

TOMORROW - THE NEW DAY

BY

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*A personal account of experiences as a Japanese prisoner
during the second world war working on the Burma-Siam
railway with an introduction by the author's children*



The author, John Murray Melville in about 1960 attending a wedding at St Martin in the Fields, Trafalgar square.

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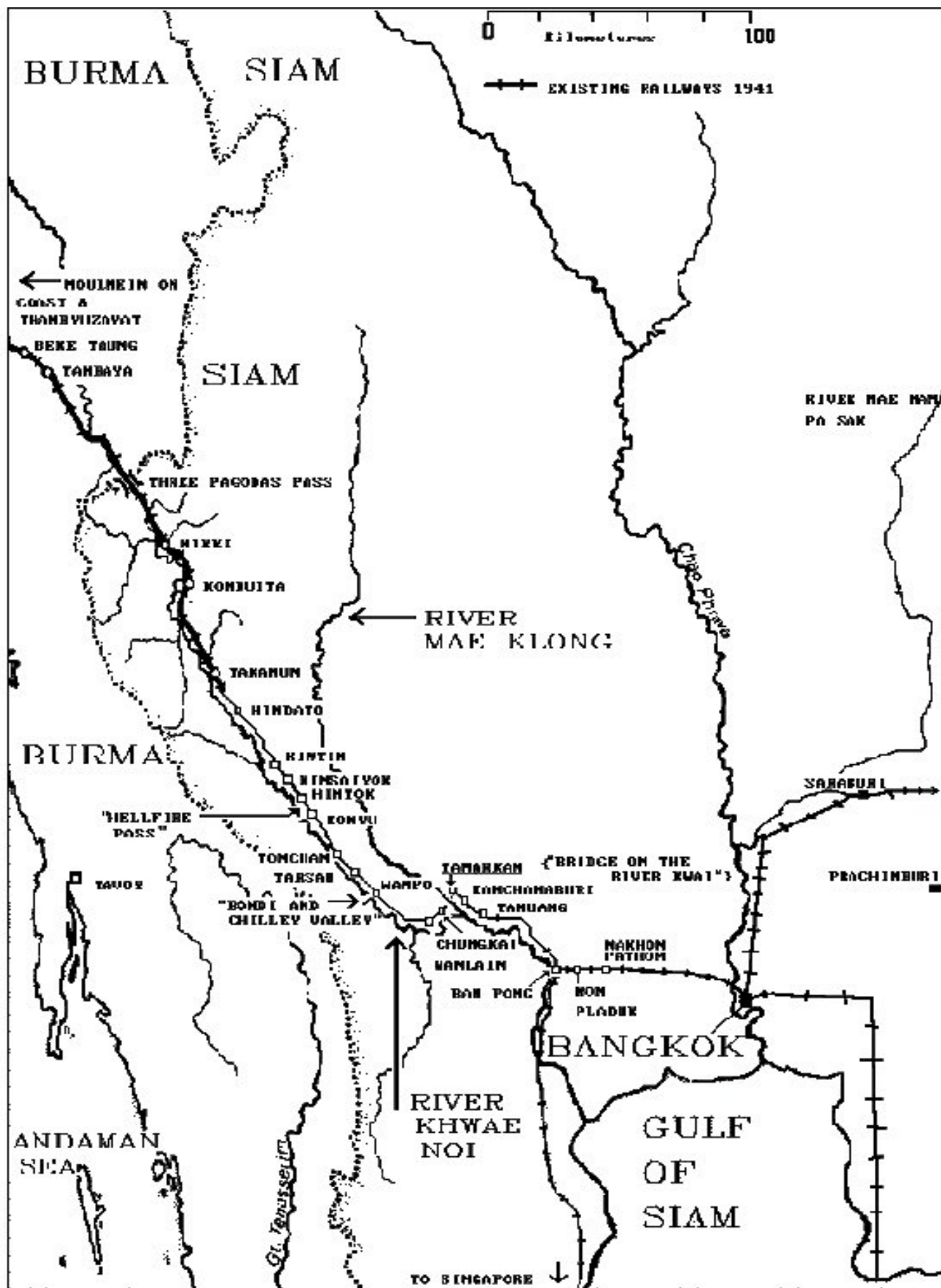
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*This book is dedicated to the memory of Frank Knight, Tom Cass and all
the
other Gordon Highlanders who failed to survive into "The New Day"*



BURMA SIAM RAILWAY

INTRODUCTION:

The film: "Bridge on the River Kwai" was released in 1957. Directed by David Lean and starring Alec Guinness, William Holden and Jack Hawkins, it won Oscars for best film, best director and best actor. It is an entertaining film to watch and most audiences believe that it gives an accurate account of the construction of the Burma-Siam railway and of the experiences of troops who were prisoners of war in the far east. However, the very success of the film as entertainment hides its many failings as a historical account and emphasises the danger of portraying recent events in feature films made with a generous mixture of fact and fiction; it becomes impossible to distinguish truth from falsehood.

This personal account by contrast, deals with one man's war experiences, without any fictional embellishments. It covers the problems of enlistment, the journey to the far east, Singapore before the fall, the fall of Singapore, imprisonment, construction of the railway (including the bridge on the Kwai) and final release. It is apparent from the account that the construction of the bridge was only a small part of the work involved in building the railway which in turn occupied only a part of the period of imprisonment even if this was the most nightmarish part. It is also apparent that malaria, cholera, typhus, dysentery and malnutrition were as much the enemies as were the Japanese.

To the far east prisoners of war, like the author, there were several questions which troubled them after their return to England. Whose fault was it that Singapore Island should have been allowed to fall so easily? Would the Japanese have killed their prisoners of war if the Atom Bomb had not been dropped? Should the Emperor Hirohito have been pardoned when he was so much involved in the original Japanese invasions? These and many other questions are also addressed in this book. The account reads quite clearly and simply without explanation. But two things are difficult to understand: the geography of the area and the background to the

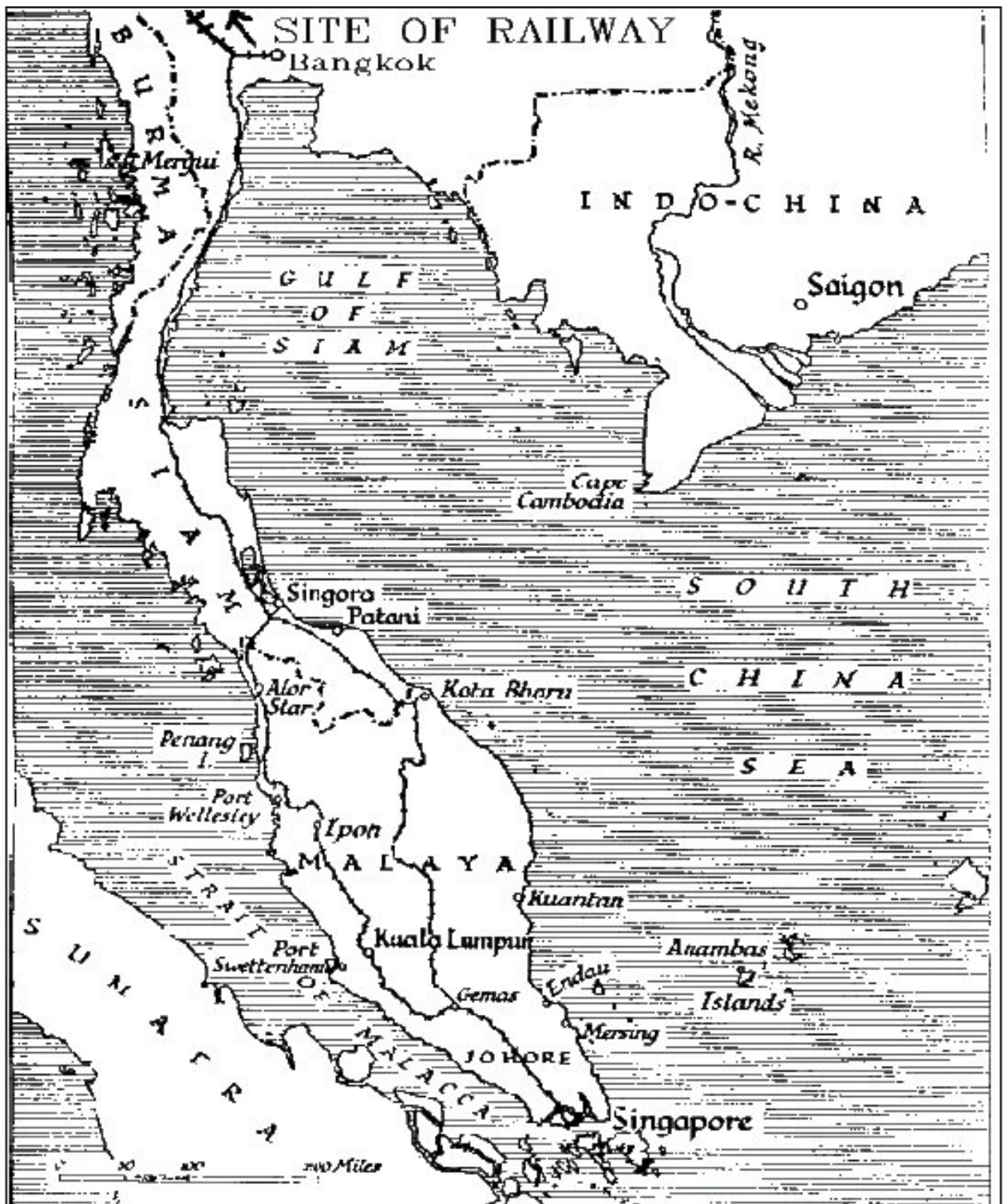
historical events described. Maps are provided to help clarify the geography and it is hoped that this introduction will help to explain some of the background to the narrative.

SINGAPORE ISLAND:

In 1817 Raffles working for The British East India company, leased the then uninhabited island of Singapore as a trading post; the company had previously worked from the nearby island of Penang. Various treaties were subsequently made and by 1909, Malaya was entirely under British protection. Malaya is shaped like an elongated lozenge with an area slightly larger than England and Wales combined. To the North, it is attached to Thailand (Siam) by a narrow neck of land. At the southernmost tip lies Singapore, an island similar to the Isle of Wight in size and shape.

Three quarters of the Malayan land mass is covered with tropical rain forest - vast areas of stiflingly humid jungle spread over a mountainous spine. The coastal plains are fertile but often swampy and the actual coast is a mixture of sandy beaches and tangled mangrove thickets. The east coast is the least hospitable, and as a result, most development in terms of roads, railways and population has tended to be concentrated in the West. The main industries (and exports) were rubber and tin.

In 1940, the population amounted to some five and a half million, consisting of two and a quarter million Chinese, two and a quarter million Malays and 750,000 Tamil Indians. Administering the area there were only 31,000 Europeans. Singapore was the heart of this multinational community, a teeming city with extremes of poverty, degradation and squalor, contrasting with the vast wealth of a small section of society. The Island was joined then as it is now to neighbouring Johore by a causeway carrying road and rail links.

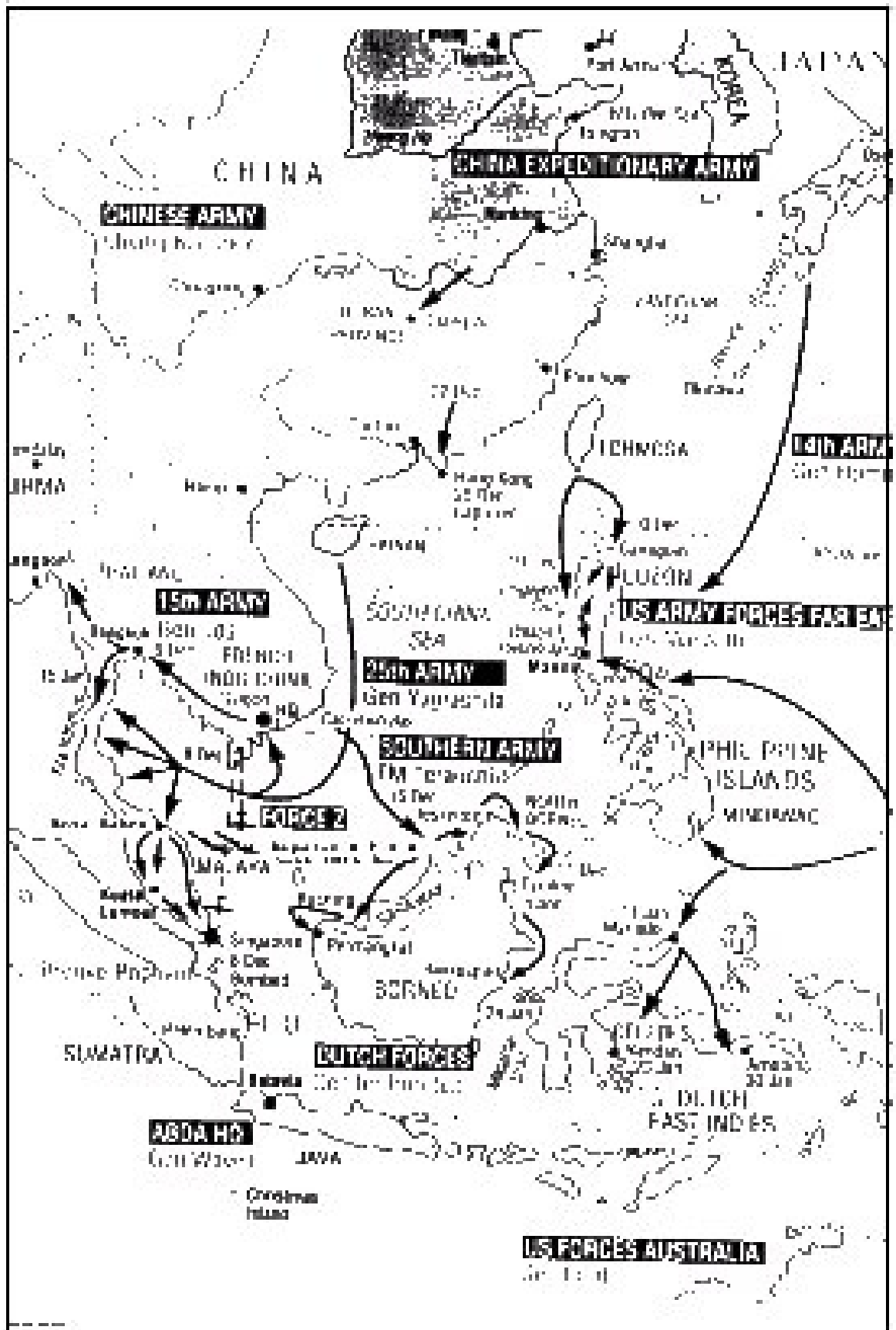


MALAYA, SIAM (THAILAND) & SUMATRA

THE JAPANESE INVASION:

Japan had started accumulating lands in 1895 with wars against the Manchu dynasty in China and in 1905 with wars against Imperial Russia. To these were added some of the Pacific territories of defeated Germany in 1919. However, Japan's biggest holding on the Asian mainland was Manchuria, which had been invaded in 1931 and an adjacent belt of eastern China. In an effort to halt Japan's war of conquest, the U.S.A. imposed economic sanctions in 1940 and 1941 by halting exports of iron, steel, rubber and oil to Japan. These raw materials were essential to Japan's continued military success against China. In order to acquire them Japan decided to conquer the Asian outposts of European Empires: The Dutch East Indies, Borneo, Malaya, Burma and the Philippines. Russia, Britain and Holland were heavily committed to the war in Europe and hence Japan felt strategically safe in invading these areas. The Japanese also believed that the Americans were unlikely to enter the war. Japan saw itself not as invading these various countries but rather as liberating them from their European colonial powers so as to create a "Greater East-Asia Co-prosperity sphere" or "Asia for the Asians".

Japan commenced the attack on several different fronts simultaneously. On 7 December 1941 Pearl harbour was bombed together with the American island bases at Guam and Wake whilst Midway was shelled from the sea. At the same time the Japanese fleet set sail to escort general Yamashita to land on the north east coast of Malaya. The following day the ships Repulse and Prince of Wales set sailed from Singapore to intercept this fleet but were sunk by Japanese aircraft on the 10th December off the East coast of Malaya. Hong Kong was attacked initially from the air and eventually surrendered on Christmas day. Assault on the Philippines began on the 10th of December and Siam which was occupied at the same time, became formally allied to Japan on the 14th of December. The occupying force which had taken Siam then attacked Burma eventually taking Rangoon in March 1942.



JAPANESE INVASION: 7.12.41-31.1.42

THE JAPANESE ATTACK ON MALAYA AND SINGAPORE

Following the first world war it was decided to build a large naval base at Singapore and to centre Britain's Far East defence around this. Attacks to the base were then expected from the sea and coastal batteries were constructed to defend it. However, it was realised during the 1930's that attack might come from Siam through Malaya and indeed the subsequent Japanese plan of attack was remarkably accurately predicted. The principle problem in defending such an attack was the shortage of resources which became much more acute once the war in Europe began. A further obstacle lay in deciding between the competing demands of the R.A.F. the navy and the army. Air Vice-Marshal Babbington argued that the R.A.F. would play a key role in any future combat and this view was vindicated when the Japanese air force sunk the Prince of Wales and Repulse so early in the campaign; Babbington saw the principle role of the army as defending the aerodromes. However, this view was opposed by Major-General Bond on behalf of the Army who considered that with the resources available he could only hope to defend southern Johore and Singapore island itself. The navy increasingly realised that a fleet could only be sent to relieve the Far East by leaving the Mediterranean to the defence of the French Navy - a strategy which became unviable with the fall of France. Further difficulties arose because of the conflict between the military and civilian authorities; the latter saw their principle role as trying to maximise the output of raw materials to help the war effort.

The strategic confusion was not helped by a number of changes in command shortly before the Japanese invasion. Air-Vice Marshal Pulford replaced Babbington, Lieutenant-General Percival replaced Bond with Air Chief Marshal Brooke-Popham appointed as commander-in-chief for the Far East. The divisions of troops defending Malaya also came from different backgrounds and were of variable quality; there was one division of Australian troops under Major-General Gordon Bennett, and two divisions of Indian troops. In practice many of the Indian troops were persuaded into surrendering by members of what was to become the Indian National Army.



JAPANESE INVASION OF MALAYA AND SINGAPORE

The Japanese troops landed on the Malayan peninsula on the 9th December 1941: Thus began a savage campaign which was to end little more than two months later on the 15th February 1942 with the surrender of Singapore. Having established a beachhead the Japanese troops were supported both by Tanks and by Air Cover. Their strategy was simply to advance down the roads until resistance was met and then to outflank it through the jungle. Having taken the island of Penang they captured a number of boats and using these they were able to make further landings down the southern coast and so cut off the lines of communication of the retreating Australian troops.

The decision to surrender Singapore was one prompted as much as anything by the plight of the one million civilian inhabitants on the island but it meant that 55,000 Japanese troops, at a cost of 3,500 killed, had taken captive 130,000 British and Commonwealth Troops with some 31,000 civilian Europeans.

It has been described as the worst disaster in British Military history. In retrospect many different factors have been blamed for the fall of Singapore:

1. The far eastern campaign took third place to the campaigns in Europe and the middle east both in planning and reinforcements before the Japanese invasion.
2. There was a shortage of aircraft, tanks, guns, ships and ammunition in Malaya. Also, the planes were predominantly outdated ones such as the buffalo flown by the fighter squadrons and the Vilderbeeste flown by the torpedo bomber crews.
3. Much of the preparations had been made against an attack from the sea and in particular there were large guns which all pointed out to sea and could not be aimed inland.
4. The troops were not trained for jungle warfare. Their preparation for the conflict had been poor because of the strategic confusion described above.
5. Following the First War there had been a general reluctance to rearm in the far east as well as in Europe.
6. There was a lack of decisive leadership on the ground as well as a lack of cooperation between the air force, army and navy in their preparations before the

invasion.

CONSTRUCTION OF THE BURMA-SIAM RAILWAY:

Having so easily conquered a large area of South East Asia the Japanese were faced with the problem of supplying and defending it. They had an inadequate merchant navy for this purpose and so looked to other means of transportation. The construction of a rail link between Burma and Siam would have enabled them to supply their troops in Burma and to extract raw materials for Japan without making the hazardous sea crossing to Rangoon. By landing at Bangkok in Siam and transporting goods by rail to Rangoon in Burma, they could make a saving of some 1,200 miles on their sea crossing as shown in the map illustrating the invasion of the South West Pacific by the Japanese. However, the route along which they would need to send such a railway was 200 miles in length, extremely mountainous, subject to the Monsoon (30" - 50" of rainfall between June and October) and infested with Malaria.

The possibility of constructing a railway through the area had been contemplated before the war and British Engineers had proposed a route along the east bank of the Mae Klong river to the latter's junction with the river Khwae Noi. The route crossed the Mae Klong at this point ("Bridge on the River Kwai"), and then followed the East bank of the river Khwae Noi to the border into Burma at the Three Pagodas Pass and thence down to the Burmese coast at Thanbyuzayat.

The prisoners involved in the construction came from prisons in Singapore, Java and Sumatra. About 10,000 prisoners worked from the Northern (Burmese) end. They were mainly Australians and Dutch with a few Americans and British and were transported to Burma on the so called "Hell Ships" because of the appalling conditions and the high mortality associated with their journeys. Nearly three times as many worked from the Southern end made up principally of British prisoners.

About 61,000 British, Australian and Dutch prisoners were taken by the Japanese in South-east Asia in the opening campaigns of 1941-1942, of whom 12,000 died building the Railway. Of the 45,000 Indians captured in Malaya in 1942, nearly 40,000 agreed to join the Japanese sponsored Indian National Army.

SOURCES USED IN THE BOOK:

This account was written by the author from memory some 25 years after the war had ended. His memory of both short and long term events was extremely accurate and

was complemented by some of the books mentioned below. In order to prepare this introduction, to construct the maps and to check the spelling and location of sites mentioned in the text the following sources have been used:

1. Death Railway by Clifford Kinvig published by Pan/Ballantine 1973.
2. World War two chronological atlas by Charles Messenger published by Bloomsbury 1989.
3. The Times Atlas of the Second World War edited by John Keegan and published by Times Books 1989.
4. Nelles Verlag maps of Thailand, Burma, Singapore and Malaysia.
5. The Second World War by Winston Churchill published by Cassell 1948-1954.
6. The Naked Island by Russell Braddon published by Laurie 1951.
7. The Burma-Siam Railway (The secret diary of Dr. Robert Hardie 1942-1945) published by the Imperial War Museum 1983.
8. The War diaries of Weary Dunlop: Java and the Burma-Thailand Railway 1942-1945 by EE Dunlop, published by Viking Books 1986.
9. Percival and the tragedy of Singapore by Sir John Smyth V.C., published by Macdonald 1971.
10. The Singapore Story by Kenneth Attiwill published by Muller 1959.
11. The endless years by John T Barnard published by Chantry 1950.
12. The Bitter End: The fall of Singapore 1941-1942 by Richard Holmes and Anthony Kemp published by Anthony bird 1982.

THE AUTHOR:

The author, John Murray Melville, was born on the 16th July 1914 at 94, Perry Rise near Forest Hill in South East London. His parents had been living in Edinburgh and his father's family were from Sutherland on the North East coast of Scotland. Tragically his father died from a brain haemorrhage whilst still in his thirties shortly before the author was born. His mother came south to Southern England where most of her relatives were living. The author was brought up by his mother and her sister Bessie in South London along with the author's brother Gordon. He went on to Alleyn's School in South London and was training to become a lawyer when war broke out. In view of his Father's Scottish ancestry he very much wanted to join a Scottish Regiment hence it was a double blow to him to be rejected by the Seaforth Highlanders as described in the first chapters.

Following the war he completed his legal training and became a solicitor in a firm in

Holborn. He married Joan Cook in 1950 and together they brought up their three children: Diana, David and Helena in Epsom in Surrey. He retired with Joan to Lymington, Hampshire in 1984 from where he continued to work part-time until his death from kidney failure on June 17th 1989.

Outside of his legal and family commitments he took great pride in his association with the Wax Chandlers Company of which he was Master 1981-1982. He never lost his love of sport in all its forms. Both before and after the war he was a keen cricketer and took a very active part in organising the Alleyns Old Boys Cricket Club. His mother played the violin and sang well and he took great pleasure in listening to classical music as he describes in the account.

Sadly the war left him a legacy of ill-health: he was still suffering from Malaria when he took his legal exams and had to have a section of bowel removed for a late complication of dysentery about 15 years after the war had finished. The psychological price can never be properly assessed. However the war left him with many friends from Scotland and with an attachment to that country for which he dearly longed. He wore his 'Gordon Highlander' tie to work with a pride and affection which his fellow commuters could never have understood.

Like so many others he would rarely speak of his war experiences, and only sat down to describe them when urged to do so by his family. He wrote this account out in long hand and then had it typed out by his secretary when the Publishers said that they couldn't assess it unless typed. He would appear to have been influenced by Russell Braddon's Book the Naked Island since he begins his account with his enlistment and describes similar experiences in his early training. Both accounts are unusual having been written by Private soldiers and perhaps the more interesting because of that. He was very disappointed when the book was rejected by the publishers who felt that the interest in war memoirs was declining in the 1970's and that the book was neither a detailed historical account nor a novel. No one else had the chance to read the account until after the author's death when the manuscript was transferred onto a word processor. Other than some changes in the spellings of the camps (for which no correct agreed spelling exists), the amalgamation of some shorter chapters and the addition of the introduction, maps and footnotes, the manuscript is in the original form prepared by the author.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

The original manuscript was typed by Miss McGovern who was the author's secretary at Routh Stacey¹ for over 30 years. This manuscript was subsequently transferred onto a Word processor by Mrs. Maureen O'Gorman and Mrs. Elizabeth Ewing at Taylor Woodrow².

Mr. Dudley Staunton³ and Mr. Patrick Staunton kindly read the manuscript and suggested the maps and the outlining of dates, which have greatly enhanced the final book. The maps were based on maps given in the sources listed above and in particular the chronological atlas of World War 2 by Charles Messenger was invaluable for describing the invasion of Malaya and Singapore. The photograph was taken by the author's wife outside St. Martin's in the Fields, London and was printed by Jill Thompson (hospital photographer at St. Mark's Hospital). The final printing was done on a Hewlett Packard Laserjet very generously donated by Frank and Christine Taylor.

However, in preparing this manuscript one is aware of a greater debt than all these described above. For it is only because of our parents' struggle both to win the war and to survive into the peace, that we as their children have enjoyed the peace happiness and security of the past 45 years. Hence this introduction is dedicated with love and gratitude to those people who have made it possible for us to enjoy "The New Day" - our parents Joan and Murray.

¹Routh Stacey was the name of the firm of Solicitors at which the author worked.

²Taylor Woodrow is the name of a worldwide construction firm founded by Frank Taylor.

³A consultant surgeon at St. Bartholomew's Hospital in London.

JOINING THE ARMY

CHAPTER 1

"No Aid for the King"

June 1940 - July 1940

Britain

Once again I was on my way back to London. The sun shone brilliantly and it was hot so that I and others travelling in the train from Scotland were weary to reach our journey's end. But there were at that time others much more weary who were struggling to return, not from the north of the British Isles, but from across the Channel. They came in every sort of vessel and by every sort of means. Exhausted from bombing, excess of sunshine and lack of everything else as they waited and prayed for rescue on the beaches of Dunkirk. For the time was June 1940, France was defeated and no one knew how many of the British Expeditionary Force (B.E.F.) would return. What was clear however was that soon, with the peoples of the Dominions, we would remain alone against Hitler's Nazidom and we would do so without the valuable equipment and arms which had had to be abandoned in France. So my companions in the train were mostly silent, or if there was conversation it was very quiet, as we waited arrival at our destination and wondered about our future and that of the country.

There seemed to be a curious hush overhanging London as we ran through the northern suburbs on the approach to Kings Cross. It was early evening with the sun dropping against the golden sky and with the barrage balloons glinting here and there and forming together a pattern in the sky almost as though they were great toys in the game which, if being played out noisily across the Channel, had yet to provide the sense of real involvement for which one had come to yearn after the months of monotony which had followed the very formal declaration of hostilities, perhaps the last of its kind, given in terms of grim foreboding and melancholy by Neville Chamberlain on a September Sunday that now seemed only a distant memory.

I had been an Officer Cadet Reservist during the years since 1932 and had vaguely expected to find myself flung almost immediately into uniform in 1940 if not into full battle! Instead I had found myself at an officer training establishment in Butt Road, Colchester. The period of waiting at this establishment I had found to be one of tedious temporisation, marking time before what I felt must surely be a long war - though just how long I dared not contemplate now that France was no longer with us.

Life in the old fashioned barracks in Butt Road, Colchester had seemed unreal with demonstrations of weapons illustrated in manuals with which we were issued but too scarce actually to be handled by the likes of us. There was organised physical training, drill, musketry and marching with expeditions on heavy army bicycles where we worked out tactical schemes and decisions in the face of imaginary enemies under the supercilious eye of elegantly attired and spoken officers from regiments of distinction but who, from their looks and behaviour, had no more experience of modern war than we ourselves. Many were agreeable and sympathetic to those of us who, emerging from civilian life and expecting an early invitation to confront and try to kill Nazis, were offered instead tactical exercises without troops and lectures on military matters differing little from what we had learned in our school O.T.C. or details of various modern forms of poison gas, of which I had already heard quite a lot from civilian instructors when training to become a warden in an air raid post.

So when I left Colchester it was in the knowledge that the authorities there had formed a low opinion of my potential as an officer in His Majesty's Forces and had designated me accordingly. Thus perhaps when I reached the depot of the Seaforth Highlanders remote and austere in Fort George up in Morayshire in Scotland, I already lacked confidence in my future. It really did resemble a fortress - though I could never decide what it could ever have been intended to defend - perhaps years before there had been cannonades of guns directed across the firth leading in from the east to Inverness - the so called Capital of the Highlands.

The depot of Fort George was filled with excitement from the moment that I and my newly commissioned companions arrived. Sadly this was not because of successes on the part of the allies, but rather followed the invasion of Denmark and Norway by Germany soon after to be succeeded by the attacks on our own expeditionary force in France, as Hitler launched his blitzkrieg on Belgium and Holland and his tanks advanced through the Ardennes and outflanked the Maginot Line at Sedan.

Although the routine of life in the Fort seemed to us as newcomers to be tame and trivial and out of keeping with the extreme urgency of events developing on the Continent, we participated in the daily instruction of the troops and in the exercises taking place at intervals to counter supposed invasion by airborne enemy in the vicinity of local landing fields. One such area was at Dalcross to the south of the main road to Inverness and the site on which the modern airport for that city now operates. Each night a guard of about forty in number were taken out in motor coaches and parties from it were located in the corners of the landing ground so that (in theory) they

could engage with their fire (from a handful of Bren guns and rifles) any Germans venturing to land by parachute as the vanguard of an invasion force. The guard was manned (or so I was given to understand) by the Companies forming the total force at Fort George and I had heard some account of its routine from other officers who had had charge of it so that when one afternoon I was suddenly informed that I was to go out with the guard that night, I was not much disturbed. Certainly all the information I had was that the guard went out in the late afternoon returning to the barracks next morning.

Dalcross, I would guess, is about six miles out from Fort George and transport consisted of two motor coaches on hire from Alexanders the road transport contractors. These duly arrived and we embarked and set out, our party consisting of myself with a Corporal (who was a militia man) two Lance Corporals and about thirty-six private soldiers, several of whom had barely held a rifle in their hands and had certainly never fired one, even by accident. But this was not really a novel situation since most of the complement of troops in Fort George consisted of recruits and it was inevitable that some of these would have been required for the extra duties which had arisen following the German offensive in France.

Headquarters for the guard were located in a disused cottage situated in one corner of the very large expanse of meadowland which comprised the landing field and I noted that no obstacles had been placed to hamper planes which might attempt a landing and there were no fortifications. The four sections from the guard did not (it appeared) have any areas sited which they were to defend, so I gave instructions to those in charge of each group to locate their men approximately at each point of the compass. Later, before darkness, I made a tour of the landing ground and saw each of the Section Commanders and was satisfied that the positions selected were reasonable in the circumstances. I estimated that the perimeter of the field was at least four miles in extent, so that my journey occupied some time and not a little effort. The Corporal had stayed with me at the Headquarters and we took turns to read through the night which passed quite uneventfully, though we were not sorry to see the arrival of daylight. About 6 a.m. the motor coaches which had taken us out to Dalcross re-appeared and the drivers informed me that they had come to take us all back to Fort George. I felt some uncertainty as to the position and we telephoned the Fort to ask for confirmation of the position. But we were told that the Adjutant (Captain Robertson) was in bed and that there was no one who knew whether or not we were to return. It appeared to the Corporal (with whom I conferred) and myself that the coaches must have been ordered

to come to the airfield by someone in authority, and it being known to me that the guard had up to that time been provided only at night and changed from day to day, I called up the sections, everyone got on board and back we went to Fort George.

On returning I went to my room and washed and shaved and then crossed to the Officers Mess to have breakfast. By chance I encountered the Adjutant who on seeing me exclaimed "What are you doing here - you have not come back with the Guard from Dalcross have you?" I told him that this was indeed the case, whereupon he exclaimed "You are supposed to be out there through the day and from now onwards until you are relieved". I took some breakfast, but without enjoyment, returned to the Company Office where I saw the Company Commander - a gnarled faced character called Maclaren (whose brother had captained and scored many runs for England at cricket). He seemed to think I should have been aware that the Guard was not to be withdrawn (though I am sure he knew nothing of this on the previous evening) and so our same collection of N.C.O's and men, with the Corporal and myself, were soon reinstated in the coaches and on our way back to the landing field. There we remained for the rest of that day, which proved to be hot and dusty and very dull. Food was sent out to us, but had laboriously to be conveyed to our sections spread around the airfield where there was little shelter and no means of diversion. But the coming of evening brought a fresh development. I received a telephone call from Fort George to say that in the next hour or so a truck would be bringing out picks and shovels and that the men were to work through the night hours digging trenches so as to form part of a defence system for the landing field. The Corporal cursed the authorities loudly because it seemed that only a handful of the men available had had any training in the preparation of such defence works and to expect them to do this work in darkness seemed (even allowing for the peculiarities of the army to which we had become accustomed) to be an extraordinary proceeding to put it mildly.

Nevertheless, with the Corporal I set about selecting sites for the trenches from which they would have as wide a field of fire as possible across the landing ground and when in due course the implements arrived work was quickly commenced. Indeed progress - bearing in mind the hard ground - proved to be rapid and efficient so that I was able to report after a relatively short time that the works were completed - as far as the materials so far sent to us permitted.

So we settled down, as we hoped, to some rest during the remainder of the night. But there was a further surprise in store for me since at some time after midnight I received

a cryptic message from the Fort: "Enemy parachutist landing expected at any moment". This, as well as astonishing me as I peered through the darkness where the landing field lay, also set me (as I saw it) considerable problems. In the first place it was obviously necessary for me to warn the various sections to remain alert - also presumably one had to ensure that the sentries (posted while their comrades rested) should have their rifles loaded. As many in this position were raw recruits, this might cause as much danger as it was calculated to avert. But I set off to warn the sections and gave guarded instructions to their comrades - directed more to ensuring the safety of our own forces than to the likelihood of action from the enemy, which in my opinion was far less likely than the message received had suggested - indeed it had been my opinion soon after my arrival in Fort George that if the Germans were planning invasion of England or Scotland with France still barely conquered, the Morayshire coast was likely to be low on their priority lists.

The next morning dawned without incident; there were no parachutists, no gliders and, mercifully, no one shot by nervous sentries. Again the weather was hot and it seemed reasonable to rest the men who were tired after two nights of watching and alarms and from their digging efforts. But soon the Second in Command from the Fort appeared and requested that I join him in a tour of the posts. He said, when I enquired, that we were to stay on the landing field until we were relieved and gave no indication when that might be. He directed that the walls of the trenches be strengthened and criticised the location of some of them. I asked that telephone communication be provided between the Headquarters and the various posts, that clean socks be sent out for all concerned and a bicycle for me. He was a reasonable and agreeable man and readily agreed to submit these requests. But it was another night before our same two motor coaches reappeared, this time with a relief guard to whose commander I was happy to hand over my responsibilities and we finally said goodbye to Dalcross and returned to Fort George.

How long the landing ground guard continued to be mounted I do not know, but no doubt obstacles would later have been placed on the landing field and the numbers involved increased, since if enemy parachutists really had descended upon us especially in darkness, they would have had every prospect in my opinion not only of landing but of consolidating their position both quickly and easily.

Back in Fort George it was evident to me from remarks passed by my Company Commander and others that the affair of the Dalcross Guard had left its mark and that I

would be 'carrying the can'. Although I saw the Adjutant in the Officers Mess quite frequently, nothing was said which in itself seemed significant. Meanwhile news from Belgium and France worsened steadily. Two drafts of reinforcements to cross the channel left via nearby Boughty Ferry on the Firth of Tay and several of the young officers who had arrived with me left with them. I had little specifically to do except training with the Platoon of which I was (at least nominally) in command, the Sergeant being a splendid fellow whose surname was Leslie. I was of course Orderly Officer once or twice and performed the duties efficiently I believed, the only adverse blot on my character being an evening parade at which (with two other Officers) I arrived late in circumstances of which I now have no recollection, but there was little comment beyond a mild reproof from Captain Maclaren.

But I was still conscious of a cloud over my head, so that when one day I was requested to see the Commanding Officer - Lt. Col. Murray - it was with some foreboding that I entered his office. He told me that he had adverse reports on me from one and another and that I had withdrawn the Dalcross guard without orders and handled it inefficiently; that he had a direction from the War Office as to whether to confirm the commission granted to me and had decided to reject me. I protested and requested that I be given a further opportunity to prove my capabilities, but he stated his mind was made up I would leave when arrangements could be made.

How many others suffered a similar fate as myself either then or later I do not know, but there must have been quite a number and, in other cases than mine, a measure of injustice because within the ensuing year an Army Command Instruction was to be issued directing that young Commissioned Officers should have the right, if confirmation were refused by those authorised to confirm the appointment, to appeal to higher authority. But at that time I was given to understand that the powers of the Commanding Officer were absolute and there was nothing I could do.

More than four weeks were to elapse before I eventually left Fort George during which time a new Commanding Officer superseded Col. Murray and the Adjutant also moved on - though I think not overseas. My father had been a Sutherlandshire man and Col. Murray was from Caithness, the adjoining county, but one with whose inhabitants there had never been much love lost over the years and I was approached by Captain Macdonald - also from Sutherland - and Lt. McGill George, a solicitor from Coatbridge (I had myself been training for the legal profession). Each urged me to seek an interview with the new Commanding Officer on the subject of my

Commission, but I had been much hurt by all that had occurred and felt no enthusiasm to stay with the Seaforths, even though my uncle had served with them in the 1914/1918 war with distinction, so I refused their requests politely but firmly. I was worried by events and expected bombing in England and London in particular to commence very soon with the imminent fall of France and thought perhaps fate had decreed that I be at hand there when the crisis became acute.

Two further incidents before I left Fort George deserve some reference. In the period of waiting I was nominated Orderly Officer at least three times - a sort of punishment I realised later as my knowledge of affairs extended - and on one such day after meeting the guard on the barrack square, I was called across by the Deputy Adjutant, an arrogant and pretentious young man for whom I had no liking, "The compliments of the Adjutant" he said to me "but your flashes are 1/4" too far forward". Such a trivial matter was still thought in Fort George to be a matter of importance when the whole future of the country in the war, and the world, was in the balance!

The other incident was when I went out with pay for a group of soldiers who were guarding a distillery in the direction of Culloden (scene of the Jacobite battle and Scots defeat) we drove out in a little Ford vehicle (about 9/10 h.p.) and were approaching a crossroads, there were no lights and it seemed to be our right of way, but I noticed a small van approaching from our right, our driver obviously expected the van to slow up or halt but it did neither so that it came across our path and we struck it with a sharp blow on its tail end. The van driver seemed to be thrown out whilst I was thrown forward, sustaining a sharp blow on the head from the clasp by which the windscreen was adjusted. I was stunned momentarily, but shortly afterwards both I and my driver alighted and obtained details from the van driver. I told the van driver to 'phone Fort George to report the accident, but to indicate that we could continue our journey; this we did and later returned to the Fort.

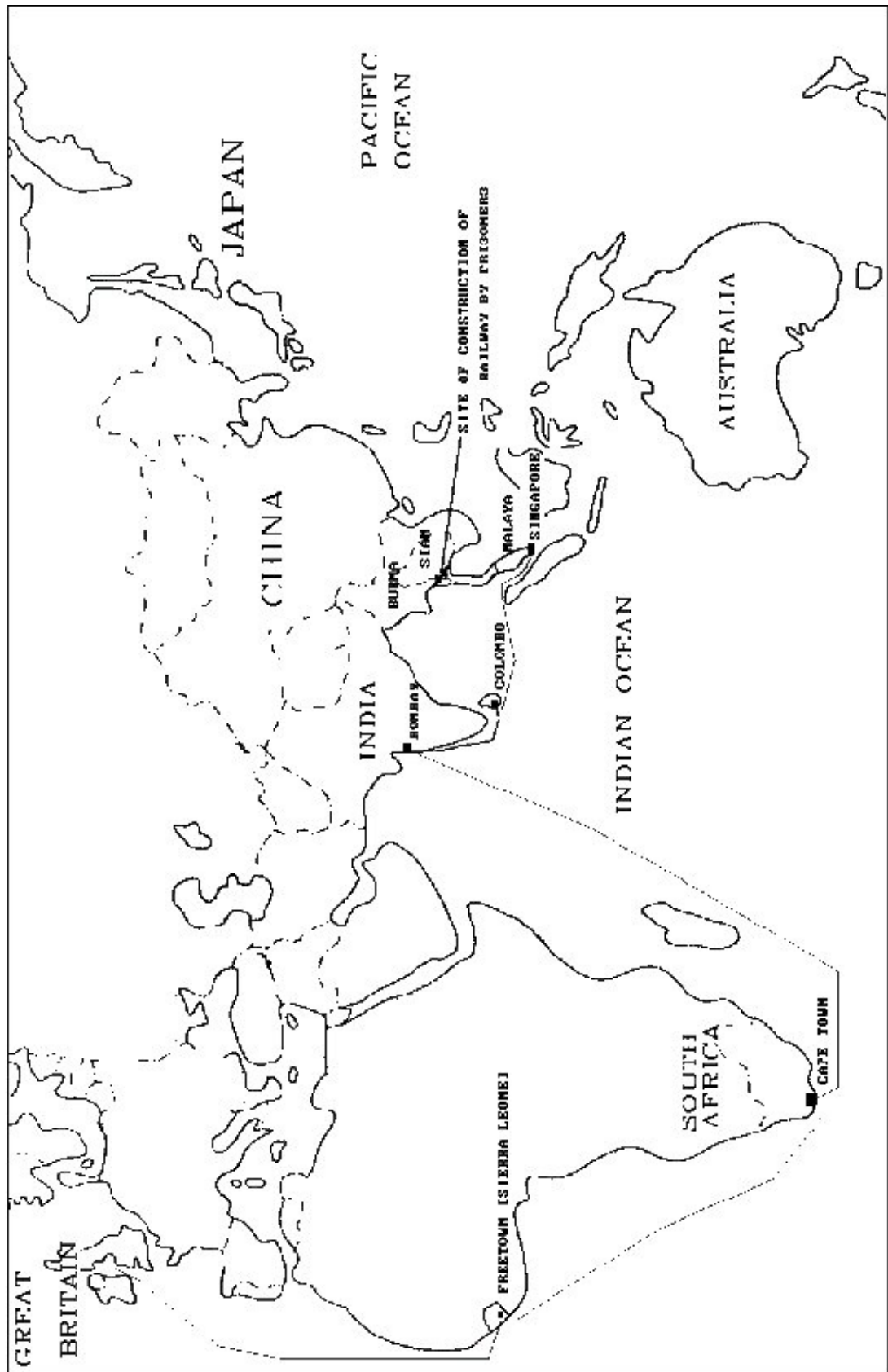
The driver of the van was later prosecuted and our driver and myself attended the court at Nairn for the hearing of the case and to give evidence. Only a day or two before my court appearance I had been summoned to see the new Commandant at Fort George he seemed embarrassed at my situation and, I thought, his own and he told me briefly that confirmation of his predecessors recommendation had now been received from the Scottish Command in Perth and that I was to proceed to London, where I lived, in two days time and where I would receive further instructions.

When I went to the court at Nairn I was in full uniform as a Second Lieutenant and, although I had doubts myself, the van driver was convicted of driving carelessly and fined about £2. This implied that our driver was free of blame and he was in high fettle having avoided loss of rank and possible responsibility for the damage done to the army car. The judge at the Scottish Court, who learned from my evidence that I had some knowledge of English law, sent a message asking me to join him in his room where we each partook of a small glass of his national drink. He shook my hand and on learning that I was leaving Scotland, wished me well. Little did he know of the circumstances leading to my departure and I wondered ruefully how much weight he might have set by my evidence had all my recent history been known to him.

As it was I thought our driver a fortunate man because he had been travelling a little fast on a downward slope and had not slowed at the crossing. Nor had the lawyer acting for the van driver brought out the point (which I had in mind) that the army vehicle was camouflaged and consequently less noticeable to the eye of the van driver, who had my sympathy.

Leaving Fort George I took the train as far as Perth where it proved there would be quite a wait before the London train was due to leave. I was still garbed as an Officer so was permitted entry to the Station Hotel which at that time was occupied by Scottish Command Headquarters. The tables in the dining room were fairly full and I found myself joining a tartan clad figure whose shoulder lapels indicated that he was a Brigadier. We talked of the war in general terms each avoiding - in my case most deliberately - enquiries as to the role in which the other might be serving, for by then the services had become security conscious even with others in uniform. But I enjoyed my meal in the presence of my companion and his treatment of me as an equal consoled me that, as I had always thought, most Scots Officers were by nature gentlemen, even though I had come to think that there were one or two exceptions farther north.

So, as my train pulled slowly into Kings Cross it was, as far as I was concerned in the knowledge that one war chapter had come to an end for me, another chapter, obscure and full of uncertainty, was about to begin.



SEA CROSSING: LIVERPOOL TO SINGAPORE

JOURNEY TO SINGAPORE

CHAPTER 2

"SLOW BOAT TO CHANGI"

July 1940 - September 1940

Liverpool - Sierra Leone - South Africa - Bombay

Singapore

My mother, widowed just before my birth, was much distressed to hear my account of events - she passed the news to her elder brother who had helped and advised me in the past; he was extremely irate and urged me to allow him to carry the facts of my case to persons in high places who were known to him. He had himself a fine record in the 1914/1918 war and had sent me to his own tailors in London to have my uniform made. But I told him that I did not wish to appeal elsewhere, even if it were open to me to do so as it seemed to me that, even if my case were supported, the stigma would remain and that I could never be happy serving as a Seaforth Officer or even in a similar capacity in some other regiment.

I had a letter requesting me to go to London for an interview where to my astonishment and, indeed amusement, a solemn faced Officer informed me that it was much regretted that my temporary commission was not to be confirmed but that, as if as a grand consolation prize, I might be enlisted into any regiment in the army which I might choose to select but with, of course, the rank of 'Private'. So I asked to go to the London Scottish but even this request was regretfully refused since this being a territorial regiment its battalions were as yet at full strength. But the 'London Scottish' it was explained to me were sister to and part of the 'Gordon Highlanders'. Would I like to go to that distinguished Unit? Well, my father had been married in the Gordon kilt and his mother (my grandmother) was herself a Gordon and said to be related not too distantly to the Duke of that name, so I said "Yes - that would be alright" and once again - for I had been sworn in before my training in Colchester - I completed the forms and took the oath of allegiance to the sovereign, receiving a florin in return, and was told to depart and that shortly I would receive instructions from Aberdeen where it appeared the training establishment of the Gordons was situated.

Thus in mid July 1940, having just attained the age of 26, I found myself No 2888645 Private Melville J. with a railway warrant to travel from London to Aberdeen from which station I was transported to the Gordon Barracks then situated at the far end of King Street by the Bridge of Don. Even less friendly, I thought, than Fort George and

though close to the sea in a far less beautiful part of the country, though I knew that not so far to the west lay the beauty and splendour of Royal Deeside.

My companions on arrival were all raw recruits, straight out of civilian life resenting their call to the colours, hating most of what they saw and suspicious of everything they were expected to do. Most noticeable among the dissenters and most strongly critical was a tall thin asthenic looking man of around 30 whose name was Wallace. I listened with amusement to his comments on the quality of the food which he had been offered, the clothing he had been invited to wear and of the palliasses (the last syllable he pronounced long) which were to serve as mattresses and which we were invited to fill with straw. Soon the very plainly furnished hut was visited first by a Sergeant who, whilst appearing to welcome newcomers, made it apparent that he viewed them with great contempt. Later a C.S.M. appeared less obtrusively and calling my name told me that I was to go on leave immediately preparatory to sailing with a draft going to the East.

I soon gathered that this meant Singapore where the 2nd Battalion of the regiment was located, and not Egypt. The Sergeant Major who, despite his Aberdeen accent, spoke in the clear clipped tones to which I was later to become well accustomed, appeared to be aware that I was fully trained and after a few words said to me "You don't have to go. I wonder you don't put in for a commission." I resisted the temptation to tell him all that had befallen me but simply thanked him and said that I would consider his suggestion! He asked me about inoculations and I told him that I had had both T.A.B. (Typhoid) injections and been re-vaccinated. I was next issued with a new (white) kit bag which I was told was for the purpose of the voyage and I received yet another warrant for a journey back to my home where I was told I was granted leave for seven days.

In the train as far as Edinburgh my companion turned out to be one George Roberts then a Lance Corporal and who, it seemed, had played at full-back in the Scots Rugby team as well as having a very low golf handicap. I liked him and I think the feeling was mutual - but he was indignant that so short a period of leave had been given to those who were being drafted overseas and he hinted that he for one might not return to Aberdeen by the date which authority had fixed.

For myself, I would gladly have stayed in Aberdeen having so recently been back to London and seen my relatives and friends, but it gave me the opportunity to tell them

what was to happen and to say my final farewells. London was seething with uncertainty, though braced by the stirring speeches of Winston Churchill. But it was evident that the air offensive against us would not be much longer delayed and I remained worried for the safety of my mother and aunt. But my brother was still nominally in a reserved occupation with the police and at least for the time could keep his eye on them. So, though with sadness and wondering how long might elapse before our next meeting, we parted and soon I was once more entrained for Scotland.

Back at the Bridge of Don I was quickly informed that 'the draft' as we were all described (a chilly expression even in July) were temporarily accommodated in some huts beyond the more permanent quarters and there I was able to inspect, largely for the first time, those who were soon to be leaving with me. There was a Lance Sergeant named Burnett who seemed to me both sound, efficient and not unkindly. Under him was a Corporal Watt who was a rougher character than his senior, but fair enough though I felt that he viewed me as an intellectual reject who somehow had been wished on to - and indeed into - the Gordons without their prior agreement and so far as he, anyway, was concerned - a rookie! There was a number of Officers who would be with us in whom I recognised the same wary look which had been visible in the eye of my erstwhile fellow companions on arrival at Fort George. They were a little excited and jumpy and their smart uniforms betrayed by the freshness of their condition that they were not of long service. The senior of them was Lt. Chayter who clearly was going to lean on the experienced Sgt. Burnett when we got on our way.

But some days were to elapse before the Sunday when we were apparently due to depart. Indeed some delay was necessary if only to complete our numbers since many of those due to have returned from their leave were still 'missing' - amongst them George Roberts. Several days were to pass before they all re-appeared and on arrival they were duly charged with being AWL (absent without leave) and just before our final departure Lt. Col. Norman, who at that time commanded the Regimental Depot of the Gordons, spent a busy morning dealing with those who had returned late from their leave. In most cases by the imposing of fines, but in others (such as George Roberts) by depriving them of their rank. It was rumoured that Col. Norman had felt some sympathy for these offenders, some of whom had but lately returned home from France via Dunkirk (in one case by sliding down the cliffs near St. Valerie with the aid of extended coils of barbed wire). Certainly the punishments given were light in all cases and in the case of George Roberts no punishment at all since he would in any event not have retained his stripe after our arrival in Singapore.

For those of us who had returned punctually there was little to do while we waited for word to leave save for drawing oddments of tropical kit, much of which seemed to be of grotesque design and was in fact to be rejected as obsolete when we eventually reached Singapore where replacements were obtained at our own personal expense! But one incident occurred at this time which was destined to influence greatly my mode of life both before and during the voyage ahead of us. In sewing on to a shirt a button which I had found to be missing, I endeavoured to break a strand of 'army issue' thread by a quick jerk between my hands, I failed and in so doing inflicted a small though fairly deep wound in the little finger of my right hand. There was no bleeding that I recall and I thought little of it, but within twenty-four hours the wound had become painful. The blankets we had been given were reputed to have come back from the B.E.F.⁴ and were far from clean - probably it was from one of these that my finger became infected and its condition became gradually worse. By the morning of our departure I was sufficiently worried as to look for medical aid, but this is difficult to obtain on a Sunday when a soldier is never (officially) recognised as capable of becoming ill. However, a kindly medical orderly on hearing that I was due to leave with the draft going east that day, provided me with some ointment and a bandage so that feeling slightly more comfortable, though still in great pain, I joined our party on the long march to the station down King Street and along Union Street behind the pipe band from the Depot as it played traditional "Long have we been altogether" and other pipe music which seemed to help us along the road, but from which I was in no state to find enjoyment, although I have always been devoted to the pipes. But we reached the station at last and the train having arrived with ample space, I was able, having shed my not inconsiderable kit and weapons to stretch out on a seat during the journey to Liverpool. There we were taken to a large warehouse style building which it seemed from its unpleasant flavour had been used in the past to store meat or even as an abattoir.

My hand was very painful and I could feel the inflammation beginning to creep up my arm so, having dumped my kit and stacked my rifle, I saw Sergeant Burnett who referred me to the R.A.M.C.⁵ Corporal who was with us. He told me that their equipment was all packed and not liking the look of my hand suggested I should make my way to the Liverpool Infirmary for treatment. It was by this time dark and with a strict blackout in force. I was eventually onto a trolley bus which dropped me close to

⁴B.E.F. = British Expeditionary Force

⁵R.A.M.C. = Royal Army Medical Corps

the hospital, the Casualty department received me without comment and, after some waiting, I was examined and had my finger dressed by a kindly sister. This was before the days of anti-biotics and penicillin and in addition to covering the finger, which was very swollen, my right arm was bandaged to the shoulder after my arm had been smeared with a black substance resembling iodine. The doctor directed that I return early next day for the finger to be further inspected after I had explained that very soon we were to join a boat to go overseas. Returning to our billet I found my companions full of complaint as to the quarters, but I had managed to obtain a meal in a Liverpool café where the surroundings were in contrast to those of the squalid building in which we were quartered and somehow - despite the smell of stale meat - I managed to obtain a fair nights rest. Next morning I made my way back to the Infirmary - more quickly in daylight - and the dressings were replaced. I then had a splendid breakfast and also managed to find a telephone to get through to my home to convey that soon I would be off and that this was really goodbye!

Early in the afternoon we left our quarters for the dockside and, after the customary delays which the army always contrives to inflict, our main baggage left us to be stowed away whilst its owners ascended the gangway of what we were to become aware was the ⁶S.S. Batory a Polish passenger ship of about 18,000 tons - normal home port Gdynia - but after the outbreak of war converted into a troopship. She had a Polish Captain, Officers and crew but for the troops who travelled there was a Lt. Colonel Commandant and his Captain Adjutant and all troops travelling were under their command for the duration of the voyage.

Those journeying on this occasion consisted of detachments from the Manchester Regiment, the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders and the Gordons, each of roughly equal size, but with a varying number of Officers and N.C.O.⁷'s. Travelling with us were some three hundred child evacuees with sundry adult escorts (almost entirely female) bound for Australia so that the vessel was well laden; perhaps, as events were to prove, rather beyond its capacity.

Our sleeping quarters were in the aft saloon, well above the water-line, in which bunks had been erected with only narrow gangways separating each tier and with little space for even the kit which had been left with us for the voyage. The blackout

⁶S.S. = Steam Ship

⁷Non commissioned officers

arrangements were improvised so that by preventing the escape of light the authorities had restricted our means of ventilation almost to nil.

We left early on the evening of July 6th and, with the sun dropping slowly ahead of us, made our way slowly out to sea where our convoy was being gathered together. Apparently at that moment there were two large convoys being assembled, one slow and the other quite fast, we were to join the second of these, but it transpired that amongst the splendid array of vessels in our company we were the slowest and from the moment that we were gathered all together and set off, our Polish Captain was always having difficulty to maintain speed so as to keep station as directed by the Commodore, assisted by the cruiser H.M.S. Cornwall which stayed with us until we reached Capetown. There were also one or two destroyers to be seen on the first day or two out from Liverpool.

Our convoy travelled westwards for at least two days into the north Atlantic and, although it was still summertime, the fact that we were being pushed along at two or three knots faster than would normally have been the case meant that from the first day out we rolled and pitched quite heavily and this produced a reaction for me in two quite different directions. The first concerned my hand which remained swollen and very painful, although the spread of the infection into my arm seemed to have been checked. I saw the R.A.M.C. Sergeant on the first morning at sea and though he told me they were still unpacked and that their location in the ship had still to be settled, he took me to the Medical Officer. Later I was told I was to see the ship's doctor who was of course Polish and grim-faced, he looked at my hand and spoke to our doctor who told me it was proposed to open the finger by "lancing it". The ship was rolling with a regular motion and also pitching a little so that it was difficult to stand still in the doctor's cabin, where there was insufficient space and no facilities for him to do what he intended with myself seated. But he seemed unconcerned and took an ugly looking scalpel from the sterilising vessel; there was to be no anaesthetic but I was invited to hold the arm of the R.A.M.C. Sergeant who, in turn, took hold of a support post standing towards the centre of the cabin. Having thus 'formed up' the 'Operation' proceeded with the doctor making thrusts at my finger as the movement of the ship permitted, that I found this alarming is to understate the position, it was also very painful but after some minutes the doctor seemed to be satisfied that he had penetrated my flesh to a sufficient depth to encourage a discharge of the puss which was the cause of the swelling and inflammation and so, after the application of further ointment, the usual lint and bandage were applied and, with my hand in a sling, I was allowed, with

some relief, to depart.

The other effect of the heavy sea was upon the passengers, civilian and military alike, the worst sufferers by far being the child evacuees whose ages ranged from around 8 up to about 16. Their plight was made worse because their escorts, almost to a man (or more precisely 'a woman') were confined to their cabins so that their charges, who had no separate cabins, were in a sorry state and it was left to those of the military passengers who were unaffected by the conditions (or to a lesser degree) to minister to them as best they could.

Authority in its wisdom when it despatched the children had decreed that each should, as they had to do at home, carry a civilian respirator. It was fortunate, I believe, that these never had to be put to any real test for I had never had much faith in their capabilities. Certainly the children with or without authority had very quickly laid aside (they may have gone overboard) the contents of the small cardboard boxes which had served as containers for the masks and these containers were found, in the emergency confronting the children and ourselves, to have perhaps for the first time a practical value for their possessions. Poor kids, they did suffer, but with so little complaint and so much gratitude for what little could be done to aid their distress.

No doubt since leaving their families they had been home-sick and this might have continued and perhaps worsened. But for the moment in their extremity they forgot their homes, but they certainly were sick!

When the worse was over and we had time to look around, we became more fully aware of the identity of the other ships travelling with us (really we were rather privileged to be travelling with them!). There was the Empress of Britain - next to the two "Queens" in size amongst our ocean going liners - the Empress of Japan, the Andes (not long in service, swift and beautiful to look upon even in field grey), Monarch of Bermuda, the Stratheden - two or three others whose names I do not now recall. All looked enormous and seemed to me a sitting target for the many German submarines at sea in those waters. But, had I but realised it, our speed was our greatest protection and until much later after we had reached the Indian Ocean there were no hostile incidents so far as I was aware.

My hand, which healed slowly, was the means of excusing me such guard and other duties as were required of us so that my time was mostly occupied in reading and in

walking many hundreds of times through the length of such deck space as was available to us so as to keep reasonably fit and as an antidote to boredom. We were able to judge from the situation of the sun that for several days we had travelled almost due west, but then we observed a shift to the south and later still for about two days we sailed towards the east. After about two weeks we saw land and soon arrived at Freetown.

This was my first glimpse of tropical conditions and the lush greenness of the vegetation and intense sultry heat made one understand readily how Sierra Leone had come to be named "The White Man's Grave". Fortunately we stayed only one night and were off again - first westwards and then south again and we began to feel that such dangers as might lurk below, or even above, the surface of the sea were slowly receding from us. Not that we forgot the war for one moment since the German bombardment of our airfields at home had begun almost immediately after our departure and the bulletins on the ships notice board told us of enemy planes shot down, but left us to guess what planes of ours might have been lost and damage done. The Polish Officers and crew were however exultant at the news of heroic deeds performed by their compatriots who had joined in the battle.

Occasional concerts were held in the Dining Saloon and after one of these the organisers announced that there would be a competition for the best play written by someone on the ship. I had been thought at one time to have some talent for writing but involvement with the law from the time of my leaving school until the war had filled my mind with the prosy structure and outlook of a lawyer, but with little else but the sea and the ships in our company to contemplate (though the occasional school of porpoises was fun) I thought I would have a go despite some difficulty in writing. Having a topical theme as a plot I found that developing this and the characters came very easily and the whole thing - one act over about 20 minutes - was soon complete and a friend, with whom I had struck up an acquaintance, made a fair copy.

By now we were throbbing on towards Capetown where we gathered the convoy would split up. Our ship was clearly having to strain hard to keep up with the much more powerful vessels in the convoy and we heard that our anti-mine equipment had been damaged, but we did not - indeed could not in safety - halt and eventually the magnificent bay on which Capetown stands came into view. We first approached at night and the lights all fully visible were in sharp contrast to the blacked-out conditions at home to which we had become accustomed.

At dawn we made our way closer in with the group of hills which are the close companions of Table Mountain forming a magnificent background to the city. My first recollections of our arrival are of great quantities of luscious oranges⁸, supplies of which had long since run out on the journey we had so far made, and packets of C to C cigarettes which had a dry and not over attractive flavour but which were extremely cheap.

We were soon allowed ashore and made many friends in the city who entertained us and showed us places of interest. They pointed out what I was told constituted the 'native quarter' where it was unsafe for white persons to go about after dark. I remember expressing surprise but even then the tendency of the white and Afrikaans population was to keep the coloured population at a distance whilst using them as a labour force and it seemed to me an uneasy, and indeed dangerous, way of life.

Repairs to the Batory kept us at Capetown for just over a week, during which time all the other vessels which had previously combined our convoy, with the exception of the Stratheden, had continued on their way and no doubt in any event a division would have taken place at Capetown, so there were only two vessels with an escort vessel when we eventually left and together made the journey across the Indian Ocean to Bombay. My hand was now better and I was therefore considered fit to perform the guard duties and other small tasks around the ship which hitherto I had been excused.

I learned that my play had been considered the best of the entries received for the competition and would be performed at the next concert. It seemed to be well received and I was congratulated by several of the senior officers on board and the ship's Adjutant, who seemed understandably to find the tedium of his duties a little frustrating, was kind enough to offer me the use of his cabin if I was inspired to write further but, although thanking him, I did not take up his offer. It was suggested that some tangible reward be given me as a present - but there was a cash alternative and, with Bombay not far distant, I opted to take the money. Not that I was altogether bereft of cash but the rate of pay to which I was entitled was less than that of any other member of our draft, probably less than that of any other soldier on the boat. This was because the army authorities, whilst recognising that the training I had received at

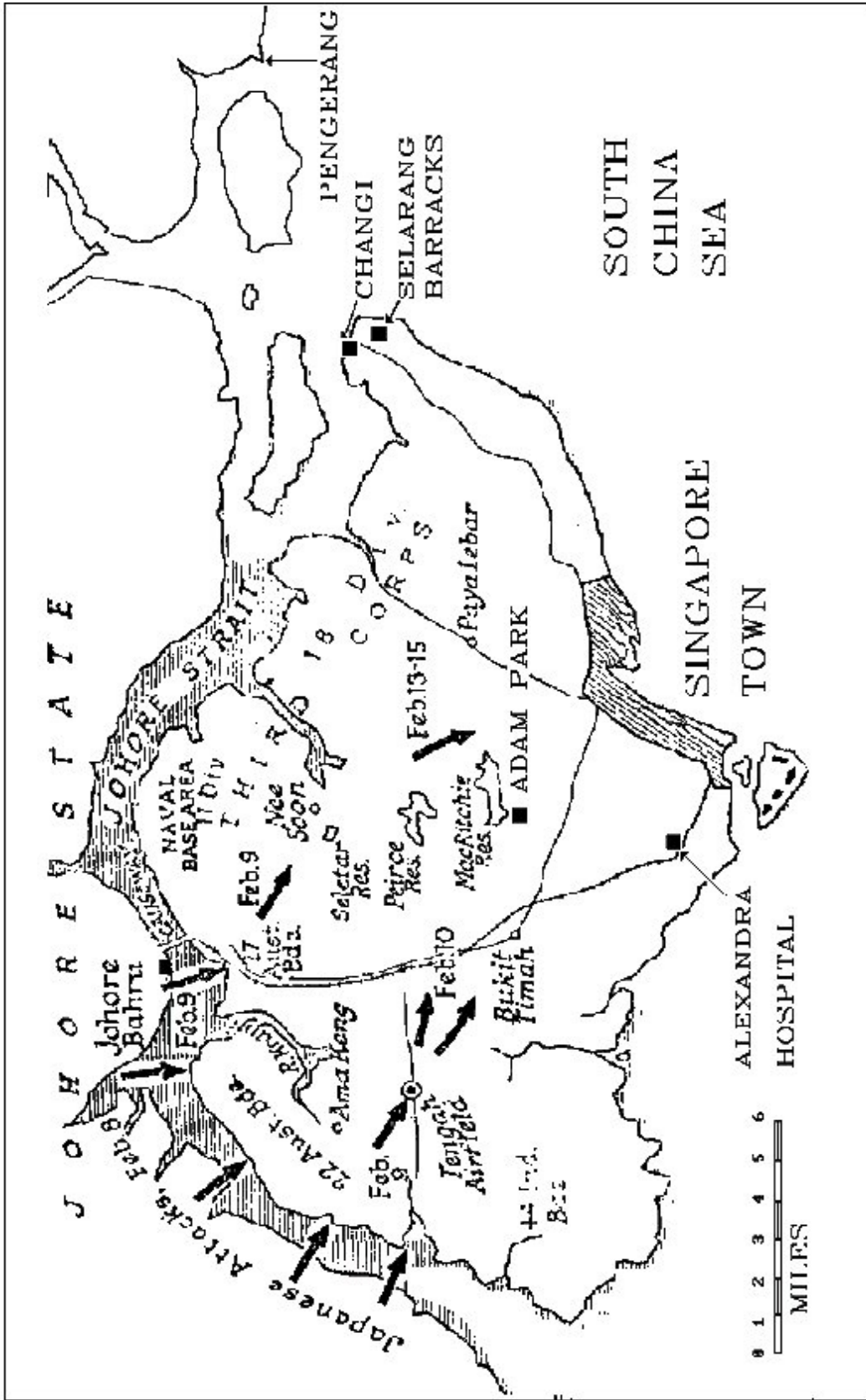
⁸ During the 1970's and 1980's when commonwealth opinion was very hostile towards South Africa, the author was always keen to point out how generous had been the reception given by the South Africans to the troops passing both to and from the Far East.

Colchester made me proficient enough to be sent overseas immediately after enlistment into the Gordons, they refused to pay me the so called "proficiency" pay to which soldiers are entitled after six months and at later stages according to their period of service. Thus throughout my service in Singapore my entitlement fell always below what it should have been and in the period of time I later spent as a prisoner the amount of pay with which I was credited was also reduced. I made representation later to Lt. Colonel Graham about this but he stated (I think quite correctly) that there was no authority for him to make any adjustment to my rate of pay although he indicated that he thought that in this respect at least I was being unfairly penalised.

One night when I was doing a guard duty close to the bridge of the ship it was evident that our speed had risen which set the vessel throbbing and rattling although in the calm waters prevailing there was little movement. I was told that our escort vessel which was an armed auxiliary had word of an enemy raider and at that time we were making speed for the west coast of India before eventually arriving at Bombay.

When we reached that city where we spent several more days, my friend and I feasted off the proceeds of the play writing prize money and made the acquaintance (fortunately for non-official reasons) with the head of the city police from whom we learned how delicate was the situation between the groups of people who inhabit Bombay. Notably of course the division between Hindus and Moslems but also the lesser groups each with its own peculiarities and rivalry. It was a stiflingly hot city seething with people, many living in great poverty. In London there were those who nightly slept on benches along the Thames Embankment, in Bombay every street had its sleeping population and beggars abounded. We sensed that those there who had knowledge of the war in Europe were antagonistic to the Allied cause, but that the majority knew nothing or were quite indifferent. They struggled only to survive.

So we were not sorry to be moving on once more and, after a brief stop at Colombo, to find ourselves in the relatively narrow strait which separates Malaya and Sumatra and its adjoining islands where, with the intense green showing up from the ship at intervals on our way, we were indeed like 'a painted ship upon a painted ocean'. It was I suppose inevitable that after the lapse of nearly ten weeks since we had left Liverpool, our ship should finally dock at this destination in darkness so that our first night in Singapore Island was as hot and disagreeable as any I was afterwards to experience.



SINGAPORE ISLAND

SINGAPORE 1940-1942

CHAPTER 3

BUT THE COCKY WEE GORDON'S THE PRIDE OF THEM A'

October 1940 - December 1941

Singapore Island

We were off the ship and on our way early next day and soon were formed up on the square enclosed by the blocks of buildings which comprised Selarang Barracks⁹. These were to be my home for more than a year to come and it was on that same barrack square in the following year that one of the most callous acts of the Japanese was to be enacted.

In the short time I had spent in Aberdeen and during the long sea journey which had followed I had found little feeling within myself of belonging to the regiment whose cap badge fate had decreed eventually that I should wear, but one had not long been in Changi to realise that here were all the old traditions. Discipline - not now a fashionable word, even in the forces - was maintained rigidly, though without perhaps that measure of compassion which produces affection on the part of the soldier as well as pride.

Many in Selarang had not been home on leave for eight years or so and, as a boxer may become punch drunk, so had many amongst the Gordons lost some of their sense of reality so that life had become a habit and not always a good habit at that.

Singapore Island is a magical place with a climate which, while producing over much heat in the noon day, provides soft warm evenings and plentiful rain to cool the atmosphere and stimulate the lush vegetation which flourishes all round. It had been likened in shape and size to the Isle of Wight but even in 1940 its roadways, save in the heart of the city's native quarter, were much better than those of its Hampshire counterpart but its shores, particularly on the northern and western sides, were thickly covered by mangrove swamp stretching inland in many places for some distance. But it had been developed substantially for commercial purposes round the city and in Changi and Seletar along the north shores by the services and in the ten years or so

⁹Selarang Barracks were situated close to Changi jail on the eastern tip of Singapore island. The incident to which the author refers occurred when the Prisoners of War refused to sign to promise that they would not try to escape and is described at the end of chapter 5.

before our arrival the Naval Base at Seletar had become fully developed and efficient, though we soon learned that it had a capacity for naval vessels far beyond the number of ships now stationed in the Far East.

It seemed to us newly arriving in October 1940 that those who we found there had yet to grasp in any real sense the fact that Great Britain, with the countries of the Empire then supporting it, was facing the greatest crisis in all its history and it did not appear to us that they were being encouraged to do much to prepare for the day when the war crept nearer and perhaps involved them wholly and completely as it was to do not much more than one year later.

At an early stage we listened to a lecture by Major W.D.H. Duke (a supremely efficient Officer then commanding "D" Company) about the defence plans for Malaya. By that time the alignment between Germany, Italy and Japan was an accomplished fact and with the first two now threatening our forces at home and in North Africa, I felt that the turn of Singapore would soon come. So that it was alarming to hear that though some airfields were located in various parts of Malaya, several were uncompleted (or scarcely even begun) and that the number of aircraft available to use them was limited and one surmised that in fact they also simply did not exist. Similarly although Malaya was to be defended along its northern boundaries with a force of some three divisions, only two of these then existed and then only comprised two Brigades instead of three.

Our own task, we were informed, was to defend a small high peaked location in the south east corner of Johore known as Pengerang where a permanent establishment from our battalion were located, split up between a number of camps which were spread around the main peak on which were sited batteries of 6" naval guns. A guard was mounted at all times on the quayside which gave access to these positions and I soon found myself named amongst this guard which was found from our rifle companies in rotation. But I suppose for security reasons we were never told precisely what the role of Pengerang was planned to be but we gathered that it was thought that if the peak fell into enemy hands it would form a magnificent observation post for forces which might attack Singapore from the sea. In fact even if an attacking commander had coveted possession of Pengerang he would have found the natural defences, which the jungle areas round about provided, were a considerable obstacle apart from the naval guns and the presence of our own battalion.

We knew from the moment that Indo China fell in to Japanese hands that if they attacked they would do so through the Malay Peninsula and we now know that General Percival in assessing the position in South East Asia had believed that the attack would come from the north. Therefore it was no surprise to me that all our defences and training with them proved to have been a complete waste - even so, in the third week of January in 1942 when - as it turned out - the fall of Singapore itself was only little more than three weeks away, it was still felt necessary when finally bringing the Gordons into the battle to replace them with a battalion of Indian troops. They in turn were withdrawn but a short time later, cynically one might conclude, in order that they might more conveniently be handed over to the Japanese on the capitulation of Singapore Island on February 15th. But as I have remarked, apart from the knowledge that we had been cast as defenders of Pengerang, if Malaya were attacked day to day affairs in Selarang still continued in October 1940 and onwards for another year as they had done in the period before September 1939 with a pipe band which sounded full ceremonial Reveille at least once every two weeks and which beat retreat weekly in the cool of the evening and in the presence, normally, of our Commanding Officer relaxing in cool tropical civilian attire and raising his felt hat as the parade came to its conclusion. Lt. Col. W.J. Graham was his name, and he was in my opinion an excellent officer. He held an M.C.¹⁰ from the 1914/18 war, and if strict with the control which he exercised and the discipline he enforced, he was held in high regard - perhaps even affection by the great body of those serving under him.

Amongst the multitude of errors and misfortunes which were occurring in Singapore after December 1941 was the decision by authority on the Island - or in India or far away London - that at the end of December Col. Graham should be appointed to command the island state of Penang up on the north west coast of Malaya. Not only did this transfer take place but a few days relatively before the battalion, which he knew (and which knew him) was to be cast into the battle, but he himself was to reach Penang to find it evacuated and in chaos so that he was powerless even to prevent the loss of such valuable shipping which was to participate vitally (in the hands of the Japanese) in the running battle which took place down the western coast road of Malaya before the final evacuation across the causeway on to Singapore Island itself.

I had been offered the opportunity of promotion not long after arriving in Malaya but having been rejected in Scotland to hold command with commissioned rank, I had

¹⁰M.C. = Military Cross

little inclination to begin a slow climb up from the ranks of a regular infantry battalion in which all promotion was governed strictly by seniority, so a simple private I remained. George Roberts who had been posted to a different company from myself but whose prowess as a rugby footballer and golfer soon brought him into the limelight, was sent off to an Officers Training Unit not far away whence he emerged as a subaltern before the Japanese begun their attack in December 1941 - but we were to see more of one another after we became prisoners.

The Company Sergeant Major of 'C' Company - one Randall Scott - who had been an instructor in the late thirties with the London Scottish in London, was a small man but very alert and spruce in his appearance, a good disciplinarian but by no means devoid of humour. The Clerk in the Company Office at 'C' Company (an Englishman) had applied for a clerical position in another part of Malaya which had become available and to which he was appointed. Somewhat to my surprise C.S.M.¹¹ Scott offered the position to me. It meant no change of rank or increase in pay but it undoubtedly brought me into closer contact with events and with the affairs of the Company. Working closely with those holding command of the company and indirectly with those commanding the battalion itself, I was able to judge the future of Malaya directly rather than from what one read in the Straits Times or perhaps heard over what passed as a radio system. I gradually became in possession of information contained in Army Command Instructions which drifted in from home at intervals and also gained a knowledge in some detail of what our role was to be in the event (always seeming to me to become more inevitable) of a war with Japan. As a result I felt that I had now been given at least a very small part in the tragedy which I felt was very soon to be enacted.

Our battalion had a visit from Duff-Cooper after his appointment as Minister in Malaya, which was uneventful except that he asked the pipe band to perform the "Skye Boat Song" and for some reason, perhaps to meet his wishes, the performance was done in 'quick-time', whereas that very well known piece of pipe music is invariably played as a slow march. The result was a shambles, both as a musical performance and as a demonstration of marching in any time!. This incident apart, my faith was perhaps unjustifiably diminished in this able politician who suffered, perhaps more than he gained, from being the husband of a notable beauty. But although the call made upon the Gordons at Selarang by Duff-Cooper can have told him little, I feel sure that as a

¹¹C.S.M. = Company sergeant major

former First Lord of the Admiralty he would have verified the naval situation in the whole area of South East Asia and also the extent of the air and military preparations. He must have realised that the air resources were ludicrously inadequate and the sending of two battleships (with it had been intended an air craft carrier) was recognition in itself of our weakness at sea, since the force sent was really a token by comparison with the known strength of the Japanese forces.

How far Duff-Cooper may have felt the land forces fell short of our real needs is less certain since in my view our own commanders misjudged the ability of the Japs to move large military forces through the sort of country found in the Malay Peninsula and to make any use of tanks, but he does not seem to have conveyed any uncertainties he may have felt to Churchill and the War Council.

Probably by the time he arrived it was too late to turn Singapore into the fortress which Churchill (and perhaps others - though not the Japs) thought it to be but I am surprised that he did not sense the dangers - which the lack of fixed defences in the north of the island created for those who later were going to have to try to defend it - and report his misgivings to Churchill.

Then there was a lone visit (so far as we were concerned) from a Thai Mission which, viewed in retrospect, must have been trying to assess our capability to resist aggression from the north. We were able to show them nothing which had not been available and in our possession for a long time. As a unit we were, in my view, fit, efficient and, generally speaking, healthy, but even a year after the arrival of my draft of soldiers in 1940 there were still gaps in the armoury of weapons at our disposal.

Last and most distinguished of our visitors around October 1941 was General Wavell. This was, I think, very soon after his appointment to the S.E. Asia Command which took in Burma and Malaya as well as the Dutch East Indies. Most of us had viewed his appointment with satisfaction but it seemed to me that authority had, in nominating him, woken up too late to the fact that war in the Far East had become inevitable and that someone of stature was needed to form an appreciation of the military situation (in particular) and to give the members of the War Council an up to date assessment of the position. It has been said long afterwards, and after General Wavell was dead, that he was a tired man at the time of his appointment and that this was therefore a mistake. It has even been suggested that General Auchinleck would have been a better choice, but I seem to recall that in Tripoli he failed where Wavell had succeeded with less

resources.

On the day that Wavell visited Selarang he was accompanied by Major Keith Simmons who commanded Singapore Garrison Troops (which included our battalion) and there were other 'top brass' in the quite large party which I saw arrive and congregate in one corner of the quite large barracks square in Selarang. It was about mid-day and in the customary heat I was seated in the 'C' Company office, dressed only in shirt and slacks, but able to see through the wide open doorway the arrival of our distinguished visitors of whose visit we had been informed in advance. At the same moment, almost as they came into my view, I could see approaching from the opposite side of the square and returning from exercises away from the barracks, one of our companies which proceeded to halt to my left and there was every indication that the company was about to be dismissed though its commander was apparently unaware of the presence of our distinguished visitors. For a moment I considered rushing out so as to give warning of the situation but, since to appear on the square beltless and uncovered was itself an offence, I hesitated. Before I could reach a decision I could hear the voice of Col. Graham calling the name of the company commander. He, poor man, realising too late the situation then crossed the square to request Wavell's consent to his dismissing the parade. No doubt this was readily forthcoming but, alas for the company commander concerned, before that day was out he found himself deprived of his command. He, with the rest of us, later went into captivity where he behaved with great courage when threatened with execution by the sword of the hands of a Japanese Officer in a camp from up on the Siam Burma Railway. I am happy to say that he survived that ordeal and served on in the regiment after his return.

When Wavell was appointed to the ABDA¹² command, it was too late for the many deficiencies to be made good and whilst it has been said by recent historians that his final order of the day to the Singapore defenders was divorced from reality and that many unit commands failed to pass it on to those serving under them, it is my opinion that despite the expression by Winston Churchill in his memoirs of his surprise as to the weakness of Singapore, it was appreciated by the War Council that the prospects of the island being held for very long were bleak and its fall cannot really have surprised anyone who knew the facts and this, surely, included Churchill himself.

All through 1941 there were political events which seemed to me to bring the advent

¹²ABDA = American-British-Dutch-Australian

of war to Singapore closer. Continuing pressure on Japan in trading activities ostensibly in support of Chang Kai Shek, although the Americans and ourselves took it for granted that unless there was open intervention by America (and we being wholly and desperately engaged with Germany and Italy) Japan would remain in China and tighten her grip on it. She took Indo China and was poised almost within yards of Hong Kong whilst we knew that she had a vast navy ready to be deployed and that although we had our naval base in Singapore, it was empty of capital ships, carriers or even lighter vessels.

But the Gordons continued to guard Pengerang (though as I have indicated this in my view was totally wasteful) and as the clouds gathered to the north we watched the trickling arrival of reinforcements from Australia and from India and we welcomed two further small drafts of reinforcements to our own battalion, the first of which included my Aberdeen acquaintance "Nellie Wallace". He managed almost immediately he arrived to make his presence felt by expressing criticism of the defences of Singapore and also of the role for which the Gordons had been cast in that connection. Wallace had at least been in the United Kingdom during the Battle of Britain and had had training in Aberdeen in methods of modern warfare adopted in Europe and whilst clearly local tropical conditions would show differences, he had become accustomed to thinking in terms of all round defence and of mobility in attack and, therefore, he considered the static defences to be quite inadequate. But needless to say no one took the slightest notice of Wallace's views and he was regarded just as an eccentric conscript.

In June 1941 our company with another from the Gordons spent about one month in the area of ¹³Muar doing manoeuvres and exercises. This town is in the extreme north of Johore, close to the sea coast and on the main road leading north to Negri Sembilan and the States beyond. The country thereabouts contains rubber estates interspersed with quite thick undergrowth with mangrove swamp at most points along the coastline. It was here that the Australians fought gallantly to hold the advancing Japanese in January 1942 being eventually outflanked by forces using boats procured further north, many from Penang¹⁴. This was country which would have been difficult to defend in any circumstances, but with the superiority of the Japanese over our forces in the air as

¹³Muar is shown in the map illustrating the invasion of Malaya in the introduction.

¹⁴This is described in *The Naked Island* by Russell Braddon.

well as by water, at that time, the amount of resistance mustered by the Australians was, in my view, remarkable. But these were, in October 1941, events still to come.

When it was announced in Singapore that the Americans and ourselves were to freeze Japanese assets in territories under our control, it seemed to me that, from being a probability, war had now become inevitable. Nevertheless, a grand fair was held in Changi on the cricket ground on which I had by this time played in many matches for our battalion. There were exhibits and a prize was given for the stall making the largest sum of money for the charitable funds on whose behalf the fete had been organised. To our surprise, and to the disgust of others competing, my own company were declared the winners. There was a cash prize and when the members of 'C' Company learned that this was to be devoted to the purchase of a typewriter for my use, their fury knew no bounds.

I was to have little use of the new typewriter when it was delivered for within a week or two we received orders to take up our battle stations on Pengerang. This was in the third week of November and the announcement had been made that naval reinforcements were on their way and we learned that the Prime Minister had stated that if Japan attacked the United States a British declaration of war would follow 'within the hour'. This from the man who later in his memoirs was to tell of his horror on being told of the lack of preparedness in Singapore and that the latter was not (as he had apparently believed) a fortress, it being, as he so colourfully remarked, as though one were to discover that a battleship had no bottom. But was Churchill really so ignorant of the position at that time? Clearly he would have been preoccupied since becoming Prime Minister with the air battle in its various phases, with the fight to maintain a foothold in Egypt and with the more recent distraction created by the attack which Hitler had launched against Russia.

But had not Churchill been made First Lord of the Admiralty on the outbreak of war in 1939 and could he not - should he not - have become aware of the absence of strength in all fields, both in Singapore and Malaya? Churchill made no secret of his delight that with the simultaneous attack on Malaya, Pearl Harbour and the Phillipines by Japan had come at last an open declaration of war by Germany and Italy against the U.S. and the knowledge that from that time on the Allies were to be joined by the might of America, seemed to make the sacrifice of our outposts in South East Asia - even of Singapore - acceptable within the global strategy whereby in the fullness of time Hitler and later Japan were to be defeated.

Just before the final climax of events in Malaya was reached, we had taken into our midst elements from amongst one or two of the battalions of Australians who had arrived in Singapore. In our case they were from Queensland and many friendships were developed which may even have been maintained during the years since hostilities ended. We entertained their 'other ranks' and at least one dance was held in our Sergeants Mess in honour of these newcomers. Alas, it was to have a sad outcome in which I was later to be involved in a minor way. The bar catering arrangements in the Sergeants Mess were (on a roster basis) in the charge of one of its members and the officer on duty on the night of the dance was Sgt. Gray from my own company. He was in fact a Lance Sgt., i.e. his rank had not been confirmed and substantiated, but although not, I think, immensely popular I had always kept on quite good terms with him.

the night of the dance it seemed that the usual fairly heavy quantity of drink had been consumed, though in the tropical heat this was quite common and did not normally result in any incidents, but it seemed that after the dance one or two people, who had already drunk plentifully, lingered behind and the main bar being closed, two or three persons came behind the bar with Sgt. Gray's consent and knowledge, and some further drinking took place. But this did not continue very long and Sgt. Gray who had with him two private soldiers who had been assisting in serving behind the bar, sought to clear the premises so as to close them for the night. There is no doubt that Gray had been drinking as had an Australian Sergeant who was one of these who had come behind the bar. But when asked to leave he seemed to have demurred and in the event some violence was used to remove him, but eventually he was ejected. The Bar and Sergeants' Mess were then closed and all left, but the Australian Sergeant was still in the building and afterwards it transpired that he was injured and, either then or later, became unconscious. Next morning he was found still on the verandah in a pool of blood and although taken to hospital died soon afterwards.

Needless to say the event caused a sensation in the barracks and wild rumours soon spread as to what had occurred. The civil authorities had been informed and although they did not, so far as I recall, take Sgt. Gray into their custody, they later charged him with causing the death of the Sergeant by a negligent act. Meanwhile, and before the civil charge had been made, an Inquiry was convened by Col. Graham to investigate the affair.

One well understood the distress and embarrassment which he felt as to what had occurred, involving not only a member of another unit who was at the Gordon barracks

by invitation, but one of those who everyone, and most of all Colonel Graham, had been at pains to make welcome in an effort to consolidate good relations with the Australians. It was even said that Colonel Graham had learnt "Waltzing Matilda" in its (? her) entirety, including the English interpretation!

At the conclusion of the Inquiry Sgt. Gray was placed under arrest and charged with (a) being in bed after Reveille (a ludicrous accusation, bearing in mind that he was a Sergeant) (b) allowing the Sergeants Mess to be used for drinking beyond the hours permitted (c) drinking with private soldiers (also a ridiculous accusation since those assisting in the mess would always have had the opportunity of a drink during and no doubt after a dance was held).

Sergeant Gray was present at the Inquiry, but he was not offered representation and no one was permitted to ask questions of witnesses on his behalf, although Kings Regulations gave him the right. Later the Civil Court dealt with the charge brought against Sergeant Gray which was found not to have been proved. There followed a court martial based on the charges made following the Court of Inquiry to which I have referred and the Sergeant was found guilty on each charge and sentenced to be reduced to the rank of Corporal. This loss of rank was, in itself, less penalising to him than the loss of pay (effective from the date of the offenses) which he had suffered. Corporal Gray knew I had some knowledge of law (and perhaps military law) and asked if I would help him to lodge an appeal. It did not seem to me that there was any conflict with my duties as Clerk of 'C' Company and I drafted a Petition which was signed by Gray and handed to Battalion Headquarters for submission to the Brigadier and eventually to the department of the Judge Advocate General in England. Whether the Petition left Singapore for the U.K. before the Japanese started their offensive in December I do not know, but at the time I was confident that the conviction of Corporal Gray would not be confirmed. Soon after this he applied for and was granted a transfer to the R.A.O.C. and I have never seen him again and do not even know whether he survived captivity under the Japanese.

There were two small troop transports of 2000 tons or so which had, I imagine, been used to take our troops to and from Pengerang ever since it was first occupied as a defence post. It was in one of these vessels that 'C' Company was carried on a day towards the end of November 1941 and as we were halted at the submarine boom which guarded the passageway leading to Seletar, there passed us about four submarines which I afterwards heard were from the Royal Australian Navy. Then we

ourselves made our way through the boom and as we began the quite short run towards the quayside of Pengerang, we saw emerging from the mist ahead (it was still quite early in the day) the shadow of two large vessels and before long we could discern that they were battleships. The newspapers had told of the despatch to Singapore of Prince of Wales and Repulse and we were able to get a clear enough view so as to identify them with their escorting destroyers. Many of those with me had actually travelled with Repulse years before when our battalion had been rushed from Gibraltar to Egypt at a time when that country was having one of its customary crises. They had got to know the ship well and many of its Officers and crew; they cheered as we passed and later good wishes were exchanged officially.

The official plans for the defence of Singapore with which we were involved had become effective with our being ordered to occupy Pengerang in force. It was a clear indication to me and those with information as to those plans that we were being put into an advanced state of alertness, i.e. that the Japanese were on the move. Our encounter during the journey over with the two battleships seemed in this respect symbolic and to confirm that the days of trial for Malaya and Singapore were upon us.

We were soon into December and as we busied ourselves settling the respective platoons in their locations, I understood from C.S.M. Scott that the news was ominous and pointing only one way. Later on in the afternoon of December 6th he informed me that a final warning RED had been received which meant that hostilities had begun or were about to begin. When, after talking to those closest to me in company H.Q. and so many of whom were fated to die in the years that followed, I went to my bed with a feeling of excitement mingled with foreboding.

CHAPTER 4
BATTLE JOINED
December 1941 - February 1942
Singapore Island

I had avoided France and Dunkirk because of my rejection by the Seaforths and this in turn had sent me away from England just as the moment had been reached when she was to be violently attacked and, indeed, my home destroyed for, although only partly damaged by an early bomb in September 1940, it had been considered by the authorities at that time to be too dangerous for habitation and my mother and aunt spent most of the remainder of the war living just out of London¹⁵. But now it seemed that actual war had finally caught up with me and I wondered uneasily how the scrappy forces which we could muster would resist an all out attack by the Japs.

At that time I knew nothing of plans to occupy positions in Thailand if Japan attacked the north but at least I felt that if we had been alerted so many days ahead we could assume that others elsewhere in Malaya were ready to resist the attack whenever it might come. How wrong I was has since been proved. A few hours only were to elapse before my feeling of uncertainty began to grow, for in the early hours of December 7th I was awakened by the rumbling roar of aircraft approaching from the north east. Passing overhead it seemed obvious they were making for Singapore but although I and others, who had also been wakened, were certain that they were Japanese aircraft which had just passed over us bound for Singapore, we neither saw nor heard anything to suggest that guns or planes were offering any resistance. Indeed the city of Singapore was still lighted and bombs reached targets in the centre of the city.

Undoubtedly this raid was no more than a token act of aggression and defiance - the bombs an oriental visiting card left as an indication by the airmen of the impending visit of their army comrades. But the guns of the 3rd Anti-Aircraft Regiment were ready to fire, but no one in Fort Canning was apparently disposed to order an attack until the bombs were already dropping and the planes making their departure.

Of the wicket-keepers who I had seen in Singapore (Ben Barnett of Australia only arrived just before hostilities began) none was smarter or more agile than Col. Hugonin who commanded those guns and who would dearly have loved, I am sure, to catch out

¹⁵Maidenhead close to Reading.

one or two of those planes but the umpires apparently still did not know that play had started! Next morning the world knew that war in the Far East had begun and soon we learned of attacks at Kota Bahru in the north, in Hong Kong and the Phillipines. Gradually news leaked out of the bombing of Pearl Harbour and American losses in their distant and supposed stronghold. America was in the war and Churchill (so he said later) rejoiced. No doubt with an eye to the distant future Churchill was right in this view, but to us in Pengerang the U.S.A. seemed an awful long way away and the Japs had already demonstrated that they were very close. Very soon they were to give the most stunning evidence yet of their presence.

On the evening of the 9th December on my way back from the headquarters of 'A' Company and looking from the high ground across the calm water towards Singapore island, I saw the Prince of Wales and Repulse and their destroyers moving in a north easterly direction up the coast and seeming to keep in quite close to it and I wondered whither they were bound and on what mission. Early next evening our radio sets picked up the voices of Japanese announcers speaking in English, telling us that both these huge capital ships were already at the bottom of the sea. We were unable to believe what we heard but I felt uneasy for at least I knew that the ships had put to sea. Soon our own radio and newspapers confirmed the devastating news.

Up to that time we had felt that the Japanese were gambling against odds and choosing to fight in a country which we knew better than them. But now we knew they had achieved the downfall of twice as many capital ships as the Germans - with all their aircraft - had sunk in more than two years of hostilities. Suddenly the bandy legged little monkeys (as one of our field officers had described them) had become supermen, capable of anything - and so it was to prove! Whatever effect the sinking of the Prince of Wales and Repulse may have had on those then controlling the Malayan war, nothing special seemed to be planned for the Gordons who remained responsible for the defence of their supposed potential observation post against an enemy who it had already become clear was making a frontal attack down the Malay peninsular so that if he ever did attack from the sea he would probably by then have all the observation posts he needed. If so it was certainly kept a close secret in 1941 and in any event, apart from defences on the Siam border, no other strategically planned defences existed beyond those on the island itself which were round the eastern approaches and like Pengerang had become irrelevant to the actual Japanese line of attack although they continued to be manned until two days before the island capitulated.

The laying of mines both against vehicles and personnel continued in December and we sustained casualties (including two dead) from mines which detonated prematurely during this process and just as 1942 began we said goodbye to our Colonel, setting off on his abortive journey up to Penang. Preceded by a piper he walked the rough road from company to company down to the landing stage and I felt that of all the eccentric acts perpetrated by the army in two and a half years since I had first put on uniform, this was the most fatuous. Colonel Graham would have been the first to admit that he was no Ian Hamilton but for all his reputation as a disciplinarian he had a much closer knowledge of our battalion than his successor Colonel Stitt and was respected in a way which Stitt could not hope to emulate in the following weeks which were to prove so critical.

The terrain around Pengerang was typical of Johore with thick jungle interspersed with clearings achieved artificially and in which our camps and battle positions were sited. But our living quarters, constructed originally on ground which had been cleared, had soon become surrounded by undergrowth and small trees in which there was much wildlife. In the first few days after coming across from Changi we killed two large snakes, which I believe were mamba and deadly, but the greatest nuisance to us were the tree rats. They look to all intents and purposes like native English grey squirrels but their diet and habits are different and they are known to carry disease spread by mites which infest their bodies.

Whether from this source or otherwise I was suddenly attacked by a violent fever which left me hot, weak and exhausted. The Medical Officer ordered me to be evacuated to Singapore where I was taken to the Alexandra Military Hospital and put into the fever ward where most of the cases were of malaria. My fever did not subside and each morning when my temperature was taken the needle crept up to 103 degrees or thereabouts and when the fever was at its height the figure went still higher. Even so, the army being the army (some say that illness is officially recognised only when you are either dying or dead!) I was still expected to totter along the ward to the wash basins and lavatories until (fortunately I think for me) the Ward Sister on seeing my temperature chart directed that I remain in bed at all times until further notice. But the fever continued and with it the extraction twice daily from my fingers of blood traces which were tested (it seemed) for malaria, indications of which obstinately failed to appear. This greatly distressed the little grey haired auxiliary nurse whose task it was to take the blood slides and who, knowing how ill I was feeling, never ceased apologising for troubling me to so little apparent purpose. I could eat nothing but, of

course, drank profusely and became exhausted with the continuing fever. But the crisis seemed to pass and when the fever had almost disappeared I was examined one day by a Colonel of the Medical Corps. He told me I had tropical typhus but (as I could have told him) I was now getting better. Had I any marks on my person? I drew his attention to a small spot on my stomach, at which he exclaimed "diagnostic" and promptly moved on, obviously well pleased. But beyond the hospital as I knew from what other patients told me and saw (or gleaned) from the newspapers, events were moving and our troops were in full retreat southwards towards Singapore. Air raids were taking place several times daily and we were told to lie on the floor or were covered by a mattress. But there was no damage done to the hospital, although several times we heard the thud of bombs and saw smoke arising in the distance. The hospital still functioned normally at that time and although I had not been taking food, I could see that the quality had not declined. I was allowed up and to move about and encountered someone from the Gordons who told me that our battalion had been moved up country at short notice and later I learned that they had taken up a position about 50 miles north of Johore Bharu in South Johore from whence they were withdrawing. It was evident that those in command had abandoned any thought of holding on to Malaya and that soon Singapore would be besieged. Even so I learned that an Indian regiment had taken over the Gordons role in Pengerang. So the observation post was to be denied to the Japanese until the bitter end! How frustrating it had been for the Gordons to remain static, remote from the action which had developed from the start of hostilities and to be brought in only at the last moment, with no real role to play. In this respect their fate was similar to that of the Loyals and the Manchesters, both regiments (like the Gordons) comprising regular battalions and part of Singapore Fortress troops left on the sidelines for the International whilst the game was played out by performers most of whom had never seen the pitch before (nor studied a map of it) and who were discovering that rubber trees while providing cover from the Jap aircraft constantly strafing them overhead, were the residence of many millions of red ants of enormous size and with an infinite propensity for biting sheltering soldiers.

We finally learned that all our troops had retired over the causeway, which separates Singapore from Johore on the Malayan mainland. George Elsmie, who commanded 'C' Company and whose clerk I was, had been leading the company in the short action in which they were engaged in Johore but had crossed back on to the island where he developed malaria and I found him one day resting on the verandah of an upper storey ward in the hospital and he gave me details of the engagement and of our casualties

which had been incurred most from aircraft rather than from enemy fire. But we had lost Lt. Russell who had come out with our party in the Batory and was an officer of the highest merit and I was greatly saddened by the news of his death.

Our rearguard had been the last party to cross the causeway and were piped on their way by Argylls, most of their battalion having been left behind in Malaya as prisoners and who later we were to learn had spent an uncomfortable time crowded in the heat of the prison in Kuala Lumpur, where they suffered many more casualties from the appalling conditions in which they were held. George Elsmie told me our battalion were camped in the Changi area resting temporarily and reorganising themselves. He was anxious to rejoin them and when I returned to see him again I found he had obtained his discharge.

By now I had begun to eat again and had been promised beefsteak to help replace some of the weight which I had lost. But the crisis days for Singapore were only just over the horizon. During the first week of February the heavy artillery batteries close to the hospital and known as Buona Vista had been projecting shells at about three minute intervals in the direction of Johore and which it appeared afterwards were intended to prevent the Japanese from repairing that part of the Causeway which had been blown up.

Why, when it was known in late December (certainly by January) that a retreat to the Island was to be made, it had not been thought necessary to blow up the entire causeway one cannot really understand. It was known that the Japanese had some tanks and it was surely obvious (whether or not one had been to the Staff College at Camberley) that these would be more than useful in the open areas and on the roads of Singapore Island.

It is known that the Japs repaired the causeway before Singapore capitulated and it is also known that tanks appeared and played a part (though admittedly not decisive) in the fighting leading up to capitulation. One cannot therefore understand on what grounds (save perhaps some very long term economy on the part of the Colonial service) any part of the causeway was allowed to be spared.

In the time (and it was most of a month in the end) that I spent in Alexandra Hospital, my admiration for the nursing staff there grew greater as the emergency conditions became more acute. The sisters and nurses seemed if anything to look cooler and calmer the more difficult conditions became, so that it is impossible to pay adequate

tribute to all that they did. Many I believe refused to leave even when the fate of the island was known to be sealed and many left their departure too late to ensure their own safe passage, whilst those who stayed on suffered far worse at the hands of their captors than did we ourselves.

There were of course a few male nurses and from one of these I received attention while in the Malaria ward at Alexandria and we used sometimes to talk about home and the war. I was to see him again more than a year later in the jungle of Siam and to hear of the adventure which befell him after I left the hospital.

Although we knew that the Japs would not delay their attack on the island for long, it came sooner than I expected and we were wakened on the morning of February 9th by the sound of machine gun and mortar fire in the west and towards the north. None of the local Malays and the Asiatics employed in the hospital turned up that morning or indeed again while I was there. My prospects on the promised beefsteak were vanishing rapidly, but I managed to drink a bottle of Guinness though this is not a drink to which I am very partial. I had already resolved to ask for my discharge because I felt certain that the position would worsen and it seemed to me that if there was a crisis I would be better amongst those I knew best. But the Major in charge of the Malaria ward told me I would be wiser to stay in hospital, as he thought I was not nearly strong enough to return to our battalion. But I persisted, something telling me that I must leave there whatever happened. On the Tuesday I made a further request and, since by then, casualties from the fighting on the island were pouring in, I was told I could leave on the Wednesday.

When you go into hospital in the Army you do so virtually as a non-combatant and without your rifle and with only immediate personal possessions - what is called 'small kit' and this was all I had to collect before I left the hospital on the morning of February 11th. In the courtyard fronting the hospital where I boarded an ambulance, I caught a glimpse of Jock Annand, a Gordon of 'C' Company, who had been a patient, but who told me he would go into the City as Singapore was finished. This I believe he did for he was never recorded as becoming a prisoner and probably found refuge with the Chinese woman who was his wife in the eyes of most of us, though without official status. Also on the steps of the hospital as we moved away in the ambulance I saw Padre Smith, not long appointed Chaplain of the Gordons and a minister of the Presbyterian Church. He had become greatly liked in the short time since he had joined us and spoke to me in his usual cheerful fashion with a "Goodbye" and "Good

luck" - I never saw him again and I believe that within three days he was dead.

Our ambulance rumbled away east towards the city driven by a coloured R.A.M.C. driver from, I think, West Africa. He was quite impassive even when the air raid alarm sounded just as we arrived at the centre of the City close to St. Andrews Cathedral and the Singapore Cricket Club on which I had played for an Army XI but a few months before. There were shelters dug nearby and the driver indicated we could go to them if we wished and one or two did so, but I could neither hear or see aircraft and as the driver remained in his seat I followed his example and stayed at his side. There were about six of us in the ambulance, one other with me on the front box seat (the vehicle resembled a lorry and was only distinguishable by its white paint and large red cross). When the all clear sounded those who had taken shelter got aboard again and we moved on.

I had observed in every part of the city which we passed large numbers of uniformed soldiers, some British, some Australian and a few Indians. They were making their way in towards the city and, it seemed, the docks. I cannot recall that any carried arms and, at best, they had become separated from their units, at worst, they were deserters and I put most of them into the latter category.

As we moved on we dropped first one and then another of my fellow passengers until only the driver and myself remained. I had asked him to take me to Changi where (according to George Elsmie) the battalion had been located; but the driver seemed uneasy and uncertain. But he had petrol and a sort of expressionless determination which (especially as events turned out) I much admired: so we passed Kallang (the small civil aerodrome) and then Katong along what had become familiar to me as 'the straight mile' where the Chinese drivers had been wont in other times to drive their single deck buses at speeds of 80 miles per hour or so! Turning right we began the final few miles towards Changi. To the left in huts which I recognised, I saw a small group of soldiers, obviously British, but who I could not identify and who showed no interest in our presence and we journeyed on without interruption. To the right we passed the now notorious Changi gaol - always a grim looking building and now in its bleak cheerlessness doing nothing to raise my flagging spirits. Finally we rounded the bend in the road where the familiar drive road which led to Selarang Barracks confronted us. To the left stood the Guard Room clearly empty of people, its door swinging open - on it someone had scrawled "Suda habis" - Gone away! Quite undaunted my still impassive driver drove up the drive past the houses where married

soldiers had been located until, in a moment or two, we reached the barrack square. This also was silent and appeared deserted with the doors of the Orderly Room open. In the centre of the square was a cavity which I guessed, and someone confirmed later, had been caused by a bomb (apparently another bomb which fell on one of the barrack blocks did little damage, despite the fact that the engineer who built them was supposed to have used inadequate materials!).

I told the driver to turn about, which he did, with some alacrity as we both felt (though neither of us spoke of it) that not only had the inhabitants left, but that others less welcome might be close at hand. Returning past the gaol back along the road we had previously traversed, we stopped at the huts where we had seen the soldiers and I alighted, catching a glimpse of a tartan glengarry, I told the driver I would enquire of its wearer. He asked if I would be happy to stay there and, with little option left, I agreed. I thanked him and we said goodbye, within seconds the ambulance was out of sight though whether it actually returned to Alexandra I do not know. The ironic position being that while the north east corner of Singapore where I had reached, though almost deserted by our own troops, had been left quite undisturbed by the Japs, the latter were even then renewing their attacks to the west of the island so that had I remained at the hospital (as the doctors had wished) I would on the arrival of the Jap Guerrillas two days later - Friday February 13th - an ominous date, have almost certainly been amongst the non-bedridden patients who were rounded up and placed in the nurses quarters at the hospital from which they were taken out after dark in pairs and bayoneted. My information on this subject came to me in a strange way, which later I will describe.¹⁶

Out on the Changi Road, unarmed and rather shaken, I made my way towards the huts at which the ambulance had left me and eventually learned that these now constituted the Headquarters of the 2nd Malayan Infantry Brigade, which comprised my own battalion who it seemed were now holding a position to the north west of Singapore City and at some miles distance from Changi.

I was taken into Captain (later Major) D. Close who was a Gordon attached to Brigade H.Q. and who told me afterwards that at our first encounter he had not recognised me as I had lost so much weight from my bout of typhus. He told me where the battalion

¹⁶The source of this information is described at the end of chapter 8 - "Death Stalks in the jungle" and is confirmed in other accounts of the fall of Singapore.

was located and said that apart from the difficulty I would have in finding them, he doubted if I could be much help and advised me to stay with them and rest for the time being. This I did and was happy to make contact with Bill Greaves a former C.Q.M.S. of 'C' Company who was English and incidentally a keen cricket player and who helped me to obtain some most welcome food.

But after two nights and a day with Brigade H.Q. I was told that all units were being pulled back to within about one mile of the City Centre and that we were to march back late on Friday to the place where we would set up what was to prove our final H.Q. before the island capitulated. It was a weary and also very long march which (taking place in the cool of darkness) I found less exhausting than I expected. There was no conversation since all guessed that we were coming to the end of the road in every sense of that expression. Everywhere above and beyond the City fires seemed to be burning which lit up the road and its surroundings as if it were still daylight, but flickering spasmodically so that at one moment the whole sky seemed ablaze and the next to return to the full blackness of a tropical night. There was some gunfire but distant only and it was not until we reached a medium sized house close to Bencooen Street that we found ourselves under fire from the Japanese mortars which by then must have been located only about a mile distant from us. It was very alarming in the darkness trying to find one's way around with missiles flying about and seeming to be exploding all round. Our men had no doubt been detected by the innumerable Japanese agents or sympathisers in the city but the firing soon diminished and we settled down to an uneasy night.

Next day we looked about us and wondered for the future. Shelling continued almost unceasingly (mostly from Jap heavy mortars I was to realise later) but I thought finding a basin and water that I would have a shave for, at least, I was left with a razor. Just as I had produced a good lather and beginning the process of removal, without warning and with a huge detonation, a bomb exploded on the roadway opposite. Fortunately windows in Singapore are rarely glazed so that only clouds of dust penetrated the room and looking out I could see that the overhead wires for the trolley buses had been brought down and were sagging crazily across the roadway beyond which some Chinese dwellings had apparently received a direct hit. There were screams of pain and terror coming from that direction and cleaning myself up as quickly as I could I crossed over. There was an immense pile of rubble and an Officer, who I did not know, emerged and told me that there had been several Chinese killed and the injured were receiving attention, but I gathered that in one or two cases there

was little could be done.

Later that day we moved to another more solid building of concrete construction which looked as though it might offer some resistance to mortar shells or even small bombs. In fact its resistance to either was not put to the test though shelling continued and I saw an artillery officer who was almost in tears after telling me that two complete gun crews had been wiped out despite their shifting their position and it was obvious that with scores of observers in houses round the city as well as their own observation posts round about the Japanese were able to pick off almost at will any pockets of resistance by shell or from mortar fire. They also had the use of a balloon which flew towards the north of the island and which no doubt provided further confirmation as to where our troops were located. Although General Percival capitulated on Sunday February 15th in circumstances which have since become history, we were left in uncertainty until late on that day before it was confirmed that we had become prisoners. Late that afternoon aircraft had flown low over the city in quite large numbers but whereas we at the time expected bombs it seems probable that this was a victory trip on the part of jubilant Japanese airmen.

Much has been written and spoken about the battle for Malaya and the fall of Singapore as to which, as relatively a spectator and being without special knowledge or qualifications, I am not able to comment but I would nevertheless venture some observations.

(1) It has been suggested that to have built defence works along the northern shores of Singapore island in January 1942 or earlier would have been bad for civilian morale. In my opinion as one who was on the island for more than twelve months before it fell, I would express the view that apart from persons actually engaged in the forces the question of morale (good or bad) never really arose or became relevant. Even when the island was besieged its inhabitants, with a few exceptions, simply went about their business or stayed within what passed as their homes and although they flew the Japanese flag after February 15th for a few days, the civilians bore no more allegiance to them than they had done to us. If the north coast had been fortified the result, in my view, would have been to improve rather than damage morale certainly among our own troops since I still believe that the local inhabitants had some respect for the British and none for the Japanese of whom they were suspicious when Singapore fell and who they quickly came to hate. There are a multitude of cases where Chinese and Malays helped prisoners after the island fell.

So in my view there can be no excuse whatever offered for the failure by our command to provide a proper plan for the defence of Singapore not only as soon as war commenced but, since General Percival knew and believed that the Japs would attack down Malaya, defences against attack from the direction should have been planned during 1941 and probably 1940 - though General Bond was of course G.O.C. during much of that time.

(2) Given that the Japanese might capture all of Malaya, someone should have considered long before the beginning of 1942 as to where and against what part of the island they would attack. Anyone knowing Johore must surely be aware that the only road worthy of the name facing Singapore is at Johore Bharu and it was towards that place that the Japanese made their main thrust and where they concentrated. Surely it was obvious that they would attack at the point nearest to the west - namely Kranji - could not the eastern areas have been lightly held whilst mobile forces were kept ready to be sent there in the unlikely event of an attack from that quarter and with our main defence forces in depth across the western corner of the island. If, of course, there had been defence works, they would have extended along the full breadth of the north coast and with the forces held in reserve astride or to the west of the Bukit Timah Road

(3) Tanks. Did Singapore Command ever ask Whitehall for tanks? If so, then what type? My understanding was that Malaya was deemed unsuitable for tank warfare and that this aspect of any potential battle was to be ignored as indeed it was. Even so, if Percival or Bond thought an attack would come down Malaya (and it seemed to us there that success for the Japs was assured by the end of December 1941) what efforts were made then to obtain tanks for Singapore island, or anti-tank weapons or to improvise such weapons, or erect anti-tank obstacles. The answer I suggest in each case is "none".

(4) Finally as to water. The supply to Singapore island came from reservoirs in Johore and from the MacRitchie reservoir on the island. I suggest that almost up to the moment that the island capitulated neither we nor the Japs had regarded lack of water as a threat or tactical weapon. My reason for saying this is the simple fact which I believe can be substantiated in most reliable geography textbooks that rain falls at some time during two out of every three days that pass on Singapore island. This is why the city is covered by a complete and comprehensive system of monsoon drains without which the island would quickly become inundated.

No doubt in January or February 1942 the water mains were fractured and the piped supply running down or stopped, but if troops had been given the defences and the opportunity to fight from behind them when faced by the Japanese over in Johore, they would perhaps have run short of ammunition (though there was supposed to be at least 12 months supply in the Alexandria Magazine) and of which the Japs themselves were still shorter, they might have been short of food (but we were still eating meat out of the cold storage depot five months after Singapore capitulated). We may well have been short of petrol (but we blew up thousands more gallons than the Japs themselves possessed) but surely (oh surely) nature if no one else would have provided us with water.

We should have been bombed, we should have been shelled, but were not London and Warsaw scenes of bombardment and just as thickly populated.

So I say with sadness let it now be admitted in honesty that we lost Singapore partly because without ships and aircraft we were bound to retreat and eventually no doubt to capitulate, but mainly because our Generals having failed to gain the initiative by crossing into Siam before December 7th eve dawned and having thus lost the battle they had expected to fight (and hoped to win) on the borders around Alor Star failed then as they had failed before then to make any provision for the defences of the very island that their whole plan of defence was designed to protect. They did not do this. The inhabitants and those of the forces who capitulated paid afterwards (and heavily) for that failure.

CHAPTER 5
PRISONERS OF WAR
February 1942 - October 1942
Singapore Island

By the end of Sunday 15th February I, with what turned out to be some 85,000 others of diverse nationalities and uniforms, became a prisoner of war of the Japanese.

It had taken Yamashita no longer to capture the island fortress than the Almighty (according to Holy Writ) had been occupied in creating the universe. It is not recorded that the Almighty met any opposition in those early times but I must record that Yamashita met very little opposition either.

It was to God that I and others had to look for aid for most of the next three and a half years, for so far as the allies were concerned, we were now separated from them by at least 1,000 miles of ocean and jungle and the gap was to get much wider before gradually, and ever so slowly, it once again narrowed.

In my case I was a prisoner with one (somewhat worn) shirt and one (ditto) pair of khaki slacks. My boots (mercifully) were almost brand new. I had a haversack and a water bottle, the means of washing and shaving, and one large towel - later divided into two. In the short interval which followed our surrender I was able to procure a grey coloured blanket of average size but poor quality though for all its deficiencies it stayed with me - not always free of unwanted visitors - until we were liberated. I also had a pipe which had been sent off to me by my mother in the late summer of 1941, as a Christmas gift. Most fortunately it reached me just after New Year 1942 but I had done no smoking in hospital so it was with me as we went into captivity and was to provide yeoman service in the next three years or so during which time it was filled many times with material of a quality which would have horrified its makers. I would have liked a ground sheet but none came to hand in the day or so of waiting for orders from our new masters. But (as police witnesses will often be heard to say) "acting on information" I located and took possession of sundry tins of food and a kitbag in which to secure them. I was still sadly lacking in weight and finding it difficult to satisfy my appetite, the sharpness of which was no doubt nature's way of putting back some of the flesh I had lost. I concentrated on cans of meat and of milk and afterwards found my choice to be well made.

We had word that all prisoners were to be gathered into the Changi peninsular to wait

further directions. This was about 14 miles away, a distance which was terrifying to me in my still debilitated state, but there was a faint hope of transport. In the end one 30 cwt truck was all that was available for our party of more than one hundred. The truck was to be used for carriage of communal food supplies and medical stores and had room for two persons only, apart from the driver, so it was evident that I would have to join the march and this, alas, meant shedding many of my treasured items because my strength was such that I had little hope of carrying much beyond the few possessions I have already mentioned.

As it was we set off with the sun already high above the horizon and, although we made frequent stops, the effort of continuing was severe. Through the city on all sides were signs of the battle now ended with burnt out lorries in some of which the bodies of their occupants were still to be seen. Few of the inhabitants had as yet emerged and those visible were silent, stunned, I think by the speed of the Nippon victory and of the collapse of the country whose rule had prevailed in Singapore for so long.

We staggered slowly along gradually leaving the city behind as we made our way down the road which my ambulance had followed less than a week before. There was a ray of hope - the truck had delivered its load at Changi, had returned and took up a batch of those in the worst state of exhaustion. Surprisingly I did not qualify for that trip, but when we were about two miles from our destination the truck returned once more and I got on board. In what was relatively a few minutes we were dropped amongst the married quarter lining the road close to our old barracks. Here we sank exhausted only to be rallied quite quickly by news that the great mass of our battalion were on the march from west of the point from which we had set off and that those of us who were from "C" Company were to prepare, as best we could, a meal ready for the remainder when they arrived. It was late that night when they came in sight and their gratitude for what we had managed to provide was more than sufficient reward for the effort we had made and which had left me, at least, utterly exhausted.

It appeared that the Australians had been allotted our barracks at Selarang this being I think a decision on our side and not by the Japanese. So having deprived us of ground advantage the authorities (perhaps relenting a little) sent us off to a hutted camp at Telok Paku on the sea shore a little south of Changi village and where I believe some Gunners had been billeted in former days.

My memories of Telok Paku are mainly of the drastic transition from a diet of three

orthodox meals a day to one which consisted of about one pound of raw rice per head, plus some vegetables, a trifle of meat and an almost ludicrous allotment of tea and sugar. The effect on our kidneys was dramatic and there was a nightly and endless queue for the bucket latrines which (like the old Music Halls) were filled to capacity every night. We were able to get to the sea to wash ourselves and our clothes and, but for the stringent diet, found our existence at least tolerable. Of course we were dragged out in what passed for our best uniforms to witness a victory parade, the route of which we provided the lining. No doubt it was intended to make us look ridiculous in the eyes of the local inhabitants as well as our victors but, despite the depths to which our morale had fallen, we still found time to marvel that officers who looked as though they had come straight off the stage at the Savoy had led this scruffy bunch of soldiers in creating the greatest military disaster ever suffered by our country.

The Japs themselves were only beginning to realise how complete and comprehensive a victory they had achieved and some further time elapsed before they directed that we be further concentrated within the Changi area, in our case in one block of Kitchener Barracks former domain of the Royal Engineers one company of which had previously occupied the space in which more than nine hundred of us were now to be squeezed.

Feeding conditions worsened, tempers became more frayed, petty illnesses became more serious. Worst perhaps of all we had little with which to occupy our time, most of which seemed to be spent brooding on magnificent meals which we had enjoyed in the past but which our contracting stomachs never ceased reminding us were no longer available. We still possessed a little freedom of movement and one evening in March I was one of those who witnessed from the top of Changi Hill the passage of a stupendous cavalcade of naval vessels leaving the shelter of Singapore and heading to the north west. There must have been at least one hundred vessels sailing I think in line ahead with several carriers and battleships and numberless smaller craft. Already there had been wild rumours circulating that a vast armada of allied vessels was gathering not far away and that our spell as prisoners was likely to be quite brief. The sight of all those ships of the Japanese navy brought it home to me as clearly as anything could that whatever might be our future as prisoners, it certainly would not be short.

When I had first reached Singapore, the Platoon to which I was posted was (perhaps ominously) No. 13 the sergeant in charge of which was Frank Knight. He was tall, fair, of smart appearance and bearing and (as we quickly found) a man who tolerated

no nonsense but if he was strict he was also just and soon won our respect and I think also our affection. But soon after the New Year of 1941 he was seconded to a special engineer company with responsibility for the Malaya railways and from then on he passed out of our view.

Apparently Frank Knight had under his charge a specialised group of Malayan railway employees whose task it would be, if Malaya were invaded from across the Siamese border, to move up along the line into Siam (Thailand) and to blow up any large bridges (which were plotted in advance) to a distance as far as 50 miles over the border. In the event, like us, his team were alerted before December 7th that invasion was threatened and, unlike our military forces, they went across into Siam so that they could actually see Japanese on motor and pedal cycles coming down the road into Malaya as their train, with its engine travelling in reverse, moved up the line to carry out its task. This is did most successfully and made its way back over the border without, as I understood from him later, sustaining any casualties or damage to the train.

No doubt they accomplished similar tasks on the line within Malaya itself after the retreat to Singapore began but Frank Knight told us that when the island finally capitulated he was only prevented from attempting a get-a-way in a motor yacht which had, with others, been found moored at the docks, because an officer with a misguided sense of duty prevented them at pistol point from going on board and removed the distributor cap from the engine, throwing it into the harbour. Frank and the others apparently spent several hours diving into the water in an effort to locate the missing part but to no avail. In the event one must conclude that the officer in question has much to answer for, assuming that he (unlike Frank Knight) managed to survive captivity.

After the fall of Singapore, Frank Knight with others who had left us for similar jobs away from the battalion, came back into our midst. He had been promoted to C.S.M. and was (even in our limited P.O.W. world) a slight embarrassment for C.S.M. Scott for whom I had resumed acting as clerk and I sensed that the situation for Frank Knight was one of acute frustration. When therefore it was announced that a party was to go into Singapore city to perform duties as yet unspecified, it was no surprise to me to find that Frank Knight was nominated as its C.S.M. The Officer in charge of the party was to be Major Lees under who, before captivity, I had played cricket in 1941 for the battalion, and with him were to be George Elsmie and also George Roberts

(now a Lieutenant) as well as various other officers and N.C.O.'s drawn from amongst all the Gordon Companies. All were volunteers and I informed C.S.M. Scott that I also would like to join the party. He urged me to stay and said that there would be other opportunities for me to leave Changi but I had become oppressed with the boredom of our existence and felt that the conditions to which we would be going could not be worse but might well prove to be better.

So, towards the end of March 1942 our party set off on foot on the road past Changi gaol. No pipe band to serenade us on our journey, but plenty of luggage and the ever present heat which prevails all year round in Singapore. Our destination proved to be a group of houses just to the east of the Bukit Timah Road and known as Adam Park. Here some of the very well off businessmen of Singapore had resided until a short time only before Singapore fell. There had been fighting in and about the houses, some of which had been damaged a little, but the absence of furniture was due, I think, to looting rather than to the battle which had been fought round about. Our party were accommodated in about four houses over an area of three or four acres and, except that we were still rather crowded, it seemed to me that we were likely to fare better than if I had taken C.S.M. Scott's advice and stayed in Changi.

It transpired that the task we had been allotted was to convert the Singapore Golf Club which was located off Sime Road and about a mile and a half from Adam Park, into an ornamented garden leading, along a network of metalled roads, to a grotto - like memorial set up to commemorate the death of those members of the Nippon army who had died in the battle for Singapore. The Japanese themselves created the grotto built amongst the trees overlooking the very beautiful MacRitchie reservoir, whose capture by the Japs late in the battle for the island is now alleged to have played so vital a part in the decision of Percival that we should capitulate.

Between April and September 1941 our party, with others who joined us later, dug out the foundation for the roads, carted the granite with which they were constructed from a quarry close to the Ford Works (scene of General Percival's humiliation) back on to the site, broke it up and laid it with kerbs and drains and in addition built one or two of those arched metalled bridges as depicted on willow pattern china and which one would (even today) expect to form part of any Japanese scenario. It all sounds easy but in the heat of Singapore on our unaccustomed diet of rice - plus - the measure of the "plus" being very small at the start but rather larger as officers and others began ever so slightly to bring pressure on these strange oriental creatures who, although they

had the most curious ideas about field engineering and were utterly incapable of counting groups of prisoners inside a minimum time of twenty minutes which sometimes extended to an hour or more. In those days we ran our own camps, our own sick bay and cooked our own food, virtually without hindrance from the Japanese and as yet no Koreans had even appeared on the scene.

By comparison with our experience in the years which were to follow the work was not so very onerous but being for me and many others a first taste of heavy manual labour and since we rested only once every two weeks - and not always then - I found the effort a great strain coming so soon after my bout of typhus. I had an attack of dysentery but this seemed to clear up fairly soon and my only other disability was an ulcer which I developed on my right shoulder due to the effect of using it to carry quite heavy loads and with the aggravation of long exposure to the sun from which of course we had been carefully sheltered in the twilight war of 1940/41.

That our relations with the Japanese at this time, if uneasy, were prevented from ever reaching a point of real crisis was due almost entirely to the efforts on our behalf of little Padre Andrews. He had been a missionary both in China and Japan and spoke Japanese fluently. How much Chinese he knew I never enquired, but he did once offer the view to me that had we fallen into the hands of the Chinese instead of the Japs we would probably be faring much worse. I was surprised to hear this, but in the light of post war happenings I have come to accept that probably his opinion was accurate. In sorting out endless misunderstandings between our officers and the Japanese and in interviewing on behalf of individual soldiers who got themselves into trouble, his diplomacy and good sense were remarkable, especially as his age must then have been nearer 70 than 60 and perhaps even older. But as well as acting as interpreter and liaison officer between us and the Japanese, he still found time to establish in one of the houses a small church where services were held by him as often as time and the Japanese permitted. In a very short while with the help of one or two of those who through illness or otherwise were not working, an upper room of moderate size was provided with an altar, windows of coloured glass (the origin of which was a mystery to me) and many other items needed for the conduct of services. We were allowed a break for Easter Sunday and there was quite a large crowd who attended and each contrived in some way to bring up his appearance to a standard befitting the occasion. In such little ways did people make an effort to maintain self respect which had become difficult in these desperate days.

When a rest day was due in June, Major Lees asked me if I thought it would be a good idea to ask Padre Andrews to conduct a service just for our group of Gordons and amongst the houses where he was billeted. Most of our party were officially designated as presbyterians, but the idea appealed to me and I told him I thought it would be accepted and perhaps (at least by some) really appreciated. In the end, one cool, calm evening the service was held, for which I think there was (in political terms) perhaps a "two line" whip. It was quite short but I still recall the talk which that little old gentleman gave to us on the theme of the 91st Psalm. Perhaps he guessed what might be ahead of us and there was an ominous and prophetic ring about the lines -

"Thou shalt not be afraid for any terror by night;
nor for the arrow that flieth by day; for the
pestilence that walketh in darkness; nor for the
sickness that destroyeth in the noonday. A thousand
shall fall beside thee and ten thousand at thy right
hand; but it shall not come nigh thee".

Many more indeed than that figure were later to succumb from amongst those surrendered by General Percival in February and of these not a few of those who listened to the words of the little padre failed to survive our captivity.

A burning question in more than one sense in those first early months whilst we remained on the island was that of smoking. Cigarettes had been so cheap, though of indifferent quality, in Singapore during the pre-invasion period, that the great majority had developed the habit and when, as soon happened, their supplies diminished and eventually became exhausted, the effect on the nerves of the heaviest smokers was considerable. After a short while we were issued with a packet of ten cigarettes (mostly called "Lion") per man for each ten days and one does not need to be an Einstein to realise this meant one cigarette per day. The few non-smokers sold their allocation or bartered them for goods, but even so, and even allowing for a trickling Black Market which operated through friendly local Chinese, the position remained acute. As a result it was a frequent sight to observe persons searching around furtively for discarded "dog-ends" and these were re-rolled in paper of varying descriptions and quality. But not infrequently there was contamination causing the outbreak of diphtheria which is a most dangerous and debilitating disease from which not a few died or were left with after-effects involving one or other of their limbs.

Money of course if possessed in sufficient quantity could provide for the smoker and would enable its possessor to buy food to supplement our miserably meagre rations. But supplies of money (the old Malay dollars were cashable while they still lasted) were running out rapidly and the pay (so called) which we who worked received, was as miserable as the food and in those early days there was very little available to be bought even for those who had money. The arrangements for pay were curious in that officers, whose duties were mostly negligible and sometimes non-existent, received one dollar per day whereas other ranks, who worked far harder than they had ever been asked to do in the army on far less food received only ten cents per day, that is one tenth of what the officers received. Sergeants were paid slightly more than other ranks, but as they worked with us as well as fulfilling their responsibility as leaders, no one questioned their entitlement to the differential which existed. Sometime later the officers gave up half of each instalment of pay which they received and the cash which they waived was used to build up a fund from which food and medicines were purchased for the sick. But despite this anomaly, the relationship generally between officers and men was perhaps better in the P.O.W. camps than it had been either before or during the battle for Singapore, since common adversity brought them closer together. Even so, there were not a few examples of officers who departed from the high traditions which each of the many famous regiments which went into captivity had striven to maintain, so that self preservation was given higher priority than the need to ensure that those serving under and with them were protected and provided for. Not that our party of Gordons under Major Lees had ground for criticism and the officers with us did their best to help to maintain our flagging morale when, as sometimes happened, it tended to droop.

Generally though the statistics of those who emerged from captivity would demonstrate, I am sure, a higher ratio of casualties amongst other ranks in proportion to officers and this reflected the fact firstly that we had to work for long periods of time and without regular rest days; whilst having poorer food and less cash with which to supplement it.

Even in Adam Park the first effects of the basic rice diet on our health were beginning to show and many of those with us had aching limbs and feet. Some soon found that heavy perspiration and vitamin deficiency began to produce soreness, especially of the scrotum - hence the expression Changi (or Singapore) balls! But with treatment and as we became used to the diet, this ailment became steadily less significant; there were, however, other and more deadly diseases yet to be confronted, but of this at that time

we were mercifully unaware.

It was while with this party at Bukit Timah that we were required to sign a declaration that - on pain of death - we would not try to escape.

The Japs had begun by ordering the senior colonel in charge (all field officers above that rank were sent to Japan quite soon after Singapore capitulated) to direct all ranks to sign a declaration that they would not escape and that they understood they would be killed if they did. When the Colonel refused the Japs ordered all ranks then in Changi to assemble within the limits of the old Gordon barrack square in Selarang. The congestion was appalling and the rate of sickness rising rapidly, added to which the Japs themselves threatened to evacuate our wounded who were in the nearby Roberts Barracks, also into Selarang. As this would have undoubtedly killed many and induced further suffering, we were ordered to sign "under protest". One ex-Gordon did remark at the time that this episode had enabled him to fulfil an ambition which he had always held which was to relieve himself on the barrack square!

The prospects of our making the effort to get away were remote, but insofar as there are rules in modern war and according to the Geneva Convention (which however the Japs had never signed) it was legitimate for us to try to escape if we could but they were entitled to kill us only in the act of prevention. In the event there were few attempts made and scarcely anyone succeeded. On the other hand the Japs carried out their threat to kill those making attempts and as if to aggravate matters the mode of killing adopted was invariably savage and inhumane.

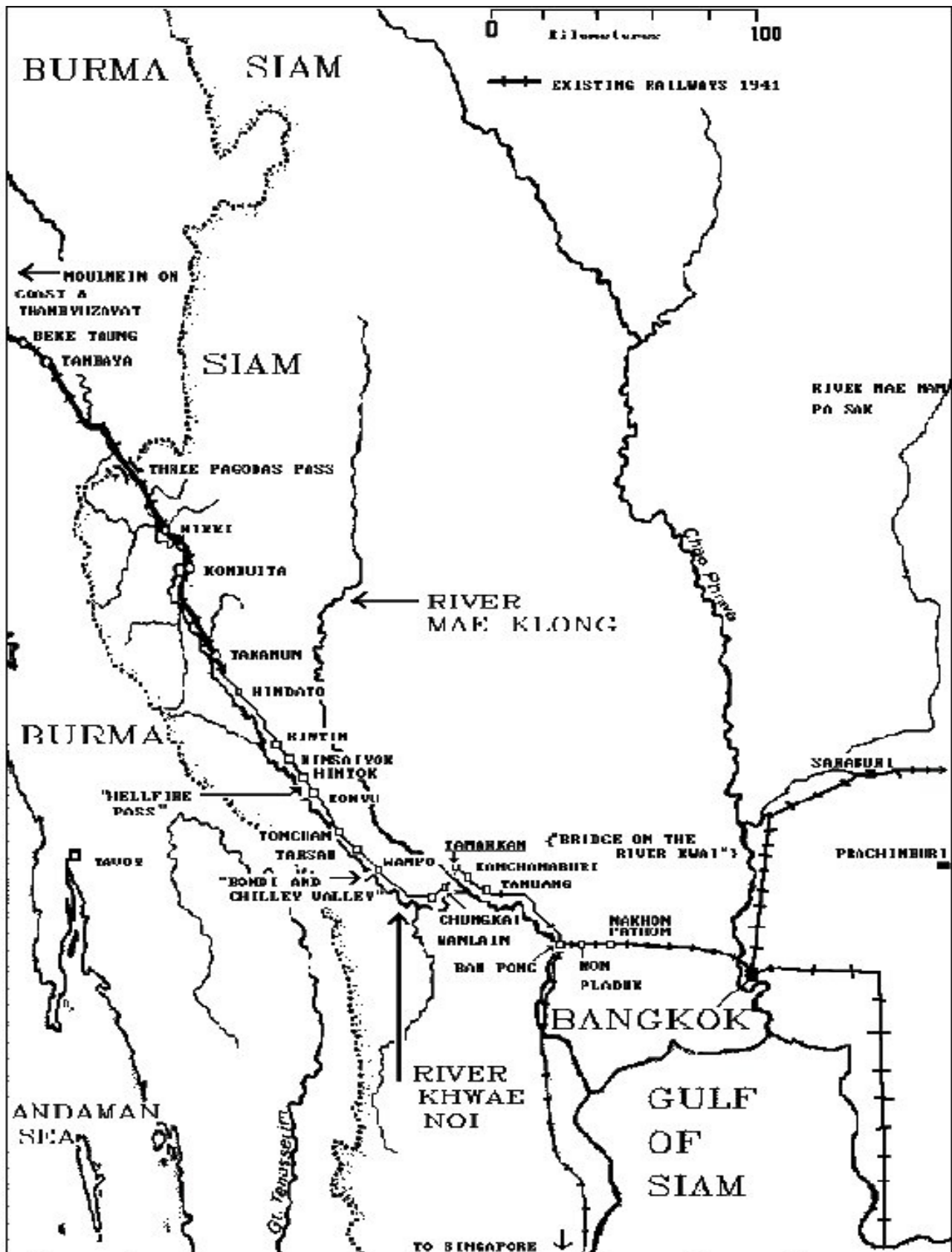
In the six months or so we spent in Adam Park we got to know our conquerors better and realised that if they lacked inches and any high degree of intelligence, they were fiercely determined and subject to an iron discipline that left an offending member of their forces no less liable to be battered about the face or kicked, than ourselves, though not surprisingly where incidents against prisoners occurred many times each day, reprimands for the Japanese themselves were much rarer.

I made one strange discovery whilst we were in Adam Park as to a house located in the vicinity and not very far from where we were billeted - in fact next to the house where the medical officer was located. Not long after our arrival in Singapore a member of another company, known to me, received an invitation from someone called Cruickshank who claimed to be an Aberdonian and who invited him to take one or two

of us out with him to his house for a meal. We were well entertained but after we had been given a fine meal and drink with it, our host, a stoutish man rather on the short side, if I recall, suddenly looked across to us and said "What's all this about Pengerang?" In fact, as I have already indicated, the strategic influence and significance of Pengerang was probably negligible, but the question left us all speechless. Our host seemed to be reconciled to our saying nothing and may perhaps have deduced that our silence alone meant that this was a "hush hush" subject and nothing more was said. But as to why the enquiry should have been made we had, at the time, no idea. Certainly our host had no Scots accent but at the time I had assumed this to be due to his long absence from home.

But when one day I had been to the Medical Centre for treatment for my sore shoulder, I happened to see an elderly Malay working around the garden of the house which I was sure was the one we had visited. Apparently he had worked there in the period before the island fell and when I mentioned the name Cruickshank he shook his head uncomprehendingly. He mentioned the name 'Muller' and apparently the house had been owned by a Dutchman with business interests in the city. The Malay thought they might have been of German origin. So also did I!

The work on the golf course memorial was all but complete and there were a magical few days in which we were not asked to work and the Japs who had been responsible for counting us when we left and returned each day suddenly disappeared. In their stead we saw the first Koreans, who were to do so much of the administration in the next two years and were to torment us both physically and mentally. But we also had an issue of food reputed to have arrived with a boat bearing Japanese diplomats back to their homeland. Each man received, as well as various tins and a few cigarettes, a quite smart "trilby" hat which was of dark green colour and a lot cleaner than the headgear we still possessed.



BURMA SIAM RAILWAY

BUILDING THE RAILWAY 1942-1944:

CHAPTER 6

BRIDGE OVER THE RIVER MAE KLONG

October 1942 - April 1943

Singapore - Malaya - Thailand - Ban Pong -
Tamarkan

As we might have guessed, this issue of good things was preliminary to a move we were to make by rail up country - it emerged that our destination was in fact Siam and it was from the old Singapore railway station that we set off, towards the end of September. We were in trucks obviously used for freight including animals. How many of them they normally carried I do not know but 30 of us were packed into each, there being about 180 only of our original party that had left Kitchener Barracks back in March 1942. The rest had been sent back to Changi because of illness or had returned to Pengerang to lift all those mines, the laying of which in December 1941 had cost us so much effort and so many casualties. The salvage operation proved just as dangerous and there were further casualties including our own Lt. Stewart news of whose death was a great blow to us all.

Our journey was horribly uncomfortable since the trucks being metal whilst very hot all day became extremely cold at night, when we tried amongst the conglomeration of baggage and human beings, to get a little sleep. Food consisted of indifferently cooked rice and boiling water to drink and, had we not had with us remnants of the tins received before our departure, those who fared badly would have fared still worse. I had a recurrence of the dysentery which had beset me in Adam Park, but Corporal Allan (who had gained the D.C.M¹⁷. in Singapore for his heroic rescue of Indian wounded from a burning hospital) found something which helped me and by the time we arrived in Ban Pong I was on the mend.

I was to see quite a lot of Ban Pong later on, before our eventual liberation, with the Mae Klong river running past it. Ban pong looked like a tropical edition of the sort of town that hundreds of cowboy films have shown Gary Cooper and, more recently, John Wayne riding into or out of with wooden buildings interspersed with bamboo huts and little that, even to eyes less prejudiced than ours, could have been described as beautiful. We had arrived just towards the end of the monsoon (with which we were to become familiar in the three years ahead) and which had left the bamboo hut into which we were "ushered" on arrival, some two feet underwater. The slatted bamboo beds which were all ours for one night only (bed, but no

¹⁷ D.C.M. = Distinguished conduct medal

breakfast) were an ominous warning to us of what was ahead in Thailand and we were very happy to get that first night over.

Many of those who were to follow us through Ban Pong en route for railroad duties were obliged to proceed from there on foot and at first we were led to believe that this would be our fate to which we did not look forward after the discomfort and exhaustion of our four day journey from Singapore, but our luck was in and we were transported by lorries on the fairly short journey which ended just beyond the quite historic city of Kanchanaburi. From the point where the lorries dropped us we proceeded on foot along the fairly dry tracks to what we were told was now known as No. 1 Jungle Camp and which was better known later (if not then) as Tamarkan.

We learnt on our arrival in Tamarkan that the Japs had decreed that P.O.W.¹⁸ forces coming into Thailand were to be divided into groups with headquarters in camps scattered at points up and down the line. We were allocated to No. 1 Group which was located mainly in Tamarkan and Non Pladuk which was a camp I was to reach many months later and where other events, still far ahead, were to occur.¹⁹

Tamarkan itself was situated within a few minutes walking distance of the site of the main bridge which was to carry the Siam-Burma railway across a wide river after which the course of the line was to follow - sometimes closely, sometimes at a distance - the lesser river which wound its way down from Burma to the north-west until it flowed into the larger river.

At the time of our arrival I myself was unaware of the courses which the two rivers took and for all the six months or so that we were in Tamarkan I was so busy working on the bridge and striving to survive that the thought even to enquire the name of the river never occurred to me. Nor, I suspect did it occur to the others who were my companions in the assorted labour force which had been gathered together at the date of my arrival and which was to undergo constant changes as work progressed and pressure built up for completion of the main task. No doubt Lt. Colonel Toosey of the 135 Regiment of Royal Artillery who was the British officer in the camp when we reached it, Captain Boyle of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders who was the Camp Adjutant and many other officers and perhaps other ranks with them were familiar with Siam or had possession of a map of the area and would thus have made themselves familiar with

¹⁸ P.O.W. = Prisoner of War

¹⁹ Non Pladuk was situated at Ban Pong and is described in chapter 10 "Evacuated". The author arrived there 1 year later in 1943.

our location. They would have known that the river which in October 1942 was in full spate in its journey eastwards to the sea was the Mae Klong and the twin sister of the even larger river the Menam which also flowed through many miles of Thailand including the city of Bangkok. Whether they also were aware that the smaller river past which the railway was to make its way in the ensuing months bore the name Khwae Noi I am rather doubtful and certainly this was a name which I myself was not to hear until years after our return when an American film company was to present to the world its production of "The Bridge on the River Kwai".

Of course I saw that film as thousands (probably millions) have done since in America and on television to the extent that so far as most of the English speaking world are concerned Far East prisoners are thought to have worked like those whom the film portrayed, worn the same sort of tattered clothing and gone to and fro to the bridge as it was built, spurred on by someone who behaved as Sir Alec Guinness (as the Camp Commandant) behaved, singing Colonel Bogey as they marched in and out of the camp and eventually striving with enthusiasm and under strict discipline from their officers in building the wooden structure which, in the film, the American commandos were ultimately to sabotage and destroy.

Though few who have seen the film can surely have believed that it resembled reality, there has gradually been built up in the years which have followed the first screening of the film a belief (which seems to be growing) that it did in some way portray the truth. Thus has been provided an example of the Hitlerian doctrine followed by Goebbels that if you intend to tell a lie then the greater the untruth the better will be the prospect of its acceptance as reality. How big then was the deception perpetrated by the film, for deception it was, and so great has its effect been on the British public (let alone the people of the former dominions and in America and elsewhere) that even the solemn and supposedly accurate Times newspaper has lately referred to the river bordering the railway as that "known to all prisoners who worked beside it as the Kwai".

The river over which the bridge had begun to be built at Tamarkan when we reached there was, as I have indicated, not the Khwae Noi but the Mae Klong. The bridge itself was to be built not (as in the film) with timber so as to resemble some toylike model of the old Forth railway bridge, but a bridge erected on solid concrete piers standing some eighty feet or so above the level of the river and carrying not a wooden structure but steel girders which the Japanese, whose whole campaign in south-east Asia was based on improvisation, had procured from Java where it had formed part of a river bridge in that island from which it had been removed section by section and with infinite care until it arrived in its entirety on the banks of the Mae Klong so that in due course it served to carry the line over the river and northwards on its journey through the mountain region which separates Thailand from Burma until ultimately the line was linked

with the existing railway at far off Moulmein.

Even the film-goers will not have imagined that the Colonel as portrayed by Sir Alec Guinness looked anything like Colonel Toosey whom we soon were to meet, know and respect after we came to Tamarkan. But physical appearance apart, let no one think that the concrete piers which were finally completed in April 1943 had the approval of Colonel Toosey or that he or any of the officers serving under him at the camp spent a minute of their time urging those whose misfortune it was to work in those days to do so with enthusiasm, with interest or with skill. Toosey was indeed busy enough asking, urging and (with growing temerity) chivvying the Japanese and the Korean guards whom they set over us in the camp, into supplying better living conditions for the workers and for the sick and above all asking them increasingly to increase the totally inadequate food and medicines with which the camp was supplied.

Tamarkan was officially styled No. 1 Jungle Camp by the Japs, but was in fact located on the fringe of the rice growing region which extends through much of the Kra Isthmus which is the name of the narrow neck of land which joins Malaya in the south with the larger mass of Thailand which stretches north and east of Bangkok. Thus there were plentiful supplies of rice available and also vegetables - sweet potatoes, cucumber, tapioca root, pumpkins (among many others) and there were also bullocks in the area available for slaughter and there was actually an abattoir in the vicinity of Bangkok. But it was already clear to us that the contempt of the Japs for soldiers who had allowed themselves to be made captives was so great that they pursued relentlessly a policy of providing for their prisoners the barest minimum of food sufficient to maintain life and the capability of those in the camp to work on the bridge. For those whose misfortune it was to become sick (and their numbers were to rise steadily) there were no rations at all, so that the greater the number of those who fell ill, the further the rations which were provided had to be spread. For if the Japs thought our sick should starve we had other ideas and they received from us more, rather than less than the workers. Fortunately we were able to buy eggs and bananas from the local natives through an illicit trading system carried on against the orders of, but frequently under the noses, of our captors.

The camp had been set up on the southern bank of the river and all along the rivers edge on our side were trees of several varieties some of which bore small fruit resembling cherries or small plums red or yellow in colour and which we discovered were edible. To the south of the camp at a distance of a mile or two were several mound like hills which from the abrupt manner in which they rose up from the dead level ground which surrounded them seemed almost as though they were the outcrop of some giant mole. Scrub and small bushes grew all over them to a high level and in the intense conditions of drought which prevailed in February and March

spontaneous fires broke out which at night flickered and glowed brightly - so much so that rumours soon spread that these were beacons signalling allied victories or perhaps the arrival of parachutists. But few had much faith in these rumours known to all prisoners of war as boreholes - since they were reputed to circulate through conversations in the latrines which in turn were usually constructed by digging or boring by mechanical means deep holes in the sandy soil on which the camp was built.

The camp was roughly square in shape covering some seven acres or so. The huts were constructed of bamboo in the manner with which we were to become all too familiar in the next three years, with gable shaped frames erected at intervals of about sixty feet above which further lengths of stout bamboo were stretched to support the light atap roof, atap consisted of countless layers of dried palm leaves bound to strips of pliable cane to form rectangular shapes about three feet in length which were laid like tiles, overlapping one another and serving to provide remarkably effective shelter from the heavy rains which descended in the monsoon season, but which allowed the huts with their light atap covered walls to remain relatively cool even in the intense heat which developed all through the year but most intensively in the dry season.

When we arrived in October 1942 the monsoon season which begins in April was at last declining to be followed by the dry season of about six months' duration between October and March. There were units of artillery and detachments from the Norfolk and Suffolk Regiments and some Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders already at Tamarkan with Colonel Toosey in command and with the exception of the Argylls most had formed part of the 18th Division which had arrived in Singapore such a short time (in many cases) before the island fell. There were about ten large huts in which all ranks were accommodated, officers being located at the end of the huts in which their respective units were quartered. All seemed friendly to us but we soon were aware that work was hard, food inadequate and the Jap engineers villainously aggressive and abrasive and ready to assault anyone on the slightest provocation. But they were quartered in their own separate camp close by, those in charge of the P.O.W. camp being mostly Koreans with one or two Japs and a Japanese officer in overall command. The Koreans proved to be far more aggressive than the Jap engineers, some of whom were not unfriendly, and although many of the Koreans engaged in barter of watches, pens or other articles of value, they were never trustworthy and mostly openly aggressive and treacherous.

Apart from a hut allocated for camp administration and quite a large cookhouse, there was a small church where services were held on Sunday evenings for workers and in the daytime for those confined to the camp through sickness or other cause.

At that time the scrutiny and care of the sick was left almost exclusively in the hands of our own doctors and a hospital had been established whose occupants increased gradually in number as the work became more intense and the resistance of the workers slowly fell. Outbreaks of malaria increased as time passed and of dysentery, but beri-beri and other illness due to malnutrition was not at first of much significance but whereas in Adam Park we had been in contact with the Japs only whilst working they, with the Koreans, were involved in Tamarkan in controlling all our activities and the entire camp paraded each morning and night for the checking of numbers. This procedure also was to form the pattern followed in all camps - large or small - until our final liberation.

When we reached Tamarkan there was no bridge whatever over the river but a temporary bridge built on wooden piers resembling telephone poles, but of much greater length and thickness, was nearly completed. But the wet season had not then finally subsided and the river (which those who were put to work on the other side crossed in wooden barges) was still in full spate and after further heavy rain it was discovered only a few days after we reached Tamarkan that the near completed temporary crossing had been swept away. This was a great setback to the plans of the Jap engineers and was scarcely calculated to improve their tempers. But if the Japs lacked inches they did not lack determination and they soon had squads of workers busy clearing what was left of the damaged bridge, salvaging the timber, renewing and strengthening the timbers which had been lost or damaged. Thus before Christmas the temporary structure was complete and not long afterwards the lines and sleepers were laid across it and the first trains enabled to cross and move forward towards the mountain regions to the north where the most difficult and arduous sections of the line on which men had already begun to work remained to be completed.

As nearly all the level sections of ground which the line was to cross were subject to flooding in the rainy season and in the hilly sections the ground was never level for more than a few yards, it meant that work had to be done on every sector and none of it was easy. Even the building of earth embankments on which we were employed in the first few weeks in Tamarkan had to be built up to quite a high level with the earth shovelled out laboriously and assisted by machinery with every drop of earth borne by an unending stream of human carriers passing to and fro with wicker woven baskets resembling in shape large sea shells but with handles to either side - at least there were supposed to be handles but most of these were broken or damaged and if, after the rains which fell heavily at quite frequent intervals, the soil grew heavy it would cling in great lumps to the base of the baskets so that even when filled they contained little but weighed all the more heavily.

An alternative to baskets were stretchers built from parallel strips of bamboo thrust through rice sacks and borne by hand or on their shoulders by prisoners of war working in pairs. In the alternating heat and damp and through endless hours from 8.30 to 5.30 and often later this sort of work was as exhausting from the tedium of its nature as from the physical effort which it entailed.

But when for a time we were taken off the embankment work our alternative tasks were either the removal of enormous bulks of timber across the river or along its banks or driving them into the ground with the help of weights dropped from giant tripods and raised and lowered by gangs of prisoners each pulling on ropes in unison hour after hour except from some incantation bellowed by one of the engineers or occasionally by one from amongst our own number.

The one great moment of the day was when, as the flow of the river receded in magnitude, we were permitted to plunge into it and to swim or splash around and thus to clean and at least partially refresh our weary bodies. There were few local inhabitants still living in the vicinity but they must have been startled - perhaps fascinated - by the sight of hundreds of us, our bodies growing ever browner and sometimes almost black from the intense sun, plunging with much shouting and noise into the river in a great rush of naked flesh. But the moments of pleasure were brief as the guards were soon shouting to those in the water to gather together for the inevitable roll call before returning to the camp.

Before the wooden bridge was even near completion the Jap engineers had brought up pumps driven by petrol or diesel oil and these chugged away while the work of delving out pits at the river's edge and above from which were to rise the concrete piers which, with those to be built at intervals across the river itself were to carry the girders which in turn would bear the rails and sleepers on which the line would ultimately cross the river.

The country to the north of the river had probably been fully cultivated until the advent of the Japs and the completion of their plans to build the railway. There were groves of bananas with papaya and kapok trees with their curiously straight branches stemming almost exactly at right angles from the tree and looking like so many green scarecrows placed there to protect the other vegetation. Thailand is one of the richest rice growing countries in the world and there were many acres of paddy fields to be seen around about and those who cultivated the ground usually had quite large flocks of ducks whose eggs were in the first place available to be purchased from vendors outside Tamarkan but later were added to the official diet but only made available usually to those in hospital. Major Lees of the Gordons quickly appreciated after our arrival how much our future survival would depend on maintaining our strength and the help of those

of us who were working outside the camp was enlisted in buying eggs etc. from the vendors and bringing them in for distribution amongst any Gordons who were actually in hospital or just "under the weather". I was much surprised and amused to be handed an egg one day and on enquiry was told that I was thought to be looking "a bit run down".

Tamarkan was never a comfortable camp nor especially well fed, but its close proximity to the river and the short distance travelled to and from our employment left us with slightly more time to spare than we were ever afforded later in 1943 and in the following years. Occasionally there was time for a sing-song or concert and there was a Dutchman with a violin which he played quite beautifully. Later he moved with one of the parties up country and I heard had been employed using a hammer and chisel drilling rock for breaking up, much further up the line. His friends told me sadly that this work had so damaged his hands that playing his violin was now quite beyond him.

In any formal gatherings or occasions such as concerts since Singapore had capitulated the Japs had always refused to allow our National Anthem or that of the Dutch to be played, but for us they allowed the singing of "Land of Hope and Glory" which was amusing since its sentiments are far more patriotic and progressive than the wild phrases of "God Save the King". Even "Rule Britannia" was tolerated also, though one can scarcely think of a song more jingoistic in its sentiments. But I never heard prisoners sing or whistle "Colonel Bogey" either in Tamarkan or elsewhere.

We had soon found the Japanese character as demonstrated by its soldiers to be full of paradoxes and peculiarities. Obviously they set great store by their families and the bond which this established for them. Many carried photographs of wives and of children whilst wearing body belts made for them by their relatives as a protection against injury and death. Dolls, rabbits feet and other such objects were held by Japs and treasured in their belief that they would keep them safe so that eventually they could return to their homeland and to their families.

In moments when breaks from the labour of the day occurred it was not uncommon for Jap engineers who could speak a few words of English to be drawn into a conversation with prisoners about their peacetime existence and to produce pictures of those closest to them. One or two amongst us with a mischievous turn of mind and having ascertained that some Jap had a wife and three children in Kobe or Tokyo would claim that his own family was far more extensive although those of us close to him knew that he had no wife in England, Scotland or elsewhere and that if he had children they were back in Singapore and had a Chinese or other

Asiatic mother. But lighter moments such as these were few enough in those early days in Tamarkan and ceased altogether in later months as the pressure of work increased and we were urged on to complete the bridge.

When one party had set off northward from Tamarkan the girders which were to be laid between the concrete piers which (with so much effort) we had completed still sat on the banks of the river and I have no doubt that there was much effort demanded from those whom we left behind us and renewed abuse from the Jap engineers before the work was finally completed by the end of May in 1943. By that time and before our departure light artillery units of the Jap army with Bofors guns had been installed on the east bank of the river not far from the camp site and it was evident then that our captors anticipated that whenever the bridge was put into use so it would become the subject of attack from our aircraft, even though at that stage no bombers had been seen over Thailand and we ourselves were unaware that the twin-engine bomber was giving way to the machine-mounting four engines with later the advent of the Mosquito bomber in addition.

Those whom we left behind - Major Lees (still second in command to Colonel Toosey) one or two Gordon Officers and many other ranks, some employed in the camp - were to leave Tamarkan at later stages but during the interval they were there they were to witness several attempts by Allied aircraft to bomb the bridge which first escaped, was later damaged and in 1944 and 1945 twice rendered unusable. The Jap guns proved of little value to them because the planes which attacked the bridge flew at very high or very low altitudes and were scarcely troubled by the defending guns. But Tamarkan camp continued in existence almost until the moment that the Japanese finally capitulated although Colonel Toosey and Captain Boyle were to move on to Non Pladuk in April 1944 where initially they were located a short distance from the rail junction but later came on to the main camp adjoining the line, as I will later describe.

Colonel Toosey with his Adjutant Captain Boyle from the Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders had some success in avoiding incidents and preventing violence being done to the other ranks or officers. But these efforts received a setback at the end of 1942. This was because two parties made attempts to escape on the first day of 1943. So far as I know the groups concerned one comprising four other ranks and the other two officers who had made their plans quite independently and only chose to make their get-a-way on New Years Day because this was to be a holiday as the Japanese celebrate the beginning of their year which (unlike the Chinese, Jews and others) coincides with ours, by a measure of festivity comparable almost with the Hogmanay traditions in Scotland. They also pursue the practice which all might do well to emulate of destroying the great mass of paper and material objects which accumulate each year but which so many of us hang on to on the apparent theory that one day this or that letter or

object may be needed for use or for reference. By contrast, the Japs have a grand clear-out and then pile everything on to a bonfire which continues till ashes only remain.

Whether they had their ceremony on January 1st 1943 we had little opportunity of knowing since for some 5 hours we stood on the open ground which served as a parade ground whilst we were counted and recounted and as the temperature and tempers (especially of the Japs) got hotter and hotter.

The four other ranks were all from the hut which we shared with the East Surrey Regiment and were all from that unit. At least one had a fair knowledge of the Siamese and Malay language which they hoped could be of help to them. The Officers came from another part of the camp and one was an American, but whether they had any language knowledge I cannot say, but I know that they had maps and compasses and quite a fair supply of food mostly canned or pre-cooked.

They had decided to make their attempts on the day of the holiday because, although we were not required to work, it had been decreed (as on two earlier "rest" days) that everyone would go out from the camp and bring in as large a quantity of combustible timber from round about as they could locate and woe betide anyone who brought back only a single light stick or so for he would almost certainly have had it broken over his back and been sent out to fetch a larger quantity. The odd feature of these rest day fuel forages was that no check was kept by the Koreans - it was they who mostly guarded and counted us now - of the numbers leaving the camp or of those returning. The fuel gathering was intended to be done at first light before we consumed what passed for breakfast and at that hour the temperature in Tamarkan is at its lowest level which is always reached around the month of January, though the mornings soon warm up again as the year advances. But at that time it was common to see prisoners whose basic clothing sometimes comprised only shorts and shoes emerging from the camp draped in a blanket or ground sheet for extra protection. Thus the six escapers were able to leave with their baggage draped with blankets or a ground sheet which friends later brought back to the camp when the escapers had gained the shelter of trees not far away.

Eventually that New Years Day we were finally allowed to disperse and celebrations which had been planned were abruptly cancelled, but we felt it might all prove worthwhile if those who had left us managed to make good their escape.

By this time we had come to know the Jap engineers who were building the bridge to the extent that we knew that some were worse to work with than others and for some time we had been

working with a group which was controlled by a Lieutenant who was of athletic appearance with spectacles and who spoke excellent English. It was rumoured that he was a Christian and certainly there were less incidents of violence done by those engineers than we had come to expect from the others.

On January 2nd we were working with this same gang of engineers and when we had a break from working after an hour or so, the Jap Lieutenant came and sat down close to where I was seated. He turned to me and said quietly "Why do all men run away?" Well there were a number of probable answers but I felt I could do the escapers no harm (whatever their fate) when I answered "They did not get enough to eat here and have gone off hoping to get somewhere where they will have more and better food." He gave a sort of smile and said no more but it did seem to me the weeks that followed that perhaps there was some slight improvement in our rations but perhaps it was just coincidence. But, alas, the four from our hut were free for just three days only when I believe they were betrayed by natives in the area to whom no doubt a reward had been offered.

It is not my purpose to depict all the horror of those days²⁰ but there is no doubt that the Japs carried out their threat to execute escapers when apprehended and that these four men were executed within a short time of being returned to Tamarkan. Of the two Officers nothing was heard for some time and we all hoped that they had made good their escape but apparently after about three weeks when they had travelled a long distance towards freedom they were caught whilst sleeping, probably in the day time as they would have had to move only in the night. They also were executed and although later retribution was brought down (not perhaps quite literally) on the head of the Jap Camp Commander Suzuki by the War Crimes Tribunal, even he was perhaps only fulfilling orders given in Japan and presumably approved by Hirohito who remains as Emperor of that country, though I am amongst many who feel that he is fortunate to have kept his head let alone his throne.

No one else ever attempted an escape from a camp where I was located but much later around 1945 I understood that a Sub Conductor of the R.A.O.C. who had been with us far up the railway in 1943 made a get-away with near success but was recaptured and tortured by the Kempeto (Jap Security Police). Whether he lost his life I do not know.

The nights were cold in early 1943 and (as I have mentioned) the early mornings too for this

²⁰ For those seeking such an account, "The Naked Island" by Russell Braddon vividly describes the horrific treatment of sick, injured and those captured by the Japanese.

was the beginning of the dry season in Thailand and the flow of the river Mae Klong which had been a torrent when we arrived gradually slackened and the sinking of the vast concrete piers which had seemed at first an impossibly difficult task, gradually progressed and one by one these huge concrete supports began to arise out of the river and layer upon layer of concrete was built up so that work on the various piers was intensified as the engineers drove the weakening and far from willing teams of labourers from our camp to greater efforts in advancing the progress of the bridge. Work began to be organised by shifts so that with various of us working through the day others took their place and worked on through the night.

The actual construction of the piers followed a curious pattern to my quite untutored eyes. They were begun with the building of a timber frame kept free of water at the base by donkey pumps which were operated all round the clock. The first such frame whilst rounded in shape was splayed out like the base of a jug at its foot. When the frame was ready groups of men fed sand, cement and stones in varying quantities into a series of concrete mixers (driven by oil fuel) and the mixture was passed down slipways into the frame until this was completely filled. After a few days when the concrete had fully dried the frame was removed so as to expose the moulded mass now set like an up-ended drainpipe, hollow and raised up with the top just above water level. The process was then repeated with a further section being imposed on the first and the entire tube sunk by excavating the soil within and at the base of the concrete tank until the whole mass of concrete had sunk into the river bed. How many metres into the river bed the piers were set I do not know, but even with the dry weather which prevailed and the endless labours which those from our camp provided, it was early April before the final pier was raised to the correct level. The ultimate process in each case was the filling of the hollow centre of each pier with more concrete so as to create a solid mass, this being levelled off with sand and cement mixture of hard texture on which the steel girders were to be erected.

Although much later I travelled back past Tamarkan the bridge was, by then, under repair from one of several bombing raids which in 1944 and 1945 were made by Allied planes so that I have never actually crossed it in a train but by April 1943 the massive girders had arrived ready to be set up on the piers. This was a time of intense improvisation by the Japanese and in planning the construction of the Siam-Burma railway they had been obliged in order to provide girders for the crossing of the Mae Klong to dismantle a bridge of similar size in Java and to tranship it in sections across to Malaya and up through that country of Siam so that finally it came to rest on the banks of the river.

But if the determination in a few months of the Japs to complete the construction of a bridge which in modern times would (I would guess) take as much as two years in building, the intense

effort demanded of our quite unskilled labour very quickly began to leave its mark on all concerned. Many of my own fellow Gordons had been the victims of malaria before the war in the Far East had even begun and the same applied to many in the Argyles and East Surreys each of which had been abroad in the tropics long before 1941. In addition to attacks of fever, dysentery²¹ soon showed itself and spread sometimes in its milder bacillary form but also the amoebic form which while producing the same symptoms could only be eradicated altogether (and still I think today) by injections of emetine, a drug of which we possessed minimal quantities which were soon exhausted. So other methods had to be evolved which if not effecting a cure at least suppressed the microbe enough to maintain the strength of the patient and keep him alive. At this time the Japs did not question the views of our own doctors as to the capacity of individuals to work and with food and living conditions tolerable by comparison with the months ahead, the numbers available to the Japanese engineers remained enough for their purpose though the gap was narrowing.

It was a sad irony that the first fatal casualty sustained in the Camp just before the turn of the year was the servant (batman) of Major Lees a man called Alexander. A gentle person but of modest physique, he had unhappily contracted diphtheria. Always a virulent disease and difficult to treat it had shown itself in Singapore before we had left there and was perhaps the result of confined living conditions and hygiene difficulties. Scarcely had the shock of Alexander's death come upon us than three others from our number also succumbed and there were deaths amongst other units in the camp. So much so that a villainous Korean who was noted for his vicious treatment of all prisoners became known then and for ever after as the Undertaker because he constructed a rough coffin in which those who died were carried to the cemetery which had been set up close to the river and eastward from the camp itself. The coffin was not buried but returned to the camp ready whenever another such occasion called for its further use. A gruesome and macabre procedure which demonstrated clearly the callous outlook with which we were viewed by those who now held us in their power we were very conscious that in Jap eyes we were expendable and it was fortunate perhaps that our labours were so intense that we had little time to dwell on our own personal prospects of ultimate survival.²²

²¹ Dysentery is a term for a group of diseases affecting the intestines and characterised by bloody diarrhoea. Bacillary dysentery is due to a bacteria as for example in some forms of salmonella food poisoning. Amoebic dysentery is due to a larger "Amoeba Like" protozoan organism. The author contracted this and 20 years later required surgery for a late complication of this - an amoeboma of the caecum.

²² Over 61,000 British, Australian and Dutch prisoners were taken by the Japanese in South-East Asia of whom 12,000 died working on the railway (Times Atlas of the 2nd World

Our huts were of course overcrowded and the issue of large dark green mosquito nets probably achieved little in restricting the ravages of the mosquito but they did serve as ample and comfortable nesting places first for the bamboo bed bugs which torment any who sleep on beds so constructed, but soon we also identified lice which, apart from their known parasitic habits, contrive to spread much disease as no doubt they did. Of course every effort was made to keep down disease and its propagators but it was a battle fore-doomed to be lost and we were soon to know that the casualties in those first few months in Tamarkan were as nothing by comparison with the ravaging epidemics we were to witness further up the railway which already was marching on its way the track stretching well ahead of us and trains which used it crossing the river by means of the wooden bridge to the building of which I have already referred.

Before the sleepers and lines were laid along the bridge it consisted only of cross timbers above each set of main supporting struts with two narrow wooden strips laid parallel to the line of the bridge and running for its full length. Those who crossed from our side of the river to the other, whether in daylight or darkness, had to walk along these narrow planks with only two or three small bays (where there were rails) between the unguarded lengths of narrow timber situated in between. Several fell into the river which became more menacing as its flow diminished and its surface receded. No one was ever killed or drowned but there can have been few who walked the plank in those times without at least some feeling of fear or nausea.

I have said that the working force had proved just adequate for the building of the bridge, but should mention that several parties of Javanese Dutch troops had begun to arrive in Siam from about February onwards and most of these (on foot) went on up the line to camps located ahead of us, but some came to Tamarkan and were not very popular with the existing residents. Physically they were mostly in no condition to do manual work and apart from needing to accustom themselves to climate changes, they had brought so much clothing and other belongings with them that the huts they occupied seemed even more congested than ours and the insect life flourished in conditions where hygiene was given low priority and there seemed to be an almost continuous process of cooking by small groups who seemed prepared to eat almost anything and were careless in dealing with fragments that might remain. There is also a practice prevalent in the east and which those Dutch forces followed of using water rather than paper for toilet purposes and many carried special bottles when they used the latrines. What provoked the irritation - indeed anger - of the European prisoners in the camp was that water needed for their containers by the Dutch was drawn by them at the well which served the camp as a whole and we were suspicious that the degree of cleanliness exercised was inadequate and that there was a

War) .

risk that the water might be contaminated and disease spread. So it was a long time before relations between ourselves and the newcomers were other than chilly and there never was real accord between the two elements.

But if the Bridge had been finalised in a short time it was not as a result of special encouragement from our Officers or N.C.O.'s and as I have previously indicated the film portrayal had no relationship to fact and I believe the air damage which the Bridge later sustained came from British and not American planes. Far from collaborating with the Jap engineers there were many instances of actual sabotage where faulty work was done with the hope and intention that trouble on the line might result later even though this would perhaps involve prisoners as well as Japs. The concrete mixers which were used - there were about half a dozen probably acquired in Malaya - were frequently defective and invariably ran out of fuel because some member of the working party sold the oil left in the mixers in the lunch break to the local Thais and replenishments would then have to be found when the work was due to re-commence.

The Bridge on the Kwai film made much of prisoners singing and of organised music. At the height of the work there was no singing by parties marching out of or into the camp, although much later at the railbase camp at Non Pladuk where I was to find myself at the end of 1943, music was actively encouraged by the Japs in the shape of a small band which played as working parties left that camp.

In so far as our party had a mascot this role was fulfilled by a white bull terrier bitch which we had found at Adam Park and who had been adopted by one of our number who used somehow to keep her fed. She certainly needed food in Tamarkan because before we left Singapore she had been mated (by accident rather than design) with a black mongrel from one of the native Kampongs in the Adam Park vicinity and around January 1942 she produced two male puppies. The colour of each they inherited from their father but whether either survived I do not know but their mother was brought back to Aberdeen in 1945 and lived until 1948 and is buried under a strip of grassland near the old Gordon Barracks at the Bridge of Don where her history as a P.O.W. is recorded briefly on a little headstone which marks the spot where she lies. One of her sons I saw running around amongst the clay mud on the railway embankment which other members of our battalion were working at up near Takanun Camp which was at least 120 miles north of where the pup had been born and to which he must have journeyed for most if not all the way on foot. I believe that Peggy's owner may have been one of a special gang formed under Major Lees which laid rails and sleepers far up the line and this may explain how the young black dog (whose mother was of a fine pedigree bull terrier strain) had travelled so far.

In those early days in Tamarkan such money as we still had or earned by our labours was spent outside with native vendors whose sales of cigarettes, bananas, sugar cakes and such like were tolerated if not officially authorised by the Japs. There was much barter and sale of clothing, jewellery, watches and fountain pens which provided cash for the sellers but there is no doubt that a lot of the dysentery which developed was acquired from goods purchased in this way as vendors (mostly women) with teeth coloured blood red from the chewing of beetle nut were not very fussy about matters of hygiene although the Thais are generally clean and fastidious in their behaviour and shy in their nature.

CHAPTER 7

THE JUNGLE

April 1943 - June 1943

Tamarkan - Wampo - Kinsaiyok

As the task of completing the piers for the Tamarkan Bridge proceeded so three events happened which in two cases cheered us but in the third filled us with gloom. The favourable Omens were, first, a delivery of mail from relatives or friends at home²³ (our first since Singapore fell) the second was the provision of electric lighting in the huts in which up to that time the only lights had been provided by crude oil lamps made from cloth or string serving as a wick dipped in a tin or other container of coconut oil. The third and adverse event was our orders to provide a party of about 120 Gordons to form part of a larger group numbering around 300 to travel on northwards up the line where other tasks awaited us.

The party included four of our own Officers with Sergeant Major Knight and Quartermaster Michie but it was commanded by an artillery Major called Roberts with whom we had hitherto had little contact in Tamarkan. He at first seemed remote and austere but he carried himself in a manner which instinctively commanded our respect; he later proved a strong champion on our behalf in seeking and often obtaining improved conditions as we were moved from place to place.

If a psychiatrist were to ask me (though none has so far had the opportunity) as to the period in our captivity which I would most expect to re-enact in a nightmare involving my life as a Japanese prisoner, I would unhesitatingly answer the months between April and October 1943. That period spanned almost exactly the beginning and the end of the monsoon of that year it was the period when I travelled some 200 miles almost wholly on foot and, as in the motto of the Royal Tank Regiment, 'through mud and blood' but in our case without finding any 'green fields beyond'. It was indeed the period when the Japanese High Command ordained that by the beginning of November 1943 the Siam-Burma Railway would have started to run regular trains starting from the main line junction just west of Bangkok at Non Pladuk north and westwards to Moulmein and beyond. It was in short the beginning of the big "Speedo" period in which every prisoner who was considered fit to work was beaten and bullied by Koreans and Japanese alike until this terrifying task pursued with the minimum of material and far below the minimum of food and medical supplies it justified was finally achieved. It was in this period that several

²³ The author described to his family how one such card received from home went to great lengths describing how friends from there were getting divorced. Such matters seemed trivial and unimportant viewed from a Japanese Prisoner Of War Camp.

thousand Allied prisoners died and others had their health so hopelessly undermined that within a short time they also were no more. It was the time when, desperate because disease and lack of food had so enormously diminished the numbers of prisoners remaining fit to perform any task, the Japanese brought up into the rain saturated country through which the line was designed to run, an enormous reinforcement of native labour drawn from the areas over which Nippon now held dominion. This extra labour force comprised not only the males who it was intended should work but also in many cases their wives and families. The accommodation with which they were provided was totally inadequate and became rapidly worse as the weather and disease took their toll so that not only was the measure of labour produced by this force disproportionately low in relation to the total number involved but the camps in which they were huddled became the chief centres from which that most dreaded of all tropical diseases - cholera - was spread.

Our first journey from Tamarkan was begun in April just after the monsoon had broken so that as we went forward we knew that for the next six months or more it would rain at least twice each day and later it became evident that in the mountainous areas bordering Burma there would be what our modern weather-casters would describe as "more continuous rain".

At first we were conveyed by train, but not for us a "special" or even the old closed metal trucks. We were to be superimposed around and above a train of open wooden trucks carrying several hundred rails eventually to be laid along the still uncompleted line ahead. This meant no cover from above and for most of us being perched on or just behind large bundles of rails which together must have weighed many tons and which (in typical Jap fashion) were most inadequately secured. It was this fact which almost as soon as we had departed caused a tragedy to befall me which was to have not a little influence on my welfare over the months to come. I have already mentioned that the clothing of which I was possessed when Singapore fell was very small; later I had managed to procure a cushion - which served me as a pillow - and a fork, spoon and mess tin with which to consume what food there was to be had. On the death of one of those who succumbed at Tamarkan I received (by means of a lottery) a mosquito net which never was used by me for its intended purpose but which served as a sort of under blanket for use at night when conditions were always damp and often cold. But I still had a serviceable water bottle the need for which had never been greater than at the start of our journey into the jungle ahead.

But, alas, when the train (as it was later to do again more than once) stopped abruptly because of a defect in the line or for some other reason known only to the driver of the engine, the pile of rails around which we were grouped on the truck I had boarded gave a backward lurch and

nearly impaled the neck of my precious bottle. The container itself was undamaged but the neck into which the stopper was wedged was almost severed so that it remained loose for ever after until the bottle itself was finally abandoned a year or so later. But the bottle could never again be totally filled and was always liable to shed its contents unless most carefully handled whilst the fractured neck soon became rusted and was never other than a poor make-shift.

The train carried us to a point some four miles or so south of the Wampo Camp where a huge viaduct was in process of construction. It comprised what resembled some vast mass of wooden scaffolding erected in layers against an almost perpendicular rock face which towered up above the river. This wooden viaduct would eventually have sleepers placed across its topmost supports and would carry the line from the points at either end where the ground was at a higher level, thus avoiding the building of a tunnel which presumably would have been a still more formidable undertaking and have occupied a longer period of time whilst requiring, no doubt, specialist knowledge and techniques which we as a work force did not possess.

Like the Israelites on the journey from Egypt, we travelled on stage by stage passing what was to become a marshalling area for the railway at Tarsau where we began to climb up into the massive hills through which the river winds its way down from the hills of lower Burma. The road was hard, the going heavy but apart from two or three of our number who were left behind us (one of whom died soon after) the party remained intact until we reached our final destination at a camp called Kinsaiyok which, I suppose, is about 100 miles above Tamarkan and whilst situated close to the river it already had a large population of sick and one cause of the illness was quickly apparent to us.

This was when we were paraded by a Japanese Gunzo (Sergeant) who shouted abuse at us and Frank Knight (C.S.M.) who was in charge of the parade and who was punched several times about the head. This was because (as was the fact) various persons during our first night in the camp had relieved themselves in the vicinity of the bamboo huts in the camp which we had been allotted instead of making the journey to the latrines which were situated a short distance away. Adjoining our huts were others occupied by a party of Javanese Dutch and we well knew that it was they and not members of our party who were responsible. There was a murmur of disapproval from our party when Frank Knight (C.S.M.) was assaulted by the Jap sergeant who was a villainous specimen in any event and he desisted from the blows on being told there would be no recurrence. That night there was a voluntary picket rota set up by our party which patrolled the huts through the night. Any Javanese or other person found in a compromising position received a boot in the most obvious place and shown the way he should have gone. I believe the picket continued the next night but the effect of the first demonstration really

sufficed and that particular problem was thereupon solved.

But the work was hard and there were quite long distances to walk to reach the centre of operations or returning from it so that even after the relief of a bathe in the coolness of the river when our day finally ended, we were never other than utterly exhausted after each day's labour. Back in Tamarkan our rations in both quality and quantity had tended to improve and the closeness of that camp to the relative civilisation of Kanchanaburi meant that outside purchases became possible but up in Kinsaiyok we were back to basic rice cooked in primitive conditions with difficulty in obtaining dry fuel and with no meat whatsoever. Dried fish resembling a sort of ossified haddock or herring having little edible flesh and lots of bones was sometimes issued as were dried vegetables which resembled seaweed in appearance and were utterly devoid of flavour. And, of course, it rained; whenever we were exposed and without cover down would come the rain in torrents so that all roads and tracks became quagmires and were in nearly every case in that area covered by pools of water which regathered and multiplied despite the fierce sunshine which blazed down in between the showers. More and more men were being demanded by the engineers so that even after every effort by the doctors to keep the worst sick in hospital or at least free of work for a day or so, they were forced to yield up more and more people whose weakness from dysentery and continuing bouts of malaria was so great that it was all they could manage to struggle out to the working site later to return but not before they had been beaten by the Korean guards whose sadistic instincts certainly were unabated by the obvious illness of their victims and indeed it seemed that they took special delight in tormenting those whose weakness was most apparent. Ironically the Koreans were despised by the Japanese to no less degree than they were hated by the prisoners and when the end finally came they became complete outcasts and it was not surprising that those who appealed to us to aid them in their plight found little sympathy.

But at that time (and it was fortunate for us that we could not judge as to our future) more than two years remained before we were to find our liberty restored and the heat was on and all the time getting hotter!

Mostly in the far from merry month of May 1943 our party was engaged in building embankments and excavating a huge cutting through a mass of rock and granite. But during two madly hysterical days we were at work cutting, gathering and pulling out some of the trees which grew in abundance in the jungle areas of this part of the Thai-Burma border. Two senior Japanese N.C.O.'s were in charge of the building of what was in effect an embankment crossing a deep and lengthy ravine which in due course the line was intended to cross but the height to which the line was to be raised was so great that the Japs had seemingly concluded that the timber construction would occupy less time than excavation of soil to build an embankment. So

large a quantity of wood was needed that a portable saw-mill had been brought to the site and was fully occupied cutting the trees to the length and shape required. Meanwhile two Japs climbed amongst the timbers as these were laid and fixed in position, leaping from one section to another with great agility and like two great apes (to which I may add they bore a marked physical resemblance) screaming to one another and to such unfortunate members of the working party who were within their range and who if they failed to react as the Japs desired would often have hurled at them pieces of wood or metal or such other object as might at the relevant moment be within reach of the engineer concerned.

It was also on this section that elephants were employed to drag out the great trees from which the wooden structure was being created. Elephants are, as is well known, very intelligent and strong but they are also extremely obstinate and strict as to the period of time within which they will perform their required task. Our elephants had an agreement between them that at 4 p.m. each day they should withdraw their labour. There were no blacklegs amongst them (at least not in the industrial sense) and weary as we were it was left to us in gangs of a dozen or so to carry on where the animals left off. The weight of a tree was itself enormous, but when it is remembered that the wooden trolleys (rather like those used by window cleaners but much heavier) had to be dragged along rough paths catching in every root, branch or creeper which lay in its track, it can be imagined that the measure of progress we achieved was ludicrously small in relation to the effort which we needed to exert. On both days when we worked in the vicinity of that wooden structure we returned to the camp at 9 p.m. having been away for over twelve hours. Little wonder we were always hungry and that our energies were flagging and our weight falling. We had always had some sickness amongst our number and those involved were increasing as time passed with new casualties even though one or another sometimes recovered enough to rejoin the working party. That they did so was partly because the Japs were now taking a direct interest in who stayed in camp as sick and frequently sent out to work men who our doctors has ordered to bed or to rest. But some of us kept going because not working meant forfeiture of pay and in any event there was a depressive effect of which one was conscious as occasionally it fell to me to join the sick and have a day in camp ostensibly freed from the burdens of the working party. But apart from some dysentery I was luckier than most, especially those who had sustained scratches or cuts from the vicious bamboo which grew profusely everywhere we went and worked. These small injuries swiftly developed into ulcers which the doctors were finding difficulty in treating and utter defeat usually in achieving a cure.

CHAPTER 8
DEATH STALKS IN THE JUNGLE

June 1943 - August 1943

Kinsaiyok - An unnamed camp near to Tonchan
- return to Kinsaiyok

After a month or so had gone by in Kinsaiyok we learned that, led by a villainous little Jap Corporal, we were to travel back on the road we had originally journeyed and that we were to set up a new but similar camp in the jungle where we would be working on a section of the line where progress had been specially slow. The camp was near to the river along which we received our food and other supplies and by which those seriously ill would be evacuated to Kinsaiyok. Once again our party had shrunk in size; when we left Changi we were about 300 strong, out of Tamarkan the number was barely half that figure and now we were down to about 100. But most of the Officers who had struggled with us as far as Kinsaiyok were in the party which left that camp including all the Gordon Officers and Major Roberts remained in command. Of those Gordons who we left behind many were in hospital and some far from well but work was continuing at Kinsaiyok. Those who left were not I think sorry to do so, though we knew our captors well enough now to know that it was no picnic on which we were setting out. The journey does not have any special memories for me but we followed tracks which the rains had converted into mud heaps with pools and small lakes in areas which were lower lying. The camp when we reached it was in its appearance alone a place from which we shrank instinctively. The site was a sea of mud in the midst of which we pitched a few small single surface tents into which our party was eventually crowded. All around were great trees of which there are an abundance in that part of Thailand and mingled with them were clumps of bamboo towering above to a great height and with large vicious looking spines protruding in great quantities from the branches. Beside the muddy path leading into the camp and surrounded by trees were three bamboo crosses marking the graves of some who had preceded us but who by the time the first tenants of the site had been moved on had themselves gone to that place from which as yet we know of no return.

Mercifully the tasks we were to do while working at this camp were brief though every bit as onerous as any we had faced before, but when after about three weeks our Japanese Corporal announced a further move we had no regrets. In the centre of the site there lay a tree trunk which may have fallen there or perhaps been cut down. A fire was built which somehow in the incessant rain was kept alight and in time ignited this tree trunk. This in turn began to burn, but slowly as though brooding over our plight. It gave off very little smoke but in the dark nights (made even gloomier by surrounding trees) it became a beacon which gave us a little warmth and cheer amidst the putrid dampness which overhung the whole site. Many a prisoner weak

and weary from dysentery and staggering to or from the latrines in the night found a little relief from his misery standing huddled up to that great mass of timber as it smouldered slowly, hissing and flickering from the rain which in that dreadful spot fell almost unceasingly.

Our second move took us a little further away from Kinsaiyok towards Tonchan camp from which we can have been but a few miles distant and which even at that time had acquired a reputation as an evil spot where workers found no respite and where we had heard that sickness and death were now rampaging unhindered.

Our new camp site (unlike its predecessor) showed no signs of earlier habitation and was a great improvement on the one we had just left. It was situated on high ground with the river flowing just below and though the section of the railway on which we were to be employed was more than a mile distant, the ascent to it was gradual till one made a sudden final climb to where the track which the line was to follow was being carved out of the hill face. Here was being formed a narrow terrace with ground rising steeply above it whilst below down another steep slope lay massive jungle through which we daily emerged. For the fortunate few with time and energy available to consider it, the view to be seen to the south (that is to say down the track) was really awe inspiring since there was visible seemingly endless miles of immense forest rising up from a thick green carpet of giant bushes and creeper intermingled with bamboo in great variety over all of which there hung, even in the high noon heat of the day, a damp mist which was dark and heavy in the early dawn, thinning as the day advanced only to return again in the evening.

Daily, sometimes more than once, across this jungle beyond which lay Tonchan we could hear the sound of a bugler playing the 'Last Post' - hauntingly marking the passing of yet another from that ill fated camp.

Beyond this stretch of jungle forest and winding away into the distance was the river partly bordered by trees and partly by giant masses of rock which towered above it as cliffs border the sea shore.

But at the end of May 1943 there were no invitations to sightseers being issued by the Japanese from whom we learned later the timid local dwellers had long since fled. Their task as laid down by Nippon High Command was completion come what may of the entire line in time for the great Jap offensive into India timed to begin as the rains were due to end in 1944 and for this there had to be the big build up from the end of 1943 into the early months of the following year.

From our Kinsaiyok Jungle camp (No. 2) parties went out daily to move giant rocks and build the terracing to which I have already referred over a distance of some two or three miles. Trees were cut down to fill in culverts where the flow of torrents of monsoon rain had driven a path for itself down the slopes towards the river below. Where there were great seams of rock which could not be moved by hand or with ordinary leverage it was left to us with hammer and chisel hour after hour and often in the high noon to drill holes to a depth of a metre or so into which the engineers thrust sticks of explosive to which they laid fuses. These were ignited often with scant warning to workers in the vicinity many of who suffered injury from the jagged pieces of granite which were often projected long distances. Several times these fragments landed in our camp which gives an indication of the extent of some of the explosions.

The camp still consisted of a row of some eight or ten tents covering the usual bamboo platform erected above ground for sleeping purposes with the area allotted per man being about 18 inches. There was no hospital and no doctor all medical duties being delegated to a Corporal of the R.A. who had been trained as a medical orderly and who in those days and months strove hard to keep at bay the malaria and dysentery which were prevalent and to care also for such other ailments as afflicted those in the party.

If a man was very ill he was sent back in the boat which came daily from Kinsaiyok with supplies, returning later with these evacuees who in turn were replaced by reinforcements sent to us from the base camp. We had heard soon after we set up the camp that the number of sick at Kinsaiyok had continued to rise and that deaths had occurred. Several of those who had died had been members of our party and one in particular we had thought to have such a strong constitution that we found it difficult to believe that he had succumbed. Already it was known that cholera had broken out at the camps between ourselves and Tarsau - notably at Tonchan (to which I have already referred) and at the two Konyu camps and as we knew that many had already died in these places it was horrifying to think that we were now so closely threatened by that dreaded disease.

Several people in our own camp were far from well and I knew that two of the Officers and C.S.M. Knight had symptoms suggesting dysentery and George Roberts (my companion on the voyage out from England) had had several malaria attacks. But the Japs would not allow more than a bare handful of people to remain in the camp while the rush was on to finish the line and many went out with working parties whose strength sufficed barely to get them to the site where work was going on and they had then to try and spend as much time in the jungle (ostensibly relieving themselves) rather than in the blazing heat of the open embankment where the work went remorselessly on. Not infrequently these poor fellows were apprehended by the Koreans

whose task it was to keep the parties at work and then there would be beatings with bamboo sticks or sometimes a man might be required to hold a heavy stone or stick above his head until he sank exhausted or his tormentor relented.

Early in July we had sent back to Kinsaiyok two or three of the worst of our sick cases and in return a similar number arrived as reinforcements. With them came a strong rumour that cholera had now broken out in Kinsaiyok Camp itself. This news made us further depressed and we dreaded the possibility that it might be our fate to be returned to Kinsaiyok and we wondered what conditions must now prevail there.

The Jap engineers with whom we had been working at this camp were the same group as we had worked under at Tamarkan including the English speaking Officer who had spoken to me after the attempted escapes on New Years Day of 1943. Their attitude was now much stricter than when we had met before and they drove us harder each day. The Officer said to me one day "Railway must finish by November - these are our orders". In charge of the section of the line forward to Kinsaiyok and (I believe) back as far as Tarsau was one Lieutenant Fuji a tall quite handsome looking Japanese, young and arrogant. He was always to be seen in a cream coloured shirt with smart breeches and gaiters and with his sword carried from his belt as he walked briskly from point to point along the line, shouting and gesticulating. He was obviously held in respect by the engineers with whom we worked but I think everyone was rather afraid of him as he was known to have a sharp temper.

When therefore our medical orderly (with his limited knowledge and equipment) reported to Major Roberts that he was worried about one of the new arrivals from Kinsaiyok who was very ill and that he thought we might have a case of cholera in our midst, the position was reported to the Jap Corporal who remained in charge of us and who in turn must have informed Lieutenant Fuji. The Japs we were soon to learn were utterly terrified of cholera both as a disease (which they might themselves contract) and as a potential scourge which in sweeping up and down the line would further delay completion of our task as already it had begun to do. We heard then that Fuji had ordered that a tent be erected out in the jungle at least 100 yards distance from the camp and that the sick man be placed in it and left to recover as best he could. Clearly we could not in all humanity desert the casualty in this way and Major Roberts informed the Japs at the camp that he could not carry out Fuji's order. Thereupon the Japs were ordered by Fuji to shoot the sick man where he still lay. It so happened that on that day and on the day preceding I had been confined to camp with a further attack of dysentery and though feeling weak and exhausted I was nevertheless aware of what was happening and saw one of the Japs (not I think the Corporal) passing the tent where I lay and going toward the end of the camp behind me

where I knew the sick man was lying in a small bell shaped tent. The Jap rifles, though lighter than our Lee Enfield and of smaller calibre, were of similar pattern and as he passed close to me the Jap was muttering excitedly and shot the bolt of the rifle forward as though into the firing position. The camp was quite quiet and relatively deserted and I waited and listened. After quite a little time seemed to have elapsed I heard a shot fired - I think only one. Then there was silence and I saw the Jap return. Later we were told that the sick man was dead and that his body had been taken into the jungle and burned or buried.

The sequel to this event which (as a lawyer) has always fascinated me, horrible as were the circumstances, was that not so very long afterwards we learned that Major Roberts and the Officer who served as his Camp Adjutant had been ordered to go to Bangkok and I saw the two of them leave the camp early one morning to board a boat which was to take them down the river at the start of their journey. Thereafter we came under the command of another Officer, Major Rowdell, who was in charge of the camp until following two nights when parties literally worked on the line "all round the clock" the section we were working was finally declared finished. It must then have been around about my birthday which is mid July and being still far from well though I had participated in the final foray on the line I managed, because my boots had finally disintegrated, to get attached to a small group which was to be left to pack up the camp and would then be picked up by boat to be taken up the river to Kinsaiyok. This respite of some two or three days was of great help and by the time we had returned to the main camp I was feeling quite well again and had benefitted from the extra rations which had been left behind as the main body left us earlier to return to Kinsaiyok on foot.

Much later we were to learn that Major Roberts and his companion had been taken to Bangkok and had then been charged with Lieutenant Fuji with causing the death by shooting of the man who had died out in the jungle. Before the trial they had received minimum rations and had been kept in fully lit cells whilst at intervals subject to questioning by the Kempetai. Apparently the military court which tried the men accused went closely into the facts from which it appeared that the Jap, who had been ordered to shoot the man believed to have cholera and who was then barely alive, was afraid to enter the tent lest he contract the disease himself and indicated to Major Roberts and the Adjutant that he proposed to shoot at the sick man from a distance. It was evident to them that the Jap was in a state of panic and had little knowledge of handling the weapon he proposed to fire. Major Roberts and his companion it was alleged then intervened and a shot was fired from within the tent. The verdict of the Court, worthy perhaps of Solomon, was that the man involved had died before any shot was fired. Both Major Roberts and his companion were absolved from guilt or responsibility for the occurrence and later returned to our party. But not before they had been closely questioned as to the conditions

prevailing both in our camp and up and down the line. Later Roberts and his companion rejoined our party and received the congratulations and good wishes of all concerned.

As to Lieutenant Fuji he was apparently deemed in disgrace by higher authority and though not, I think, reduced in rank he was not sent back to the railway but removed to duties in another part of Thailand or elsewhere.

It is of interest to note that in the opinion of our medical orderly (who admittedly had never before seen a case of cholera) the man who died was in a dying condition when he first reached our camp. This may seem surprising in that he was supposed to have been fit to work when he left Kinsaiyok on the boat to join us but cholera strikes so suddenly and with such a rapid rate of deterioration that it is more than possible that the disease had overtaken him in the interval of the journey between the main camp and the spot where we were located.

The very great significance of this occurrence is that in my belief this was the first time that the Jap High Command had become aware of the appalling conditions prevailing up and down the line from Tamarkan northwards. It was soon after they acquired this knowledge that we heard that new camps were being built and others extended to accommodate the large number of prisoners who had become ill in camps up and down the line and in August 1943 and from then on the evacuation of a large number of these was begun.

In our case the remnants of our party had now all returned to Kinsaiyok where utter gloom prevailed and death stalked at every turn, but away from the main camp a hospital area had been established in which the numerous cholera victims were being treated by Major Bennett of the R.A.M.C. and the other doctors with various heroic orderlies and helpers who between them saved many lives. But many were already dead and others foredoomed to die. Meantime the Japs had ordered that a party be organised to journey onwards up the line. It was to be of smaller size than that which had left Tamarkan in April and there was much to-ing and fro-ing as to who should be included and what was more who was to remain and later to be evacuated down the line. Had I cared to represent my state of health to the doctors I believe that I could have avoided joining the new party but I had a great liking for Frank Knight who, though far from well, declared himself ready to continue. With him were C.S.M. (Chick) Michie, Sergeant Smart and several I knew well from 'C' Company, whom I think it had been shown had stayed 'the course' as strongly as those from any other company in our battalion. One Gordon Officer only was with us and in all there were I think 48 Gordons in the party which eventually set out. In the few days which elapsed at Kinsaiyok whilst the new party was being got together there was not much to be done and I had a chance to wash such clothing and belongings as I still

owned though at the height of the monsoon drying was a problem. I also effected repairs to my 'wardrobe' as best I could but my leather boots had finally disintegrated before we left the jungle camp. I learned that the Japs were issuing new rubber boots for those in need and quickly secured a pair. It was the largest which I gathered was ever to be found in any Nippon Quartermasters Store but at size 9 they were at least half an inch too small for my feet and being of the shape which we had become accustomed to as worn by the Nips with a recess intended for the big toe and another but only slightly larger space for ones other toes. I just about managed to get into them but had little hope of travelling far without suffering great discomfort - but I hoped that at least they would keep out the mud and the water of which at that time there was a vast surplus in all directions.

Everyone was very jumpy because of the threat of cholera - all our feeding utensils were plunged into boiling water before and after use and further warnings were being issued against drinking other than boiled water whilst all bathing in the river was forbidden. It was in any event now in full spate and anyone attempting to swim would have risked being swept away in the furious current.

But I did find at least one person who was no less calm than when we had last seen one another - though heaven knows he had reason to be just as excitable as others in the camp when I think again of the story he had to tell me. He was, I would guess, something over 30 years of age, well built but not athletic. Always when I had seen him last he had been the epitome of calmness. But that was when he was a male nurse in Alexandra Hospital tending to me and others in the fever ward there. It will be recalled that I had left the hospital on the morning of Wednesday February 11th 1942 when it was already overfull with casualties from the battle as well as patients who were ill. Fighting had got closer to the hospital on the Thursday and on the Friday morning Japanese guerillas entered the hospital and afterwards claimed that they had been fired upon from one of the ground floor verandas by retreating Indian troops. This has never been substantiated and even if true it provided no sort of justification for what followed since it was abundantly clear even to the most myopic of Japanese soldiers that the building was a hospital and in use as such. Nevertheless some medical staff and patients, including surgeons engaged in performing operations in the theatre, were bayoneted by the guerillas who entered the hospital. Some of the Japs (so my friend told me) had performed what later became the familiar trick of asking if anyone had a watch or pen and promptly carrying it off. But the nursing staff, some male - others female, were all congregated together and were then put into the building which had been in use as a home for the nurses. In all around 200 persons including Padre Smith and all the 'up patients' (amongst whom I had been numbered less than 48 hours earlier) were crowded into two or three quite small rooms in conditions of stifling heat.

But when darkness fell Japanese soldiers came and began to take out those inside in pairs. Eventually my friend realised that it would be his turn and he resolved that he would make a break and run if an opportunity presented itself. When it came to him he managed on emerging into the open to elude the grasp of the Jap who had hold of him and ran off as fast as he was able into the trees and thick bushes which were not far from the hospital building. The soldiers fired in the direction where he had disappeared and when he lay hidden in thick cover they threw grenades which exploded close by him but, fortunately, without causing him injury. Eventually the Japs seemed to give up the search and he waited till the noise of their movements and voices died away then he crawled slowly away eastward towards Singapore city and ultimately managed to make his way to the General Hospital in the centre of the city. He told me how when he recounted what had befallen him to the senior Warrant Officer at the hospital the latter expressed open disbelief of his story and accused him of having deserted from Alexandra; later however it was confirmed that the Japs were in fact in possession of the hospital as he had claimed but when he enquired later he could only find one other of those who had been imprisoned with him who had escaped the massacre which had occurred.

In the period of sixteen months or so which had elapsed since the fall of Singapore this was the first time I had heard this appalling tale and whilst later the occurrences were confirmed and have been reported on in the later years, I believe that my friend who I found so unexpectedly in Kinsaiyok was almost the only survivor of this terrible event. He was awaiting evacuation southwards from Kinsaiyok and I hope survived to regain his freedom and perhaps still lives. I, of course, was to journey on northwards and I have never seen him again.

CHAPTER 9
NIGHTMARE MARCH AND BEYOND
August 1943 - September 1943
Kinsaiyok - Hindato - Takanun - Konkuita

Our complement of Gordons was now only 48 and we could not have set off in worse conditions. I remember having calculated that if we had been at home and in peacetime, it would have been August Bank Holiday but we had no charabancs or side shows or even a few umbrellas to keep off the torrential rain which fell as we were paraded and counted and officially moved on our way. As usual we carried not only our personal effects but also our cooking utensils and there travelled with us some thirty bullocks which members of the party took turns to whip up but in all the wind and rain and with trees and bushes for them to wander into the task of keeping them with us and travelling at a roughly level rate of progress was a nightmare.

Much of our journey lay beside and along embankments already prepared to receive the sleepers and lines which were to carry the railway forward through the giant hills and forests which abounded above the River, the general course of which the line followed. We passed the notorious Rintin Camp now emptied of inhabitants, their tasks completed. At regular intervals in small and large groups, some close up to the embankment, were the simple bamboo crosses serving to remind us of the many who had been there before us but who would not be making any return journey. I must say I do not know how far we travelled that first day but of Bank Holidays in my life it was certainly the wettest and we were all utterly spent when a halt was finally called.

The journey was made doubly difficult because ahead of us were travelling a larger convoy of native labourers from the large force recruited by the Japs to supplement our efforts and to try to ensure that the line was finished on time. Eventually they were to lose far more than ourselves having inadequate food, training equipment and more particularly no medical officers or supplies. But they nearly all walked barefoot or in the loose wood sandals which later we ourselves sometimes wore. In the mud their progress was slow but we soon discovered that bridges of varying lengths covering ravines and the like had been constructed. They consisted as had the temporary wood bridge at Tamarkan of two narrow strips of timber across which later the sleepers for the lines would be laid. In the meantime a covering of greasy mud left by the native convoy ahead provided a further hazard for ourselves as we strove to keep our balance in effecting a crossing with, perhaps, an army cooker in one hand and our kit across our backs. Many found these crossings a strain on their nerves and I saw several who had to get astride the planks and ease themselves across whilst colleagues helped them with their burdens.

When we had made the journey up from Tamarkan to Kinsaiyok, the officers who had retained camp beds as well as a fuller wardrobe than the rest of us found some amongst us strong enough (and for a consideration no doubt) to help them in the transport of their baggage but on this further journey it was every man (irrespective of rank) for himself and indeed it became a case of the survival of the fittest - perhaps of the most fortunate.

But after a day of toil in incessant rain and with little real cover when our convoy did halt, we were finally stopped at a point where there seemed to be no established camp. To the left of the completed rail embankment - a sea of mud as we reached it - were a large group of trees beneath which was the usual jungle scrub and creeper. It was nearly dark and we were utterly spent, yet we needed food and this had still to be cooked. Somehow fires were kindled and rice was cooked though there was a little as I recall to eat with it and it had scarcely been fully cooked through the dampness of the wood for the fires and the shortage of time. As for sleeping, our Japanese escorts finally produced three single layer box tents of the type in use, I believe, for the Indian Army but between them sufficient even with maximum concentration for barely 40 of our number. The rest were then obliged to bivouac but as this meant having a ground sheet or gas cape, neither of which I possessed, I managed to find a minute space in one of the tents. Those with ground sheets spread them within the tent and we made the best we could of the night, finding some warmth from one another. Overhead the trees dripped their moisture incessantly and added to our feeling of gloom and despair.

Next morning the Japs were soon screaming for us to resume our march - they having enjoyed the use of a tent to themselves and having pre-cooked rice and concentrated rations to sustain them. But our cooks had been struggling since well before daylight to kindle fires to cook us some rice but with little success and in the end we had just a small ration per man before we were once again assembled, counted and moving forward. Somehow word reached us that not long after we had left Kinsaiyok George Roberts had a severe attack of cerebral malaria and had collapsed and died. Although he had been weakened by illness since coming to Siam, he had been well enough to leave Tamarkan and news of his sudden passing was a great shock to me and indeed to all our party. But we ourselves were already coming under new pressure from the exhaustion of our first day's journey and the appalling weather and conditions. We had been warned not to drink from the many small streams which had begun to flow down from the saturated hills which surrounded us, but boiling water was rationed because of the difficulty in producing it in sufficient quantity and the temptation was strong in the heat of the day (for between the rainstorms the sun was no less hot than in the dry season) and many of us drank water which had not been sterilised despite the warnings we had received.

On the second day Frank Knight was clearly finding it difficult to keep going though he made no complaint. Eventually we arrived outside the large camp situated like Kinsaiyok on the rivers edge and called Hindato. But access to the main camp was possible only across flood water by which it was almost surrounded and we were left to camp on some marshy ground which in places was already under water. Above in a grove amongst some banana trees there were some crude native houses and the residents were offering bananas and malacca sugar (like molasses) as well as cigarettes and tobacco for sale. Frank Knight was beside me in the tent we had been allotted and though I had little money he had some from the sale which I had made for him of a clock just before we returned to Kinsaiyok from the jungle camp. I bought some bananas of which Frank ate one or two and so did I, but some malacca sugar I had put into my own mess tin which in those days one often carried at one's back with the handle stuck into one's belt. Sitting in the tent I shared the sugar with Frank Knight taking each a little but using the same spoon. The Japs had said we could stay on the site for the whole of the day after our arrival for I think they were as exhausted by the conditions as ourselves, but apart from the food to which I have referred Frank Knight took nothing further to eat that day and the doctor having seen him and another of our party both were put in a separate tent for the second night. Next morning both men seemed worse with acute vomiting and diarrhoea and our medical orderly from the jungle camp days told us he thought they had cholera. We decided to try to persuade the main camp authorities to take them in, there being a boat in which they could be ferried across. Four of us carried poor Frank Knight down to the water's edge but were met with refusal from the people in Hindato who were nervous of taking in cases believed to be of cholera. So the medical orderly agreed to stay with them both in a tent on the site we had been occupying. We collected salt from amongst the party from which we hoped that saline could be prepared with which, if they indeed had cholera, there was just the chance that they might be treated and cured. But the Nips were impatient for us to continue on our journey and immediately on returning with Frank Knight I was handed my mess tin in which was some rice. I suppose I was foolhardy not to wash my hands but there being so little time I consumed the rice without further thought and within a few minutes we were off on our way. Alas before we had left the next camp up the line where we stopped after leaving Hindato, we learned that both Frank Knight and the other member of our party were dead. We knew by then how swift is the effect on the human body of cholera so that this news was not a great surprise but it was a further blow to rapidly fading morale. Apart from these two fatalities there were others from amongst our original number who fell out from the march at each further stage that we advanced to our ultimate destination whose identity remained, as ever was the wont of the Japs, a secret until the actual moment had arrived. In the event when we reached Konkuita I was one of six only who completed the final stage on foot though the others followed on within a day or two by river craft which picked them up along the way.

Just how I continued without myself falling by the way I do not after the long period which has intervened recall; I used always as we reached each new stage to wash my feet in the river which perhaps made it easier for me to start afresh on the next day's stint - even so long before the journey ended I had been forced to cut the big toe piece from each of my rubber boots as issued to me at Kinsaiyok thus effectively destroying any chance thereafter of keeping my feet dry, though reducing the pain which they had given me before I finally decided that I must take such drastic action.

The bullocks which we had taken with us on our march from Kinsaiyok to Konkuita had somehow been kept together along the way and when we reached Takanun quite a large and well established camp we discovered that the number of beasts in our herd was greater by one than that with which we had begun. Enquiry showed that the newcomer was not local and we eventually concluded that an animal must have been left behind by some party which had already passed through and was ahead of us. There was an immediate conference between our acting herdsman and one of our number who had had experience years before in some Aberdonian abattoir. Thereafter events and those concerned moved swiftly so that by nightfall the animal had not only been killed and skinned and the waste products disposed of, but the tastier elements, which the lay public would describe no doubt as offal, were cooked and being consumed before we retired for the night and next day our party set out each with his mess tin crammed as full as he could manage with newly boiled beef. I was but a consumer in this most unusual exercise and, indeed, spent the evening in question lodged in a curious bamboo shanty which resembled an over large dog-kennel but which had till but a few days earlier housed Mr Milne the Regimental Sergeant Major of the Gordons who, with others, at the time of our arrival been placed in quarantine because they had been in contact with others then ill with cholera or who had died from that disease. This was the only good night's rest I had on the whole of that dreadful journey from Kinsaiyok to Konkuita and though my entry and exit to the camp where I slept were not only unsanctioned but expressly prohibited by the Japs in charge of our party, I felt that the risks involved were well worth while especially with the magnificent meat "ration" which I drew next day and we had reason to feel that our reunion in Takanun with many old friends had been a most happy one for us.

I had been very uneasy lest my close contacts with Frank Knight just before and during his fatal illness might have resulted in my contracting the same dread illness, but miraculously I escaped. Even so, I was exhausted when we finally reached a piece of open ground close to the river from which it rose at a moderate gradient and which was, we were told, to be our new camp - only a few miles before we reached it we had passed through a deserted camp with huts to either side of the road. It was uncannily quiet and a dreadful stench pervaded the atmosphere. The camp

had stood on a piece of rising ground and our track ran up between the empty huts and beyond. But before we could continue we were stopped by a small group of Japs who sprayed us up to our waists with some anti-germ fluid (anti-biotics and detergents were names developed only after the war). One of the huts proved to be full of unburied corpses and although we had seen the bodies of several from among the groups of native labourers who we had passed and sometimes repassed along the road, this was the worst example I came across of the ravages of disease (almost exclusively cholera) at this time.

At that moment there can be no doubt that the Japanese - at least administratively were at full stretch - if not in complete disarray. Their High Command cannot have failed to be impressed by the calm detached demeanour of Major Roberts when he described to them the appalling conditions of disease and death then prevailing all the way up the line and they would have appreciated that if the lives of prisoners were of small account their value to Japan as a labour force was still considerable and an enquiry into statistics would have disclosed that in August 1943 more than half of the prisoners who had been brought up to the line had for the time being at least ceased to be capable of assisting its progress any further. One suspects therefore that at this moment the Japs were torn between their fanatical belief in the all conquering power of Nippon in its projected advance into India and a tinge of what served in the Oriental mind as a conscience so that on the one hand they could try to improve at least marginally the conditions of the sick, many of whom were soon to die, on the other hand to advance the welfare of those who were still deemed fit enough to continue the work of building the line which was at least reaching the point of completion. In the back areas conditions soon became much better, more so because the monsoon was receding and its effects being in any event less significant out of the hilly zones further up the line. But in places like Konkuita where it still rained torrentially at least twice every day, although we had bullocks to be killed and eaten, we had only about one tent for each forty men so that many slept permanently in bivouacs or improvised shacks and the journeys to and from the place of work were seldom less than three miles in each direction. In the early morning this was tolerable but at night after a long day and in pouring rain it left most of us at breaking point.

CHAPTER 10

EVACUATED

September 1943 - October 1943

Konkuita - Hindato - Chungkai - Non Pladuk

For my part, having stayed on my feet through the journey from Kinsaiyok, I found that the penalty was the immediate removal by our Doctor of each of my big toe nails. But I was out with the rest after a day or so but found my energies soon sapped and there were indications that I was retaining fluid to an alarming extent which, of course, meant "beriberi". We had few Officers with us and for the only time I recall in the three years or so I spent in Thailand it was evident that those with us were concentrating primarily on their own preservation. Only two Officers ever came out with the working parties, which many times had to rely on Warrant Officers and N.C.O.'s to provide any protection for the workers in dealing with the Jap engineers.

Towards the end of September one of the N.C.O.'s gave me the chance to join a gang whose task it was to bring in wood for use as fuel in the cookhouses. But my efforts were feeble and it was only thanks to the wonderful determination of those with me in that party that we succeeded in gathering enough to satisfy the Japs in charge. But so little was now left to be done up the line that I learned (as it seemed in the nick of time) that our party was to be evacuated by stages with priority given to those in the worst shape. There was an inspection by the senior Jap Officer of nominees for evacuation whose names were put forward by our medical officer Captain Christison who had doggedly pursued his efforts on our behalf first in Kinsaiyok and lately in Konkuita. Happily I learned that I was to be in the first party who were eventually packed into the stern end of one of the giant junklike craft of wood construction mostly owner driven and (what was more to the point) navigated! but which were towed up and down the river by small narrow motor vessels known universally amongst P.O.W.'s as pom-poms. Our journey was adventurous in that we ran into the banks of the swift flowing river on numberless occasions, on each of which there were screaming altercations between the Thai owner of our boat and the driver of the pom-pom. But somehow we progressed, though slowly, and the plight of the worst of my sick companions was desperate to an extent that one had expired before we made a halt at Hindato, the reverse journey by water having taken hours by comparison with the days spent on the march two months earlier.

We sank down exhausted in a tent at Hindato but I felt I must try and locate the spot where I believed Frank Knight had been buried. Somehow I felt satisfied when I came upon the small bamboo cross bearing his name and glad that I had managed to pay him this last mark of respect. Ironically, I found that in my absence from the tent one of my companions had

recovered sufficiently from his fatigue to relieve me of a pouch which contained my meagre supply of tobacco and the sum of two dollars which had been handed to me and to all others in the party before we left Konkuita. This was both depressing and exasperating but next day when our barge moved further down the river to Tarsau, I had word that someone I knew from 'C' Company was there and I was lucky to get the gift of a dollar which meant at least that I was not utterly destitute.

From Tarsau the railway now ran freely, if slowly, but over a track which was as yet unballasted and which wandered along the embankments erratically like a child's toy train layout, but we progressed steadily and one evening were put down outside where we soon learned was the very large camp at Chungkai. There had been a camp there when we were building the bridge at Tamarkan, which was only a few miles to the south and since the war ended it is one of the places at which a large cemetery has been established.

It was a camp of contrasts confusion and in many respects of utter despair at the time we entered it. Some of its residents from the Group to which the Japs had given the number Two had jobs both within and outside the camp and had cash to spend in the Canteen which operated. But there were some huts in which were people from Group No. Four and we ourselves were from Group No. One. There were several large huts accommodating hospital cases - some with dysentery, others with malaria or beriberi and among all the cases a high proportion were so debilitated that the doctors and orderlies were powerless to prevent the death roll which in September 1943 was running at a minimum of ten per day with this figure often much higher. The hut where I was first accommodated was very close to a smaller hut where the walls were open from just above shoulder height so that we could see within it very readily. It was the camp mortuary and with morbid curiosity we would look in to it early each day and learn from the number of rice sacks which were laid within as to what had been the daily tally. Funerals were held once or twice daily according to the religious denomination of the victims. It was all desperately depressing even though in exploring the camp one found many old Gordon friends from who at least one could expect a word of cheer and our old Sergeant Cook Webster who had not, I think, always been universally popular back in Singapore, kept me supplied with tobacco for my pipe (which still survived) and which helped to while away the time while we were still unfit to work, though as always in those times there was never a time when we were not hungry. But I found that even if old friends gave me extra food its effect on my stomach was violent leaving me a constant visitor at the latrines.

It was then some three years since I had first come into the tropics but though I had suffered a vicious and perhaps near fatal attack of typhus, I had avoided malaria, which had been the cause

of weakening so many friends even though if they had died the ultimate cause may have been some other malady. But I had been in Chungkai little more than a week when a malarial fever struck me with sudden violence. The first attack came on a Sunday and I found it no surprise that as in Aberdeen in 1940 the medical officers saw nobody except patients in the hospital wards on the Sabbath. The fever must have been very high but I just had to stick it out and, of course, on the day following, as is customary with this fever, my temperature had almost abated. But it returned next day and I was able to obtain quinine and gradually made a recovery, but I was to have numerous relapses later.

I had learned that most of the party who had come down from Kinsaiyok in August when I had moved up to Konkuita were now to be found at Non Pladuk, which was the camp at which the junction between the new line up to Burma and the main line from Bangkok south to Malaya had their link. Periodically parties of men out of No. 1 group were able to move down from Chungkai to Non Pladuk, but initially I had not been well enough to travel and the attack of malaria meant a further delay. I made up my mind that I would join one of these parties as soon as I could because it seemed to me that if I stayed in Chungkai illness would get the upper hand and I had heard that Non Pladuk was considered a better camp. Before I did leave I was able to see "Nellie" Wallace whose arrival in Aberdeen had coincided with my own but who had been with the main body of Gordons who I had last seen in Takanun. That he had survived to return was a miracle since he had been attacked by cholera not once but twice and had had other illnesses as well to contend with. Recoveries from cholera were rare in themselves, but for someone with his frail physique to have emerged twice from the disease was quite staggering. But looking at him as he lay in one of the huts looking desperately thin but chattering away merrily and with his accustomed wit, one realised that it was the spirit within him more than physical factors which had enabled him to survive. In the last camp where he had been before his return to Chungkai someone wishing to help restore some of the flesh which he had lost through illness got him a job working with the cooks who produced the meals for the Japs. No doubt this helped him to build up his strength and then he was thought strong enough to be sent on the journey back down the line. Apparently when he had news that he was leaving he included with the early morning meal he prepared for the Japs a bottle of tablets ordinarily used for purgative purposes. When not long after leaving the camp the vehicle conveying them broke down, he suffered some anxiety lest a party should come in pursuit of him, but they re-started and he had heard no more of the matter. But needless to say he was relishing the thought that the meal had produced the sort of results he had anticipated! A remarkable person and one who was to recover so well that in later months at Chungkai he was able to give excellent female impersonations in shows produced in that camp that he must have been the Danny La Rue of those times.

As soon as I was considered fit enough I managed to get into a party travelling to Non Pladuk the journey being by water to Ban Pong and thence by road. It was towards the end of October 1943 just about a year having passed since our arrival in Thailand - somehow it seemed so very much longer. I had shed at least two stone in weight and felt very frail and tired. As I stood with my few companions and scanty belongings just behind the Camp Guard Room at Non Pladuk where our escorting Jap had left us, I looked around me and felt a wave of relief at having said goodbye to the death and disease with which for me the memory of Chungkai will always be associated.

The camp at Non Pladuk was rectangular in shape with the eastern boundary running close to and parallel with the railway which runs north to Bangkok and south to Ban Pong and to Malaya. To one side of the entrance gate which was beside the line stood the guard room behind which were the guards living quarters. On the opposite side of the gateway lay our cookhouse, store huts, etc. Having passed the guard room anyone entering the camp was confronted by open ground free of any noticeable vegetation but with a well situated a little to one side and which served all those accommodated in the camp and never failed to provide a fresh supply of water all the time that I was there. Beyond the well to either side was a double row of very long huts built with wood, including wood boarded floors, but with the usual palm leaf (atap) roofs and with walls of a similar light construction. In November/December they could become chilly at night and in the early morning, but they were much more solid and durable than I had seen at Tamarkan or Chungkai and, of course, far better than anything to be seen further up the line in the various jungle camps. Forming a rectangle around the parade ground with the well roughly equidistant from either end were other wooden huts; those to one side housing our own officers and a well run canteen and there were more huts at the far end of the camp close by to the cookhouse. Some additional huts were built behind the wooden huts running parallel to the long side of the camp. Amongst these were two buildings of the usual bamboo and atap construction which served as a hospital in which the worst of the sick were accommodated and when I arrived I was sent there and remained a patient for some three weeks or so. It was a depressing place and many of the patients had been there for a long time and seemed to have lost hope of being passed fit to leave. I had a relapse from the malaria which had attacked me in Chungkai, but there was no special diet save in very exceptional cases and I had the impression that if I was to get back into some active life the main effort on my behalf would have to be made by me. The little cash I had borrowed in Tarsau was exhausted and though I was due arrears of pay earned in Konkuita, this was likely to be delayed. Fortunately for me George Elsmie was in the camp and he obtained some soap and a little tobacco for me and some cash. It seemed to me that the authorities in Non Pladuk had lost touch a little with events having (as in the case of those of our party who had come from Kinsaiyok) become

adjusted to the basic life and had chosen to forget the difficulties faced by me and my companions who had just arrived. It was for them I believe mentally a form of escape.

After I had been in the camp a month or two, I learned that every new arrival was to receive tobacco and soap such as I had been given, the monies needed being provided from Red Cross Funds which were becoming available. The soap looked like gorgonzola cheese and produced a very poor lather but its possession did something for our morale which mere words could never have achieved.

CHAPTER 11
RAIL BASE CAMP
October 1943 - November 1944
Non Pladuk

Non Pladuk camp had been established in the earliest days of the Thai Burma railway with a nucleus of men from the 137 Field Artillery Regiment under Lt. Col. Gill who was a north country solicitor in civil life and whose regiment had been amongst those landed at Singapore long after the fate of that island had been sealed. Thus many of the key positions in the camp had been filled by men from the 137 and many of them knew nothing of, or ever I think come to appreciate, the horrors which those of us who had been right up to the top of the line had had to face. So there was something of a division between these more fortunate individuals and those of us who were striving rather against the odds to regain a little of our self respect.

Working parties went out daily from the camp to the marshalling yards near by and to other railway dumps where there were sidings and petrol, sleepers and sometimes rails (which were very heavy) were loaded on to trucks for transmission elsewhere - perhaps a short distance, perhaps further away, we never knew. But as each party left in the early morning or again after the break in the middle of the day - some parties, who worked close by, returned for their lunch. There was a small band which played marches - mostly I think by Sousa, as we passed out of the camp gate where, of course, we were required to salute the miserable Koreans who constituted the camp guards and who bullied everyone on the slightest provocation and were capable of every sort of sly trick which could torment those under them. Whether this music had any link with the Colonel Bogey theme which became such a popular fancy after the River Kwai film, I do not know but though I recall that the leader was one known as "Ace" Connolly, I think that whatever music was featured in the film it was, like the rest of its subject matter, the child of the imagination of the man who produced it.

This was the first camp in which one began to hear regular news of the war in Europe and in the Far East. There had been the so called Syonan Times - Syona being the name given by the Japs to Singapore. This sometimes contained lyrical accounts of the heroism of Jap soldiers and airmen, but in one or two copies which I saw it seemed as though the war in Europe was fairly accurately reported, whereas it soon became apparent that the war in the Far East was not. We became aware of allied success in New Guinea then the Solomon Islands - of the existence or situation of which some of us were barely aware - but we gradually realised that the Americans were beginning the long haul back. But save for the occasional reconnaissance plane in the early days in Siam, it was not until 1944 that air activity on the allies part began to be significant, but even the smallest activity gave us hope for the future.

Certainly when I arrived in Non Pladuk the camp seemed to be composed of people who were either exhausted or bored. Fortunately the malarial attacks I was having began to become less frequent, especially as one of the doctors obtained a little atabrin (which had been quite unobtainable up the line) and I was able to have a short course of that drug and by January 1944 I was back with the various working parties and regaining a little of the weight which I had lost.

There were rumours of changes in the camp administration and soon we had back in command of us Col. Toosey and his Adjutant Captain Boyle of the Argylls who, it will be recalled, had been at Tamarkan for some time before and after our party left to go up the line and now were coming to assume similar responsibilities at what was in fact now the base camp for No. 1 Group under the system which the Japs had set up. Their arrival was a boost to the morale of all and I was also happy to learn that Major Lees who had commanded the party of Gordons in Adam Park and Tamarkan was also coming to Non Pladuk. He had left Tamarkan in charge of a party which had laid sleepers and rails for miles up the line and we soon gathered that he was held in, if anything, higher esteem with the men comprising that party than with our own group of Gordons.

Smoking in the various camps all over Thailand remained a problem because the only raw tobacco we could obtain was very strong and had to be treated before it could be smoked in cigarette form, for there cannot have been many whose lungs would have stood up to smoking it raw, even through a pipe. In the early days after the fall of Singapore the only supplies were the meagre issue from the Japs plus various locally made cigarettes obtainable from vendors at prices which became more and more impossible. In Thailand the Australians were foremost in establishing a black market (their versatility on the sale and purchase side was quite remarkable) and made themselves a handsome profit on the difference between the price paid to the Thai producers and that extracted from P.O.W. consumers. But they took enormous risks in the forays out of the various camps and into the Kampongs and I do not think anyone really begrudged them the spoils. Later still, as 1943 advanced and thereafter, official supplies of tobacco and proper cigarette papers were obtainable in camp canteens but by the time this system had got going there had been a heavy run down on papers procured from books of the better quality for like the "Holy Boys" in the past who sold their Bibles, it was necessary for the P.O.W.'s to burn theirs!

I myself was horrified to find a fine omnibus edition of Walpole's "Herries Chronicle" being eroded page by page just after I had assisted in carrying it on the journey from Changi when we first marched to Adam Park. I believe it had entirely disappeared before we left there. Cigarettes for many were a very rough substitute for the lack of food!

In Non Pladuk in 1944 the cigarette business had become a quite well organised commercial enterprise, but there were no filter or cork tips on offer, or gift coupons, though some involved undoubtedly turned out a better product than others. Thus even with the pathetically small nominal resources available, the smokers were able to "shop around" but there was never any variation in price which was always one cent per cigarette with no reduction on the quantity - sales being generally of ten cigarettes bound in a rough bundle.

I entered the tobacco business about the middle of 1944.²⁴ About that time the officer in charge of No. 1 Hut, who was in the Manchester Regiment and had known me since our journey out together from Liverpool in 1940, offered to a little Lancastrian from the Reconnaissance Corps called Taylor and to myself the task of keeping the hut, which was about 250 feet long, as clean as local conditions permitted. This meant keeping the floors brushed (but mercifully not polished) and also keeping the ground which lay beneath the floors (which were built about 3 feet above ground) as clear as possible of refuse, much of which filtered through between the boards and other openings in the floor which had developed. It was also our task to fetch and distribute the rations allotted to the Sergeants and W.O.'s²⁵ who occupied the end section of the hut which was partitioned off from the rest of the building and separated for ration purposes. Taylor and I were included with the Sergeants and this meant that in the period I was employed at these tasks we always had a generous share of camp food and my health benefitted considerably.

It was because this occupation kept me in the camp every day that I was approached by one of the Java Dutch with the proposal that I should sell cigarettes made by his "firm" to those in No. 1 Hut. This was on terms that I should pay him 90 cents for every ten packets of cigarettes with which I was supplied, which left me (as is not difficult to calculate) a profit margin of ten per cent. Although business began slowly the cigarettes were well filled and packed and trade soon became quite brisk so that for the first time I had cash with which to buy extras and also to build up some savings.

But I did not enjoy this halcyon existence for very long for a number of reasons. The first was that the job in the hut was intended as a "light duty" to be fulfilled by someone not fully fit and perhaps recovering from illness as (when I had first been employed) had been my own situation. But I became so obviously stronger that my substitution was made inevitable. The second

²⁴This tobacco business is described vividly in James Clavell's novel - "King Rat".

²⁵W.O's = warrant officers

contributory factor was that activity by bombers flying over Siam became more and more significant as 1944 advanced. We had learned with delight of the invasion of Europe by the Allies in June and of the fall of Rome which seemed to happen almost simultaneously, though the significance of the second event seemed to me scarcely to bear comparison with the first. We knew that Bangkok had been bombed several times also the Bridge at Tamarkan, though reports as to the results of these operations were conflicting. We also knew that A/A²⁶ guns had been stationed close to the marshalling yards of the railway and but a short distance from our camp. But somehow we assumed that our friends in Ceylon and Burma (or whereabouts else the bombers were based) knew that we were in Non Pladuk and that therefore we would be immune from attack. The Japs also seemed to have some belief in this for having made us dig trenches round each hut in March and seeming to be so surprised that these promptly filled up with water as soon as the monsoon broke in April (which seriously threatened the hut foundations), they then ordered that the trenches be filled in again and this remained the situation through to August and into September.

Meanwhile the Japs had begun to call for volunteers to join parties en route for Japan. About the same time they had begun to build a large new camp at Nakhon Pathom which is a small town about midway between Non Pladuk and Bangkok where there is the equivalent of a western university. There is also a pagoda of considerable size and beauty and which stood out so prominently against the surrounding buildings and countryside that it formed a homing point for allied bombers arriving in the Bangkok area prior to their many raids in 1944 and later. I participated in several working parties which built the hospital camp in this area and although I never saw it after completion, I had heard that the first entry of patients there had begun by August 1944. One or two of our own battalion left us to take up jobs there including a Master Cook whose efforts in that field later made him a popular figure amongst those who came to the camp.

But in September 1944 Non Pladuk was still quite heavily populated with, I would guess, around 2,000 in the camp of which about two thirds were British and the remainder Dutch. Not far from us a regular party went out daily to a marshalling yard where there were some trees providing cover from the air and in which we were regularly employed moving drums of oil and petrol and loading them on to trucks. We had heard that a train load was waiting to move any day up the line in the direction of Burma.

That night the air raid alarm bugle was sounded by the Japs and we heard the approach of

²⁶A/A = Anti-aircraft guns

planes. It was about 10 p.m. and everyone was in bed as the call was heard, but no one stirred or showed reaction because this sequence had been followed many times before. But this time there was a difference. The planes did not pass on towards Bangkok or elsewhere, but the noise of their engines increased and I was aware that they must be close overhead. Suddenly we heard the scream of bombs and heavy explosions. Almost immediately the sky was lit brilliant red and I concluded that the bombers had hit and ignited the petrol train. Our hut floor being raised above ground, I felt uneasy lying there and went to the door. The sky had been lit not only by the burning train but also by flares which appeared to have been dropped by one of the planes. The anti-aircraft guns were firing red tracer shells skywards but obviously the planes were above the level they could reach but they were still clearly circling above us. Suddenly there was a further scream of bombs and I realised that these were falling inside the camp. Gradually the glow faded in the sky and though there was shouting in the distance it seemed quite safe to return to the hut. On the blanket where I had been sleeping was a jagged piece of metal, but I saw no evidence in the darkness of any damage round about me. Amazingly, as it seemed later, I and others at our end of the hut settled down and were soon sleeping again though we could hear voices raised in the distance which later proved to have been coming from our own hut and from farther away.

Why we were not further disturbed that night must always remain a mystery for me, for in the morning the scenes of devastation were horrifying. At that time I was still responsible for the cleaning of our hut and after we had drawn breakfast for the N.C.O.'s and consumed our own, I went to inspect the hut. At the far end was a crater between No. 1 and No. 2 hut beneath our own hut there were gaping holes showing in the floor boards and blood and fragments of flesh. Beneath No. 2 hut was lying a human leg severed at the knee. But behind the No. 2 hut was still worse damage. In the hut, which had been built of bamboo and atap only, there was utter devastation from which I learned a large number of bodies had already been removed and many injured. It appeared that a stick of some five or six anti-personnel bombs had dropped diagonally from north west to south west, two of which had straddled the hut housing some Dutchmen. In all, by the end of the day the number of dead was known to be 98 and there were upwards of 300 injured, many severely. None of my companions had been killed but several were injured. I was directed with others to commence at once to dig new slit trenches a short distance from our hut; this work occupied us all that day and for two or three days after as the ground was very hard. It was the hardness of the ground in the camp which had rendered the bombs so devastating in their effect as the shrapnel they contained had been flung in all directions over a wide area with the result I have recorded.

The shock to all in the camp of this sudden and unexpected disaster was enormous and for a day

or two one scarcely dared to discuss matters outside our own immediate concern, but the rows of rice sacks built up in front of the evacuated No. 2 hut spoke volumes that made comment from us needless and somehow irreverent. But the camp was in the tropics and this meant immediate burial of the casualties. Up to that time death had struck little at Non Pladuk in the time since I had arrived and I was not even aware of the location of the camp cemetery. It seemed that it was nearly two miles distant and it was thought the burden of carrying the casualties so far might prove too great for the customary four persons, so six were allotted in each case. Thus later in the day the melancholy procession set off, wearily perhaps so far as many were concerned who had had to work hard all through the day but nevertheless with quiet dignity, fading slowly and sadly from view against the background of the setting sun.

The hospital at the camp had become for the moment a casualty station and we visited and tried, ineffectively I fear, to comfort the shocked victims. Within a day or two all who were fit enough were moved to Nakhon Pathom which meant in many instances parting from friends who had been with us in the struggles for survival of 1943 and of whom we had to hope that those elsewhere would care for them now as they were faced with such unexpected injury.

I needed no better evidence that the whole camp was suddenly in a state of shock than the information from my Dutch wholesale tobacconist who said he could now sell every cigarette he could make within the limits of his own hut and so my modest financial outlet was abruptly terminated and I was left with a small amount saved with in addition only such income as I might be paid for work, whether in my employment round the hut or (as soon happened) back with the working parties away from the camp. Now, however, nobody seemed able to relax and whenever the air raid alarm sounded, which it did quite frequently, we peered anxiously skywards and wondered whether we were once more the target.

Long after the bombing raid I did learn from someone with R.A.F. knowledge that the oil train had been the primary target but that the camp was a secondary target as Air H.Q. in Burma, or wherever they were located, believed that we were a transit camp used by Japanese troops. There was in fact just such a camp very close by but, alas, someone had managed to confuse the two locations - as gigantic a piece of fratricide as perhaps was committed anywhere in the war and from our point of view the unkindest act of all!

There was worse in store for me in the period which followed, for apart from losing my tobacco income, I also lost my job in No. 1 hut and at once had to begin working with the outside parties which still went out daily - one or two were at some distance for which we took rice ready cooked in mess tins with additionally what was known in Non Pladuk as a 'Doover'. Apparently

one of the cooks had graduated on a higher plane of culinary life in days of freedom and was familiar with 'hors d'oeuvres' which nowadays would be listed as 'starters'. But the fried rice rissoles which were mixed with onion and really quite tasty had come to be known as 'd'oeuvres' for short - hence 'doovers'. Generally these were eaten before their recipients left the camp so unsatisfying was the breakfast with which each day began!

Being now much less well off I had to try to conserve what little cash remained but I was fortunate in having three windfalls, each of which typify the desperate conditions which forced my ever hungry comrades (and I was just as hungry - no longer enjoying the luxury of rations with the Sergeants Mess!). One day it was my turn with another of our party to act as 'tea-boy'. The expression was euphemistic in that we never had any tea, but our task was to boil water for the working party to drink when given a break from their work. This meant building and lighting a fire, keeping it going and boiling on it water in disused petrol cans. We had had our break and dispensed some of the water when I was approached by a Gordon colleague who informed me that two of them had removed from a Japanese lorry its battery (fixed on the running board I think) and had found a Thai outside the fence willing to purchase it. But there was a problem of transporting the battery from where it had been temporarily hidden to the boundary hedge beyond which the intending purchaser lay hidden. Would I assist in transporting the battery from where it lay to the hedge hidden inside the petrol can? I was of course to receive a percentage of the eventual sale price. Rather hesitantly I agreed because, apart from the risk of apprehension by the Japs, I was worried that the battery, which seemed enormously heavy, would drop clean through the bottom of the tin. But I agreed and, with one of the two 'dealers' involved, I staggered with the container suspended from a bamboo pole across what seemed to me at the time to be an enormous distance of open grassland until we finally reached some bushes and the hedge beyond which lay our intending buyer. The battery had been almost wholly immersed in water and its condition must, to say the least, have been indifferent as a result, but the Thai was nevertheless persuaded to hand over some twenty five dollars in exchange for it and later I received my 'cut'.

Such changes of fortune quite often occur successively and it cannot have been many days later when a package containing clothing 'fell off' a truck we were unloading close by to Non Pladuk. Its contents disappeared as if by magic amongst those of us working in the vicinity and I found myself with two pairs of light weight cotton shorts thrust under my waist band so that it appeared as though, magically, I had recovered much of the weight which our stringent diet had caused me to shed. Often we were searched by the Japs on our return from these working parties as the wastage amongst their various stores had become serious so adept at petty theft had most of us become. But we decided to take the risk of a search that evening and happily our

luck was in. The shorts were too small for me but I found ready purchasers and the Exchequer gained a further eight dollars.

Six weeks or so later, after I had returned from a working party on a bright and (as ever) sunny evening, there were suddenly observed coming from the direction of Bangkok and directly parallel with the railway line, some fifteen four engined bombers flying in groups of three line abreast and in perfect formation. The raid alarm sounded only after they were observed and we were already moving rapidly towards our slit trenches as the planes which seemed to have either the railway or us (or both) as their target. The trenches had been fairly well drenched from rains and there was at least a foot of water at the bottom and for a very brief moment I weighed up the relative unpleasantness of a plunge into the mud and the approach of the planes. They could not have been much above 3,000 feet up - I would say less - and I saw them all dip their wings slightly to the right and their bombs emerge and begin to fall at the moment I descended into the trench and heard the hiss of bombs descending, at which my own head lowered abruptly. There was a thunderous roar and the planes were past. We looked up through a mist of dust and realised that whilst bombs had fallen up and down the line one or two at least had come down in the camp close to the boundary with the line. In fact the Jap Guard Room was hit which event might, in isolation, have cheered us a lot but this was but one point of impact and we emerged from the trenches and moved towards where the other bombs seemed to have gone - but before we had advanced more than a few steps we became conscious that the planes which had carried out the first attack had been joined by others and we could see a mass of some twenty-four aircraft still at about the same height moving in now at right angles to the line but still directly towards us.

At the sight of this further menace there was a frantic rush, not to the trenches but to the fence round the camp which was of light calibre and not of great height. Numbers of men including, we later learned, several of our gallant Korean guards rushed over and through the fence out into the open ground beyond. Perhaps it seemed to them they would be safer but in fact they were probably little less vulnerable. The planes kept on and the earlier process was repeated with a much greater noise as the bombs were falling but there were in fact no explosions. Instead we saw the whole of the cookhouse suddenly the centre of what might have been a super display of Roman candles, but of course we had received a surfeit of incendiaries and in a moment or two at least two of the huts on the far side of the open ground at the other end of the camp were ablaze. Quite quickly there were calls to form a chain from the well using any utensil which was at hand and somehow part of one of the huts was saved though one was gutted. By the time the huts had been cleared of fire it was suddenly dark - for there is never any twilight to speak of in Siam - and we were paraded by our own officers in an effort to recover our wits and salvage

our belongings. We learned that we had only suffered four casualties but two (including a popular young officer) were dead and there were at least two unexploded bombs reputed to be lying in the cookhouse area. Some of us made up parties and evacuated vital stores of food from the threatened areas. Order was finally more or less restored and we returned to our quarters to try and gain some rest. Next day we were out on the line and saw that nearly every store round the railway sidings had been burned and other severe damage done. The Japanese looked shamefaced - perhaps a little scared but surprisingly less vicious than we had expected.

It should in fact be recorded that after the earlier night raid the greatest help given to casualties amongst our number came from the Japanese Guard Commander who personally carried many of the injured to the hospital area and not a few owed their lives to him. There were many examples in the war of courage amongst the Japs - sometimes quite fanatical in character, but I have heard of few other examples of courage on behalf of (as to him we were) the enemies of his country. I believe he was called Sergeant Watanabe and I hope perhaps Her Majesty the Queen who has now given back the Garter to Hirohito (who is not reported to have saved anything other than his own skin) may have spared a thought at least for one subject of the Emperors who treated friend and foe alike when the need was greatest.

One amusing sequel to the second of the bombing raids on Non Pladuk was that in the effort to put out the fires in the end huts all utensils were utilised to carry water in a chain from the well and amongst these was a bucket which I greatly prized. Afterwards it had disappeared and with it my best guarantee of keeping clean, because all water with which to wash oneself had to come from the well and borrowing utensils was difficult. So therefore in my 'spare' time I had to make a complete tour of the camp - buckets being generally retained by their owners beneath their beds. I am glad to say I located the missing article in a hut occupied by Java Dutch and removed it at once. I said nothing to the party concerned and he at least said nothing in dissent!

It might be thought that I was not on good terms with the Dutch but in fact I knew several well and played bridge with two in particular when the chance offered. I had of course dealt with another in the cigarette 'trade' but in general their outlook was Asiatic rather than European and many of them tended, we thought, to be more co-operative with the Japs than we considered was our duty so there were generally barriers separating us from them.

BUILDING SUPPLY DUMPS CLOSE TO THE RAILWAY

CHAPTER 12

BRANCH LINE TO BURMA

November 1944 - April 1945

Non Pladuk - Wampo - Bondi

So Non Pladuk had been shattered to its foundation and so had its inmates. We lived for days and weeks with strained nerves and low morale and wondered when and where the next blow (or bomb) might fall. At that moment if I had been asked to go to Japan I might have agreed but in fact I was ordered, amongst a party of about a hundred, to go up the line once again - task unspecified. George Elsmie was with us and one or two other Officers with a Dutch M.O.

I should perhaps interpolate as a final reflection on the year or so I spent in Non Pladuk, that clean healthy camp as it usually was, it undoubtedly gained much in stature by the advent of Colonel Philip Toosey and of David Boyle whose long experience in Tamarkan had taught them so much about the psychology of the Jap and who with the benefit of that knowledge did so much to improve our way of life and to try to ensure that further casualties were restricted to the minimum. They also faced the two devastating bombing raids with great calm, even though these were in each case shattering in their effects and created enormous problems with which they, rather than the Japs, were left to contend. They encouraged physical activity whenever conditions and the fitness of those in the camp permitted and football matches played between officers and men, English and Dutch and even against the Koreans, were popular as much with the many spectators as with the participants. There was also encouragement for intellectual interests with quizzes and debates and, in so far as time permitted, there was religious tolerance which developed enthusiasm and interest amongst all ranks. The leader in this field was I think Padre Ross who I believe gave spiritual help in directions often differing widely, I suspect, from his own Methodist convictions. There was also a Catholic priest - one of many who were to be seen at intervals up and down the line mostly out of doors and sometimes in far from good weather, dispensing Mass to members of that faith. There was also our own 'Gibby', Captain C.A. Gibson, who had been 2nd in Command of 'C' Company under George Elsmie when I was clerk but who, before becoming a fighting soldier, had been a Presbyterian Minister in one of the east coast towns of Scotland -south of Aberdeen. A great character who had been a journalist at one time and whose personality was probably better suited to the latter profession than to the army or the church. But his cheerful good humour made him many friends and he did me the inestimable service of giving me a novel soon after my arrival in Non Pladuk. There was no official library in that camp - at any stage so far as I am aware - and if one wished to read it was necessary to have a book oneself to offer in exchange for the book you might be

seeking from someone else. Sometimes books were lent and later returned, but generally the exchange was permanent so that it was desirable to have a book with popular appeal. I think the book I had from 'Gibby' was by Donford Yates and it helped me in the first weeks after my arrival from Chungkai to keep my mind busy by reading and so having less time to dwell on my other problems at that time. Gibby could not, I think, have been popular with Colonel Graham when we were in Singapore for although he must have provided his fellow officers with many laughs, his insatiable thirst got him frequently into trouble. He did not enjoy soldiering and I recall an occasion when the Company was out on a route march in the tropical heat which in Singapore even early in the day is fierce and unrelenting, we had stopped for the usual ten minute break and I was with him as part of Company H.Q. at the rear of the column. Perhaps he thought I was finding the heat specially intense because he said to me "Here - take a drink" offering me one of two bottles he was carrying. I thanked him and without thinking took a draught from the bottle, I gasped and nearly choked for the bottled contained (as far as I could judge) neat gin which I abominate. He laughed at my discomfiture and apologised for not warning me but one could never feel anger or even resentment for him. He died in Queensland not so long ago, I believe, but whether the trumpets have sounded for him I hope he will have found a suitable embrosia with which to quench his thirst.

We travelled by train in the same old cattle style trucks, our destination proved to be Wampo and we alighted in the sidings just above the massive wooden viaduct which we had seen under construction about 18-months earlier. We marched out of Wampo in a westerly direction and soon learned that we were to make a road and later to establish at points along it caches (being bamboo huts in the main) where supplies of food were to be stored. The work was hard - the food less than we had lately become accustomed to, but we had left the bombers behind us and, what was most cheering of all, it looked as though the stores we were setting up were for the Japanese soldiers retreating from Burma so we had the first positive evidence that our forces in Burma were on the road forward and that the days of Greater East Asia were well and truly waning.

But as ever on the railway the work was hard, the hours were long and the food was poor. We were in a series of camps, some with tents, others with huts and worked from these at first building a fairly level stretch of road running some twenty miles west to the foot of the hills which form the natural ridge by which Siam and Burma are separated along the Kra Isthmus. For some time in December 1944 and the following month we were in a camp at the foot of the first range of hills around which the new road was being created winding slowly up on to the plateau above. All around us in the camp were massive rocks and stones and at night the temperature dropped quite alarmingly. We called the camp site 'Chilly Valley' and the Dutch

who were with us called it 'Nova Heptad' which is in northern Siberia and a place near where the Russians have made atomic tests in the post war period. The Japs with us had a fire lit while we were there as a prevention against tigers of which they seemed to have great fear. We saw no tigers, but we were glad to warm ourselves during the night when the temperature dropped to below 40 degrees.

We were aware that apart from Allied pressure bearing down on the Japs in Burma and the Phillipines, the war in Europe seemed almost to be over. Back in Non Pladuk we had received regular news but out in the jungle west of Wampo the information mostly dried up. Even so, from the high ground which we travelled we often got a sight of bombers flying in and out and planes which successfully bombed the viaduct at Wampo passed over us at a terrifyingly low altitude of around 1,000 feet. This was a great achievement on the part of their pilots since there were massive cliffs which overhung the line all round the half circle of the viaduct and the damage done (which we saw not long after) must have needed most precise flying but there would have been no opposition even from guns. Indeed by this time the Japs resources in war materials, including transport in Thailand and lower Burma, were becoming steadily more limited. It was said that when war ended there were scarcely half a dozen railway engines available anywhere and for their lesser operations the crudest methods were forced upon them. Soon we moved on to a camp located in what had been a small Thai village (which we knew as Bondi) where there were banana groves and fig trees. In one or two places we even found traces of tobacco being cultivated, but the natives had fled further into the jungle away from the Japs leaving behind their unharvested crop.

The building of the road proved as exhausting as had the railway before it but the work that followed was even more arduous. Quantities of rice, dried vegetables, sugar and other stores were brought out from the railhead at Wampo on a shuttle service operated by prisoners between a succession of points each some five or six miles apart. For a long time we made daily trips from Bondi back to 'Chilly Valley' and collected each a sack of rice weighing around 50 lbs or often something even heavier to be borne awkwardly and unsteadily on a bamboo pole between two of us. Our energies were stretched to the utmost and although we were experts in scrounging and thus 'acquired' some extra stores from the Japs, our strength was slowly eroded and with it, again, our health. Malaria was rife and I began to have what were either recurrences of my first illness or a fresh infection picked up somewhere along the road. Our spirits flagged and our weight fell again to the very low levels it had reached in 1943. Little or no meat was given us for although cattle had been driven up to Bondi we learned that they were to be used as pack-mules, or at least this was what the Japs had planned they should do. Wooden carriers had been made suitably shaped and which, with padding and straps, were to be attached to the backs

of the bullocks who would then have a sack or two of rice loaded on to them and then were to be driven or led up to the top of the steep mountain (I think that description is justified) which towered above Bondi to a height of some 4/5,000 feet. Needless to say the Japs showed no inclination to take any part in the training of the bullocks for these proposed near 'rodeo' exercises and this task, like all others unpleasant in those days, was allocated to the prisoners. I was aghast when confronted one morning by an ill-fed and clearly ill-tempered bullock on which it was proposed John Pirie and I should place in position a saddle of the type I have described. That the animal was suspicious was evident but John Pirie, who fortunately for me had had experience before entering the army on farms in Aberdeenshire, thought that we should first show our bullock the saddle and (as it were) introduce them to one another. Apart from looking a little warier the bullock showed no reaction to this ploy on our part so we began warily and with circumspection to try to place the saddle in the vicinity of the animal's back. Its reactions were immediate and violent and I learned with discomfort that whereas a horse will when roused lash out with its hoofs directly to the rear, a bullock throws a kick in an outward direction and I quickly found myself at the receiving end. But we persevered and somehow we did eventually get the saddle on and fixed to our wretched bullock which bellowed in complaint. The difficulty then became as to whether a load could be placed in the saddle and, what was more to the point, whether the beast could be persuaded to make a forward move. Well our bullock with the saddle loaded certainly moved forward but in the direction of a tree in which it rapidly became entangled so that the Jap in charge eventually agreed that if peace were to be restored we should remove the saddle and burden and this we did. We learned that our colleagues had had no greater success with the other cattle and eventually everything that went up that particular mountain had to be manhandled. George Elsmie told me he had been spoken to by the Jap Officer in charge at Bondi who had admitted that "Americans and British had petrol for lorries - Nippon have none and must use bullocks!" So much for Japan's dream of Greater East Asia!

Alas we were shortly saying goodbye to George Elsmie who had been ordered at short notice to return to Wampo and from there journey southwards. Similar orders were going at that time (March 1945) to all other Officers in Thailand and they were soon concentrated into a single camp at Kanchanaburi.

The doctors in some cases stayed with us, this concession having been made grudgingly by Nippon. The move was further evidence of their nervous behaviour following their own reverses in Burma and the imminent collapse of Germany in Europe - but of these events we were at the time only vaguely aware. But there had been a Japanese Sergeant who, in November when we first came to Wampo, hounded us around in just the manner which had

been in vogue in 1943. He left suddenly and we understood was going up into Burma. Not long after George Elsmie left, a party of Japs came past us on foot marching towards the railway. They carried with them a crude stretcher made of rough cloth and with bamboo poles, I looked at the person they were carrying and recognised the Japanese Sergeant, thin and emaciated. We learned that he had blackwater fever and that he was one of many hundreds of sick who having fallen ill during the Jap offensive in Burma had been left to make their own way back to Thailand as best they could. One felt pity for him and those others in their plight but at the back of our minds was the thought that the tables were turning.

CHAPTER 13

TAMUANG AND AFTER

April 1945 - May 1945

Bondi - Wampo - Tamuang - Bangkok - Saraburi

At this stage the road was finished as far as Bondi to which lorries from Wampo brought consignments of food and other supplies to be placed in huts built at points beside the road both between Wampo and Bondi and beyond but, as the bullocks failed to fulfil the Japs intention that they act as carriers up the steep mountain slopes beyond, it became our task for the last weeks of March to make a daily trip up the mountain with a load of rice or whatever else was to hand. We began very early, around 8 a.m., climbing by stages with frequent halts on the winding track which led to the summit. From there was to be seen a view of great beauty with ridges of green wooded hills stretching both back towards the railway and forward towards and into Burma. Twice we made extra trips that took us down from the mountain and beyond to the banks of the Tenasserim River which marks the boundary between Thailand and Burma at that point and the road to Tavoy (not much more than a track) follows the river on the far side for most of the distance beyond the point we reached.

The second occasion that we travelled this far was not long before we left Bondi. We had performed our accustomed morning stint, taking a load of dried vegetables and rice to the peak of the mountain, eating our cold rice and scrap of dried fish and then descending (quite rapidly) to our camp to rest as we could and wait what passed then for an evening meal.

But we had not long returned and washed ourselves in the little stream which flowed through the camp, when a Japanese Lieutenant with about five soldiers arrived from the direction of Wampo having taken off the lorry which had carried them what looked like heavy radio-telephone equipment, with this they also carried their personal baggage with what looked much like a British Officer's valise for the Lieutenant the latter having had a forceful conversation with the Jap commanding our camp; we were told six men were needed to carry the Jap equipment and baggage up the mountain and beyond. The Lieutenant told me we would have to

march "all night - walk many miles - speedo". We were all Gordons who were selected by the Lieutenant to make the journey and he seemed to regard me as the leader. I told him if we were to stay overnight we must carry our blankets and the rush mats which we had acquired at Wampo as a sort of ground sheet, as well as our feeding utensils and water. So to our not too well concealed amusement he ordered that four Java Dutch - who he had earlier rejected as carriers - should come with us to carry our gear while we carried for the Japs.

It was an exhausting exercise - though the Lieutenant was agreeable to our resting on the way up the mountain at reasonable intervals; but we pressed on from the summit towards the river which we knew lay ahead. We had begun the ascent at around 5.30 p.m. after an early, and very hasty, supper so that it was dark long before we reached the summit and, in fact, it was about 1 a.m. when the Lieutenant agreed that we halt at a small camp just short of the Tenasserim river. He told me that others would continue with him next day and we were to return and he thanked us. He was a burly bull-faced man, strong looking, moderately tall and really quite good looking. He dismissed us with a gesture and went off to a clearing under trees where the Japs had a small camp. It was nearly eight hours since we had eaten and we were also thirsty and, although very tired, I determined that I would make an effort to obtain food for those who were like me, late though it was. I went across to the Jap camp where the Lieutenant (quite fresh) was talking and laughing with others, I bowed to him (this being their own practice which we were now obliged to follow) and told him our party needed a meal. He understood but laughed and seemed surprised at my daring to make the request. But he spoke to another Jap with him and motioned to me to go away. As I left another Jap figure emerged from trees close by and, apparently, it was the cook. He shouted abuse at me and struck me twice about the face but then moved away muttering. Afterwards my companions and myself who had been together on the journey, went across and lay down in the open. I fell asleep but less than an hour later was wakened and told that the Japanese cooks had sent over a tub of fresh cooked rice and some meat stew. Although I was really too tired to eat what was offered (and the rice was very well cooked!) I had a good portion and felt a wave of pleasure - almost of exultation - that my request had been granted. Even in this trifling incident I still feel that there was an underlying moral reflecting on our first encounters with the Japs long before the fall of Singapore. They are immensely determined but will yield if the same determination is shown by those by whom they are confronted. Alas the history of Singapore - and of Malaya before it - shows a want of determination on the part of those at the head of events from the beginning (when admittedly we were weak) to the moment of capitulation.

Nevertheless we were ourselves in poor shape and efforts to obtain extra food produced little or nothing. Constant bouts of malaria and the beginnings of dysentery in our midst meant that we

were less and less able to do worthwhile work. Furthermore I think the Japs did not relish our seeing their own forces in retreat. Word came that we were to return to Wampo; there, after a day or so of waiting, we began our journey back. The Japs were still trying frantically to repair the damage done to the viaduct and the chorus of "Kuras!" which their engineers were venting on our comrades who had been dragooned into the task of repairing the viaduct and getting the trains moving, was reminiscent of other days. Momentarily we wondered if we were not after all to be evacuated but would be pressed into the repair work, the extent of which looked enormous. But we moved on and were not so long in being put on to a train moving south in which we made quite swift progress. At Tamarkan we crossed by the old wooden bridge and there were gasps at the extent of the damage done to the piers and girders alike at the main bridge by the bombers. Eventually we pulled up at what looked like a small halt and which turned out to be the station for Tamuang and was originally intended to house members of those assigned by the Japs to No. 4 group. But as with other camps, after the confusion of disease and death which had resulted from the building of the railway, there had been an influx of people from other groups though the majority were probably still of No. 4. By the time we arrived at the camp it was nominally commanded by R.S.M. Fitzgerald who seemed an efficient person and the camp seemed to be well run and with a happy atmosphere. There were a large number of sick, some in decline, others at various stages of recovery. A high number were accommodated in the camp hospital where the physicians held in highest regard when we got there seemed to be two Australian doctors, Majors Coates and Moon. The second of these saw me soon after we arrived and as I was somewhere under nine stone (about the same as when I had arrived in Non Pladuk) I was told I was to be on 'C' diet which I think meant primarily that I received a duck's egg each day as well as a diet well ahead of anything we had been having up in Wampo and once again I began to emerge from the tunnel of illness out into the daylight of better health. I saw several Gordons who I had not met since leaving Changi in 1942 and who were, as was ever their wont, kind and helpful and I soon knew my way round the camp and had been warned as to which of the Koreans I should avoid (which meant nearly all) and also of some of my fellow prisoners who were not held in high esteem and of these there were, happily, very few.

Two features at Tamuang surprised me greatly - one was the practice of disinfecting the clothing and belongings of all newcomers in a special chamber of ingenious construction built above a fire which was kept lit more or less permanently. Doctors had realised how much of our disease was carried by microbes irrespective of malaria with whose source the doctors had long been familiar. Clean clothing as well as bodies had been shown to play their part in containing and sometimes eliminating germs.

The second feature (which was of interest to me personally perhaps more than to my companions) was the well run library service which was in operation. How many books in all it contained I do not recall but there were quite a number of prisoners who had learned to keep the books bound and in repair but who in the first place had divided nearly every book into several portions so that a single novel might be broken down into, say, four or even six sections. Rather in the manner of "Happy Families" one had gradually to acquire each section of the book being read, but of course one would always endeavour to read the sections of a book in their correct sequence and somehow the need to wait for the next section of this or that book seemed to add to the charm or excitement which its author had created and one's interest was maintained and perhaps even enhanced by the delays which tended to occur.

Not that I spent all my time reading books while in Tamuang, I was only really able to enjoy reading whilst in the hospital where I stayed about 3 weeks, after that I was put on working parties but these were not very exacting in their nature but they did however qualify me for pay by the Japs who had regrettably taken no account of inflation as it affected us and were still paying the same amount fixed back in 1942.

We had arrived in Tamuang just as the dry season boiled up into the intensively oppressive heat which heralds the approach of the monsoon. In Non Pladuk I have recorded how the slit trenches were flooded to overflowing in the first massive downpour which occurred in 1944. In 1945 with a similar build up there was a most terrifying thunderstorm with vivid lightning and enormous claps of thunder followed by devastating rain. Sadly four far from fit men taking shelter in a disused hut were caught by the electrical shock which struck the building and all died. Though we did not then know it, freedom was not so far ahead of us and it was terrible that this event should have occurred to men who had succeeded in surviving far worse hazards in the previous three years.

Scarcely had I begun to regard Tamuang as a new home then word came that further moves were in contemplation. A big new camp was being set up we were told in the country east and to the north of Bangkok. We were to evacuate Tamuang gradually and parties would leave at intervals during May. So once again I gathered together my meagre and ragged possessions which at least were no great weight for me to carry and we set off in yet another train. First to the junction which I knew so well near to Non Pladuk and then past that camp (which so far as I could see was now deserted) on again towards Bangkok passing near to Nakhon Pathom and finally to the south bank of the Mae Nam river where we saw what was left of the former big rail bridge over the river, now totally wrecked after a visit from the R.A.F. Crossing the river in barges we moved on down the far bank past railway sidings where engines and rolling stock

lying in grotesque positions, some upside down and others standing on end, had likewise had attention from the bombers. Air raid warnings were constantly sounding and we saw planes (though in no great number) flying in the distance and once or twice, to our consternation, overhead. But although we were lodged in a warehouse alongside the river and close to a railway siding for several days, we escaped injury and we even did a day's work cleaning up some houses which had been damaged on the fringe of Bangkok and which were it seemed subject to requisition by the Japs.

Finally a primitive looking train puffed wearily along and we were put on board. After traversing Bangkok and its immediate suburban area we seemed to branch a little northward and finally late in the afternoon stopped at a village which we learned bore the name of Saraburi. It was smaller than Ban Pong but with the same sort of wooden 'western' houses and one almost expected to see Gary Cooper emerge from the local saloon and blaze away with six shooters. But we were gathered together and soon began a march along rough tracks which took us south and east of the town out past an air landing field till we reached the site of what was it seemed our new camp, called Prachinburi²⁷.

²⁷ The author referred to Pratchai in his original account, but since Prachin Buri as marked on modern maps of Thailand corresponds to his description of the place, I have used this modern term for the camp - now a town with an airport!

CHAPTER 14
NIPPON GO - GOING - GONE
May 1945 - Aug 1945
Prachinburi

This was really two camps in one. In the first were many Jap soldiers fully armed with field guns of some lightish calibre. Within yards of this camp was that allocated to us - it was close to a stream which ran down from the hills which rolled away behind us for several miles. Not far away was a hill of exceptional height and steepness at the top of which we were told the prophet Buddha had rested when on some pilgrimage, though never quite understood whence he was supposed to have come or whither he was bound. Just below this hill was a small but very beautiful little pagoda with the stream running close by to it. At the time of our arrival a large part of the ground where our camp was to be sited was flooded to a depth of about a foot and for the first week or two we waded through the water to collect our food from the cook house which had been set up on an island beyond this (as we hoped) temporary lake. We began at once to build huts and soon somehow order emerged from the conditions of chaos prevailing when we arrived and we then became aware of what our real task was to be.

It appeared that the Japs having been defeated in Burma and retreating out of that country were planning a defence line east and to the north of Bangkok and covering their occupation of Cambodia and Indo China including Saigon. So as to safeguard their dwindling supplies of oil, fuel and their ammunition it was intended to tunnel into the foot of the hill side close to the stream to which I have referred. We, of course, were to provide the labour for this task.

There had been much muttering by those now in charge of us - Medical Officers, Warrant Officers and below - as to the close proximity of our camp site to the Jap camp which was immediately adjacent to Jap fighting forces known to be taking up positions close by. Of course this was contrary to the Geneva convention but then so to had been our other various occupations whilst their prisoners, their inadequate food and payment and the notorious declaration that we would not try to escape which they had extracted by methods of extreme duress. The location of Prachinburi Camp and our employment in what were overtly acts assisting the Japanese war effort were only another example of their defiance of a Convention of which they were well aware. They did not repudiate it in the years leading up to the war, but not being bound by it one finds it no surprise that they virtually ignored it at every turn in the treatment we received.

Certainly we were in no position to argue these matters in May 1945 even though the Japanese now openly admitted "Germany finish!" So we did our best and I think succeeded in creating a

well built camp, a healthy camp, a well fed camp (within the limits allowed by the Japs) and in general a happy camp. We were as ever required to work hard but in the main suffered few casualties. For we had not brought any of the sick of Tamuang with us when we moved and Prachinburi proved a healthy spot with a good water supply.

It has surprised me sometimes when reflecting on those times that although suffering severe reverses in 1945 by comparison with their numerous triumphs in 1942 and 1943 the Japanese did not seem specially to vent their feelings on us which is something in their favour to set against their many inhumane acts in those early years. Their soldiers were not, I think, well informed as to events at any stage (as instance the Jap soldiers on a train which halted at Non Pladuk in 1944 and who believed they were in India!) but at least in general they knew that the tide had turned but they seemed to be ready to concentrate on the task on which they were immediately engaged and without reference to the future, still less the past. In the three months or so which in the event we were to spend in Prachinburi I was most employed in the work of building the bunkers to which I have referred, but in the course of one or two days when parties went to Saraburi to collect materials and implements I caught the glint of bombers to the west of us, at some height, and there was a slight explosion sharp in its tone and a flash and I wondered what this portended. At the time we believed that the war in Europe had ended more than a month before and I had at first imagined that in a very short time an immense assault would be made on the Japs wherever they were still located including Siam but, in fact, apart from the incident I have mentioned there was absolute quiet both on the ground and above it.

The planes I had seen and the noise I had heard were involved (of all things) with the dropping of leaflets. Some had been dropped around Non Pladuk in 1944 and were in English with a map of France showing the areas occupied by the Allies at that time, but if leaflets had been dropped in Siam in the local language I doubt if they will have made much of an impact on the inhabitants. They are not a warlike people and would, I think, have preferred to be neutral but were forced to give the Japs access through their country after only token resistance in 1941 and joined in against us with one assumes the thought that their country would suffer less by co-operating and in this conclusion I think they were proved to have been right. But the population with whom we came in contact showed kindness and no animosity towards us and when in the closing stages of the war they knew that the Japanese faced defeat they were, I think, happy that this should be so and the further kindness we received after the Japs capitulated was genuine and not I think simply a means of gaining Allied favour.

Though our work at Prachinburi proceeded steadily and with much less interference from rain than we had met in the hills through which the railway had been driven, the shortage of

materials was apparent. To carry implements and the oil and ammunition a light railway was constructed running along the verge at the side of the rough track which led up through the hills and adjacent to which the bunkers were located at intervals of 300 - 400 yards. This railway was built entirely of wood - sleepers, rails, trucks and even their wheels, locomotion being provided by ourselves. But, as with other primitive devices of the Japs, it was made to work and helped a little to speed up the progress demanded. Those of us who witnessed this demonstration of determination by the Japs have been not at all surprised to witness the rapid revival of their country in post war years and their establishment as a leading industrial country. Perhaps there is a moral to be drawn from this, in the approach of our own people (in whatever field) to the problems which this country now faces.

We had begun building the bunkers fairly close to our camp but as progress advanced so to did the distance we travelled to whatever new site was allotted to us. Thus by August we were working at fully two miles or more from Prachinburi. The engineer in charge of us was not specially belligerent towards us and in the spell we had with him we had not been too severely stretched and there were no incidents or violent assaults on any of our number though if anything went amiss there was the usual shouting and gesturing which we had long since come to understand as normal behaviour as much between the Japs themselves (and especially between the Japs and the Koreans) as with ourselves. So that when on August 17th we set out from Prachinburi around 8.30 a.m. it was for us the beginning of just another day. On the rough road just outside the camp were a number of Thais one or two of whom walked beside us as we tramped up the track towards our place of work. They grinned at us and made a "thumbs up" sign and one of them said quite loudly and distinctly "Kambaree" which was of course short for Kanchanaburi. We did not take much notice of these incidents but afterwards their significance became more apparent. I do not recall the precise nature of the work we did that day, but it was fully 6.30 p.m. before we were at the stream which followed the course of the track alongside which the works were taking place and in which more than one of us lingered having had a bath to get clean of the sweat and dirt of the day. In the end the Jap engineer was hurrying us to begin the journey back. Other parties ahead had passed us on their return and those behind us were also finished so that our walk back was quiet and we encountered no one. But as we came to a point outside the camp gate where we could see beyond to the camp itself, an extraordinary sight confronted us. A great quantity of our companions who at that time would ordinarily have been collecting or eating their evening meal were to be seen strolling about in front of our living quarters shouting and laughing, several had on coloured shirts which ordinarily were only issued by the Japs to parties who were leaving to go to Japan. No guard stood at the gate though the guard room seemed still to be occupied, but one or two people seeing us approach ran towards us calling out "It's all over - we're free" - someone said that Colonel Harvey who was

the senior M.O. at the camp was at that very moment conferring with the Jap Commandant as to our future and we looked closely at the building where this talk would have been taking place still not certain that we could believe what we had been told.

The air was alive with rumours and I realised that something of significance must have occurred since it was entirely against the Jap code of war that they should capitulate. That night when others sang and almost danced with delight, I and one or two doubting Aberdonians took our evening meal quietly as we normally would have done and concluded that we hoped this was all really true but we would bide a moment before we felt justified in joining in the general rejoicing.

Some stayed up late talking that night but, although I went to my bed, I found sleep difficult. I had always wondered what our end might be fearing that the Japs might involve us in a mass demonstration of hari-kari. All round us at Prachinburi was a huge moat about twenty feet wide and fifteen feet deep and there were guard posts with machine guns at each corner. Similar moats had been dug around Non Pladuk and Tamuang and I believe all of the camps in Thailand in 1944. I was never sure whether they were intended as a means of preventing escape or as a means of identifying each of the camps.

I still could not put it out of my mind that even if our soldiers had won the final victory we might not survive to share in it. About midnight there was a rattle of machine gun fire and later a further burst - was this the beginning? But for the rest of the night there was silence and in the morning I learned that Thai brigands - who operated in the remote parts of Thailand - hearing that Japan was surrendering had thought to get some pickings in our camp and that the sentries (who were understandably jumpy) had fired at them.

CONCLUSIONS

CHAPTER 15 FREEDOM AND CONCLUSIONS

Next day our fears were finally dispelled. Suddenly we had lots of food and I acquired a Japanese blanket this enabling me to place on a bonfire comprising similar antiques my own thin and germ ridden covering. We gradually learned of the Emperor's rescript and of the new devastating bomb dropped on Japan. In a day or two word came that supplies were to be dropped on the landing ground we had passed on our first journey from Saraburi and that a party was to go there to collect packages which might descend at this airstrip. I encountered David Nunnerly, a Gordon officer, who had been ordered to take charge of this party. He had been sent over from a nearby camp to which some officers had lately been moved. He asked me to recommend a group of ten (including a Sergeant) to go out to the airfield and this I did and we left soon after.

We were there for some two weeks, fed magnificently by the Thai army, who were most courteous to us all. Various drops from the air took place including one by an R.A.F. Squadron Leader in person whose visit seemed to be slightly non official. The air drops consisted of urgent medical supplies and some food and cigarettes, but also many bales of tropical clothing - jungle green shirts and long trousers as issued to the 14th Army of General Slim. The more fragile items were dropped attached to parachutes, but the clothing was in bales enclosed in sacking. One or two of these burst open as they struck the ground and though we endeavoured to salvage their contents the local Thais soon spotted an opportunity to pilfer and were often successful. But we had overlooked the Thai drivers of the lorries which were carrying the supplies from the airstrip out to the nearby camps. Imagine the surprise of the Officer travelling back with a lorry load when smoke began to seep from under the bonnet of this vehicle, calling a halt he discovered that the trouble did not have its origin in the engine but was the result of sundry pairs of trousers placed under the bonnet having (not surprisingly) become heated and caught fire! In those days in Thailand the local inhabitants obviously found the problem of clothing nearly as acute as ourselves!

There was one alarming moment when the Thais in bringing our food suddenly warned us that the Jap soldiers in position up in the hills all round us were restive and that there was danger that they might descend and shoot us up and also those in the camp we had left. We were warned to take to the hills if there was any such move and that they would then come to our aid. That there was substance in this story is supported by the fact that evacuation of those in the camp was suddenly begun with the arrival of motor coaches at three o'clock one morning and by

the rapid movement thereafter of those we had left at Prachinburi. We had been promised a ride in the first plane to put down on the landing ground and to our joy one finally set down and word came from the British area Commander Col. Lillie of the Sherwood Foresters that we were to leave when she took off.

So we left Thailand at last after (in my case) a spell of almost three years. We learned later that our pilot was nervous whether our Dakota would get airborne from the very short airstrip available to him and that we might well have landed in the paddy fields beyond. Fortunately we were unaware at that time of his misgivings and apart from crossing through violent storm cloud right above the hills through which we had built the railway, we had an uneventful trip to Rangoon and a safe landfall.

At Rangoon in the Hudson University Buildings we found that we had become RAPWI (Returned Allied Prisoners of War and Internees) and that our diet was to be free of rice (at least for the moment) and we slept between pure white sheets under the rather stern eye of an immaculately clad nurse who impressed on us how vital it was that we should digest the numerous mepacrine tablets lest at this late stage we be stricken down once more by malaria. It was rumoured that the tablets would render us either sterile or impotent (and perhaps both) and more tablets were lost in some way than were consumed. I now had jungle green trousers and a shirt, a monsoon cape and some gym shoes, the latter being all that S.E.A.C. could muster in my size. But I still tramped quite a little distance through rain and mud to listen to a gramophone concert which I fortunately saw advertised in the canteen to which we had access. We had had concerts of an improvised character, humorous and light hearted on some of the few rest days enjoyed in Non Pladuk and Tamuang, but classical music had been separated from us since the days of Adam Park when I had managed to borrow for one evening a gramophone salvaged at that time by a 'wealthy' lorry driver with valuable 'contacts' round Singapore. The main items in his limited repertoires of old 78 and 80 speed records was a rendering of Egon Petri of Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto. So it was with mixed feelings that after hearing Beethoven's Leonora No. 3 overture I heard the familiar and thunderous opening of the No. 1 now alas (in a world full of limitless hi-fi) deemed hackneyed but, at that moment for me and others, very moving.

Our 'theatre' was located in a concreted floored room devoid utterly of furniture save a radiogram and a container of records. We sat on the floor and the bare nature of the surroundings perhaps enhanced the magic of sound which we had begun to feel had been lost to us for ever. They had an interval and someone who was apparently the prime mover in organising the occasion asked for suggestions for later concerts which were going to be

organised. One or two pieces were mentioned and I enquired with a little hesitation if they could play Dvorak's 'New World'. The organiser gave a broad smile and told me this was to be played after the interval. It is a piece which I still find remarkable and grow sentimental about when it is played to this day.

And so to the boat, the slowest vessel plying on behalf of His Majesty anywhere at that time and I believe destined for the scrapyard after it carried us ponderously and with little comfort though admittedly with a cuisine in advance of our Thailand standards. She was the S.S. Orduna of some 12000 tons but with a draught just a foot or so less than S.S. Queen Mary with which regrettably she had nothing else in common and, though happy to be going home at last, it is a fact that our journey out to Singapore five years earlier was made in greater comfort and in not much longer time bearing in mind that we had the facility of the Suez Canal for the second journey. It was at the foot of the Suez Canal that we had been issued with thicker clothing though we had to be taken in by tankers because our old lady had to stay off-shore because she drew so much water. After another ten days we were edging up the estuary into Liverpool and two days after I was reunited with my family.

Since my return I have read many stories written by a variety of people telling their version of the days before and after the fall of Singapore but few had been far up the railway, fewer still had been long in Malaya before it was attacked and it has for long seemed to me that a broader history of those times could be set down. I have made little if any reference to acts of brutality committed by the Japs and Koreans for although these occurred on a vast number of occasions the parties concerned were of small importance in themselves although (often because they were small in stature) they tried to exaggerate their own significance by making victims of their captives. Those at the head of affairs and some also in lesser positions came before War Crimes Tribunals and were punished - some being executed. This could not erase the memory of all that had been done or expiate the acts committed and I still believe that in all the history of human suffering and deprivation the story of the Thai Railways in the year 1943 would at least have prominence.

The statistics as to those who went into captivity and those who emerged which have been published have been viewed by me with suspicion and I still believe that amongst the parties actually entering Siam and working on the Railway even if they (or elements of them) returned later to Changi or went to Japan, the numbers who died were in the ratio of at least one in four as against those who survived and we know that of those who returned a large number are no longer with us, many having died at a quite young age and where some have recovered their physical strength many have had nervous disorders of various kinds which are present, though

not always apparent.

I am now the sole survivor of what in December 1941 constituted the headquarters of 'C' Company. C.S.M. Scott and C.Q.M.S. Greaves died whilst with the ill fated 'F' Force which suffered disastrous casualties at Nikki (north of Konkuita). Of the rest, one person was killed laying mines, another died earlier of wounds received in action and all the others died as prisoners or have died since we were liberated, so that as far as I am aware no one else remains of those closest to me in December 1941, suggesting that the casualty ratio (taking in the post war period) has been very heavy. So in thinking of suffering Japanese let us be mindful also of those who became involuntary victims of their want of humanity. Fate can sometimes provide her own balancing factor. Above all, let us not forget that the decision of Harry Truman to authorise the dropping of two atomic bombs in Japan almost certainly saved more lives than it cost.

The Japanese had, when they bombed Pearl Harbour, a reasonably modern, well trained and well led navy with an army of immense determination and stoicism, though much less ingenuity and flair than the utterly unenterprising Jeremiahs in Fort Canning gave them credit for. They had also a determined Air Force, as Admiral Tom Phillips learned sadly to his cost, but their lack of the basic materials of war especially petrol and steel were to mean that by August 1945 they had mainly only the courage of their forces still in the field on which to rely and by then their navy had shrunk fantastically and their air force had been swept from the skies; but their army was still ready to fight on in the Islands of Japan itself as well as in Burma and Malaya and the East Indies and before all their forces were obliged to capitulate they would have lost more, I would estimate, in dead than were lost at Hiroshima. The Americans and to a less extent their allies would also have lost thousands of casualties before the last pockets of resistance were eliminated. And of the 60/70,000 prisoners left in captivity (and their precise numbers are I suggest still a mystery) how many of them would have returned to their families? We in Prachinburi had between two and three companies of Japanese soldiers (infantry and artillery) all fully armed within yards of our camp in those last hectic days which marked the transition between slavery and carefree liberty. Japanese records (never repudiated to my knowledge) suggest that P.O.W. Commanders had orders that if Allied Forces landed in Siam or Malaya, or elsewhere, where there were prison camps to liquidate all those held. If the Officers had still been with us some plans might have been evolved for resistance or flight, but if there were any such plans for those in Prachinburi these were never ever hinted to anyone within my acquaintance in the camp. In our case at least the prospect of our survival must have been poor and although there was a Commando force gathering in the vicinity of Kanchanaburi (it was of this force we later realised that the Thais outside Prachinburi were calling to us on the day we

learned we were free) they could only have helped prisoners in that locality and the number of these had been greatly diminished since the Officers camp there had already been broken up and a large number were close to us when the Japanese capitulated and it was in part to these Officers that supplies we received on our airstrip were sent.

So it seems to me that together the number of battle casualties and butchered prisoners would almost certainly have exceeded the number of those who died in Hiroshima and Nagasaki and terrible as was their plight, I believe that if horror had to be balanced by horror the Japanese could have no complaint that these disasters befell their own citizens and not ourselves or our allies.

In the much wider ethical aspect of the use of the atom bomb, I am even more convinced that this has benefitted the generation which has entered the world since 1945 and will (one hopes) continue to benefit other generations far into the future. In this regard, it is my view that every new device needs not only to be tested but to be seen by the masses to be effective before its full potential is accepted in the world. Would the 'A' bomb or for that matter the 'H' bomb have become the deterrent to further world war which it cannot be denied they are now are if the practical results of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had not been available for examination and analysis by the world? If Truman had not ordered the planes to set off in 1945 would not some latterday Hitler seeking to dominate the world have by now carried out some still more devastating experiment and perhaps engulfed and laid waste the entire world! The thought is too horrible to contemplate.

Apart from the comparison between known atom bomb casualties in Japan with likely numbers of casualties in all theatres had the bombs not been dropped, one may also consider how those who survived on either side have fared since August 1945. Obviously with the intense ethical argument which developed after the war as to the use of the bomb, much attention has been focused (and still is) on the fate of those who survived Hiroshima and one would have to have a hard heart indeed not to feel sympathy for the people of Hiroshima who were in the city when the bomb fell, yet have survived. But it was obvious there would be scientific interest apart from the humanitarian aspect and little thought is given as to how the prisoners of war and internees have fared since their return. Many lost their limbs or their vision and so extensive have been the effects of their spell in Japanese hands that the Department of Health and Social Security has set up a special department to deal with relief claims and the long established rule whereby war pensions are not paid unless claimed within seven years (without special circumstances being proved) was waived in favour of Far East prisoners some time ago.

For my part I have concluded that my rejection by the Seaforth Highlanders and later precipitation into the Far Eastern Theatre of war, whilst greatly damaging my physical health, has given me a far wider insight into how men react under extreme conditions. I also learnt much of the working of the Oriental mind which (at least in wartime when patriotic feelings are fully aroused) is ruthless and utterly devoid of human compassion as much to those within itself who fall short of their objective as to those coming within their power. If Padre Andrews was right in considering the Chinese to be the more ruthless of the two races then my final thought must be that one must trust to providence that these two races, whose destiny in the history of man has so far always been separated, will not ever come together as did Russia and Germany in 1939. That event precipitated the Second World War and the meeting of the Confucian and Nippon stars in juxtaposition could be just as devastating.

In 'C' Company of the Gordon Highlanders I was often in the company of one Thomas Cass (Tom to his many friends) who had enlisted many years earlier in the Royal Scots being from the lowlands of Scotland. His mental ability was adequate to have taken him into high places in the army had not his capacity for consuming liquor on many an occasion got the better of him so that promotion had several times been followed by reduction to the ranks where he still remained when we first met. He was responsible for the payment ledgers in the Company and for some time we worked together and I enjoyed his companionship and I also admired his ability at cricket. He had that great gift of being able to make a cricket ball swing very late and not too much, whether the ball was new or old, and in his time he took the wickets of many fine batsmen.

It happens that when I was evacuated to hospital in January 1942 Tom Cass took my place as Clerk and when the Gordons were occupying a defence position just outside Singapore City a day or two before the island capitulated, a chance mortar shell fell beside him wounding him in the leg. He was evacuated to hospital whence he was removed by the Japs after our forces had capitulated. He was never seen again and is believed to have died from his wound. His philosophy was simple - 'Tomorrow is a new day'. At Imphal a memorial stands commemorating those who died in the battle in Burma "For Our Tomorrow They Gave Their Today". Fate decreed that Tom Cass received what otherwise could have been for me and so far as I am concerned 'for my tomorrow he gave his today'. I therefore dedicate the foregoing to his memory and to that of Frank Knight and all those other Gordons who had not my good fortune to survive into "The New Day".

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