However, when there was danger of cholera, it was necessary to collect water from the river in an oil drum and boil it over a camp fire before washing in it.

As the building of the railway progressed, so the length of the march out and back each day increased. During the monsoon season, embankments of beaten earth were washed down and were in continual need of strengthening and repairs and the jungle track became thick with mud and rutted by vehicles. But, in spite of the immense difficulties, the work was never allowed to stop. The railway undulated gently into the steaming distance.

From time to time, other battalions of prisoners arrived in Tarsao, having slogged many miles over the jungle tracks from the south. In many cases, their physical condition was poor. They would be accommodated in huts, the sick would be treated in the hospital and they would be fed. Then, after that brief respite, they were marched on again, making for labour camps further north, perhaps leaving behind a few of their number, all chronically sick - some to die.



Tarsao Hospital

Since I had injured my left ankle, some months previously, in the sinking of the barge on the river, it had never really healed, though I had kept it clean and bathed it with hot water every quiet evening. It would close over and apparently be healing quite normally but would then break out again two or three weeks later. However, from this apparently not very serious condition, the wound now began to develop rapidly from a small area on and beneath the inner side of the ankle bone, into a ragged suppurating hole which was eating into the flesh down towards the heel. It had become extremely painful and I was unable to put on my boot. I went to see one of the camp medical officers who certified me as "sick" and unable to work, and told me to keep the foot up and bathe the wound twice a day. I had contracted a 'jungle ulcer'. Jungle ulcers were virulent eruptions in the flesh of the leg, generally below the knee. They could be caused by even a very minor scratch which would fester and then break open and spread, to become a painful gaping hole in the flesh. If the ulcer could not be checked, it could eventually reach the point where it was gangrenous, when amputation of the limb above the ulcer was necessary to save the life of the patient. Many prisoners of war lost parts of limbs through this cause. In some cases, repeated bathing and cleaning of the ulcer with hot water - a very painful process - could effect a cure. But the real need was for drugs to check the infection. In prison camp hospitals these were almost non-existent.

I could only adopt the bathing routine which, to my relief, did have some effect in reducing the infection. The edges of the wound began to draw in slightly, and it was at that point that one of the medical officers produced a small supply of Sulphonamide tablets, which he had been carefully harbouring for use in cases which he was sure had a chance of responding to a small application. He felt that my case was suitable and having cleaned the ulcer he crushed half a tablet to powder and sprinkled it into the wound. He then bound it up and told me not to disturb it. Within a week the foot felt more comfortable and after the same treatment with the remaining half tablet, the infection disappeared and the wound closed in, healing completely after a further period of rest. I kept it bound up after that, to protect the delicate new skin. I was very grateful to that doctor.

When taken prisoner, part of my possessions were a safety razor and a few blades, issued when I came ashore at Singapore. However, even harbouring the blades as carefully as possible could not make them last for ever. After a couple of months or so I gave up the battle and gradually became heavily bearded, as many others did.

But, I now found that having a face covered with a thick mass of hair proved to be very uncomfortable indeed. When working in the heat and humidity of the monsoon period, sweat ran down through the whiskers, causing irritation and discomfort. Something had to be done.

I still had my army knife, fork and spoon. The knife was stainless steel; had a sharp ring to it when struck, and my experience with metals gave me to believe that it might be of

good enough quality to take a fine edge, if I could hone it down effectively. So, on my next visit to the river bank, I collected a large flat stone and took it back to the camp. It took several hours of rubbing down, and sore fingers, before the knife edge was fined down enough to finish by stropping on an old piece of leather - the upper of an old worn out boot from a rubbish heap. The first two or three attempts at shaving were painful; were interspersed by more rubbing down and stropping, and left my face feeling very sore. The skin had become unused to shaving and the knife had needed more work. In addition, the native soap was very hard and full of soda, which caused irritation. However, gradually the problems eased; the knife finally became a very serviceable razor, and I was clean shaven once more.

At Tarsao, one of the officer prisoners was a Chaplain to the Forces, a Church of England padre. With him giving the lead, a number of us constructed an open air church. We built an altar from bamboo and laid out rows of felled tree trunks as seating, after clearing ground, still within the compound, but at the rear of the hutted area. The Padre then organised simple services which began to be quite well attended. For a short while, this activity went unmolested by the Japanese, then one or two came to watch. Finally, one Sunday evening, while the service was progressing, a small squad of soldiers with fixed bayonets appeared. With shouts and gesticulations they drove us away and knocked down the altar.

When they had gone we returned to the church and repaired the altar. We then decided that we would hold another service a few days later. We did so, and again we were scattered by the Japanese. We could not understand why they took exception to a church service, but it could have been that they thought that our meeting together might result in some kind of subversive action. As we could not carry on in the face of their displeasure, representations were made to their Camp Commandant, following which the opposition ceased, and we were permitted to hold our church services, without interference, from that time on.

The services were improved greatly by the formation of a choir. The fellow prisoner responsible for that was a friend of mine, who was an organist and choirmaster in happier days. His name was Ted Lacey - a most pleasant and gentlemanly man. We mustered a group of very good voices and produced an excellent sound. A number of Japanese and Korean soldiers regularly came to listen to us when we practised, and some would be seen occasionally standing at the back of the church services, even though very few of them understood any English.

There was one young Korean, however, whose name was Umida, and who was quite different from the others. Following the Japanese acceptance of the religious services, we organised a concert party and built a platform for a stage. Sometimes, in the evening, we would have an impromptu concert, at which I was one of the entertainers. Umida was often a spectator. One day, he came to speak to me. He had a few words of English and I could manage some Japanese by then. I learned that he had studied music and singing in Korea. His favourite composer was Schubert. He made a point of seeking me out several times after that, and he sang 'The Wild Rose' for me in a very pleasant light tenor voice,

but with Korean words. He taught me the first few lines. I still remember them, and I can still see clearly, in my mind's eye, that very pleasant little 'enemy' who, through music, became a friend. He moved on shortly after that and I did not see him again. I hope he survived.

The concert party became more and more professional. It was inevitable that, among so many thousands of men, there would be some who had had experience of theatrical productions, both professional and amateur. To our surprise there were also musicians in Tarsao Camp - a good half dozen or more - who had managed to preserve their instruments through the fall of Singapore, and to carry them with them into captivity. The high point of the year for the performers was the weeks leading up to Christmas, when everyone spent all their free time preparing for the pantomime. I recall, especially, 1943.

That was a very bad year, with deaths occurring every day in the camp hospital. Almost one in every three men died in a camp holding about fifteen hundred. When we played cards in the evenings, there was an awareness that one or two out of the four might need to be replaced at some time. At the beginning of those three and a half years of existence as prisoners of war, the death of one of us was an occasion for mourning the passing of a comrade in adversity. A service would be held and 'Reveille' and 'Last Post' would be sounded over the grave. Later, as the number of deaths increased, bugle calls were being sounded several times on some days. This was very bad for morale and the bugle was dispensed with. But, as always, in times of great misfortune, men find ways of lifting the spirits, not only of themselves but of others. And so, "The Sleeping Beauty" went into production at the beginning of November.

It played to what the theatrical business would describe as 'a capacity audience' at Christmas, before the total population of the camp and a fair number of the Japanese staff. The music, by Tchaikovsky, was specially written and arranged by members of the 'Tarsao Orchestra', and included additional popular pieces of the day.

After the show, which took place on the stage of the specially built theatre, the musicians and singers went to the hospital to entertain the patients. Many were very ill, and some were not to live very long, but, just for a short while, those who could do so joined in singing popular songs, and laughing at the 'female' members of the cast - who were extremely well made up and appropriately padded. I recall the bitter irony of the last big chorus as everyone joined in singing "Happy days are here again!"

It was about the middle of 1943 that I had a remarkable piece of good fortune. The Japanese decided that they required a workshop to deal with repairs to their uniforms and boots. In addition, they also wanted a watch repairer. Any prisoners of war who could repair footwear or watches, or who had tailoring experience, were required to come forward. Throughout my youth, my father had always repaired the family's footwear. He was very skilful at this craft and, as time went on, I learned from him and became able to repair my own working boots.

At that time I was working on maintenance of the railway and the monsoon was

beginning. I knew that the rains during the months ahead would cause more damage to the permanent way and to the embankments, and I was not looking forward to the constant struggle to keep a very sub-standard railway operational in sticky cloying mud. With some trepidation, I volunteered to be a boot-repairer. In the event, the Japanese took on a Dutchman, whose name was Jan van der Groot, and who knew only a little English; an Australian named Joshua Hines, from Hobart, Tasmania; two other Englishmen - a Geordie named Nicholson and a Norfolk man named Kemp - and me. Nicholson and Kemp were professional boot and shoe workers, and the Dutchman was a harness maker. Josh Hines and I were both amateurs. In addition, another Englishman named Arthur Ardley, from Herne Bay, Kent, was the watch repairer.

We were installed in a well constructed hut, which had been allocated for the purpose in the Japanese administration area. Initially, it was strange leaving our camp compound and going to work in the Japanese side, but both we and the Japanese quickly became used to the arrangement. For us, it was an entirely new experience to be working in clean surroundings and out of the rain, mud and sun.

A Korean soldier - a tailor in civilian life - was put in charge of us. His family name was Yasuda, and his given name was Seiji. In Japanese style he was known as Yasuda Seiji. His comrades addressed him as "Yasuda" or, occasionally, as "Yasu". We addressed him as "Yasuda" or, if calling him to attract his attention, by using, the polite form of "Yasuda San". He was about five feet three inches in height and of strong and muscular build. A naturally pleasant little man, he was always smiling, and when he did so, he showed all his very white teeth and his eyes wrinkled up at the corners, almost disappearing into slits in his round, brown face. In common with all his fellows his head was shaven. He was probably about twenty five years old. Initially, he had no English at all, and his instructions to us were given mainly in sign language. As time passed, however, he picked up quite a few words. With that, and my increasing knowledge of Japanese, we managed to get along very well. To him, I was 'Cha-lee'.

I started work on repairing a pair of Japanese soldier's boots. They needed soles and heels. The soles were riveted, so stripping the old ones off, cutting new ones and refixing them was quite a straightforward operation. My initial nervousness began to evaporate and, after a few days, I had achieved some confidence. Japanese officers wore highly polished jack boots. These were all stitched, and repairing them required a lot of very careful hand sewing. My first pair of these took me an inordinate length of time but, when they were done they looked quite good to my very critical eye, and the officer who came to collect them himself was pleased, and gave me some cigarettes. From that point on, I quickly settled into that very much more comfortable existence.

Repairs to Japanese boots were, after a short while, quite up to date, and we were then permitted to repair the boots of prisoners of war, when we had no other work. The doctor who had cured my jungle ulcer had British Army style boots which were breaking up. It gave me great pleasure to put them back into good condition, and to say thank you. My own boots were those which had been issued to me in Singapore. At that time they had looked well made and strong. I had looked after them, but working on the railway had

been hard on them and the soles began to break away from the uppers. I now had the opportunity to repair them but, when I took off the worn soles, I found evidence of that contemptible being - the wartime profiteer. The boots had been constructed with a cardboard inner sole instead of leather and the poor upper leather had begun to tear where it joined the sole. The boots were useless. I could only curse that despicable footwear trader, who had no conscience about supplying intentionally sub-standard boots to servicemen, in wartime, for the sake of big profits. It was fortunate that I now had a job for which there was no need for me to wear boots. I was able to go back and forth to the workshop wearing the universal Japanese style slipper, consisting of a wooden sole, held on by a strap of leather, or cloth, across the toes. However, through working as a cobbler, I did eventually become the possessor of another pair of boots. They came into the workshop for repair and, having been finished, remained there, unclaimed, for some weeks. They were Australian Army issue brown leather boots, so I made an enquiry among the Australians in the camp. Sadly, the owner had died.

These very good boots were my size so, as they did not then have an owner, I took possession of them. They served me extremely well and I finally disposed of them two years later when, after release from captivity, I was issued with new British kit.

It was towards the end of 1943 that I began to develop the symptoms of beriberi. This is a disease which results from malnutrition and vitamin B1 deficiency. It causes an accumulation of fluid in the body tissues which becomes noticeable due to swelling of the legs and abdomen. Eventually, it can lead to heart failure.

A very high percentage of prisoners of war suffered from beriberi to some degree. In normal circumstances the cure is simple - provide the patient with a much improved diet and a course of vitamin supplements. As this was quite impossible in a Japanese prison camp, one could only ensure that what money one had was spent on things like limes and peanuts, when they were available. The standard of food supplied by the Japanese was quite insufficient to maintain health.

My condition was not serious, but I did suffer from oedema of the legs - I could press my fingers into the flesh and the deep impressions made would remain for some time, indicating the presence of fluid in the tissues. This state of affairs lasted for some months, without really worsening, until one day when I was told by a Japanese to help unload a lorry. The load was sacks of rice and vegetables. One sack had been dropped and had burst open on the ground. The contents, which had spilled out, were rice 'polishings' - rice bran. It was abandoned where it fell, but with care, I was able to salvage quite a lot of it in the burst sack and take it back to camp. The vitamin content of this material is well known and, for some weeks after that, whilst it lasted, I stirred some into my rice every day. Gradually, the oedema lessened and finally disappeared. I continued to buy peanuts and limes - and, sometimes, bananas when I could. Fortunately, the beriberi did not return, but I continued to suffer, for some time, from tinea in patches around the waist and between the legs, and a form of herpes-like blisters which erupted from time to time under my arms, and which were quite painful. Apart from these comparatively minor ailments and occasional griping abdominal pains which were recurrent since the attack of

dysentery in Ban Pong, I remained fairly fit.

The greatest problem at Tarsao in relation to hygiene – and indeed in all Japanese prison camps, was the multitude of blowflies. These came from an inadequacy in the latrines, due to our inability to construct them deep enough. To do so would have required planks to shore up the sides, but the Japanese would never provide these, and so latrines were never dug deeper than about six feet due to the danger of cave-in. This made them breeding grounds for blowflies and mosquitoes.

The trench would be about three feet wide and about twenty feet long. Spanning the top at intervals were pairs of foot platforms, each consisting of half a dozen bamboos lashed together with bamboo strips. Surrounding the whole latrine was a screen of atap and bamboo.

In use one stood on the foot platforms and then squatted over that great evil smelling trench half full of filth and rainwater, which seethed with the activities of thousands upon thousands of blowflies and mosquitoes. The feeling of revulsion in a man, forced by dysentery to visit such a latrine up to twenty or more times a day, is not difficult to imagine. Add to this the fact that that toilet paper was unheard of, and any other kind of paper almost non-existent, forcing the use of leaves, or what grass was available, the full extent of this unsanitary nightmare can be imagined. The death of a friend of mine - a fellow sergeant whom I shall not name - still fills me with horror after nearly fifty years. He was suffering with dysentery and, although very weak and ill, was still staggering to the latrine many times a day. What happened is not known. Perhaps, in his weakness, he stumbled, or was overcome by faintness. He was dead when he was found later, in the latrine.

It was at Tarsao that I learned to play contract bridge. On a piece of cleared ground, a little away from the large accommodation huts, there was a small hut which had been used as a store, in the early stages of the camp. When it became disused, it was taken over by a small group of warrant officers and sergeants, of which I was one. We installed individual beds of bamboo and were able to improve our living conditions a little. The Japanese, recognizing rank to some extent, did not object.

One of the sergeants, Tony Sneezum, from Ipswich, was an expert at contract bridge, and taught three of us to play. We learned systems and conventions and became quite fanatical about the game, playing almost every evening by the light of our small oil lamps. These were made by cutting a section of a three inch diameter bamboo a few inches above a joint, so making a cup. This was then half filled with palm oil in which a rope or thick string wick was suspended by a piece of wire resting across the top of the cup. Each lamp gave out light roughly equivalent to that of a candle, and one fill of oil would last for hours. Bridge was a complete escape from the realities of the cruelty, disease and death which surrounded us during those long years. The concentration required, to keep up to the standard set by our teacher, Tony, shut out all other thoughts for those two or three hours at the end of the day, and created a great bond of friendship.

It was through playing bridge that a most remarkable coincidence occurred. During 1940 I had been stationed with my army workshops unit in the village of Aspley Guise, close to the Duke of Bedford's estate at Woburn. The workshops were deployed in Aspley Woods and the ladies of the village very kindly arranged the setting up of a canteen in a marquee there, especially for our benefit. Among these good people, who came up to the woods morning and afternoon to act as assistants in the canteen, were several girls from local families. One of these was Ruth Parrington, the daughter of a retired army officer and his wife. Ruth had a brother who was also serving in the army, but I did not know him. Our unit moved to Scotland towards the end of the year and we never met. I think it was early in 1943 that one of the battalions of prisoners of war, marching from the south, to camps in the north, stopped for a day or two rest at Tarsao. Among them was a small group of young officers who, having asked around the camp about the likelihood of being able to have a game of bridge, were directed to us. We made up two fours, and, to break the ice, I introduced myself and my partner and asked one of them where he came from. He replied that it was just a little village - I was unlikely to know it. I persisted, and he then said, "I come from the village of Aspley Guise in Bedfordshire". His name was Parrington. And so, in a prison camp in the Siamese jungle, many thousands of miles from home, I met Ruth Parrington's brother.

In those days, those of us who were smokers, probably a very high percentage, found continuing to indulge the habit quite difficult. But it was one of the few consolations we had in that dreary existence. Normal western style cigarettes, made in Siam with Virginia tobacco, were sometimes obtainable, but at a very high price. Smoking these was quite out of the question. The alternative was the local Siamese native tobacco. This could be bought from the traders on the river barges. It came in bundles of a dark reddish brown colour, shredded into strands like a coarse pipe smoking shag. These bundles were about eight inches square and two inches thick and they cost one and a half Siamese dollars. That was ten days pay at my sergeant's rate of fifteen cents a day. Made into cigarettes it was chokingly strong and, because of this it was common practice to wash the bundle in water, squeeze it out, and then spread it out to dry. During the washing, the water took on the dark ochre colour and the tobacco became a little paler - but it still retained a lot of its kick and could still make the unwary smoker splutter. The greatest problem lay in obtaining paper in which to roll it. Throughout Siam paper was very scarce, and cigarette papers were unheard of. The natives rolled their tobacco in slips of thinly cut banana leaf. I tried smoking these native cigarettes. They were quite awful, with the smell of the burning leaf added to the tobacco. So, I smoked when I could find some paper. Letters from home, through the Red Cross, did materialise, but they were very rare. I received only two deliveries from Pamela during three and a half years. The first, in 1943, consisted of three letters, each written on a couple of sheets of airmail paper. I read them several times before making cigarettes from them. The second postal delivery, in 1944, was of two letters. Unfortunately, they were on thicker paper and, when I saw her again, we laughed over the fact that, although this second delivery was received with equal joy, they were not much good for making cigarettes!

CHAPTER EIGHT

‘Cholera’

Of all the diseases endemic along the route of the railway, the most horrific was cholera. It is most dangerous in that there is no cure, and vaccinations often provide only temporary protection. After an incubation period of from one to five days, there is an onset of extremely severe and continual vomiting, and diarrhoea, which rapidly causes the body to become dehydrated. Treatment consists of replacing the lost body fluids and salines, by intravenous drip and injections. Death can ensue within a few hours of the symptoms becoming apparent if treatment is not immediately available.

The disease is transmitted in water which has been contaminated by the faeces of sufferers. The greatest risk exists in primitive countries where native communities rely solely on a river for all purposes. Prevention can be achieved only by boiling all water - including washing water - thoroughly, and by good hygiene. Where these precautions are poor, epidemics of immense proportions can arise.

Whenever, there was news of cholera to the north of us the Japanese prohibited all bathing in the river, although we were permitted to draw water for washing and, of course, for cooking. I can recall a prisoner of war at Tarsao dying of the disease. He was employed in the prisoner of war cookhouse. Like all cooks, he had access to all left over food, and this fact showed in his appearance, which was quite robust and strong. He contracted the disease. The symptoms were apparent one morning. He died early the following day.

In 1944, I was ordered by the Japanese to find ten men for a special task. We would be going to a camp further north, with some Japanese soldiers, for 'one day, maybe two'.

When the job was completed we would return to Tarsao. I asked what kind of work we would be doing, but the only answer I could get was a shrug and "Shirimasen!" "Don't know!"

Even though the task we were taking on was unknown, I had no shortage of volunteers. Probably, because the job was going to be completed in a day or two, whatever it was had a limit to it and a break from the monotony was worth the risk! We were assembled early the following morning and clambered into a big open Japanese truck, after loading stores and a supply of tools, shovels etc. For the next hour or so we jolted and swayed along the jungle track, eventually turning to the right off the main track

After two hundred yards or so along this side track we came to the outskirts of a quite large jungle camp, with the usual atap roofed bamboo living huts. However, these huts were built around a central compound and there was no perimeter fence. This was, obviously, not a prisoner of war camp.

The soldiers clambered down from the truck and told us to do likewise. We were then led into the compound and, hardened as I was by that time to tragedy and death in all its forms, I still experienced shock and revulsion at the scene before me. The compound and the huts were littered with dead bodies. They lay in all sorts of twisted attitudes, which indicated the agony of their death. As we carried out a tour of the stricken area we found other bodies in the jungle fringes surrounding the camp, as if some of these poor unfortunates had thought they would survive if they could only get clear of the place.

Many of the bodies were bloated with putrefaction. Others were still in rigor mortis, indicating more recent death. The dead were all Indian natives. This had been a Tamil work camp.

It was equally obvious that we were looking at the terrible results of a cholera epidemic, and that we had been brought there to bury the dead. The leading Japanese shouted to us to unload the truck and, whilst the others were doing this, he called me to go with him. I followed him into the scrub.

Then, in a relatively clear area, he indicated that we dig - marking out the dimensions of a pit, about ten feet square, with sticks. He then said. "Shinda no bito motte kure!"-(bring the dead here.)

The thought of handling those twisted bodies, filthy with continual defecation and vomit, without any protection and with no possibility of sterilising our hands afterwards, filled me with horror. Struggling with my vocabulary, I asked if he had disinfectant, or rubber gloves. This infuriated him. He jabbed his rifle into my midriff and shouted "Nan to ita ka? - yare, yare!" (What are you saying? - Get on with it)

It seemed to me that, behind his bluster, he was just as disturbed and revolted with the job he had been given as I was. I decided to risk one more try. I smoothed him down by saying I was sorry but, without disinfectant, we could carry the "kansen" (infection) back to Tarsao camp. This appeared to give him some thought. He went back and called the other guards and a lengthy discussion took place. He then called me. I went across to him and he said, 'Shigoto yare - ato de kaerimas!' (Get to work – I'll be back later). He stalked off and a few minutes later the truck could be heard grinding back along the track.

We started to dig. A pit six feet deep and ten feet square entailed the removal of six hundred cubic feet of solid and undisturbed soil interspersed with chunks of rock. We worked in relays due to the limited space in the pit. Some three hours later the truck returned and we were still working. Eventually, one of the guards shouted "Yuroshi - yasume" (That's good - rest)

During the digging, those not actually working had been collecting the bodies and laying them out nearby. We now put them in layers in the pit, which was finally about half full, and shovelled the remaining earth in over them. This resulted in quite a large mound when the job was done. It looked as if it should be surmounted by a memorial, but we had no idea as to what form it should take. Tamils are Hindu mainly. So we left them. Just

another heap of dead in a mass grave along the route of the railway. Within a few months it would disappear under the encroachment of the all enveloping green tangle of the jungle.

The truck had returned and with it a can of what appeared to be a phenol type liquid disinfectant. We fetched water from the river, mixed the phenol in it and, together with our guards, washed ourselves thoroughly, including our boots. When we arrived back at Tarsao we were immediately treated by the Japanese as if we were infectious. A small hut near the camp perimeter fence had been prepared for us. This hut was surrounded by a two metre bamboo fence and we received strict instructions not to leave this small compound within a compound, nor to have any communication with our fellow prisoners.

The usual rice and watery soup was brought to us in containers and left outside, as was water for washing, which we boiled on a camp fire. This state of affairs lasted for several days. Finally, we were released when it became apparent that we were not going to develop cholera. I heard later that the Japanese had also been isolated. They were not taking any chances.

CHAPTER NINE

‘The last months’

During the latter half of 1944 we began to hear the sound of high flying aircraft occasionally. They were always distant and were obviously following a flight path to the west of the river.

This activity, although infrequent, was immensely cheering. Later, there were reports, from prisoners of war in the south, that allied planes had bombed the railway and Japanese installations near the bridge.

But the hope, and the lifting of spirits, which this news generated was overshadowed by a disastrous misfortune. On the night of 6th September, the railway marshalling yards and the Japanese camp at Nong Pleduk were bombed. The prisoner of war camp was full, and a newly arrived party of Dutch prisoners of war had been accommodated temporarily, in a hut outside the camp and near the railway line. The Japanese camp and the railway sidings and rolling stock were subjected to considerable damage but, sadly, the prisoner of war camp and the Dutch prisoners hut were also hit. A hundred British and Dutch prisoners were killed and almost four hundred were wounded. This grim tragedy was all the more poignant when one remembered that these men had survived two and a half years of Japanese hell, only to die at the hand of their allies.

Another Christmas - the third since the fall of Singapore- came and went. Our cookhouse staff, by careful husbanding of supplies, performed minor miracles and the concert party put on another Christmas show. Then, around March 1945, my life took a new turn.

I was in the workshop when one of the guards came in, spoke to Yasuda and beckoning to me said “Ooweeroosong!” (the nearest any of them could get to ‘Wilson’) “Isho ni kite kure!” (Come with me)

I followed him to the Japanese Administration Office where the Japanese Interpreter sat at a table. This man’s name was Oseiki and he was a business man brought into the prison camp system for his knowledge of English. He was sly and cruel and quite powerful in the Japanese organization. Later, in 1946, I was called to the War Crimes Commission office in London and was able to add to the evidence which was being amassed against him and other Japanese prison camp officials.

He was a stout little man with horn rimmed spectacles and, like the interpreter in Ban Pong, looked like the caricatures of the Japanese seen in books and magazines in England.

He did not mince his words. “You lied”, he said, “you are not a shoemaker – you are a kajiya (blacksmith)”

I said immediately that I did not lie; I had never been asked what my craft was. I was working as a 'kutsuya' (shoemaker) because I could repair boots. I had, in fact, repaired his jack boots, by hand stitching a new sole into them. I wondered who had told him what my true craft was, but he would not have told me if I had asked. He said "you will be sent to another camp where a kajiya is needed, to repair tools for a special task". He grinned, showing his tombstone teeth. "It will be very hard work!"

Two days later a large party of prisoners of war was marched out to the railway track and loaded onto open trucks. It was a long journey, but eventually, we arrived at our new home about seventy miles east of Bangkok, and a similar distance from the border with Cambodia. This was a new camp just to the west of the small town of Prachin Buri. The camp was known as Prachai.

After two and a half years of life in the jungle, Prachai was like a paradise. This was the coastal plain of Siam. Gone was the oppressive atmosphere of the tropical river valley, winding its way through hundreds of miles of tangled green vegetation, and the early mornings when the dawn mist condensed and dripped from the trees. Instead, here was open country and fields of padi, against a background of low hills. We sorted out places in the huts and settled in.

The following day I was taken from the morning 'Tenko' by one of the Korean guards and escorted to a large open hut in the Japanese administration area. This man's name was Yamamoto and he was to be in charge of me.

In the hut, lying on the earth floor in sections, was what I recognized as a large, portable steel forge with a geared up turbine type blower, operated by a winding handle. Nearby was a very large heap of charcoal which was obviously to be the fuel I would use. There was clearly going to be plenty of work to do, for lying beside the forge was a large pile of picks, shovels, chisels, heavy digging points – and chunkels, the mattock-like digging tools used universally throughout the east.

Most of these implements were in need of renovation or repairs of some kind. I was going to need assistance – at least one man to act as a hammerman and the other to work the forge. I told Yamamoto this. He went away to speak to someone in authority and returned to tell me to choose two men myself.

As all the men who had been on the morning 'tenko' had been marched out of the camp to some external work site, I could not make a selection then, although I already had two in mind. When they returned, however, I explained what I wanted. They were only too pleased to have the chance of doing something which was out of the ordinary, and away from the monotony of the usual working parties, who, they said, appeared to be engaged

in excavating the side of a hill.

The following day the 'Prachai Blacksmiths Shop' opened for business. From the start we had plenty of work to do to keep up with the wear and tear on the tools. The working parties were indeed excavating the side of a hill. These excavations were to become underground storage caverns for oil, explosives and ammunition for the Imperial Japanese Army.

However we had worked for only two or three days before it became quite apparent that working in a blacksmiths shop, at a latitude of fourteen degrees north, had one very great drawback; the sub-tropical heat of southern Siam. Oseiki, the interpreter at Tarsao, had been quite right - it was hard work. We used a metal bucket in which to boil water from a well, so that we would have a continual supply of drink, with which to replace the body fluids lost by being in a continual sweat. After a couple of weeks - and following discussion with my two helpers I approached the Japanese Authorities, through Yamamoto, with the suggestion that, if we had to do this very hot work, we could work better at night. To my surprise there was no objection at all. So we began to commence work at 10pm and finish at about 6am or earlier if the work was completed. Initially, Yamamoto came to see us start work and would remain with us for an hour or so, but, after a week, he merely came to see that we were present and working before leaving us to it, presumably to go to bed. After all, the evidence that we had been working was there for all to see in the number of tools repaired.

After we had been so deployed for some time, there was a new development in our relationship with Yamamoto. One evening, when we reported for work, he appeared carrying a galvanized bucket in each hand. Each bucket was covered with a cloth. He uncovered them. One was full of the perfectly cooked, pure white, high grade rice which was prepared for the Japanese. The other was half full of a thick stew of vegetables and pieces of pork with bean curd and soya shoots.

He said that there was always food left over after the Japanese had eaten. This was usually thrown away, but we could have it if we wished. He was very diffident in his manner, as if he feared that we might feel insulted by being offered left over food from the Japanese cookhouse.

I was very touched by this surprising act of kindness and expressed our thanks to him. Obviously, his actions were unofficial, and I wondered what would be the reaction of his masters if they knew. From that time on he brought left over food to us regularly. Quite often, he was not there in the evening, but the food would be awaiting us in clean covered buckets when we reported for work.

When we three had eaten, I took any that was left back to friends in my hut. We all agreed that we were in great need of the extra nourishment. Our survival to return home was the only really important thing in our dreary lives, and it would have been stupid to have declined such a valuable addition to our diet because it was Japanese 'left overs'.

So we enjoyed the food and gradually I began to feel the benefit of it. My weight, which had been just over twelve stones (77 kilos) before I was taken prisoner, and had fallen to ten and a half (67 kilos), began to increase, creeping up steadily to just under eleven stones (69 kilos).

My general health was better, and I began to lose the skin rashes and eruptions from which I had suffered to a lesser or greater degree during the past two years.

During the last few months of 1944, we had heard persistent rumours of an Allied invasion of France. This had come from the Siamese traders initially, although it was disclosed, after the war, that there was an 'underground' radio in one of the southern prisoner of war camps. However, there was complete secrecy on the possibility of such a source of information during our captivity, for the obvious reason that discovery would have resulted in the summary execution of those found to be operating it.

Strangely, however, in spite of the lack of information, we had an unshakeable belief in the inevitable victory of the Allies over the forces of Germany and Japan. There was no logical reason for that belief. Our personal experience of the course of the war until our captivity had been that of one disaster after another. We had seen a crushing defeat in Europe, with the rapid collapse of the French, and the British Forces being chased out of France, escaping from Dunkirk only through the lack of German follow-up of their retreat. Had Hitler not hesitated then, he could have invaded England. There had been victories in North Africa, but shattering losses in the east; victories in the air, but the loss of millions of tons of shipping in the Atlantic.

In Prachai Camp the days passed monotonously. The monsoon arrived on time, and with it the periodic torrential rain, but its effects were nothing like they were in the jungle. The camp was on the plains and the sudden downpours, from time to time, soon soaked into the light sandy soil and dried in thin clouds of drifting steam from the hot roofs of the huts. Then there came a day in August the events of which I can still see in memory, like a well remembered cinema film. I had been working at night and had just awakened from my sleep. The time was around midday. I sat up on my bed platform and looked over the atap sidewall of the hut, across the sun-baked parade ground between our huts and the Japanese Administration buildings. The scene before me was one of great activity. Japanese and Koreans were trotting back and forth between their offices and the edge of the parade ground. All were carrying large bundles of papers which they were throwing onto a heap which was growing rapidly. As I watched, someone put a match to the heap which had obviously been treated with petrol, for it erupted in a column of smoke and flame. Still they added to the pile, shaking out filing cabinet drawers and boxes to the sound of shouted commands urging them to hurry. Then, suddenly, all was quiet, and they withdrew to their quarters, leaving the fire to burn itself out. As I sat there, realisation of what I had been watching slowly dawned upon me. They had been destroying records. That action could have only one interpretation. Could it be that the years of degradation and misery were over? Had the war, which had seemed never ending, ended at last?

Then, a short while later, there came a formal announcement from the Japanese. The date was 17th August 1945. The war was, indeed, over. Atomic bombs had been dropped on Hiroshima on the 6th and on Nagasaki on the 9th August. The Japanese had capitulated on the 15th August, but it was two days later before the instructions of their High Command reached the Command in Siam.

After six long years of war - three and a half of which I had spent in the atmosphere of humiliation, disease and death of Japanese prisoner of war camps, I would be going home.

After the announcement, there followed a strange period of hiatus. The Japanese stayed in their own compound, obviously very apprehensive about what retribution would descend on them. An odd little incident gave an indication of their state of mind. One of the guards crossed the compound and sought me out. Approaching me very nervously he said, "Please remember that I never kicked anyone whilst I was wearing my heavy work boots - only when I was wearing my light rubber ones." I almost felt sorry for this frightened, cringing creature, who had been such a bombastic enemy. His world, based on incessant propaganda glorifying the invincibility of the great Imperial Japanese Army, was in ruins. There would be many thousands like him.

Overnight, some Japanese were killed by the Siamese when they ventured out. In the morning, the Japanese had gone.

CHAPTER TEN

‘Freedom and homecoming’

During the years of captivity, the Japanese had descended in strength upon the camp, periodically, to carry out searches. They would arrive suddenly, a large group charging in at the double, with fixed bayonets, and splitting up into sections, each going to one of the huts.

With much shouting and commotion the occupants would be driven out and placed under guard in the compound whilst a search was carried out. The earth floors under the bed platforms would be inspected minutely to see if there was any indication of disturbance which could indicate something buried; the hollow bamboos of the hut structure and bed platforms would be examined by thrusting bayonets for any sign of use as a hiding place, and the earth banks surrounding the hut would be dug into at intervals.

All personal writings, drawings, diaries or records of any kind were strictly forbidden under pain of severe punishment. The guards were very thorough, and obviously took a sadistic pleasure in scattering the meagre belongings of the prisoners, enjoying the opportunity to demonstrate their power to do as they pleased with us, without the slightest possibility of protest.

Therefore, we were amazed when, within quite a short time of the extremely premature return to the camp of the working parties, a group of prisoners had erected a tall bamboo pole in the centre of the compound, and from this improvised mast flew a Union Jack, quite six feet in length. That the flag had been carried by one of the prisoners of war for so long, without discovery, was nothing short of a miracle.

There was no great demonstration of joy or delight in the fact that the great ordeal was over. No cheering, no shouting. Just groups of men standing around, or sitting on their platforms and talking. It was to be some days before the reality of that long prayed for end of the war became accepted fact, and men began to rejoice in freedom once more.

Quite soon, new tropical uniforms, food and medical supplies were dropped nearby by parachute and brought into the camp. The luxury of having fresh new clothes, for the first time in years, was indescribable. An Army Paymaster issued each of us with money which - in local native terms - made us very well off indeed, and a local truck was supplied to act as a bus service between the camp and the nearby town. With three friends, I went into the town, where my first port of call was a barber's shop. There, I spent an hour indulging in the luxury of being treated as a valued customer by the very attentive Siamese barber, who demonstrated his skill in giving me a shampoo, haircut and shave. Then we found an excellent native eating house, where we were supplied with an enormous dish of beautiful white rice, surmounted by crayfish, and surrounded by mangos and papayas. Being clean and free was a wonderful feeling.

A day or two later, I was in the concert party hut in the camp, wearing only a 'fundoshi'

and ironing a pair of shorts I had washed, in preparation for a concert we were going to give that evening to the headman and leaders from the town. I became aware of people entering the hut and, looking up, saw a lady in tropical dress accompanied by officers standing before me. This was Edwina, Lady Mountbatten, wife of the British Commander in South East Asia - Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten.



This very charming and brave lady was always deeply concerned with the welfare of the fighting forces, and had been flown into Siam to visit the camps immediately it was safe to do so. She asked where my home was and, hearing that I came from Southampton, talked about the area and her home - 'Broadlands' at Romsey - saying 'I expect you know our place then'. About two years later I attended a reunion at the Festival Hall in London. She was there and we met again. Without any hesitation she recalled our first meeting in Siam, saying that I was somewhat better dressed on this second meeting! Tragically, her husband was murdered by an I.R.A. bomb in 1979.

We put on the concert of music and singing for the dignitaries from the town and they reciprocated by inviting our concert party members to a performance at their theatre. The Siamese dancers were quite entrancing, but the majority of the show, which went on for several hours, consisted of traditional theatre, similar to the Japanese 'No' plays. It was all very stylized, with slow posturing dances performed in grotesque masks and accompanied by dramatic speeches, interspersed with periods of clowning - all completely incomprehensible to us. We realized that our performance must have sounded just as strange to them! There was no doubt however, that the Siamese experienced great relief at the defeat of the Japanese and our relations with them were exceedingly cordial.

That cordiality was further expressed in their suggestion for a football match between their local team and a team of ex prisoners of war. This was arranged and it was played on the compound of the camp. There was quite a crowd from what was, obviously, the local supporters club! I cannot recall the result of the game, but one incident will always remain sharp and clear in my mind.

The Siamese played in bare feet, were very agile and much given to leaping for high balls. I was playing in defence and, towards the end of the game, jumped to head away a clearance from the other end. At the same time, a Siamese forward also jumped high for the ball. Our heads met with resounding crack and we both fell to the ground.

The game was stopped but, after a short time, we were both on our feet again, play resumed, and I played on for the final ten minutes or so.

I went back to my hut and washed. Apart from a slight headache I felt no ill effects from the clash of heads.

However, I then experienced a scratching sensation in the back of my nose and in my throat, which caused me to cough and, following that, I found that I had pieces of bone in my mouth and coming down my nose. Careful exploration with my fingers revealed that there was a distinct depression in my forehead above the right eye. There was only one explanation - I had fractured my skull in that collision.

I walked the twenty five yards to the Medical Hut and found the Medical Officer. "Yes, sergeant", he said, "What can I do for you?" I said, "I'm sorry to bother you, but I think I have fractured my skull". His reply was in a somewhat exasperated manner. "Don't be bloody silly man - you don't just walk into my surgery and say you've fractured your skull!" I showed him the bone fragments in the palm of my hand and he immediately became serious and professional. His fingers carefully probed along my forehead. He then said, "My God! - My apologies - you are quite right. You have a depressed fracture of the frontal bone. I want you to lie down on that examination table and don't move until I tell you."

I did as I was told. I believe I slept. Some time later, the doctor made another careful examination. He then told me that there did not appear to be any complications, but only an X-ray could determine that and it would have to wait until I reached civilisation. In the meantime I must be very careful indeed. He had no need to tell me. I realised that, having had the great good fortune to have survived where so many around me had died, I had come close to suffering a really serious injury in those first exuberant, heady days of freedom which could have delayed my return home and even had lasting consequences. But my luck continued. The splintered bone knitted and, although I still have that depression in my forehead, I have never had any ill effects from it.

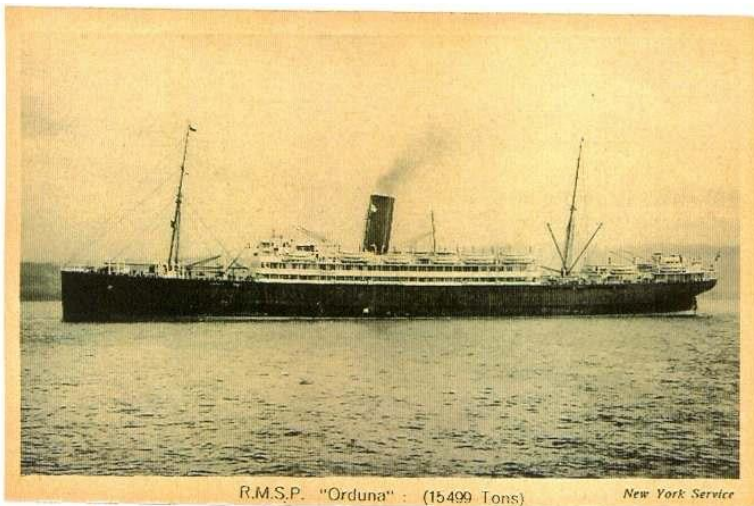
The remaining days of our life in the erstwhile prison camp, dragged slowly by. We chafed at the delay, even though we appreciated the logistical problems involved in evacuating thousands of former prisoners of war from the jungle camps along the river. Many were chronically sick, some, for whom rescue came too late, died before they reached their homeland, and some, by a cruel stroke of fate, were killed in the crash of a ferrying aircraft. When our turn came, there was little warning. We were loaded into trucks and taken to the airport, where we boarded Royal Air Force Transport 'Dakotas'. Our plane was devoid of any comfort whatsoever. Accommodation consisted of a continuous bench type seat of metal tube and canvas which extended the whole length of the aircraft, on each side of a central gangway. We sat side by side, close together, with our belongings at our feet, for the four hundred mile flight to Mingaladon airfield at Rangoon. The journey was uncomfortable and, at times, bumpy, but I had never flown before and still remember it as one of the most exhilarating experiences of my life. From Bangkok, our flight path was north-west, first across open country, then over the thick green carpet of the jungle and the river. The tops of mountains rose here and there through the late monsoon mist which shrouded the railway and the prison camps along

the banks of the River Kwai, which were now rapidly becoming deserted.

Landing at the war-battered airfield at Mingaladon, we were taken to a hangar and given a meal, and it was there that I experienced yet another remarkable coincidence. I met the pilot of our transport Dakota. His name was Jack Wallace, whose brother, Fred, was a school friend of mine. Later, in 1948, when I joined Southampton Police, I found that both the brothers were already members of that force. We served together for many years.

From the airfield, trucks ferried us to hospitals for tests and observation. I found myself admitted to a ward laid out with a large number of cot-beds. The number of patients in that ward would have been met with disbelief by the staff of even the most overcrowded hospital at home in Britain. This was Rangoon General Hospital, however, in a city which had suffered the horrors of the Japanese occupation.

Probably due to my skull fracture, I was detained in the hospital for much longer than many of my friends. However, I was a 'walking wounded' case and, after a few days, I was allowed to go out for periods, during which I was able to look round the city. There was much damage and destruction, but the great 'Shwe Dagon' pagoda was still a magnificent sight.



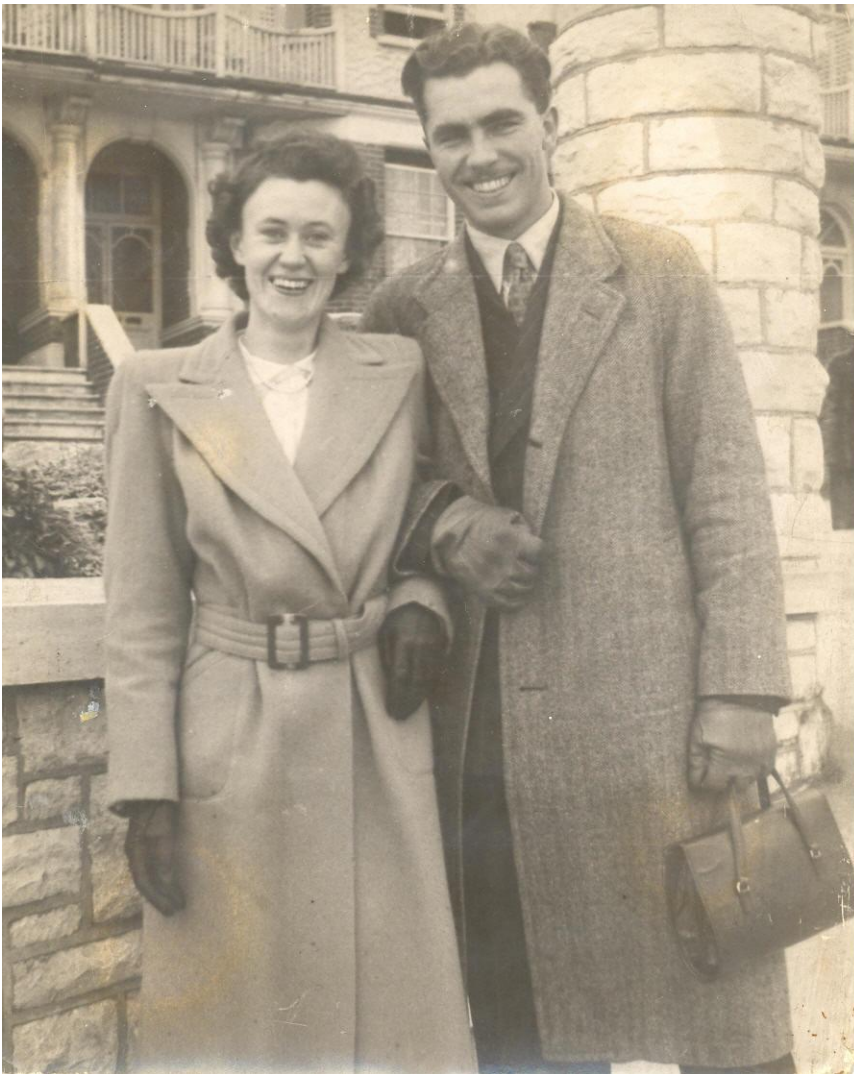
Eventually, I was passed fit to travel and was taken to the docks where, together with probably fifteen hundred or more others, I boarded the S.S."ORDUNA" - a Pacific Steam Navigation Company passenger liner of 15,500 gross registered tonnage, converted as a troop-carrier. On this ship I had the great good luck to occupy a shared cabin, so my long journey home became a

recuperative cruise. Our route was from Rangoon to Ceylon - now Sri Lanka. Then, across the Arabian Sea to the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, and through the Suez Canal to Port Said and on to Gibraltar.

By then, the weather had begun to change and we headed north up the coast of Portugal and across the Bay of Biscay, feeling the increasing cold of mid-November in the Northern Hemisphere. I had hoped that, as Southampton was the nearest British port for ocean liners, we would dock there, but those hopes were dashed by the announcement that we were bound for Liverpool. There was, of course, great rejoicing among the northerners aboard, but those of us from the south faced a train journey of many hours.

But, as I walked down the gangway in the damp greyness and grime of Liverpool Docks, the tremendous exhilaration of being home again after four long years - of having survived the war and the disease and squalor of the prison camps along the River Kwai – put a spring in my step, as I marched across to the reception area in the dockside sheds. It was a wonderful feeling to be back home in an England which, although battered and impoverished by six and a half years of war, was now at peace.

After the formalities of receiving an advance of pay and rail tickets for the journey home, I was soon on a train for London. I had sent telegrams to my parents, and to Pamela, who came to meet me at their house. I recall that it seemed that we would never stop talking - there was so much to catch up with. Pamela and I were married seven weeks later, on 5th January 1946. We had been engaged to be married since 2nd November, 1940.



Pam and Charles on their honeymoon.

CONVOY-CODE NAME " WILLIAM SAIL 12X"

Although the United States of America did not enter the Second World War until precipitated into it by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941, a meeting between the President and the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, took place in August of that year aboard the British battleship "Prince of Wales", anchored in Placentia Bay, Newfoundland.

After two years of a crippling war, with Britain struggling, to survive and almost in a state of siege, Churchill was hoping for substantial assistance from the President to support the British war effort. However, Roosevelt was much hampered by the need to have regard to a strong 'isolationist' lobby in the United States and, although the meeting pledged friendship and mutual support, no active help resulted from it.

There then occurred one of those incidents in wartime which have very wide ramifications. On September 4th 1941, a German U boat attacked the American destroyer 'Greer'. The attack was, no doubt, a mistake, and in any case was unsuccessful, but Roosevelt was then able to order the U.S.Navy to treat U boats as hostile and to brand Hitler as a 'pirate'.

Churchill had asked Roosevelt to provide American troop ships and Navy escort for a British convoy of 20,000 troops to reinforce British Middle East Forces. Now, Roosevelt was able to agree and Convoy "William Sail 12X" came into being.

The American ships, sailing from various ports, were directed to arrive at Halifax, Nova Scotia, by 6th November. They were to be fully loaded with food, ammunition, fresh water and medical supplies. The convoy carrying the British 18th Division and other military elements arrived in Halifax on 8th November. The transfer of all troops and equipment was completed in two days and convoy "William Sail 12 X" left Halifax on 10th November, 1941, bound for Basra in the Persian Gulf via Port of Spain, Trinidad, and Cape Town, South Africa.

The composition and command structure of this convoy was as follows:-

Convoy Commander :- Rear Admiral Arthur B. Cook, USN.('Ranger')

CONVOY 'WILLIAM SAIL' 12X

Aircraft Carrier	USS RANGER	Capt, W.K.Harrill
Heavy Cruiser	USS QUINCY	Capt. C.E.Battle Jr.
Heavy Cruiser	USS VINCENNES	Capt. P.L.Riefkohl

Troopship (*)	USS WEST POINT	Capt. F.II.Kelly
Troopship (#)	USS MOUNT VERNON	Capt. D.B.Breary
Troopship	USS ORIZABA	Capt. G.Gulbranson
Troopship	USS JOSEPH T. DICKMAN	Cmdr. C.W.Ilarwood
Troopship	USS LEONARD WOOD	Cmdr.
H.C.Bradbury		
Troopship (+)	USS WAKEFIELD	Cmdr.
W.K.Scammell		
Fleet Oiler U	USS CIMARRON *	Cmdr. H,J,Redfield

The convoy escort screen consisted of

Screen Commander :- Captain T.C.Kincaid. USN.(Wainwright)

Destroyer	USS WAINWRIGHT *	Lt.Cdr. T.L.Lewis
Destroyer	USS MOFFETT *	Cmdr. P.R.Ileineman
Destroyer	USS McDOUGAL.	Cmdr. D.L.Madeira
Destroyer	USS WINSLOW	Cmdr. H.R.Holcomb
Destroyer	USS RHIND *	Cmdr. H.T.Read
Destroyer	USS MAYRANT	Lt,Cmdr. F,.A.Taylor
Destroyer	USS ROWANI *	Lt,Cmdr. B.R.Harrison
Destroyer	USS TRIPPE *	Lt,Cmdr. R.L.Campbell

Note:- The ships indicated above by markers were formerly passenger liners owned and operated by United States Lines:- C3

(*)USS.'West Point'- previously S.S.'America' (#)USS.'Mount Vernon' - previously S.S.'Washington' (+)USS.Wakefield- previously S.S.'Manhattan'

USS.QUINCY' and USS.VINCENNES' were both sunk on 9th August, 1942, in the battle of Savo Island in the Pacific Ocean.

APPENDIX 'B'

Orders from Commander in Chief, South West Pacific, to General Officer Commanding, Malaya.

It is certain that there are Japanese troops in Singapore Island who have crossed the Straits. We must destroy them. Our whole fighting reputation is at stake, and the honour of the British Empire. The Americans have held out in the Batavia Peninsula against far heavier odds, the Russians are turning back the picked strength of the Germans, and the Chinese, with almost complete lack of modern equipment, have held the Japanese for four and a half years. It will be a disgrace if we yield our boasted fortress of Singapore to inferior enemy forces. There will be no thought of sparing troops or the civilian population and no mercy will be shown to weakness in any shape or form. Commanders and senior officers will lead their troops and, if necessary, die with them. There must be no thought or question of surrender. Every unit must fight it out in close contact with the enemy.

A.W.P. Wavell - General

Orders from General Officer Commanding, Malaya, to Troop Commanders, Singapore.

I attach a copy of an order I have received from the C.in C. South West Pacific Command, General Sir Archibald Wavell, G.C.B., C.M.G., M.C.

The gist of this message will be conveyed to all ranks through the medium of Commanding Officers.

In some units the troops have not shown the fighting spirit which is to be expected of men of the British Empire. It will be a lasting disgrace if we are defeated by an Army of "clever gangsters" many times inferior in numbers to our own. The spirit of aggression and determination to stick it out must be inculcated in all ranks. There must be no further thought of withdrawal without orders. There are too many fighting men moving about in back areas. Every available man who is not doing other essential work must be used to stop the invader.

A.E.Percival. Lt.General. G.O.C. Malaya

**Copy of Extraction from the War Diary of Alexandra
Hospital**

The Epic of Alexandra Hospital - Malaya

February 14th 1942

During the early morning the water supply was cut off, shelling and aircraft activity became intense, some shells bursting in and many near the hospital. These appeared to be mainly enemy mortar bombs with an occasional shot from our Artillery. The enemy were drawing near and approaching the rear of the hospital from the Ayer Rajah Road area. The number of incoming patients had lessened considerably and there was little or no traffic in the wards,

During the morning routine work continued. Japanese troops were seen for the first time at 13.40 hours attacking towards the Sister's Quarters. Jap fighting troops were about to enter the hospital from the rear. Lt: Weston went from the Reception Room to the rear entrance with a white flag in order to indicate the surrender of the hospital. The Japanese took no notice and Lt: Weston was bayoneted to death by the first Japanese to enter. The troops now entered the hospital and ran amok on the ground floor. They were very excitable and jumpy and neither pointing to the Red Cross Brassard nor shouting the word hospital had any effect. The following events all commenced at approximately the same time;

(a) One party entered the theatre block (at this time operations were being prepared in the corridor between the Sisters Bunk and the Main theatre, this being the best lit and most sheltered part of the block). Japs entered the corridor and at the same time a shot was fired through the window wounding Pte: Lewis, R.A.M.C. in the arm. About ten Japs came into the corridor and the Medical Personnel held up their hands. Captain Smiley pointed to the Red Cross Brassard but they appeared excited and took no notice. The Japs then motioned the staff to move along the corridor, which they did - then for no apparent reason set upon them with bayonets. A Lt: was bayoneted twice through the back of the thorax and died at once. Captain Parkinson was bayoneted to death and as also were Cpl: McEwan and Pt: Lewis. A patient on the operating table was bayoneted to death (this patient was later identified as Cpl: Holden

2nd Loyals). Captain Smiley was bayoneted but struck the blade aside and it hit his cigarette case in his left breast pocket. He was then again lunged at and wounded in the left groin, the previous thrust having cut his thumb and wounded his left forearm. He then pretended to be killed and pushed Pte: Sutton who was unharmed to the floor calling to the others to keep quiet. The Japs left the corridor. After fifteen to twenty minutes he saw the C.O. coming along the corridor.

(b) Another party of Jape went into a ward and ordered the nursing orderlies and patients who could walk outside the hospital. In one ward two patients were bayoneted. Two Japs went upstairs and gave similar instructions. These two seemed to have been more humane than the others for they motioned patients to remain behind. Patients and personnel numbering about two hundred were taken outside; their hands were tied behind them with a slipknot. One length of cord uncut being used for four and five men. Some of the patients could only just hobble. Some had only one arm. Some were in plaster and others were obviously very ill. Many of the seriously ill patients showed signs of great distress, one or two collapsed and had to be revived. This party was marched by a circuitous route to the old quarters where they were herded into rooms fifty to seventy being placed in each room, the size of which varied from 9' x 9' to 10' x 12'. Here they were literally jammed in and it took minutes to raise one's hands above one's head. Sitting down was out of the question and people were forced to urinate against each other. During the night many men died and all suffered severely from thirst and the suffocating atmosphere. Water was promised but never arrived. When the dawn came Japs could be seen with cases of tinned fruit which they kept entirely to themselves. By evening shelling was at its' maximum and shells were bursting all around. One struck the roof injuring some of the prisoners and blowing open the door and windows. When this happened about eight men tried to escape, some were successful but others got hit by machine gun fire. Prior to this the Japs had been leading small parties out of sight and the ensuing yells and screams coupled with, on one occasion, a Jap returning wiping blood from his bayonet, left little doubt as to their fate. Except for the few who escaped none of that party was seen again. Captain Allardyce who could speak a little Japanese, Cpl: MacDonough and Cpl: Wilkens were taken off. Captain Allardyce was under the impression that he was being taken away as a hostage or that the Japs wanted some wounded attended to. However, he was only seen again that night and for the last time the following morning at the servants' quarters where the doomed two hundred were imprisoned. It must be assumed that he and Cpl: Wilkins suffered a

similar fate as the others. The body of Cpl: MacDonough was found outside the hospital and it would appear that he was killed by shrapnel.

(c) A party of Japs came into the Reception Room shouting and threatening the staff and patients who were congregated there. Sgt: Sherriff was bayoneted and died. The remainder was similarly treated. Another party went into the wards 16 and 17 causing injuries to the patients. They entered the kitchens of these two wards and killed Pte: Bruce, probably using a Tommy Gun, This party was also shown the Red Cross Brassards and replied by firing and throwing a hand grenade into a Sister's bunk.

It is difficult to understand the reason for the reason for this barbaric attack on the hospital and investigations were carried out to find a possible explanation for it. Rumour has that Indian Sappers and Miners digging a tunnel at the rear of the hospital had presumably made a run for it when the Japs advanced and passed through the hospital building. At 16.00 hours forty or fifty people were herded into the building corridor and a guard placed over them. Later the guards went away and Captain Bartlett went out to investigate but found no sign of the Japs: the party remained there until dawn,

February 15th

Shelling was very heavy and a few direct hits were made on the building. Japs were using the ground floor for battle. This, however, did not interfere with the duties of the hospital staff. About 18.00 hours the Japs took a party off, including Sgt: Anderson and about twenty others away. Their hands were tied behind their backs and they were led to a drain near the Sgt: Major's Quarters, where they remained all night, but were given cigarettes and raisins. About 08.00 hours the Jap looters arrived. At 10.00 hours a Jap Medical Officer of the rank of D.D.M.S, entered the hospital and saluted all our dead. He complimented the staff on the way the patients had been looked after and provided a guard against looters.

February 17th

The Jap G.O.C. called and expressed his regret at what had happened and assured the staff that they had nothing further to fear. He told the O.C. that he was to be regarded as a direct representative of the Emperor and no higher honour could be paid to the hospital.

APPENDIX D

ORDERS UPON SURRENDER OF SINGAPORE

Commander 3rd Indian Corps,

Commander - Southern Area

Comdr: A.I.F. 'A' 'Q', C.A.A.D., B.R.A., C.R.E., C.S.O., D.D.S.T., D.D.O.S., D.P.M.

It has been necessary to give up the struggle but I want the reason explained to all ranks. The forward troops continue to hold their ground but the essentials of war have run short. In a few days we shall have neither petrol nor food. Many types of ammunition are short and the water supply upon which the vast civilian population and many of the fighting troops are dependant threaten to fail. This situation has been brought about partly by being driven off our dumps and partly by hostile air and artillery action. Without these sinews of war we cannot fight on. I thank all ranks for their efforts throughout the campaign 'G' Ops.

15th February 1942.

A. E. Percival – Lt. General Malaya

G.O.C. Malaya

Message from Major - General Beckwith - Smith, Commander 18th Division, to his units on the unconditional surrender of Singapore.

No Commander has over led a happier and more loyal team into battle. The Division was sent into a theatre of war, for which it was neither trained or equipped, to fight, a clever cunning enemy who was on the crest of the wave. It was sent to fight a battle which was already lost and had to pass through troops who's morale had been badly shaken. It had to endure long periods of hardship without food or rest, yet it fought with great courage and tenacity and inflicted heavy losses on the enemy. Every man can, I know will, rightly hold his head high knowing that he upheld the best traditions of the British Army. During the eighteen months I have been priviledged to command the Division at home and over-seas it has carried out every varied and exacting task it has been called upon to undertake and I now can only dedicate the rest of my life to helping in any way I can the Officers, Warrant Officers and men of the 18th Division. God Bless you all and bring you safely home when victory is finally ours with the knowledge that you have played your part in its achievement.

Beckwith - Smith G.O.C.,

18th Division - 15th February, 1942

Major General Beckwith-Smith died a year or two later in Japan of, I believe, diphtheria.

APPENDIX E

SELERANG - SPECIAL ORDER NO: 2. - BY COL: E.B.HOLMES

The requirement by the I.J.A. issued under their Order No: 17 dated 31st August, 1942 that all ranks of the P.O.W. Camp, Changi, should be given the opportunity to sign a certificate of promise not to escape has now been ammended in a revised I.J.A. Order No: 17 dated 2nd September, 1942 to a definite order that all officers, N.C.O.s, and men of the P.O.W. Camp will sign this undertaking.

I therefore now order that these certificates will be signed by all ranks and handed by Area Commanders to Command H.Q. by 11.00 Hours on 5th September, 1942.

The circumstances in which I have been compelled to issue this order will be made the subject of Selarang Special Order No: 3. which will be issued later.

signed - E.B. Holmes. Colonel

4th September, 1942 - Commanding British and Australian Troops, Changi.

Reference Selarang Special Order No: 3 dated 4th September 1942.

My attention has been drawn to some concern which is being felt that there may be adverse financial consequences on individuals as the result of the signing of the non-escape certificate. It is obviously impossible for me to give a ruling in this matter which must rest in other hands than mine. I wish, however, all ranks to be informed that this point had my full consideration at the time of decision and I am convinced that no such adverse consequences on pay, pension or allowances will result to any individual.

It will naturally be my first endeavour also, to ensure on release that the position is made clear to H.M. Government.

Signed - E.B. Holmes - Colonel

Commanding British and Australian Troops - Changi

COPY OF SPECIAL ORDER NO; 3 DATED 4TH SEPTEMBER, 1942

1. On the 30th August, 1942 I together with my Area Commander, was summoned to the Conference House, Changi Gaol where I was informed by the Representative of major Gen. Shimpei Fukoye, G.O.C., P.O.W. Camps, Malaya, that P.O.W.s in Changi Camp were to give forms of promise not to escape and that all were to be given an opportunity to sign this form.
2. By the laws and usages of War a P.O.W. cannot be required by the power holding him to give his parole and in our Army those who have become P.O.W.s are not permitted to give their parole. I pointed out this position to the Japanese Authorities.
3. I informed the Representative of Major Gen. Shimpei Fukoye that I was not prepared to sign this form and that I did not consider that any officer or man in the Changi Camp would be prepared to sign the form. In accordance with the orders of the Japanese Authorities all P.O.W.s were given an opportunity to sign. The result of that opportunity is well known.
4. On the 31st August I was informed by the Japanese Authorities that those personnel who refused to sign the certificate would be subjected to 'measures of severity' and that refusal to sign would be regarded as a direct refusal to obey a regulation which the I.J.A. considered it necessary to enforce.
5. Later, on the night of the 31st August / 1st September, I was warned that on the 1st September all P.O.W.s persisting in refusal to sign were to move by 18.00 hrs to Selerang Barrack Square. I confirmed, both on behalf of myself and in the name of the P.O.W.s, our refusal to sign.
6. The move the Selerang Barrack Square was successfully accomplished on the same afternoon.
7. I, and the Area Commander have been in constant conference with I.J.A., and have endeavoured by negotiation to have the form either abolished or at least modified. All that I have been able to obtain is that which was originally a demand accompanied by threats of 'measures of severity' has now been issued as an official order of I.J. Government.
8. During the period of occupation of the Selerang Barrack Square the conditions in which we have been placed have been under my constant consideration. These may be briefly described as such that existence therein will result in a very few days in the outbreak of epidemics and that most serious consequences to those under my command and inevitable death to many. Taking into account the low state of health in which many of us now are, and the need to preserve our force intact as long as possible, and in the full conviction that my action, were the circumstances in which we are now living known to them, would meet with the approval of His Majestys' Government, I felt it my duty to order all personnel to sign the certificate under the duress imposed by the I.J.A.
9. I am fully convinced that H.M. Government only expects P.O.W.s not to give their parole when such parole is to be given voluntarily. This factor

can in no circumstances be regarded as applicable to our present condition. The responsibility for this decision rests with me and with me alone, and I fully accept it in ordering you to sign.

10. I wish to record in this order my deep appreciation of the excellent spirit and good discipline which all ranks have shown during this trying period. I look to all to continue in good heart, discipline and morale.

Thank you all for your loyalty and co-operation.

Signed - E.B. Holmes - Colonel

Commanding British and Australian Troops, Changi Selerang –
September 1942

4th

"JAPANESE HOLIDAY"

A BROADCAST TO LONDON

By

Padre J. N. DUCKWORTH.

The Japanese told us we were going to a health resort. We were delighted. They told us to take pianos and gramophone records. *They* would supply the gramophones. We were overjoyed and we took them. Dwindling rations and a heavy toll of sickness were beginning to play on our fraying nerves and emaciated bodies. It all seemed like a bolt from the tedium of life behind barbed wire in Changi, Singapore. They said. "Send the sick. It will do them good." And we believed them, and so we took them all.

The first stage of the journey to this new found Japanese Paradise was not quite so promising. Yes, they look our kit and they look our bodies, - the whole lot - in metal goods wagons, 35 men per truck through Malaya's beating, relentless sun for 5 days and 5 nights to Thailand, the land of the *free*. For food we had a small amount of rice and some "hogwash" called *stew*. We sat and sweated, fainted and hoped. Then at

Barnpong station in Thailand they said: "All men go." "Marchee, marchee!" We said: "What! We're coming for a holiday." They just laughed and in that spiteful, derisive, scornful laugh which only a prisoner of war in Japanese hands can understand, we knew that here was another piece of Japanese buschido - deceit.

Our party marched, or rather dragged themselves for 17 weary nights, 220 miles through the jungles of Thailand. Sodden to the skin, up to our middles in mud, broken in body, helping each other as best we could, we were still undefeated in spirit. Night after night, each man nursed in his heart the bitter anger of resentment. As we lay down in the open camps - clearings in the jungle, nothing more - we slept, dreaming of home and better things. As we eat boiled rice and drank onion water, we thought of eggs and bacon.

We arrived, 1680 strong at No. 2 Camp, Songhurai, Tlailorid, which will stand out as the horror hell of

Prison Camps. From this 1680 less than 250 survive today to tell its tale. Our accommodation consisted of bamboo huts without roofs. The monsoon had begun and the rain beat down. Work - slave work - piling earth and stones in little skips on to a railway embankment began immediately. It began at 5 o'clock in the morning and finished at 9 o'clock at night and even later than that. Exhausted, starved and benumbed in spirit we toiled because if we did not, we and our sick would starve. As it was the sick had half rations because the Japanese said "No work, no food."

Then came *cholera*. This turns a full-grown man into an emaciated skeleton overnight. 20, 30, 40, and 50 deaths were the order of the day. The medical kit we had brought could not come with us. We were told it *would* come on. It never did. We improvised bamboo holders for saline transfusions, and used boiled river water and common salt to put into the veins of the victims. Cholera raged. The Japanese still laughed and asked "How many dead men?" We still had to work, and work harder. Presently, came dysentery and beri-beri - that dreaded disease bred of malnutrition and starvation. Tropical ulcers, diphtheria, mumps, smallpox, all added to the misery and squalor of the camp on the hillside where water flowed unceasingly through the huts at the bottom. A rising feeling of resentment against the Japanese, the weather and general living conditions coupled with the knowledge that their officers could do little or nothing about it, made life in the camp full of *dread* that each

day would bring something worse. The lowest daily death rate came down to 17 only as late as September 1943, when the weather improved and things began to get a little better. Yet we had to work, there was no way out of it. Escape through the jungle as many gallant parties attempted, would only end in starvation and disease, and if the party survived and were eventually recaptured, the torture which followed was worse than death itself.

We were dragged out by the hair to go to work, beaten with bamboo poles and mocked at. We toiled, half-naked in the cold unfriendly rain of Upper Thailand. We had no time to wash and if we did it meant Cholera. By day we never saw our bed spaces (on long platforms of those bleak hundred metre huts). Our comrades died, we could not honour them even at the graveside because we were still working.

The spirit of the jungle hovered over this Valley of the Shadow of Death and my boys used to ask me constantly "How long now Padre? What's the news?" We had the news. Capt. James Mudie, who now broadcasts from here, by an amazing piece of skill and resource, got it and gave it to us. And we lay and starved, suffered, hoped and prayed.

Never in my life have I seen such tragic gallantry as was shown by those men who lay on the bamboo slats and I speak now as a priest who administered the last rites to all of them. Yet they died happy. Yes, happy to be released from pain, happy because our cause would not be suffered to fail among the nations

of the earth.

No Medical Officers or orderlies ever had to contend with such fantastic, sickening, soul destroying conditions of human ailment. No body of men could have done better. We sank low in spirit, in sickness and in human conduct, but over that dark valley there rose the sun of hope which warmed shrunken frames and wearied souls.

Here I would like to pay tribute to the stirring work and worth of some Officers amongst many to whom many men now living may owe their lives - Lt. Col. Andy Dillon, RIASC, Lt. Col. John Huston, RAMC, and to Lt. Col. Hutchison, MC, known affectionately to us as "Hutch" also to Capt. E.J. Emery, who tended the

sick even from his bedside and to Major Bruce Hunt of the Australian Imperial Forces. One cheering result comes from this dismal epoch in our lives, the coming close together in friendship and mutual understanding between the men of the United Kingdom and the men of Australia.

A new understanding has been born and will endure amongst those who think over the things which are of good report.

Those of us that came out of that hell, thank God for deliverance and for the memory of just men made perfect, whose examples as martyrs at the hands of the Japanese blaze yet another trail in the annals of human perseverance.

Singapore

12th September 1945.

**Rationing of food supplies and clothing and control of raw materials
during World War II**

Every member of the population was issued with a ration book from which small sections were removed by the shopkeeper for every purchase. When **all** sections had been surrendered it was not possible for the holder of the book to buy any more of the rationed goods. Severe penalties - including imprisonment - were imposed on any person guilty of contravening the Food Regulations

In spite of the penalties, however, illegal trading existed on the 'Black Market' and those who could afford to pay the high prices could augment their rations from that source if they could find a contact, and were willing to take the risk.

Food rations for one person for one week were as follows:-

14

Meat	8 ozs
Bacon	4 ozs
Eggs	1
Butter	2 ozs
Margarine	2 ozs
Lard	2 ozs
Cheese	2 oza
Sugar	8 ozs
Tea	2 ozs
Jams	4 ozs
Sweets	2 ozs
Milk	2 ½ pts

Expectant and nursing mothers were allowed extra rations and milk.

In addition to the normal meat rations, some animal products controlled only by their scarcity were available in small amounts. These 'off the ration' items included everything which came under the heading of 'Offal', such as chitterlings, tripe, liver, kidneys and sausages.

From time to time, word would get around that a butcher in the neighbourhood had some offal for sale. Within a very short time a long queue of people would appear, extending twenty or thirty yards from the shop door back along the footpath. Scores of people, mainly wives and mothers and many with children, would stand patiently for hours, often in bad weather, hoping for the chance of being able to buy something with which to augment the family diet. Frequently, those at the back of the queue had the crushing disappointment of being told "Sorry - sold out", before they got to the shop door.

Usually, shopkeepers were very fair, allowing each customer a reasonable amount but, inevitably, a certain amount went "under the counter" for the specially favoured customer.

Whale meat began to be available 'off the ration' as an extra. However, it had an unpleasant 'fishy' smell and also a peculiar strong after taste which made it unpalatable even to the hungry. Made up with herbs into sausages it was equally unattractive and 'whale meat bangers' were eaten only when there was nothing else available.

Clothing and shoes were also rationed, obtainable only by the surrender of 'coupons'. The allowance was meagre and shoes and clothes became much repaired. The ration allowed, for example, for a man to buy a topcoat once in seven years; a pair of trousers once in two years; a pullover once in five years; a pair of underpants once in two years and a jacket once in two years. Everything was reduced to a few basic designs with no trimmings.

Furniture was very plain and was made to a simple 'Utility' standard. It was not rationed, but due to the widespread bomb damage in many areas it was scarce, and it was often very difficult to obtain a certain required item due to the demand for replacements.

Even babies' cots were few and far between. The Government put out advice to mothers-to-be that a useful substitute for a cot could be made out of an old drawer padded with old worn out material and lined with something like a discarded nightdress! However, vegetables were not controlled and were a main source of food. The Government ran an intensive 'Dig for Victory' campaign to encourage the use of all gardens and pieces of spare ground for cultivation. Television did not exist at that time but regular 'wireless' programmes - it was not called 'radio' then - gave advice on the growing of vegetables and all sorts of recipes for their preparation were broadcast in cookery talks.

In addition to the restrictions on food, the consumption of alcoholic drink was severely curtailed. Spirits and wines were in very short supply and beer, if available, was very much reduced in strength.

All discarded, worn out or unwanted metal objects and utensils were collected for salvage, and miles of iron railings in front of houses and around parks all over the country were taken away and melted down for munitions. The public were asked to put out everything they could for 'salvage' to help the "War Effort".

However, there was an unexpected bonus arising from the years of 'spartan' living. The health of the nation was very good. The enforced low fat, low sugar diet, augmented by home grown vegetables and salads, produced a leaner Britain.

The enormous cost of the war resulted in the country being bankrupt at the end, owing billions of pounds to the United States. Sadly, the Socialist Government which came to power in 1945 squandered what few resources the country had on the implementation of their doctrine of 'Nationalisation' - the buying into Government control of all the major industries and services, such as Mining, Railways, Docks, Power, Gas, and so saddling themselves, without the drive of private enterprise, with further expenditure necessary to repair the ravages of war. Some forms of rationing continued into the 1950s.