NIPPON SLAVES

Photograph of the Author taken shortly after his release from internment. He is seen wearing the well-preserved Singapore Volunteer Corps uniform given by his brother in April 1942.

NIPPON SLAVES

LIONEL DE ROSARIO

JANUS PUBLISHING COMPANY
London, England

First published in Great Britain 1995
by Janus Publishing Company
Edinburgh House
19 Nassau Street
London W1N 7RE

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data. A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 1 85756 103 1

Cover design Linda Wade

Printed & bound in England by
Antony Rowe Ltd,
Chippenham, Wiltshire

Dedicated to

David W. Ginsberg,
my very dear friend and uncle-in-law,
and to the memory of
Eduardo E. Da Silva,
another dear friend,
both of whom had shared with me
the good and the bad times in
various prisoner-of-war camps in Singapore
and the many happy years thereafter.

Contents

Illustrations

Plates Nos. 5, 7, 18 and 20 have been reproduced with the kind permission of the Imperial War Museum, London.

Maps

Preface

Fifty years ago, the almost invincible Imperial Japanese Army overran the island fortress of Singapore, resulting in the Japanese occupation of Singapore for a period of three and a half years. That event is now distanced by time, and to the present generation it is past history which they know little or nothing about.

With the fall of Singapore, more than 100,000 British, Australian, Gurkha and Indian soldiers, not forgetting the European and Eurasian members of the Singapore Volunteer Corps who had fought for the defence of Singapore's sovereignty, became prisoners of war of the Japanese. During their internment, they suffered deprivation and untold hardship. Thousands were forced to work in the deep jungles of Siam (Thailand) on the construction of the infamous 'Death Railway'. The majority who had survived the ordeal had been reduced to skin and bones. The civilian population who were faced with an unknown future had hoped that the quality of mercy would not be strained. Unfortunately, mercy was a moral value which was totally alien to the Japanese. Singapore was renamed *Syonan* and the Japanese masters ruled the occupied territory with an iron hand. People who had lived through the Japanese occupation of Singapore will long remember those dark days in the history of Singapore as days of fear, brutality, torture, rape, executions and sadistic exploitations. Ultimately, good had prevailed over the evil forces. Ironically, it was the devastating atom bomb which became the instrument of peace. The atom bomb which rained fire over the skies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had brought the Japanese nation to their knees. Whatever had happened had receded into the limbo of history; nevertheless, the ordeal has left indelible

impressions in the minds of many survivors.

My personal experience on the construction of a stretch of the 'Death Railway' including the 'Bridge of the River Kwai' and my battle for survival in the promised 'hill-resort' called Songkurai is like a nightmare which dominates my memories. It is something which perpetually haunted me especially as the loss of my hearing power, the persistent pains in my belly and a scar on my shin are everlasting reminders of that ordeal.

In the past, I had written a few articles and short stories about some facets of my experience for some periodicals and newspapers in England and Singapore. Now that I have retired from the Singapore Engineering Service, and have much time on my hands, I feel that it is a good opportunity for me to record all my memories before senility creeps in.

The purpose of this book is not to rekindle the fire of hatred against the Japanese people but to present a first-hand account of my personal experiences of the war, especially in the various prisoner-of-war camps in Singapore and Siam at a young age. It is my hope that my book will arouse a sense of awareness in the minds of our present generation of what had happened in Singapore just a half century ago. Perhaps, they will also learn that many of the older Singaporeans had been noble and civic-minded men who had the guts to enlist as members of the Singapore Volunteer Corps and rally to the defence of Singapore when the need arose. Some of those men had made the supreme sacrifice and are forgotten, but many still live in our midst. Above all, they could learn to appreciate the true value of peace which they enjoy today. Their peace is a legacy which was left behind by thousands of Allied and local servicemen and women who had sacrificed their lives for Singapore.

Today, peace is so fragile in our turbulent world. Perhaps the *Nippon Slaves* could be a sober reminder to the present generation of the dire consequences should their beloved country be subjected to foreign domination. It is now up to the present generation to ensure that history does not repeat itself.

The *Nippon Slaves* is not a biased litany of atrocities committed by the Japanese. It is a blend of the bad, the good and the

amusing episodes. Some of the bad stories are unpleasant and disturbing while the amusing stories seem fantastic. Sometimes, truth is stranger than fiction.

Most of the men who had worked with me in Songkurai and have survived the ordeal have one common belief so deeply entrenched in their minds. To them, there is no good Jap and the only good Jap is a dead one. It would, however, be fair for me to mention that not all the Japanese soldiers I had encountered in the various work camps were brutal tyrants. I came across a few who were humane, and within their steel hearts they did have a soft spot. A Japanese soldier once said to me and my colleagues in Songkurai: 'Not all Japanese are bastards'.

The writing of *Nippon Slaves* gave me much pleasure and brought back many memories. They were not related to brutality I had experienced but to the difficulties I had encountered and surmounted in my battle for survival in an unimaginable earthly hell where life hung by a thread.

In conclusion, I must say that my war service and subsequent internment had taught me to appreciate the simple but precious human values in life like selflessness and trust. I also learnt to appreciate the spirit of camaraderie especially in those dark days. Above all, I will always remember the tenacious bonds of friendship which I cultivated and which have remained strong throughout these years.

Lionel de Rosario

Sydney, Australia

Acknowledgments

This book could not have been completed without the help of many people to whom I am greatly indebted. I am unable to name all of them but I would particularly like to mention the following:

Firstly, my younger daughter, Maureen, who despite the heavy pressure of work both at the office and at home, found the time to type my manuscript which has been amended frequently.

Secondly my elder daughter, Beverley, who has done some research in Singapore on my behalf.

Mr Chira Silapakanok, a Thai architect, kindly drove me from Bangkok to Kanchanaburi, to visit the Allied War Cemetery, and took some photography.

The Keeper, Department of Photographs, Imperial War Museum, London, for his advice about suitable photographs and for the permission to reproduce some of the historic photographs.

My many ex-POW colleagues who now and again discussed those days of internment with me and in a way refreshed my memory.

Last, but not least, my dear wife Ivy for all her encouragement and advice. She is among those who had the opportunity to visit the POWs at the Bukit Timah Camp in Singapore during April and May 1942.

A special thanks is due to Mrs Hedwig Anuar, former Director of the National Library, Singapore who, despite her heavy commitments, has found the time to read my book and give an advance opinion.

Introduction

I am a Singapore-born Eurasian of Portugese descent but a natural born British subject. Subsequently, when Singapore was granted independent status, I became a citizen of Singapore.

My father was an architect with his own private practice. I was always fascinated by what he did and from an early age I was keen to follow his footsteps. Invariably, whenever he did some work at home, I would use his drafting instruments, and gradually acquired the technique of drafting.

In 1937, I passed the Cambridge School Certificate Examination, whose questions were set and answers adjudicated by the Cambridge University Examinations Syndicate. Passing such examination opened the door to employment in the junior civil service or commercial offices. In the hope of being an architect someday, I decided to join my father's firm as a draftsman.

By June 1940, my father began to experience a recession, so I left him to join the junior civil service in response to a vacancy advertisement. As a clerk in the General Clerical Service, I gained a varied experience in the Colonial Secretariat, the Audit Department and the Import & Export Office.

As a keen sportsman during my school days, my friends, my two brothers and I formed the Windsor Sports Club with a generous donation from my father to purchase the necessary sports gear. At the same time, I joined the Junior Civil Service Sports Club. I was able to play cricket, hockey and football for both clubs against teams from the business houses, other sport clubs and the Services.

My father had been a member of the Singapore Volunteer

Corps for more than twenty-five years before he resigned in early 1939 following the death of my mother. However, when the Pacific War broke out, he joined the Local Defence Volunteers. He was awarded the Efficiency Medal just before he resigned from the Volunteer Corps.

To maintain the family tradition, my elder brother Allan and myself joined the Singapore Volunteer Corps in 1940. Allan was attached to the Signals Company while I joined the 'D' (Eurasian) Company, my father's former company. My younger brother, Roland joined the Air Raid Precaution unit. Both, Allan and myself were mobilised for active service at the outbreak of the Pacific War.

When the mighty 'Fortress Singapore' crumbled before the determined onslaught of the Imperial Japanese Army on 15 February 1942, I became a prisoner-of-war and a Nippon slave. My internment lasted three and a half years. In this book, I hope to give my readers a brief idea of my experiences as a prisoner-of-war, since what had happened during three and a half years would fill many volumes.

On 5 September 1945, troops of the British Fifth Indian Division re-took the island of Singapore, but it was not until June 1946 that I was finally demobilised and returned to civvy street.

My former post in the Import & Export Office awaited me. I worked for a year and with a view to getting a technical job as a stepping stone to becoming an architect. I managed to get a transfer to the Public Works Department where I became acquainted with the Chief Architect who was also the President of the Institute of Architects of Malaya. Certificates awarded by the Institute were the necessary qualification for entry and promotion in the Architectural Branch of the Public Works Department. Still hoping to jump across to the Technical Service, I approached the Chief Architect who agreed to allow me to take the examination. Candidates were normally allowed to sit for one examination in one year before taking the next higher grade in the following year, but somehow, I managed to pass three examinations in two years. With the three certificates in my hand, I once again approached the Chief Architect, and with the

concurrence of the Director of Public Works, I was transferred from the General Clerical Service to the Technical Service.

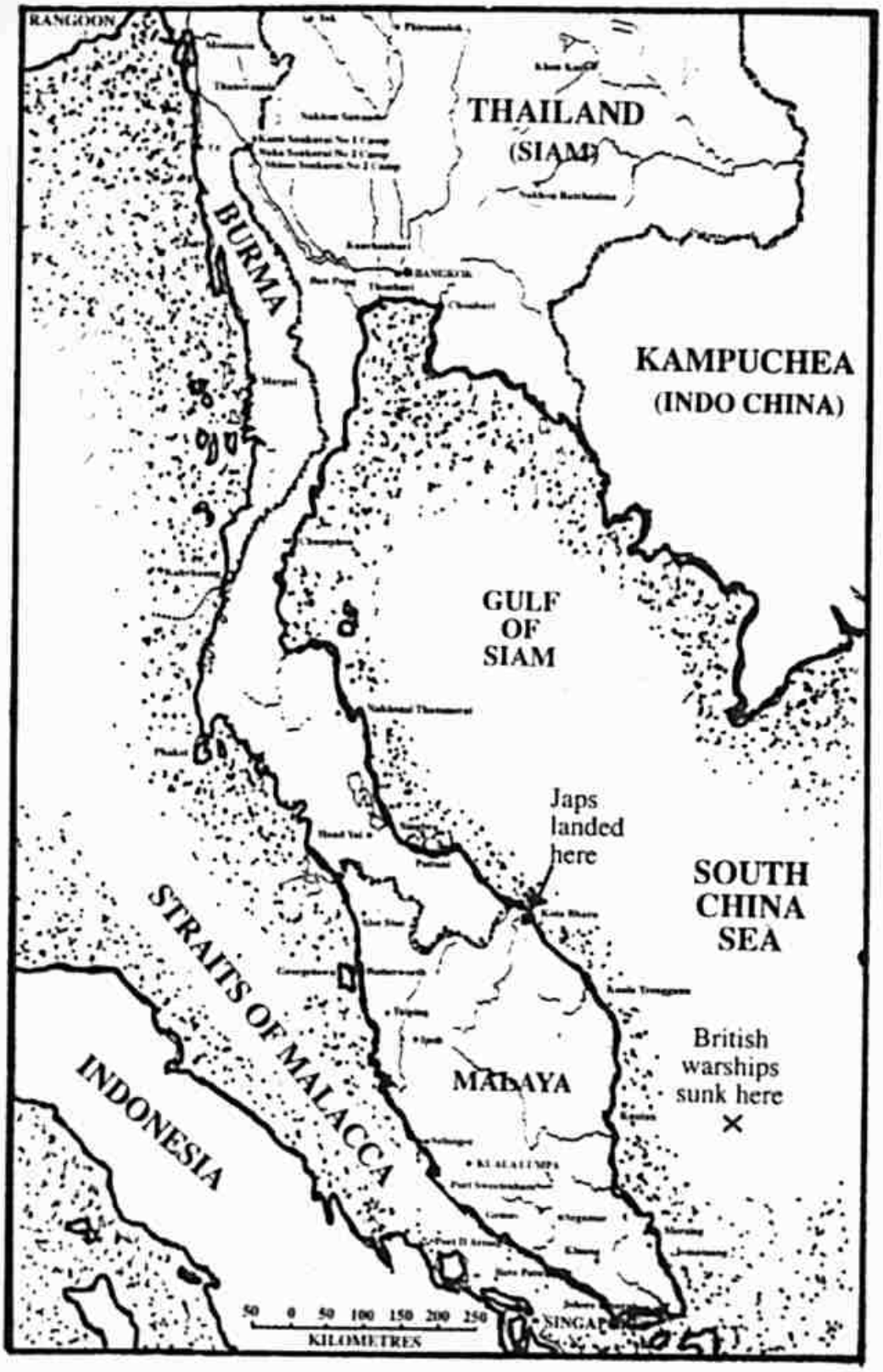
In the immediate post-war period, the British government set up the Colonial Development Welfare Fund, The purpose was to send suitable men and women to British universities or colleges to obtain higher qualifications to enable them to take over some of the senior administrative and professional posts in the Civil Service in accordance with the British 'Malayanisation policy'.

When the advertisement inviting suitable candidates was circulated in the department, I again approached the Chief Architect and he reluctantly agreed to recommend me, as the department was only keen to recommend those who wanted to study engineering. Anyway, I was successful in obtaining a scholarship to study architecture at Oxford. Despite my age, I was determined to succeed and usually burned the midnight oil.

Upon my graduation in 1956, the Chief Architect who was on home leave in England invited me to a lunch in London, during which he told me that when he recommended me for the scholarship, he thought that he had backed a 'wrong horse', but my yearly progress reports and final results made him feel proud of me.

The war had generally brought various changes to different countries and people. The British Empire had shrunk and the Commonwealth had expanded. The British government gave Singapore its independence and it became a Republic within the Commonwealth. Many people have crossed frontiers for a better life, while others have adopted another country as their own. For myself, I feel happiness mingled with pride that I had achieved the ambition of being Singapore's Chief Architect and later designated as the Assistant Director of Public Works (Architecture).

Had there been no war, it would be difficult to predict what would have been the turn of events or what would have happened to me or to Singapore. One thing is certain, I would not have been a Japanese prisoner-of-war, and *Nippon Slaves* would not have been written. And so to the many friends and relatives who have invariably asked me about life in a prisoner-of-war camp, I hope *Nippon Slaves* will satisfy your curiosity.



South-East Asia

CHAPTER 1

Heading Towards War

It was thought that the First World War was to be a war to end all wars, and the whole world had pinned its hopes for a lasting peace in the world when, in 1919, the League of Nations was formed in Paris. These hopes were dimmed when Germany and Japan departed from the League of Nations in 1935, and a few years later they caused the Second World War to erupt.

At that time, the British Empire was at its height of glory and Britannia ruled the waves of all the oceans. The British Empire stretched from Canada in the north to Australia in the south and from Hong Kong in the east to the West Indies in the west. The tiny island of Singapore at the southern-most tip of the Malay Peninsula was part of that vast British Empire over which the sun never set. In September 1939, world peace was once again shattered when Great Britain declared war on Germany. It was not because the sovereignty of her Empire had been transgressed, but because Germany had invaded Poland without a declaration of war. Thus the Second World War began.

The events that followed showed that Britain had not been fully geared for a major war. The German military might soon proved superior on land, sea and in the air. By mid 1940, the German armies had occupied Holland and Belgium. France was in danger of being overrun. The British Expeditionary Forces, which had engaged the German armies on the European continent, were forced to retreat towards the French Atlantic coast. A retreat that eventually culminated in their miraculous evacuation from the

French port and beaches of Dunkirk, thus avoiding being crushed by the powerful German army which was well backed up by Panzer (tank) divisions and air force.

The war in Europe made no impact upon Singapore. With its rich history as a trading centre for British, Chinese, Indian and Arab merchants, Singapore continued to enjoy peace and a flourishing international trade.

Life for its multi-racial population went on as usual and undisturbed. They had no worries of the war, neither were they aware of the realities of war. Their knowledge of the horrors of war was limited to whatever they saw of Movitone newsreels at the cinemas. Nobody in Singapore ever thought that the war in Europe would spread to the East and involve Singapore, or that there was any threat of war from any nation in the Far East.

Unexpectedly, some ugly war clouds appeared to darken the Far Eastern skies. Having shed feudalism, Japan matured into an imperial power. The actions of the Japanese Government identified it as a potential enemy in the region. The Japanese Imperial Forces had already conquered Manchuria and China and her soldiers had gained much experience in the battlefields of those two vast countries. By 1941, the Japanese had moved into French Indo-China (now Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos) and there were indications of a planned military drive southwards. The aim of the Japanese was the creation of a 'Greater Co-Prosperity Sphere' which would incorporate Malaya, Singapore, the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia), the Philippines and even Australia. Secretly, they had already finalised their military plans to achieve their ambition.

Although tension was building up in the Far East, the potpourri of people of Singapore were always confident of the British imperial might. Perhaps they had been influenced by the song *Rule Britannia* which they had sung in school and the last line of which says that 'Britons never, never, never shall be slaves'. Furthermore, their faith in the British Government was strengthened by Britain's assurance in the years before 1941 of its intention and ability to send adequate forces to Singapore when the need arose. Singapore was Britain's most important military and naval base in

the Far East. However, the desire to defend this far-flung outpost was over-ridden by priorities on her home front. Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy were growing stronger as the European war dragged on. Thus Britain had no option but to concentrate all her efforts in Europe. The threat to Britain became more pronounced after the British Expeditionary Forces in Europe were forced to evacuate from Dunkirk and there was a likelihood of Britain being invaded by the German Army. Somehow, like Napoleon, the Germans were not to cross the English Channel; nevertheless, the British government had to ensure that they had adequate troops to repel such an invasion. Any escalation of war would no doubt stretch British resources and manpower to breaking point. Whether or not the British had the ability and determination to defend Singapore should war break out in the Far East was yet to be put to the test.

At that time, there was still a fairly substantial British force stationed in Singapore which was popularly known as 'the glamorous gateway of the East'. The Singapore garrison was considered to be capable of defending the island fortress against any possible invasion. The island was considered to be an impregnable fortress and was sometimes referred to as 'Fortress Singapore'.

Nevertheless, in the middle of 1940, a few thousand men of the Australian Imperial Force arrived in Singapore to assist the Singapore garrison in the defence of this bastion of the British Empire in the East. In fact, the Australian forces in Singapore came to man a forward position in the defence of their own country, as Singapore in the hands of an enemy could easily be the springboard for an attack on the Australian continent. They also brought with them members of the Australian Women Auxiliary Services to service their own hospital.

During the colonial era, the island fortress had been the 'home' of many English, Scottish, Irish and Welsh soldiers. There were also Gurkha and Indian soldiers. A posting to Singapore was considered as prestigious, and a tour of duty usually lasted three years. In peacetime, army life in Singapore was fairly easy. Soldiers were kept busy by carrying out various military duties,

training and parades, but there was also plenty of leisure time. It was a colourful spectacle to watch the smart soldiers participating in the annual grand parade held on the *padang* (the civic green) to celebrate the King's official birthday.

Social life was generally localised to the various military establishments. Life varied according to rank, however, and some form of compartmentalisation existed within the establishment. Army officers lived separately in nice bungalows or villas and had their own mess. Likewise, the warrant officers and sergeants lived apart from the junior non-commissioned officers and other ranks. The various mess activities, such as dances, musical evenings and games nights, were restricted to members of that particular mess and their families and guests.

Sport was the main pre-occupation in which all ranks shared a common interest. They usually played cricket, football and hockey. Inter-services tournaments were played and friendly matches were arranged against civilian teams. They also participated in various civilian league matches. As a member of the Junior Civil Services Sports Club, I had the opportunity of playing several cricket and hockey matches against service teams.

Local servants were employed to perform some of the ordinary chores in the barracks, and the soldiers' uniforms were washed by a *dhobi* (laundryman). In their dining rooms, waiter services were provided by what is known as 'kichie boys' – generally Chinese men.

Except for the officers and their wives, the other ranks and their families were isolated from Singapore's pre-war social circles which were generally graced by European members of the commercial establishments and the senior staff of the Straits Settlements Civil Service. The senior staff and European officers were commonly known to the local population as *Tuan Besar* (Lord) and were considered 'millionaires' compared to the servicemen and their families. The British officers however, were not subjected to such social barriers and isolation since they invariably had private incomes and were thus able to become members of the exclusive Tanglin Club and the Singapore Cricket Club, both of which we reserved for the Europeans only.

Today, both of these clubs have a multiracial membership. It is a legacy of an unexpected domination of the British Colony by an inferior Asian nation. It was after the Japanese occupation that non-Europeans were able to become members of the two exclusive clubs. The British officers were also able to frequent the high-class Raffles Hotel and socialise with their brother officers, their families and other European guests.

For the majority of the other ranks, their off-duty hours could be very dull. They generally remained in the camp and spent their time in their canteen. All they could do was to read, chat with their fellow servicemen, play darts or drink Tiger, the locally brewed lager beer which has received international recognition. Having developed a liking for Tiger, the servicemen invariably frequented the many bars which mushroomed near the military camps. This was despite the fact that the cost of beer was cheaper in their own canteen. One is therefore led to surmise that it was not the beer but the friendly barmaids that attracted them, especially at weekends. Generally, the servicemen were well-behaved, but now and again, brawls did break out either among themselves or with some civilians. Sometimes a visit to the Singapore City made a welcome diversion for the unmarried single soldiers. They generally frequented the Union Jack Club, which was for the exclusive use of the servicemen, or one of the three 'entertainment worlds', namely the Great World, the Happy World, and the New World. In the cabarets of the entertainment worlds,there were professional dance hostesses to cater for those wishing to dance at a cost of 25 cents per dance. They were thus able to enjoy the company of the fair sex, something which was not available in their camp. While the cabarets did serve a purpose as a readily available type of entertainment for the homesick or lovelorn servicemen, it was the Union Jack Club which was fondly regarded as a 'homely place' away from home. The military police (MP) usually patrolled all the areas frequented by the servicemen, not only to ensure that they behaved themselves, but to render any assistance when necessary. Some of those who went into the city in pursuit of entertainment were also keen on fostering good relationships with local women. Such fraternisation was

frowned upon not only by their superior officers, but also by the women's relatives and friends and the local population. Despite objections from all quarters, such relationships still flourished resulting in quite a number of inter-marriages between servicemen and local women. Though the 'red light districts' were out of bounds to all service personnel, there were still some adventurous ones who would venture into such areas to satisfy their sexual appetites, with disastrous effects. Generally, nights out in the city for the servicemen were not frequent, as it was a costly means of spending one's leisure hours. Nevertheless, the city was crowded with servicemen on Friday nights, when the soldiers received their weekly pay.

Although Singapore was considered to be an impregnable fortress, it was still a tiny island surrounded by seas and large oceans. There was therefore a need for maritime supremacy to ensure its security in the region. A few ships of the British Navy were always at anchor in Singapore's naval base. Those warships were ever ready to show the British flag anywhere in the region should it be necessary. Until the outbreak of the Pacific war, the British Navy had ruled the waves in the Far East.

In July 1941, Japan made the war clouds over the East look darker. Their government and its military advisers had told Emperor Hirohito that an attempt should be made to capture the military bases in Indo-China (now Cambodia and Vietnam) even at the risk of going to war. Their secret plans somehow fell into the hands of the British and American governments, resulting in a meeting being convened between Mr Winston Churchill, the British Prime Minister and Mr Franklin Roosevelt, the American President. The meeting, in August 1941, agreed to send strong warnings to the Japanese government. It was also agreed that America would enter the war should the Japanese attack the British and Dutch possessions in the Far East.

By that time, the Japanese were already feeling the effects of the trade embargo imposed on them by the Americans. In such a situation, the Japanese Prime Minister was forced to submit to pressure from the military leaders and an imperial conference decided that, in view of the dwindling oil stocks, preparation for

war should be completed by October 1941. If no agreement was reached with the Americans by then, the decision to go to war should be taken.

Meanwhile, the Japanese Prime Minister continued to make conciliatory proposals to the Americans,which were considered to be insincere. The Japanese were apparently offering an olive branch to the British and the Americans while at the same time preparing to stab them in their backs.

The political situation in Japan deteriorated further thus forcing Prince Konoye, the Japanese Prime Minister, to resign on 16 October 1941. He was succeeded by General Hideki Tojo, the War Minister. In addition to holding the post of the War Minister, General Tojo also took over the portfolio of the Home Affairs ministry. These important cabinet changes marked the increasing ascendancy of the militants who were determined to lead Japan to war.

On the same day that General Hideki Tojo took over the reins of the Japanese government, Mr Churchill, the British Prime Minister decided to send a battleship and a battlecruiser to the Far East as a deterrent to the Japanese. The battleship was the *Prince of Wales*, newly commissioned to head the new Far East Fleet, and on board was its commander, Admiral Phillips. In making his decision, Mr Churchill had ignored the recommendations of his naval advisers.

On 2 December 1941, the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* arrived in Singapore. They were a floating symbol of Britain's naval might and were intended to boost the defence potential of the small island colony and the morale of the multi-racial people. Their arrival, however, appeared to be too late to achieve the planned deterrent effect on the Japanese government.

By the end of November 1941, there were reports that Japanese naval forces were already on the move. Such manoeuvres, together with reports of other Japanese movements in the region, led to increased tension in the Malay Archipelago and the East Indies. The war with Japan seemed inevitable and imminent.

As early as in the third quarter of 1940, when the possibility of

a war with Japan seemed very likely, the Government of Singapore appealed to its people to join any of the defence organisations. I had the option of joining either the Singapore Volunteer Corps, the Air Raid Precaution Unit or the Local Defence Volunteers.

The Singapore Volunteer Corps was a military organisation whose members were armed and trained in attack and defence strategies. It is noted that the Volunteer Corps was first formed in 1854 and its members were all Europeans who wanted to assist the government in maintaining law and order, in view of the rising crime rate at that time. The Corps adopted *Primus in Indiis* ('First in India') as its motto, subsequently changed to *In Oriente Primus* ('First in the East'). In fact, the Corps was formed even before the great volunteer movement in England. The Singapore Volunteer Corps, whose members participated in the defence and of which I was a member, was formed in 1918, although the motto of *In Oriente Primus* was retained on its cap badge.

Members of the Singapore Volunteer Corps were initially trained to counter internal security disturbances. Later, they were trained to meet external threats and to be used as front-line troops. During the inter-war period, the Volunteers went through various types of training to ensure efficiency in defence duties should an emergency arise.

The Local Defence Volunteers were also armed but, in case of an outbreak of war, they only provided static guard duties for public buildings and vital installations. Members of the Air Raid Precaution Unit ensured that all precautions were taken, such as blackouts, to deny the enemy any advantage in bombing raids and rescue people trapped in debris after an air raid.

Being a civil servant and a patriotic Singaporean, I responded to the appeal and on 3 November 1940, I enlisted with the 'D' (Eurasian) Company of the Singapore Volunteer Corps. I joined the 'D' Company because I wanted to get the military training which could in some way make a small contribution to the defence of Singapore.

Besides, my father had previously been a member of the same unit for over twenty-five years and had been awarded the

Efficiency Medal. When the war broke out, he became a member of the Local Defence Volunteers. I did not expect any remuneration for joining the Volunteer Corps, and I received nothing except for a transport allowance based on bus fares incurred in travelling to the training centre. The 'D' Company was an infantry unit, and its basic weapon was the Lee Enfield ·303 rifle as used in the British Army. I received military training and learnt not only how to drill smartly, but also how to handle the rifle, which in the event of a war, would be my most treasured companion. I was also taught how to handle other light machine guns such as the Lewis gun, the Bren gun and the Thomson sub-machine gun.

Military training was normally given to us on Tuesday evenings and Saturday afternoons every week. The regulars nicknamed us 'the Saturday night soldiers'. There were also a few weekend camps, and once a year we attended a fortnight's in-camp training. Military training was exciting and enjoyable and the majority of us never skipped training session.

By early 1941, when the threat of war became real, our training became more intensive. We underwent two months' full-time in-camp training at the Telok Paku Camp on the eastern sector of Singapore. A large part of this camp now lies within the Changi International Airport complex.

Our training was rigid and was carried out under the strict supervision of regular British Army instructors. At first it was great fun, and was more like a social outing. Later our outlook towards our training became more serious when we realised that it could be a matter of life or death in the event of a battle.

As part of our training, we took part in mock battles using blank ammunition and thunder flashes. Such battles were usually held in the rubber estates of Sembawang and Tampines and in some way gave us some experience in jungle warfare. We were also trained in the art of unarmed combat. To increase our endurance capabilities, we had weekly marches when we were made to march with full battle gear for a distance of 25 kilometres within three hours. We also spent much time on the rifle range to ensure that we were proficient at shooting.

Other than our rifles, our company had only one Lewis gun (a

light machine gun) for each platoon. A few weeks before the outbreak of the Pacific War, we were issued with a new type of weapon as part of an infantry weaponry, a Boys Rifle, which was then the latest British-made gun capable of dealing with light tanks. The rifle had a long barrel and was quite heavy. It was operated by bolt action and fired a powerful 0·55-inch bullet which produced a very heavy recoil. The bullet was said to be capable of penetrating the shell of a light Japanese tank. By the end of November 1941, the war with Japan seemed almost certain. Following intelligence reports that the Japanese were preparing for an attack on the Malay Archipelago, a state of emergency was declared in Malaya and Singapore on 1 December 1941. At the same time, Sir Shenton Thomas, the Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the colony of Singapore, issued a mobilisation order calling up all members of the Singapore Volunteer Corps for active service. The mobilisation order also affected the Local Defence Volunteers and the Civil Defence Force, but members of those organisations were not required to report for full-time active service.

Official call-up notices were immediately issued to each and every individual member of the Singapore Volunteer Corps. On 4 December 1941, I duly reported for active service to the Volunteer Battalion Headquarters at Beach Road. The seriousness of the matter had not dawned on us and the majority of us were cheerful and happy. We were just like a bunch of schoolboys getting ready for an outing. After completion of administrative procedures, we were issued with our army book (AB64) our 'dog tags' (identity discs), rifle, bayonet and ammunition. Having collected other general stores, our company was transported to the Geylang English School which had been requisitioned for use as the 'D' Company Headquarters.

The 'D' Company had been assigned the task of defending the foreshore on the southern coast of the island. It stretched from the Siglap Canal on the east to the end of Tanjong Rhu on the west. We were supported by the heavy machine gunners from 'C' Company who had to man the pill-boxes and gun emplacements along the beaches.

I was attached to Platoon 16 which was required to defend the stretch of foreshore extending from the Siglap Canal to the Amber Canal on the west. On 5 December 1941, we moved into our allocated defence position. Our platoon headquarters was located in the Grand Hotel at Katong, which was a stone's throw from the beach. After our arrival, we lost no time in preparing some defence positions. We excavated slit trenches on the foreshore, drove some solid steel posts into the ground and erected barbed wire obstacles on the beaches. We also laid land mines in open spaces, including vacant grounds of the former Katong Convent and in the compounds of the vacant buildings on the foreshore.

At all times, the gates to our platoon headquarters were manned by two of our colleagues who were on two-hour shift duties. At dusk, and at the break of dawn when any attack seemed likely to take place, we would man prepared defence positions around the Grand Hotel and along the East Coast Road.

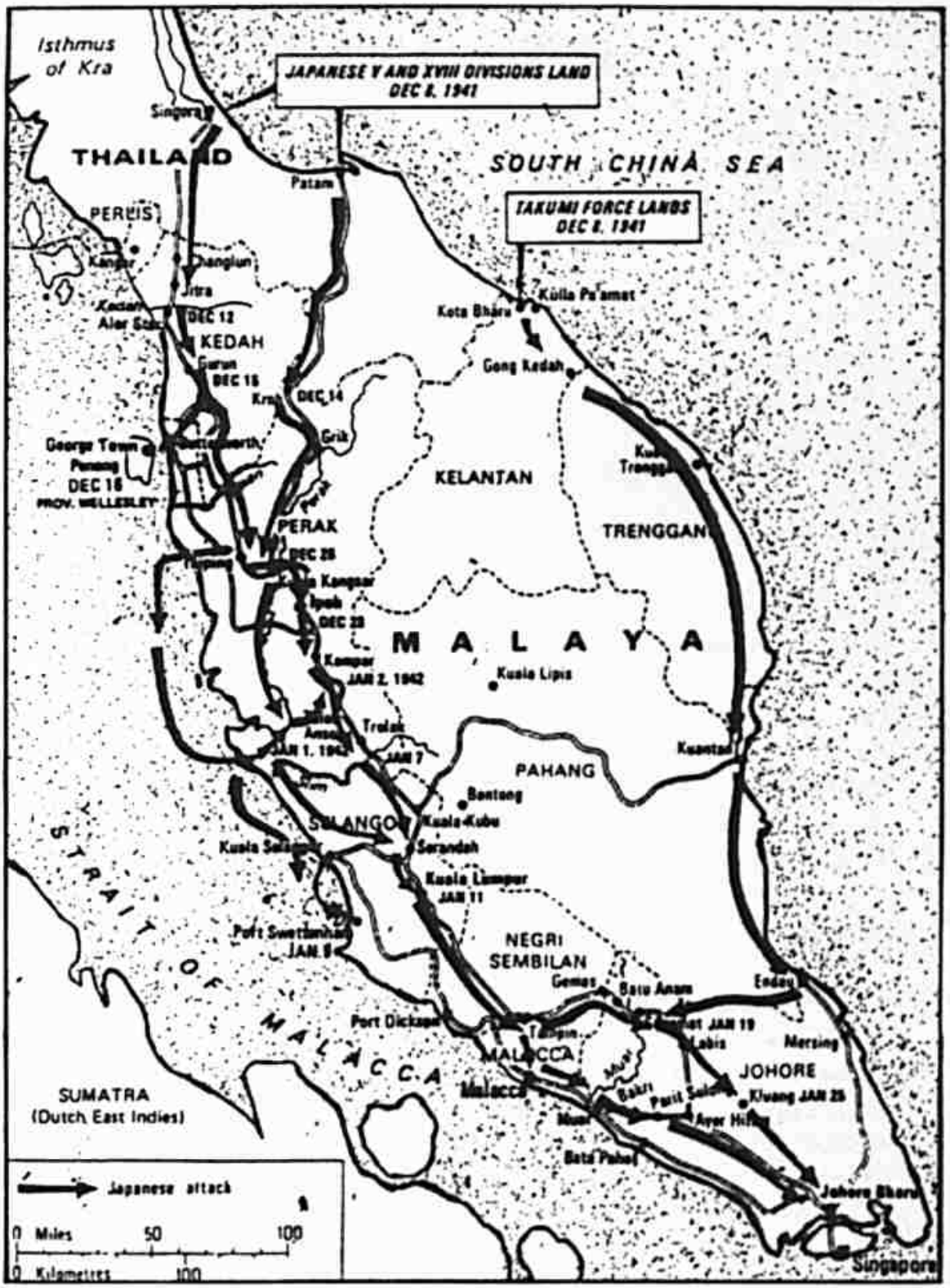
In the early hours on the morning of 8 December 1941, I was on guard duty at the gates outside our platoon headquarters. My colleague and I kept an alert eye for intruders or anything suspicious. We took turns to walk across the wide gate to keep us awake. The night was cool and refreshing, as a gentle breeze blew from the sea. Millions of stars shone from the night sky, but their anaemic light did not brighten the inky black darkness around us. The night was quiet and eerie. Having worked during the day, both of us were a bit tired, but we still did our best to keep ourselves awake and alert. As we stared out at the darkness around us, the stillness of the night was suddenly disturbed by the humming drone of aircraft engines. The sounds were unfamiliar to us and they grew louder as the minutes slipped by. We were not at war yet, so it was unlikely that the drone came from enemy planes. My colleague and I thought that it could possibly be some new types of RAF night fighter planes either doing some exercises or going out on patrol. We scanned the dark skies with our night binoculars but could see nothing. Then searchlight beams pierced the skies. I wondered whether it was a secret military exercise. The sweeping searchlight beams picked up a

number of planes flying majestically in an arrow-head formation. The fact they had been detected did not seem to bother them. They looked like a flock of large silvery birds from the cold north heading for the warmer southern hemisphere.

The planes were heading south-west towards our fully lit city, which brightened up the night sky with a beautiful orange glow. A few moments later, we heard loud explosions. My immediate reaction was that Singapore had been bombed. I was a bit nervous as I knew that war had begun. Then, the air-raid sirens began their mournful wail. Some shells were fired from our anti-aircraft guns. The enemy planes having completed their mission of destruction in an undeclared war, flew away northwards amidst an ineffective anti-aircraft barrage.

The British Royal Air Force had a number of Brewster Buffalo fighter planes based on the various airfields in Singapore, but none of them took to the air to challenge the Japanese invaders. It was later rumoured that the RAF. pilots did not go up because they were fearful of being shot down by our own anti-aircraft guns which were manned mainly by Indian and locally enlisted gunners whom the pilots considered to be incompetent. What an irony! The anti-aircraft units were trained and led by British officers and it is therefore a slur on them. As a matter of fact, a few days before their treacherous act of aggression against Singapore, one Japanese aircraft had violated Singapore's air space. The aircraft was no doubt carrying out an aerial photographic survey. There was no anti-aircraft barrage, yet no RAF plane was sent up to intercept the intruder or chase it away.

Singapore had been surprised by an enemy who chose to attack before any declaration of war. The people of Singapore had received their first baptism of fire. It was reported that the bombing was carried out by Japanese Navy bombers operating from bases on Indo-China. Thus, the first chapter in the war with Japan had been written. At daybreak, Japanese nationals in Malaya and Singapore were rounded up. At the same time, Japanese vessels in the Singapore harbour were seized. The Japanese nationals were later sent to an internment camp in India.



Map showing the Japanese Army advance down the Malay Penisula

CHAPTER 2

Seventy Days Of War

While the Japanese aircraft were bombing Singapore, other Japanese aircraft operating from an aircraft carrier were bombing Pearl Harbour, thus forcing the United States of America to enter the war, and causing the eruption of war in the Pacific as well as in South East Asia. The Japanese had escalated the Second World War. They had chosen to do battle with two super-powers at the same time, but their cunning strategy and treachery in the initial stages had caught both the Americans and the British off guard with spectacular results. They had destroyed the greater part of the American Pacific Fleet. Their bombing of the fully lit city of Singapore resulted in many buildings in the business district being destroyed or damaged and the killing of many innocent civilians.

Shortly after midnight on 8 December 1941, the Japanese Imperial Army made a co-ordinated attack on Kota Bahru in Northern Malaya, Singgora and Patani in Southern Siam (now Thailand). The Japanese met with stiff resistance from Allied troops at Kota Bahru and suffered heavy casualties. However, they landed unopposed at Singgora and Patani. A few hours later, the Japanese reached a compromise agreement with the Siamese Government to allow Japanese forces free passage through Siamese territory. Having successfully established footholds in northern Malaya and Southern Siam, they lost no time in capturing the airfield of Kota Bahru. They then swiftly advanced southwards down the Malay Peninsula and, at the same time, they

advanced westwards towards the island of Penang,the 'Pearl of the Orient'.

The acquisition of Fortress Singapore had always been a prime objective of the Japanese imperialists, and, with their successful landing at Kota Bahru and Singgora, the Japanese had really begun their effort to capture Singapore. With the capture of the Kota Bahru airfield intact and the bases in southern Siam, the Japanese had an immediate advantage, as they were able to carry out air strikes on the island of Penang and other parts of Malaya. However, most of their bombing raids on Singapore were carried out by their planes operating from bases on Indo-China.

Two days after the Japanese landed in northern Malaya, the British battleship, the *Prince of Wales* and the battlecruiser, the *Repulse* went out on a reconnaissance of the South China Sea. It was possible that Admiral Phillips intended to blockade the Japanese landing area to prevent further reinforcements and supplies being landed. The two battleships went out with an escort of four destroyers but without an air umbrella. Admiral Phillips expected to receive some air cover from the air force in northern Malaya, but he was unaware that the air bases in northern Malaya had already fallen into Japanese hands and whatever planes that were available had been evacuated to safer areas. It was also possible that the admiral could have under-estimated the Japanese air power and the determination of her pilots. Whatever it was, fate had decided his destiny.

While heading north towards the Japanese landing area, the British battleships were sighted by a Japanese submarine which no doubt reported the positions of the two ships to their high command immediately. The submarine was not detected by either of the two warships, and as Admiral Phillips was unaware of the presence of the submarine, he continued his journey northwards.

Later, some Japanese aircraft were sighted in the sky above them, but there was no action. Presumably the Japanese planes were either assessing the situation or were taking aerial photographs of the British battleships. Admiral Phillips then decided to turn back once he realised that he could not expect

British fighter planes to protect his ships so far north in what had already become enemy territory.

The two warships were steaming towards Singapore when, around midnight, Admiral Phillips received a report of a Japanese landing at Kuantan. He altered his course and headed towards Kuantan, but he decided not to signal his intentions to the British command staff in Singapore to avoid giving away his position to the Japanese. He expected that the British command staff in Singapore would anticipate his move and would send fighter planes to support him at Kuantan at the break of dawn.

At daybreak, the alleged landing at Kuantan was found to be non-existent. The anticipated British fighter planes were also nowhere to be seen. The report was possibly a Japanese ploy to prevent the two warships from returning to Singapore, where fighter planes and heavy anti-aircraft artillery fire could be expected to protect them. The two warships then continued on their way to Singapore.

On the morning of 10 December 1941, the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* were sighted by another Japanese submarine which fired some torpedoes, all of which missed their targets. The submarine, however, reported the position of the two warships to the Japanese high command. Once again, neither of the commanders of the two ships was aware that they had been attacked by an enemy submarine. It is unbelievable the ships' radar did not detect it.

At about midday, the tropical blue sky over the China Sea was clear and visibility was excellent. The two British warships were easily located by the first wave of Japanese aircraft which were operating from bases on Indo-China. The Japanese pilots were determined to destroy the pride of the British Navy. Wave after wave of bombers flew over their target in an unending exercise to discharge their lethal cargo. Altogether, about 90 Japanese planes were involved in the attack which was carried out relentlessly. The Japanese used high explosive bombs and aerial torpedoes. The two British ships had no aerial support and had to depend upon the limited fire power of their own anti-aircraft guns and that of the escorting destroyers. After two hectic hours of continual

aerial bombardment, both the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* went down to their watery graves. Admiral Phillips and about 800 men went down with the ships. The rest of the naval personnel were rescued by the escorting destroyers. The destruction of the two warships was a tremendous blow not only to the British but the Allies as well.

The naval disaster left the Allies without an active battleship in the entire Pacific theatre of war. The Japanese already had complete superiority in the air space in the region and, with the sinking of the two British warships coupled with the crippling of the American Pacific fleet, they became masters of the Pacific Ocean.

On land, the Japanese armies made rapid advances down the Malay Peninsula and every day saw more Malayan territory being captured by them. The British forces were not adept at jungle warfare and they could not find a solution to the infiltration tactics of the nippy Japanese soldiers. To aggravate the situation, the British had virtually no tanks to support their ground troops in battle. As such, they were forced to fight a rearguard action and withdrew most of the time. British, Gurkha and Indian troops bore the brunt of the attack from Kota Bahru down the Malayan Peninsula up to Negri Sembilan where the Japanese soldiers were engaged by fresh and tough Australian troops. Many fierce battles were fought and the heroic stand put up by British, Gurkha, Australian and Indian troops and the soldiers of the Malay Regiment was highly commendable. In one fierce battle, an Australian army officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Anderson, was awarded the coveted Victoria Cross for his gallantry in fighting a rearguard action. Nevertheless, the Japanese maintained their advance southwards towards Singapore.

On 12 December, 1941, dive bombers operating from airfields in Singgora and Patani in southern Siam, devastated the island of Penang. The tiny island was inadequately defended by about 600 soldiers with no battle experience and four anti-aircraft guns. Two days later, the British decided to abandon the island and all the soldiers including the local volunteers headed for Singapore.

On 17 December, a battalion of Japanese soldiers stormed ashore in small boats and occupied the island without any loss of men. In their haste to evacuate from Penang, the British soldiers overlooked the need to destroy the radio station on the island, and the Japanese soon made full use of it for their own propaganda.

Despite the war, Christmas 1941 was still a day of rejoicing for us in Platoon 16 of the 'D' Company. Apart from a few who had some duties to perform, the rest of us were free. There were some who could not resist the temptation of singing Christmas carols and other songs just to be merry. Traditional Christmas fare was served for lunch and dinner and there was a second helping for the hungry ones.

Colonel Newey, our Commanding Officer paid a surprise visit to our platoon just to wish us a Merry Christmas. All of us were assembled in two neat rows in the large hall which was used as our sleeping quarters. As the colonel walked down the aisle between the rows of men, there was a suppressed smile on his face, but Lieutenant-Gregoire, the Platoon Commander, and our ever cheerful Sergeant Perreau who accompanied the colonel, were not amused. Sergeant Perreau was biting his teeth in anger and his face was red as a cooked lobster, since all of us had only our boots on and nothing else. The colonel appeared a bit amused with our 'dress' as he left the hall. After Colonel Newey's departure we were told that beer was available for all of us with the compliments of the colonel. Sergeant Perreau soon forgot the incident and never mentioned it at all.

Propaganda had made the Japanese believe that Singapore was an impregnable fortress, so while the battle on the Malay Peninsula continued, they subjected our small island fortress to heavy aerial bombardment, every day and night. It was intended not only to soften the defences of our fortress but also to demoralise the civilian population. The daily bombing became so regular that we could more or less forecast the time of the raids. The noise of the bomb explosions was terrific and frightening. There were many civilian casualties, but generally the morale of the people remained unshakened as they had always hoped for a British victory ultimately.

Since landing at Kota Bahru in the early hours of the morning on 8 December, the Japanese army kept advancing all the time. Their agile soldiers travelled light, and the speed of their advances was attributable to their antiquated 'war horse,' which was none other than the humble and old-fashioned bicycle. Thus for battlefield mobility, the bicycle proved an asset as a modern instrument of war in the Japanese Army. They only brought with them a few thousand cheap bicycles, as they knew that the rural folk of Malaya depended on the bicycle for transportation in the rural areas, and so in their advance down the mainland, they commandeered all the bicycles they encountered. They rode on bicycles through the jungles and rubber estates and were well supported by light tanks which were equally mobile. Their infiltration tactics were a success and quite often they managed to circumvent Allied defence positions.

On the other hand, Allied troops did not have much armament, tanks or aircraft to support them in battle. They were forced to retreat all the way down the mainland. On 30 January 1942, Allied troops began retreating across the causeway into Fortress Singapore. Aided by brilliant moonlight, Allied troops evacuated from the mainland. The last man to make the crossing was Lieutenant Colonel Stewart, the Commanding Officer of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. Ahead of him were two of his bagpipers appropriately blowing the tune: 'Blue Bonnet across the Border'. In the morning, in accordance with the British scorched-earth policy, Indian sappers blasted a 20-metre gap in the Johore Causeway, so as to deny the Japanese an easy overland passage into Singapore.

On the afternoon of 31 January 1942, Japanese troops entered Johore Bahru. With the occupation of Johore Bahru and the retreat of all the Allied Forces into Singapore, the Japanese had gained absolute control of the Malay Peninsula. They were now on the threshold of achieving their ambition of incorporating Singapore into their planned 'Greater Co-Prosperity Sphere' and were ahead of their planned schedule for the capture of the mainland.

When planning the capture of Singapore, the Japanese

intelligence would no doubt have received ample reports and secret photographs from the many Japanese businessmen and itinerant hawkers operating during the years before the Pacific War. That vital information must have convinced the Japanese war lords that Fortress Singapore could easily repel any seaborne attack. The massive long range 16-inch guns located on the off-shore island of Blakang Mati (now Sentosa) could create havoc. Furthermore, most of the prepared shore defences were built along the south coast. Consequently, they chose a strategy which gave them access into the island fortress from the rear. Thus the capture of the Malayan Peninsula became a priority and they succeeded in achieving their objective within 62 days. General Tomoyuki Yamashita, the Japanese commander, moved into the Sultan of Johore's palace at Bukit Serene and used it as his headquarters. From a room on the upper floor, he had a commanding view of Singapore, especially of the Tengah airbase and the naval base at Seletar. He lost no time in planning the strategy for the attack on Singapore.

THE BATTLE FOR SINGAPORE

For 62 days, the Japanese had been on the offensive all the way down the Malay Peninsula. They had shown themselves to be an invincible army. Their soldiers had endured intolerable heat, waded across mosquito-infested swamps and rivers, and had pushed on despite exhaustion. In their advance, they had to overcome the various lines of Allied defences, some of which were fiercely resisting. On reaching Johore Bahru, they could clearly see the tiny sun-baked island of Singapore nestling peacefully across the narrow Straits of Johore. Singapore, considered to be an impregnable fortress, was the prize they had set out to get. It was then within their reach.

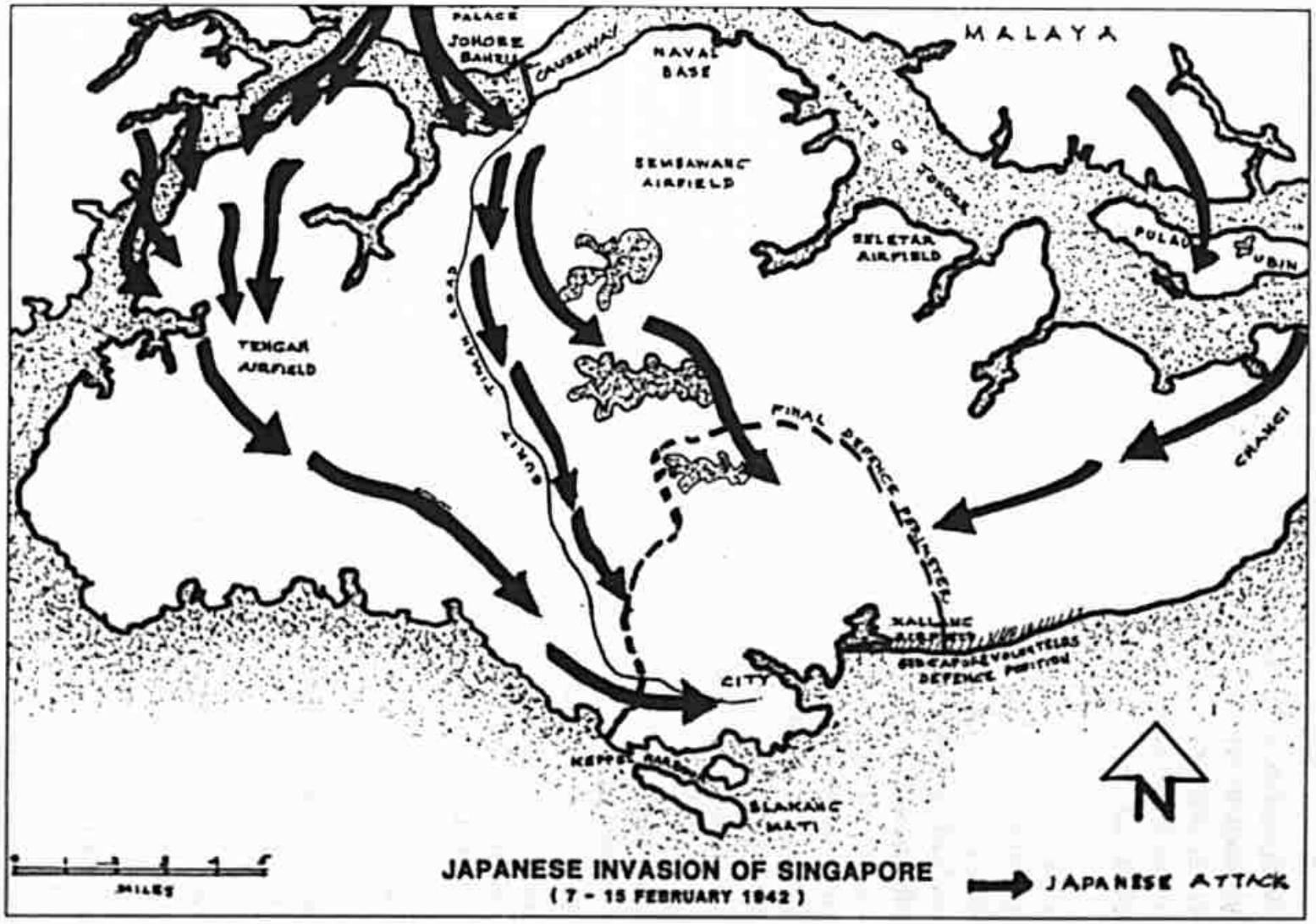
Notwithstanding the fact that the Japanese had been successful in the Malayan Campaign, the British was confident that the tiny island fortress could withstand the Japanese onslaught and

contain the invincible Japanese Imperial Army. With the breaching of the causeway, the Straits of Johore became a natural defence obstacle. By then, the majority of the Allied troops on the mainland had successfully retreated into the sanctuary of the island fortress. The Singapore garrison had about 100,000 soldiers to defend the island. While General Percival, the commander of the Singapore garrison was hoping for reinforcements to arrive, all the Allied soldiers waited anxiously for the Battle of Singapore to begin.

On 5 February 1942, three of a four-vessel convoy bringing troop reinforcements reached Singapore Harbour and immediately began setting ashore the remaining troops of the British 18th Division. Having been at sea for several weeks, the men were disorientated and unacclamatised to the tropical heat. They were really unfit for immediate active service. The fourth vessel, which was the slow coal-burning *Empress of Asia*, was lagging behind. She was attacked by Japanese dive bombers as she entered the Straits of Singapore. Direct hits soon set the ship ablaze from bow to stern and she eventually sank. Prompt action by the Royal Naval patrol boats ensured minimal loss of lives, but unfortunately, the much needed arms, ammunition, equipment and other supplies were lost.

The majority of the newly arrived soldiers were young men. Like the men of the Singapore Volunteer Corps, these newly arrived soldiers had no battle experience. As we had no tanks, no warplanes and no heavy artillery, it was unlikely that they could have made any contribution to turn the tide of the war. It was unfortunate that just a few days later, all those ill-fated young men became prisoners-of-war of the Japanese. I befriended some of them in the internment camp. We developed a strong bond of friendship and even at this present time, a few of them still keep in touch with me. I learnt that those young men had been conscripted into the army. They were attached to various regiments like the Norfolks, the Suffolks, the Cambridgeshire, the Sherwood Foresters and the Recce Battalion.

In view of the imminent danger of the invasion, General Percival, had a choice of two alternative strategies for the defence



Map showing the Japanese prongs of atack in the Batttle of Singapore

of Fortress Singapore. He could either spread the bulk of his forces thinly across the entire northern coastline facing Johore or he could hold back the bulk of his forces in readiness to counter-attack the Japanese invaders wherever they chose to land. He was confident that the Japanese would attempt to land on the area east of the causeway where there were two airfields and the naval base. He therefore divided the island into three areas namely the 'Northern Area', the 'Western Area' and the 'Southern Area' and deployed his forces accordingly. All units of the Singapore Volunteer Corps remained in the Southern Area as a reserve force. In an attempt to soften up the island's defences and to demoralise the civilian population, the Japanese rained artillery shells and bombs on the island fortress incessantly. They paid particular attention to known British artillery locations, airfields, and important installations from information either previously obtained by their intelligence officers or local fifth columnists. The noise of the continual bombardment was not only deafening but frightening too. The majority of the people remained calm ,always hoping against hope that the tide of the war would eventually turn against the Japanese.

Soon after nightfall on 7 February, a battalion of the Japanese Imperial Guards Division crossed the Straits of Johore in collapsible boats and landed on the tiny off-shore island of Pulau Ubin on the east of Singapore and overlooking Changi just a few kilometres away. It was the first positive step in the invasion of Singapore, but actually, it was just a feint designed to deceive the British General Staff into believing that the main thrust of the attack on Singapore would come from the east, thus causing the British to deploy their troops unnecessarily. The token British force on the island offered minor resistance and by midnight, 400 Japanese troops and artillery occupied the island.

The next day was Sunday. It was bright and sunny. There was a comparative lull in the artillery bombardment of Singapore, but at 10.00 a.m. the peaceful quiet was shattered. The Japanese resumed their artillery bombardment on a more intensive scale. At the same time, Japanese air force pilots, having accurate information from ground intelligence or fifth columnists,

bombed important targets with devastating effects. The noise of the exploding shells and bombs continued throughout the entire day. The Chinese Lunar New Year was just a week away. The joy of the approaching festival was overshadowed by the devastation and the ravages of war. It was quite demoralising, and it was unlikely that any Chinese family would have spared a thought for planning or preparing the traditional reunion dinner on their New Year's Eve.

When the sun sank below the horizon and darkness enveloped the tiny island of Singapore, there was a strange silence. The dark night seemed so peaceful yet so frightening. The tranquillity was too good to be true. In fact it was the calm before the violent storm as men of the Singapore garrison anxiously awaited the inevitable invasion.

Under the cover of darkness, the Japanese troops crossed the Straits of Johore. They came in small boats and successfully landed on the north-western sector of the island near the mouth of the Kranji River. They quickly advanced inland. The area was defended by tough soldiers of the 8th Australian Division. The crucial Battle of Singapore had begun. It was a fierce battle. The Australian troops fought bravely but eventually were forced to withdraw.

Moving further inland, the Japanese invaders met resistance from other Allied troops of the Singapore garrison. The defenders fought gallantly, but they had faced heavy odds, in terms of armament. The Japanese ground forces were well supported by heavy artillery, and their air force also played a decisive role in driving the defenders further inland. The Japanese Army Engineers soon repaired the breach in the causeway thus enabling more troops and tanks to cross over into Singapore and advance towards the city.

The huge-long range 16-inch guns on the off-shore island of Blakang Mati, south of Singapore, could not make any contribution to the defence of the island or to harass the enemy, as they were designed to repel a seaborne invasion and faced the open sea. All the guns were in a fixed position and could not be turned around to face the mainland and harass enemy positions.

I suppose the British military stratagists never expected any enemy would ever attempt to enter by the back door.

The British Royal Air Force depended on some untested Brewster Buffalo fighter planes. They subsequently performed very poorly against the Japanese Zero fighter planes. Later, the British government sent a few Hurricane fighter planes to beef up the might of the Royal Air Force in Singapore. The Hurricanes were the latest British fighter planes used by the Royal Air Force and had distinguished themselves against the aircraft of the German Air Force. These planes, however, could not make any contribution as they were destroyed by the Japanese even before they could take to the sky.

On 9 February, the remnants of the Allied Air Force together with all their personnel were evacuated to Sumatra and thence to Ceylon or Australia. Singapore was then left to the mercy of the Japanese Air Force whose pilots became more daring. On 10 February, General Archibald Wavell, Commander-in-Chief, India, and the newly appointed Supreme Commander of Allied Forces, South West Pacific, visited Singapore. He wanted to assess the situation personally and to boost up the sagging morale of men of the Singapore garrison. In his strongly worded 'Order of the Day' to General Arthur Percival, General Officer Commanding, Singapore, he said that 'it would be disgraceful if we yield our Fortress of Singapore to inferior forces. There must be no question of surrender'. It was obvious that General Wavell intended that the Singapore garrison should fight to the last man and the last bullet in accordance with the age-old tradition of the British Army. That same day, General Wavell returned to the peaceful haven of his headquarters overseas, leaving the disheartened Allied troops, many of whom were already lacking in resolution, to do or die in the so-called impregnable fortress.

It is ironical that soon after General Wavell's departure from Singapore, Allied troops retreated further than necessary, due to some conflicting orders. Thus, some very good defence positions along the Jurong line were abandoned.

On the following day, Allied troops, either inspired or stung by General Wavell's harsh and painful 'Order of the Day,' launched

a counter-offensive. It was a final and determined attempt to drive the Japanese invaders back to the coast and out of the island. It was planned that three battalions of troops would be used in the offensive, but unfortunately, only two battalions took up their assigned positions, and this was aggravated by the fact that there were no tanks, no heavy artillery and no aircraft to support the ground forces. The counter-offensive was repulsed by the Japanese invaders and the Allied Forces suffered heavy casualties. The determined Japanese forces then began their drive towards the city of Singapore.

The final curtain for Fortress Singapore had begun to roll down. There were no built defences or fortifications around the city. It was defended by a human barricade. The entire strength of the Singapore Garrison was positioned to defend the city; just a thin line of soldiers spread along the entire perimeter of the city. The fighting spirit and the morale of the troops were generally waning, although certain regiments could still be expected to live up to their military tradition.

Following the failure of the British counter-offensive, General Yamashita sent the following message to General Percival requesting the surrender of the Singapore garrison. The fateful message, which was air dropped over the British sector, was as follows:

> 'The Japanese Commander to the British Commander:
>
> In the spirit of chivalry, we have the honour of addressing you to surrender. Your Army founded on the traditional spirit of Great Britain, is defending Singapore which is completely isolated and raising the fame of Great Britain by the utmost exertions and heroic fighting. I disclose my respects from my innermost feelings.
>
> Nevertheless the war situation is already determined and in the meantime, the surrender of Singapore is imminent. From now on, resistance is futile and merely increases the danger to the 1,000,0000 civilian

inhabitants without good reason, exposing them to infliction of pain by fire and sword.

Furthermore, we do not feel you will increase the fame of the British Army by further resistance. From first to last our counsel is that Your Excellency will cease to think of meaningless resistance, and from now on yielding to our advice promptly and immediately suspending the action extending over the whole British battlefront.

It is expected that you will take measures to despatch an Army messenger as stated below. If on the contrary you continue resistance as previously, it will be difficult to bear with patience from a humanitarian point of view and inevitably, we must continue an intensive attack on Singapore.

Ending this advice, we show respect to Your Excellency.

1 The Army messenger's route of advance shall be by Bukit Timah Road.
2 The Army messenger hoisting a white flag as well as the British flag will be escorted by a number of soldiers as protection.

It was signed by Yamashita.

In sending this message to the British Commander, General Yamashita was convinced that the Allies were no longer a force to be reckoned with and that Fortress Singapore was already on the brink of collapse. Unknown to General Percival, the Japanese forces were also in a precarious situation as their stock of bombs and ammunition was getting desperately low. General Yamashita's tough stand was indeed a bluff. There was no doubt the Japanese might lay with their air force which could still rain fire and destruction on our city, but it would perhaps be for a few more days only. Eventually, General Yamashita's bluff paid off.

Acting on instructions from his superiors, General Percival

continued to resist the Japanese invaders. He also believed that the Singapore garrison could hold out until help arrived. However, his fellow officers did not share his confidence. It was evident that the fate of Singapore was almost sealed. Everywhere there was destruction. The floating dock was sunk and the ships in the harbour were burning. On the roads, there were many burnt-out vehicles of every description. Oil storage tanks were furiously burning and emitting thick black smoke filling the atmosphere with oil smoke, soot and dust.

The Japanese continued to advance towards the city. There were some breaches in the defence line around the city and all units of the Singapore Volunteer Corps were thrown into the battle as Singapore's last hope. The volunteers were a mixed batch of European and local civilians who had answered the call to arms to defend Singapore. They came from all walks of life from the senior civil servants and managers of commercial enterprises to the humble clerks and *peons* (messengers). The volunteers were, however, grouped along racial lines with members of each race being drafted together in the same company. Although the volunteers had received some training in defence strategy against external aggression, they had no experience of a real battle. Prior to their deployment to a forward position nearer the war zone, most of the volunteer units had been defending the beaches on the south coast.

The 'D' (Eurasian) Company to which I belonged was assigned the defence of a line stretching from the Orchard Road and Scotts Road junction to the Balmoral Road junction. Other than the rifle and bayonet which all of us carried, each platoon was equipped with one Lewis gun, one Bren gun (both were light automatic guns) and one Boys Rifle (a small anti-tank gun).

That morning, there was much excitement when our Platoon Commander informed us that were moving out of the Grand Hotel and going up to the 'front line'. As we drove through the city on our way to take up our allocated position, people along the way cheered us. It was very encouraging, especially as we had never seen any military action before. We were really green and inexperienced soldiers. Nevertheless, in that dark hour when

Singapore was fighting for its survival, we were all prepared to stand up for the defence of our homeland.

General Yamashita was very annoyed when his request to surrender was ignored, and he vented his anger on the city with the most savage artillery and aerial bombardment. Fire raged everywhere, but the precious water needed to extinguish them was not available, as the Japanese, having captured the mainland, had cut off the water supply to Singapore.

My company did not confront the enemy but every day our position was subjected to a heavy artillery barrage. The never-ending shell explosions sounded like a rhythmic drum beat. Now and again, one or two single-seater planes cruised overhead. They usually flew at low altitudes and we would take pot shots at them with our rifles always hoping that a lucky shot would bring down a plane. We knew they were spotter planes and reckoned that they were relaying information about our position as no sooner had they gone than an artillery barrage would be pounding our position. The shells fell quite close around us but, fortunately, there were no casualties.

Those spotter planes would sometimes drop hand grenades over us, which were of the fragmentation type with a short delay fuse. They usually exploded in mid-air scattering fragments of metal harmlessly over us. At other times they would fire their machine guns at random. There was no damage or casualties and, as there was no trace of any bullet hitting the ground, it was possible they were letting off some fire-crackers just to frighten or demoralise us.

In their drive towards the city, Japanese front-line troops attacked the Queen Alexandra Military Hospital on 14 February. Those soldiers were extremely bloodthirsty. They totally ignored the Red Cross insignia on the armband worn by the medical officers and orderlies and the white flag held up by an unarmed military doctor. The Japanese soldiers just went berserk. They massacred everyone they encountered. Even all those inside an operating theatre, where a surgical operation was in progress, were not spared. Some medical orderlies tried to escape into the nearby woods. They were pursued by some Japanese soldiers,

who upon returning with blood-stained bayonets, left little doubt about the fate of those orderlies. To justify their barbaric act, the Japanese later made the excuse that some Allied troops were hiding inside the hospital and were sniping at them. That was untrue, for somehow, a few medical orderlies survived to tell the atrocious story.

I personally had one brief encounter with the enemy. It happened on the afternoon of 14 February. I was in a defence position near the junction of Balmoral Road and Bukit Timah Road. I felt secure behind a sandbagged barricade looking northwards, when I spotted a lone Japanese tank presumably on a reconnaissance mission. It was rambling down Bukit Timah Road and was heading towards my position. I thought for a moment and decided that attack was the best means of defence. I fired one round from my Boys Rifle. It was a new weapon, a small but powerful anti-tank gun. I had been trained how to handle the gun but had really never used it before. The noise made by the gun frightened me, but my shot was ineffective. I thought of firing a second round when the tank came closer. I reloaded my gun and waited anxiously. Then, there was a louder explosion. My immediate reaction was that the tank commander was returning my fire. I looked around and was relieved to see some Indian soldiers in a jubilant mood nearby. They were manning a field gun by the side of the Bukit Timah canal, and the shot they fired had destroyed the tank.

Soldiers and armaments were not the only ingredients that played decisive roles in the battle for Singapore. Just as important was water, a simple but precious thing in life, and which we normally took for granted. Fortress Singapore depended upon the mainland for its water supply and the Japanese had cut off our supplies when they captured Johore. To aggravate matters, our own reservoirs on the island, which held a reserve supply for one week, had also fallen into enemy hands. The water in the taps everywhere, including the hospitals, became a trickle until finally they went dry. Nothing flowed out from any tap in the city.

Our stocks of ammunition ran low. Our air bases at Tengah and Seletar had been captured by the Japanese. Whatever planes the

Royal Air Force could save, together with all their personnel, had already left Singapore. The Japanese Air Force pilots became more daring and they flew at lower altitudes over the city for more accurate bombing of targets they could choose easily. Generally, the civilians suffered most as they could not retaliate.

Sunday, 15 February 1942 was the Chinese Lunar New Year. There was no celebration to welcome the Year of the Horse. The day was more noisy. It was not due to the traditional letting off of fire-crackers but was caused by exploding bombs and shells. The Japanese continued to shell and bomb the city relentlessly. The noise was terrific and unending. It was frightening and very demoralising. The day was sunny and bright, but over some areas, the sky was darkened by the pall of heavy black smoke billowing from burning oil tanks. They were damaged as part of our scorched-earth policy. Like the pall of black smoke, the clouds over the city hung heavy with defeat as the Japanese made a determined effort to subjugate the impregnable Fortress Singapore.

On that fateful morning, as I stood behind a sandbagged barricaded defence position near Balmoral Road, I watched the final scenario in the life of the dying British colony. The traffic along that stretch of Bukit Timah Road was very heavy. It was choked with military as well as civilian vehicles. Everybody seemed to be rushing hurriedly by. Some were tugging along their children, while others were carrying small bundles of their possessions. They were all going towards the city. Among the crowd, I noticed a few unshaven Allied soldiers. They carried no weapons and did not even have steel helmets over their heads. I could only surmise that they had either been detached from their units or had deserted their positions. They all seemed eager to get away from the battle zone as quickly as possible. Perhaps they all considered the city to be a safe haven which was being defended desperately by other Allied soldiers who still had the guts and the will to fight.

The life of the city was fast fading away. The troops within Fortress Singapore knew that they were fighting a losing battle without war planes and tanks. Many hardened professional

soldiers would have thought of death before dishonour, but at that crucial moment when all hope seemed lost, many soldiers too had lost their will to fight on. There were disturbing reports of many soldiers forcing their way into the ships which were evacuating civilian women and children.

Perhaps for them, it was time to think of their own survival. It was every man for himself. Maybe, the thoughts of those men could be reflected in the following poem:

> 'He who fights and runs away,
> Will live to fight another day,
> But he who fights and stands the ground,
> Will have his bloody head knocked round.'

The men of the Singapore garrison could not be expected to comply with General Wavell's harsh 'Order of the Day' or to adhere to the age-old British Army tradition, as the conditions prevailing in Singapore at that time were not conducive to a heroic stand. There were other factors to consider. Our stocks of ammunition were almost exhausted. Our water taps ran dry, thus making our hospitals inoperable, and the wounded could not be treated. What was more important was the need to conserve human lives. There was no doubt that the civilian population was the main target of the Japanese.

It was evident that any further confrontation with the ruthless enemy would result in very heavy loss of civilian lives. In such dreadful and hopeless circumstances, General Percival, the General Officer Commanding the Singapore garrison, following consultation with Sir Shenton Thomas, the civilian Governor of Singapore, decided to seek peace terms from General Tomoyuki Yamashita, the Commander of the Japanese forces.

On that historic afternoon, I was still manning the defence position at the Balmoral Road junction and watching the vehicles and people rushing towards the city. At about three o'clock, two British military staff cars drove past my position. They were heading towards Johore. I soon learnt that General Percival and some of his senior officers were on their way to negotiate a truce

with the Japanese. The 'peace' conference was held at the Ford Motor Car plant at Bukit Timah Road.

There was no doubt that the Japanese commander knew that victory was already at his doorstep. He demanded an unconditional surrender, failing which he threatened to annihilate Singapore. While the conference between the two opposing generals was in progress, the Japanese forces continued to devastate the city.

Like the life of Singapore, the daylight of 15 February began to fade away. As darkness enveloped the doomed island, the Japanese bombardment suddenly ceased. There followed an uncanny silence. Even the nocturnal insects did not dare to disturb the tranquillity. The stillness of the night was even more frightening than the deafening roar of the battle that I had grown accustomed to. I felt relieved and thought that at last there was peace.

Nevertheless, my colleagues and I were a little sceptical about the true intentions of the Japanese. We continued to be vigilant and waited anxiously in the darkness. Later that night the sad news came through. We were told that Singapore had capitulated to the Japanese forces. The inadequate defences of our fortress had crumbled to the determined efforts of the Japanese Imperial Forces supported by adequate armament and air superiority. The last bastion of the British Empire in the East had been lost. With its loss, the invincibility of the mighty British Empire crashed from its ivory tower. It also dealt a death blow to the myth of the white man's supremacy in the East, and had a very great impact upon the life of the local population in post-war Singapore.

The battle for Singapore was over. The surrender of Singapore was no doubt made in the interest of humanity. Nevertheless, it was a shameful military disaster for the British Empire. The powerful Allied Forces had succumbed to what was considered to be an inferior force. The British Prime Minister, Mr Winston Churchill, described the surrender of Singapore as the 'greatest disaster and worst capitulation in British history'. Fate had destined that I should be spared the ordeal of being engaged in a bloody battle, but when all is said and done, I had a mixed feeling of

shame and happiness. I felt disheartened and ashamed that we had lost the war, but at the same time, I was happy that the war was over. Above all, I was glad to be alive, even though I could not foresee what future awaited me.

I then rejoined the rest of my platoon and had our field dinner of 'dogs' biscuits' (hard, dry biscuits), a tin of corned beef and some luke-warm tea. Thereafter, I could do nothing except wait for the dawn of a new day and a new life whatever it might be. In sheer exhaustion, I fell asleep on the cool bare ground where for the past few days I had waited in vain for the unseen enemy. That was the first time I had a good uninterrupted sleep for almost a week.

On the following morning, our platoon reported to the Company headquarters at the Goodwood Park Hotel for regrouping. There was a roll-call to check whether there were any casualties or anyone missing. Later we were free but instructed not to wander outside the grounds of the hotel to avoid unpleasant encounters with belligerent Japanese soldiers. We then anxiously waited for instructions from the Japanese Army.

There was sufficient stock of 'dogs' biscuits' and tinned corned beef to last us for just one day. In the cellar of the hotel there were a few bottles of liquor, but in our grief nobody ever thought of taking a nip of the whisky or brandy to drown our sorrows. In accordance with our 'scorched-earth policy', those few bottles of liquor were smashed and their contents were allowed to flow into the open surface drain. This was done to deny the Japanese soldiers the opportunity of celebrating their victory and becoming drunk and violent.

On the second morning after the surrender, a Japanese army officer accompanied by a few fierce-looking soldiers came to the Goodwood Park Hotel. Most of them were dressed in baggy khaki trousers and sweaty shirts. They wore rubberised boots. The bottoms of their trousers overlapped their boots and were tightly wrapped with woollen leggings to prevent, I presumed, any insects from crawling up their legs.

The Japanese soldiers did not appear to be suffering from battle fatigue and it was not possible to say whether they were

front-line troops or reserve troops brought in as the army of occupation. Anyway, that was the first occasion I had confronted the enemy forces. They had come to supervise the surrender of our weapons and ammunition. At the same time, they indulged themselves in looting. They relieved us of whatever they fancied, like our wrist watches, cigarette lighters and Parker pens. They even took our gold chains and religious medals which hung around our necks.

Later, an empty military truck driven by an oldish-looking, bespectacled Japanese soldier arrived. The officer shouted in Japanese which we understood to be instructions to load our weapons and ammunitions onto the truck. Even as we carried the weapons there were more shouts and gesticulation. It was really difficult to know what they wanted us to do. Eventually, the work was completed and the truck drove off. The Japanese officer and his soldiers also went along leaving us wondering what we had to do next.

Fifty years after the surrender of Singapore to the Japanese I read a report in *The Guardian*, one of the United Kingdom's most authoritative newspapers. The report revealed some very disturbing facts about the defence of Singapore.

According to the report, in August 1940, the British Prime Minister, Mr Winston Churchill, had been secretly advised by his Chiefs of Staff that no reinforcements could be spared from Europe to defend Singapore, Malaya and Hong Kong against the Japanese.

A copy of the secret memo was sent to the British Far East commander-in-chief, Air Chief Marshall Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, in Singapore. The secret memo was sent by sea mail aboard the ocean liner *Automedon*. Unfortunately, the ship was captured by *Atlantis*, a German surface raider in the Indian Ocean, and so the memo fell into German hands and subsequently given to their ally, the Japanese. The Germans no doubt expected the Japanese to open up a second front in the Far East, thereby weakening the British position in Europe.

The information contained in this secret memo must have

been invaluable to the Japanese and could possibly have encouraged them to be more aggressive in executing their plans for the creation of their Greater Co-Prosperity Sphere. The Japanese had gambled and won at least for a few years.

The report made me sick. I was led to believe that General Wavell's 'Order of the Day' issued on 10 February 1942 was just a sham and that Britain had deliberately sacrificed not only the lives of her soldiers but also those of the people of Singapore. Perhaps the Battle for Singapore could have been avoided had the British followed in the footsteps of the Siamese Government in deciding not to confront the Japanese.

CHAPTER 3

The March To Changi

The surrender brought an end to the hostilities but, at the same time, it meant a change in our status. We were no longer British soldiers, but overnight we had *ipso facto* become prisoners-of-war of the Japanese imperial forces. All together, about 100,000 soldiers became prisoners-of-war. The Japanese considered us to be inferior to them, especially as they claimed Allied Forces outnumbered them by five to one. To them it is a dishonour to surrender in battle and they regarded all prisoners-of-war as being lifetime slaves of their great Emperor, the 'Son of Heaven'.

Our High Command had received instructions from the Japanese regarding our internment. By a sheer twist of fate, the large British military camp at Changi on the north eastern sector of Singapore also underwent a change of status. It became a prisoner-of-war camp for thousands of Allied soldiers, many of whom would remember Changi as their home before the war. All Allied soldiers were ordered to make their way to Changi on foot. The Gurkha and Indian soldiers were interned in the Buller Camp in the Alexandra area.

If there was ever one moment that signalled the end of the old British colonial power in Singapore, it was the march of defeated Allied soldiers to Changi on the 17 February 1942. Columns of British and Australian soldiers, who became prisoners-of-war of the Japanese following the surrender of Singapore, began their 32 kilometres march from the various points of their surrender in the city to the Changi internment camp. It was the beginning

of our dismal journey into an incarceration which eventually lasted three and a half years.

That morning was bright and sunny. The brilliant tropical sun shining from a clear blue sky began to intensify its heat as we prepared for the march. Carrying whatever chattels the men thought would be useful to them in the unknown future, British and Australian soldiers marched silently in endless rhythmic procession. Despite the surrender, our morale was still high and our marching did not reflect the character of a defeated and dejected army.

We, the members of the Singapore Volunteer Corps, commenced our march from the grounds of the Goodwood Park Hotel in Scotts Road. We did not have a field cookhouse or cooks to make a quick breakfast or even a cup of tea. As nothing was left of our rations, we left on empty stomachs for the long march to Changi. That was the price we paid for allowing the Fall of Singapore to happen. We had been rushed to the battle zone in the final stages of the battle. Other than the uniform which we had worn for the past seven days, we had nothing else with us, not even a change of clothing. Anyway, who would have thought of being well dressed during the heat of the battle? All that we took along with us was our haversacks, which contained our rubberised cape-cum-ground-sheet and eating utensils. It was a blessing in disguise that we had travelled light.

The merciless Japanese soldiers did not allow us to take our steel helmets with us and, as we made our way to Changi, our uncovered heads had to endure the heat of the cruel tropical sun. Our heads were bathed in sweat which trickled down our faces and the back of our necks. That was in a way a sort of punishment the sun meted to us for having surrendered to the Japanese. Later, when we were on a working party at the Singapore harbour, we found that a large quantity of steel helmets were shipped to Japan as part of their spoils of the war. I presume that they were melted down and made into weapons of war for use against the Allies in other theatres of war.

In the initial stage of our march to Changi, we retraced the same route we had previously taken when we drove up to the

battle zone. I found, to my dismay, how easily the attitude of the people could change. Some of those who just a few days ago had cheered our convoy as we went forward to face the enemy, now began to boo and taunt us as we marched in defeat. There was really no reason for them to behave in such a manner. After all, we too were Singaporeans who had volunteered our services for the defence of Singapore. It is possible that those who booed us either wanted to impress their new masters or had been dictated by the Japanese army photographers to do so for propaganda purposes.

I did not know whether to be offended or to feel sorry for them. To me, they were just like the tall wild grass in the open fields being swayed by the changing winds of politics. Admittedly, my colleagues and I were upset at being booed. However, we took no notice of their jeers but continued marching as if we had neither seen nor heard them.

Many other people just looked at us blankly as they watched us go marching by. On the other hand we encountered quite a number of sympathetic and generous people, who rushed out of their homes to give us food, cakes and cold sweet drinks. Others just gave us plain ice-cold water to quench our thirst or to cool ourselves. These people were mainly Straits-born Chinese and Eurasian men and women. I am grateful to them and salute all of them as they had risked being chastised or beaten by the Japanese guards who accompanied us. There were also other Japanese guards who were patrolling the route in trucks.

Along some stretches of the route, I was surprised to see that many of the houses flew the Japanese flag from their verandahs or windows. I suppose they did so either in resignation or to welcome their new masters. What I could not understand was how in such a short time the Japanese flags were so readily available in the market. Perhaps some enterprising flag makers, either in anticipation or in collaboration, had worked overtime to produce the flags which were then sold profitably to all those anxious to express their new loyalty.

About midway to Changi, I recognised a few people among the crowd who had gathered by the roadside to watch the columns of

prisoners-of-war march by. Some were office colleagues, while others were those living in my own neighbourhood. They seemed to be in a state of shock, but somehow, they gave me a weak smile and a discreet wave when they recognised me. They were mainly civil servants, and most probably were afraid to be seen as being friendly to us.

On reaching the Still Road and Changi Road junction, I spotted Allan, my elder brother. He was trying to look for me among the sea of faces moving along in an unending kaleidoscope. He was standing on the right hand side of the road, but when he spotted me he threw caution to the wind, ran across the road to embrace me. We had not seen each other since the day we were mobilised for active service. He told me that my father and the rest of the family were well and gave me a big pile of sandwiches and a few fruits from our garden. They were most welcome as other than a nice cold sweet drink I had from a Straits-born Chinese woman, I had had nothing to eat since the previous evening when I ate two dog biscuits and drank some tea. Allan also gave me a wet towel to cool my face and head. Having marched with me for some distance, he felt that it was time to part and as he left me, he gave me a V-sign and said, 'Keep your chin up.' He then quickly slipped back into the crowd of bystanders. I kept turning around to see him go but he seemed to have disappeared completely. I suppose having seen me, he was rushing home to give the news to my father. As I looked at the sandwiches and fruits that Allan gave me, instinct told me that they were not for me alone and so I shared them with my colleagues who were marching near me.

Allan was also a member of the Singapore Volunteer Corps. He was in the Signals Unit. He told me that after the surrender, he and the rest of the men in his unit were advised by their British Commanding Officer to discard their uniforms and return home as he thought that only European volunteers would be interned as prisoners-of-war.

Furthermore, he felt that Allan and his colleagues could serve the British cause better outside the prisoner-of-war camp. I managed to see more of Allan when I was later sent to the labour

camps in Bukit Timah and Pasir Panjang.

Despite the long march, aggravated by the heat of the blazing sun and marching the whole day on an empty stomach, none of us fell ill or collapsed along the route. This is no doubt attributable to the training we received at Telok Paku when we frequently had to march about 25 kilometres within three hours and generally with full battle gear.

By evening when it was beginning to be cool and refreshing, we finally reached our destination in the Changi Camp which was to be our 'home' for an unknown period. We were tired and hungry but relieved that the march was over and we could look forward to a peaceful sleep that evening.

Certain accommodation had already been allocated to the volunteers, and our company was given the whole of the ground floor of a four-storeyed building in Robert Barracks. In view of the limited space, it was a matter of 'first come, first served' for the best places. There was then an orderly scramble to secure the best spot or to be among friends or relatives. I was not bothered about location, as long as I had a space to sleep in our new 'home'. The space available for each individual was sufficient for us to lie down with our haversack as a head rest. We slept on the cold concrete floor using our rubberised ground sheet as a mat. There was not much space to separate the sleeping bodies.

Messing arrangements were non-existent that evening and we continued to go hungry until the next morning when we were given two dog biscuits and a cup of light plain tea for breakfast. We soon settled down to adapt ourselves to a new way of life in captivity but always hoping that our internment would only be for a short duration.

A few days later, members of the Singapore Royal Artillery (volunteers) found their way to Changi. They had been manning the long range guns at Blakang Mati to repel a sea-borne invasion which never took place. Apparently, after the surrender they continued to live on the off-shore island of Blakang Mati until the Japanese discovered them and gave them their marching orders to Changi.

News of what was happening in the city began to filter into the

camp and we heard that just before the surrender, most of the non-European volunteers of the Second Battalion, Straits Settlements Volunteer Force, as well as Asians who had been recruited into the regular British units, were instructed by their European officers to discard their uniforms, bury their weapons, change into civilian clothes and blend with the civilian population, as it was felt that volunteers, especially Chinese, would stand a better chance of survival out of uniform. We also received news that the civilian European men, women, and children were being interned in the Changi convict prison. There were also many rumours about a purported British landing on the west coast of Malaya. Generally, the majority were resigned to fate. There was no use worrying as we could do nothing to change our destiny, since whatever will be, will be.

Quite a number amongst us were more optimistic and very confident of the British imperial might. They felt that the British forces would counter-attack and re-take Singapore within a few months. At the latest, they expected to be home by Christmas. I was a fatalist; my motto always was 'While I breathe, I hope'.

CHAPTER 4

Early Days In Changi

Changi became known as the most notorious camp in Asia, and in the minds of many people in England, Australia and America, the Changi prisoner-of-war camp would invoke visions of atrocities, starvation, bad living conditions and emaciated men. It was the place where prisoners-of-war were reduced to a physical state looking more like living skeletons. As a prisoner-of-war, not only in the Changi Camp but in various camps in Singapore and Siam (Thailand), I cannot understand how Changi had earned such a reputation. My memories of Changi have never been unpleasant. Prisoners-of-war in Changi did suffer deprivation, and loss of self-esteem, but the conditions were not appalling. Although food was rationed, it was provided every day. The camp was also provided with amenities, such as electric lights and piped water, which contributed to our cleanliness and good healthy conditions.

When compared with the life and the working conditions on the Siam-Burma railway work camps and other camps in the East Indies, Changi Camp was more like a low budget holiday camp. It should be noted that when the survivors of the Siam-Burma railway construction gang learnt that they were returning to Changi, they were extremely happy. It was like going home.

The camp occupied a large area on the north-eastern sector of Singapore. There was plenty of land for the more energetic prisoners to wander around. There were no Japanese soldiers within the camp and even the daily head-counts were conducted by our own

Currency note issued by the Japanese governement for use in Syonan (Japanese-occupied Singapore), commonly known as Banana Money (above, obverse)

prisoner-of-war administration. The camp was guarded by Indian soldiers, who during the war were part of the British army and who had been coerced to join the pseudo-Indian National Army established by the Japanese.

The only occasion when we did see some Japanese soldiers within our camp was on one day about a week after the fall of Singapore. The occasion was a sort of Victory Parade or an inspection of prisoners-of-war by the victorious General Yamashita, the conqueror of Malaya and Singapore, who had been dubbed the 'Tiger of Malaya'.

On that morning of the inspection, all the prisoners-of-war had to stand along the designated route within the Changi Camp where the general would pass. We stood shoulder to shoulder facing the route while many hundreds of Japanese soldiers with their rifles and fixed bayonets stood facing us. They were spaced at intervals of one metre apart and watched every move we made.

At the appointed time, a motorcade carrying General Yamashita and his entourage came into view. We were told to look ahead and not move our heads, but as the motorcade passed I had a fleeting glance of the plump and haughty general who had forced our country to surrender unconditionally. He sat in an open landau looking very fierce and arrogant. The tables however, were turned on him in December 1945, when he was tried by a United States Military Commission in Manila, and was sentenced to death for the ill-treatment of Allied prisoners-of-war by the soldiers under his command.

Among the officers in the general's entourage was a colonel whom I recognised as a former well-known commercial photographer in Singapore prior to the war. He had often been commissioned to take photographs of many official functions and several group photographs of officers and various companies of the Singapore Volunteer Corps. It is possible that copies of all those valuable photographs would have found their way into the hands of the Japanese military intelligence in Japan.

A few days after our arrival in Changi, we were given a special assignment. It was exciting but dangerous. Somehow the Japanese knew that our company had laid the land mines on the foreshore along the east coast. Either their intelligence had been extremely good or they had been advised by some collaborators eager to build up their image. Our task on that day was to go back to the scene of our 'crime' and remove all the land mines we had laid. We then had to defuse them under the watchful eyes of some Japanese soldiers. All the mines we had retrieved were collected by them, presumably for use against the Allied Forces elsewhere.

During the first few weeks of internment, only a few men were given some work to do either in the cookhouse or in the general

cleaning and sanitation unit daily. Some others were given heavier tasks such as drilling deep bore hole-latrines as water was inadequate for essential use and the water-borne sewerage system did not seem to be functioning properly.

For the rest of the prisoners it meant idleness which led to boredom and day-dreaming of what the future held for us. The majority of us were resigned to the fact that the duration of our internment would be long, as Britain had her own problems of defending herself against a possible German attack and daily aerial bombardment. Some of the more optimistic types were forecasting that we would be released before the year was over. Some were even prepared to bet on a specific month.

I had always placed my trust in God and most of the time I kept to myself, as the majority of my colleagues were much senior to me in age and service. Sometimes, their jokes caused me embarrassment and being alone, life became very monotonous. As time went on, I realised that the internment camp was no place for a recluse as, some day or somehow, I would need a helping hand from someone, and it would perhaps be difficult without any friends.

One day, Corporal Eduardo da Silva, whom I shall later refer to as 'Eddie,' approached me as I sat alone watching some Japanese naval vessels steaming up the Straits of Johore heading towards the naval base. He sat beside me and began a conversation. He told me that he was a good friend of my father and that he had lived not far away from my home. He told me not to worry and that he would take care of me in the camp. He called me by the name of 'Love,' which was one of my father's given names and the one by which he was popularly known to all his friends.

There was nothing to lose by being friendly to Eddie so I readily accepted his friendship and we became good friends. During the days that followed, he would be close by me most of the time. Whatever 'goodies' any of us had or were able to scrounge would be gladly shared between us.

Towards the end of February 1942, a contingent of the Singapore Royal Artillery (Volunteers) arrived in the camp. They were allocated accommodation in the same block as we were in, but on the

third floor. One of its members was Sergeant David Ginsberg, who will later be referred to as 'Ginny'. One morning, he was looking down from the verandah on the third floor. Eddie recognised him and beckoned him down for a chat. While the three of us stood beneath a shady tree, Eddie told Ginny that I was Love Rosario's son. Ginny looked at me and said that he knew my father well. He too told me not to worry as he would look after me in the camp. He called me 'Sonny Boy'. How lucky I was to have two good godfathers to care for me in the camp.

The three of us became inseparable friends, but unlike the Three Musketeers, we became known as the 'Three Racketeers', as we soon became involved in black-market activities. Our friendship was tenacious and lasted not only for the duration of our internment as prisoners-of-war but for a very long time thereafter. As a matter of fact, I subsequently married Ginny's niece in Singapore twelve years after the war. She was one of those who had frequently visited us in the Bukit Timah Camp and had watched the boxing tournaments there.

As time went on, the inactive life in the camp became monotonous and boring. Rumours of what went on in the outside world was rampant and some were exaggerated beyond fantasy. Nevertheless, it was always amusing and boosted the morale of the camp. There was plenty of idle time without anything to do and so the idle mind became the devil's workshop. Quite a number turned to gambling. There were always willing hands to oblige those who still had some Singapore currency which they felt would be useless after the war. Many played poker, but the most popular game was 'two up' which was introduced and operated by the Australians. These sessions drew a fairly large crowd of gamblers and spectators and soon became a regular pastime, especially during the coolness of the evenings.

The more energetic prisoners indulged in physical exercises or played football and cricket to keep fit. Quite a number spent many hours just frolicking on the beaches or sunbathing and some even swam naked within a proper swimming enclosure.

Education classes were set up and various subjects were taught to those willing to learn or thirsty for knowledge. Languages were

also taught and this included Japanese which was not very popular. Generally the teaching of the various subjects was undertaken by those without teaching experience, but they were fully qualified men in their respective fields, and they willing to impart their knowledge to their fellow prisoners. As many books were available in small libraries in the various barracks, a central library was established and books could be borrowed for reference or for reading. The big drawback in the education programme was the lack of writing paper and pencils.

For some time I was able to study the 'Elements of Structural Engineering'. I studied conscientiously until the time I was sent away to another work camp in Singapore. After the war, I attended evening classes at the Balestier Trade School to pursue a course of study on the same subject. By sheer coincidence, my tutor was none other than a fellow volunteer who was my lecturer in the Changi prisoner-of-war camp. I managed to complete the course and was successful in the examination conducted by the City & Guilds of London Institute, Calhaem.

One of my volunteer colleagues was a well-known dental surgeon with a private practice in Singapore. He felt that it would be a good idea if he could get some of his dental equipment from his clinic in the city so that he could help his fellow volunteers who needed dental treatment. He decided to discuss the matter with the powers that be. When approached, the Japanese prisoner-of-war administration not only agreed to his proposal but also provided the transport with an escort for him to bring to Changi all his own equipment, instruments and dental supplies from his clinic.

He set up a very good dental clinic in the camp and his services were excellent, but he did not charge any fees. I really admired his generosity. Initially, his patients were mainly volunteers, but later as news of the clinic spread, other prisoners-of-war were also treated. On one occasion even a Japanese soldier sought his services.

I was lucky to be one of his patients in the camp. I was always afraid of going to a dentist, but on that particular occasion I felt very comfortable with him. He carried on his practice in the

camp until he was sent away to work on the Siam-Burma railway. I do not know whether he survived the war or what happened to his clinic. As a tribute to him, I feel obliged to say that in the post-war years I have been treated by dental surgeons in Singapore, England and Australia, and I am proud to say that the root therapy and filling he did for me in Changi Camp is undoubtedly beyond compare. One of the dental surgeons who treated me could hardly believe that such an excellent job was done in a prisoner-of-war camp nearly fifty years ago.

Some of the more enterprising prisoners managed to produce plays and concerts. They were of a very good standard taking into consideration that all the necessary materials for the actors, 'actresses' and props had to be scrounged. I was told that some of the organisers and producers had been associated with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. The show, were good and enjoyable, especially the excellent impersonation of female characters. The shows were usually held at night out in the open air and the seats were coconut tree trunks. They ran for several days to allow many people to attend and were usually packed to capacity. Japanese soldiers were sometimes among the spectators and they seemed to enjoy the show visually as they did not understand what was spoken. What attracted them most was the beautifully made-up 'actresses'.

Before being called up for active service, some of the Singapore volunteers had worked with the Singapore Municipality. With the return of civil administration under the Japanese military authorities in Singapore (now renamed *Syonan-to)*, the Singapore Municipality was re-established and was known as *Gunseibo.* The former local staff were needed to run the organisation and they were requested to report for duty. Whether it was through information provided by those who had reported for duty or through collaborators, the Japanese administration became aware that some of the essential staff of *Gunseibo* were interned in Changi Camp. These volunteers were soon released from the internment camp and were allowed to return home to work for *Gunseibo.*

It did not take long for the Japanese administration to realise

that with a large number of prisoners-of-war in Changi, they had a potential work force. Rather than allowing the prisoners to be idle most of the time, they could make us work for them. They soon began sending batches of men to work on the dockside in the Singapore Harbour or at the railway station. Their work usually involved the loading or unloading of materials or supplies, and such work sometimes brought them into contact with the local people, thus enabling them to obtain many things either through purchase, barter or theft. The work party usually returned to camp at the end of the day daily, and this led to the establishment of a black-market in goods which were unavailable in the camp.

Later, instead of using Changi as a base for such working parties, the Japanese decided to establish satellite camps in some other parts of Singapore. Work parties to the dockside or railway station were then sent out from the satellite camps.

CHAPTER 5

The Human Flotsam

Friday, 20 February 1942 began just like any other day in the camp. We had the usual unappetising breakfast of two dogs' biscuits and light tea followed by a head-count when duties for the day would be allocated to some unlucky ones.

After the first few had been given some chores in the cookhouse and to do some general cleaning work, the rest of us expected another free day of idleness. Instead, the men of our entire company, except the cookhouse staff, were assigned an unknown task which later turned out to be a macabre affair.

We were instructed to collect spades and *changkols* (Asian digging implements with a long wooden handles like hoes) from the quartermaster's stores after which we marched towards Changi village. There was much speculation as to the type of work we would be required to do and most of us were joking as we went marching along. Nobody ever guessed what it was and eventually we really had a big surprise. Continuing on our march, we crossed the bridge over the Changi Creek and finally stopped at a spot about one hundred metres from the beach, which had subsequently been an unmarked and unknown cemetery for almost two decades. The present Fisheries Research Station at Changi is located quite near to the gruesome spot.

Three of our officers who had gone before us then appeared. They came from the direction of the beach and had surgical masks covering their mouths and noses. Our Sergeant Major walked up to them and a discussion followed while we again

began to speculate our task. We soon learnt what it was. The Sergeant Major told us that we were required to dig seven large graves for the burial of some corpses. At first we thought that about a dozen or so corpses were to be buried.

While the non-commissioned officers were busy marking out the graves, curiosity made me and a few colleagues wander towards the beach. The sea was calm and the gentle waves were lapping the shore. The tide was low and the sea water had receded leaving a wide stretch of white sand, where a gruesome sight met our gaze. There was a large number of corpses lying on the beach. Most of them had been washed ashore by the receding tide, while some others were rolling with the waves. Some were lying on their bellies while others were looking skywards with open rotting eyes as if crying to the heavens for help. Many-blue bottle flies attracted by the stench hovered around them, and a few coconut trees leaned over the corpses keeping a silent watch just waiting for someone to discover them.

In the sea, the gentle waves made rippling noises as they carried more human flotsam to the beach. We looked at them with mixed feelings of horror and sorrow. It was beyond any doubt that they have been the victims of a massacre by the Japanese soldiers as all of them bore multiple bullet wounds on their bodies. Some had even wounds on their faces too.

The majority of the corpses were in an advanced stage of decomposition, and the stench which floated in the air was unbearable. Quite a number of them were beyond recognition, but their features told me they were Chinese and made me wonder what crimes they had committed to forfeit their lives.

It was afternoon when the excavation of all the graves was completed, and then followed the task of transferring the corpses from the beach to the mass graves. A number of them were so badly decomposed that bits of their rotting flesh dripped through our fingers as we carried them to their resting places. Some eyeballs were left on the beach when we carried those that were lying on their bellies but we collected all of them and deposited them into the graves. All the corpses were buried with whatever gold necklaces or rings they wore.

When all the bodies were placed in the open graves a Church of England Minister offered some prayers while we stood in silence around the graves. Unknown to us then, we were honouring our own comrades. It was past three o'clock in the afternoon when we were given a rest.

The heavy work under the cruel tropical sun made us tired and hungry. The sight of the four cookhouse orderlies carrying the dixie cans of food and tea was most welcome. Our lunch turned out to be the same as our breakfast. It was just two pieces of hard dry biscuits and some hot plain tea. Hungry as we were, the majority of us just could not eat anything after what we had witnessed and handled, further aggravated by the stench that still floated in the air.

John, one of our colleagues who had felt the urge of nature, wandered to some nearby bushes to relieve himself. A little later, we heard him making some hideous guttural noises. A few of us ran towards him to see what was the matter. John looked pale and was speechless, but encouraged by our presence, he uttered, 'Ghost' in a low voice. We went closer to him and discovered the cause of his fear. It was the hand of a 'corpse' holding on to his leg and feebly repeating, 'Please help me, please help me'.

We could not believe our eyes on seeing the living 'corpse'. His body was riddled with bullets. Many flies had settled on his festering wounds and more were hovering around him. Despite the wounds, he was alive, but he was in great pain. Obviously, he had miraculously survived the massacre. His body had floated with the other corpses and had landed on the beach from where he had crawled to the undergrowth. We assured him that we would help him and told him to be quiet. We offered him some biscuits but he could not eat. He had a few sips of the tea we gave him.

Tony who had been another member of the burial party ran off to inform our Sergeant Major and Captain W of the discovery. Immediately Captain W decided that we should try to smuggle him back into the camp. At that moment, to add excitement to the scenario, two Japanese soldiers carrying their rifles with fixed bayonets appeared and stood on the bridge across Changi Creek.

That was the only way for us to get back into the camp unless we took a detour and went along the beach. Such a move would no doubt create suspicion, so Captain W decided to play for time. The cookhouse orderlies were instructed to return to camp and bring back a stretcher. Captain W wanted to test the reaction of the Japanese soldiers, but they took no notice of the orderlies when they passed by. Evidently they were more interested in watching some Malay women bathing in the creek.

While the orderlies were gone, we back-filled the graves quickly. Meanwhile, Tony stood beside the wounded man to give him comfort and assure him that all would be well. The completion of our task coincided with the return of two cookhouse orderlies bringing with them a stretcher. Once again, the Japanese soldiers standing on the bridge took no notice of them and Captain W decided to run the gauntlet. The wounded man was to be smuggled into the camp where he could hide until he recovered.

We gathered all our tools and assembled in a marching column ready to move back to camp. We named the wounded man 'Lazarus,' as the episode resembled the miracle related in the Scriptures of a dead man named Lazarus, who was entombed for three days and came forth alive when commanded by Jesus. 'Lazarus' was carefully placed on the stretcher and was told to keep absolutely quiet especially when we passed the bridge. Captain W and the other two Eurasian officers then removed their jackets and covered 'Lazarus'. We then placed a spade and *changkol* beside him just to deceive the Japanese soldiers into believing that he had collapsed from exhaustion. His feet were exposed so John took off his own boots and fitted them on 'Lazarus's' feet while he walked barefooted back to camp.

The stretcher was carried by four men at hip level and was hidden within the ranks of the marching column as we made our way back to camp. Our marching was smart and to keep in step, we whistled the tune *When the Saints go Marching in.*

The Japanese soldiers were still standing on the bridge as we approached them. In an effort to soften them up, Captain W. who was marching in front of the column, gave them a smart British salute. They bowed in acknowledgement and walked away

from the bridge to make way for us. They completely ignored us and we all felt much relieved. Had 'Lazarus' been discovered, not only would all of us be punished but 'Lazarus' would certainly be killed. Soon we reached the safety of the camp. 'Lazarus' was sent to the sick bay where he was nursed back to health and continued to live in the camp as an unaccounted for prisoner-of-war.

We learnt from 'Lazarus' that he too was a member of the Singapore Volunteer Corps. He belonged to 'E' (Chinese) Company. After the surrender, he and the other members of his company were told to return home. A day or two later, he and his colleagues were among the many young Chinese men who were rounded up by the Japanese or who had been asked to report to an assembly centre at Jalan Besar. They did not realise what the Japanese wanted to do with them.

Having been identified by some collaborators or *quislings* that he and his colleagues were volunteers, they were segregated. The Japanese later lied to them that with their military training and discipline, they could assist the Japanese administration in maintaining law and order in *Syonan-to*. They would be required to help the Japanese to police the city. Instead the doomed men were placed on military trucks and driven to Ferry Point at Changi. There they were lined up on the jetty and machine-gunned. Their bodies fell into the sea and floated with the current until they were washed ashore on to the beach where we found them.

There were two sequels to this gruesome episode. Firstly, 'Lazarus' fully recovered from his wounds, and continued to be harboured in the Changi Camp until the liberation of Singapore. Later he was one of the few members of the Singapore Volunteer Corps who, after the war, was sent to London to participate in the Victory Parade.

The second sequel occurred in mid 1960. I was then the Assistant Director of Public Works (Architecture) in Singapore, and was appointed to be the Singapore Government's representative on the committee formed by the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce. The committee was responsible for the development and construction of the War Memorial at Beach Road, presently located opposite the Raffles City.

The memorial was primarily intended to commemorate the many Chinese people who had been killed by the Japanese during the occupation. However, the winning design of the memorial, which had been the subject of an open architectural competition in Singapore, was a composition of four tall concrete pylons joined together by simple horizontal bands to signify the Chinese, Malay, Indian and other races of the multi-racial society of Singapore, and thus the monument became known just as the War Memorial.

As a committee member, I was able to convince the other members of the existence of the mass graves at Changi and to pinpoint their exact location. The graves were then exhumed and the remains of those unfortunate people together with the remains from other known graves are now resting within the podium of the memorial.

CHAPTER 6

Bukit Timah Camp

After having been in captivity with nothing much to do, we began to get bored. That was despite the fact that we did have some fun and were able to do exercises and play energetic games. Then rumours began to float around that the Japanese administration of prisoners-of-war intended sending out prisoners on working parties. They knew that they had a large labour force that was idle and they decided to put us to some use. They probably intended using the prisoners as cheap labour. It also was rumoured that some would be sent to work camps in Singapore while many more would be sent to work camps overseas.

At that time, the nature of the work which the prisoners would be required to do and the overseas destinations were unknown; as such, speculation was rife. Not everyone was enthusiastic about the matter. There followed many discussions among various groups who were keen to be together.

As usual, I listened to the advice of my two godfathers. A few others also joined our group for discussions. Ginny assumed the role of our leader. He advised us that it would serve us best to get into a working party going into Singapore. His contention was that we would be able to meet our relatives and friends and to scrounge around for the things we needed. We could also learn what was happening in the city. It was also a good opportunity to be involved in black-market dealings.

Ginny, as our leader, decided to scout around for any information he could get about the working parties. In the first week of

April 1942, it was confirmed that 300 men would be required for a work camp in Singapore. Whether it was through his manipulation or sheer luck, he, Eddie and myself were included in this first batch. The group were made up entirely of European and Eurasian volunteers from Singapore and Malaya. None of the regular British soldiers were included in the party.

A few days later there was some excitement as the time came for us to be moved out of Changi to another camp somewhere in Singapore; however, we were still not told what we would be required to do. When the time came for us to leave Changi, our few possessions were quickly packed and we were ready to move. We then made our way to the Upper Changi Road where a convoy of Japanese military trucks were waiting for us. There were also some soldiers who looked rather fierce and who were smoking heavily and joking among themselves. Eventually, they turned out to be quite an amiable group of men.

After a quick head-count, we boarded the trucks which soon moved off. Along the way some people stood on the roadside to watch our convoy pass by. They had never seen prisoners-of-war before and they all looked surprised. Most of the children were smiling and waved at us.

The sun was shining from a clear blue sky making the day quite hot. Our trucks were uncovered and after an uncomfortable journey along some roads which still bore the effects of the artillery bombardment, we finally reached our new camp. It was situated within the former rifle range at Bukit Timah, which was quite close to the venue where our General Percival surrendered to the Japanese.

Our work force was commanded by Major Taylor, a genial officer of the Singapore Volunteer Corps. He was soft-spoken and was easy to get along with. He found difficulty in communicating with the Japanese camp commandant who despite his knowledge of English always spoke Japanese, which Major Taylor did not understand.

Ginny who was a natural linguist picked up the Japanese language very quickly. He was able to converse reasonably well with the Japanese camp commandant, Captain Hogino, and his

soldiers. As such Ginny became *ipso facto*, the unofficial camp interpreter. Captain Hogino and his soldiers preferred to deal with him rather than Major Taylor. The Japanese could not pronounce his name and always addressed him as *Ginsbakko* or *Socho* (Japanese for Sergeant). They were pleased he always understood their instructions and that all works had been completed to their satisfaction. Such arrangements served us well; however, Ginny would always consult Major Taylor on all matters. The relationship between the two men was nevertheless cordial.

Since Ginny got on amicably well with the Japanese camp commandant and all his subordinates, he was able to obtain many favours and benefits for all of us. The first benefit he managed to squeeze out of Captain Hogino was to make Sunday a day of rest for the whole camp. He later persuaded Captain Hogino to allow all the Catholic prisoners in the camp to attend a church service in a church outside the camp. Captain Hogino understood our need to pray to 'Maria' (the Virgin Mary).

When Ginny first discussed with Major Taylor his intentions to approach Captain Hogino on the matter, Major Taylor thought that the idea was preposterous. He felt that Captain Hogino would be annoyed and vent his wrath on the whole camp, but although he was sceptical, he did not object to Ginny trying his luck.

Some of our fellow European volunteers who heard about the matter thought that Ginny was off his mind. They did not imagine that the hard-hearted Japanese, who were noted for their brutality, would allow prisoners-of-war to go to church and worse still, outside the camp. They too shared the fears of Major Taylor that the Japanese camp commandant would punish the whole camp and tried hard to coerce Ginny to drop the matter.

They had underestimated Ginny's persuasive powers. Anyway, Ginny went ahead with his plan and encountered no difficulty in getting the green light. The good news spread like wild fire and soon quite a number of non-Catholics wanted to be included in the group of churchgoers. The numbers quickly increased as Sunday approached, but many still secretly felt that the plan would not ultimately materialise

The second Sunday in April 1942 was to be our first church-

going day. It was the first rest day for the camp. The day was bright and sunny and we felt that it was a good omen. All of us who were going to church were ready and excited. As we waited eagerly, no instructions were forthcoming from the Japanese. There did not seem to be any activity in the camp commandant's office. There was not even any sign of Captain Hogino. Many were beginning to feel that Ginny had played a belated April Fool joke and began taunting him. Ginny however remained calm and confident that Captain Hogino would honour his promise.

At about eight o'clock that morning, Captain Hogino appeared on the verandah outside his office. He was not wearing his military jacket but appeared to be in a good mood. He had just finished his breakfast and had a toothpick between his teeth.

Ginny and a few others who were standing on the forecourt outside his office took no notice of Captain Hogino. Minutes passed and nothing happened. A little later, Captain Hogino then called out to Ginsbakko to assemble the men in front of the camp commandant's office for a roll call. All those who were going became excited.

Captain Hogino allowed us the use of a large truck and also assigned 'Cracko', a first class private to be in charge of the church party. 'Cracko' was a short, stumpy soldier who was always smiling. We nicknamed him Cracko as he appeared to be a bit crazy in his mannerisms, but generally he was a good bloke. He was jovial and a happy-go-lucky chap. I could never picture him as a stern battle-hardened soldier in any war.

After a quick check of the numbers that were going to church we boarded the truck. It was driven by Ginny, while Cracko sat beside him. Cracko did not carry any arms. I suppose Captain Hogino had sufficient trust in us that we would not attempt to escape. Soon we were on our way, sitting passively in the truck, showing no sign of our elation.

There was a Catholic church quite close to our camp, but Ginny chose to go to St Joseph's Church in Victoria Street, which was in the city about twelve kilometres away, since it was the church most Eurasian Catholics frequented. The Mass had already begun when we arrived and we caused quite a stir when we entered the

church. The congregation was surprised but continued to pray solemnly as the service proceeded.

When the Mass was over, Cracko allowed us some time to mingle and chat with our *tomadochi* (friends). They were exceedingly pleased to see us. It was the first time they had seen us since the day we were called up for active service.Some of our friends rushed out to the nearby shops to get meat buns, cakes and titbits for us. Of course, Cracko was given some too and he seemed quite pleased.

Before long it was time to take leave of our friends and by noon we were back in camp. It was a memorable and happy day for all of us who had the good fortune to go to church to fulfil our religious obligations. We hoped that the week would pass by quickly so that we could go again to church on Sunday.

That afternoon, the hut was filled with much chatter as those who had been left behind wanted to know how we had fared and what it was like in the city. Later quite a number approached Ginny to request that they be included in the following week's church-going party. Ginny was kind-hearted and always willing to help anyone in need. He accommodated all those who approached him and the numbers of pseudo-Catholics swelled as the days went by.

In the city, the news of our visit to St Joseph's Church soon spread. In the following weeks, many more relatives and friends turned up at the church. Our relatives were very happy to know that we were alive and well. Once again, our relatives and friends showered us with gifts of food and other necessities which we previously requested.

I was lucky to meet my elder brother. He gave me a few things which he felt I needed. He also gave me a good set of uniform and a pair of army socks. Those were most welcome and I kept them with great care. I saw him at the church every Sunday I went there.

Ginny, who was well-known in the entertainment world in Singapore before the war, met not only his relatives but many close friends and well-wishers. With the thought of promoting some sort of healthy sport in the camp on our rest days, he

managed to obtain two new pairs of boxing gloves, of the type used for professional boxing matches, from a good friend. Ginny approached the Japanese camp commandant who readily gave permission for a proper boxing ring to be constructed. Thereafter, boxing tournaments were regularly held every Sunday afternoon.

There was no dearth of boxers, and they were categorised according to size in stature, in the absence of a weighing scale. In the early stages, all bouts were among prisoners-of-war, but later some of the Japanese soldiers participated. At first, the prisoners were reluctant to hit out at their Japanese opponents. Invariably, our referee awarded the bouts to the Japanese soldiers, amidst much cheering from both sides.

Captain Hogino was not happy about the results of the bouts, as he felt the referee was biased towards his men. He wanted something exciting and a fair fight, without favouritism. After that, we witnessed some lively bouts between the Japanese soldiers and the prisoners. They traded really hard punches. There was much cheering and clapping of hands on both sides and the Japanese soldier who lost his bout did not show any malice. It was nice to see such good sportsmanship among enemies, who were normally considered as barbaric.

Ginny was also able to obtain permission for our relatives and friends to visit us on Sunday afternoons. It was like a carnival. Watching our boxing tournaments was only an excuse. The real intention was for them to bring us home-cooked food, cakes, fruits and the many other things that we needed. It was also an opportunity to meet others who had not heard about us going to church in the city.

My elder brother visited me frequently. On one of his visits, he brought me an aluminium billy-can. It was filled with crispy sugar-coated peanuts. I liked them very much, but beneath the peanuts I found a brand new jack knife neatly wrapped up in cellophane foil. Both the billy-can and the jack knife became my treasured possessions. They proved to be a great asset in my battle for survival while working on the Siam-Burma railway in the deep jungles of Siam.

Like all good things the happy church-going Sundays came to an end after five weeks. We were no longer allowed to attend Mass at the St Joseph's Church. Presumably the news of the concession extended to us must have reached the ears of higher authorities who then had instructed Captain Hogino accordingly. However, Sunday was still a rest day and we continued to have the boxing tournaments. Our relatives and friends were still able to visit the camp and bring us home-cooked food and other things we needed. The church-going concession had been a great morale booster for all of us not only during those five weeks but for a long time afterwards.

The type of work given to us was varied, not too heavy, but was something which we were not accustomed to do. Prior to being mobilised for active service, the majority of us had worked either in the civil service or in the commercial sector. Some held very senior appointments. Being prisoners-of-war, we were forced to work as *coolies* (Asian labourers) and were paid a paltry sum of ten cents a day in 'banana money', which was the currency used in Japanese occupied Singapore. It was called 'banana money' because the currency notes had an illustration of a banana tree with a bunch of bananas. Working as *coolies* made us lose our self-esteem, especially as we were seen daily or had to work alongside the local population, the majority of whom were considered to be of a lower social status in pre-war society of Singapore.That was the price we paid for being prisoners-of-war: it was not by design but fate.

On most working days we would either go to the railway station or the dockside where we had to load or unload a variety of goods, mainly of scrap iron, or empty drums and hay. The scrap metal consisted of every possible easily retrievable metal object, such as empty tin or metal containers, ornamental steel, cast-iron fences or our steel helmets. They were being shipped to Japan as the spoils of war possibly for recycling, thus helping their war effort.

Sometimes, our working party would be split into two groups. One group would unload goods from the wagons at the railway station and load them on to trucks driven by our own men. The

trucks would then go to the dockside to be loaded on to cargo ships by the other group. At times, the procedure was reversed. Either way, the trucks would be escorted by an armed Japanese soldier. Quite often we would just stack up empty oil drums at the dockside, about five to six metres high. This tended to be dangerous as the drums could roll off the stack. On one or two occasions, such accidents did happen resulting in some of us being hurt.

The route to the railway station and Keppel harbour was always the same. We drove through the old tree-lined Reformatory Road. It was always quiet and so peaceful. I could not imagine that just a few weeks earlier, a fierce battle had been fought in that area. Here and there, I saw the scars of battle and the relics of war: large craters in the ground caused by artillery shells or bombs. There were quite a number of burnt-out military trucks and a tank. Some isolated buildings along the road were also damaged. As a grim reminder of the war, I saw many skeletons lying around.

All the skeletons I saw were still dressed in the uniform of the Allied Forces. I was a bit sad that our group could not stop to bury our brothers in arms. I did not see any skeletons of Japanese soldiers. Evidently they had all been collected and buried along or off the road. Their graves could easily be identified by their simple square wooden posts about a metre high, bearing inscriptions written in Japanese characters.

On a few occasions, we were sent to cut the tall grass on some vacant grass wasteland. The cut grass was tied into bundles. On each assignment, we were required to cut a specific quantity by weight. It was a tiring and back-breaking job. We did not have proper implements and the heat of the tropical sun wore us down quickly. In order to get our job completed earlier we would stuff some lumps of rock, stones, or any other heavy scraps into the bundles of grass to achieve the required weight. Our guards too were happy as they thought we had 'worked hard' and so we returned to camp earlier. The cut grass was later sent away as fodder to feed the Japanese army horses in the other theatres of war.

On one grass-cutting assignment, we passed along Upper Bukit Timah Road. As we reached the junction of the old Jurong Road, I saw a male human head resting on a simple wooden stand. His face appeared to have been badly bruised before he was beheaded and flies were hovering around his blood-stained face. It was a gruesome sight. I later learnt that he was one of seven Chinese men who had been beheaded for stealing from the Japanese.

A few days later, I saw a naked Chinese woman tied to a wooden post by the side of the main trunk road leading to the mainland. She was alive but her face showed evidence of maltreatment and had borne the brunt of a bashing. Her head hung down in shame. As a further form of punishment, three bamboo stakes were driven into the ground in front of her. The exposed ends of the bamboo stakes had been sharpened to points and they were placed strategically at her breasts and genitals. There was hardly any tolerance between the sharp ends of the stakes and her body. Any movement she made resulted in the sharp points either scratching or piercing her painfully. It appears that she had stolen something from a Japanese store. The punishment seemed to be a very heavy price for stealing.

I do not know whether the two incidents were related although they happened to be in the same area. I was shocked at such barbaric actions of the Japanese. I presumed that such grim exhibitions were intended to serve as a warning to other would-be thieves, be they men or women, that such would be the price they must expect to pay for their crimes. For quite some time, I could not forget what I saw on those two occasions.

Inside our camp, life went on as usual and nothing exciting happened. The Sunday visits of relatives and friends continued and the boxing tournaments were as popular as ever. As we were able to meet quite a number of the local people outside, some of us became involved in some black-market activities in a small way. Some things which we scrounged from the railway station or the dockside were easily and quickly sold to some willing local buyers. All transactions were conducted in the vernacular language.

Whenever we had the opportunity, we would always try to outwit the Japanese soldiers. Sometimes it was just for fun, but

most of the time, it was for our own gain. Here is an incident when we outwitted them and were rewarded in the end. This tale is completely true, but it appears like something from the mind of someone with a fantastic imagination; however, truth is often stranger than fiction.

This incident happened after we had finished laying a concrete floor for an assembly point in our camp. The next morning, the paw prints of a dog were found all over the floor. As this appeared to be a local problem, Corporal Kinoshita asked Ginny how to deal with the matter as more concrete work had to be done on the following days. Ginny advised him to put up a 'Dogs Keep Out' sign.

Despite the sign, paw prints were again found on another patch of newly completed concrete on the next morning. Ginny was asked for an explanation. He was quick to reply that the sign was too high and should be reduced to the height of a dog's eye level so that the dog could see.

On the third morning, paw prints were again found on another freshly completed concrete patch. This time Ginny explained that the local dogs had not yet learnt *Katakana* (Japanese characters).

Corporal Kinoshita was sceptical about it. He thought that Ginny was trying to pull a fast one over him. Whether or not he accepted the explanation was doubtful. Nevertheless, he did agree that a new sign in English should be erected and at a height suggested by Ginny.

That night having put up the sign in English, Ginny persuaded a reluctant Eddie and a few others to keep a night watch. They were to ensure that no dogs ever came near the newly finished concrete floor. The night watchmen were bribed with cigarettes, biscuits and hot coffee. Each of them was armed with a long bamboo pole and they kept patrolling around the vital area. Some dogs were spotted but they did not dare to go close to the concreted area. The men no doubt took turns to have some sleep.

The crowing of the roosters in the nearby farm heralded the dawn of a new day. It was morning and there was not a single paw print to be seen. The concrete floor had set and was in a perfect

condition. When Corporal Kinoshita came out to inspect, he was pleased as Punch. He was smiling all the while. He must have thought that after all, Ginny did not deceive him. Ginny's image received a tremendous boost. Kinoshita rewarded him with two bottle of *Asahi* beer and some nice Japanese biscuits. The gifts were shared amongst all the night watchmen.

Towards the end of May we were told that we would soon be leaving the Bukit Timah camp. The news was depressing as we had grown accustomed to Captain Hogino and his soldiers. Above all, the working conditions were tolerable and we enjoyed the weekly visits of our relatives and friends. Our immediate fear was that we would be sent overseas as quite a number of prisoners-of-war from Changi had already been sent away to unknown destinations. We did not like the idea of being sent overseas. Then Corporal Kinoshita assured Ginny confidentially that we were only shifting to another camp in Singapore. We were all quite relieved and, about a week later, we moved to a new camp.

CHAPTER 7

Pasir Panjang Camp

Our next camp was the Shell Company oil depot at Pasir Panjang Road. It was quite large in area and was completely enclosed by a galvanised wire chain-link fence about two and a half metres high. There was also strands of barbed-wire above the fence. During the war, the depot was considered a 'Protected Place'. It was guarded by armed men and intruders were liable to be shot.

The Japanese commandant of the camp was still Captain Hogino assisted by the Japanese soldiers who had been with us at Bukit Timah Camp. Captain Hogino and his subordinates lived in separate bungalows on the eastern end of the depot while the prisoners lived within the main depot complex. There were two gates to the camp; one led to the prisoners' section while the other led to the Japanese quarters. The gates were manned by former British Indian soldiers who were now members of the pseudo-Indian National Army.

There was nothing much to do on the first day in our new camp except to get the place in order. When night came, it was found that there were no lights anywhere, although there was electrical installation.

Even the Japanese quarters had no lights. The night was dark and the many shady trees within and around the camp made the night even blacker. The eeriness was aggravated by the saw-mill-like noises made by the cicadas and, here and there, the blackness of the night was punctuated by many glow-worms hanging on the trees. They looked like fairy lights.

Heyman, one of our colleagues, then decided to make some improvised lamps. Heyman had previously worked as an oil chemist with the Shell Company and the lamps he produced were simple but functional. He filled some small empty cans with coconut oil, and used a wick made of jute strings from the rice sacks. They gave out a dim light but it was better than the darkness.

The following morning Captain Hogino enquired of Ginny whether any of the prisoners knew anything about electrical installation and he was pleased to learn that Ginny himself was a qualified electrical and sound engineer. Ginny was asked to see what could be done to reinstate the electrical supply.

Ginny made a quick check of the electrical distribution system and found that the electrical supplies originated from a British-made Petbow generator mounted on a trailer, similar to that which provided the power for our searchlights during the war. He checked the generator and discovered that one of the atomisers was damaged. Captain Hogino was informed accordingly and assured that the fault could easily be rectified if only a spare atomiser could be found.

Ginny knew exactly where he could get an atomiser to replace the damaged one. He discussed the matter with Corporal Kinoshita who readily agreed with his proposal to steal the atomiser from a similar generator elsewhere. Ginny had in mind the gun emplacement and searchlight battery at Pasir Labar about twelve kilometres from our camp. Corporal Kinoshita instructed Cracko to accompany Ginny and myself on the stealing mission. We lost no time in getting to Pasir Labar.

The gun emplacement and searchlight battery at Pasir Labar was in a secluded position on the north-western sector of Singapore, overlooking the Straits of Johore, commanding a good view of the western approach into the Singapore harbour. The place was desolate when we reached it. The generator was inside a strong camouflaged concrete building with steel gates, which were not locked.

Ginny and myself went inside the generator house and found that the generator was in a very good condition. It was evident

that whoever had been manning the position had evacuated hurriedly and did not destroy or damage the generator in accordance with the British scorched-earth policy. We brought along some spanners and screw-drivers but found that there were ample maintenance tools in the store. We helped ourselves to some of the tools.

While we were busily removing the atomiser from the generator, Cracko stood outside. He diligently acted as our look-out man in case other unfriendly Japanese soldiers came on the scene. Nobody interrupted us and our operation was successful. We managed to dismantle two atomisers, after which we cut off the fuel-supply pipe,damaged the generator's governor, and other vital parts. Cracko was pleased when the operation was over and we quickly returned to the camp. He was completely unaware that we had taken two atomisers, and of the mischief we had done to the generator. One of the atomisers was used to replace our damaged atomiser while the spare one was later sold on the black-market.

Tests then showed that the generator was functioning and the electrical distribution system was immediately energised. That night when the lights were switched on, our colleagues were hysterical with joy and sang 'For Ginny's a jolly good fellow'.

Captain Hogino and the Japanese soldiers were happy too. They were able to listen to their radios, do some reading, and cool themselves with the electric fan. Ginny was well rewarded with some packets of cigarettes, a few bottles of beer and biscuits not only from Corporal Kinoshita but Captain Hogino as well.

Captain Hogino was so happy with Ginny's efforts that he appointed him to be the engineer in charge of the electrical sub-station. Ginny asked him for two assistants to help him in the running of the substation. Captain Hogino agreed that he could choose anyone he liked. Obviously, he had Eddie and myself in mind and the two of us joined his electrical sub-station staff, although both of us knew nothing about electricity or electrical installation.

The three of us stayed away from the main camp. We were given accommodation adjacent to the sub-station and which was within

the same compound as the living accommodation for the Japanese soldiers. Captain Hogino lived in a separate bungalow situated about fifty metres to the right of the sub-station. As the prisoners' cookhouse was situated some distance away in another part of the camp, we obtained our cooked food from the Japanese cookhouse, and were given the same food as the Japanese soldiers. Corporal Kinoshita ensured that we were properly fed and would sometimes check to satisfy himself that not only were we given the same food as the Japanese soldiers, but had enough to eat. We were also allowed to share the large hot water tank (improvised sauna bath) with the Japanese soldiers. However we preferred to shower rather than to soak ourselves in the tank with all the naked Japanese soldiers.

Ginny was required not only to ensure that the electrical installation was in good running order but also to do any extension to the system as was needed. He taught me the rudiments of electricity and electrical circuitry so that I could undertake minor electrical wiring jobs when he felt I was capable. Normally, he would draw up a plan showing the electric circuits to be carried out and when I had memorised it, I had to redraw the plan after which the original plan was destroyed and I went away to do the job. Sometimes, he would make a check to ensure that what I was doing was in order. As I was young and looked small in stature, Captain Hogino and the other Japanese soldiers called me *'Chi Sai'* engineer.

As an assistant to Ginny, my job was to ensure that there was an adequate supply of diesel oil to the generator. Every morning, I would start the generator at six o'clock. I could get up promptly every morning without a bugle call or an alarm clock. During the day, I kept an eye on the various meters to ensure everything ran smoothly and that there was no overload and was sometimes called to do some wiring jobs. I would switch off the generator promptly at ten o'clock at night after giving sufficient warning by turning the lights off and on for three times and allowing a lapse of fifteen minutes before finally turning it off.

The power house was our exclusive domain and no Japanese soldiers were allowed inside. If anyone did stray into it, I would

yell '*denkei*' (electricity) and in the majority of cases they retreated. However, on one occasion, a haughty Japanese soldier named Ban ignored my warning yell and began tinkering around with the generator. I reported the matter to Ginny who told him to stop meddling and leave the premises, whereupon Ban slapped him. Ginny became annoyed and immediately turned off the generator. It disrupted the electrical supply to the entire camp, including the workshop and the Japanese quarters.

Cracko soon came to investigate, but Ginny did not want to discuss the matter with him as Ban was his senior. A little later the *Socho* (Japanese Sergeant) came along. Ginny then told him of the intrusion by Ban and the slaps he received. The *Socho* became annoyed and sent for Ban. He was made to stand before the *Socho* and Ginny. The *Socho* asked him a few questions in Japanese all of which he answered *hai* (yes). The *Socho* then went up to him and gave him a few hard slaps across his face. At the same time he muttered a few Japanese words in a rough tone of voice. All the while Ban stood stiffly at attention. The *Socho* tendered his apology, and assured us that there would be no further intrusion into our domain.

The incident was considered closed. The generator was turned on and electricity was restored to the whole camp. Ginny regained his image. From that day onwards no Japanese soldier ever dared to set foot on the electric sub-station. We, the 'Three Kings', reigned supreme in our domain thereafter.

A few moments later, Ban returned carrying two bottles of *Asahi* beer. He offered them to Ginny as his peace offering. Ginny refused to accept it. Ban was very disappointed and walked away still clutching the beer bottles. Then Cracko came as an intermediary. After some discussion he managed to coax Ginny into accepting the peace offering in accordance with their so-called custom of appeasement.

The work given to the rest of the prisoners was generally easy. During the last days of the war, as part of the British scorched-earth policy, a large quantity of oil drums were destroyed or damaged. The job was not done thoroughly or was done in haste, as quite a significant number of drums were still intact. The

prisoners' task was therefore to search for undamaged drums, fill them up with oil and later transport them to the dockside for shipment overseas. The damaged drums were repaired by local welders who were brought in daily to our workshop. The repaired drums were also filled with oil and exported.

Some of our colleagues were involved in sorting out similar types of oil from among the damaged drums and filling them up in the reconditioned drums. The Japanese graded the oil as either *heaby* (heavy) or *lyto* (light). In this respect they sometimes sought the advice of Heyman, the oil chemist.

On one occasion, the Japanese found a type of oil which they could not identify and Heyman jokingly said that it was 'cat's piss'. *Ah so* ('I see'), said the Japanese soldier smilingly. He was pleased that he had discovered a new type of oil, and he wrote 'Katopisso oil' on the drum. We never heard where that oil drum went to, or what 'Katopisso oil' had been used for. It became a standing joke in the camp thereafter, to call any type of oil that could not be identified 'Katopisso'.

Allan, my elder brother, and Peter, a very good friend of Ginny's, continued to visit us in the camp regularly. They came separately by bicycles and at different times, and the majority of our colleagues took advantage of their free courier service. Besides bringing us food, they brought in many other things requested by our colleagues. The pair also gave us the latest local news such as atrocities perpetrated by the Japanese soldiers in the city and about the guerrilla activities in Malaya. They sometimes brought news about the war overseas. They had risked their lives to visit us as, although the soldiers of our camp were friendly, they had to pass through many checkpoints or road blocks before reaching our camp. The Japanese soldiers manning those points were really rough guys, who would not hesitate to bash anybody severely if they did not like them. Nevertheless, the two fearless angels were able to visit us all the time while we were at the Pasir Panjang Camp.

Towards the end of June, the *Socho* knowing that Ginny was an electrical engineer, asked him whether he could *shuri* (repair) his radio receiver as there was no sound. Ginny replied that he

could, but he needed a test meter and a soldering iron. They had some discussion and the *Socho* was given details of the type of test meter, brands available and the possible sources where they could be obtained. That evening, on his return from the city, *Socho* came over to the power house, carrying a medium-sized parcel. There was a broad grin on his face as he handed the parcel to Ginny. The parcel was opened and inside Ginny found a multi-test meter and an electric soldering iron complete with a coil of soldering lead.

The multi-test meter was very useful to pinpoint the fault quickly and rectify it. Ginny had promised the *Socho* that the set would be ready within a week. The set was repaired within a few hours but we kept the radio receiver to listen to the BBC news. We made sure that the set was not functioning whenever the *Socho* came along to enquire about his set.

It was really exciting to be able to listen to news from overseas especially when we heard a voice saying 'This is London calling. Here is the news', and listened eagerly and attentively. We received reports of the heavy RAF raids on Bremen, Hamburg and the Ruhr. There was also news about the gallant defence of El Alamein in North Africa by British forces led by General Auchinleck.

Before our deadline to return the *Socho's* radio set expired, we received another one to repair. When *Socho's* set was returned to him, he was very pleased and soon Ginny became the unofficial repairer of radio receivers not only for the Japanese soldiers of our camp, but also for their friends in other units. Ginny was always rewarded with *Asahi* beer, cigarettes and biscuits which were shared with Eddie and myself.

As there was a likelihood of having a constant stream of radio receivers to be repaired, Ginny decided that it would be a good idea if we were to listen regularly to the news and prepare an illicit news bulletin for the camp. We therefore always ensured that we had one radio receiver in hand before we returned a set that had been repaired. If a second set was not forthcoming then the set which we held for repair would not be returned. Our ever-ready excuse would be that the fault was complicated. We were

therefore able to receive the news from the BBC every night for almost six months.

I recorded the news in a mixture of Pitman's shorthand and abbreviated words. After I had transcribed what I had taken down, Ginny would check to ensure that my reporting was correct. Later we prepared the news bulletin. This was handed to Major Taylor for discreet circulation in the camp every morning. The daily illicit news bulletin was a regular feature and become an important part of the life in camp. It was a real morale booster for us all.

One day when the news bulletin did not arrive in time, our colleagues used every excuse to delay their departure for work. When the news was exceptionally good, the camp would be given advance notice by an agreed signal. The electric lights would be turned off and on twice. Our colleagues would cheer and clap their hands and the Japanese thought that they were happy that the electric lights did not go out completely.

There was only one occasion when we did not have a radio receiver to hear the news. We were expecting some good news from Europe as well as from the Pacific. Our colleagues in the camp were informed of the possibility that there would be no news bulletin the next day. They were disappointed and so were we, our disappointment growing greater as each hour passed by. We were hoping against hope that a radio receiver would be brought in for repairs. It never came.

Late that afternoon, Ginny had a brain-wave. He told me of his plans. I agreed with him that it sounded so easy and was fail proof. We waited until the *Socho* returned to his quarters before we put our plan into operation. Ginny switched off the electricity supply to the Japanese soldiers' quarters, then coolly awaited the outcome.

A little later, we saw the *Socho's* batman coming towards us. The batman was a silly and sleepy-looking soldier whom we nicknamed Dopey. As he approached us, Ginny had a wide grin on his broad face as he knew his plan was working. Dopey told us that the *Socho* was feeling *art sui* (hot) as the ceiling fan had suddenly stopped functioning.

Ginny and myself followed Dopey to the *Socho* quarters where seated Japanese-style on the floor beside a table, was the *Socho*. He was bare-bodied and was trying to cool himself furiously with a hand fan. He greeted us and asked Ginny whether the fault could be repaired quickly. He said the fan stopped suddenly.

Ginny looked at the fan and the fan's regulator. He also checked the electrical distribution board, looking for a non-existent blown fuse. He then told the *Socho* of the various possible faults and the conversation dragged on. Ginny was purposely distracting him to allow me time to do the mischief. In accordance with our plan, I would quickly remove one valve from the *Socho's* radio set and hide it in my pocket. Now and again Ginny looked at my direction to see how I was progressing, waiting for a thumbs-up sign. He then told the Socho that he would fetch the multi-test meter which would quickly trace the fault. We knew there was no fault, nevertheless, we had to do some fault-finding exercise. Later the electricity supply was restored and the *Socho* was happy that the fan was functioning again.

That evening, Dopey brought us the *Socho's* radio set. He was in tears and his face was red. Evidently he had been blamed for the radio set going out of order and had received a few slaps. Dopey admitted that he had sometimes meddled with the *Socho* radio set, but for the whole of that week he had never touched the set. We sympathised with him and assured him that we would try to repair the radio as quickly as possible. The *Socho* was later told that a faulty valve in the radio set had caused the failure of the electrical supply, and the valve needed to be replaced.

Poor Dopey had the blame and the slaps but we had the 'defective' radio set for our purpose. Our plan had been successful. When the usual time came to listen to the BBC, the stolen valve was reinstated into its rightful place. We were excited to hear 'This is London calling. Here is the news.' The best bit of news we received that evening was about the now famous Battle of Midway which was the turning point in favour of the Allies in the Pacific theatre of war. The agreed signal was given to the camp. Next morning, the eagerly awaited news bulletin was delivered to the camp. Our reputation for delivering the bulletin

on time and all the time had been maintained. After a few days, another defective set arrived for repair, and the *Socho's* set was then returned to him. Of course, he had to pay for the cost of the valve we had 'replaced'.

One afternoon Captain Hogino sent for me. He had just returned from the city and was carrying a table lamp and a medium-sized box. I was asked to connect the table lamp to the power outlet. While I was busy with the job, I saw him remove a pair of headphones from the box and toy with it. When I had completed the job, I switched on the lamp to show Captain Hogino that it was in order. He smiled and nodded his head, then he came forward to tap my shoulder. Still smiling, he said, '*Chi Sai*, your 'rahdeo' sound is 'velly' loud. You better use this.' He handed me the pair of headphones. '*Arigato* (thank you) Captain Hogino,' I said, as I took the headphones. There was no sign of nervousness or happiness on my poker face as I walked away. Captain Hogino kept smiling. I did not know whether it was a genuine or sarcastic smile.

Evidently, Captain Hogino knew that we were listening to the radio while we did the repairs. However, I do not think he was aware that we were specifically listening to the news about the war from the BBC and preparing of the news bulletin, otherwise he would not have allowed his kindness to override his obligation to report the matter to the *kempei tai* (the dreaded Japanese military police). They were noted for their brutality and showed no mercy to those who had the misfortune of being interrogated by them.

Our involvement with the radio receivers was not limited to repairing them or listening to the BBC news. On one occasion, we even managed to sell a radio receiver to the *Socho*. It happened when his own set began to break down frequently and he wanted to get another set. So he turned to Ginny for help. Ginny was discreetly asked to find a good second-hand set at a reasonable price. Nothing was impossible with Ginny, but at the same time, he did not want to be trapped. After all, we were prisoners-of-war of the Japanese. They could easily frame us and cause us to be executed.

We discussed the matter among ourselves and felt that it was

quite a risky business. A few days later, the *Socho* again asked Ginny whether he had made any progress in the matter. He appeared to be in a genuine need of a replacement set. We decided to take the risk and I asked Ginny where he was going to get the set. He laughingly replied that it would come from Heaven. He then unfolded his plan of action. It was quite simple, but I was flabbergasted and scared, especially when I learnt that I was to be the star performer. Ginny said that as I could freely wander around the camp, I just had to walk into Captain Hogino's bungalow and remove one of his radio sets. Later, the set could be sold to the *Socho*.

I gave the matter much thought and felt that even if I was not directly involved, I would still be implicated if things went wrong, since the three of us were the staff of the electric sub-station and always worked together. So I finally decided to go along with the scheme. On the eve of the day the plan was to be implemented, Ginny and myself went into Captain Hogino's bungalow on the pretext of checking the electrical installation. We were in fact assessing the situation and choosing the radio set which we wanted to acquire. We found that Captain Hogino had five radio sets in his bungalow. It was possible that he too had done some scrounging. We thought it was unlikely that he would miss any set, as he was away from the bungalow for most of the time during the day and at night. That afternoon nobody had noticed us going into or coming out of the bungalow. We considered that it would be best to carry out our operation at about the same time on the following day.

When the time came for me to steal the radio set, I became panicky. Ginny assured me that nothing could go wrong. I should be calm and not to show any signs of nervousness. If Captain Hogino's batman saw me carrying out the radio I was just to tell him '*shuri*'. Later, we would return the radio set, and we would make sure the batman saw the radio being returned. Luck was on our side. Everything went according to our plan. Ginny made a quick check of the radio set. It was in good order, and he quickly hid it under his bunk. We kept the set, for a few days, in case Captain Hogino discovered one of his radio sets was missing. If

so, we would return it just as mysteriously as we had removed it.

About a week later, the *Socho* appeared to be in a cheerful mood. He had just seen off a glamorous-looking 'comfort girl' wearing a pretty flowing pink silk dress. Cracko told us that she was a Korean. In fact she was an official prostitute who was known as 'comfort girl'. One of those unfortunate young girls from various Japanese-occupied countries, she had either been recruited or forced to join the Japanese army for the purpose of providing sexual services for the soldiers, usually in a country other than their own to prevent them from escaping. A group of 'comfort girls' were accommodated in a few seaside bungalows along Pasir Panjang Road, not far away from our camp.

When the *Socho* was free, Ginny approached him and began conversing in Japanese. He was nodding his head most of the time. He then came to our quarters to test the set. He was pleased with the sound and appearance of the compact set. The deal was clinched and fifty dollars changed hands in a twinkle of an eye. Later, Dopey then came to collect the radio set, bringing presents from the *Socho* – two large bottles of beer for Ginny and Eddie and some Japanese fancy biscuits for *Chi Sai*. A few days later, the radio set again changed hands. The *Socho* gave it away as a present to his favourite Korean 'comfort girl'. We were pleased with the development, for if Captain Hogino discovered that one of his sets was missing, it was nowhere to be found within the camp.

We again hoodwinked the Japanese soldiers on another occasion. They brought a live pig into the camp and were delighted with their catch, having stolen it from a nearby Chinese-owned farm. They had intended to have it slaughtered and roasted. In this respect, they had in mind Maxi, Captain Hogino's cook, who has been a chef in pre-war days and had been appointed as cook for Captain Hogino on Ginny's recommendation. The Japanese soldiers asked him to slaughter the pig and have it roasted for that evening's dinner.

Ginny's mind worked fast. He told Maxi to try to stall the slaughtering of the pig so that we could try to sell it back to the farmer. Maxi, who was used to putting on airs, looked at the pig with a critical eye and shook his head. He said the pig was not fit

for the table. It was too old for roasting as a suckling pig but was too lean for immediate slaughter. He suggested that the pig be fattened up for a few weeks after which it would be ready for the table. The Japanese soldiers agreed reluctantly to his suggestion and a rough pig pen was quickly built. Maxi was given the daily task of feeding the pig.

Meanwhile, we managed to contact the farmer who agreed to purchase the pig in a fortnight's time. It was also agreed that payment would be made before the pig was delivered. On the appointed day of the sale, the farmer came and paid us $200. He was then asked to wait in the secondary jungle adjacent to our camp until we had opened the pig pen and chased it towards him. He managed to lasso the pig and lead it away. We then raised the alarm.

A few Japanese soldiers ran out of their quarters holding their rifles. They joined us in the abortive pig chase going in the opposite direction. They kept shooting at the thick undergrowth and bushes. After a while we gave up the chase and returned to the camp. The Japanese were disappointed to lose the pig. Maxi was happy that he did not have to 'murder a pig' and the four of us were happy to share the proceeds of the sale.

The following Sunday, the Japanese soldiers brought back another pig which they had stolen from the same farmer. They contended that like a homing pigeon, the pig would surely return to familiar surroundings. By the time the pig reached the camp, he was in a very bad mood, and was baring his teeth. We all stood around the truck not knowing how to manhandle the pig or to get him out of the truck. The Japanese soldiers decided that the pig should be slaughtered immediately, but nobody was brave enough to catch hold of the pig. When the rear barrier of the truck was lowered, the pig jumped down and began chasing everybody around. It was fun running around to avoid being bitten by it. Meanwhile, the Japanese soldiers began discussing the best means of killing the pig. They decided to club its head but without success. They finally decided to kill the pig with their bayonets. They thought it was fun to stab the pig as it ran around squealing and scattering his blood on the pearl-white sand. A

little later, the pig lay dead and the Japanese cooks dragged the carcass to their kitchen. That night we had a sizeable chunk of roast pork for dinner.

On 30 August 1941, the Japanese administration ordered all prisoners-of-war to sign an undertaking not to attempt to escape. The declaration read as follows:

> 'I the undersigned hereby swear on my honour, that I will not under any circumstances, attempt to escape.'

Our own administration forbade us to sign the form as it contravened the Geneva Convention which permitted prisoners-of-war to escape. Then followed the 'Selarang Squeeze' when about 20,000 prisoners-of-war still living in the Changi Camp were cramped into the open parade ground of the Selarang Barracks. They were exposed to the elements day and night, and were without any toilet facilities.

To drive home their determination to force the prisoners to sign the declaration, the Japanese picked at random some prisoners and shot them. The number of prisoners that were shot on that day reflected the number of days the prisoners resisted their order. On 4 September our administration advised us to sign the declaration under duress to avoid further loss of lives.

The good days in the Pasir Panjang Camp passed so quickly that my twenty-first birthday went unnoticed. It was like any other day. I did not even tell Ginny or Eddie about it. I just said a silent prayer for my well-being and ultimate release. To the Japanese I was still called '*Chi Sai*'.

With Christmas fast approaching we had planned to have a *makan besar* (a Malay word for 'big feast'). We were expecting some goodies from home and we had also been saving some of the beer we had been receiving from the soldiers. Alas, 'what man proposes, God disposes'. We were disappointed. We were told that we would be returning to Changi Camp on 15 December 1942.

A few days before our departure to Changi, we made a further

raid on Captain Hogino's bungalow and managed to remove another radio receiver. We had intended to smuggle the set into the Changi Camp so that we could continue the production of the illicit news bulletin. Our plan would have succeeded had it not been for heaven's intervention and Maxi's unco-operative attitude. He was a temperamental, stubborn and short-tempered man.

On the day of our departure the skies were grey and rain clouds began to appear. We had hoped that the wind from the south-west would blow the clouds away. The sun still did not appear as we began to load all our belongings, including the radio receiver, on to the utility truck. Then there was a slight drizzle, Ginny quickly grabbed a ground-sheet which was lying close by on the ground and covered the radio receiver with it.

The four of us then stood around the truck waiting for further instructions. Then the heavens opened up. The drizzle became heavier. It began to rain. Maxi looked around for his ground-sheet. He became annoyed when he found that it was being used to cover our belongings on the truck. He tried to retrieve it but Ginny stopped him. He whispered into Maxi's ear that we had hidden a radio receiver under it. Ginny even offered him the use of his own ground-sheet. It was all in vain. Maxi just shrugged his shoulders and insisted on having his own and, in his rage, he pulled it away. The radio receiver was exposed to the shocked gaze of the Japanese soldiers around us.

Captain Hogino became very annoyed that we were attempting to smuggle a radio receiver into the Changi Camp. That was the first time I saw how angry he could be. In a loud and rough voice, he rambled off a tirade in Japanese. One particular word which caught my ear and frightened the wits out of me was the mention of *kempei tai*. Ginny understood that Captain Hogino intended to hand the three of us over to the *kempei tai* for interrogation. The vision of brutal treatment and possible execution began to cross my mind. Ginny looked very cool and was quick to react.

At first Ginny tried to explain to Captain Hogino that the set had been given to him for repair and he had inadvertently loaded it on to the truck. Captain Hogino was not convinced and continued a loud tirade in Japanese. He again mentioned the

kempei tai. Before he really became nasty, Ginny played his trump card. He told Captain Hogino that if he was sent to the *kempei tai*, under interrogation and torture he would confess that the radio set was given to him by Captain Hogino. It was because the set had been seen by his subordinates, that Captain Hogino decided not to report the matter and so save his skin.

Captain Hogino was temporarily shocked. On regaining his composure, he said that it was unlikely the *kempei tai* would believe Ginny's story. Then Ginny coolly turned the set around to show Captain Hogino the incriminating evidence. There was his personal stamp on a bamboo tag attached to the frame of the radio set. There was also his name and number on a metal plate rivetted to the chassis of the radio set.

Captain Hogino knew he was beaten, but he remained cool and silent. He muttered something in Japanese while giving the set a closer examination. Then he relented. Turning to Ginny, he said, 'I no tell *kempei tai*, but I must slap you, Okay?' I thought that it was a light punishment for our crime. The three of us stood at attention before him. He looked at us very sternly. Reluctantly, he gave us several slaps across our faces. Maxi just looked on without remorse. Having punished us, Captain Hogino walked away briskly. Cracko then quickly removed the radio receiver from the truck and carried it to Captain Hogino's bungalow. I was sorry that our attempt to smuggle the set had failed. What was more irritating was that the stubborn and selfish attitude of our colleague was responsible for that failed attempt.

A few moments later it was time to say goodbye to the Pasir Panjang Camp and return to Changi. Cracko told Ginny to take the wheel and the rest of us jumped on to the back of the utility truck. I sat beside Eddie while Maxi sat opposite. Eddie sat in cold silence and was staring at Maxi all the while. Inwardly, his temper was building up. Maxi was sullen, possibly regretting his action. I was amused watching their attitudes. Cracko, who was to accompany us to Changi, sat beside Ginny. Despite the attempted smuggling incident, he was still smiling and friendly. During the journey he teased Ginny. Both of them seemed to be enjoying the jokes and were laughing heartily.

Just as the truck began to move, Captain Hogino reappeared and stopped the truck. He carried a brown paper bag. Going up to Ginny, he said: 'So solly I slap you.' He then handed Ginny the paper bag. Ginny said, '*Arigato*, Captain Hogino.' He then handed the bag to me through the rear window of the driver's cabin. I peeped inside the bag. It contained a bottle of *sake* (Japanese rice wine), some American cigarettes and some nice Morigiana biscuits. It was either a Christmas hamper or his peace offering for the slaps he had given us.

As our truck moved out of the camp to join the convoy of lorries carrying the other prisoners and which was lined up at Pasir Panjang Road, Captain Hogino and the other Japanese soldiers stood at the gate. They all were smiling as they waved us goodbye. We were sorry to leave them as our association with them had been wholly amicable and was only marred by our unsuccessful attempt to smuggle out a stolen radio receiver. However, we took back with us many pleasant memories of those happy Sundays with the church parades and the visits from relatives and friends who brought us the many good things which we needed. We remembered the fun we had in the boxing ring, especially with our Japanese opponents. Above all, we would always remember with amusement our exploits in the camp, especially those when we hoodwinked the Japanese.

After the war, both Ginny and myself each received a letter of appreciation from Major Taylor stating that he was extremely pleased with the illicit news bulletins which we produced at the risk of our lives. He felt that our efforts should receive some recognition and he had therefore made a strong recommendation to the Officer Commanding of the Straits Settlements Volunteer Corps for an appropriate award to be given to us. The award never materialised, but we later learnt that Major Taylor was awarded an OBE.

I was not disappointed, but was satisfied that at least someone appreciated our efforts and above all, grateful to have survived the incarceration and able to begin a new life.

CHAPTER 8

Gateway To India

By the spring of 1942, the Japanese forces had conquered a great part of the eastern and south-eastern regions of Asia. They were then battling for the conquest of Burma and victory seemed within their grasp. Encouraged by quick success in the various campaigns in South-East Asia, the Japanese decided to venture westwards. They began to contemplate the conquest of British India although initially, they did not include India in their plan for the proposed Greater Co-Prosperity Sphere.The Japanese propaganda media had begun to boast that the Japanese army were already on the road to Delhi.

With the help of a former Indian leader, Chandra Bose, the Japanese administration had established the pseudo-Indian National Army in *Syonan* (occupied Singapore). Quite a number of former British Indian soldiers, who were captured when the Japanese overran Singapore, were coerced into joining the Japanese-sponsored Indian National Army, but the Japanese did not succeed in getting any Gurkha soldier to do so. Many Indian women also joined up and the Rani of Jhansi Regiment was formed. The Japanese had hoped that the Indian National Army would be useful to them when they invaded British India.

The Japanese armies had won many impressive battles from Manchuria down to the Malay Archipelago and the East Indies. Their soldiers were not battle weary but rather battle hardened. They were eager to help their government achieve their ambition and expand their territorial boundaries. They were diehards who

were prepared to die for their country and their Emperor, who all Japanese considered as being the Son of Heaven.

The ambitious Japanese government was obsessed by their desire of creating a Greater Co-Prosperity Sphere incorporating the vast majority of land of the Asian continent. In March 1942, they decided to make plans for the invasion of India. The dry season of 1943-1944 was considered as the most appropriate time for such a venture.

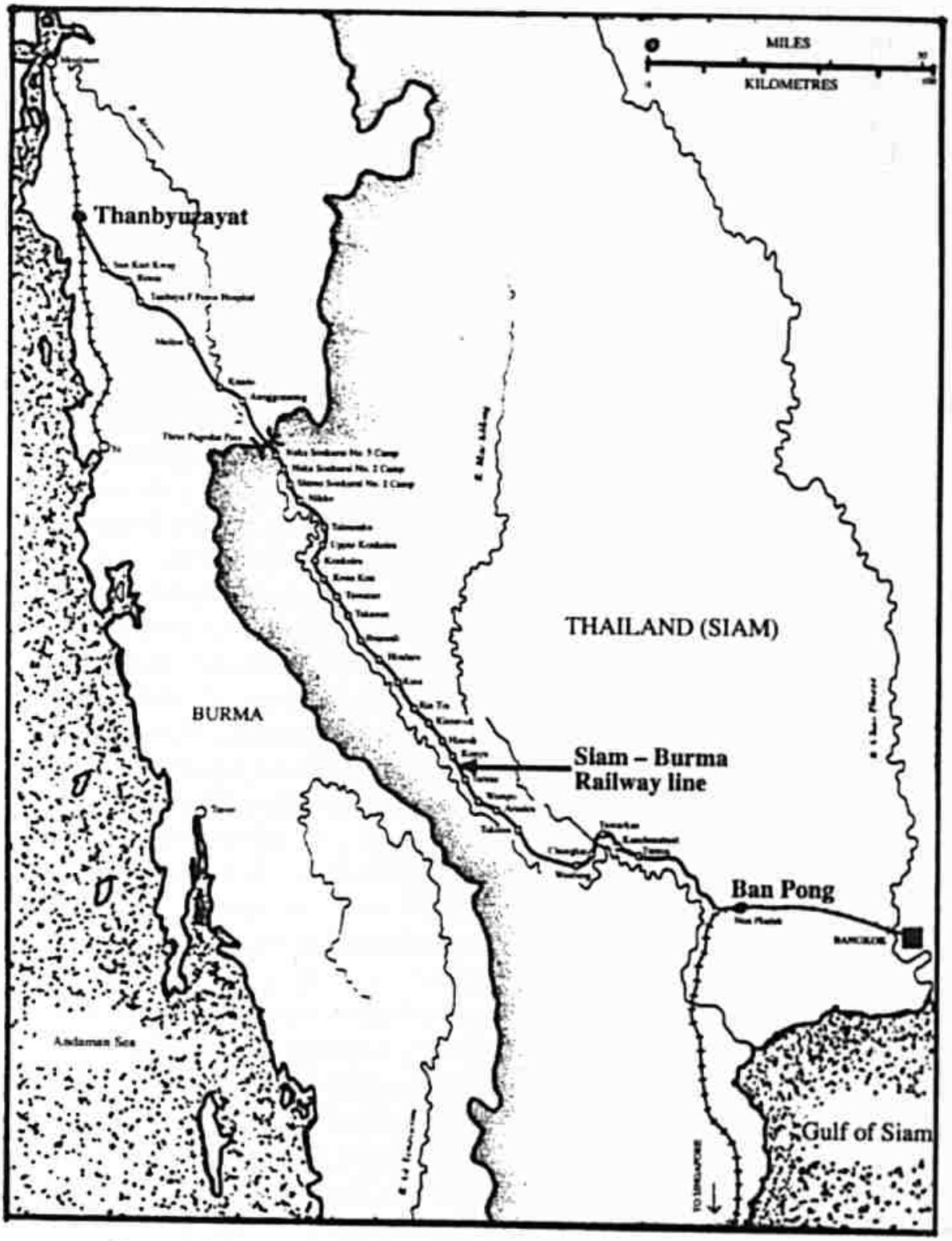
The Japanese enjoyed the superiority of the air in the region, but movement of their troops and supplies from the Gulf of Siam through the Straits of Malacca into the Indian Ocean was becoming increasingly vulnerable. The presence of Allied submarines lurking in the Straits of Malacca was taking a heavy toll of Japanese shipping. An alternative overland route had to be found, and be found quickly, as part of their plan for the invasion of India.

At that time, the Japanese controlled the railway system from Manchuria, through China, Indo-China, Siam and to Singapore. They also controlled the railway system in Burma, but there was no link between Siam and Burma. Such a link would not only improve the communication between all the countries they occupied, but would also provide a much needed supply route for their armies in Burma. Above all, they would have achieved their most important objective of opening the gateway to India.

In June 1942, Emperor Hirohito ordered the construction of a 415-kilometre, single-line metre-gauge railway line to link Ban Pong in southern Siam to Thanbyzayat on the north-east of Burma. The work was to be completed by the end of 1943 at the latest. It was a royal command that had to be obeyed irrespective of cost.

The route of the proposed railway line followed an old British survey plan which was carried out just before the end of the nineteenth century. That project was abandoned due to the many difficulties envisaged and the fact that several diseases were known to be endemic throughout the area.

There was no doubt that several thousand human lives would have been lost if the Siamese Government had proceeded with



Route of the Siam-Burma Railway commonly known as the Death Railway

the project. Siam was predominantly a Buddhist country. Those who professed Buddhism considered life as sacred whether it be human, animal or bird.

On the other hand, the Japanese were not concerned with loss of human life so long as they could achieve something they sought. The completion of a railway to link Siam with Burma would provide the vital link they so badly needed for supplying and reinforcing their army in Burma and open the gateway to India.

The Japanese government knew they had one big asset in their hands. It was the large number of hapless slaves of their Emperor, which was what all prisoners-of-war were considered to be. They were there in abundance in the South East Asian region which they had already conquered.

So in order to expedite the construction of the railway line, the Japanese government decided to employ Allied prisoners-of-war from Singapore and Java. Their purpose in employing prisoners was twofold. Firstly, they had cheap labour. The prisoners-of-war were paid a daily 'wage' of twenty-five cents in the worthless currency issued by the Japanese government in the territories they occupied. Those who fell ill received no wages. Secondly, as a high death rate was inevitable, then the number of prisoners-of-war to be looked after by them would be greatly reduced.

It was estimated that several thousand prisoners-of-war would be required for the project. They would be sent to Burma and Siam in several groups, so as not to alert the outside world to their evil intentions. The prisoners-of-war would be transported either by ship or overland by train.

In order to employ Allied prisoners-of-war for the dreadful task they had in mind and to avoid the possibility of objections from the British and Australian Governments and the International Red Cross, the Japanese government resorted to repeating endless lies. All the time they maintained that the prisoners-of-war were not being sent out on working parties. They attributed the need of moving the prisoners to the growing shortage of food in Singapore and the over-concentration of prisoners-of-war in the Changi Camp.

Emphasis was also placed on the change for a better environment. The Japanese administration declared that the prisoners-of-war were being taken to a 'hill resort' or 'rest camp' up north. There the environment was better than that prevailing in Singapore: it was much healthier and the weather was excellent. They also lied that the food there was plentiful. In their attempt to move as many prisoners as possible, they even encouraged men who were sick, but not too serious to go to the 'hill resort'. They lied that the sick men would be able to convalesce. The Japanese further promised that, although some work could be expected, it would only be some light work related to the needs of the camp.

The Japanese government took the first positive step to put their evil scheme into operation in mid 1942, when the first batch of three thousand Australian prisoners-of-war were sent from Changi on a journey to the promised 'hill resort'. At the time of their departure the actual destination was not disclosed. Even while they were away, the Japanese administration did not give any information on their whereabouts or how they were being employed. Eventually, about sixty thousand Allied prisoners-of-war from Singapore and Java were engaged on the construction of the infamous Siam-Burma Railway. In view of the high death rate, it was later known as the 'Death Railway'.

RIGHT. Members of the 'D' (Eurasian) Company of the Singapore Volunteer Corps attending a church parade at St Joseph's church in June 1938. The Corporal standing nearest the camera is the author's father. P.o.W's from the Bukit Timah Camp went to the same church during April and May 1942, and it was there that the author met his future wife.

BELOW. On 30 August 1942, more than 20,000 P.o.Ws remaining in Changi were squeezed into the Selarang Barracks and Square when they refused to sign an undertaking not to escape. They signed under duress on 4 September 1942. The photograph shows the crowded Square during what became known as the 'SELARANG SQUEEZE'

ABOVE. The River Kwai at Kanchanaburi. It is a long river originating from the mountains beyond Songkurai.

LEFT. The hills beyond Kanchanaburi over which P.o.Ws. had traversed during their long march from Ban Pong to the Songkurai 'hill resort', in May 1943.

ABOVE. The notorious 'DEATH RAILWAY' at Chong Kai in Thailand. The gap in the rocky hill known as the 'Hell Fire Pass' was carved out by Po.W.s using only the most primitive implements. The Allied War Cemetary nearby contains the graves of 1,750 Po.W.s. BELOW. Tam Krasaer in Thailand. This illustrates the harshness of the terrain and the difficulties the Po.W.s faced when track laying, bridge building and cutting through rock without the benefit of proper equipment.

ABOVE. The improvised locomotive used on the 'DEATH RAILWAY'. It was of the type used to convey survivors of the Songkurai camp back to Kanburi in November 1943. LEFT. The locomotive later used to transport troops, military supplies and horses to the Japanese Army in Burma. Both locomotives are now in the open-air museum near the Japanese Monument in Kanchanaburi.

ABOVE The Memorial in the Allied War Cemetery in Kanchanaburi, Thailand. There are 6,972 Allied P.o.W. graves in the cemetery.

BELOW The main gate and high perimeter wall of Changi Prison.

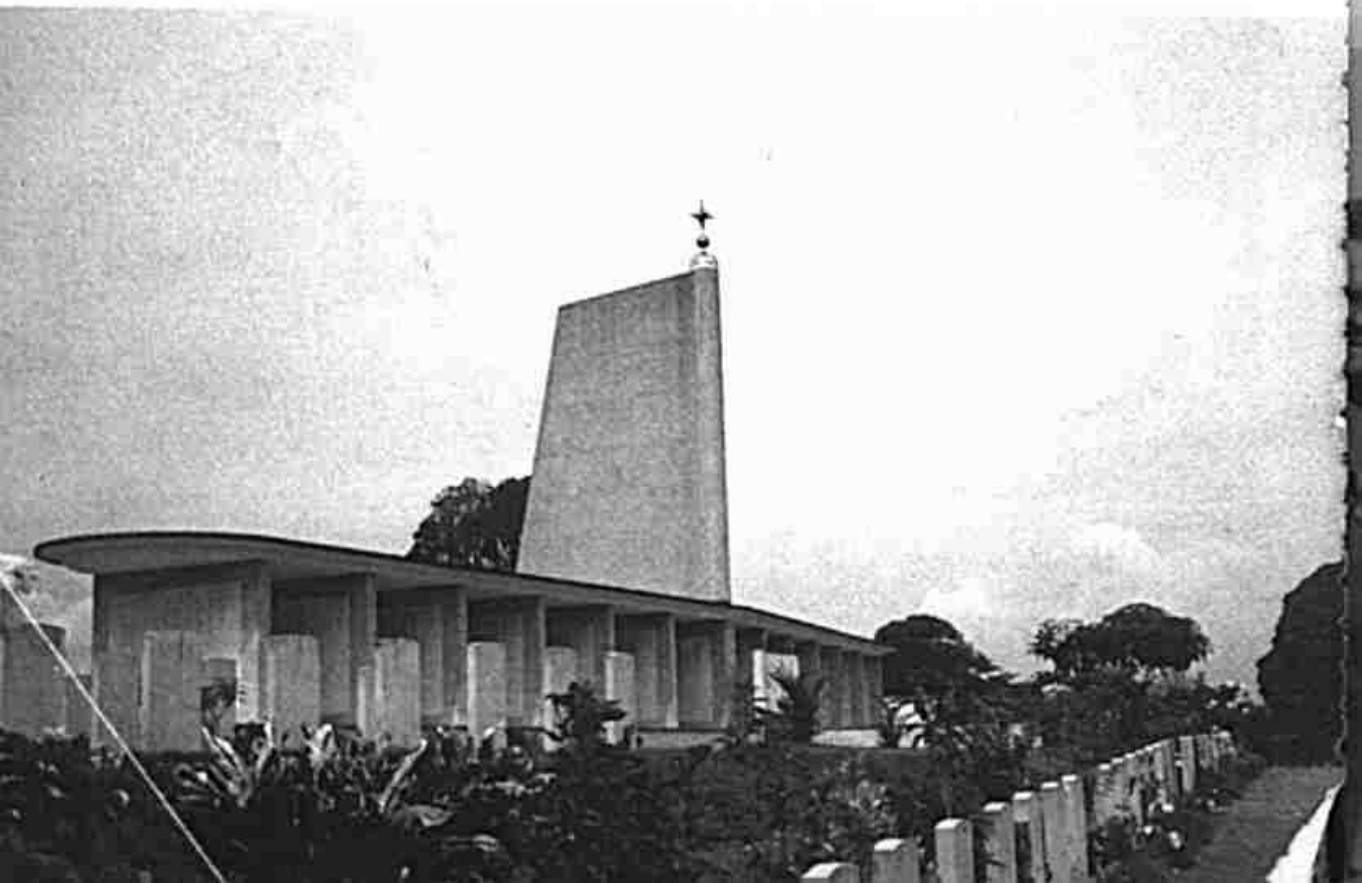
LEFT The author shows the art of climbing a tall swaying coconut tree. It looks easy but is dangerous, as one slip could result in multiple bone fracture or even death.

BELOW Religion has always been the source of inspiration and hope for the Allied prisoners-of-war during their captivity, and invariably, they found solace in a Chapel. This photograph shows a replica of the Changi Prison Chapel which was erected outside the Changi Prison Museum as a memorial to the Allied prisoners-of-war in Singapore.

ABOVE. Allied PoWs celebrate their liberation from Changi Gaol, Singapore. (Photo: Courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London)

RIGHT. Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, Supreme Allied Commander, South East Asia, accepting the surrender of the Japanese Forces, on the steps of the Municipal Building, Singapore, before a large crowd on the *Padang* (Civic Green) on 12 September 1945.

ABOVE. Japanese General Itagaki signing the Surrender Document before Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, Supreme Commander, South East Asia, in the Council Chamber of the Municipal Building, Singapore on 12 September 1945. (Photo. Courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London). BELOW. Allied War Memorial and Cemetery at Kranji, Singapore.



ABOVE. Memorial Service at the Kranji War Cemetery, Singapore. The British Governor of Singapore (with plumes on helmet), is seen reading the names of the dead service personnel and P.o.Ws. inscribed on the walls of the memorial. BELOW. H.R.H. Prince Phillip, Duke of Edinburgh chatting with ex-servicemen who formed the Guard of Honour, when he visited the Kranji War Cemetery in 1964. On the extreme left is Sir William Goode, the last British Governor of colonial Singapore, and the first Yang di-Pertuan Negara (Head of State) of the new Republic of Singapore. Sir William was also an ex-volunteer and ex-P.o.W. who had worked on the Siam-Burma Railway (Death Railway).

ABOVE. The author and Ginny his 'P.o.W. Godfather', on a happier occasion celebrating New Year's Eve 1958 at the Victoria Memorial Hall, Singapore. (left to right). David Ginsberg (Ginny), Mrs Ginsberg, the author and his wife. BELOW LEFT. The author beside his cousin's grave in the Allied War Cemetery in Kanchanaburi, Thailand. BELOW RIGHT. The author and Mr Downes, another survivor of the 'DEATH RAILWAY' together with their spouses in England, 1993.

CHAPTER 9

Journey Into The Unknown

After quite an enjoyable life in the Bukit Timah and Pasir Panjang Camps, the life in Changi seemed very monotonous. We had nothing to do most of the time and spent the time daydreaming of our liberation. Nevertheless, we had to adjust ourselves to the Changi way of life once again.

The first anniversary of the Fall of Singapore passed unnoticed. Nobody thought of it or even mentioned it. Perhaps by then it had already been lost in the realms of history. In actual fact, the first year had gone by ever so quickly and most of us did not fare too badly in our first year as prisoners-of-war.

Now and again we recalled those happy days we spent at the Bukit Timah and Pasir Panjang Camps. The tales of our escapades never failed to amuse us. It was really a morale booster. In my solitude, I often wondered how much longer I would have to remain in captivity. I felt that my young life was being wasted, but all I could do was to wait and hope. Every new day became another day of endless waiting and hoping.

The population in the Changi Camp was dwindling as more and more men were sent away. By March 1943, eight thousand British and Australian prisoners-of-war from Changi had already gone to unknown destinations. The whereabouts and the type of work they were doing remained a complete mystery to our own administration.

Early in April 1943, the Japanese administration wanted a further seven thousand prisoners to be sent away from Changi. This batch was known as 'F' Force. It was rumoured that this force would be moved overland, possibly by train. Again, the Japanese would not disclose either the destination or the type of work the prisoners would be expected to do. This gave rise to much speculation.

The Japanese always maintained their usual lie that the force was not a working party but that some light work could be expected within the new camp. They claimed that the proposed movement of prisoners was dictated by the growing shortage of food in Singapore. To add substance to the alleged food shortage, they created an artificial food shortage by progressively reducing the supply of rations to the Changi Camp.

Once again the Japanese lied that the prisoners were being taken to a 'hill resort' or 'rest camp' up in the north. There, the environment was healthy, the weather was excellent and the food was plentiful. Even the sick who were not too serious were encouraged to go since they would be able to convalesce.

We interpreted the 'light work' as being the usual chores that were done in Changi. We expected such work to be the general cleaning of the camp, working in the cookhouse and doing some vegetable gardening as necessary.

The Japanese also assured our prisoner-of-war administration that there would be no marching and that transport would always be provided for the movement of all the prisoners from one place to another.

In the absence of firm information about the so-called 'hill resort in the north', speculation was rife. It covered every possible Malayan hill station such as Fraser's Hill, Cameron Highlands and the Penang Hill. Some even went further afield and thought of Chiengmai in northern Siam. As days went by, we drew a blank, and the Japanese never even gave a hint of the resort's whereabouts.

Ginny, who had an uncanny sixth sense, predicted that the prisoners were being sent to Siam. He envisaged that the so-called 'hill resort' would most likely be a camp in the mountainous

jungle. Quite a number of our fellow prisoners thought Ginny was exaggerating and they did not agree with him. The many arguments that followed on this subject usually ended with Ginny telling them: 'Just wait and see.' Ginny had always emphasised that life over there was definitely going to be extremely difficult. Conditions were primitive. He knew what he was talking about as, in the pre-war days, he had occasionally been to Siam on business. Ginny maintained that if his hunch was correct; he did not think the Japanese were telling the truth. He was almost certain that the prisoners were going to a hell rather than a hill resort. Ginny strongly advised me to keep out of the force and he did all he could to coerce the Regimental Sergeant Major not to include my name on the list of volunteers to go with the force. For a while I was happy that he succeeded in his attempt to keep me out.

The majority of my Eurasian colleagues were annoyed that I had taken the advice of a white man. They told me that all of the Eurasians should stick together, I suppose like birds of the same feather. We could help one another in time of need. They promised me that since Eddie would not be going, because he was physically unfit, they would look after me. I was not prepared to change my mind. They became more angry and taunted me.

As the departure day, or more appropriately doomsday, came nearer, there were mixed feelings among those who were going. Some were happy with the chance of seeing a new country. Others, who had heard what Ginny had said and having had the time to ponder over it, became worried. They realised that they were heading for trouble. Somehow fate had destined that I should go on the journey to the unknown. Someone who was going with 'F' Force became very sick and could not travel. Someone else had to replace him. There was no other suitable replacement, so I was drafted into the force.

When Ginny learnt of the matter, he became very annoyed. He had a long argument with the Regimental Sergeant Major who insisted that he could not find a suitable replacement. All the other remaining volunteers were old men or were medically unfit to go. There was nothing he could do as the quota of volunteers

had to be met. In his rage, Ginny told the Regimental Sergeant Major: 'If my Sonny Boy doesn't come back alive, don't you ever dare come near me.'

I was resigned to the fact that I had to go but at the same time I became worried. Quite often at night, I dreamt of working in the jungle with hideous-looking people around me, and such dreams kept haunting me. When I was awake, I began to get nervous. Then I would brace myself up and let fate decide my destiny. All I could do was to hope for the best. After that fateful day, when I was drafted into the force, the days seemed to pass by quickly and, before long, the departure day came. On the previous night, Ginny spent much time with me, trying to comfort me he best he could. He assured me that everything would be all right. He kept telling me repeatedly not to worry too much. That made me all the more nervous, as I really did not know what to expect at the end of the unknown journey.

At the break of dawn on the morning of 1 May 1943 we left the 'vicarage', which had been our living quarters since our return from the Pasir Panjang Camp.It was still dark as we walked down the hill towards Changi village. The air was a bit chilly at that time of the morning but worse still, it was not the weather but fear that gave me a greater chill. In addition to our belongings, each of us carried something for communal use such as cooking pots, utensils and containers. This made our pack much more cumbersome and heavier. Ginny and Eddie, and the rest of the volunteers who were staying behind, accompanied us to Changi village to send us off. They wanted to give us some moral support before we embarked on our journey to the unknown.

There was a convoy of military trucks waiting for us when we arrived at Changi village. The trucks were driven by Japanese soldiers. There were also a number of armed Japanese soldiers who I presumed would be accompanying us to wherever we were going. There was still time for a last minute chat with my two godfathers. I could see that Ginny was upset that I was going. When the time came for us to board the trucks both Ginny and Eddie embraced me. As I took leave of them, tears streamed down my cheeks. Ginny again put his reassuring arm around me

and assured me that all would be well. He then gave me a final farewell hug and said, 'God be with you always.'

We were counted twice and what we carried was searched. We then boarded the truck for the first leg of our journey to the unknown. For the majority of the group, it was to be a journey of no return. As our trucks moved away, our colleagues waved us goodbye and wished us good luck. They stood there for some time, waving at us until the tail lights of our trucks disappeared from view.

Those remaining behind then slowly made their way back to the Vicarage in silence. Then Ginny turned round to Eddie and said: 'I have a strange feeling that we may not see Sonny again, but let us pray and hope that he will return safely.'

The morning was cool as the convoy of trucks carrying their human cargo rambled through the quiet, deserted streets of Bedok, Geylang and Kallang. We appeared to be going towards the city, but we did not know where we were heading for. It could either be the railway station or the harbour. Some of the local people were awake and were standing by the road-side. They looked at us without any expression. They had seen similar convoys passing by previously. There was no activity in the city as we passed through. The road we took indicated that we were definitely heading for the railway station or the harbour, both of which were in the same vicinity. After what had been a journey of suspense, we finally reached the Singapore railway station. Besides a few civilian workers, there was quite a number of armed Japanese soldiers within the grounds of the station, either to guard the station or to ensure that we were put safely onto the train.

We disembarked from our trucks. It was just getting bright. There was a head count immediately upon disembarkation. They counted and recounted us a few times before we were ordered to walk up to the railway platform. A long goods train was waiting on the rail track. A number of completely covered steel freight wagons were attached to the locomotive which was warming up already. Each of the steel wagons measured about four metres long and three metres wide and had a sliding door on each side.

There was another head count and search before we finally boarded the train. Thirty of us with all our belongings and the communal utensils were crammed into each steel wagon. That was our accommodation for a journey to the unknown. It was very uncomfortable.

The long shrill whistle of the train signalled the commencement of the second leg of our overland journey to the promised 'hill resort'. The slow-moving train soon gathered speed as I said a silent goodbye to Singapore and all those I was leaving behind, especially my family and friends. Eventually, the journey lasted five days and nights in inhuman conditions.

As the tropical sun rose higher in the sky, the heat made the walls and the roof of our wagon too hot to handle. Conditions inside the steel wagons became intolerable. To aggravate matters, the Japanese guards only allowed one five1.5 metre wide on one side of the wagon to be opened. That did not allow a free flow of air or cross ventilation.The interior of the steel wagons soon became stuffy and extremely hot, like a hot furnace. Everyone was bathed in sweat and some soon became ill.

We did not know how long the journey would take, so we got ourselves organised into three groups of ten people each. One group sat in an upright position while the second group had sufficient space to lie fully flat and sleep. The last group sat in the area fronting the open door. They were able to get some fresh air and enjoy the changing Malayan landscape as the train rambled along. The train was travelling northwards and we presumed that our destination would either be in Northern Malaya or somewhere in Siam.

Toilet arrangements were non-existent and occasionally, the train stopped for *benjo* (toilet). We would then jump off the train to relieve ourselves along the edge of the jungle. We would also stretch our numbed legs beside our wagon. We were always under the ever-watchful eyes of the armed Japanese soldiers. Before reboarding the train, there was the never-ending head count.

The toilet stops did not always coincide with some individual needs, especially after two days of travelling and eating cold stale food. Quite a number became afflicted with diarrhoea. In such

cases, we were forced to relieve ourselves through the open door of the fast-moving train. Those who were sitting near the door would hold on to those relieving themselves to ensure that they did not fall off the train.

Our food, which was usually some cold cooked white rice with a bit of fried fish or vegetables, was served at some of the smaller railway stations or during the *benjo* break. It was never appetising, but beggars cannot be fussy and we had to satisfy our hunger. To make matters worse, the food was not served at regular intervals with the result that many of us became ill with stomach ailments.

The train bypassed Kuala Lumpur (the capital city of Malaya). Many people were standing on the railway platform and they waved at us as the train passed by. It is possible that they knew where we were going. The train stopped for quite a long time at Rawang, a small town just north of Kuala Lumpur, which was the steam locomotive watering point where the water tank of the steam engine was replenished. Many of us rushed out naked to get a bath from the large water hose. The train driver, who was a local man, just turned a blind eye. Occasionally he would yell and retrieve his hose to fill up his engine's water tank. He did so just in case the Japanese guard saw what was happening and chastised him. After a little while, we would pull back the hose for the others to have their bath. This ding-dong battle for the water hose went on for some time.

While the train stood at Rawang, many of the local people living close by managed to sneak up close to our wagons. They freely gave us some cooked food, cakes, fruits and drinks. These generous people did so at great risk to themselves. Had they been caught by the Japanese guards, it was very likely that they would have been severely bashed or even shot. We were very grateful to them for their generosity. There were others who came forward to sell native cakes, fruits and drinks, but business had not been good for them.

Alor Star, in northern Malaya, was our last stop on Malayan territory. It was not a scheduled stop. Our train stopped for just a short while to allow a troop train to pass us. We had to remain in our wagons all the while. Now and again, some of us would go

to the door for a breath of fresh air. As usual there were many local people who came to the train to sell Malayan cakes, fruit and cold sweet drinks. They did good business as most of us were eager to get rid of our 'banana money', which was only legal tender in Japanese-occupied Singapore and Malaya.

By the time we reached the Siamese border, most of us had stomach problems, diarrhoea, or dysentery. No medicine was available and those affected just had to live with the illness. Many had to make frequent trips to the open door to relieve themselves, but as only two persons could safely do so at one time, others were forced to relieve themselves inside the wagon. This was done on sheets of old newspaper which was then quickly wrapped up and thrown out of the moving train. The smell of the excrement would linger in the wagon for a long time and caused nausea.

As we travelled further into Siam, the scenery became different. We saw the mountain ranges rising above the horizon beyond the rice fields. The mode of dress of the people was different. Many of us realised that the promised 'hill resort' was somewhere up on the Siamese mountains. Some even recalled what Ginny had said, but we could do nothing as the dice had been cast. As the train rambled on, the journey to the mountain ranges seemed unending.

In the early hours on the morning of 6 May 1943, we finally arrived at Ban Pong, a railway junction in southern Siam. By then we had travelled five days and nights cooped up in the steel freight wagons, undergoing extreme discomfort, hunger, thirst and stomach problems.

Many of us were weak when we left Singapore. We were further debilitated by the heat, inhumane conditions and poor food during the long train journey in steel wagons, which were normally used for the transportation of rice and other commodities. By the time we reached Ban Pong, many more were weakened by stomach ailments.

The morning was cool and refreshing as we marched through the deserted streets of Ban Pong. Luckily, the camp was close to the station, and we did not have to march far. We carried not only

our own belongings but the utensils needed for communal use as well. The total load was quite heavy. Even though the distance from the station to the camp was short, many found difficulty in walking as our feet had been in cramped positions for a long time. Others who were fit willingly helped the sick men.

The long hut which was used for sleeping had an *attap* leaf roof and its sides were also covered with *attap* leaf panels. There were no sleeping platforms and we had to sleep on the bare earth floor. We were lucky that it was during the dry season. We stayed for two days in Ban Pong while we waited for other trains to arrive bringing more men of the 'F' Force. There was nothing to do in the camp except to rest our weary bodies and daydream. The monotony was frequently interrupted by head counts conducted by the Japanese guards. Sometimes searches were carried out by the dreaded military police. They were searching for hand guns and radio communication equipment. Nothing was ever found, but nevertheless such searches continued every now and then.

Our camp was enclosed by a fragile bamboo fence. There were many gaps in it and one could easily pass through them. To forestall any attempts to escape, the Japanese warned us not to fraternise with the local people. The penalty would no doubt be a severe bashing, or a locking up in a cramped bamboo cage.

As we wandered aimlessly within the camp, some Siamese women and children appeared at the fence. They were selling rice cakes, hard-boiled eggs and bananas. Conditions were unhygienic as the rice cakes were uncovered and many flies had settled on them. Nevertheless, they all looked tempting. We avoided the cooked food but the hard-boiled eggs and bananas looked good and were cheap. There was no harm in eating them as their shells or skins were discarded before eating. It was a welcome change to the camp food which always consisted of boiled rice with fried dried fish or some boiled chick peas.

We did not have any Siamese *ticals* to pay for the goods, so we sold off some of our belongings to obtain some local currency. Bargaining was done by show of hands. When the deal was clinched, it meant rushing to the fence to deliver our goods, grab the payment money and then rush back to the hut. There was a

possibility that we could receive less money than the agreed sum, but they could also be cheated by us. I remember selling off two shirts which had only fronts and sleeves but without the back panels.

On the afternoon of 8 May 1943, we were told that we were to move to Kanburi, another camp about fifty kilometres to the north west of Ban Pong. Kanburi was the main base of the Japanese Railway Engineering Corps. That evening we were fed a meal of boiled rice, with some fried dried fish and boiled beans after which we were to be ready for the move. We expected to travel by rail or by truck.

When darkness enveloped Ban Pong, our group left the camp on the third leg of our journey to the unknown. Contrary to what had been promised before we left Singapore, no transport was provided. We went on foot burdened with both our own belongings and the utensils. We marched in the dark along a bitumen road and escorted by about a dozen armed Japanese soldiers. Despite the darkness, we soon realised that we were marching on a road which was parallel to a railway track and which we later discovered linked Ban Pong with Kanburi. That made us very angry. We could do nothing except utter swear words and curse the Japanese. It was our first experience of a series of broken Japanese promises. The march to Kanburi was completed in two stages, each covering a distance of approximately twenty-five kilometres.Kanburi was quite a busy place. A work camp had already been established there with a large group of prisoners who had left Changi earlier. At that camp I met Robin, another member of the 'D' (Eurasian) Company of the Singapore Volunteer Corps. For some unknown reason he was separated from the rest of our company in Changi and had gone to Siam earlier with another force.

With a little knowledge of the Japanese language, he somehow managed to converse with the Japanese soldiers and got on well with them. They took a liking to him and gave him a job in the cookhouse of the railway engineers. At the same time he was made a valet to the Japanese officer in charge of the engineers. He appeared to be having an easy time.

Robin was happy to see me and the other members of my company. He gave us some food and other titbits which he scrounged from the cookhouse. He also told us that the Japanese were building a railway through the jungle, but he did not know where: that was the first time we heard about the Siam-Burma railway.

We expected Kanburi to be the end of our journey, but it turned out to be another staging camp. After resting during the day, we continued on our journey that evening. Beyond Kanburi, the road degenerated into an uneven dirt track, and marching in the dark became increasingly difficult. During the first few stages, the country was flat, but as we went further it became more mountainous and the jungle became more dense. Along the route, there were groves of bamboo trees which we could not detect in the dark. The sharp edges of the bamboo leaves caused many cuts on our hands and faces.

Generally, we marched at night and rested during the day. I presume that by marching at night, we could not be detected by any Allied reconnaissance planes. Anyway, I doubt whether planes overhead could detect us through the thick jungle foliage. Marching at night was a blessing in some ways. The night was cool and it was less tiring. On the other hand, the heavy jungle foliage made the darkness even blacker and we were plagued with sand flies and mosquitoes throughout the night.

The cool dry night did not last long. The advent of the monsoon season brought the heavy rain which fell continuously, but the night marches went on despite the rain. The ground became a muddy quagmire that made marching extremely difficult and our boots were badly affected. Some of us lost our heels or soles in the deep mud. Many had to continue marching barefooted. The pack we carried on our backs became heavier with every step we took.

The difficulties we encountered and the hardships we endured were another blessing in disguise. It strengthened our spirit of comradeship. It made us realise the need to help each other. Those that were still physically capable helped our weaker comrades either by supporting them during the march or relieving them of the heavy load they were carrying on their backs. Some of the utensils were discarded.

Our Japanese escorts were well prepared for the march. They had waterproofed capes and steel helmets to protect them from the rain. They also wore rubberised boots to keep their feet dry. Furthermore they did not march with us all the way. They only marched from one staging camp to the next when a new group of soldiers took over the escort duty.

By the time we reached the next staging camp in the morning we were drenched to the skin. We shivered with cold. We were also very tired and hungry. During the day we normally bivouaced on open ground near a Buddhist temple or an established work camp. It was extremely difficult to find any shade from the scorching sun. Other than some clumps of bamboo, there were virtually no shady, leafy trees around. We were therefore forced to rest out in the open under a scorching tropical sun. At some stops, we rested by the river. We were then able to soak ourselves in the cool, clear river water. We normally went into the water fully clothed, so our clothes would be washed of any dirt. When we got out of the water, we just wandered around or rested on the river bank and allowed the sun to dry our wet clothes.

Whenever possible, we would try to snatch some sleep during the day, but our sleep was frequently interrupted by unscheduled head counts to ensure that no one had escaped.

In the later stages of our march, the night-long rain continued throughout the day and it was impossible to have any rest. We had to remain in our wet clothes and even eat our meals in the rain.

When we stopped at Neiki, we met Ginger and a few other European members of the Singapore and Malayan Volunteer Forces. They had left Changi earlier with another force and had been working on the construction of the Siam-Burma railway for some time. We were pleased to see each other. They gave us some information about the type of work they were doing and their working conditions. It was not an encouraging bit of news and quite a number of the men group in our began to feel demoralised. We kept guessing how much further we had to go beyond Neiki. It just meant more nights of marching and going deeper into the jungle.

During those nights, it would have been extremely easy for

anyone, who had enough guts and was prepared to take a chance, to slip away and escape into the jungle under the cover of darkness. Nobody ever attempted to do so. It was not because of the declaration which we signed in Singapore in September 1942, promising not to escape from the prison camp, but because of other factors. Without the aid of a proper compass, a good map of the region, some food supply and a survival kit, any escape attempt was definitely doomed to fail right from the start.

Although the Japanese were in total control of the region, the jungle was no doubt neutral, but an escapee would have to contend with wild animals and poisonous snakes. Furthermore, it was doubtful whether the natives would be co-operative, especially as they would be rewarded by the Japanese for capturing those who escaped.

As the first streaks of light filtered through the jungle foliage on the morning of 24 May 1943, we finally reached the eastern banks of the river. By then we had painfully completed marching under trying conditions a total distance of 315 kilometres. The majority of us were in a pretty bad condition. Most were suffering from malaria, dysentery, diarrhoea and general ill health, due to fatigue and lack of proper food. We were totally exhausted. How we managed to march such a long distance in such intolerable conditions is almost a miracle.

For a while, we all stood on the high embankment on the eastern bank and just gazed at a large jungle clearing beyond. We were separated by a river which we later learnt was called the River Kwai. There, across the fast-flowing river, we had a panoramic view of the promised 'hill resort' nestling in a tranquil environment surrounded by the thick jungle. It was Songkurai, the hill resort promised by the Japanese. It was to be our 'home' and work base for the next six months. Whatever it was, we were in a way relieved that the long and painful march was over, but what awaited us at Songkurai was unknown.

CHAPTER 10

Songkurai Hill Resort

The wet season had begun and Songkurai gave us a very cold welcome. Even Heaven wept profusely as it foresaw what was in store for us at Songkurai. The rain fell in torrents. The sounds of the rain falling on the different surfaces sounded like a musical interlude.

Such was the condition as we crossed the fragile wooden footbridge spanning the fast-flowing River Kwai and cautiously walked up the slippery earthern slope to our base camp. The sight that confronted us almost broke our hearts. The entire ground within the camp was covered with a thick carpet of black smelly mud. As we walked, our feet made deep imprints in the mud, which soon became multiple puddles of black water. Here and there, small streams were formed and the muddy water made its way to the river.

The long, narrow *attap*-sided huts in which we were to sleep had no roofs. They looked like giant open mouths eagerly swallowing most of the water that continuously fell from the heavily-laden dark grey skies above. There was also no rendering on the floor and the muddy water flowed through the hut. The sight of the camp made many of us feel utterly dejected.

Before we left Changi, the Japanese had promised that we were being sent up north to a 'hill resort' or a 'rest camp' with a climate healthier than that prevailing in Singapore. Now that we were in Songkurai, we realised that it was just another empty Japanese promise. It was true that Songkurai was up in the hills,

but it was more a hell hole, even blacker than the Black Hole of Calcutta. In fact, a hell hole was not a fitting description of that forsaken place.

The Songkurai camp accommodated a work force of 1,600 British prisoners-of-war and was part of the 7,000 strong 'F' Force of British and Australian prisoners-of-war. The British contingent was generally a mixed combination of regular soldiers, territorials, conscripts and volunteers from Singapore and Malaya. Here again the volunteers were another mixed unit of European and Eurasian members. Less than fifteen months ago, we volunteers were civilians working either in the civil service or in business.

The 'F' Force had been given the task of constructing a stretch of about 60 kilometres of the Siam-Burma Railway. We at Songkurai had to complete a stretch of 15 kilometres of the railway line, including the famous wooden bridge across the River Kwai.

The area in which the 'F' Force had to work was situated in the remotest and most isolated part of western Siam near its border with Burma. Wild animals were known to roam the jungles in the region, but throughout our stay in Songkurai we never saw any wild life, neither did we hear any noise made by wild animals. It is possible that the human invasion of their habitat, the yelling of our Japanese guards, and the loud noises emanating from the daily blasting of the rocky mountains could have driven them to seek sanctuary deeper in the jungle.

The only wild life we encountered was a large brown snake which unfortunately found its way into our camp. It was seen gliding along the damp floor of our hut. It looked dangerous. All of us quickly retreated to the security of our sleeping platform. Then somebody decided that the unwelcome reptile could provide a tasty meal. Our courage returned and many of the men attacked the poor creature which soon ended up in a cooking pot.

The continual rain turned our camp into a muddy mess. There was mud everywhere. Fresh puddles were created as we walked around the camp. The sloping terrain became extremely slippery

making it difficult to walk up especially in the darkness, as there were no lights whatsoever or handrails in the camp compound.

Our sleeping huts were primitive. They were about 100 metres long and 6 metres wide and were constructed of bamboo framing with an enclosing wall of *attap* panels. There was one opening in each wall but no roof covering. Inside the huts, the floor was not rendered. Water found its way into the huts and the floor was as muddy as the ground outside. There was a central aisle about 1.5 metres wide running through the entire length of the building. On either side of the aisles were sleeping platforms. They were raised about 75 centimetres above the ground and were made of split bamboo slats.

During the first three weeks after our arrival, we slept in the roofless huts even though it rained most of the time. We were too exhausted after the day's work to bother about the falling rain. Most of us slept on the bare bamboo slats. Our bodies were cut or scratched by the sharp edges of the bamboo slats. I was among the few lucky ones who possessed a rubberised groundsheet. It made sleeping a little more comfortable. Others were contented with pieces of canvas or rice sacks which they had scrounged.

While we were away at work, the small skeleton work force who were left behind to work in the cookhouse and the sick bay did the roofing of the huts. The *attap* supplied were insufficient, and so some of the *attap* panels on the sides of the huts were ripped off to make up for the deficiency. The men also dug drains around the perimeter of the huts to keep away the surface water. Eventually, we had a hard, damp floor, but it was not muddy.

There were no lights of any kind inside the hut and generally the interior was dark. Some daylight filtered into the hut from the void space just below the eaves and through door openings at each end and the middle of the huts. When the huts were roofed over, and the ground became drier, we lit a few bonfires along the aisles. These fires gave us some light at night as well as some warmth; we also used them for our illicit cooking of soups, stews and the brewing of tea.

Even with the flickering flames of the bonfire, the interior of the huts were fairly dark. The darker space beneath the soffit of

the roof became a haven for many anopheles mosquitoes. The pools of water and the swampy undergrowth in the nearby jungle provided excellent breeding grounds for these mosquitoes. As there were no anti-malarial measures, the mosquitoes became a big problem, for their bites caused malaria. There was no proper medication except quinine. Many of us including myself fell victim to malaria and a few men were known to have died from cerebral malaria.

Besides mosquitoes, we had to contend with other parasitic insects. The bamboo slats aided by the lack of light and proper ventilation soon became a breeding ground for body lice. The situation was aggravated by the men having to sleep close to one another, thus encouraging infestation to spread.

Body lice looked like long white rice grains or white ants. They shunned the light and were generally found hiding in the folds or seams of our clothing. They crawled all over our bodies at night causing much discomfort, their bites causing irritation and even scabies.

I often wondered where the first louse came from. I am sure they did not come from the jungle. It was possible that our sleeping huts had previously been occupied by other less hygienic workers and the colonies of lice had been hibernating, eagerly awaiting our arrival to feed on us

Alternatively, some of the men in our group could have brought these pests with us from Ban Pong. They could also have been picked up from any of the staging camps along the way. Anyway, the lice population expanded rapidly. They were a great nuisance and made our lives miserable.

We had no pesticides to destroy them or to contain their population explosion, but we had to accept the lice as part of our life and endure the discomfort. Much of any spare time we had was spent simply crushing them between our thumb nails. Our efforts to reduce their numbers were in vain. They never seemed to be diminishing.

Unlike Changi, we did not have a piped water supply at Songkurai. Although there was plenty of water in the river adjacent to our camp, it was polluted by the in-flow of surface run

off from our camp, which was usually muddy and more often was mixed with the excrement that over-flowed from the primitive open latrines situated on higher ground.

Our source of water came from a little stream running in the jungle behind our camp. This was channelled into the camp by a bamboo trough. There were no filtration or chlorination facilities. Although the water was crystal clear, we took no chances. All the water required for cooking, drinking or even washing of utensils was boiled. Cauldrons of boiling water were placed at the food distribution points for the sterilisation of our eating utensils. This was normally done by dipping our utensils in the boiling water for a few minutes before collecting our meals. There were no sterilising facilities at the work site. We usually sterilised our utensils before we left for work, and before we collected our meals, we would place our utensils over the fire.

The cookhouse was sited some distance away from our sleeping hut, on the lower ground. There was no covered walkway between the sleeping huts and the cookhouse. As it rained most of the time, going to the cookhouse to collect our meals meant negotiating cautiously the slippery slopes and the muddy ground, like a circus balancing act. We had to exercise extra care when going to collect our evening meal in the dark. Luckily, there was a hurricane lamp at the food distribution point so, like the flying ants, we headed straight for that light.

There was an acute shortage of cooking utensils and food containers. Although we brought with us from Changi a number of utensils and containers and, on leaving Ban Pong, each of us carried some of the utensils and containers in addition to our own personal effects. During the long march quite a number in the group became too ill to march further. They stayed behind at the various staging camps, and the utensils which they carried were likewise left behind. Other utensils were jettisoned along the way when they became an unbearable burden to those who felt the strain of the march.

We were given meagre food incompatible with the heavy work we did. The quality was poor – it had no nutritional value. Although we were given three meals a day, they were always the

same, there was neither a change in quantity or quality. They were insufficient to fill our empty stomachs.

Each meal was a cupful (about half a pint) of plain, boiled, white rice served with some boiled chick peas. On a few occasions, we were given a small portion of fried Burmese dried fish instead of chick peas. The Burmese fish looked like Spanish mackerel and had a nice taste. It was a welcome change and made the meal more palatable.

All the utensils and containers that were available were used for cooking food and boiling water. There were no containers for serving and so food was served in bamboo baskets lined with large leaves from the jungle. It was therefore not possible to serve any liquid food, such as soup or stew, with any of our meals. In fact, throughout our stay in Songkurai we were always served 'dry food'. Invariably, the rain provided us with 'gravy', as we ate our meals standing in the rain.

We encountered great difficulties with our food supplies. It appeared that the Japanese prisoner-of-war administration in Singapore was still responsible for us and our food supplies. This was aggravated by the fact that Songkurai was in no-man's-land. Access to our camp was very difficult. We sometimes received our supplies from Neike, two camps down the line on the eastern side, while at other times our supplies came from Burma.

During July 1943, conditions deteriorated. The monsoon rains made the road to Songkurai, impassable except for six-wheel trucks with chains wrapped around their wheels. Such trucks used to pass by Songkurai but they usually carried supplies and ammunition for the Japanese army fighting in Burma. It became a matter of each camp for itself and we were thus forced to collect our own supplies. Now and then a few of us had to walk westwards to Burma to collect our rice supply. Each of us had to carry a one-100-*katis* (about 60 kilos) sack of rice on our backs. The journey either way, covered several kilometres of muddy and slippery jungle tracks. The outward journey was a bit easy, but on our return journey the rain-soaked sacks of rice became heavier with each step we took.

After some time, we decided to share the burden by using a

'stretcher' made of bamboo frames. We then placed four bags of rice on the stretcher which four men carried on their shoulders. The total weight was much heavier, but at least we were able to change shoulders when one shoulder became sore.

The primitive open latrines, for obvious reasons, were situated far away in a jungle clearing. They were not enclosed, neither was there any roof over them or fly-proof covers. The latrines consisted of two long slit trenches with bamboo foot-rests. There was no doubt that they had been used previously as thousands of maggots were crawling all over the place. To make matters worse, the continual heavy rains swept them downhill through the camp and on to the river. There were also no lights near the latrines, and those of us answering the call of nature at night had to grope in the dark and depend on instinct to lead us to the place that stanks. On getting there, great care had to be exercised as one slip meant falling into or being buried in a faecal mess.

When we arrived at the Songkurai 'hill resort', the Japanese gave us two days to tidy up the camp and make it habitable. We had no tools whatsoever. On the third day we began the real hard work in the so-called 'hill resort' where the supposed 'light duties' were just another empty promise of the Japanese. For the rest of us, it was working as slaves beyond human endurance. We were paid as 'wages' a paltry sum of twenty-five cents a day in the currency of the occupied country. It was downright forced labour. The Japanese paid only for the number of people actually working and the sick were unpaid. In the spirit of camaraderie, part of the wage-earners' pay packet went into a common fund to help the sick.

The task assigned to the slaves of Songkurai was to construct a large-span timber bridge, high above and across the River Kwai. That bridge became famous in 1957 after the screening of Hollywood's film entitled *The Bridge of the River Kwai* with Alec Guiness acting the part of the British commander in charge of the prisoners-of-war. In Hollywood's version of the story not only was truth heavily diluted with much fantasy but the prisoners-of-war were given a very bad image. They were shown as having collaborated with the Japanese in building the bridge. That is

definitely far from the truth. As one of the few survivors of the Songkurai hard-labour camp, I can categorically state that at no time was there any act of collaboration committed by any British prisoner-of-war whether officers or other ranks, in the construction of that bridge and the railway. We all had no choice and were forced to work as slaves and for long hours.

We also had to construct about 16 kilometres of the infamous railway line stretching about 8 kilometres to the east and 8 kilometres to the west of the River Kwai. Construction of the railway and the bridge had to be completed within five months and there was no doubt that the Japanese railway engineers were determined to achieve their goal. This was reflected in their brutal attitude towards us and their frequent yelling to push us to work beyond exhaustion. The Japanese soldiers did not value human lives, especially that of the prisoners-of-war, since they had a contempt for soldiers who surrender in battle.

In all the territories occupied by the Japanese, work was carried out in accordance with the Tokyo time, irrespective of whether the sun rose at six o'clock in the morning or that night fell at four o'clock in the evening in any particular territory. A typical working day in Songkurai would begin at 5 a.m. Tokyo time (about 3 a.m. actual time) and did not end until long after daylight had given way to the darkness.

We usually woke up when it was still dark and invariably in the rain. We then staggered half-sleepy down the slippery slope to the food distribution point. There we queued up to sterilise our eating utensils, collect our meagre breakfast and either squatted or stood on the muddy ground while eating in the rain as quickly as we could. Soon after breakfast we immediately marched to the work site to begin the day's work.

The clothing we wore for work was varied. Some wore the tattered remains of a pair of shorts, but most of us had a loin cloth or G-string made from fragments of any material we had scrounged. A G-sting provided minimum privacy cover for the private parts. I was lucky to possess two good pairs of shorts and shirts. I did not want to spoil them or allow them to deteriorate in the wet and muddy conditions. With my knowledge of simple

sewing stitches, I made myself a reasonably good pair of shorts out of some light canvas material I managed to scrounge, which I wore all the time I worked in Songkurai. They were usually washed by the rain or sometimes I waded in the waters of the river to clean off any dirt. Nightly, I dried myself with my shorts on beside the bonfires before going to sleep. Many officers still had their peak caps, but the rest of us went about with the rain falling on our bare heads.

The long march from Ban Pong over uneven jungle tracks, in wet and muddy conditions, took a heavy toll on our boots. This was aggravated by the heavy work at Songkurai and the boots soon disintegrated. I generally took great care of my possessions. With a good spread of grease, my pair of boots had remained in a fairly good condition. I decided to save them for happier times when I hoped to leave Songkurai. The good clothing and boots were kept in my haversack which served as my head rest for sleeping at night. For my daily work, I used the pair of sandals that I brought from Changi. These durable sandals were made from cut-outs of old military truck tyres and were tied around my feet with thick cords. The sandals were never removed from my feet even when I slept. It was very convenient when having to answer a call of nature at night and it also saved time when I awoke in the mornings. My sandals lasted till the day I left Songkurai and then they were taken back to Changi for further use.

Every night when I returned to the camp having laboured beyond exhaustion, my rain-soaked body ached all over. Sometimes I felt disheartened, but my inner spirit prompted me not to lose hope. The rain would normally wash the mud off my shorts, but if there was a thicker cake of mud, I would grope my way to the river to wash myself as well as my shorts.

After dinner, I would huddle around the bonfire inside our hut to keep warm and at the same time to dry my shorts. Despite the hardship we had to endure, there was always someone who would crack a joke to raise a laugh and thereby keep up our drooping spirits. Others would join in to relate amusing anecdotes about encounters with the Japanese while at work.

The many bonfires within the hut not only illuminated the interior but they also spread some warmth we needed after working in the rain all day. What was more important was that the fire was useful for making tea or soup and doing illicit cooking now and again.

Medicines and drugs were totally unavailable. All the Japanese provided were quinine tablets and mercurochrome solution. The quinine tablets were effective for the treatment of malaria but, in the absence of any other medicines, quinine tablets were prescribed for any illness we had.

Although all our doctors worked very hard to save lives they could not do much without diagnostic aids and thus a proper treatment could not be prescribed. Furthermore, just being sick would not exempt anyone from the hard work, since the Japanese required a daily quota of men to work on the railway and the bridge. Those short cruel, yellow devils were determined to complete the project at all costs, even if all of us had to die in carrying out the project.

There appeared to be a standard procedure for those seeking medical attention. If anyone felt ill and went to the sick bay for treatment, it would mean filing past the doctor for a quick cursory examination and then receiving the standard prescription. It was two quinine tablets to be taken three times a day. That was prescribed for whatever illness one suffered. The sick men then moved along with open palms to the medical orderly who would give one day's supply of the quinine tablets. Thereafter, you went out to work as usual. This procedure was repeated the next day and the next and so on until you were either cured of your illness or embarked upon a lonely journey to eternity.

Mercurochrome solution was invariably applied to all cuts, bruises or wounds which we had quite often. Almost everybody could be seen moving around the camp or work site with some orange patches on their bodies. It was effective for some, but it was not much help for those whose body resistance was depleted. In the majority of cases laceration of the skin developed into tropical ulcers and possible eventual amputation of the limb to end the misery.

The construction of the railway track and the bridge involved various hard and sometimes dangerous work, including the blasting of rocky hills and the crushing of large chunks of stones. Parts of the jungle and thick undergrowth had to be cleared. The felling of tall large trees and cutting up to sizeable logs had to be done. There was also the cutting, digging and building up of earth embankments. All this involved the movement of several tons of stones, earth and timber without proper means of transportation or carriage. Construction of the bridge itself involved the erection of tall timber pylons and piling to its foundation. The piling work was done in the fast-flowing river, chest high in water, all day long. The water was cold, especially with the rain, and there was always the danger that someone could slip and be swept away in its rushing waters.

Every morning the Japanese would group the work force into teams of ten men. This was to facilitate head counts and to ensure that a given task was not undertaken by too many men. The teams were then allocated different tasks to do for that particular day. It was unlikely that anyone would do the same job every day. The work was usually supervised by armed Japanese or Korean soldiers who would not hesitate to club anyone with their rifle butts if they thought the prisoner was not pulling his weight or was a bit slow.

Our daily work proceeded even after dark. The work area was illuminated by large carbide lamps and bamboo tubes filled with diesel oil with wicks made from rice sacks. Sometimes large bonfires were lit with bamboo stems and off-cuts from the logs, which not only illuminated a large area but also provided warmth to those not feeling too well or taking an illicit rest when the guards or engineers were not watching. We normally worked about fourteen hours a day and most of the time in torrential rain.

During the entire period when I was a slave of Songkurai I had a taste of every type of work in the construction of the railway track and the bridge. I was also involved in non-constructional work as well. I never missed a day's work irrespective of the state of my health: I was determined to be fit and eventually survive the ordeal.

The blasting of the hills for rocks and ballast was dangerous work, involving the hand drilling of small deep holes for the insertion of explosive. When detonated, it caused large lumps of rocks to be blown sky-high and fall to the ground. An unfortunate knock on the head by such a large piece of rock could cause serious injuries or could even be fatal.

The drilling was usually done by one group known as the 'hammer and tap brigade'. Another group would then break up the large chunks of rocks into smaller pieces. Depending upon the stage of construction or requirements, four or more groups would be engaged in transporting the broken rocks and ballast to the site where they were required.

In the 'hammer and tap brigade' one man wielded a heavy sledge-hammer while his partner held a long steel chisel which he freed and rotated clockwise between each rhythmic swing of the hammer. It was a manual means of drilling a 25mm diameter hole about 700mm deep. On completion a charge was carefully placed inside the deep hole with a fuse wire trailing some distance away. Everybody within the danger area then ran for cover as the charge was detonated by the Japanese engineer. About four holes a day could be drilled by each pair of men. When we returned back to camp in the night we usually had to nurse an aching back and a painful pair of blistered hands.

The explosion would cause a few tons of rock to fall from the sky like manna from heaven. The crushing team would then move in to begin their work. Each man in the three-man team wielded a heavy sledge-hammer to crush the large chunks of rocks into smaller pieces of different sizes. Some of the crushed rocks were dumped into the river bed to strengthen the base of the tall pylons of the bridge. The small chips were spread over the ground as the base for the railway sleepers. When the sleepers had been laid, more rock chips would be spread between the sleepers.

The transportation gangs were responsible for carrying all the crushed stones and ballast from the quarry to where they were needed. There were no proper means of carrying the material, and cartage was done manually using primitive methods. The

Japanese provided only bamboo wicker baskets which were poorly made and were easily broken. Replacements were difficult to obtain and we were forced to improvise 'stretchers' made from rice sacks strung on bamboo frames. The bamboo baskets and stretchers were carried by two men. We used our bare hands to fill the baskets and stretchers, and invariably our hands were cut by the sharp edges of the rocks. When the Japanese felt that insufficient quantities were being transported, the men were forced to carry large chunks of rocks with their bare hands or on their shoulders. During the rainy season, the ground conditions became very bad and transportation of the rocks, especially down slippery embankments or near the river banks, became a dangerous undertaking.

A large quantity of timber was needed for the construction of the gigantic bridge across the wide River Kwai as well as sleepers for the rail track. This was readily available in the dense forest nearby where the trees were tall and enormous with almost straight, branchless trunks. At the tree top rested a luxuriant leafy head. It was like an enormous umbrella shielding the dense undergrowth from the sun. The trees that were cut down for timber were mainly teak or other hardwood trees which were ideal for the purpose and grew in abundance in a region as yet uninvaded by Man.

We had to work really hard to obtain timber. None of us had been lumberjacks before, neither did we have any experience in tree-felling. We learnt fast. We were tutored by brutality and shouts of '*speedo*' from our Korean guards. In a short while, we could easily determine the direction the tree would fall.

Two or three groups of men were daily engaged in felling the hardwood trees. Thereafter the same groups of men would cut up the tree trunk into seven-metre lengths of logs. Longer lengths were also needed for the pylons of the bridge. Each group of ten men was sub-grouped into two-man teams using long, two-handle cross-cut saws to cut the trees, and the same team would proceed to cut the tree into logs. When their job was completed, they went on to fell another tree. The process continued throughout the day. It was always accompanied by

shouts of '*speedo*' from our guards. Now and then, those short yellow devils would also shout '*kurra*' or '*bageiroh*'. I never learnt the true meaning of those words, but I suppose they were swear-words or could possibly mean 'you bloody idiot'.

On an average, a two-man team was daily expected to cut down six or seven trees, including cutting the tree trunks into logs. All through the day, the forest resounded with our frequent shouts of 'timber'. It was a warning to our colleagues that a tree had been cut and was falling in their direction. There were also other warning noises, like the crackling noises when the uncut portion of the tree was desperately trying to restrain the tree from falling. Then, there was also the noise of branches of the falling tree hitting the branches of other trees on their way down to earth. When the tall tree finally smashed onto the ground, I felt that the whole ground tremble under my feet. The noise was terrific and frightening.

The railway sleepers were required to be of a regular and uniform size. Manual work without proper tools could not have turned out the required product. Furthermore, we were not too keen to produce an excellent job. The Japanese engineers then rigged up an improvised power-driven circular saw. It was housed in a make-shift saw-mill shed and electrical power was obtained from a small portable petrol-driven Honda generator. The electrical powered saw was only used for the mass production of the railway sleepers which were required in very large quantities. That was the only bit of modern equipment used in those primitive surroundings.

The logs were carried on the shoulders of ten men. Many of the men assigned to do the work were weak with illness. They were unable to bear the heavy weight and their knees buckled up under the load. Consequently, the more able men had to bear the brunt. They did it willingly in the spirit of helping one another. There were no ready-made trails to follow. The man in the lead usually took a course which he felt was best. The route was normally through heavy undergrowth, over uneven, muddy and waterlogged ground. There was always the danger of someone slipping and upsetting the team's rhythmic process of

regimented walking, thereby causing an accident. For easy carriage, the log was carried on the left or on the right shoulders of the entire team. In case of an anticipated mishap the log could easily be jettisoned, but luckily, there had never been an accident.

One morning, I was surprised to see a cow elephant waiting at our mustering point. A native *mahout* (elephant driver) was standing beside the elephant who was busy munching some leaves. A cute little calf was standing a little distance from its mother. He was free to roam and seemed to be enjoying his little game of going around in circles or chasing his own tail.

I soon learnt that the elephant was joining our labour force. She had been recruited specially to haul the extra long logs from the forest to the river side. I had previously seen elephants at the zoo or in a circus, but I had never dreamt that one day I would be working alongside an elephant and serving a common slave master. I called her 'Elfie' although her driver called her by another name. The *mahout* always grunted in his native language to make the elephant respond to his instructions.

When I first had to work with Elfie, she would not do my bidding. It was possible that my voice and language was totally alien to her. She would only obey her driver. He sat astride her neck and steered her by jostling his knees behind her large ears. If Elfie did not respond to his command, he would yell at her in his native language or make grunting noises. As a last resort he would hit her with his metal-tipped rod. Sometimes, Elfie found it difficult to haul the heavy logs. She would trumpet wildly but at the same time strain herself to drag the log. Quite often, we were forced to assist her by pushing the log or pulling the chains attached to the log.

Most of the time, while Elfie was working hard, her baby Jumbo would be romping around nearby. Sometimes, he would walk beside Elfie as she dragged along her heavy log. Now and again, baby Jumbo would go up to his mother's milk bar to get his ration. At night, one of Elfie's front legs would be chained to a tree while baby Jumbo would be free. Nevertheless he would always stay beside his mother.

The driver never fed his elephants. He allowed them to gather

their own food from the forest. I soon learnt the type of leaves and wild grass the elephants ate and occasionally I would feed them with those leaves. In time, Elfie became friendly with me. I was able to pat her sides and stroke her trunk. In acknowledgement of our friendship, Elfie would sometimes place her trunk on my shoulders or would tickle my ear with the end of her trunk. Later, Elfie recognised my voice and understood what I said in English. She responded to my commands, and for some time we worked together amicably. Elfie worked in our camp for about three months. Then one morning, when we arrived at our mustering point, she was gone. I did not have an opportunity to bid her farewell; anyway, I am sure she will remember me should we ever meet again.

Like all elephants, Elfie had a long memory. I know this for a fact and this can be substantiated by an incident which I witnessed while working with her. One day Elfie was having difficulty with her load. The Japanese officer decided to use some force. He grabbed the *mahout's* prodding iron and he gave the elephant a few hard blows on her head. He also used the sharp ends of the prodding iron to stab the elephant's body. Blood oozed out from a few wounds. Elfie was hurt and became furious. She trumpeted loudly and tried to break loose but the chains and the heavy logs held her fast. As usual we had to assist her. It so happened that the Japanese officer was on an inspection tour and after the incident he went off to another camp. All of us soon forgot about the incident, especially as we had to get on with our job and had no time for daydreaming.

A few weeks later, the same officer returned. This time, the elephant had a lighter load and was hauling the log more easily. When she saw or had the scent of the Japanese officer, she must have remembered the harsh treatment he gave her. All of a sudden she went berserk. She chased him. The load she was hauling did not have any effect on her pace. Luckily, the hauling chain became entangled with a tree and her advance was finally checked. The pale Japanese officer managed to escape, but I am sure he must have been very frightened. As far as I can remember, he never came back to inspect our work again. Evidently he

too must have been convinced that the elephant does have a long memory.

The cutting and building up of earth embankments was a tricky job. It was not dangerous, but negotiating the slippery slopes could sometimes cause accidents. Someone could easily slip and fall together with the load he was carrying. We had inadequate means of transporting the many tons of earth and had to resort to primitive methods. Earth was normally carried in either flimsy bamboo baskets or a makeshift stretcher made from rice sacks strung on bamboo frames. The stretchers were carried by two men. The usual procedure would be to scramble up the slopes, dump the load of earth and quickly scramble back for another load. With the rain, the slopes became very slippery. The conditions worsened with the continual procession of fast-moving men carrying their heavy loads. Some were known to have slipped and fell down taking along their loads with disastrous effects.

With the heavy work, insufficient food, malnutrition and exposure to the weather, our health and body resistance deteriorated. We were thus easy prey to various illnesses that invaded the camp. Many of us fell victims to malaria, dysentery and diarrhoea, but the worst of all was cholera.

In early June 1943 cholera, the dreadful disease, broke out in the camp. It soon spread like an uncontrolled bush fire. The doctors and medical orderlies had little or no experience of tropical disease, especially cholera. Nevertheless, they did all they could to contain the disease. In the early stages, cholera victims were not segregated from the rest of the group and this helped the disease to spread. There was really no treatment for cholera in the camp. Anyone who contracted the disease had automatically received a death sentence: cholera was a terminal disease. A cholera victim just discharged all his body fluids either through the mouth or anus at frequent intervals. Within a few hours, the body became so dehydrated that the victim soon died. The majority died within twenty-four hours of showing the first sign of the disease.

One night when I returned from work, I found Blaike, a fellow

volunteer and immediate neighbour, lying on his side. He was ill and looked very pathetic. I collected his meal and tried to coax him to eat. He just shook his head. He did not have an appetite for the meagre and unpalatable food. I then offered him a cup of hot tea. Again he shook his head. He was so weak and made me feel so sorry as I knew his life was ebbing away. He later began vomiting and purging as he lay on the sleeping platform – the obvious symptoms of cholera, especially as there was already an epidemic in the camp. There was nothing I could do to help him. I ate my meal, warmed myself before the fire and soon exhaustion made me sleep soundly. Some time during the night, I felt Blaike's body leaning against me. I thought he was uneasy and could not sleep. I moved away a little to give him a bit more space. Somehow, his body continued to lean on me. Being tired and sleepy, I just slept soundly. Next morning when I awoke, I found Blaike was stiff and stone-cold. Evidently his corpse had been leaning on me for quite some time.

At the height of the cholera epidemic, about thirty-five men were dying each day. By the time the epidemic abated about three weeks later, more than six hundred men had died.

There was neither the time nor the men to bury the dead in individual graves. All the corpses were cremated *en masse* over a large open fire outside our camp which was continually fed with logs from the nearby jungle. The raging fire was kept burning even during heavy rain. At night, the glow of the fire lit up the black sky, its dancing flames glowing against a back-drop of the heavy dark foliage. The smell of the burnt corpses filled the air. It made me sick in my stomach, especially as I knew that some of my friends or relatives were being cremated. The cremation of corpses was done manually and was another job I did in Songkurai. On one occasion when I flung a corpse into the fire, he was seen to be stretching his arms and legs. I thought he was trying to climb out of the fire. My immediate reaction was that it was either a spirit or that someone alive had been thrown in. Anyway, there was nothing my partner and I could do to retrieve him from the fire. The heat of the inferno was too great. On reporting the matter to the doctor, I was relieved to learn that it

was *rigor mortis*. It appears that the heat was constricting the dead man's sinews and muscles thereby causing movement of the hands and legs.

Even while the cholera epidemic was raging, the work on the railway track and the bridge went on uninterrupted. The Japanese engineers had a target date to meet for the completion of the Siam-Burma railway. They were determined to achieve it. In an effort to make us work at a faster pace, those slave drivers would incessantly shout '*speedo*', meaning faster. Invariably, shouts of '*speedo*' were accompanied by clubbings with clenched fists, hefty kicks, or rifle butts.

The behaviour of our guards and engineers, whether Japanese or Korean, was unpredictable. It was disturbing to note the irrational behaviour of our guards who might suddenly attack us for no apparent reason. Sometimes, it was possible that some bad news from home or military setbacks in other theatres of war drove our guards to greater fury. A few slaps then developed into a horrific clubbing with the rifle butt or violent punching and kicking. The ultimate result would be a senseless crumpled body left lying helplessly on the muddy ground. No one, not even our officer, could help him. He lay there all day either in the rain or sun. In the evening, the subdued guard would allow the battered man to be carried by his colleagues back to camp. The chance of an emaciated victim recovering was very slim. On some other occasions, apparently sick men, who were naturally slow in their work, were badly kicked. The unlucky ones were pushed from the uncompleted bridge into the river to be swept away by its fast-flowing water.

I would like to relate a specific instance of the unpredictable and irrational behaviour of our guards. I witnessed it in disgust and anger especially as there was no reason for their action. Joe, a fellow volunteer, was assigned the task of chopping some wood. A pint-sized Korean guard with devilish eyes kept watch over Joe who was chopping some wood. Having delivered the first blow with his axe, Joe was in a bending position. The guard who was standing behind suddenly gave him a hefty kick on his genitals. Joe's reflexes caused him to stand up immediately. He was still

holding the axe above his head. The guard clubbed him with his rifle and yelled hysterically in Japanese. Presumably, he accused Joe of attempting to attack him, whereupon two other guards joined him. The trio then gave Joe a terrible bashing with their rifle butts, flavoured with multiple punches and hefty kicks. Our officer tried to intervene, but they brushed him aside and continued with their mad orgy. When they finally stopped, Joe lay moaning on the ground. They dragged him up and tied him to a wooden post. He looked pathetic with a badly bruised face and blackened body. He was kept at the post for three days and nights exposed to the elements to be tormented by bluebottle flies during the day and mosquitoes or sand flies at night. To add to his misery, whenever any of the guards was in a bad mood, he walked up to Joe, yelled at him in Japanese and either kicked him or gave him a few slaps across his face.

In the night some of us crept up to feed Joe as he stood tied to the post. Others kept a lookout for any approaching Japanese. On the third day, following another round of brutal attacks, the Japanese untied him. Joe immediately collapsed on the spot. They allowed us to carry him away to the sick bay. The medical team gave him some quinine tablets to ease his pain and attended to his wounds. He remained in the sick bay for a few days. The medics did a good job and Joe miraculously survived the ordeal and eventually left Songkurai. He returned to Changi and lived there until the end of the war. As far as I am aware, Joe is still alive today, but he does not want to remember that incident when he was so close to death.

By the end of August 1943 the many deaths in the camp had greatly depleted our work force. Although the construction of the railway and the bridge was in a fairly advanced stage the Japanese engineers doubted that the remaining work force would be able to complete the project in time. They decided to reinforce our work force. They brought in another three hundred Australian prisoners-of-war from a neighbouring camp. The Australians were part of the same 'F' Force and had been doing the same type of work for the past three months. They arrived wearing G-strings or ragged shorts and most of them were

bare-footed. The shrill tune of 'Colonel Bogey' filled the air as the motley column of Australians whistled their way into our camp. Like most of us, they looked like living skeletons. Anyway we were happy to have the extra hands to help us in completing our task. For some reason, the Japanese generally did not mix the British and Australian prisoners. They were also assigned separate jobs although, on a few occasions, some of the work teams were mixed.

Despite our spirit of comradeship, there was one aspect I could not tolerate when working with both the British and Australian prisoners-of-war in Songkurai. That was their free use of the word 'bastard'. They seemed to relish using it either in jest, anger or contempt. Perhaps they did not know the true meaning of the word. On the other hand, they possibly had a total disregard of other people's sensitivity. Anyway, to them every Japanese was a bastard. We were generally warned of any approaching Japanese when someone yelled, 'here comes the bastard!' Once I felt amused when I heard someone saying, 'Them bastard fish is damned good.'

I must say that my fellow volunteers, whether European or Eurasians, were more civil. I spent much time with them, not only in Songkurai but in other work camps as well. I had never heard any of them express that offensive word. Having been brought up in a society where calling someone a bastard is defamatory, and could lead to a libel suit, I naturally resented it, especially when it was directed at me or one of my colleagues.

On one particular occasion, Louis, a fellow Eurasian volunteer, was carrying a 'stretcher' of earth. He felt ill and sat down on the muddy ground. His partner, a Britisher, yelled at him, 'Come on, you black bastard, we'll have to finish our job!' It was bad enough being yelled at by the Japanese tyrants, but being yelled at by a fellow prisoner and being called a black bastard really made me see red.

I stopped what I was doing and went up to him. He was taller than me. Recalling the advice my 'godfather' gave me in Changi, I sized him up and felt confident I could take him on if necessary.

I said to him, 'Look here, Titch, you should not have called him

by that name. Can't you see he is sick? Who do you think you are, a stooge of the Nips?'

'I can call anyone any name I like!' he replied.

'Don't you dare to repeat that word!' I warned him.

'Get off my back, you black bastard!' he sneered.

'You will be sorry,' I said, and then my well placed punch to his jaw sent him flat on to the ground. I quickly knelt on his chest and squeezed his mouth. With my right hand raised, ready to deliver another blow, I warned him again, 'Never dare to call me or any of my colleagues a black bastard again. If you do, I'll smash your big mouth!'

Meanwhile, the British and Australian prisoners had gathered around us. While the Britishers yelled at me not to hit a man when he was down, the Australians were urging me on to 'teach the Pommie bastard a good lesson'. Louis became the peace-maker. He pleaded with me to end the row. I then pulled up the Britisher and reiterated 'Remember what I told you and never dare again', and turned to his colleagues and said, 'I would never hit a man on the ground. I know your Bloomsbury-style boxing, but that is for gentlemen only. A gentleman doesn't go around calling other people a bastard.' From then on, no one ever called me or my colleagues that name. However, they still freely called their mates 'bastards'. Some days after that incident, poor Louis died. I felt sorry for him. In a way, I was happy that I had been able to stand by him when he was alive and was abused by a lousy fellow prisoner.

There, in Songkurai, far away from civilisation our ultimate fate was uncertain. There was no reason to hope for anything. Many had given up hope for their survival. Although, quite a number of men would invariably yell, 'Oh God' when they were in pain or were being brutalised, yet in other circumstances they would readily say, 'There is no God'. When I questioned them about the logic of their expressions at different times they would reply, 'If there is a God, why did He allow this to happen to us?'

Those dejected men had lost confidence in themselves. They had also lost their faith in God. They saw no hope. For the majority like them, their inevitable doom soon became a reality. Many

knew that every day that passed by brought them closer to the end, but they could not say what they hoped the end, would be.

Despite the hopeless environment, the spiritual aspect of our life was not overlooked by our good and tireless chaplain. I remember him as Father Walsh. He was a Catholic priest attached to the Australian Forces. He never forgot his flock who were working as slaves along the entire 400-kilometre Siam-Burma railway. The Good Lord gave him the strength to carry out his mission. He went from camp to camp along the railway line to attend to the spiritual needs of all the men who shared his faith, relying on his two strong legs to move around. The Japanese did not provide him with any transport, but they did not hinder him in his work.

I remember Father Walsh arriving at our camp one day just before lunch time. He brought along a portable improvised altar which he assembled and waited for our lunch break. It was about the end of the rainy season, but although continual rain had fallen during the preceding days, there was no rain on that particular day. Even the sky was not overcast. Some rays of the sun managed to penetrate the grey clouds and the thick jungle foliage and it shone on the little jungle clearing which was to be our place of worship. That was a good omen. It gave me that ray of hope for my ultimate survival.

When our guards shouted '*Yasmei*' (rest), we dropped our tools. We had a hurried lunch – there was nothing much and it did not take long to eat. Then all those who still had faith in God gathered around Father Walsh and eagerly waited for Holy Mass to begin. That was the first Mass we had attended for about five months. There was only a small group around the altar, most of whom were my fellow Eurasian colleagues. Father Walsh advised us to remain standing for the Mass but we chose to kneel on the cold, soggy ground. We were grateful to have had the opportunity of attending Mass and receiving Holy Communion – it was an unexpected divine presence in that forsaken camp, deep in the jungles of Siam. After the Mass, Father Walsh stayed with us for a while, chatting with those dejected men before going on his westward journey to another camp nearer Burma.

I expected to see Father Walsh again on his return journey, but he never came. Anyway the short sermon he gave during Mass was a morale booster. Despair had given way to hope.

To me, Songkurai will always be synonymous with the never-ending yells of *speedo*, the uncalled-for brutality and the irrational behaviour of the Japanese and Korean guards. I personally experienced or witnessed so much brutality that after a time, it made me believe what was generally said about the Japanese, especially in our camp. The consensus of the majority of the men was that 'there is no good Jap, and the only good Jap is a dead one, when he is totally harmless'.

It would, however, be fair to mention that among the group of bashing-happy Japanese tyrants I came across one engineer, who for a moment was humane and civilised. It is possible that as the construction of the Siam-Burma railway was nearing completion there was no need to be brutal any more and their humanity was brought out. The sun had just begun to brighten our days, giving us a ray of hope that soon our task would be over. The afternoon sun was hot. It began to wear us down especially in our weakened state. Suddenly, the Japanese railway engineer in charge of our group called out *Yasmei*. It was an unscheduled and unexpected rest period. We quickly stopped work and sought some shade under some nearby trees.

The Japanese engineer sat on a log close by us. Then he pointed at Charlie and beckoned him to come forward. Our immediate reaction was that Charlie was in for a bashing. Charlie was a bit nervous as he walked towards the Japanese. He did not get the expected bashing. Instead, he was asked to sit beside the engineer on the log. Charlie still did not know what to expect. Then, taking a cigarette from an opened packet, he gave it to Charlie.

'*Arigato*,' Charlie said as he tried to keep the cigarette in the pocket of his tattered shorts. He was hoping to share the cigarette with us later in the evening.

The Japanese engineer shook his head. He looked a little displeased. Producing a cigarette lighter he lit Charlie's cigarette and asked him to smoke it. The Japanese then lit a cigarette for

himself. Both Charlie and the Japanese began puffing away.

The Japanese then beckoned all of us to gather around the smoking pair. For a while we watched the two smoking happily. The Japanese was making smoke rings as he puffed out the smoke from his mouth. Charlie felt a bit uneasy seeing us watching him smoking. He tried to share his cigarette with us. Once again the Japanese forbade him.

Having taunted us enough, the Japanese produced a new packet and handed out a cigarette to each one of us. He then lit all our cigarettes and told us to smoke. The scene was reminiscent of the warring Red Indian tribes smoking the 'pipe of peace'.

The Japanese engineer had a cheeky smile on his cruel face as he watched the motley group dressed only in tattered shorts or G-strings happily smoking the cigarettes. At the same time, he kept nodding his head like a puppet. After some time, he asked, 'Okay, good.' We all replied, 'Okay, very good.' His smile widened. To our surprise he spoke in English and said: 'Not all Japanese are bastards.'

As a fitting conclusion to this chapter, I would like to tell the story of how four men of the Singapore Volunteer Corps consisting of a lieutenant, a corporal and two privates made a dramatic exit from this hell on earth. After they left, there was a mixed reaction amongst us as to whether they were brave, adventurous or foolhardy, as they had no compass, no survival kit and no knowledge of the native language of the region they were passing through or heading for. Even the sun did not want a hand in their venture and hid behind the rain-laden clouds. Nevertheless, we kept our fingers crossed, always hoping that they would ultimately reach their destination and make our plight known.

It happened while the cholera epidemic was raging and the death rate was very high. Perhaps the thought that the death knell would ring for them sooner or later, made them decide to make a dash for freedom while they still had the strength. Furthermore, there was no daily roll-call as the Japanese soldiers dared not enter the camp grounds because of the epidemic.

Their escape plan was simple, but they succeeded in getting

out. Their belongings were carefully placed on a water-proofed ground sheet to resemble a motionless human form which was covered with another ground sheet. It was raining heavily as usual, as the four men dressed only in tattered shorts and worn out boots, each carrying one end of the sheet walked nonchalantly up to the gate.

In normal circumstances, they would have been searched by the Japanese guards at the gate, but for fear of the dreaded disease, they were satisfied to watch another 'cholera victim' pass by on its way to the cremation site, thus giving the four men an easy passage to freedom.

According to their plan, they split into two groups, one with Lieutenant M and a private who would head westwards to try to make contact with the British troops fighting in Burma, while Corporal R and the other private would head north for China. They depended on instinct to guide them through the dense jungle.

It was later learned that only Lieutenant M managed to reach a Burmese village where he was looked after, but somehow, either through betrayal or sheer bad luck, Japanese soldiers appeared and captured him. He was taken to the Rangoon prison, and later when the British Army were closing in on Rangoon, he was transferred to the Outram Road prison in Singapore, where he died before Singapore was liberated.

I often wondered whether any or all of them would have survived the ordeal in Songkurai had they not made that remarkable escape, but being a fatalist, I believe that their destiny was preordained anyway.

CHAPTER 11

My Battle For Survival

Before we left Changi, the Japanese promised us a rest camp in the north, with plenty of food and some light duties. That did not materialise. What I found was really a hell on earth, a very far cry from Changi. There was no rest in this slave-labour camp. Instead, we had plenty of hard work and long hours daily.

The food was meagre and lacked nutrition. It was not only totally inadequate to sustain life, but was grossly incompatible with the extremely heavy work which we did. We never had a morsel of meat with any of our meals throughout our stay in Songkurai. Every day, we had three meals and each meal consisted of boiled rice and boiled chick peas or some fried dried fish.

The Japanese lied about the weather. They said that the so-called hill resort had a good environment and its weather was better than that prevailing in Singapore. The environment I found was a mosquito-infested, dense jungle. As for the weather, the south-west monsoon was in full blast. There was rain, rain and more rain. It just rained continually; there was no let up. On the other hand, the rain was indeed a blessing: my body did not become dehydrated and never felt thirsty even with the hard work. Although drinking water was available from the kitchen, I dared not drink any, even though I knew the water had been boiled. On one or two occasions when I really felt the thirst for water, I would just face skywards with my mouth wide open and allowed the heavy raindrops to enter into my mouth and satisfy my thirst.

Almost everybody in Songkurai was afflicted with some sort of illness. It was either diarrhoea, dysentery, malaria or jaundice. To aggravate matters, cholera swept the camp taking in its wake many lives. Then there were tropical ulcers: they blossomed and spread on the legs of many men. I could not understand why ulcers generally attacked the legs and not the other parts of the body. Ulcers seemed difficult to cure, due possibly to the lack of body resistance and, invariably, most ulcers reached the stage when the limb had to be amputated to put an end to the sufferer's agony.

It did not take long for the majority of the men to feel the strain of the continual heavy work. Malnutrition and exhaustion lowered our capacity to ward off diseases. Soon, most of us fell ill and many died. Our morale declined. Many of us were on the threshold of despair. There was nothing we could do but to hope for the best. Even when we went to sleep after the 'day' was over, we never knew whether we would see the light of another day.

In Songkurai life hung by a thread. Death was a daily occurrence. No matter how many died, the work on the construction of the railway went on and the pace was dictated by shouts of *speedo*. It was just like the Christian slaves manning the long oars on the Roman galleys where the speed of rowing was dictated by the beat of the drum. The work must be completed at all costs. Every available man had to go out to work irrespective of the state of his health.

There was a sort of a struggle within me: one half of my spirit was feeling despondent, but the other half kept telling me not to be pessimistic. I remembered my strong Catholic upbringing. I always had a strong belief in the Almighty God and I knew that He would always provide the courage and strength to surmount any difficulty. My better half triumphed. I became confident that my faith would lead me home. Whether it be to my family home or to a heavenly home was the prerogative of the Almighty One to decide. At the same time I felt that if I did my best, the Good Lord would do the rest. My religious belief spurred my fighting spirit to greater heights and the hope for survival. With such confidence, and the vigour of my young manhood, I was determined to get out of Songkurai alive.

Life in Songkurai was tough and knew I had to be tough to survive. In order to be tough I had to be fit. As far as possible, I would not allow any illness to overpower me. I had a strange feeling that if I ever went down, I would never rise again. I decided that even if I fell ill, I would go on working. I was prepared to eat whatever thrash the Japanese gave to me so that my body would at least get some strength. I would try to withstand stoically anything those cruel and brutal Japanese soldiers handed out to me. I was determined to stay alive.

Among the few little things which I brought with me from Changi were a jack-knife and an aluminium can with a handle. Both these items were given to me by Allan, my elder brother, during one of his visits to me at the Bukit Timah Camp in Singapore. They became my most treasured possessions and stayed with me for many years after the war was over. I had also brought along a medium-sized packet of Ceylon tea leaves, a bottle of cooking salt, some laundry-starch flour and two rolls of 75mm wide cotton bandages. I had also with me an empty, screwcapped 'Bismag' (a brand of anti-acid tablets) bottle.

All the foregoing items may appear insignificant in everyday life. At that time in Songkurai, where the prevailing atmosphere was one of despair dominated by deprivation and brutality, they were indeed very precious to me. All those little things played an important role in my struggle for survival whilst working on the infamous Siam-Burma railway.

During the entire period when I was a slave in Songkurai, I had really worked every day, irrespective of my condition: I never missed a single day's work. I was involved in both constructional and non-constructional work. I had once walked to Burma to collect our rice supplies and returned with a 50kg bag of rice on my back. I was not trying to portray a tough image. I just wanted to ensure that illness did not conquer me and smother my life away. I knew I had to work hard to stay alive. Every night, before I went to bed, I prayed with my rosary. I always prayed to the Good Lord to let me see the light of another day. In the morning when I awoke, I faced the day with a renewed hope despite the fact that a day's hard work lay ahead, and I could possibly be a victim of

another storm of abuse or sadistic brutality. Nevertheless, every new day that I lived was another day closer to the completion of the railway when I hoped to leave Songkurai alive.

Life in Songkurai was a real test of my endurance. Even when I felt really ill, I did not admit it. I felt that by doing so, I would be conceding defeat. I always had that frightening belief that if I went down, lethargy would keep me down and I would never rise again. That was what I saw happen to many of my colleagues. When they fell sick, they became unwilling or unable to get up to go out to work in the morning. They would be lying helplessly on the sleeping platform as I walked away from the hut to go to work. When I returned in the evening, I found that they had gone on a journey of no return. Fate had decided their destiny, but then, sometimes, you could still cheat fate. It was possible that if any of them had made an effort to get up and go to work, they would not have succumbed. Work was a sort of exercise. It helped to tone up and toughen my body. I still had a lot of good flesh on my skeletal frame.

Despite the extreme hardships, aggravated by brutal treatment, illness and a starvation diet, I was determined to stay alive, so that one day I would be able to let the world know what really happened in a labour camp deep in the jungles of Siam. My total faith in the power of prayers gave me unlimited hope. My sheer determination helped me survive the six-month ordeal on the Siam-Burma railway and eventually welcomed the glorious day of my liberation from captivity on 5 September 1945.

Life for me in Songkurai was never plain sailing. I took a fair amount of bashings, kickings and clubbing. These were frequently meted out by both the Korean guards and the Japanese railway engineers in their determination to get me and my colleagues to work beyond exhaustion, generally during torrential rain. The jungle air was always filled with the incessant yells of the Japanese soldiers. As time went on, I became immune to their yells. I had also developed an enormous capacity for endurance.

There is one brutal incident which is deeply entrenched in my memory. It happened on one occasion when a Korean guard, for no apparent reason, severely bashed me with a *changkol*, giving

me a hard blow across the left side of my head. I went reeling down to the muddy ground. As I stroked the side of my head, I felt some blood oozing out from my ear. It trickled down my cheek. My first fear was that my skull or brain had been damaged.

In response to my reflexes and the belief that if you are down, you are out, I got up quickly. I looked at him defiantly and earned myself a bonus punishment. Grabbing the *changkol* again, he gave me another hefty blow. This time, he hit my left leg. It caused a big gash on my shin. In pain, I knelt down rubbing my shin. Soon my hand became bloodstained. For a moment, the pain was unbearable. I did some quick thinking about my next move. I decided to remain kneeling down rather than risk getting a second bonus. I massaged my leg trying to ease the pain and at the same time, I kept watching what the Korean devil would do next.

The Korean guard looked at me sneeringly. He was still holding on to the *changkol*. Then he gave me a hefty kick on my chest causing me to fall flat on my back onto the muddy ground. As a grand finale, he yelled at me in Japanese as he stood over me. I interpreted it as an order to get on with my work, so I obeyed quickly. I forgot about the pain as I stood up and continued with my work. He was proud and happy that he had proved himself to be my master. Having satisfied his lust for brutality, he walked away coolly, still displaying that unforgettable sinister smile on his cruel face. In normal circumstances, I could have given him a good punishment in a fair fight.

Some time later, blood was still oozing out from the wound on my shin. I scrounged around for some jute string and made a torniquet to stop the bleeding. I also did my best to keep away the flies and the mud from my wound by bandaging it with some wild banana leaves from the jungle.

On returning back to the camp that night, I immediately went to the sick bay. The medical orderly cleaned my wound and painted it with some Mecurochrome. He also put a drop of Mecurochrome into my ear, and gave me two quinine tablets to ease my pain. That was all the medical orderly could do for me, but I was satisfied. It was a miracle that my young skull did not suffer any damage. Eventually however, my hearing became impaired.

The wound on my shin would not dry up. The daily application of the Mecurochrome solution had no healing effect. It was partly because the exposed wound came into daily contact with the river water and mud splashes whilst working on the construction site. There were also frequent brushes with the heavy undergrowth which scratched the wound and caused much pain. To add to my misery, bluebottle flies would sometimes hover around the wound. I made sure they did not settle on it and lay their eggs, thus preventing further infestation. Eventually the wound on my shin developed into an ulcer. It was something I had feared and I had a frightening feeling that I could lose my leg as had happened to many others.

Other than cholera, the next worst thing to get in Songkurai was a tropical ulcer on the leg. They usually start with a slight scratch or a wound, and as the body resistance was low, the ulcer ate into the flesh and bones until, eventually, the amputation of the leg became inevitable.

Amputation was usually performed under primitive conditions. There was not even a simple field operating theatre, neither was there any anaesthetic or proper surgical instruments. Such instruments as were used were improvised from cutlery or made from bamboo. I once witnessed an amputation operation being carried out with only an ordinary carpenter's cross-cut saw. The patient yelled with pain while two medical orderlies held him down. In many cases, without proper post-operation care, gangrene set in and the patient died. Either way, with or without amputation, ulcers caused death in most cases.

The ulcerated wound on my left shin was very painful. I endured it stoically in silence. It spread rapidly and already there was a septic smell. A visit to the doctor would not help as there appeared to be no cure for ulcers in our depleted condition. What the doctor could do was only to prescribe some quinine tablets to ease the pain. The possibility of having to amputate my leg kept haunting me.

The sight of ulcers spreading on the legs of many fellow prisoners, the excruciating pain reflected on their faces, sometimes accompanied by cries of agony and the amputation of their limbs to terminate their misery, made me even more fearful. In a deter-

mined bid to save my leg, I was prompted to try an unorthodox method of treatment for my ulcers even though it seemed drastic.

I had developed a high threshold of pain. I was determined to try out my intended unorthodox method of treatment no matter how painful it would be. To me, if there was no pain there would be no gain. I wanted to ensure that eventually I would survive and continue walking with my own two feet. I did not want to hobble around with an artificial leg for the rest of my life. I decided to experiment with my own hitherto untested 'maggot-and-salt therapy'.

My method of treatment was simple but painful. My few cousins who were in the same camp and other colleagues had a mixed feeling of shock and amazement. Eventually, however, it proved effective and was successful. I do not think my method was ever tried by any other men with ulcers on their legs. I made a saline solution by boiling water with some cooking salt and used it to bathe my ulcer. With a pair of improvised chopsticks, which I made out of bamboo using my jack knife, I selected two young maggots from the open latrines and having washed them, I placed the wriggling maggots on my ulcer. The wound was then bandaged and was kept wrapped up for three days. The maggots would no doubt eat up the dead flesh.

Meanwhile, I did not think about it and continued working on the railway and the bridge daily. During my spare time, I used my jack knife to make a scalpel from bamboo. All the while, I felt excruciating pain as the maggots gnawed away the dead flesh. Concentration on my work made me temporarily forget the agony.

On the evening of the fourth day, I removed the soiled bandage as I sat beside the bonfire. The wound emitted a foul septic smell. Having sterilised my scalpel in the boiling saline solution, I then scraped away the maggots and all the dead flesh. The mess was immediately thrown into the fire. By then, bright red blood began to flow out of the wound. I knew I had reached the layer of good flesh. I bathed the wound with some warm saline solution again and having sprinkled some grains of cooking salt

on the open wound, I applied a fresh bandage. For some time, the wound was smarting badly, but I withstood the pain. The soiled bandage was washed, boiled for some time and dried over the fire for re-use on the next day.

The cleaning of the wound, application of cooking salt and bandaging was repeated daily for about four weeks until a scab was formed. I was happy that I had made good progress, so I continued with my treatment until I was sure my ulcer was completely healed. Eventually, I was extremely glad that I had been able to save my leg from possible amputation. A 150cm scar on my shin now remains as a silent but permanent reminder not so much of the Korean guard's brutality but of my successful attempt with an unorthodox method of treatment to save my leg from an inevitable amputation.

Besides the ulcer, I also had malaria, jaundice and diarrhoea. I usually went to the sick bay and joined the 'quinine queue', to collect my daily ration of six quinine tablets. At first, I took the full dose as prescribed by the doctor, but I had some side effects. I felt lethargic and there were ringing noises in my ears. I decided to reduce the dosage. I took only one tablet three times a day. The remaining three quinine tablets were stored in my empty 'Bismag' bottle for some other need. It took a longer time, but eventually my malaria was cured without suffering any side effects.

I next turned my attention to my jaundice. Again, the usual medicine prescribed by the doctor was a daily dose of six quinine tablets. After taking the full dose for few days, I did not make any progress. My whole body including my eyes and urine became yellow in colour. I felt sick and at times was too lazy to get up. Not wanting to concede defeat, I forced myself to get up and go out to work, even in the rain. The heavy work involving the movement of my hands and legs promoted my blood circulation which in turn warmed me up and made me feel less lethargic. Since I had been successful in healing my ulcers by an unorthodox treatment, I felt that my jaundice too could likewise be healed by a non-standard type of medication. My thoughts went back many years in time. I remembered what my mother had prescribed for

our housemaid's child who had jaundice. I thought it a simple form of medication and decided to give it a try.

My medicine for the jaundice was none other than the plain laundry-starch flour which I had brought with me. Every morning, before going out to work and again in the evening before retiring, I just swallowed a cupful of plain boiled starch. It was tasteless, but I swallowed it willingly in the belief that it was beneficial for me. After a fortnight or so, the colour of my eyes and skin became normal again and I began to feel better and more active. Once again, a non-standard method of treatment proved successful. I do not know what was so wonderful about the starch, but it certainly cured my jaundice. Little was left of my laundry-starch flour, so I decided to finish up the balance to ensure that my cure was complete.

My attempt to cure my diarrhoea was a little more difficult. The diarrhoea came and went off frequently and it was hard to know whether I was making any headway. The usual prescription of six quinine tablets a day was of no help. Then I remembered my mother's remedy when I was a boy. She made me drink a cup of very strong black tea. I thought that it was worth trying out that remedy, especially as the frequent discharge from my bowels was making me weak. It was possible that if my body resistance was very low, I could become a victim of the dreaded cholera. I drank some strong brew of black tea every morning and night conscientiously.The intervals between discharge became protracted until my diarrhoea stopped, but it turned out to be a temporary success for, after a while, the diarrhoea returned. The strong tea-brew remedy did not have much effect. I made the tea brew stronger and took a bigger dose of the bitter concoction, but the diarrhoea persisted. It was possible that the germs in my stomach had grown immune to the tannic acid in the black tea. The only option open to me was to try something different and my thoughts turned to charcoal.

I gathered some lumps of charcoal from the bonfire and pulverised it. I then took two teasponsful of the jet-black powder. My mouth, filled with the powder, became dry and I found it difficult to swallow it, so I washed it down with a drink of the

black tea. I even sprinkled some charcoal powder on my cold rice which I had for all my meals. The charcoal powder, washed down with the black tea, was regularly taken for about a week.

My new treatment proved effective. My diarrhoea was completely checked, nevertheless I continued with the treatment for a few more days just to ensure that the diarrhoea did not return. There was no longer any necessity to run off into the jungle during the day to drain off the messy fluid from my body, neither did I have to grope in the dark to find my way to the open latrines at unearthly hours of the night. Strangely enough, I never had diarrhoea again, either during the rest of the time working in Songkurai or thereafter in Changi.

The daily meals served in the camp were not only unpalatable, but had no nutritional value, nor were they sufficient to fill my belly, with the extremely hard work I had to do. Nevertheless, I ate without a murmur whatever meal was given to me, always hoping that it would sustain me and keep me alive. I tried to make my evening meals more palatable by sprinkling some cooking salt, a source of calcium, on my rice. Sometimes, instead of salt, I used sugar or honey with my food, not only to make my meal more palatable but to give me some energy. The sugar and honey were surreptiously bought from a Siamese trader by the riverside.

The Songkurai work camp was situated in the most remote region of Siam near its border with Burma. It was a God-forsaken place. One could not expect to see any other human being, except for those in the camp and the occasional columns of Japanese troops marching by on their way to the Burma Front. In spite of being isolated, a few Siamese and Burmese traders found their way into our work site. They were all males and they came up river by paddle boats. They usually waited by the river's edge among some bulrushes. They had to attract our attention by imitating bird calls but, somehow, they managed to elude our Korean guards.

These traders offered for sale only goods that they thought were saleable. They usually brought native biscuits, bananas, dried fish, local cigarettes and hens' eggs. Some of the eggs were raw and some were hard boiled. Sometimes they brought sugar,

native honey and tinned provisions. I learnt to bargain well. Rather than having to go back without making a sale, they would invariably agree to a reduced price.

I always dealt with one particular Siamese trader, as he spoke a bit of English. He looked more like a Chinese and sported a thick black moustache with tufts of hair trailing like tassels on either side of his mouth. As he looked like an old man, I called him *Ah Pek* (old man in Chinese). He was kind and always charged me a fair price. He was obliging too: if he did not have the things I wanted, he never failed to bring them along on his next trip. He visited our work site fortnightly or thereabouts, and always during our lunch break.

The surplus of quinine tablets which I had accumulated were sold to *Ah Pek* at intervals. In return, I bought from him various things, such as raw hens' eggs, bananas, dried fish, palm sugar and honey. All these 'luxuries' supplemented the meagre and tasteless camp meals. They were also my source of vitamins, proteins, calcium and carbohydrates. In some way they were instrumental in keeping me alive and active.

Although my immediate neighbours in the hut knew of my hoard of such luxuries, I had never lost anything. Sometimes, I would share some of my 'luxuries' with them. The majority of the men in the camp bought native tobacco and hens' eggs. The tobacco was made into crude cigarettes by rolling the tobacco with any odd bits of paper they could get, but generally, tobacco was smoked in an improvised pipe made from bamboo.

Some of the dried fish which I bought from *Ah Pek* was later bartered with some Japanese soldiers who were on their way to the Burma war front. They usually marched past our camp and on a few occasions, their rest break coincided with our lunch period. Once some of the soldiers sat not far away from me having made themselves comfortable before removing their lunch packs from their haversacks. Each of them had a packet of boiled white rice and a tin of 'Imperial' corned beef.

On that particular day, I had brought along with me some uncooked dried fish. By sheer coincidence, we were also served a similar type of fried fish with our rice. As the fried fish was cold

and mine was uncooked, I toasted it on the open fire. The strong smell of the toasted fish must have attracted the attention of some of the Japanese soldiers. The one who sat quite close to me kept looking in my direction, his unshaven face making him look shabby and fierce. He was really staring at my fish. I envied him and was longing for a taste of his corned beef. As far as I am aware, 'Imperial' corned beef was never made in Japan. It was therefore possible that the tinned meat had formed part of a Red Cross consignment for Allied prisoners-of-war and which was never delivered to us.

In my mind, I was toying with the idea of bartering with the Japanese soldier. I wondered how I could initiate action since neither of us spoke each other's language. Meanwhile, we both kept looking at each other's possession. Then our eyes met and he blurted out something in Japanese. I did not understand what he said. I seized the opportunity and said: *Changeo.* By a show of hands, the desire to exchange my ration of fish for his tin of corned beef was understood by both parties. The deal was closed with smiles on both faces. Later, I managed to get two colleagues to share the tin of corned beef in exchange for their ration of fish. Other colleagues wanted a share in the bargain. I then had to work fast before the tins of corned beef were opened and eaten by the Japanese soldiers.

By the time the lunch break was over, I had obtained for myself six precious tins of 'Imperial' corned beef. It was made easy through the good offices of my new-found Japanese 'business partner,' who was given a piece of fish as his commission. The tins of corned beef were carefully wrapped up with some wild banana leaves and were hidden inside a designated thick bush. That evening, the parcel was smuggled into the camp under cover of darkness. Normally, we were never searched on returning to the camp when the day's work was over.

That night, I opened one tin and made it into a thick, corned-beef stew. It went well with the plain cold rice that was served to us. Many of my colleagues had a share of the stew. Incidentally, the stew was made in the billycan which I used to brew my tea and also boil my soiled bandages during the treatment of my ulcer.

Another tin was given to my relatives who were at the other end of the hut to be shared amongst them. On another night, a tin was opened and just heated over the fire and we all had a spoonful of the corned beef with our rice. It was an excellent meal and it was repeated on another night. The remaining two tins of corned beef were bartered with *Ah Pek* on separate occasions for the usual 'luxuries' that I needed.

One day, someone in the camp stole an ox and slaughtered it. Then fresh beef was offered for sale illicitly. I heard of it and as I was fond of beef, I went on the prowl to trace the source. It did not take long to find the 'butcher' and buy myself a nice chunk of beef. Part of the meat was made into a stew while the rest was grilled quickly over the bonfire. The beef was done rare and it was so tender and succulent. I ate it quickly as it would have been confiscated if I had been caught with it. There was a great demand for the black-market beef and many others were grilling their meat over the fire too.

The smell of the roasted meat floated in the air within and outside our hut. Before long an officer came snooping around. He wanted to catch the culprit who had cooked illicitly and worse still, cooked the meat of a stolen ox. The smell of the freshly roasted meat lingered inside our hut as the officer walked down the entire length of the corridor. All he saw were some satisfied faces with many sarcastic smiles on the living skeletons.

Despite the poor, meagre food, I still managed to stay alive and strong. Unlike the great majority in the camp, I was not emaciated and did not look like a living skeleton. I attribute my healthy condition in Songkurai to the many extras and luxury items. I frequently ate hard-boiled or half-boiled eggs and sweet bananas to supplement the camp food and, sometimes, I used native sugar or honey to flavour my rice. In addition, the black-market fresh beef was also beneficial. All these luxuries were surreptiously bought on the black-market from *Ah Pek*, the ever-smiling, genial Siamese trader, who was partly responsible for my survival.

By September 1943, the construction of the railway line and the bridge over the River Kwai was in an advanced stage of completion. By then I had become immune to brutality and illness. Even the

hard work in the rain, dressed only in a pair of shorts, did not give me a chill or make me sick. My body resistance, instead of being lowered, had increased tremendously. No longer did a scratch on my leg become a sore and develop into an ulcer. The occasional bashings and kicks which I continued to receive seemed to have lost their sting. It was no longer painful to be clubbed by a rifle butt or be kicked on any part of my body, and I dared to be defiant.

In the days that followed, I continued to be involved in the heavy work. I no longer felt exhausted when the day's work was over. I had left Changi as a timid and gentle young man but Songkurai had turned me into a tough labourer. It was because of this toughness that I had been able to exist and survive. Anyway, by then, I knew that I had won my battle for survival in Songkurai: I had been able to withstand all the brutal treatment that I had received. I had encountered many difficulties and had been able to surmount all of them.

I became optimistic. Having survived for the past few months, I was confident I could survive just a little longer. Inside me, I had a strong feeling that soon the days of my slavery in Songkurai would be over. I always cherished the hope that one day in the not-too-distant future, the beautiful tropical sun would shine brightly when I would walk away alive and well from that earthly hell. I would always remember Songkurai as an intensive training ground for my manhood and, above all, as the place where I won the battle for my survival.

I do not think that I could have survived the ordeal on my own. I must admit that my religion and the firm belief in the Almighty One was the constant source of strength which always sustained me and gave me much hope during those dark and hellish days.

CHAPTER 12

Sayonara Songkurai

The month of October arrived like a gentle lamb. With its coming, the monsoonal rain seemed to be on the wane. The sun began to show its face more frequently, bringing warm and sunny days. To me the bright rays of the sun were a good omen, it brightening my hopes of saying *sayonara* (farewell) to Songkurai in the near future.

Despite the hardships I had endured, and the absence of a proper calendar, I remembered my birthday on 5 October. It was my twenty-second birthday and the second one I was spending in captivity. It was like any other day, just working all day and coming back dead tired in the evening. There was no celebration, but I gave myself an extra helping of honey and a boiled hen's egg with my evening meal. In my solitude, I just said a silent prayer for my continued good health and ultimate release from captivity. I hoped that it would be the last birthday I would spend in captivity.

The last few months had been a nightmare of hardship flavoured with much brutality even the weather had been cruel. Anyway, I was thankful that I had been able to keep myself alive and well in that hell on earth. I had surmounted all the hardships and after some time it was like a bad dream. Life in Songkurai was like living in a long dark tunnel with no sign of any light at the end.

The construction of the 16-kilometre stretch of railway track and the huge timber bridge across the River Kwai was virtually completed. There were some minor adjustments to be made, but

really we had completed our assignment. Nevertheless, there was no change in our daily routine.

About midday on 19 October 1943, there was jubilation at our work site as news filtered through that the entire length of the Siam-Burma railway had been completed. The stretch from Thanbyzayat in Burma and the stretch from Ban Pong in Siam were finally connected at Konkoita. The last spike was driven to secure the rails to the wooden sleepers amidst shouts of *Banzai* from the Japanese engineers and 'cheering' from Allied prisoners-of-war.

A simple ceremony was held and the Japanese railway engineers were reported to have driven a symbolic golden spike into the wooden sleeper. In effect, it was just a gold-coloured ebony spike pushed into a prepared hole.

The Japanese had achieved their ambition of opening the gateway to India. We were happy, not because the Japanese had completed the railway, which in a way would then be used to help their troops engaged in fighting the British on the Burma Front, but because our days of slavery were over. Though our days in Songkurai were numbered, I often wondered how much longer I would have to continue living in that hell hole before I could really say *sayonara* to Songkurai.

On subsequent days, we still went out to work as usual. Generally, the work had eased off considerably. The yells of *speedo* were no longer heard, and here were no more shouts of *kurra*. Above all, there were no more clubbings, bashings or kickings. The Japanese engineers and Korean soldiers became less belligerent and appeared to be a bit more amiable.

There was more free time. We returned to camp earlier while it was still bright. During some free time, I took the opportunity of wandering around the nearby jungle to admire the many beautiful orchids up in the trees. I also saw many colourful carp swimming vigorously in the clear water of the river. I tried to throw rocks at them, but they scattered away as soon as the rocks hit the water. All these beauties of the jungle and river had never been noticed before.

The Japanese soldiers had also learnt of the existence of the fish in the river. Their liking for fish prompted them to go 'fishing'.

They did not use a net or a hook and line, but instead they threw dynamite charges into the river. The explosions stunned the fish, which floated to the surface to be carried away by the fast-flowing waters. Then they forced a few of the prisoners to jump into the river downstream and gather them up.

The Japanese soldiers would be walking briskly along the banks following the floating fish. All the fish we gathered had to be thrown onto the bank and were quickly snatched by the Japanese. Most of us took a share of the catch by hiding one or two fishes in our shorts before getting out of the river further downstream. Had we been caught with them, we would have been severely punished as the Japanese considered stealing to be a very serious offence. Later we had to think of an ingenious way of cooking the fish without being seen. We wrapped the fish with wild banana leaves and buried them in the ground over which we built a fire. After a while, we removed the banana-wrapped fish from the hot sand and ate the fish with our lunch. The taste of the baked fish was excellent, making our meal really enjoyable.

A few days later, we were surprised to see an unusual contraption gliding along the rail track. It was a diesel truck fitted with steel rims to match the railway track. The improvised locomotive which came from the west it was hauling a few empty trucks and was travelling at a moderate speed. Evidently, the Japanese military engineers were making a trial run to test the railway line and the stability of the timber bridges along the line.

We watched with anxiety as the train stopped on the bridge. We were hoping that nothing went wrong. Should there be any defects, the Japanese engineers would lose face and would probably be chastised for not doing a good job. There was no doubt they would then vent their anger on us with renewed shouts of *kurra* and *bageiroh* and our stay in Songkurai would be prolonged. We would no doubt have to rectify the defects with more shouts of *speedo* to be accompanied with more brutality.

The train moved forward and backwards over the bridge a few times. The bridge swayed a little. We held our breath. The bridge did not collapse. The train went backwards again. It stood on firm ground for a while. Then it moved and, gathering speed, it

raced over the bridge at a faster rate. The railway engineer appeared satisfied. He repeated the test again and there was a wide grin on his silly face as the train crossed the bridge without any mishap. Evidently, the bridge was stable and the railway line was in good condition. He waved at us as the train continued on its journey eastwards towards the next camp down the line. The Japanese officer in charge of our group was happy. With a broad smile on his bespectacled face, he gave us the thumbs-up sign and said: *jotoh* (good).

We all were much relieved. In a way, we were quite pleased that the stretch of the Siam-Burma railway and the bridge over the River Kwai which we had been assigned to build had at last been completed. It had also passed the test. As such, it meant that our days in Songkurai were definitely numbered and, if all went well, I hoped that soon the day would come when the golden sun would shine in all its glory for me to say: 'Farewell Songkurai.'

On 23 October, I saw another train approaching. It was decorated with the Japanese flags and came from the east. When the train passed, I saw that it carried a full load of Japanese army officers, some of whom appeared to be of very senior rank. All of them appeared to be in a cheerful mood. I thought that they could either be making a final test run of the railway line or else it was a sort of 'victory parade' to celebrate the ceremonial completion of the infamous railway of death. We were told that the train came from Kanburi and was going all the way to Thanbyzayat in Burma.

The following days went by quickly, and soon 11th November arrived. In pre-war days, this was a Remembrance Day to commemorate the signing of the Armistice in 1918, thus ending the First World War. It was generally called Poppy Day when volunteers, mainly women, would be offering artificial poppies in return for a donation, the funds collected being for the welfare of the ex-servicemen and women who were in need of assistance. To me, 11 November will be an everlasting Remembrance Day. On that day in 1943, I said farewell to Songkurai and slavery. I had survived the hardship and brutality and had returned to civilisation.

The dawn of that particular day began just like any other day. I awoke while it was still dark. As usual, I made my way to the food distribution point to collect my breakfast. The morning air was cold but it was dry, as I collected my meal. As usual it was some boiled rice and some boiled chick peas. I stood near the sterilising point to get some warmth from the fire. It did not take long to finish the meal. After cleaning our mess tins and eating utensils, all of us were told to collect another allocation of food, not as a bonus but as our meal for lunch. I was a bit surprised. Normally our lunch was brought to our work site in bamboo baskets. Getting a meal in advance meant that we were either going to work far away from our camp or that we were being transferred to another camp. This gave rise to speculation. The consensus of opinion was that we would be going to another camp, possibly in Burma. We discussed various possibilities while we waited for firm instructions.

We then received instructions to pack all belongings and be ready to move out of the camp shortly. There was nothing much to pack. We then gathered in small groups for more useless discussion. Once again, there was much speculation. Some thought that having completed the railway we were to be given another tough assignment. The majority felt that we were going to another camp to be responsible for the maintenance of the railway line. To me, it was another journey to the unknown. I thought to myself that whatever will be, will be.

Then someone spread the news that we were returning to Ban Pong for regrouping. Immediately I had a dreadful vision of another long march. But I was pleased to be leaving Songkurai to go to Ban Pong, which was closer to civilisation. What I saw of Ban Pong was definitely better than Songkurai. What lay beyond Ban Pong again became the subject of speculation.

The morning became brighter as the sun's rays appeared through the gaps among the trees. Instructions were given to move out of the camp, and the remnants of the British force made their way sluggishly towards the gate. The group of Australians who had arrived only a few weeks earlier to reinforce our depleted force, had already gathered there. They were staying behind to do some

maintenance work. We marched out in silence. The Australians waved us goodbye and wished us luck. It reminded me of that popular war-time song, *Wish me luck as you wave me goodbye,* which was sung by Gracie Fields when the British troops were leaving England to go to the war front. Somehow, it kept buzzing in my ears as I began another journey to the unknown. The thought of having to march back to Ban Pong kept haunting me.

Our group walked over the familiar footbridge across the river for the last time. I paused for a while to admire the gigantic bridge that spanned the River Kwai. From where I stood, I could see the majestic wooden bridge towering high above the fast flowing-river, its reflection on the flowing waters making a beautiful picture. I looked at the bridge with pride mingled with sorrow and bitterness. I was proud that I had been one of the slaves who had built such an engineering feat. It was done under trying conditions with improper tools and using primitive methods. At the same time, I felt sorry that so many of my colleagues had lost their lives. The bridge stood there as a silent monument to the hard labour and sacrifices of the many prisoners-of-war, especially those who died in Songkurai.

The group followed a zig-zagging trail worn out by daily marching of countless feet. We cautiously climbed up the embankment on to the level platform, which had been our daily mustering point for the past six months. There we waited for further instructions and, once again, we began speculating

On that particular morning, I saw a strange improvised locomotive, with some empty open trucks attached to it, waiting on the railway track. It was similar to the one that carried out the test run. The engine of the vehicle was warming up, emitting some thick grey smoke. The driver was a Japanese soldier. I did not know whether the train was making another test run or whether it was waiting to transport us to our destination.

We waited at the mustering point for quite some time. Many were engaged in idle chatter to pass away the time. I decided to take a closer look at the train, which had a diesel engine. The open trucks appeared to have been used for transporting horses for the Japanese army in Burma. The rain had washed away the

dung and urine but their smell still lingered on. The trucks had timber floorboards with metal supports, with sides also made of timber. There were empty spaces between the boarding to allow for a flow of air, and they had no roof covering.

A few Japanese soldiers then appeared. We formed up in three rows to be counted. The soldiers counted and re-counted us a few times after which we were told to board the open trucks, which were longer than the covered steel wagons we had travelled in from Singapore. Thirty of us occupied one horse truck. There was plenty of space to move around and stretch our legs. As we did not know where we were going or how long the journey would take, we held an 'in-house' discussion to agree upon the 'rules and regulations' to be followed during the journey. We were keen to make ourselves as comfortable as possible despite the fact that we were exposed to the elements.

I was thankful for the train ride, even though I was travelling in a horse truck without a roof. I had come to Songkurai on foot, marching a distance of 315 kilometres from Ban Pong. I was now returning by train using the railway line, part of which I had slaved to build. It was a railway whose construction had cost the lives of so many thousands of Allied prisoners-of-war. I also learnt that many thousands Asian *coolies* (labourers) had also worked and died on other sectors of the railway line.

There was no whistle to announce the departure of the train. Suddenly, I felt a jolt of our truck, and it was began to move slowly. By sheer coincidence, I said *sayonara* to Songkurai at eleven o'clock on the eleventh day of the eleventh month in 1943. Our days as slaves of Songkurai were really over. I was extremely happy to leave that God-forsaken place for ever. As the train increased its speed, I was certain that I was finally saying farewell not only to Songkurai but also to the many dead relatives and friends I left behind. The majority of them had no graves to mark their resting place, they had been cremated *en masse* and their remains had turned to ashes. It reminded me of what I had so often heard at funerals: 'Thou art dust and unto dust thou shalt return.' Some day Songkurai would be enveloped by the jungle again and those who died there would be like a lost tribe never to be found again.

When we walked into Songkurai on 24 May 1943, we were a force of 1,600 able-bodied British prisoners-of-war. On 11 November, just about six months later, only 112 emaciated men remained to say *sayonara* to Songkurai. Although the infamous Siam-Burma railway would some day be forgotten, we who had survived the ordeal in Songkurai would always remember the hardships we had endured. Above all, we will remember the difficulties we had encountered and surmounted.

Unknown to us, some British guerrilla soldiers had been parachuted into the jungle behind our camp. It is not known how many there were or how long they had been there. Perhaps their unseen eyes had been watching us and had been monitoring the progress of the Siam-Burma railway project. As a matter of fact, one day, a mysterious stranger had appeared at our work site. He was a tall and big man whose skin was milk-white. He looked well fed and was really physically fit. He was dressed only in tattered shorts just like most of us. We just accepted him as one of us and never asked him any questions. He did whatever work we did, but he did not share our food. He must have had some rations of his own. The majority of us were sun-tanned, and the milk-white skinned stranger could have easily been picked out by our guards. Somehow, the Japanese did not seem to notice his presence as they were possibly too busy slave-driving us to *speedo*. He worked with us for quite some time and then he disappeared just as mysteriously. After the war, I learnt that he could have been a member of the Chindits, a British guerrilla force based in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) that was frequently operating behind the Japanese lines in Burma and Siam. Consequently, the Japanese were later denied the use of the completed railway line due to the frequent and accurate bombing by the British Royal Air Force, whose intelligence officers would quite likely have been receiving information from the guerrillas.

As the train sped eastwards until the outline of the massive bridge finally disappeared from my view, my thoughts were directed towards some relatives in Singapore who were unaware that they would never see their dear ones again. I said a silent prayer for all those who were sleeping in heavenly peace.

The train journey was slow, not very comfortable, and very noisy, as the steel wheels of our truck rolled over the steel rails. Anyway it was much better than our march from Ban Pong to Songkurai. The violent vibration of the truck kept me awake most of the time. My eyes, though tired, remained open. I laid on my back and just stared at the sky above. The night was dark, but the constellations were very clear and bright. I identified some of them.

The train locomotive was an improvised diesel truck without adequate power to travel uphill. Sometimes it required the assistance of manpower. I remember one occasion when the train had to negotiate a steep uphill gradient and we were all ordered to get out to give it a push. When the train regained speed, we had to quickly reboard the moving train. Luckily, no one was left behind.

During the journey, there were two toilet stops on the next day. We would jump off the train and run to the edge of the jungle to ease ourselves. The stop also gave us the opportunity to walk around and stretch our legs, and I admired the beautiful orchids that grew on the tall trees. The stop also gave the locomotive driver a rest and allowed the engine to cool down. There was no set time for our lunch. We ate our food allocation when we felt hungry. We had learnt that the cooked rice would not keep for some time. The hot atmosphere tended to ferment it and render it uneatable.

That evening, we had a longer stop at Kinsayok beside a work camp. There we saw other British prisoners-of-war. They were not allowed to come near us, but their cookhouse served us a hot meal of rice and beef stew which soaked up the rice. It looked more like rice porridge. That was the first time in almost two years that the Japanese ever gave us beef with any of our meals. Later, we were given another portion of rice and a piece of fried salted fish. That was intended to be our food for breakfast as well as lunch on the next day. Having nothing else to do, we just sat on the damp ground beside our truck and waved at our fellow prisoners-of-war standing near the edge of their camp while we waited for the train to continue with our journey.

A new train driver was brought in. He had an assistant with him. I suppose he was to relieve the driver at intervals during the night. A quick head count followed. Our guards wanted to be sure that nobody had escaped, or that no one from Kinsayok camp had tried to stow away. We then scrambled back to our respective trucks for the onward journey as the men in the camp waved at us.

As the train continued its journey to Ban Pong, the region became enveloped in darkness. On either side of our train, the thick jungle formed a black back-drop with the star-studded sky as the ceiling. The train seemed to be travelling in an inky-black tunnel. Although the night was cool and refreshing, we were tormented by countless unseen sandflies. They took delight in hovering around us, biting our faces and hands. There was nothing we could do except to swipe them occasionally. We slept despite the rough ride, the insect nuisance and the eeriness of the jungle night.

We were lucky that the monsoon season had ended and there was no more rain. The next day was bright and sunny and soon the tropical sun, shining from a clear blue sky, became unbearably hot. We explored the possibility of getting some shade with a makeshift shelter. Only some of us still had our cape-cum-groundsheets. In a spirit of helping one another, we decided to pool our resources for communal benefit. During the day, the groundsheets were used to provide the much-needed shelter from the sun. At night they served as mats for sleeping. The conditions in our truck became a little more comfortable for all of us.

At midday, we had a stop for lunch and toilet. Most of us had no food for lunch as we had eaten our breakfast and lunch together at daybreak. Those who had kept part of their food, hoping to have it for lunch, were disappointed as the severe heat of the day had made the rice sour and it could not be eaten. As the train stopped for some time, we were able to wander around to admire the mountainous jungle landscape and the river below. Some stretches of the railway closely followed the course of the same River Kwai that had been flowing from Songkurai.

As usual, there was a head count before we reboarded the train. We then continued on another leg of our journey. Just before sunset, we arrived at Kanburi, where the inmates were lining up for their evening meal. They seemed to be a happy bunch. I thought it was another stop for a meal and toilet, as the rumour in Songkurai indicated that we were being sent back to Ban Pong for regrouping.

There was no instruction to disembark, so we remained on the train. Our guards were engaged in a discussion with some Japanese officers of the Kanburi camp. Later, we were told to disembark and take all our belongings with us. We stood beside the train for some time before our guards re-appeared. Following the usual head count, we were escorted to a vacant hut in the camp, where we were served with a hot meal. Afterwards, Robin, a volunteer colleague and quite a number of British and Australian prisoners-of-war who had been in Kanburi camp for almost a year, gathered around us. We exchanged stories of our respective experiences. They were shocked and visibly upset to learn that we were the only survivors of the Songkurai camp.

Kanburi was a pleasant break after our incarceration in Songkurai. We were closer to civilisation and came into contact with the natives. Except for the surprise check now and again, we were always free to do what we liked. We were idle most of the time and our idle minds invariably brought back memories of those hard days in Songkurai. Occasionally we would go down to the nearby river to swim. We also tried to catch some fish, using our shorts as a net. When I was alone, I often wondered what awaited me after Kanburi, where we stayed for five days. All the while, we were anxious to know what would be our fate. Behind the scenes, the Japanese administration would no doubt be discussing what to do with us.

Rumours were rampant. First, we heard that a batch of the prisoners were to be sent to Japan. They would travel overland across Siam and Indo-China and thence across the Sea of Japan by boat. A second rumour indicated that we were to remain in Kanburi to do maintenance work on the railway line. Then there was a heartening rumour: we were to be returned to Singapore.

I was not interested in the rumours. I did not want to get involved in any discussion on the subject. I had reached the stage where I did not care what the next destination would be. I had won the battle for my survival in Songkurai and I felt confident that I could survive anywhere. I would be able to surmount the difficulties in any other work camp wherever it might be. Anyway, there was nothing we could achieve by idle discussion, neither would we be able to influence the outcome of our destiny. All I did was to hope for the best.

In the meantime, I decided to enjoy myself. It was a well earned holiday. I did not have to get up early in the morning if I did not want my breakfast. Nevertheless, I would automatically be awakened by the crowing of the roosters in the nearby village heralding the dawn of a new day. We were free to roam around the camp, but we were not allowed to go to the village which was just a stone's throw away.

However, traders from the village came near our camp to sell hard-boiled eggs, local fruits, native delicacies and tinned food. Typical of a village market place, these traders were invariably accompanied by hordes of flies, which settled on the goods they had displayed for sale. We avoided them as we were afraid of getting diarrhoea, although the food and fruits were very cheap and tempting. Eggs were sold at one *tical* (money issued by the Japanese authorities) for one dozen and so were the bananas. I felt that it was safe to eat the eggs and bananas since their shells or skins had to be peeled off before eating. Furthermore, all the wages I had earned in Songkurai were still in my pocket. As such money would not be usable at our next destination, I decided to spend all my money. Most of the time I feasted on hard boiled eggs and bananas. I seldom ate the camp food. I also bought a few cans of tinned fish. It was hot and spicy. Occasionally I would eat it with the white boiled rice which was served in the camp. It was something different and quite tasty.

Our leisure time was frequently interrupted by head counts and checks for contraband. As usual, the Japanese were looking for communication equipment and hand guns. The checks were usually carried out by our own guards but, on a few occasions,

they were carried out by the *kempei tai*, the dreaded Japanese military police. One afternoon, after a head count, we were given a medical check up. We lined up to have our anuses glass-rodded. The check was to ascertain whether we had any serious abdominal diseases. We were, however, never told its purpose, neither were we informed of the results.

On the afternoon of 18 November 1943, we were told to pack all our belongings and to assemble outside the administration office immediately. A few armed Japanese soldiers came and took up position in front of us. It was quite frightening as I did not know what they were going to do with us. My fear was allayed when those few fierce-looking and impatient Japanese soldiers began counting and re-counting us. Other soldiers made a thorough check of our belongings. I knew that our D-Day (departure day) had come, but I wondered what our destination would be.

At the rear of the administration building was a railway siding or marshalling yard where a steam locomotive train stood on the track, with several covered steel wagons attached to it. The steel wagons were similar to those that had transported us from Singapore. The driver was a native, either a Siamese, Malay or Indian. He was stoking up the engine and dark grey smoke was belching out from its funnel. I began to think that our destination could possibly be Singapore.

When the search was over and nothing incriminating was found, the Japanese soldiers withdrew. Then a few other soldiers with haversacks on their backs took up fresh positions in front of the steel wagons. They were our escorts. We were grouped in batches of thirty and were told to board the steel wagons.

As I passed the train driver, I tried to fish out some information from him. I asked him in Malay: *Enche, kereta api ini pergi ke-mana?* (In English, this meant: 'Mr, where is this train going to?'). He just looked at me without any expression on his face. I presumed that he either did not understand me or that he was afraid to talk to me. I was back to square one and had to be resigned to the fact that it was another journey to the unknown.

The bright sun was peeping behind the tall trees casting long

shadows on the ground as the train began to move. Many prisoners-of-war from the Kanburi camp stood alongside the railway track to bid us farewell. The train was drawn by a more powerful locomotive engine and soon it was speeding along the track which ran parallel to the road leading to the town. We passed the village and many of the women and children waved at us.

About more than an hour after leaving Kanburi we arrived in Ban Pong. It was already dark and the evening was cool. The few electric lights near the disembarkation point were an indication that we were in a civilised place. We disembarked under the watchful eyes of the armed Japanese soldiers and made our way to the food distribution point where we were served a hot meal of boiled rice, fried salted fish and some boiled chick peas. We ate our food either standing or squatting on the dry ground. Not far away, some Siamese women were trying to sell us some hard boiled eggs and bananas. Nobody dared to go towards them. We were afraid that our guards would interpret it as an attempt to escape with possible disastrous effects. Later, we were given some more food. As usual, that was intended to be for our breakfast on the following morning.

Ban Pong was the main rail junction. One branch went eastwards towards Bangkok (the capital city of Siam) and onwards to Indo-China, while the other branch went southwards to Malaya and Singapore. With the completion of the Siam-Burma railway, the Japanese armies in Manchuria, China, Malaya and Singapore could conveniently use the rail link for communicating with each and to reinforce their armies in Burma.

When we boarded the train again, we were still uncertain about our final destination. I did not think it was worth speculating as our destiny had already been sealed. Anyway, we would soon know the direction we were travelling. The orange streaks of sunset were slowly disappearing on the western horizon. Darkness began to descend on Ban Pong as the train moved away to continue on its journey. I was in suspense. Where were we heading for?

The journey to either Indo-China or Singapore would take a

few days, so once again we settled down to organise ourselves. The same arrangements as we had on the outward journey were introduced. As one group of ten sat up, a second group sat in the area fronting the open door while the last group had some space to sleep.Grouping was decided according to our surnames in alphabetical order and the groups were rotated every four hours. In the absence of a watch, we just guessed the time and the changes were made with mutual agreement of all. We had learnt from our experience on the outward journey, so on the return trip we were more prepared for any emergencies.

I was lucky to sit by the door in the initial stage of the journey. During my schooldays, I had taken an interest in constellations and I had a fair idea of them. I could easily identify some groups of stars, such as the Milky Way, the Southern Cross and others. On that particular evening I was more interested in locating the Southern Cross since it would give me an indication of the direction we were travelling. The night sky was dark, but it was clear. The myriad of twinkling stars looked like fairy lights. I kept scanning the skies and became the butt of jokes from my colleagues. After what seemed like ages, I finally spotted the Southern Cross. I was delighted to see the group of stars ahead of us: I was almost hysterical with excitement. I told my colleagues that we were heading for Singapore. For a moment, they would not believe me. I told them about the Southern Cross and that our train was heading towards it, which was a clear indication we were travelling in a southerly direction.

It took some time before any of them was convinced and then there was chaos in our wagon as many scrambled towards the door to get a glimpse of the Southern Cross. Quite a number were still doubtful. On the next morning I found that the sun rose on the left-hand side of the train. That clearly told us east was on our left side and we were heading south. I was satisfied and happy. The rest of my colleagues in our wagon then became convinced, and some of them even knelt to pray.

On the second day, the mountain ranges in the distance looked the same, but the landscape of the countryside definitely looked Malay in character. The quaint houses by the side of the paddy

fields were different and the people dressed differently. The old women were chewing the betel leaves or had lumps of tobacco in their mouths. We were then more convinced that we were already travelling on Malayan territory. Everybody in our wagon became jubilant and was really convinced that we were heading for Singapore.

Then someone in our wagon leaned out of the door and, despite the noise emanating from the wheels rolling on the steel rails, managed to spread the good news to those in the other wagon. There were still some who doubted. However, when we reached Alor Star, everybody was finally convinced that we were truly on Malayan soil. There was no doubt that we were going to Singapore. The train did not stop at Alor Star, but the people who stood on the platform waved at us. Singapore was no longer a destination: it had become a journey home. Yes, after the ordeal of Songkurai returning to Singapore and Changi was like returning home.

Once we were on Malayan territory, we felt that the train was travelling exceedingly fast. We could only catch glimpses of the picturesque landscape. Changi seemed to be crying aloud: 'Oh carry my loved ones home safely to me', and the train was responding to Changi's cries. Once again we stopped at Rawang for refuelling and filling up the water tank. We seized the opportunity to jump off the train and get a bath from the large water hose. Those who had some Singapore banana currency were able to buy some native cakes, fruits and hard boiled eggs from the vendors, who seemed to have instantly appeared from nowhere.

As the train continued its journey southwards, it passed through Kuala Lumpur, Seremban and Gemas without stopping. Although there were many people waiting at the platforms at the various stations, we passed by unnoticed. To them, it was just another goods train going by. All through the journey, stops for toilet and meals were made at small stations either just outside or between the larger towns. I presumed it was easier from the security point of view since there would be almost nobody around.

Soon we reached Johore Bahru. Here again, the train just

passed through and crossed the long familiar causeway into Singapore. Everybody became more cheerful and excited and began clapping their hands. Many wanted to get near the open door just to breathe the refreshing Singapore air and see the familiar sights again. Soon it was dark, but nevertheless, I could feel that I was back on Singapore's soil.

It was the evening of 23 November 1943. The train finally came to a stand-still at the Singapore railway station. We had travelled five days and nights in a covered steel wagon. It had been an uncomfortable journey, but just being at our railway station was sufficient to make me forget the journey and all that I had left behind. I was really happy to be back in Singapore.

Our guards had already disembarked and had taken up strategic positions along the length of the train. We then disembarked and stood in three rows in front of the wagon we had travelled in for ease of checking. Just beyond the platform, a convoy of trucks was waiting. They were driven by Japanese soldiers who looked at us in contempt as the majority of us wore tattered shorts or loin cloths. Quite a number were also bare footed.

The guards, who had accompanied us from Kanburi, made a head count after which we boarded the lorries for our journey to Changi. There were a few people outside the station. Some were surprised to see us, while others just waved at us. It was heartening to travel along familiar roads even at night and to see friendly faces again. The streets were lighted up; there was no curfew. Many people were either standing idly or were walking along the streets. Quite a number appeared shocked to see us: most of us looked like living skeletons though still smiling. Nevertheless, they waved at us and we waved back.

Sometime later, we drove along a very familiar stretch of road. We realised that it was the Upper Changi Road. The lorries began slowing down and finally stopped on the main road outside the Selarang Barracks. The long, tiring and uncomfortable journey from Siam was over. Strangely enough, none of us fell ill during the return journey. It was possible that we had either become seasoned travellers or else our stomachs had grown immune to the bacteria. We were really very tired. Our stomachs longed for

food but it was unlikely we would get any at that time. Anyway all of us were exceedingly happy to be back 'home'.

On 23 November 1971, I returned to Kanchanaburi in Thailand. (As a prisoner-of-war, that place was known as Kanburi to me.) I did not go there as a tourist just to see the Bridge on the River Kwai, a much publicised tourist attraction. Instead, my return to Kanchanaburi was a pilgrimage of remembrance and to pay homage to a few relatives whose remains are buried in the Allied War Cemetery there.

There are 6,972 graves in the cemetery, which is maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission whose headquarters is in London. I was greatly impressed with the well maintained cemetery and many of the graves were adorned with bunches of beautiful orchids. I was told that many local people who had been close to the prisoners-of-war during those dark days frequently visited the cemetery to lay flowers on the graves they have 'adopted'.

I was also told that simple ceremonies are held annually to honour the war dead on different occasions. The British would honour their dead on Remembrance Day (11 November) while the Australians and New Zealanders honour their dead on Anzac Day (25 April).

While I was in Kanchanaburi, I also took the opportunity of visiting the supposed Bridge on the River Kwai which was not far away from the War Cemetery. To me the real and unforgettable Bridge on the River Kwai is the one which I had been forced to build and which now lies abandoned at Songkurai.

I was also surprised to see a memorial standing near the bridge. My Thai architect friend, who drove me from Bangkok, told me that the memorial was built by the Japanese after the Second World War. The local people call it the Japanese Memorial. It was built to commemorate those Allied prisoners-of-war and the impressed civilian labourers from many Asian countries who died in the construction of the infamous Siam-Burma railway.

On the memorial are various plaques with inscriptions in Japanese, Thai, English, Malay and Tamil to honour the dead. On the English plaque, there is a rose to symbolise the British

War Dead, a thistle for the Scottish, the wattle for the Australians and a tulip for the Dutch.

There is another war cemetery at Chong Kai where there are a further 1,750 graves.

CHAPTER 13

Changi Again

Returning to Changi made me feel like being on the top of the world. On the other hand, having grown accustomed to the hard life of Songkurai far away from civilisation, Changi was strange and foreign to me. It was like arriving in a place and not knowing what to expect.

The night we arrived was cool, dark and quiet, but now and again, a few cicadas would disturb the stillness of the night. The black sky above was studded with thousands of twinkling stars which could not brighten the dark night. Around us, against the dark background of trees, many glow-worms flitted around. They looked like fairy lights hung out to welcome us back. We just waited in the open trucks while the Japanese Sergeant who had escorted us all the way from Kanburi went forward to meet the Japanese Camp Commandant.

In front of our convoy was the reception area. It was floodlit by a few fluorescent lights hanging from tree branches. I could see clearly the Japanese Camp Commandant standing there with a few soldiers. Our escorting Japanese sergeant went up and saluted him and they began chatting. I suppose the sergeant was giving some details of the number of men returning to Changi. Some of the officers from our own administration and the Volunteer Regimental Sergeant Major were also present.

After a while, we were told to disembark and line up on the road beneath the bright lights. Then followed a joint head count by the Japanese soldiers and our own officers. The Japanese

counted and re-counted us a few times to ensure that they had accounted for all the emaciated prisoners-of-war returning from Siam. We were then handed over to our own camp administrators. As a welcome seranade, the cicadas broke out into a prolonged cacophony. The sounds they made sounded like a chain-saw in full bore operation.

Our bedraggled group was the first batch from the Siam-Burma railway labour force to return to Changi. Hitherto, our administrators knew nothing of our whereabouts or what had happened to us. The majority of the men in our group were in a bad shape. Our own officers were visibly moved when they saw the condition we were in, as most of us had been reduced to skin and bone and the pale fluorescent lights made us look more ghostly. Our officers said that they were pleased to welcome us back and assured us that everything possible would be done to bring us back to health. We then made our way into the camp.

We were billeted in a vacant hut within the Garden Area. The hut was of a semi-permanent type, raised about 500cm above the ground to allow a free flow of air beneath it. The walls were timber weather-boarding with openings for doors and windows. The timber floor was smooth and it had an asbestos sheet roof. The interior was airy and it was illuminated by a few incandescent electric lights when we arrived. It was a luxurious hut compared to that in which we had lived in Siam.

We were kept in quarantine so as to be purged of all the pests and diseases which we might have brought with us from Siam. Even though we were tired after the long journey, we just could not sleep. We stood outside our hut, chatting away and breathing the wonderful air of Changi. We were all happy to be back in a friendly environment. Before we retired for the night, we were told to have a good night's sleep and breakfast would be served at 9.30 the next morning. The cook sergeant's voice sounded so sweet. It was unbelievable to our ears, which had been accustomed to constant shouts of *speedo, kurra* and *bageiroh.*

The next day was a Sunday. It was a day of rest for the majority of the prisoners. The morning was nice and sunny with a gentle breeze blowing from the sea. In another sector of the camp,

Ginny, Eddie and a few other Changi Pensioners, (the name we gave those who stayed behind) had gathered for their usual Sunday morning chat after breakfast. Ginny was puffing away with his custom-made wooden pipe, filled with pure Java tobacco which gave a slightly fragrant smell. He had made the pipe with own hands and he was very proud of it.

As usual the topic of the conversation centred around the fate of their colleagues who had been sent away to the 'hill resort somewhere up north'. The absence of any information about us led to much speculation and fantastic suggestions. Time and again they would discuss or argue about our supposed whereabouts or the type of work we were doing. Some even tried to forecast the possible date of our return. They were all very imaginative. Soon after we left, there were suggestions that we went to either the Fraser's Hill or the Cameron Highlands. As time went on, they went further afield and suggested somewhere in northern Siam. The most fantastic suggestion was that we had gone to Burma and by then had been rescued by the British Fourteenth Army. The construction of the Siam-Burma railway was something which no one in Changi had ever heard of, especially as the Japanese would not divulge any information.

Ginny and Eddie were more interested in little Sonny Boy. They had often wondered whether we would ever meet again. In retrospect, when they waved us good bye in the early hours of that morning about six months ago, Ginny had told Eddie, 'I don't think we will see Sonny Boy again.' He had a feeling that I was going on a journey of no return. Deep in his heart, he had nevertheless cherished a faint hope that one day, Sonny Boy would come back alive. So, whenever they gathered around for their Sunday morning chat, mention was made of Sonny Boy. During his spare time, Ginny had made a beautiful rosary with wooden beads and which he hoped to give to me should we ever meet again.

On that particular Sunday morning, since they were still unaware of our whereabouts, their imaginations were on the threshold of fantasy. Some of the fantastic suggestions drew laughter amongst themselves. While they were chatting, they

noticed the Regimental Sergeant Major standing some distance away, appearing uncertain of his next move. Then he turned around and walked briskly towards them.

'Sergeant Ginsberg,' he said in a strong military voice, 'you will take charge of a work party to go to the Garden Area.'

Ginny had a sarcastic smile on his face when he replied, 'It's my day off Sergeant Major, and I am not going.'

The Regimental Sergeant Major was lost for words and looked a bit annoyed, but he wanted to give Ginny a big surprise. He had a mischievous look in his eyes when he said, 'Come on, David, you must go.'

Ginny became more annoyed and replied angrily, 'I said it's my day off and I am definitely not going.'

Then, rubbing his clean-shaven chin, the Regimental Sergeant Major said teasingly, 'Well, I suppose I'll have to find someone else to go since you are not interested in seeing your Sonny Boy.'

'Don't give me that bull,' Ginny replied, 'you sent him away to God knows where and now you tell me that I'll have to go to the Garden Area to see him.'

So as not to keep the news any longer, the Regimental Sergeant Major disclosed, 'I am not pulling your leg, David. Your Sonny Boy was in a group that returned last night from Siam. They are all in quarantine in the Garden Area and only authorised people will be allowed to go in. I must say that the majority of them are in a bad shape. It is very pathetic to see them'.

He had barely finished speaking when Ginny jumped up from his seat and said, 'What are we waiting for?' He was quickly joined by Eddie and soon all the Changi Pensioners volunteered to go on the so called work party.

The brilliant Singapore sunlight had filtered into the hut making it look bright and cheerful. It was the promise of a new day and a new life for all of us. Ginny, Eddie and the rest lost no time in coming to our hut. I was still asleep on the bare wooden floor when they arrived. They did not want to wake me as they thought that I must be very tired after the long journey from Siam.

Ginny, Eddie and Ollie sat on the floor around me. It was

reminiscent of that first Nativity scene when the Three Wise Men brought their offerings to the Little Child. My three dear friends had also come to offer their gifts to little Sonny Boy. They brought some *gula melaka* (local palm sugar), corn bread, and *ikan bilis* (whitebait).

Recalling what the Regimental Sergeant Major had said about our condition, my two godfathers expected to find me an emaciated figure of skin and bone. They were surprised: unlike the majority of my colleagues, I had plenty of flesh and muscles on my small skeletal frame. When I left Changi, six months ago, I was a meek and timid lad, but I had returned as a tough man. This was attributable to the heavy work I had done and the 'luxuries', especially the hen's eggs and honey, which I bought on the black-market to feed myself.

I awoke that morning with a happy feeling. I was happy knowing that I was back among friends, although I never expected to see them for some time as we were in quarantine. No sooner had I opened my eyes, then Ginny and Eddie simultaneously hugged me. They were exceedingly happy to see me again, much as I was happy to see them. I was moved emotionally and some tears rolled down my cheeks. They then showered me with the gifts they had brought. Ginny was proud to present me with the rosary which he had made by hand especially for me. It was a unique and perfect souvenir from Changi and something which I have treasured all these years. In return, I gave to them each a tin of the spicy fish I had bought in Kanburi. There were similar scenes of joy and happy reunion among friends throughout the entire length of our hut.

Ginny and Eddie were very keen to hear of my experiences and asked me many questions. I was reluctant to answer them as it was a nightmare I wanted to forget. They insisted on knowing at least something. I finally relented and told them that I had worked on the construction of the Siam-Burma railway including the bridge over the River Kwai and that the working conditions had been extremely hard. Cholera and other illness and malnutrition aggravated by maltreatment and brutality contributed to the high death rate. We were the lucky survivors of a batch of 1,600 British

prisoners-of-war. They felt really sorry for me. When the time came for them to go they hugged me again before returning to their billets. Ginny promised to find some way to visit me again.

When our visitors left, the sergeant in charge of the cookhouse informed us that breakfast would be served shortly. For a long time we had been accustomed to the harsh shouts of the Japanese guards and by contrast, the sergeant's voice sounded most welcome. We did not need to *speedo* as our breakfast waited for us. What a change!We were served a fairly good breakfast. It consisted of *pap*, a sort of rice porridge, sweetened with *gula melaka* and some bananas. We were all given a double helping of *pap*, possibly to make up for a meal we missed on our arrival. There was some left-over and so a *lagi* round (a second serving) began with those whose surnames began with 'A' and so on.

After breakfast, our purification began. All our clothing, groundsheets and haversacks were sterilised in cauldrons of boiling water. They were boiled for some time to ensure that all body lice or any other pests hiding in our clothing were destroyed.

While our belongings were being sterilised, we were each given a piece of soap and we had a good bath, the first proper bath we had had in six months. After our bath, we remained naked and just basked ourselves in the sun. We looked like members of a nudist colony somewhere on the Côte d'Azur. Later, we were given a piece of cloth to wrap around our loins and thus maintain our modesty, but just for fun, someone would now and again remove his loin cloth while doing a dance of a single veil.

After lunch, we were given a proper medical examination by a panel of three doctors. The general findings of the panel were that the majority of us were suffering from debility, malnutrition and fatigue. Some were found to be suffering from beri-beri, a tropical disease caused by a deficiency of Vitamin B. As part of our rehabilitation programme, the doctors decided that we all should be given daily servings of *lallang* soup and rice-polishings flour. *Lallang* soup was considered to be a cheap but good source of vitamins, made from the wild grass growing in abundance in the vicinity of Changi jail. The long narrow leaves were soaked in water for a few days and boiled. The result was a putrid-smelling

black liquid, with an awful taste. We were each given a cupful of the so-called black soup twice a day. At first, the majority of us threw the soup away after taking one sip of the smelly liquid. The doctors soon found this out and a compulsory *lallang* soup parade was introduced when we had to line up and everyone had to drink the soup under the watchful eye of a supervising officer.

Rice-polishings flour is the residual powder left over from the whitening process of rice grains. It was normally used as a fattening agent for poultry and cattle, given with their food so as to hide its taste.

Our doctors had found that rice-polishings flour was a good and cheap source of vitamins for human beings too; it was especially beneficial for those suffering from malnutrition and *beri-beri*. It had a bland taste and, like all powdery medicines, it was difficult to swallow. It was usually taken with a little water or together with the *lallang* soup. I found that the best way to take my dose of the rice-polishings powder was to mix it with the cooked rice. Its bland taste was hidden by the rice which had been sprinkled with the hot, spicy *sambal belachan*, a powdery mixture of ground shrimp paste and chillies cooked on a dry hot pan.

We soon settled down to our new life in Changi. We took our daily doses of the *lallang* soup and rice-polishings powder diligently. We were not give any work to do, and once again life became lingering days of dreaming, wandering around and waiting for the day of our deliverance. Sometimes, to pass away the time, I used to wander around the garden and admire the different vegetables which were grown to supplement the rations provided by the Japanese. Although life seemed monotonous, it was more like a holiday camp when compared to the hard life we had experienced in Songkurai, deep in the mountainous jungle of Siam and far away from civilisation.

I do not know whether the *lallang* soup and the rice-polishings flour had effective medicinal properties: of one thing I am certain, and that is all of us who survived the ordeal of the Siam-Burma railway construction and had been nursed back to health with those improvised medicinal products ultimately lived to see the

day of our liberation from the prison-of-war camp. About a month after our return to Changi, we celebrated our second Christmas in captivity. Nevertheless, it was a day of rejoicing. For us, survivors of the slave camp of Songkurai, the Christmas of 1943 was a memorable one. For some time before Christmas, our thoughtful cooks had saved part of our meagre daily rations to provide us with a 'grand' lunch on Christmas day. We ourselves had saved part of our daily wage of ten cents so that we could buy 'luxuries' from the sparsely stocked canteen in the camp. Some enterprising men made wine from sweet potatoes. Like manna from heaven, the Japanese delivered the whole carcass of a large whale to our camp two days before Christmas. It was a complete surprise. On the evening of Christmas Eve, the few electric lights within our hut were switched off punctually at ten o'clock as usual. We remained awake. Many of us stayed out in the open to enjoy the fresh tropical air. To pass away the time, some cracked jokes and caused much laughter. Just before midnight we made our way to our humble chapel situated a short distance away.

The chapel was a small and simple *attap* hut. It was sparsely lit up and rough coconut-tree trunks served as seats. The chapel stood at the edge of the banana plantation and was not easily noticeable. The night air was cooled by the gentle breeze blowing from the sea not far away and there was a new moon in the sky, whose light was anaemic. It appeared to be resting high above the chapel just like the Star of Bethlehem which shone high above the manger on that first Christmas Eve.

The chapel was soon filled to capacity. Many stood along the side aisles. When the priest entered the chapel, its flimsy walls of *attap* panels reverberated with husky voices singing the joyful strains of *O come all ye faithful.* Holy Mass followed as we knelt down on the cold damp natural ground to pray for peace on earth and goodwill to all men. Above all, we prayed for our own deliverance from captivity.

After saying the *Gloria in Excelsis Deo,* the priest turned around to face the congregation and said 'The Lord be with you.' For a moment he stared straight ahead. He was bewildered and speechless. His hands remained outstretched. Curiosity made us

look back, to see what had attracted his attention. There, standing at the entrance, was a short and stern looking Japanese soldier. He had a rifle in his hand and leaned against the door frame. As we looked at him, we expected him to yell *kurra*. There was no furore. He remained silent and simply gazed at the altar, possibly saying a silent prayer in his heart. His face was expressionless.

For a while, we were filled with fear. We expected him to yell at us for looking at him. It was extremely unusual for a Japanese soldier to wander into our camp, especially at that time of the night. Anyway, the priest regained his confidence and continued with the Mass. Now and again, I turned around to see whether he had gone away, but he was still there and standing at the entrance. My one fear was that he would spring into action when the Mass was over.

At Communion time, the lone Japanese soldier also walked up to the altar. The sight of him receiving Holy Communion was indeed heartening. It was an assurance that he was of the same fold. At the end of the Mass joy filled our hearts as we sang, *Silent Night*' When we emerged from the chapel, we found that the Japanese soldier had completely vanished into the night. I then wondered whether what I had seen was really a Japanese soldier or someone from the 'Twilight Zone'. Quite sometime afterwards, and whenever we recalled that incident, the mysterious Japanese soldier was always referred to as the 'blithe Spirit of Christmas'.

We had a nice lunch on Christmas Day, including a big chunk of whale steak. I had never tasted whale meat before, but it tasted good, especially as I was hungry. After lunch, we sat outside our hut to talk about those happy days gone by. Although we were in captivity, Christmas was still a day of rejoicing. Despite some feeling of melancholy, a few were cheerful enough to sing Christmas carols. Soon others joined in and there was an air of merriment.

For a moment, I forgot the predicament I was in. It seemed ironical to hear someone singing 'I'll be home for Christmas,' especially as my own home was just about fifteen kilometres away.

I began to wonder when I would really be able to say that I would be home for Christmas.

Christmas is a time when we think of the absent loved ones. In my solitude, my thoughts were directed towards home, my loved ones, close relatives and family friends. I thought of those happy days when my family was joined by relatives and friends for lunch with my dad at the head of the table. There was the usual traditional Christmas fare, a blend of eastern and western cuisine. The food was washed down with Johnny Walker whisky or Hennessey brandy. I was sure that my loved ones at home must also be anxious not knowing where I was and how I was faring in captivity. I also thought of a few relatives and friends who would never see their loved ones again, as they were permanently sleeping peacefully deep in the jungles of Siam.

Early in May 1944, all the prisoners-of-war from the Selerang area and Roberts Barracks were moved into the Changi jail and its precincts. Hitherto, the Changi convict prison had accommodated all the civilian men, women and children internees. They had been kept there since the Fall of Singapore until 1 May 1944, when they were all transferred to another camp in Sime Road. What was originally been planned as a jail for about one thousand convicts, eventually accommodated twelve thousand prisoners-of-war. It is possible that the Japanese move was prompted by the fact that the Allied Forces were making extremely good progress in the Pacific theatre of war. In the event of an attempt being made to recapture Singapore, then the prisoners-of-war could not give any trouble, as they could easily be locked inside the high, solid prison walls. There were even rumours that they would massacre all of us should they lose the war. Every available space in the jail was used for sleeping. Some even had to sleep under the overhanging eaves beside the courtyard. Individual cells meant for one convict accommodated four persons. The officers were accommodated in huts just outside the prison, near the hospital.

Generally, there was no change in our pattern of living. We were given some light duties or no work at all. Life was beginning to be monotonous for me and I tried to find some work to do.

There were still a few working parties being sent to work in the city. It was difficult to get into any of the groups. I would have thought that some would be too happy to rest, but working in the city had some attractions. There was always a chance of scrounging for something or getting involved in some black-market activities. The prisoners also had the opportunity of meeting some of the local people, exchanging news of what was happening in Singapore, Malaya and other parts of the world. Some news of interest to us were usually brought back.

It was on this grapevine that I learnt of my elder brother's fate. He had been arrested by the *kempei tai* and accused of being a British spy. He was given a trial which was held at the former Raffles College at Bukit Timah. As he had been a member of the Singapore Volunteer Corps during the war with the Japanese, the outcome of the trial was a foregone conclusion. He received a death sentence and was beheaded soon thereafter. It was sheer coincidence that he was executed on the same day that I returned to Changi after my ordeal on the Siam-Burma railway. I later learnt that he was betrayed by the brother of a young woman he was courting. In fact, my brother was arrested outside her house after visiting her, the last time they saw each other. When the war was over, I did my best to bring the traitor to justice. He was arrested and was charged for collaborating with the Japanese, but was only given a short jail sentence. That was British justice. I had always hoped that my brother's memory would haunt that traitor all the days of his life. Despite exhaustive investigation, I had not been able to establish where the Japanese had buried my brother's remains. My father had always clung to his belief that he was still alive and would return home some day. Ever since the day my elder brother had been taken away, my father had been very sad, sitting by the window overlooking our main gate all day long, always hoping to see the return of my brother. He died in June 1967 without seeing his dream come true.

Somehow I managed to get into a working party – the 'firewood collection party'. The work was fairly hard: about five tons of firewood were daily collected from a rubber plantation about ten kilometres from our camp. The plantation was situated near

the junction of Changi and Bedok Roads. Transportation of the firewood to Changi jail was made by manpower, the wood being placed on a trailer which was drawn by twenty-four men. The driver was usually a disabled man who had lost either one arm or one leg. His job was to steer the 'vehicle' or gently apply the brakes to slow it down on the down-hill stretches of the journey.

We normally made two trips a day, and always went out without a Japanese escort. We were only counted when we left and re-entered the control gates. The local people who lived along the route watched us as we passed by, dared not approach or speak to us for fear of collaborators who would not hesitate to report them to the *kempei tai* just to curry favour with the Japanese.

After a few weeks working with the firewood-collection party, I decided to look for another job. I did not have to do heavy work if I did not want to as I was a veteran of the Siam-Burma railway, but I felt that by doing some work I would remain fit. I remembered the saying that 'the cook never dies of hunger' so I decided to find a job in the cookhouse. Through the recommendation of a colleague, I managed to join the elite band of cooks. I was put in charge of the tea-making unit. It was an easy job. There was plenty of time for idle chat and to scrounge around for some 'extras'. Tea was not a precious commodity, but in the spirit of co-operation among the brotherhood of cooks, I was able to get some extra rice, vegetables or fish. In return, I ensured that the other cooks had a supply of tea outside the normal hours of distribution.

I worked in the cookhouse for a few months. Although it was an easy job, but I had to get up very early in the morning and I felt that just brewing tea was really not my cup of tea. I wanted to do something more active and so I decided to look for another job, preferably outside the confines of Changi jail.

While playing darts one evening, I heard of an unusual job. It was the tapping of 'toddy' from coconut trees. Toddy is the sap from the coconut buds before it blossoms. The buds are tightly wound with a piece of twine and the bud end is cut to allow the sap to flow out in a slow trickle. The sap is collected in a small jar attached to the bud and later poured into a larger collection jar

tied around the waist of the 'toddy tapper'. Trees from which toddy is extracted do not bear coconuts. Toddy was found to be another good source of Vitamin B, especially for *beri-beri* sufferers and, in view of the scarcity of toddy, only a spoonful of it was given to beri-beri patients every day.

Collection of 'toddy' was not an easy job. It was dangerous too. It involved the climbing of tall, slender, branchless coconut trees about 35 metres tall. The trunk was fibrous, and climbing a coconut tree was like climbing a rough surfaced pole. Quite often the wind caused the trees to sway, making the swinging coconut palm trees a picture of serenity.

There were only three men willing to do the job. As I liked the wide open spaces and was a bit adventurous, I decided to join the team of 'toddy tappers'. Despite the danger involved, I felt it was worthwhile as my effort would be helping many sick colleagues. Furthermore, climbing the coconut trees was a form of exercise for me. It also gave me a sense of freedom, I was doing something that I liked of my own free will. It was an enjoyable adventure.

There were four of us in the toddy tapping team. All of us were Eurasians. Although an Indian Army doctor was in charge, he never interfered with our work. We worked independently without any supervision. Each of us was assigned to tap five trees. We went about our job once in the morning and again in the afternoon.

I had never climbed a coconut tree before. When I stood on the ground and watched the others climb, it looked so easy. It was done by embracing the trunk and jacking up with the legs. The repeated movements forced the body upwards a little at a time until the top was reached. Sometimes the chest became bruised. Hands and fingers could also be pricked by the needle-like fibres of the tree trunks. One slip could mean multiple bone fractures or even death. Nevertheless, the toddy tappers went about their jobs heedless of the danger involved.

I soon learnt the climbing technique. I grew to love the job and was ever ready to begin the day's work. The crown of the trees became a hiding place for the unripe bananas which we tappers stole from the officer's garden. When the bananas were ripe, they

were shared among the tappers and were eaten on the tree tops. The skin would be left up in the tree so that there would be no evidence on the ground.

Collectively, the toddy tappers were required to bring back 50 ounces of toddy each day. We normally collected more and the surplus was shared amongst the toddy tappers as our intake of Vitamin B. Fresh sap is very sweet and is a refreshing drink. When fermented, it becomes toddy, too much of which is intoxicating.

Every day, *beri-beri* patients were given a spoonful of toddy. My godfather, Ginny, also suffered from *beri-beri*. Toddy gave me the opportunity of showing my gratitude to him for what he had done for me in the camp. I scrounged around for an empty bottle and found an empty Parker ink bottle. Every day, I filled the bottle with toddy and brought it back for him; it helped him to recover quickly and his *beri-beri* was completely cured by the time we were liberated. I was happy that I had been able to help him.

The coconut plantation was not far away from the sea. The trees were evenly spaced out and looked like a regiment of tall soldiers, standing in serene simplicity. The majority of the trees were ramrod straight but quite a number were bent like the Leaning Tower of Pisa. We normally climbed the straight trees. There was always sea breeze or wind in the area causing the trees to sway while we climbed. The wind was sometimes gentle but sometimes violent.

It was quite exciting to reach the top of the tree and sit among the leaves of the crown. Sometimes, I did not feel like getting down. Invariably, in my solitude up the tree top, I felt like a monarch of all I surveyed. I felt I was free like the many birds that flew around me. I also enjoyed the panorama which gave me a good view of the surrounding area and beyond, as far as my eye could travel. To the west I could see the Singapore Harbour and far on the southern horizon I could see the many tiny islands of the Dutch Archipelago (now Indonesia) on a clear afternoon. Sometimes, I saw a Japanese naval vessel entering the Straits of Johore on its way to the naval base.

When I climbed down from the tree and rested my feet on firm ground again, I realised that I was still a prisoner of the Japanese

and must return to Changi jail to be cooped up again. One consolation was that the next day would be another day when, once again, I would be a monarch sitting atop a coconut tree and be free as the birds in the air.

I had worked with the toddy tapping team much longer than either the firewood collection party or as a tea-brewer in the cookhouse and stayed with the team until the day officers of the Rehabilitation of Allied Prisoners-of-War and Internees unit (RAPWI) were parachuted into Changi. Then the much-needed medicines and drugs became available. There was no further need for toddy to be given to *beri-beri* patients. The toddy tapping team became redundant and was disbanded, and I became idle again. In a way, I was sorry that it was all over as I had lost a form of exercise and pastime. I could no longer climb a coconut tree and be a monarch of all that I surveyed. Working as a toddy tapper was not only a pleasant break from the monotony of captivity, but it really gave me complete satisfaction and the opportunity to help my colleagues.

CHAPTER 14

Dawn Of Liberation

By early 1945, we had already been prisoners-of-war for three solid years. Despite the absence of a proper calendar, we were still able to keep track of the days, date and months of each year that had gone by. Three years in captivity was a pretty long time: all those years had been wasted.

Far from feeling abandoned by the British Government and its war machine, we were beginning to realise that the dawn of our liberation was not far off. We were encouraged by the good news of the war on all fronts in favour of the Allies.

The authentic war news we secretly received helped to maintain the high morale of the men in Changi Camp. It was received by a clandestine radio receiver somewhere within the camp, which was operated by Ginny. Being a qualified electrical and sound engineer in civvy street, he had been able to construct a radio receiver from scraps of materials he could scrounge. Even an abandoned domestic electrical fan regulator was useful to him.

Ginny would normally listen to the news from the BBC London, New Dehli or SEAC (South East Asian Command) Radio. The news received was quickly but secretly disseminated within the camp, proving to be a morale booster for all of us, especially if it was about battles in the Pacific or Burma.

Every day, we received good news of the spectacular progress made by the Allied Forces in Europe, Burma and the Pacific theatres of war. On 8 May 1945, we received the heartening news that Germany had surrendered to the Allies. Both the British and

American people were celebrating VE (Victory in Europe) Day. Now that the European War was over, the Allies would no doubt be intensifying their efforts to defeat the Japanese.

At about the same time, we received news of the American successes against the Japanese forces in the Philippines and Okinawa. The Australians were also advancing well in Borneo. All this news made our spirits rocket sky high, since the theatre of war was nearer to us and would have an effect on our ultimate liberation. The best bit of news we heard was about the war in Burma: except for some scattered pockets of Japanese resistance, the Burma campaign was virtually over and the British forces were preparing for their next major move. Their most important objective was the liberation of Malaya and Singapore: that was the most heartening news we had ever received.

Everybody in the camp was jubilant as the days of our internment appeared to be ending. Thereafter the days seemed to pass by more quickly as we eagerly awaited the coming of Admiral Lord Mountbatten's forces to liberate us. The Japanese had suspected that we were getting news of the war from a clandestine radio receiver inside the camp but, although they carried out intensive searches on a few occasions, they were never able to discover the whereabouts of the radio receiver or the person operating the set. Our jubilation was somehow marred by disturbing rumours that the Japanese intended to massacre all prisoners-of-war should the British forces land in Singapore. At first, most of us treated the matter as just another rumour, but there appeared to be some credence in the rumour as, about the same time, lessons in unarmed combat were organised by our own administration. Secretly, able-bodied men were asked to volunteer for such training which, should the horrifying occasion arise, would at least enable us to offer some resistance and not just be sitting ducks to be easily bumped off.

The first week of August 1945, heralded another milestone in our journey towards liberation. In that week, a new type of bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and again on Nagasaki. We later learnt that the mysterious bomb was called the atom bomb and that it had a devastating effect on the two cities. After all the

hardships we had endured, we had grown bitter towards the Japanese. We felt no compunction for the many thousands of innocent Japanese people who were killed or maimed by the bomb. That was the price they had to pay for a war which their government had started without a declaration of war. To us, although the use of the atom bomb may have appeared atrocious or inhumane, it was a positive step towards ending the war. We felt that the atom bomb had been used as an instrument for peace and not for destruction. On a subsequent bombing raid on Japan, Allied planes dropped thousands of leaflets as a clear indication of their supremacy in the skies over Japan, and containing the threat that on subsequent bombing raids, atom bombs instead of leaflets would be dropped. Secretly, I had wished that the Allies would carry out their threat to drop more atom bombs on other Japanese cities, especially Tokyo, but within me, I had a strange feeling that the inevitable downfall of the Japanese nation was already a *fait accompli*. No further atom bombs were dropped on Japan. However, the desired objective had been achieved. Japan surrendered soon afterwards.

Many optimistic *gurus* in our camp had often predicted when the war would be over. In actual fact, the end of the war came suddenly and unexpectedly for all of us. The VJ (Victory in Japan) Day occurred on 15 August 1945. On that very early morning at about two o'clock, we received the wonderful news: Emperor Hirohito of Japan had decided to terminate the war by surrendering to the Allies. Even at the early hour of the morning when most of the people of Singapore were sound asleep, the prisoners-of-war in Changi became wide awake, having heard the good news. It was our happiest day in captivity. The war was over and, *ipso facto*, we were really no longer prisoners-of-war of the Japanese.

I was in deep slumber when Ginny woke me up. He said, 'Get up, Sonny, the war is over.' My immediate reaction was anger. I was angry to be awakened from a peaceful sleep. It was so early in the morning and I thought it was a practical joke.

In anger I told Ginny, 'You must be mad! You will still be here at Christmas and will be having *pap*.' I then went back to sleep.

Ginny forced me up again. This time he made me sit up. 'See,' he said, 'everybody in the camp is mad except you.'

I looked around with half-sleepy eyes. The electric lights had not been switched on inside the B Hall, which was our sleeping quarters. However, the light of the moon filtered through the high grilles on both sides of our hall, and I saw everybody was really awake. They were all in a jubilant mood. They embraced and congratulated each other for 'making it'.

The courtyard adjacent to B Hall was floodlit by the bright blue moon above. It was a fine setting for such a wonderful and happy occasion. Lots of prisoners-of-war had congregated in the courtyard. There were the same scenes of jubilation. They gathered in groups and were chatting wildly, and smoking cigarettes or cigars which they had been saving for that special day.

Ginny embraced me and said, 'The Good Lord has answered our prayers. We are now free men again.' We were both locked in embrace for a few minutes. Later Eddie joined in the embrace. I then went back to sleep satisfied in the knowledge that the war must really be over. The dawn of our actual liberation had arrived. But like a doubting Thomas, I told myself that I would only believe that I was truly free when I saw columns of British soldiers rushing through the gates of Changi jail.

At five o'clock the same morning, Ginny again woke me up. He wanted me to go to the chapel for Holy Mass and to thank the Good Lord for our deliverance. Incidentally, the 15 August was the Feast of the Assumption of Our Lady into Heaven, a Catholic religious feast and a holy day of obligation. I was in a better frame of mind when he awoke me. I willingly went with Ginny and Eddie to our modest and humble chapel. Many others shared the same thought and soon the chapel was filled to capacity.

After breakfast, it was just like any other day to us. We went out to work as usual, except that we were in better spirits. We marched out of the camp very smartly. The officer leading the work party also gave a smart British salute. We all responded smartly to his order of *Kashira medari* (eyes left).

The Japanese camp commandant returned the salute but he and his men were surprised at our behaviour. He called up our

officer and questioned, 'Why are the men so arrogant this morning? Do they think the war is over? Tell them they will be prisoners-of-war for many more years. They must behave themselves properly.'

Evidently, the Japanese officer and his men were not aware of the fateful message of their Emperor Hirohito. The message had earlier been broadcast to the Japanese nation, but they evidently did not hear it. We later learnt that there was a possibility the Japanese army commanders in the various territories they occupied would contest their Emperor's decision. They were determined to continue resisting the Allies.We were then warned by our officers not to display further signs of our elation just in case the Japanese soldiers objected to our behaviour and vented their anger on us.

During the days that followed we were more docile, although inwardly we were sneering at the Japanese. We went about our work as usual and carried out any instructions the Japanese gave us. We were confident that the day of our actual release was just a few days away. We did not do anything that would antagonise the Japanese. Among ourselves, we would laugh and joke and above all, we would bet on the actual date the British liberating forces would arrive in Changi jail.

On 28 August 1945 a lone British aircraft flew over Changi area and dropped thousands of leaflets. They appeared like flower petals being showered over us. The leaflets were addressed to all Allied Prisoners-of-War. The contents confirmed what we had previously heard, that Japan had surrendered unconditionally to the Allies. The leaflets also stated that the authorities would get supplies to us and would make arrangements to get us out soon. We were also advised what to eat and what to avoid. The leaflet told us not to accept gifts of food from the local people. The reverse side of the leaflet contained instructions to the Japanese forces about the treatment of Allied prisoners-of-war. There was no doubt that some of the leaflets had been picked up by some of the Japanese soldiers guarding our camp but there was no change in their stern attitude towards us.

About the same time, our clandestine radio receiver picked up

a radio message from South East Asia Command (SEAC) addressed to the Commander of the Japanese forces in Singapore. The message requested the Japanese authorities to display a sign – POW – in large white bold letters on an open ground near the Changi jail. The Japanese authorities were also to make arrangements for the handling and transportation of supplies which were to be air-dropped over the area, at about two o'clock on the afternoon of 30 August 1945.

The Japanese authorities complied with the instructions on the display of signs and arranged for the transport. Our administration was then instructed to provide the labour for handling the supplies. This task was assigned to members of the Singapore Volunteer Corps.

I somehow managed to work my way into the 'collection party'. On the appointed day for the dropping of the supplies, we were at the rendezvous a few minutes before the scheduled time.

As the minutes went slowly by, all of us scanned the sky for a sign of the aircraft. There was much excitement when someone spotted a tiny black speck in the western sky, which became larger as it approached us and we knew it was the aircraft we were expecting. A little later, there was a mighty roar of aero-engines. We saw a giant B-29 bomber overhead, making a test run over the dropping area where the letters POW had been neatly laid on the ground. The aircraft went towards the China Sea and made a turn in preparation for a second run over dropping area.

When the aircraft appeared over the dropping zone, I saw a dark object falling from heaven. It was silhouetted against the clear blue cloudless sky and appeared to be plumetting towards the ground. Suddenly a parachute opened: it was as if an unseen hand had restrained the falling object from crashing to the ground. The black object then drifted slowly but gracefully earthwards. My colleagues and I were a bit surprised as we were expecting to see supplies raining on us.

The parachutist soon landed. We looked at the strange man both in amazement and admiration. He was tall and well built and wore a strange green uniform. It was meticulous, the creases on his shirtsleeves and trousers were crisp and sharp. We later

TO ALL ALLIED PRISONERS OF WAR

THE JAPANESE FORCES HAVE SURRENDERED UNCONDITIONALLY AND THE WAR IS OVER

WE will get supplies to you as soon as is humanly possible and will make arrangements to get you out but, owing to the distances involved, it may be some time before we can achieve this.

YOU will help us and yourselves if you act as follows :—

(1) Stay in your camp until you get further orders from us.

(2) Start preparing nominal rolls of personnel giving fullest particulars.

(3) List your most urgent necessities.

(4) If you have been starved or underfed for long periods DO NOT eat large quantities of solid food, fruit or vegetables at first. It is dangerous for you to do so. Small quantities at frequent intervals are much safer and will strengthen you far more quickly. For those who are really ill or very weak, fluids such as broth and soup, making use of the water in which rice and other foods have been boiled, are much the best. Gifts of food from the local population should be cooked. We want to get you back home quickly, safe and sound, and we do not want to risk your chances from diarrhoea, dysentry and cholera at this last stage.

(5) Local authorities and/or Allied officers will take charge of your affairs in a very short time. Be guided by their advice.

Copy of leaflet air-dropped over Changi, Singapore on 26 August 1945. On the reverse were instructions to the Japanese regarding treatment of POWs.

learnt that the uniform was the jungle green used by the British troops for jungle warfare. His black boots were highly polished and reflected the rays of the afternoon sun.

The man was heavily armed: he had a revolver in a holster attached to the left side of his broad belt and, on his right side, he had a machete in a sheath. His hands gripped an automatic gun firmly which he kept pointing at us. The 'crown' on his epaulettes was a clear indication that he was a Major in the British Army. On his back, he carried a neat haversack of a colour matching his uniform. Walkie-talkie equipment was attached to the side of his haversack.

The Major had freed himself from the parachute and stood almost rivetted to the spot where he had landed. He looked a bit bewildered, but his steel-blue eyes were alert. While assessing the situation, he kept his gun pointed towards us. He was ready for any eventuality. He had expected to meet some hostile Japanese soldiers, instead he saw a timid and motley group of suntanned men. We were dressed only in tattered shorts or G-strings, and many of us looked like living skeletons. We definitely did not look like Japanese. I suppose the Major may have wondered whether we were the local inhabitants.

There was silence all this while. Suddenly it was disturbed by his yell of, 'Do any of you men speak English?'

'Yes,' we all replied loudly in unison.

'Who the hell are you?' he yelled again.

We replied, 'We are British prisoners-of-war.'

He then realised that we were the long-abandoned British soldiers whom he had come to help. In a more friendly tone of voice he asked, 'Are there any Japanese soldiers with you?'

We replied, 'Yes, they are with the trucks,' pointing to the two large trucks which were parked a few metres away.

He appeared to be satisfied with our identity. To be doubly sure, he kept his gun trained in our direction and said, 'Will one of you come forward to be recognised.'

Without hesitation, Lofty, the tall suntanned Englishman, went forward and saluted him. Having had a close look at him, the Major was completely satisfied that he was in fact a prisoner-of-

war and extended a warm hand-shake. He then walked towards us and shook our hands too. Then pulling out the antennae of his walkie-talkie equipment he spoke to someone in the aircraft. We understood that he was giving the all-clear signal to his men. All this while, the aircraft was circling around the dropping zone. Those in the plane were no doubt waiting for the green light from the Major.

The time to carry out the mission had arrived. When the aircraft came over the dropping zone, nine more men baled out of the plane. With their open, cream-coloured parachutes, they drifted gracefully earthwards in close formation. That was a spectacular sight. It was something which remained in my memory for a long time. We were all very happy to see our new-found friends: they were the angels of mercy coming down from the heavenly sky to bring succour to us in a territory that was still in enemy hands.

All the men landed safely. They were all armed too. Having relieved themselves of their parachutes quickly, they approached us and began chatting. I soon learnt that they were British army officers attached to the unit called RAPWI (Rehabilitation of Allied Prisoners-of-War and Internees). Besides the major, who was the team leader, there was a doctor, communications officer and a logistics officer in the team. It was a picture of contrast to see those tough-looking and well-fed men standing in the midst of a group of living skeletons.

Later, the aircraft once again appeared over the dropping zone. This time, the blue sky was filled with numerous black objects, all of which were supported by parachutes. They floated in the breeze and slowly drifted down to earth, landing quite close to the spot designated with the large 'POW' letters. It was an excellent example of 'precision bombing'.

The dark objects turned out to be metal canisters, normally used for air-dropping of supplies to ground forces. The RAPWI officers quickly detached the parachutes from the canisters, in a precise and professional manner. We learnt that the canisters contained communication equipment, clothing, food and medical supplies.

We happily gathered all the canisters and neatly folded parachutes, loading them onto the waiting trucks driven by Japanese soldiers. Together with the newly arrived Britishers we made our way back to Changi jail.

The news of the impending arrival of the British parachutists and supplies had already spread around. Even the Chinese and Malay civilians living in the vicinity of Changi jail had heard the news. It is possible that some of them could have also seen the parachutists drifting down to earth. Many of them stood at the entrance to the driveway leading to the jail just to get a glimpse of the newly arrived British soldiers. By the time we reached Changi jail, a large crowd of prisoners had assembled near the massive steel gates to welcome the RAPWI officers. After all these long years of captivity, everybody was happy and excited to see unfamiliar but friendly faces again. The RAPWI officers were greeted with wild cheering.

Bungalow No. 1 at Moon Crescent was occupied by the Japanese camp commandant in charge of us. His office was on the ground floor while his living quarters was on the upper floor. The colonel in charge of the prisoner-of-war administration went up to him and told him that the war was over. The colonel also told him that he should vacate the bungalow as it was needed for the newly arrived RAPWI officers. The Japanese camp commandant remained silent and just lowered his head. Was it either an acknowledgement of our colonel's instruction or was he ashamed of Japan's surrender? He offered no resistance. There was not even a murmur from him. Taking his long sword from the table, he walked out of his office for the last time.

Shortly afterwards the bungalow was taken over by the RAPWI officers. They lost no time in getting down to business. Establishment of a line of communication with South East Asia Command (SEAC) headquarters was their top priority. The communication equipment was quickly assembled and tested. Soon they were communicating with the SEAC headquarters in Colombo, Ceylon. Details of the prisoners-of-war and civilian internees in Singapore were despatched. Request was also made for more supplies of clothing and medical supplies.

The RAPWI major brought over some maps of Singapore. He wanted to know the location of the Joo Chiat Police Station and the civilian internees camp as he wanted to visit them. He later requested a guide to accompany him.

As a civil servant and a member of the Singapore Volunteer Corps, I considered myself qualified to be the major's guide. Besides, unlike the majority of the men in the camp, I did not look like a living skeleton and I had already met the major on his arrival. I decided to offer my services and on the recommendation of our Regimental Sergeant Major, my services were accepted.

I had a good set of uniform complete with 'fore and aft' cap and my 'SVC' shoulder title, given to me by elder brother in April 1942. It was outdated, but it served the purpose. I had kept it all these years hoping to wear it on the day when I returned home. Now that I was almost free and was to act as a guide to the RAPWI officer, I felt it was a good occasion to wear my uniform.

That same afternoon, the RAPWI major and some of his men were ready for the reconnaissance trip. We travelled in a truck supplied by the Japanese authorities. It was ironical to see a Japanese military truck flying the Union Jack and being driven by armed British army officers on a public road in Japanese-occupied Singapore. Here and there along the route, few people watched us in amazement. Some reluctantly waved at us.

We took a beeline route to the civilian internment camp. It was located on a large tract of land at Sime Road. When we reached the camp, we found the locked gates were manned by Sikh guards who were former members of the Sikh police contingent. They were armed with British ·303 rifles. It is possible that they had already been made aware of the arrival of the RAPWI team in Singapore, as no sooner had we reached the gates, than they immediately opened them and let us pass through without even checking our credentials.

The internees were surprised but exceedingly happy to see British soldiers again. Above all, they were pleased to know that they would really be free very soon. There were cheers and shrieks of joy as they gathered around to shake hands with the

RAPWI officers. Some women were overcome with emotion. The RAPWI officers had a short meeting with those in charge of the male and female sections of the camp to assess their needs and to give them the good news. We had brought along some food supplies which were handed over to them with promises of some more to come. We left the camp amidst wild cheers from all the internees, who kept waving at us until they could see no longer.

Our next stop was the Joo Chiat Police Station at East Coast Road in Katong. The major had a few words with the commanding officer of the station and, after a quick look around the station, we headed back for Changi. I often wondered why the major wanted to see the Station. I supposed it was due to its proximity to Changi jail as well as the city.

The area was very familiar to me and brought back many pleasant memories. For a long time, I had lived about two kilometres away from the Station. I was longing to see my family and my home again. On our journey back to Changi jail, the major very kindly allowed me to visit my family. They could not believe their eyes when they saw me. Tears rolled down my father's cheeks as he embraced me and told me of my brother's arrest by the Japanese. I assured him that I would be home in a few days' time. The news of my visit to my family immediately spread around the neighbourhood like wild fire. Soon quite a number of my friends came over to greet me. We had not seen each other since the day I was called up for active service. They were pleased to know I was still alive and well and they also wanted to see the newly-arrived British soldiers at close quarters.

On our way back to Changi jail, we passed through the residential areas of Katong, Siglap and Bedok. Many people who were standing by the roadside watched in amazement the Japanese truck flying a British flag driving by and, when some of the RAPWI officers waved at them, they began waving back wildly. It must have given them something to talk about, was the war really over and had British forces already landed somewhere in Singapore to begin the recapture of Singapore?

CHAPTER 15

Freedom At Last

The arrival of the RAPWI team brought an immediate change in our daily life and eating habits in the camp. We no longer had to carry out any work previously demanded by the Japanese. However, firewood had still to be collected. There were many willing hands to do the work as it was no longer considered a heavy task. The staff of the cookhouse needed reinforcements to meet the needs of preparing many more meals and varied menus. There was no shortage of volunteers to give the cookhouse staff a helping hand and also to do the general cleaning of the camp.

We were given small quantities of good and wholesome food at more frequent intervals. Instead of the three meals a day which we had grown accustomed to, we were fed six times a day, with a cup of Ovaltine before bed-time.

Besides the food we were given other luxuries, such as cigarettes, chocolates and glucose sweets. The cartons of cigarettes looked so strange. We were given a few cartons each. They were well-known British and American brands, such as Players, Chesterfields and Camels.

For those eager to know something of the outside world, there were some British newspapers and periodicals. There was also some mail from home for the lucky ones.

The cigarettes were very welcome. However, having grown accustomed to smoking the dried papaya leaves, crushed tobacco stalks and Java (local tobacco), the men had lost the taste for

good cigarettes. Some of the men mixed the tobacco from the good cigarettes with the local tobacco and smoked the mixture in a pipe.

The majority quickly exchanged their allocation of cigarettes for Java. The Chinese shopkeepers in the neighbourhood were ever willing to oblige, knowing that the foreign cigarettes which had disappeared from the shops in Japanese-occupied Singapore would soon bring them handsome profits when the local people learnt of their availability.

We were frequently advised that we should not over-indulge in eating the new food and luxuries. However, such advice was ignored by some with disastrous effect. A few just ate themselves to death. It was a great pity that having survived the Battle of Singapore and endured three and a half years of hardship in a prisoner-of-war camp, they succumbed to over-eating, especially as the happy day for their release from the prison camp and return to their loved ones was just around the corner.

New jungle green uniforms and boots were issued to us. Stocks were insufficient as they had under-estimated the number of prisoners who were still interned inside Changi jail. This matter was soon rectified by radio communication and fresh stocks arrived without any delay.

The sight of the confident and fearless RAPWI officers and the sudden eviction from his office made the Japanese camp commandant realise that the war was really over. Japan was in fact a defeated nation. The *status quo* had changed abruptly. Instead of being an arrogant officer of the Imperial Japanese Army in occupation of Singapore, he had become a *de facto* prisoner-of-war of the Allied Forces.

To any Japanese serviceman, especially an officer, it was considered a dishonour to surrender to the enemy. In this instance it was not of his own doing. His great Emperor, the Son of Heaven, had decided to surrender unconditionally to the Allied Forces, and as an officer of the Japanese Imperial Army he must obey his Emperor's command. He must therefore have given the matter some deep thought and may have been overcome with shame. He decided that the only option open to

him was to end not only his military career but his life as well.

A few days before the arrival of the liberating forces, the Japanese soldiers guarding our camp had assembled on the playing field in front of their quarters. The Japanese camp commandant then appeared wearing his best military uniform. The soldiers stood at attention and looked at him in silence, waiting to hear what he had to say. He then made a speech in Japanese. My colleagues and I were sitting on the embankment overlooking the field, expecting to see some sort of a parade. Instead we heard what turned out to be the camp commandant's farewell speech, although we never understood a word that was spoken. I suppose he was telling his soldiers that Japan had surrendered unconditionally to the Allied Forces and bade them farewell after thanking them for carrying out all his instructions. When he finished speaking, he saluted his men. For a time he stood stiffly at attention. Then he knelt down and committed *hara kiri* (Japanese style of suicide). He did not do it in the traditional classical style in which a ceremonial dagger was normally used to disembowel the person. I suppose that he did not have a ceremonial dagger, but instead he removed the pin from a hand grenade and held it to his abdomen. In a few seconds, there was an explosion and his guts were blown off. That was a tragic end to his career. I was a bit upset to witness such an incident, but I suppose he wanted a dramatic end to his military career.

Our actual liberation from the Changi prisoner-of-war camp happened on the morning of 5 September 1945, when troops of the British Fifth Indian Division repossessed the island of Singapore. Earlier that morning, there was news of their impending arrival, and from the roof top of Changi jail we could see the Singapore harbour and outer roads filled with a variety of ships. We did not know that we were in fact watching the British invasion armada. A detachment of the Fifth Indian Division was assigned to liberate the prisoners-of-war and they lost no time in getting to Changi. They came in landing crafts and landed on Bedok beach. Immediately thereafter, they headed for the Changi jail travelling along Bedok and Upper Changi Road. They were spearheaded by fierce-looking Gurkha soldiers who led a

convoy of trucks carrying more British soldiers, in jungle-green uniforms and in full battle dress. Armed with automatic weapons, they were ready to engage the Japanese soldiers should they decide to offer any resistance.There had been some rumours that despite the Japanese Emperor's call to the nation to surrender to the Allied Forces, the Japanese field commanders outside Japan wanted to continue fighting and would not give up. Destiny had decided that there should be no further bloodshed. The liberating British forces met no resistance as they made their way to Changi and finally drove through the wide open gates of Changi jail. Contrary to the jubilant scenes that were witnessed when the news of the Japanese surrender were received by our clandestine radio receiver in the early hours of 15 August, the prisoners-of-war welcoming the liberating forces appeared dazed and were lost for words. Perhaps the coming of the British liberating forces was something which they took for granted and they were just waiting for it to happen. There had been a tremendous joy to know that the war had ended, and there was also more happiness and excitement to welcome the RAPWI officers who parachuted into Changi while Singapore was still occupied by the Japanese but, somehow, the arrival of the liberating forces seemed less dramatic.

The cameramen of the world press and the cinema newsreels expected to see a wild cheering mass of prisoners welcoming their liberators. They were disappointed. The emaciated prisoners-of-war had a blank look on their faces and had to be cajoled into smiling for the world's photographers and cameramen.

Immediately after the arrival of the British forces, a simple flag-raising ceremony was held within the courtyard of Changi jail. Once again, the Union Jack flew over Changi jail and on Singapore soil. Fanned by a gentle morning breeze, the Union Jack flew majestically for all those near and far to see. Only then did the stark reality of liberation dawn on the prisoners-of-war. They realised that they were no longer prisoners of the Japanese, but were truly free British soldiers again. They gave a thunderous applause and spontaneously sang *God save the King*. In their delirious moment of joy, they embraced the men of the liberating

forces. They were thankful for being liberated. The wild scenes of joy spread as we embraced and congratulated each other. The scenes were no doubt captured on film by the picture-hungry press photographers and newsreel cameramen. We had survived three and a half years of hardship and the sight of British soldiers and the Union Jack fluttering in the breeze convinced us that we were truly free. The majority of the liberating forces then left Changi jail, presumably to rejoin their division to take over the control of Singapore from the Japanese. Some of the men remained in Changi, possibly to guard the liberated prisoners-of-war from any attempt of reprisal by the defeated Japanese soldiers. While awaiting repatriation to our respective home countries, all prisoners-of-war were given a 'Freedom Fiver' to spend. It was a sum of five British pounds which were converted into new Singapore dollars and handed out in crisp new currency notes. The majority of my British and Australian colleagues spent most of the time wandering around the city which they had defended against heavy odds three and a half years ago. They wanted to see the sights and the places that were familiar to them and to meet some Singaporeans whom they had befriended before, to renew acquaintance and bid them farewell before returning home. They usually took along their allocation of cigarettes to give away to their friends. Those who had no friends traded their goods on the black-market. Every morning, the men would leave Changi jail after breakfast and would return for dinner in the evening. Some of the men managed to obtain lifts from passing military trucks or civilian transport. Others who were not so lucky were quite happy to go on foot. They were free to roam wherever they liked. It reminded me of those birds that used to fly around me as I sat atop the coconut tree collecting toddy not so long ago.

Those prisoners who were not fit or who required urgent medical attention were flown home without delay. They were evacuated by military aircraft operating from the Changi airfield which had been constructed by the prisoners-of-war, and now become useful for the evacuation of sick prisoners.

A few days after our liberation, all of us in Changi jail were transferred to the Sea View Hotel in Katong. It was about five

kilometres from the city and was very convenient for the men to get into the city. The hotel was used as a repatriation transit centre. Prisoners-of-war and internees stayed there before boarding a troopship bound for England or Australia.

I was scheduled to go to England with the other volunteers. When embarkation day came, I could not bear the thought of leaving my family behind, especially my father, who having lost his eldest son, was expecting me to return home. Furthermore, I could not reconcile myself with the idea of going to a country which would be totally alien to me. I could not foresee what my future would be if I followed my colleagues to England. It would be another journey to the unknown. I therefore decided to remain in Singapore and bade my colleagues a fond farewell.

On 12 September 1945, Admiral Lord Mountbatten, the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces, South East Asia, formally accepted the surrender of all the Japanese Forces in South East Asia from General Itagaki Seishiro, Commander of the Japanese Garrison in Singapore. The ceremony was held at the Municipal Building (now the City Hall) in the city of Singapore. I was among the thousands of spectators who had gathered on the civic green fronting the Municipal Building early that morning. I wanted to get a glimpse of our saviour and the defeated Japanese General. Despite the many years of deprivation and suffering, I could not bring myself to boo at the Japanese General and a few of his officers as they walked up the steps of the Municipal Building in a solemn procession and with heads hung down. At that time, I did not harbour any malice towards them, since I was extremely happy that the Japanese had been defeated and that Singapore had been freed from their domination.

I was demobilised from active service on 30 June 1946, but three months earlier, I had decided to return to my former civilian job in the civil service as there was now nothing to do in uniform.

After existing for about nine decades, the Straits Settlements Volunteer Force was officially disbanded when the Volunteer Forces and Local Defence Corps (Demobilisation) Ordinance was passed in July 1946.

Certificate of Service

20281 Pte. Lionel de Rosario

served as an embodied member of the

1st Bn. Straits Settlements Volunteer Force

from 4th December 1941 to 30th June 1946

and last held the rank of Private

A. W. Baigent

O.C. Volunteer Forces Record Office, Singapore.

The author's Certificate of Service, issued by the Volunteer Forces Record Office, Singapore.

EPILOGUE

Since the end of the Second World War, there has been internal strife in some countries and also a few international conflicts but, generally, the world had enjoyed peace for the last half a century. Let us hope that peace will prevail for many more years and that the present generation will be spared the horrors of a Third World War in the foreseeable future. Electronic art coupled with more advanced technology, more sophisticated weapons of war and the possible use of nuclear armament, will make the next war more destructive, and millions of people would lose their lives.

The immediate post-war period became a day of reckoning for some people who had been responsible for, or had perpetrated atrocities during the war in Europe and in the Far East. Retribution was swift. Those who committed atrocities or had ordered such atrocities were considered as war criminals. They were tried by a War Crimes Tribunal, and those found guilty were executed or received long terms of imprisonment.

I was only interested in the trials of two notable Japanese generals, as they were directly involved in the Battle of Singapore and subsequent occupation. The first one was none other than General Tomoyuki Yamashita, known as the 'Tiger of Malaya' and the proud conqueror of Singapore. He was tried by the United States Military Commission in Manila, Philippines, in December 1945. He was found guilty of war crimes committed by the men under his command, and was sentenced to death. He died on the gallows at Los Banos on 23 February 1946. The second war

criminal was Major General Shampei Fukei. On 7 April 1946 he was brought to justice for ordering the execution of prisoners-of-war in Changi during the Selarang Squeeze. He was later executed by a British firing squad at the very same spot of his crime committed almost four years previously.

The triumph and decline of these two Japanese generals have passed into the realm of history. They died instantly without suffering any pain but, for the thousands who had suffered as prisoners under their charge and have survived, the memories of those dark days in captivity will last for a very long time.

For me, the severe hardships I had endured in the jungles of Siam, slaving on the construction of the Siam-Burma railway had been a nightmare. It has haunted me all these years. Those experiences lived in my memory as difficulties encountered and overcome. I remember my successful battle for survival, and above all, I remember the physical trials and mental stress which demanded mutual understanding and comradeship. I invariably remember how dependent each of us had been on our comrades at some time or other, especially during those dark days, when all hope was lost in Songkurai, far away from civilisation.

The railway to link Siam with Burma was not the original concept of the Japanese military engineers. It was thought of as early as in the late nineteenth century. At that time, the Siamese government had rejected the proposal to build the Siam-Burma railway as it was envisaged that many lives would be lost in the construction of such a railway. However, the Japanese government had thousands of hapless Allied prisoners-of-war, and they were prepared to sacrifice human lives in order to achieve their objective of opening the gateway to India. When the railway was finally completed, more than sixty thousand men had died.

The Siamese (Thai) Government did not feel happy about letting the infamous Death Railway remain for posterity. In 1955, the rails of the railway line that previously went north-east from Tarsoa to the Burmese border were ripped up. The rolling stock was sold and the proceeds were distributed to all prisoners-of-war who had worked on that railway.

My share of the proceeds was a sum of £3. I was studying at

Oxford in England in April 1956 when the Crown Agents for the Colonies in London sent me the cheque. I decided not to cash the cheque, but to retain it as a lifetime souvenir and a reminder of those difficult days when I was a slave in Songkurai.

Memories of Songkurai have always been grim, but there is, however, a happy sequel to that episode I would like to mention. A sheer twist of fate gave me the opportunity of a reunion with *Ah Pek*, the Siamese trader who went up river to Songkurai to trade with me. I met him in unexpected circumstances in November 1971. At that time, the Singapore government was developing a new chancery building for the Embassy of Singapore in Bangkok, the capital of Thailand. I was then the Assistant Director of Public Works (Architecture) in Singapore, and the project undertaken in association with a Thai architect, came under my purview. As such, I frequently visited Bangkok at various stages in the development and construction of the project.

It was during one of these visits to Bangkok that I had expressed my desire to visit the Allied War Cemetery at Kanchanaburi (which I previously knew as Kanburi). During the discussion about the beautiful and well-kept lawn cemetery, the Thai architect was pleasantly surprised to learn that some of my relatives and many colleagues were silently resting there. He immediately agreed to take me to Kanchanaburi a four hours' drive by car from Bangkok, the very next day. He said that while I was there, I should also see the Bridge of the River Kwai which was near the War Cemetery. It was a good tourist attraction. I was surprised to learn that the Bridge on the River Kwai was at Kanchanaburi.

A casual discussion about the bridge followed and I was adamant that the real Bridge on the River Kwai, as depicted in Hollywood's film of the same title, was built at Songkurai. Just then, the Thai project engineer came into the conference room. He had overheard our conversation and questioned me about Songkurai. I told him that I was a prisoner-of-war there, and had worked on the Siam-Burma railway as well as the bridge. Our conversation then drifted to the traders who turned up at Songkurai in paddle boats. I mentioned my dealings with *Ah Pek*.

For a moment he was silent. I suppose he was trying to recapture the scenario of the past in his mind. He then came across the room and embraced me. It was just like a meeting of two lost brothers. He blurted out: 'I am *Ah Pek*'. I myself was stunned and lost for words. I was pleased to meet him again as the 'goodies' he sold me had in some way contributed to my survival. Those days in Songkurai came to my mind again.

I learnt that *Ah Pek* was then a member of an underground movement working closely with some British guerrillas. They had been parachuted into the jungle behind some work camps on the Siam-Burma border. Songkurai was one of the areas where they were in action. I immediately thought of the milk-white bodied stranger who had emerged from the jungle and who had worked with us for some time before disappearing, again mysteriously.

They had been keeping watch on the progress of the railway line and especially the bridge over the River Kwai at Songkurai. I was told that the Japanese could not make use of the railway as they had envisaged. Since October 1943, when they began sending trainloads of troops and supplies from Siam to Burma, they were subjected to intensive Allied bombing. Any repaired section was bombed again. The Japanese could not even use the railway to evacuate their retreating army from Burma.

Now that I have committed my experiences to posterity, I hope that all my dreadful memories will be buried in the pages of this book. Nevertheless, I shall always cherish the thought of the many good friends I made in the various prisoner-of-war camps that I have worked in. Many of them are now dead, but others are still living in Singapore, England and Australia.

I sincerely hope that should any of them have the opportunity of reading my book, it will help them remember Songkurai-not so much the brutalities they experienced but the many difficulties we had encountered and surmounted. Above all, to remember with pride the strong bonds of comradeship that held us all together during those dark days deep in the jungles of Siam.