

ANTHONY HENRY COWLING
Experiences as a Prisoner-of-War, 1942-1945

Interviewed by
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Oral History Archives
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Charles G. Roland, MD:

Please just go ahead.

Anthony Henry Cowling:

After arriving in Singapore, my dad asked me to go up on behalf of the company and collect the equipment that was being evacuated from the Japanese advance from Alor Star, and Sungei Petani, both airstrips that were under construction in North Malaya. I left, with the idea of just trying to recognize this equipment coming down the road, as troops and other people were evacuating the northern area. Eventually, after getting north of Kuala Lumpur in Central Malaya, I recognized the first of our turnpoles, that were coming south.

C.G.R.:

Sorry, first of your what?

A.H.C.:

Turnpoles. That's a type of equipment made by Letourneau, in Texas, and they're heavy earth-moving equipment. At that time they were quite revolutionary because they were electrically operated. These turnpoles have two huge wheels and a scraper behind them. And they gather the topsoil, etc., whatever you're moving on airstrips. And, being wheeled vehicles they're much faster than tractors but, of course, there is no great speed involved. They were coming down the highway from Sungei Petani, and I stopped these native drivers on the turnpoles and told them what I was trying to do, and who was following them, and how many were being evacuated, and where the employees and this kind thing. Then I told them that we would arrange a rendezvous in

Kuala Lumpur and try and get them all together and then go down in convoy to Singapore. So we did this.

I had a nasty...I'd relieved one of the drivers just north of Kuala Lumpur, and had a nasty accident with an army vehicle in Kuala Lumpur, actually. We phoned up the police to see what they would do about it. They weren't the least bit concerned because of wartime, and bombings, and this kind of thing, so that was washed over. We got the equipment back to Singapore. And then at this stage my father suggested that I join the New Zealand Construction Company that was operating in Singapore -- it was New Zealand's contribution to the Far Eastern defenses. I did this.

Actually I went to the RAF. Not being a New Zealander, I couldn't join directly. I went to the RAF, and found that I was too young to join. They told me I had to be at least 18 and I was still 17. So I went back and worked with my dad for a couple of weeks in Singapore, and then went back, and obviously the scam was to say I was 18. So I was 18. I joined the RAF and explained that my father was in the construction business, and was seconded then -- I think he had made prior arrangements with people he knew -- I was seconded then to the New Zealand construction unit, and spent some time with them in Singapore. Then it became obvious with the Japanese advance south in Kuala Lumpur that -- I guess on a political basis, I don't know -- anyhow, the New Zealanders were going to be evacuated from Singapore.

So I was taken with the New Zealand unit, as a member of the unit, onto the transport, onto the ship in Singapore -- all my

kit and caboodle, what I had left, now. I had already lost a lot in Kota Bahru; we went on board the ship and we were just about ready to sail. It was very shortly before the actual castoff time, when a message came down that Cowling was to report to the RAF. He was not a New Zealander and should remain with his parent unit. So I went back without any kit at all. The New Zealanders took all my beautiful new kit down to New Zealand, and safety, and I went back to the RAF.

At this stage I remained in the transit camp, Seletar Transit Camp, just outside the big Air and Naval Base in Singapore, with Gregson, our Commanding Officer, wh had, at this time, started the "X" Party. "X" Party being a group of people who were in transit at different places, and, with no particular training, our job was to go out and conduct demolitions at the different areas where the ground defense of RAF had not had time, or had missed, or a pre-planned defensive destruction. This was very exciting from my point of view. We would go out and blow up all kinds of gas dumps, and had a lot of little experiences on the way.

One particular one was that when we got to Tengah Airstrip on the northern, or central part of Singapore Island, the Bofors defense at Tengah were in a horizontal attitude combating the Japanese who were advancing on the other side of the airstrip. And we claimed, as we were ourselves carrying submachine guns -- Thompson automatics and sten guns -- we very proudly claimed that we had shot down a Japanese dive bomber, at this stage, but, of course, it was open to a lot of debate since there was so much

ack-ack going up, nobody knew who it was.

After this the advance of the Japanese on Singapore Island was very well established and our commanding officer, Wing Commander Gregson, decided that he should evacuate the unit. We found, or he found, a vessel. I think it was the Epo Star, I'm not sure; but a vessel in Singapore harbor, that was very badly holed, it was listing even as it was tied up to the dock. Gregson announced to us on a parade in Singapore, in all the shambles, and the smoke of the buildings that had been destroyed, and the gathering of different army units, and the whole place was just a shocking mess, the very last days at Singapore. He announced that he had been able to get a local pilot -- this was a sea pilot, marine pilot -- who knew how to navigate from here to Batavia. So this man had volunteered to take the boat out; all they needed now was a volunteer defense crew on the ship and a volunteer crew to stoke the boilers. We got on board. All kinds of miscellaneous personnel came on, other RAF units, other army units. We were all heavily loaded. I myself had a sten gun, a Thompson automatic, and a .303 rifle. At the age of 17, man, I was just loaded with bands of ammunition and going on what....

C.G.R.:

If you do it, do it properly.

A.H.C.:

Right [laughter]! We were going to defend the Empire. And we had lost it, actually at that stage. I think this was a day or two days before the actual fall of Singapore. We got out -- the Empire Star was there with us, which was a big transport ship

getting out at the same time. We left, then, and because we were very heavily listing, we were ignored by a lot of Japanese aircraft. We were strafed by some and bombed by some, but most, I guess, from their advantage point of being high up they could see other ships in the straits, and they took after them and we obviously had this attitude of sinking.

We got...it took us three days to get to Batavia. When we got there we had no food or water. The Dutch rejected us totally. They said, "We don't want any more troops in here. Get out." Gregson, I guess, or the Captain of the ship, said that we had no further supplies, we couldn't go on to Australia, we had to anchor there, or tie up there, and disposal of the ship would have to wait till later. So we disembarked in Batavia.

We went to an RAF camp in Batavia. And the most memorable thing about Batavia, was that there was a little restaurant there who supplied steak, eggs, and chips for a dollar, or a guilder. And it was the RAF paper. We'd all go down there for a meal, and I had pathetically little money. My time in the RAF I wasn't paid for the first four years. It was rather incredible, actually, because my documents never caught up to me when I was taken prisoner, and I didn't get paid till I got back to England afterwards, except for one little exception I'll explain in a while.

We went to and stayed in Batavia. I was very concerned about my father so I went to the Hotel Desans in Batavia and left a message there to say if my father, or an uncle I had in Singapore, and an aunt, were to come through, would they please

contact me through RAF Headquarters. I didn't hear anything, and I just didn't know what had happened to any of my relatives. My mother was in England at this time.

We stayed in Batavia for a matter of three or four weeks and then went down to Polakarta in the central part of Java. My geography of that area has always been very good but, specifically in Java, I didn't know where Polakarta was. It was a camp with very, very high atap -- their coconut leaf -- huts, that we used for tobacco leaves. And looking back on it now, it's really quite humorous. The RAF senior officers decided that we should hear Churchill's speech to us, in Java. And Churchill was telling us that we would fight to the last man. Well, Churchill was 8,000 miles away and we were fighting to the last man with our small arms, etc. As a youngster then, of course, I took this very seriously and we listened to this speech. Later in the day, or possibly the next morning, we were told that we were going to be evacuated from Tjilatjap in the south, a town on the south coast of Java, evacuated by transport to Australia.

So, we were then marched to the railway station. We were disarmed totally. At this stage all the fantastic amount of arms and ammunition we'd left Singapore with had been taken from us. But most of us had rifles and 50 or 100 rounds of ammunition. We were disarmed and told that we were going straight to Tjilatjap, and we would be evacuated there on British transports. We marched down to the station -- naked so to speak, from an armament point of view. Of course, we were very military, from a clothing point of view. Got on the train, got on to the station, and we were being loaded into cattle cars for

Tjilatjap.

I don't like being confined. I'm not claustrophobic, but I admire nature and the beauties of the outside, so I asked the sergeant if I could sit on the brake area, braking area on the little platform at the back of each car, there's a brake station with a little handle that the brakeman turns. And he said, "Yes." So I said, OK, if I can then my buddy, and I figured who it was at my stage, because I had lost my buddies in Singapore, and I was really on a limb, I was on my own then. So I asked one of the other fellows if they would join me and we would sit back to back on this break car while we went down to Polakarta, which was about a planned 6- or 8-hour trip.

We left in the late afternoon. Dusk came down and the train was jogging on its way, and I chatted over to the fellow behind me, "Hey, look at these beautiful fireflies." We came into an opening and the place was absolutely beautiful, the way these little fireflies twinkling in this opening in the jungle. And I was just admiring this, and then there was a thummm. And this turned out to be a mortar shell, and swoosh. And the first mortar shell, apparently the Japanese had landed either with an advance party or paratroops, we didn't know. But there was an advance party there and they were in this clearing in the jungle. And all this beauty was just masking machine guns and the Japanese unit.

The first shot, as we discovered later, crippled the engine. They had had time to zero in their mortar on the railway line, and then with the firing of their mortar, all their machine guns

and the rifles opened up, and, of course, this scared a lot of people who were in the front, fairly well towards the aft of the train. And they got out of the train and they were running beside it because they didn't know where to go. They couldn't go into the jungle. That's where the firing was coming from. And they were running beside and we sitting on the outside, didn't know who these guys were -- whether they were our guys or....And so there was pandemonium going on.

I had a tin helmet on and I was trying to hide my whole body in a crouched fetal position behind this tin helmet [laughter]. There were bullets striking the boxcars, and people running beside us, and we really didn't know, and the engine had been hit and we were coasting through this area of where all the beautiful fireflies had been. And once the engine got to the end of it's steam, or inertia, or whatever, it lost power and we just stopped. But, then, of course, we got out and we found that the guys running beside it were all part of our own group. We had been yelling at each other anyhow. When we discovered they were RAF, English people, we tried to haul them onto the side and, you know....

So, the engine had stopped at this stage, the Japs are behind us now, we've coasted clear of the danger area, the Japs are behind us, we're just milling around. "What the hell's happening, we're supposed to be in Tjilatjap, and here they've surrounded us and ambushed us." This is one of the really disgraceful parts of my time in the service, where the officers who were in charge of us were taking off ahead of us, ostensibly to find out where they could lead us, but they were leading us

without any following. They were hightailing it down the railway lines. I heard later that some of them had been detailed to find out what, you know, to recce ahead, to find out what was just going on ahead. However, we felt very deserted and the senior NCOs then coordinated the men that were left and we marched down the railway line.

C.G.R.:

Roughly how many people are we talking about?

A.H.C.:

I really don't know, I really don't know. I believe at this stage there were about 7,000 RAF in Java. How many had been in Polakarta camp I really don't know. All our trainload was RAF, so it was virtually an RAF ambush.

C.G.R.:

Several hundred?

A.H.C.:

Oh, there must have been, must have been, because we had maybe 20 or 30 cars in here and they were all loaded with people, and there was the odd bods like myself on the outside. Then we were organized by our senior NCOs and we marched down the railway lines. Well, human nature being what it is, some people were trying to carry more than they could. Back packs were too heavy and so there were things being discarded here and there, and luckily my total possessions were fairly light, so I was able to carry on.

We got down to a bridge over a river, and apparently one of the officers (I only learned this years afterwards) had gone down

there to find out from the Dutch, what the situation was on this bridge. Little did we know that it was timed, as our belief at that time, it was timed to go off at midnight. And we were walking across. They'd filed us in single file, walking across the bridge. And a fellow came, we were in this single file marching across the bridge, just off to one side of the railway. I guess it was a maintenance area or something of that nature off to one side of the railway. And a Dutchman came elbowing his way down through us -- and being a little bit of friction between the British and the Dutch, there were some people yelling and cussing him and doing all kinds of things -- but this lad was on his way down to the center span of the bridge. Luckily I had passed the center. And he was going to pull the wires on the explosives that was set to blow the bridge. And, of course, we had no idea what he was up to. He was just another fellow elbowing his way the other way.

When the bridge actually blew, I was near the other side of it, so that when the whole thing went up, I was blown on shore, on the right shore. We lost an awful lot of men on that, being right in the area of the devastation. And then the survivors of that were in the water, in the flowing river. And, not knowing where they were, we set up a system of ropes. I say, "we," I had actually been blown ashore and I went on with the others, but some of the fellows stayed behind, set up a system of ropes, and tried to get the remainder across the river. I don't know how many they got or how successful it was, I went on with the other group.

And we spent about 2 or 3 days then, really, not knowing.

A disorganized bunch of people who had been split into various groups because nobody knew where in the hell they were going. Some were saying, "Oh, Tjilatjap's this way," some said that way, and some were going across paddy fields, some were going on the road, and it was just, just every man for himself, really. So we went on this way -- and I don't know how long this went on -- until we got to an area -- I myself ended up on another station which turned out to be Tasikmalaya railway station, and, all I had left in the way of goodies to eat here was one can of condensed milk. And, I was frightfully proper, you know, and you mustn't talk to anyone unless you were sort of more or less introduced --this type of thing still in my background. And there were 3 or 4 of us sitting on the railway station just squatting native style, wondering what in the hell was going to happen next. And one of the fellows said to me, "Hey, buddy, do you want a drink?" You know, and they offered me his water bottle, or his cup, I guess it was a cup, half one. And I said, "No, I don't think I should," you see -- dying of thirst and all I've got is this sweet milk, condensed milk, which makes you even thirstier! And, to my horror, he just poured it, he didn't want it, he wasn't being polite, he just poured it on the hot cement, and it just disintegrated. I can see it being soaked up by hot, hot cement! God! I thought, how stupid can you get, you know, dying for a drink and you're still being very formal. So, that was a big lesson right there, and I drank back half my condensed milk and gave him the other half and we became buddies.

Sometime after that, we'd been on the station awhile,

literally just sort of wondering, you know -- "We don't know where we're going." There's a few people around. We discussed this ourselves; where is Tjilatjap? We were told we were going to Tjilatjap to be evacuated. Nobody really knew. There were no trains operating because the lines had been blown. And then eventually, somebody came up and said, "All military personnel have to report to the school in Tasikmalaya." So we went down there and there was a collection, just a getting together of all kinds of bodies, in this school. And there we met up with officers and there seemed to be some military organization going on again. So we were part of a group.

We stayed there for awhile. The "awhile" being a matter of hours. And somehow or other a big collection of boots and shoes had been got together. And they said before we go up to the air station at Tasikmalaya, which I guess it was a bit more than a landing strip, they had some hangers there, there was some big hangers. "If you want any boots, go up to the yard in the school and just select yourself boots."

Well, once again, being very naive I looked around for a beautiful pair -- I found these very shiny leather shoes with a sole about an eighth of an inch thick, which was absolutely totally useless. So my boots being, I figured, pretty well shot, I discarded those and took on these beautiful leather shoes [laughter], much to my regret a short time later because what I should have been getting was the big heavy stuff that would last me for the remainder. Anyhow, at that time we didn't know we were going to be prisoners.

So I took these shoes and then we were herded up the station

at Tasikmalaya where there had been a few Hurricane fighters and Lodestar bombers, and Mitchells, I guess. It was an RAF station, RAF Dutch station. And we were told then the next day, we spent the night on the station, and the next day Gregson, our wing commander, formed up the group on the runway, and this was the 8th of March.

This was the most incredible display of discipline I've ever seen. He'd formed us up on the runway. There were 4000 troops there. He told us that Java was going to surrender and at 12 o'clock the surrender was final. And while he was talking, a group of 27 Japanese bombers came flying at about 1000 feet straight over the runway, flying parallel with the runway. And, being a little bit of a renegade, anyhow, I was peeking up at these damn bombers. I said, "God damn it, I hope they don't open their bomb-bays." And Gregson said, in a very military fashion, you know, "There is to be no movement. Everyone will stand fast." And these bombers opened their bomb-bays and flew right over us. And, I'm convinced that if we had dispersed, they'd have just pulled the trigger, right there, and there would have been a massacre. All those bombs from 27 bombers would have been down and all over us. Not a man broke rank. It was just incredible. We just stood there like little martinets, all obeying the orders.

C.G.R.:

Sweating a lot.

A.H.C.:

Right [laughter]. Right, and 95 degree temperatures --

this kind of thing. They flew over, and naturally, it only took a matter of moments before they were over us and they went on to announce that Java had surrendered and we would be prisoners of war as from 12 o'clock that day, noon on the 8th of March. We filed back into the big hangers there.

Actually, I should go back a night, because the day I came into the hangers, I'd lost contact with the buddy I had made friends with on the station, who I had given the condensed milk to. So I knew no one. And, I came into this hanger, huge hanger, with little groups of people all around. And, my really good friend Jack Dobby who had been a rubber planter in Borneo, and had joined up with me in Singapore, or just before me actually, I didn't know where he was. And, so I went into this hanger, absolutely, totally, lost just sort of dragging a back pack, and a couple of guys said, "Hey," (it wasn't "Buddy"), but "hey," some derogatory term, you know, "Come over here." So I thought God! there's nothing to lose, you know, and I went over. And these were members -- they were ack-ack, army ack-ack troops -- members of the Glasgow Slasher Gang [laughter], who had been sort of pulled into the army as one unit. And, I found out that the slasher gangs used to put razors in their peaked caps, and they would, you know, if you annoyed them they would slash you. They were a pretty rough bunch of guys. But they were the only guys who took sympathy on one odd bod struggling in, or coming into POW camp. Anyhow I hunkered down with them for a little while and then I got to meet a few other fellows.

And this situation lasted for awhile. And, of course, naturally, escape is the big thing -- there aren't many Japs

around. We had seen a few. We were told the whole country was surrendered, so the best thing to do then is to get away. We got a scheme going where we could get out. I was fortunate inasmuch as I could speak Malay. We would get out of the camp, we tried to get up into the hills where there's obviously very few people and we could steal food and maintain ourselves up there during the period, because we figured hell, in three months this place is going to be liberated. So we would get away.

Then I met up with my buddy, Jack Dobby, who had been a planter in Borneo, and he was in his 30s. A very, very good individual. He could speak Malay in many dialects. He could astound the Malays because he would turn on Borneo dialect, some Dykan, Dyak, all kinds of different dialects in Malay. And he pulled me aside one night and said there was an escape attempt going on with a Lodestar. And there were only, I think the number was 27 people, they could take in the Lodestar, but there were already a hundred names on the list to go in. "Did I want to get in on it?" So I said, "Yes, for God sake", you know, "but, how in the hell can I ever overcome this 100?" He said, "Don't worry, at the last minute the people chicken out. They just won't go for it." I said, "OK, I'm with you."

So, this was very exciting until the last night and apparently the commanding officer got to hear about this, and I believe on that station there was a Group Captain, but he got to hear about this and he decided that the tires on the Lodestar should be slashed and there would be no escape attempt. We had already had three officers shot going out to celebrate a birthday

party, escaping from the camp, which was very easy because it was a huge RAF camp. You could walk out of it and go into the town of Tasikmalaya. And these three fellows had gone into celebrate one of their birthdays and the Japs had caught them and then shot them.

There was another case where the Japs had taken some other officers who were out of the camp area and tied them up to trees in the main park in Tasikmalaya and bayoneted them. And it became very evident that there was no fooling around, you know. We were prisoners and if there was escaping going on there was going to be a lot of retribution, or revenge. So he canceled that one by slashing the tires on the aircraft, and then we were back to our scheme of trying to get up in the mountains.

Well, we did a lot of planning, a lot of scheming. We went out of camp for a night or two. We got through the camp bounds and towards the south coast -- an alternative scheme had been to get to the south coast and see if we could pick up a boat of some sort and sail away. Nothing really worked. The natives were too hostile: where a few weeks before they had been all for us whites, now they were all against us. And just the tone of each village that we went into was very, very anti. So we went back into camp and stayed there.

We stayed in Batavia, on fairly good rations, RAF rations, for a matter of, I believe, 3 or 4 months, all the time thinking that we would be prisoners only a matter of 3 or 4 months. It was my personal survival system that they will be here in 3 months -- I did this for nearly 4 years -- they'll be here in 3 months, they'll be here in 3 months. We went on like this.

One of the doctors in the camp had the good sense and foresight, on one of our parades, to tell us that human beings can survive under just incredible circumstances. You have the will to survive, all you've got to do is exercise it and keep going. It doesn't matter what happens, keep going. And this was very inspiring.

Most of the parades we went on were devoted to Japanese trying to -- it was really quite farcical -- trying to indoctrinate us with their commands of, attention, and left turn, right turn, and they taught us a few phrases like "I'm going to the bathroom," this kind of thing, because in some of our camps we had to actually go outside the barbed wire to go to the bathroom. So we learned a few basic Japanese phrases and all the military commands. And we had to number in Japanese, ichi, ni, san, and this Japanese officer standing up on a big podium in the middle of the runway, with troops -- there were 4000 of us spread out on each side of him -- with Japanese soldiers yelling orders. Like the officer would yell "kiotski", which is "attention," and then all his Japanese soldiers would yell "kiotski," and of course, none of us knew what in the hell it stands for, so they would go to attention. This little farcical business went on for a couple of weeks till we all got the message. And, after the first initial indoctrination of this, the message was beating; if you didn't come to attention immediately you were beaten.

The same thing happened on working parties. One of our sergeants was out supervising the working party from the camp,

with a Japanese guard supervising; well, the sergeant figured he is the boss of the working party. And, what he said, would be the orders that us ORks would carry out. So, he would give an order and then the Japanese would decide no, and the sergeant would say yes. There was a terrific communication gap there because they didn't know what in the hell was going on. A lot of sign language and gesticulation and this kind of thing. I can remember on one occasion when the sergeant said yes and the Japanese said no and the Japanese just picked up his rifle with the butt and chased the sergeant around our whole working area [laughter], but the sergeant wasn't going to be butted. And the Japanese was going to get his way. Well, eventually it was resolved by the sergeant saying yes, OK, you've got the bayonet. And from then on the word got around that the sergeants were virtually ineffective. And this established, really the only two ranks we had in prison camp, were the officers and the men. So that anything in between, the warrant officers and the sergeants, corporals, were not effective at all. The Japanese guards, what they said was law.

We stayed in Batavia for some months. Then we were marched through the streets of Tasikmalaya and went down to Surabaya. And I guess I was very young-looking as a POW, and as we marched through the streets some of the Dutch ladies and girls would come out and they'd give me, like a bar of chocolate or a flower or something of this nature, you know. And, I'd be in the middle ranks and they'd have to go through all the people so it was really quite intriguing that they could sort of pick out some guy who was that much younger. I guess the average age must have

been 18 or 19 anyhow, it wasn't a hell of a lot older than I was but maybe I was just boyish-looking.

We marched on down through the town, got onto the train, went into Surabaya, and we went into a school there. Again, in Tasikmalaya we had been in hangers, where there was really a lot of room. You could have your little groups of people fairly free. We got into this school in Surabaya and we were fantastically crowded. There was just room for each body to lie down with your legs facing into the middle of the room.

We stayed there for quite awhile. We went out on working parties down to the docks. There was an Italian ship came in, which was very surprising to us because here were other white people being treated normally by the Japanese and you know, we were the other white people being beaten! We went out there, there was a lot of smuggling going on. Anything we could steal, so stealing became a very desirable asset, if you could steal stuff and smuggle it back into camp.

There were atrocities going on all the time. Some of the girls who had Dutch boyfriends in the camp were trying to smuggle stuff in, and I can remember on a couple of occasions, where these girls were, their heads were shaved totally, and they were made to stand outside the camp so that when troops went in they'd see these girls with totally shaved hair. And they'd been beaten as well. This kind of thing was all happening, you know, as part of life, so that we were being degraded all the time. You couldn't do anything on the docks except work and maybe, with your own little schemes going on, steal stuff. You'd have people

to protect you from the Japanese and you'd steal something and tomorrow they'd steal something, and so on. So you each took turns.

We went out to the island of Madura, which is just off Java, had a working party on there, which was very nice because it was out in the country. It was a good working party. I forget exactly the details of it now, but I remember on Madura the working party was very good.

We stayed in Surabaya for a few more months. Actually, when we went into that camp in Surabaya, after we were in the school we were transferred to a big camp where there were a lot more prisoners and we were just taken in as a group and put into some huts that the Dutch troops had had. And, what little belongings we had, we spread around and got onto the bamboo. The beds there were just bamboo slats. And that night we went crazy with bedbugs. Have you seen bedbugs? They're little red things. The only way you can kill them is between your fingernails and your thumbnails. Oh, that was horrendous. We were just tortured all night with these damn bedbugs. And we got lice there, body lice. And, one or two fellows had crabs -- anything that survives in dirt and filth was in that camp. Once again, I think there were about 4000 in there.

Then one day we were called onto parade. We were told that we had to take a sample of our stool, and parade before a Japanese doctor. I didn't know what in the hell was going on. I was very legitimate and got a sample of my stool and I wondered why some of the guys were getting samples of dysentery. And you had to put this in a leaf and display this. And strip naked.

And there was a Japanese doctor sitting at a table with his entourage around him, and you walked in front of this table with your sample stool and you were absolutely stark naked. And, if your stool was firm and fairly good you were over that side, and if you had a dysentery stool you were over this side. And, of course, being naive, I didn't know what was going on. I had quite a normal stool, and I was over on that side. And it turned out that all the "over that sides" were going out to the Islands of Ceram and Haruku, just off New Guinea. So, this was our medical inspection and we were really amazed by this. Here's a Japanese doctor looking us up and down, and you really don't know what he's admiring in all these white bodies.

He passed us and we were then made into a group that were to go on a ship to the islands just off New Guinea. They put 2000 troops on Ceram and 2000 troops on Haruku. The nearby island that is well known was Ambon, which had Australian troops on it as a defense measure. And they apparently put up a very good fight against the Japanese.

We were slated for Haruku. We went on this ship, which was a typical Japanese prison ship, where in the hold, the hatches -- a hold on the ship is a center hatch with levels of floors off at different heights. And the height is usually about 6 feet. So they had a ladder going down one corner of the hold. We had to go down this ladder, once again, with the pathetically few possessions that we had. And in the hold that was 6 feet high they had put a partition in the middle, so that there was 3 feet, actually. And we were crowded in there to such an extent that

not only were the sides of the hold all full of bodies, but the center, where had put the normal hatch covering in the center, was also full up. And then the next layer would be filled, so that there was just a small air draft coming down. And we found ourselves in a situation where we had to lie like sardines. I had my head towards the center of the hold, and on either side of my head were feet, because their heads were by my feet. So we were literally packed like sardines. And the center section was also packed, so that the whole hold was just a seething mass of humanity.

And there was a bucket on each level that people could go to the bathroom in. But when you get to sea, bathroom isn't the only complaint you had, there was a lot of people being sick. And underneath our hold, somebody had packed oranges, fresh oranges, in a hold with rice. And, of course, with the heat that a steel ship has, and having this mass of humanity on top, there was no ventilation for these oranges and in a very short time they were stinking like mad, they were rotten. And, whoever thought they were going to get the oranges they just ended up with a mass of pure rot.

However it didn't help us at all because the fumes of this came up and you'd got the rotten oranges, and the vomit, and the excreta, and urine, and everything that's around. When we got to Ceram they let people off one of the forward, I believe it was the forward hold in our boat. And they were to man this island of Ceram and build an airstrip in Ceram. We went on for another few hours after they had been unloaded and went into Haruku. Haruku. When we arrived there it was the rainy season.

They had erected some....

C.G.R.:

Excuse me. When would this have been?

A.H.C.:

I really don't know, I really don't know. From the time we left Java, we were in Java anywhere from 8 months to a year. And, I really can't tie it down anymore than that.

C.G.R.:

What's the usual rainy season? What part of the year?

A.H.C.:

Well, in Singapore it's in December. So we'd have been going in there, if it's the same, and it quite possibly is, we'd have been going in there around about December.

C.G.R.:

So it would have been late '43.

[End of side 1.]

A.H.C.:

God! I was so involved with Surabaya that I forgot we were...actually, before we went on that party from the school to the big camp, we were selected for a party -- 100 RAF and 100 Dutch troops went up to a town, Semarang. It's a small town on the north coast of Java, where they wanted the runway extended.

And a delightful Dutch fellow there, who I think his name was Halderman, we called him Hangi. Hangi took a great liking to me because I was the youngest guy on the camp. And he was going to fix me up with a girlfriend. And Hangi had owned to hotels in Semarang. So Hangi had all kinds of really wonderful

contacts in Semarang. I used to write notes, and whoever went down on the ration run into the town would take these notes -- it was all very secret, and hush-hush -- and slip them to one of the natives that was loading the truck, of course, slip it to one of the natives loading the truck. And the note would get back to one of Hangi's employees, because he had these hotels in Semarang. And through this way he got me in touch with a girlfriend.

We had barbed wire surrounding our camp. But every so often, I forget just how long it was, now, they would have a black market. The black market just being because they were black people, and we were white on the inside. They would bring up papayas, and mangoes and mangosteens and all kinds of fruit and goodies to the market, and we'd be able to buy this stuff. But I didn't have any money. And Hangi had got me in touch with this girlfriend and things were -- not that we could do anything, you know. She'd slip me a note, or she'd slip me a papaya or something through the wire. It was a very nice thought on his part and it supplemented our ration.

But I noticed that in the camp -- there was a canal that went through the camp -- and in the canal there was some big sea snakes. I've always been a little bit of a nature lover, but I was very hungry too, and I saw that these snakes were maybe 4 to 5 feet long and they had a fairly good body on them. So I would get into the canal and catch a snake, take it out and gut it, skin it, and then with some salt from the cookhouse I'd rub the salt on the skin and then I could sell the skins to the Japs. And I forget how much I got for it now but it would give me

enough money to buy goodies from the black market. So, snakes became very scarce around there. I think I was the only one doing this. I guess I was the only one that really was not frightened of snakes and could catch them. And so I depleted the whole canal of snakes and I got my few bucks.

One day we were coming back into camp from the work party and I spotted a wallet on the side of the road. This was very, very dicey business. It could have been a plant on the part of the Japs and whoever picked it up would be really beaten very severely. But I had nothing to lose, literally nothing, so I picked up the wallet and just put in my jowat. At that time we were wearing, our clothes had worn out pretty well, and were wearing a jowat which was just a sheet of cloth with a string around it which you tied around your tummy and you pulled up the center part between your legs and overlapped it. Like the Indians wear in India today. I hid this wallet in there and when we got back to camp I went to Gregson, who was our CO, and said, "Look I found a Japanese wallet. It's got 60 guilders in it. What do you think I should do?" So he said, "Leave it with me. If nothing happens over the next few days, don't worry, you'll get it back." So that was fine. He kept it because he obviously knew what could happen as well as I could. They could be after us. So he kept it for awhile and then gave it back to me. So I had another source of money here - I could go to the black market again.

And then one day I got picked for the truck, loading the truck down at the.....

C.G.R.:

Excuse me. Sixty guilders, was that a lot of money?

A.H.C.:

Yes it was. It would buy you, the Japanese were devaluating everything. Not internationally, obviously, but within the purchasing power of Java. Sixty guilders was declining very rapidly so that it would buy a fair amount of fruit. It would keep me going for a week, anyhow.

I was selected for this party to go down to the Jap headquarters and load on all the provisions for the camp for that day. And in my jowat, the little string I had around my tummy, I had a little note to this girlfriend. Of course, any communication with the outside was strictly forbidden; you weren't allowed. And something happened where the Japs got word that something was going on and they wanted to search us all. Well, there wasn't a hell of a lot to search. We were pretty well naked to start off with. So you can't really hide a piece of paper too much, but I slipped this around and you know tried to get it a little bit less conspicuous. And the search went off all right. There was a lot of shouting, and their words were "kura, gotcha-gui, bagero" all derogatory words calling us a bunch of bloody idiots, is what it amounts to [laughter], or worse. This shouting and yelling went on for quite awhile. We got over that and I got my note across eventually. And I brought a note back from this girl to Hangi so that he knew what was going on down town.

I got a real lesson with my own buddies in Semarang, because, being on the work party I'd figured, hell I'm not going

to work for the Japs, you know, I'm going to do as little work as I possibly can. But, as these guys pointed out to on no uncertain terms when I'd go up there and just stand on my shovel, that we were all in this together. And, you know, if you don't do the work one of your buddies had to do it, so it's not "working for the Japs," it's spreading the load evenly between all of us -- which was logical. So, I started working after that.

We spent a few months in Semarang, and fixed up the airstrip, extended the airstrip for them to the extent that it was long enough for their fighters to land. This was the main aim of the game -- it was a fighter strip. There had been some huge warehouses which, when we arrived there, were still smoldering from the bombing, which was months afterwards. They had been full of some kind of beans, and they were just smoking and it was really quite extraordinary that that huge time lapse could go on and these things were still smoking. Nobody apparently bothered. They were not being controlled by the fire-fighting people in the area.

Oh yes, another incident happened at Semarang. They landed some fighters there -- the Japanese Zeroes. And these were crank fighters, that you had to crank up by crank handle. And I was just in the camp one day when a Jap came yelling and shouting, and the first person he saw was me and he said, "Come on here." So I went out there and I had to crank up this Japanese fighter. Well, it didn't strike me till after I was cranking that if I walked that way I'd go into the propeller, you know [laughter], never having cranked a fighter before! So, that was one fairly

close call I had. They didn't care one way or the other. If you died, walked into the propeller, that's one less to worry about. I cranked up that fighter there.

On another occasion we had to move some trucks. They called for volunteers to move trucks into, that was Sukabumi, we took the trucks to Sukabumi. And I thought, man, this is the real time to create a lot of devastation, even if it's only with one truck. So I volunteered to drive a truck down to Sukabumi. I think I really tore that gear box out in that one trip! Gearing up, gearing down, not using the clutch, going as fast as I could in the lowest gears, and going as slow as I could in the fastest gears, and just generally messing up the whole deal. I know some of my buddies thought I was very unpatriotic to volunteer to drive a truck but I could see it from a point of view of destroying something rather than being of assistance.

After we returned from Semarang we went back into this big camp in Surabaya where we met the bedbugs. That was how we got that. Then we went on to this parade of having a stool and going out into Ceram, where we dropped our 2000 group. And we went into Haruku, and we were taken ashore there and the boat anchored out. And we were taken into this camp which was just atap shelters. There were no walls, yet, on the camp.

As we went up from landing on the beach, we went up into the camp, there was some plants growing beside where we were walking. And somebody who knew the area well recognized these as peanuts. And, of course, the word went down the ranks pretty damn fast and as we'd go by we'd grab a plant and hope to God there was some peanuts on the end, because we were damned hungry. The rations

on the boat had been minimal anyhow. There had been a lot of dysentery -- it started on the boat. There were people with malaria, and the general stench and everything was absolutely terrible. We'd get this one bucket load of food handed down each day and we had to spread it around. I can't really say what our ration was there. I forget now, but it was minimal. So when somebody said these things are peanuts, of course, we just grabbed them. People grabbed things that weren't peanuts. We learned because those weren't peanuts but these were. And we ate the peanuts right out of the shell there. We got into the camp, and as I say, it was an atap roof only -- just sheltering. The whole camp itself was on the side of a hill, and quite a large area of it was a swamp. We went in there and we had to bed down for the night, and get a cookhouse organized, start everything from nothing, virtually. All the wojangs. Is that an unusual word, wojang?

C.G.R.:

Yes.

A.H.C.:

It's a great big frying pan of a conical shape with two big handles on it. Get those marched down to the...

C.G.R.:

Like a huge wok.

A.H.C.:

Right, wok. Get those down to the river. The camp was near a river and there were two levels of this camp. There was the cookhouse, which was about six or eight feet above river level,

and then there was our camp which was another maybe 50 feet, 30 to 50 feet above that. And on the side of a hill. So all this gear had to be taken down to the river level -- the cookhouse, obviously, being located near the river for your water supplies. And we were on the top level and the rain was running off the roof of these huts with no sides. And, of course, it was running, the top side of it would run underneath and right under the roof. And the bottom side would run under the roof of the next hut.

We started with 2000 men there and we lost 300 in the first three months, from dysentery, starvation, and malaria. And they were incredibly badly organized. We were on working parties from the word go; from the time we landed you were either unloading from the boat or your were taken out to the airstrip. And doing all kinds of other miscellaneous.

They had this huge work force that they were going to work to death, and that became very evident, fairly soon. We would have worked all day, come back to the camp, and then some other group of Japanese would say, "We want 200 men," or whatever, and then we would be selected again to go out and work half the night. And so there was this just turmoil going on, with an awful lot of sick and an awful lot of dying. The officers were in a separate area to us and they had really no control over what was going on. They tried to reason with the Japs that this group of people had just come back from a working party, but it was "No, they go." I guess within, well, within three months we had 300 dead.

The rainy season being what it was, just torrential rain

most of the time, there was no way we could get dry wood to light the fires. So the fires were little smoldering areas of charcoal and smoke. And the meals that we got were half-boiled rice. So that the rice would be fairly soft on the outer 50%, the inside was just...and, of course, this didn't help people either.

The whole scheme of the island, Haruku, was rather like a camel's double hump -- two big humps with a valley in the middle. And they gave us the first organized day, after we had set the camp up -- which was probably only one day out, I really forget -- but they were dead set on creating this airstrip. They gave us a chisel and a household hammer. And we went onto the top of the hump of the hill, with a hammer and a chisel, and we were going to hammer and chisel off half the hill, to cut this so that it was level! Isn't that incredible?

C.G.R.:

Yes!

A.H.C.:

They were apparently boasting that the Japanese empire was going to make these unsinkable aircraft carriers. And, of course, we were just to the west of New Guinea, and the Americans are on the east of New Guinea, and this was one of their unsinkable aircraft carriers. And, of course, the whole terrain there is coral and these hills there are all coral. And any time you scratch the skin, break the skin, there is coral infection. So within no time we had people with huge ulcers. And we were carrying around these little hammers and chisels and

hammering off the top of the hill. Then they got us pick axes.

Of course, I had nothing to do with the medical side of it, at this first stage, we were working as a working party up on the hill. One of the big terrors in our camp was to go on sick parade with an ulcer, and if you had a scratch -- there were two main ways of getting a scratch; one was the coral, and the other was to go in a party in the jungle where they had these, I believe they were nipa or sago palms, which have about five to six inch spikes sticking out as part of their protective system. And, if you scratched yourself on one of these spikes, it invariably infected. So, you had an ulcer. And, of course, the worse place was your legs. You were terrifically ulcerated.

The worst aspect for us, apart from the whole Japanese part of it, was to hear Dr. Springer saying "on der table." And when he said "on der table," there would be three orderlies or four orderlies standing around a bamboo table, and Springer would do his best to clean up your ulcers. And this consisted of cleaning out the ulcerated, and pussing, and festering material on top of the skin to get down to the raw flesh. It was just incredibly painful. There would be four orderlies holding you down, and God! just screaming. It was...he was doing his best, and we were suffering, we were getting the sago palms, and the coral cuts. His system, then, was to sprinkle in sulfur powder, yellow sulfur powder. And he'd sprinkle that in and put used bandages on, because there was such a short supply of bandages that when people died the bandages were taken off and boiled and soaked in the stream and re-used.

C.G.R.:

Was he the only medical officer?

A.H.C.:

No, but he was the one that would say "on der table" [laughter]. There was a Dr. Forbes, we had a Doctor Allen, who actually had his wings, he was a pilot, but a dentist also. And there may have been another English doctor, I don't know. I don't know what the allocation of medical doctors was to personnel, but we had 2000 personnel. And I know Forbes and Springer were there, and Allen as a dentist. And there was another dentist that I went to see. They probably all said, "on the table" or something of this nature, but the authoritative way that Springer said it, you know, "on der table", he was a Dutchman.

C.G.R.:

That has lived in your memory!

A.H.C.:

Right [laughter]. It was terror. I had a toothache one day and I went to see the dentist. I didn't know what he could do for it and much to my horror he pulled the tooth and there's been the gap there even since, naturally, as a gentle reminder. There wasn't a heck of a lot they could do either, in any way. There was a certain amount of quinine on the camp. Quinine, sulfur, and soda bicarbonate. And soda bicarbonate in those days....Oh, M & B 693. Do you remember that one?

C.G.R.:

Yes.

A.H.C.:

Well, we had a few of those in Java. I don't know if any of them got out to Haruku. That was an antibiotic [a sulfa drug] that was the ultimate as far as we were concerned. Soda bicarbonate tablets were fairly big tablets. And the doctors were cutting these in quarters, or getting the medical orderlies to cut them in quarters, and they were given to us as anything, this is the old placebo effect, anything that the doctor felt would do if you had a chronic headache or whatever, he'd give you a soda bicarbonate -- we didn't discover this until later -- and tell you this was the strongest aspirin there was. Right. And you recovered, you were damned happy to get it. And this would happen with these little quarter....It was quite a while before we tagged on that everything was a quarter-sided tablet.

C.G.R.:

And always the same tablet. Same color, and so on.

A.H.C.:

Right [laughter]. He must have had thousands of soda bicarbonate tablets. Yes, that was, that was one of the medicines we had. That and the sulfur.

Then after the initial shock and the initial loss of 300 individuals in the first three months, they brought a boat in and they took some people off the camp. Why, I don't know, because they still had the airstrip to build, and I don't think they felt any disgrace at losing this number of men. They did fly in a medical officer, who weighed us. And my weight at that time was 62 pounds. So this must have been, probably, well into '43 again, or even '44. I really don't know.

C.G.R.:

A Japanese medical officer?

A.H.C.:

Right. And he was flown in apparently with the idea of doing an autopsy on the people who were dying and finding out why they were dying. And the results we got were that the stomach, in the autopsies he'd done, the size of it averaged that of a 3-year-old child, 2- to 3-year old. We were so...because our whole total flesh was, like I myself was 62 pounds. And I was a working member of the party.

There were people who were in hospital -- I can remember later when I became an orderly that there was one man in hospital with his legs bent in such a fashion that the tendons had actually shortened in here. And he couldn't straighten his legs. He was totally deformed because he'd been either sleeping in that position, or on his back in that position, and you could see the tendon was.....

C.G.R.:

Was tightened right up.

A.H.C.:

Right. Most of these people died. And even the pity in death was that you couldn't give them a proper funeral, because there was nothing to put them in. They were deformed. You couldn't lie them on their side because at this stage we...originally our coffins were made of bamboo. And afterwards, because the bamboo was getting shorter, we had to put them in rice sacks, so that people were being buried in rice sacks. And this was where Gunso Mori, Sergeant Mori, the

Japanese sergeant, started really getting a name for himself -- he rolled up to one of the funeral parties, totally drunk. And being disgraceful acting in a totally drunken manner towards our dead, who we were trying to bury as respectfully as we could. Mori had an interpreter, I forget his name now, but it's recorded in The Knights of Bushido, Lord Russell's book on the....you've read it have you? Mori's in there.

British troops being what they are, and having a wonderful knack of giving out names, Mori got the name "Blood", and his creepy little interpreter got the name of "Slime". So we had "Blood" and "Slime" running around the camp, and then of course, dysentery, is made up of blood and slime and this is what was killing most of the people right there.

"Blood" and "Slime" would come around the camp at night and listen. Our huts housed 200 people. They were divided into four sections which slept 50 people to a section, so that you were shoulder to shoulder all the way. I remember one night a rat started at the very beginning -- I was about the fourth man down -- and a rat started at face level, running, and I guess, as each person woke up it scared the hell out of the rat but he ran on everybody's face, for 50 people right through this one section of the camp. And, of course, we all got up. If you went out to the bathroom, in these circumstances, you couldn't get back because people would turn over and, you know, be lying, there would be three people lying on their backs.

C.G.R.:

The space would be filled up.

A.H.C.:

Right. You just couldn't get back in again. And "Slime" would creep up at night and listen outside; because he was the interpreter, he could understand English. He would listen outside the camp, outside the bamboo. And by this time we had put sides on the huts, so that not only was there a roof now, there was a side to about 8 feet above the ground, and then a gap like a big window, and then the side would go down from 3 feet down, so there was a big open area. And he just crouched down behind there and listened if there was anything anti-Japanese said. Of course, we cottoned on to this and we would say the most wonderful things, and there would be old "Slime" with his chest out thinking, God! these guys really love us [laughter]. They couldn't take a joke at all.

I should mention that back in Surabaya, when we were on the big camp, we had to, every morning we had to pray to Hirohito, Emperor Hirohito, and we would face the east, and the Japanese Colonel would (no, he only came once, actually, on a special occasion) the Japanese camp commandant would be up on a big stage and he would give the word, I forget what the command was now, and all the 4000 POWs would bend from the waist and you'd have to say a little prayer to Hirohito. You could imagine the Japanese would hear all this mumbling going on but there wasn't a prayer amongst us [laughter], just the greatest abuse of the Japanese you could think of.

C.G.R.:

Yes, I can imagine.

A.H.C.:

Yes. To get back to Haruku. "Blood" and "Slime" had their field-day there. The commanding officer, who was a Japanese captain [according to Dr. Forbes' report, this was a Lt. Kurashima], had neglected his duty totally, and he let Gunso Mori have his way with the camp. And it was, well Mori was shot right after the war, or beheaded, or whatever -- was shot I guess, hung, right after the war for his atrocities in camp. You think of it, he did it.

On one occasion, this was after the camp had been fairly well established, they did allow men to work in the camp. Malaria strikes you with one day a very high fever and shivering and the next day is relatively easy, so to speak, there's no outward effects. And the Japanese would go around the hospital and they'd say, "You, you're not sick. Out," you see, and this would be the in-between day of malaria. And so these guys would be out and they would carry sand up from the beach and make a parade ground in the camp, because they did convert it from swamp into an area where there was a big wide parade ground. As I remember it was really quite something.

And this party of sick that would make the parade ground, well, one day a fellow had stolen a can of food out of the Japanese storehouse, we had work party that was near the store house. And he'd stolen a can of food out there and had been caught. So Gunso Mori got the whole of camp, at night when we came in from work, around this man. We went around the edge of the parade ground, the four sides of the parade ground, every man facing in, and then this poor devil was brought into the middle of the square and Gunso Mori came out in full uniform,

and he started swearing and cussing at this man, and telling the whole camp in Japanese that you mustn't steal. And he proceeded to beat him to death. He took off his sword, and took off his Sam Browne [belt], and after pummeling and kicking the guy he just lambasted him with his Sam Browne. And the fellow didn't actually die on the parade square, he died in the hospital. I don't know what you call hospital -- an atap hut with no medicine -- died in there a short time later. And that was our lesson that you shouldn't steal.

All kinds of things went on like that. I had an experience with a Japanese that -- we were coming back from a work party, and you could walk around Haruku in a day, quite easily. We'd been on a work party other than the airstrip. We'd been doing something else -- unloading some Japanese trucks or something of that nature, and I heard a...our rations at this time were very, very slim -- as I say, I was weighing 62 pounds and this was the average weight of everyone around. And I heard a coconut drop into the bushes ahead of where I was marching. So I figured, God! I can get that, you know, but we've got guards all around us. And, as we came up to this, I rushed off into the bushes and picked up this coconut and when I came back to the group still marching, it had only taken me just a matter of seconds to get in there and back, there was this Japanese walking along with his rifle at the level, pointing at me, you know, and yelling and shouting his head off, and I remember thinking, "shoot you bastard, shoot." You know, I knew he couldn't hit me [laughter], and I'd got nothing to lose. You know, you've been

degraded for so long, what is there left?

A coconut represented a good 50 percent of my ration for two days. The problem was to keep it overnight -- where could you keep it? I could eat half a coconut as soon as I got back to camp. But, there's the other half, and these other 2000 guys -- well, by this time, about a thousand guys were equally hungry. How do you keep that coconut overnight. I kept it.

There were all kinds of schemes going on. When we first arrived, we buddied up with a Dutchman who knew a lot about the edible plants in Indonesia. And he said, "You guys go out and bring back anything. I'll make sure it's edible. If it's not edible I'll discard it." So we did this, we brought back all kinds of nice-looking roots and leaves, and stuff like this. And he even made us soup, and you know, we were living pretty high off the hog with roots and leaves. So we were doing very well. One day we come back to camp and the poor devil is dead. He had cooked the wrong roots and was dead. So that stopped that in a hurry. We knew which ones were good but we didn't know which ones were bad ones.

All kinds of things like that happened. We were allowed to make little fires in the camp. Normally we worked from sun up to sun down, but after sundown you could get a little fire going and if you'd been able to get some roots, you'd bury them under the fire and keep things going like this.

One night, after we had incredible outbreak of lice on the camp -- bedbugs were not a problem, because we'd arrived there fairly clean of them, but we did have an awful lot of lice and a lot of scabies. And, normally you'd think parading a thousand

POWs naked, would, to rub each other's backs -- which is what the whole camp ended up with -- and since coming back people have said, "You could do this, how about, you know, how about sex?" And I always laugh -- sex was totally and absolutely forgotten. All we talked about was food. You know, when you met your buddies, you said, "I'll see you in the Trocadero after the war." It wasn't for picking up a girl or anything like that.

The doctors had decided -- they had got some coconut oil in the camp and quite a supply of sulfur. The oil and the sulfur were mixed and we paraded, in the moonlight, outside our barracks on the little road that went down, sort of joining all the barracks together. Stark naked. Two columns. The orderly would come down and pour into the palm of your hand, this oil and sulfur mixture, and right in front of you, back to you, was your "buddy." And you were to put his oil and sulfur mixture in both hands and rub his buttocks, to try and get rid of the scabies, because that's where the scabies were. And then, after you had done this for two or three minutes everyone would turn around, the orderly would walk down the other line, and he'd rub your buttocks [laughter].

But, this time we were suffering very much from what we called Java balls, absolutely raw scrotum. Incredibly itchy and painful. And nothing, really, nothing, it was just malnutrition, nothing could be done about it. A lot of us had pellagra, where the skin would go beautiful colors of purple and gray, and red -- a chillblainy sort of thing, you know, all over your back. This was all part of the gradual lowering of our

resistance.

You know, one of the little side aspects that you don't think of twice is that the method of ablution, in Java, is for the Dutch people to use a bottle of water rather than toilet paper. So we got to used to holding a bottle in your left hand, and you'd wipe your bum with your right hand. This was a little unusual to start off with, but when we'd been prisoners for any length of time, it's incredible to realize that we didn't even see a piece of toilet paper. And I'm thinking as a converse of newspaper, we didn't see any kind of paper for all that period of time. We would invariably use a bottle when we went to the bathroom or, if you were caught in the jungle, of course, you used even sand or leaves or whatever was available. But it's always struck me since that we just didn't have any paper. If you wanted to make a fire you made it out of dried leaves and scrounging a little bit of fire or cinders from somebody else's camp.

I should mention that while I was working on the airstrip, or the progression of this airstrip, as far as the Japanese were concerned, we were making very little progress with our hammers and chisels. The Japanese realized that they were being entirely unrealistic in thinking 2000 men could build an airstrip in whatever specified time they had, even as a slave labor force. We had lost 300 in the first three months. They had taken some away, why we don't know. And we heard afterwards there were no survivors. That boat with the 500 on was sunk by American submarines. There was no record of those.

We, at this stage, had about a thousand people left in camp

and the Japanese decided that what they could do, with a certain amount of effect, was bring the bombs that the Dutch hadn't used against them, from Ambon, which was a big naval and air base; they'd bring the bombs from Ambon, the neighboring island, over to us at Haruku, and we would then build what amounted to graves in the coral six feet long, and about six feet -- if we were lucky we'd get six feet deep -- usually about four feet deep. They'd place the bombs in the bottom of these graves with a fuse to the top and when so many had been placed they'd give the order and we'd all run like hell into the lalang, which is the long grass on the side, and they'd detonate the bombs.

Then we'd come with our chungkals, a chungkal's like a big hoe, and scrape all the debris into the center section and continue with the airstrip. It was on one of these occasions, when we were dispersed for the bombs to go off, that a native came rushing over to me. I was lying in the long grass watching the strip, and I heard this native, he was running, actually, diagonally to where I was sitting, or lying. He said, "The ships are coming, the ships are coming." You only have to say that to a prisoner whose been there for, what, two or three years, for him to think American ships are coming, you know, this is relief. God! what's going on.

So I got up from my hiding place and signaled this man over to a stack of cordwood that was there being prepared for the steam rollers that were coming on to the airstrip. So, I said, "Come over here." I could speak Malay. "Come over here and tell me what ships are coming, where are they coming from, where are

they?" And I hid down behind this stack of cordwood, only to find after I just started questioning this guy that there was a Japanese guard on the other side of the cordwood. As soon as the Japanese made himself known the native ran away, which was obviously the smart thing to do, and I'm trapped there having spoken to a native, which is a real "no-no."

So he stood me to attention, and their favorite trick was that when you're standing to attention they put their leg behind you from the knee down, behind your ankles, and shove you. You're standing to attention, you've got nothing to do but go over on your butt end. So I went over and then he started beating the living daylights out of me. Luckily he was a private. The order of seniority in the Japanese army is very, very, well defined and we had had this man beaten to death in camp and there wasn't going to be a private beating to death of a prisoner, it would be the privilege of the sergeant. So the sergeant -- it wasn't Mori, it was another sergeant -- called this Jap off and told him to lay off. By that time my kidney had been really well damaged. I only have one today as a result.

When I got back to camp I was put back into the work party. I couldn't do a hell of a lot. My biggest recollection of the whole thing, after the beating had really gotten under way, was that the other soldiers and airmen were standing around yelling at this Japanese and, you know, it gave you a sort of feeling that we're all together, you know, we've got this guy who's an enemy. But it didn't do a hell a lot of good as far as the beating went. He beat the living daylights out of me.

Much to my surprise, when we got back to camp, I believe it

was Dr. Forbes, I'm not sure, gave me some morphine. I was in pretty bad shape and he managed to talk the other, the Japs into letting me stay off the next day. I was just not able to walk or do anything. And I had this relief from the morphine and recovered from that very nicely. There were all kinds of other beatings.

There were one or two funny things that happened up on the airstrip. One day there was a wild pig ran out of the jungle towards the sea. And we got our chungkals [laughter], if you could see 500 POWs chasing a pig! And then we smartened up, as this pig got up into the open and we started beckoning to the Japanese to shoot this thing, but they wouldn't. And they even stopped us chasing it and the pig got away. There was another occasion when the Japs had brought in a cow next to our cookhouse. It wasn't for us, it was for the Japs themselves. And one of them stood with his rifle aimed at this cow from about 20 feet and he missed it on about the first three shots [laughter]. So we were wondering how well trained these superior victors in the far east were at this stage.

We ate dog. We managed to catch a couple of dogs on the airstrip and they were thrown into the soup. I ate snakes. The snakes that I had skinned in Sumatra had given me a good basis. I hadn't eaten the meat then, but I discovered that, you know, it's nice white meat. And I sort of looked at it with that in mind but we were still getting fairly good rations. Later on when we got on to Haruku, any snakes I could find we ate.

All kind of roots that we found. One day we went into the

jungle and there was a plant growing that looked a little bit, in outside configuration, like a bulrush, but the top of it instead of being brown little furry head, was red, almost like miniature cherries, on top of this. And, of course, one thing we'd smartened up to was that you'd kill yourself if you take a lot of anything, and it's deadly, but if you take a little bit, you get sick. And, so a couple of the braver guys there took a couple of these little red cherry-type things and ate them. They didn't get sick within two minutes [laughter], so in our hunger and enthusiasm we polished off this whole sort of swamp area of these red berries. And they were totally finished. We didn't suffer anything from that.

The island was very beautiful. It had a lot of cockatoos.

[End of side 2.]

It was shortly after I'd finished a lot of this work-party business, and being out with the general population that one of the doctors -- I presumed it was a doctor -- realized that I was the youngest kid on camp, and they were very short of orderlies, and so he asked me if I would work in the hospital. And, naturally, I said, "Yes." God! I'm working for us then, not the Japanese. I always had this feeling that we were doing something for the Japanese, and the other way I'd be working for our own people, so I was very, very keen to do this. So I transferred all my little belongings which was about one backpack, at this stage, from my workers' hut into the orderlies' hut, which was an extension of where the doctors were living. So we were, sort of, the elite, which was kind of nice.

I should mention that I had previously got a mosquito net

from one of the bodies. When things got really down, right down to nuts and bolts, we were wrapping bodies in anything, and I had been told, before I became an orderly, that one of the bodies was being wrapped in a mosquito net and put into the sacks, rice sacks, before burial. So I went to the doctor and I said, "Look, for God's sake, could I please have the mosquito net? I'll take it down to the river and leave it there for day or two, or whatever you require, but I need the mosquito net." And he gave me permission to take this. And so I spent, this was one of my big possessions to have this mosquito net, in spite of the fact that it had been on a dead body. But that's just how basic we were at that time.

They asked me to go inside. I transferred all my kit into the medical orderly side of things. And, what should happen -- I had had malaria when we were in Semarang and being, touch wood, very free of it for a long time -- and then the day after they'd asked me to become an orderly, I got malaria. And I was lying on the bamboo slats and a Dutch doctor came down, it wasn't Springer, it was another fellow, came down and took my temperature. He left the thermometer in and was chatting with some other fellow, and he took this out, and as he took it out I could see it was registering 109 on the scale, on the thermometer. And he looked at this and sort of said, "No, no, not that." And he shook it, you know, and he put it back in my mouth. I guess I didn't see it the second time, he took it out again and did whatever he did. He said, anyhow, "You've got malaria, you know, there's no doubt about this. You stay here

for a couple of days."

And, I figured that I had -- there was one other case where the doctors had suggested -- this was soon after we were taken prisoner in Tasikmalaya -- that we'd take, or the orderlies take the body down to the stream, and this guy had malaria and he was registering one hell of a high temperature, and they actually just dunked him in the stream and kept him there to try and get his temperature down.

Our access to water was only at the beach on this camp, and the beach was used as our toilet. There was a little platform built out over high tide and we'd all go out there. That was in the later stages. In the first stages there was just a big pit built with bamboo slats across it. And this thing was about 6 feet deep in excreta. It was just a stinking, writhing, filthy mass -- it was just a horrible place to go, but it was the only place to go. And many people died on their way trying to get there, because it was just that basic.

After I became an orderly I was walking down the hospital corridor one day. I should explain that the hospital was just another hut with its four sections of three feet of atap, and then an open area of three or four feet and then another three feet of atap, and a roof. And inside was the four sections of the hospital with just bamboo slats. And the trick of sleeping on these was to get your hip bone, which was the most prominent thing on your side, between two relatively similar-sized pieces of bamboo, so that you were fairly lodged for the night with your hip bone stuck in there.

I was working down at the hospital one day, and I came down

this corridor: I was absolutely staggered, there was a fellow's scrotum as a writhing mass, it was just pulsating! I'd never seen, in all my life, anything like this, and I went to the doctor and I said, "For Gods sake, what's wrong with the fellow who's half way down there, his scrotum is just....?" He said, "He's fly blown." Isn't that staggering! He was in the very advanced stages of malaria, body is swollen to all beat all hell, and his scrotum was just pulsating. God! it's, you know, it's just one of those things that.....And the fellow was dead within 24 hours or so. But he was actually full of fly maggots.

The only similar case I came across was after we'd left Haruku, we were at another camp, and by this time I was a senior orderly and I feel responsible for this fellow, who is lying on the canvas. We'd given him up for dead. We had, oh, we were getting anywhere from a dozen on Haruku, a dozen dead people a night to, when we got to Muna, another camp, this young fellow was lying on the bamboo, and had been neglected by us because he was given up for dead. He was an incredibly courageous fellow. He just hung on. And I rolled him over one day to just wash off his back and there was a hole around the base of his spine that I could have put my fist in. Just staggering. Do you know, that boy survived! Survived. I wanted to get in touch with these organizations and see if he still survived. I'd like to know who he is again. In fact he's got a scare like the size of a watermelon on the back, or the size of a cantaloupe on his back. Just incredibly wonderful. We cleaned it up, naturally, as soon as we could see what was wrong, and, as I say, he went on to, as

far as I know, he survived the whole ordeal.

But in Haruku, well, I sort of started there as a medical orderly, and was soon after that shipped out from Haruku. The Japs had no organization in as much as personnel were concerned. You'd be on parade in the morning and they'd come up and say, "All right, everyone from here to the left move." And we moved. And then we were marched down to a little boat and we went off to another island. We went off to the Island of Muna.

C.G.R.:

Muna?

A.H.C.:

Muna. It's just off the Celebes. And, we went in there loaded in a small little coastal junk -- well, a big junk for a junk, big -- but a little coastal boat. I've nearly always been seasick and in this boat we were loaded on top of empty gas barrels. I forget how many, I believe it was 250 personnel on this boat. We were thrown in, literally, down the hold, on top of these gas barrels that stank of gas. And when we requested some food or drink or anything from the Japs, they handed down tea that was made with salt water -- 50 percent water, 50 percent fresh -- that's what it tasted like to us. We drank this because that was all we had to drink, but I've always figured since that I'm not seasick (touch wood) today [laughter], that this was the time I overcame my seasickness, because everything else was so chronically horrible that seasickness sort of faded into the background: basic survival was the case then.

C.G.R.:

Your body couldn't be bothered to be seasick.

A.H.C.:

Right, there was nothing to bring up.

They got us to the Island of Muna and the boat was pulled up to the dock there and we marched ashore. And we went into this little camp that was 3 huts and, again, the hospital, because by this stage of our existence, there was as many sick as there were fit. And the doctors we had, we had Doctor Forbes, and three Dutch doctors. I'm not sure if Dr. Allen the dentist -- yes, he was, he was with us then because I remember a tooth-pulling episode later. He was with us. They had one section of the bamboo, and myself and a fellow that developed into my very good friend, Watty Bowman, who died in the '50s was there with me, and a couple of Dutch orderlies. We were mixtures of Dutch and British troops at this stage. And we had a major as an OC at the camp.

We arrived there, got into this camp -- there was tight barbed wire around it. By this time everybody knew we couldn't escape. When we'd been on Haruku we'd heard word that four of the Dutch fellows from the Ceram party had tried to escape and they'd been made to dig their own graves and were beheaded right there. I should have mentioned, also, that on Haruku, before we left, that the conditions were so bad, not only for us but for the Japanese, that two guards tried to escape. Two guards sort of abandoned, I guess. What's the word for running around from the military?

C.G.R.:

I was going to say mutiny, but that's naval.

A.H.C.:

Deserting, deserting -- had deserted their force and been brought back. And they were put into an atap hut in our compound, right on the edge between the Jap compound and our prisoner-of-war compound. They'd built this little hut, which was totally enclosed, had a V-shaped roof, and no opening in it at all. Where the ground lowered a little bit there was a slope where the Japanese guard would come out and they'd put these two Japs in this hut and shoved in food every day. And that was all. You can imagine what it was like in there after two months. They spent two months in there. That's how they treated their own people.

So, going back to Muna, we got into this camp, which to our astonishment they had barbed wire every six inches. There were big posts around the camp. It was a fairly open camp. The island of Muna is not big, and the barbed wire was six inches all the way around. We had three huts and the hospital hut and a cookhouse. And when we got there the most wonderful thing was that there was fish, by the ton, almost. The fisherman in the area, they were still sufficiently far back from American attack that the fisherman were going out every day and they were catching loads of fish, and we were getting it. And we were eating fish like you wouldn't believe. It was wonderful. Things were good again.

Here, you know, we were back from the front. I should have mentioned that in Haruku we were being bombed and strafed by the Americans on a pretty constant basis. I can remember -- I'm kind of jumping around here but things sort of trigger -- I can

remember being taken out on a work party on Haruku and we were being driven down the road on the back of a Jap truck. The day before one of the prisoners, our POWs, who was in favor with the Japanese (he used to do all kinds of odd jobs for them, and he was a brown-noser), he'd told us that he'd seen an American forked-tail airplane which was a fighter, it was a P-38, actually. We didn't believe him, because he was in with the Japs, but the next day we were driving down this road on the back of a Japanese truck and what should come out of the sky but two of these P-38s, and here's about 40 prisoners on the back of a truck. We didn't give a God damn what speed that truck was going [laughter], we just evacuated while it was driving along. Here's this driver going along the road, driving his truck, and this P-38, swish -- they've got eight machine guns, you know, four on each wing -- and they were just blasting the hell out of it. We were, naturally, picked up later and returned back to camp. But, it was just a natural reaction. Here they come. When they were bombing and strafing, we were shouting and yelling at them, you know, and encouraging them to come on.

We got down to Muna, and got into this camp, and I can remember, there, that the conditions were, after this fish influx had happened, the American started strafing again. They weren't strafing with fighters because I don't think they were within that range, but they come over with Liberators and their front gunners and tail gunners and everything were strafing everything that was floating out of the sea. So our fish supplies dropped, absolutely 100%. They grew a little bit of maize on the island

and we got that for awhile.

I was going to say, when these bombers were, or soon after they had strafed the boats out of the sea, they came over one day. Our camp was in a little bit of a, only about a 50-foot, depression, in a hill that was around us. And these Liberators came over. We had been used to watching them, they were bombing a little lumber mill down the road and it wasn't of any great importance, I guess, it supplied a bit of wood for the Japs. But, they were bombing this thing every now and again, and they would come over and strafe. And this particular day they came over at about, just about tree-top level, and if you want to be scared, you want to hear all the machine guns on a Liberator going as they come in at about 50 feet above tree-top. We were just terrified. There were four of us went through this wire. I don't know whether we went through it, or over it, or what, but we got out of camp and they were coming from, say, our left, and we were going to get behind the trees on the right so we'd be protected from the bullets, and as they went over we'd switch, you see, so we'd be on the other side from the tail gun.

And my brother was a tail-gunner in Lancasters in the RAF and I thought he might be up there [laughter] and shooting the hell out of me. He was actually a mid-upper WOPAG. We went, four of us went through the barbed wire and into this wooded area right beside the camp. And that is "escaping." We were outside the barbed wire without being on a working party. We had -- Gunso Mori was still back at Haruku with the troops there -- we had a fellow with us that we called "Yellow Boots" (we gave everyone a name). This fellow was, sort of, half-decent and he

wore big yellow jackboots. We called him "Yellow Boots."

So after the planes had gone over and everything had quietened down again, Yellow Boots got the four of us on parade in the Jap compound. I was the last one on the left so the other three fellows were on my right, and Yellow Boots took out his sword and started berating us, starting on the right, and when he'd finished talking to the first man he brought his sword down and tapped him with the flat of the sword on the head. And then he moved to the second man and he did the same thing. And I thought Jesus! this bastard's going to cut my head off, because he can't do the others because, with the swing to the right, he's got to have room to chop our head, you see. And, many people had had their heads chopped off in prison camps, this wasn't unusual.

And, I thought, Jesus!, this is it, you know, we've escaped, and this bastard's going to cut our heads off, and I'm the first one. He's just pretending with the flat of the sword and he came to three and then he came to me and he started berating me, and I thought God! if I'm going out here, I'm going to kick this bastard so hard in the balls that he'll get my head but I'll get his balls [laughter], you know, maybe it'll give the other guys a bit of a chance. Anyhow, I was thinking like this and as he brought the sword down I realized he was coming straight on top of my head. And I didn't think he was edged sword, he was flat sword, like he'd done the other three, and luckily I kept my feet to myself and he went on yelling and shouting at us, but it was all over.

C.G.R.:

That was it.

A.H.C.:

Right, and whew! that was a close one.

It was in Muna where, being chief orderly we would allow the fellows in camp to smoke. It was very, very difficult. They weren't smoking tobacco, they were smoking dried-up leaves and all kinds of garbage, and us who didn't smoke were hungry as all hell, but we figured that the guys who smoked, maybe they weren't quite as hungry, so they were smoking, they were still smoking. And, there was a little bit of that attitude that, smoke is no good for you anyhow, so why are you guys doing it, but maybe they weren't eating as much or they weren't as hungry, anyhow. We sort of justified this in our own minds. And, at night, when I was on duty, I'd let the smokers smoke and the Japanese guards would be on this little bit of a hill around us, and when the American airplanes -- we could hear them, there was no warning system, you just heard them, and any aircraft you heard were American -- when they would hear these, they'd shout out the Malay for "shut your fire," meaning "put out the cigarettes." And I would say to these guys, "forget it," you know.

The guys were damn nearly dead, we were all damn nearly dead, and these guys are actually in the hospital with advanced stages of malaria, and dysentery, and starvation, and everything else. And I guess it was a year -- no, it wasn't a year, it must have been quite a few months after I'd been weighed in at 62 pounds, so I was even less then. So I'd say, "smoke, it doesn't matter."

And this happened for about a month, actually. The next morning after there'd been a raid, the Jap guard would report, when he changed guards, he'd report to the guard room that there was smoking going on during the raid (and the aircraft usually just flew over, they didn't drop anything), been smoking in the hospital during the raid. "Who was responsible?" And they'd come and get me. And they'd beat the shit out of me [laughter]. It was my own little piece of, I guess, jolly British defiance [laughter], that I would let the fellows smoke and I'd get beaten up the next morning. It happened when there was raid, over a period of about a month, which may have only been a half a dozen times. But, it was just a little, sort of, show of defiance.

There, on Muna, I can remember that I was one of the...they would take a small working party out, and being the medical orderly I would certify (this is where I was saying that I think, earlier on, the doctor had given up completely), I'd certify the body as being dead. The doctor didn't bother coming in at all to the hospital, you see, he'd take my word for it; put them into rice sacks and then carry them up with the burial party, help dig the grave, put the body in and come back.

Well, normally, you had a grave-digging party, and a burial party, and it was fairly well organized so that each person did their own thing. We had so few fit people there that I was doing a little bit of everything all the way up the line. I think when we came in, on our boat there were 250, and there was another boat of about 250. We had a camp that started at about 500 people; it ended up, when we left it had ended up at about

250.

We left there, again, it was a question of parade -- OK, these guys go. Dr Allen, I should mention Dr. Allen here, the dentist: some fellow in the hospital had a horrendous toothache, or trouble with his jaw, and this was akin to Springer and Haruku, where he'd say "en der table," and there's four people holding you down.

This poor devil had a root, I guess, that had grown around the jaw, something of that nature, and Dr. Allen started off as a routine extraction, and he was using very unconventional -- there was no dentistry tools in the camp -- very unconventional methods. It ended up, as I remember, with five of us holding this poor bastard down. He was screaming his head off. And eventually the tooth came out, but it took the best part of either all morning or all afternoon, I forget which it was, but it took hours to get his tooth out.

But I was going to say, when we left there we were put onto a little coastal vessel, that had -- the Japanese were in control naturally -- it had the bridge at the back of the vessel, with the Japanese there. They had the anti, what did they call it, it was the sort of Japanese Javanese army, a Japanese army that recruited Javanese and Ambonese individuals to be their support forces, you know. So they had these fellows in the center section of the boat, and then on the front of the boat they had 100 of us POWs, 70 of whom were stretcher cases, and 30 of us were right up in the poop part of the...under the forward deck. And on the forward deck they had a machine gun. And then they took off.

Our boat was actually being towed by one that had an engine in it, and it had more of this Japanese-Japanese army on it, and the Japanese. And we left just about dawn and shortly after we left, a high-flying Liberator came over, which we were very happy to see. He was up at about 30,000 feet. And he went over and we didn't think anything more of it. There was speculation amongst us, you know, "I wonder where he's going. Is he going to drop bombs, is he recce, is he...what's he doing up there?"

And then at about 10 o'clock in the morning two P-38s came in right on top of the waves, came in, this had obviously been a recce aircraft and signaled back that we were two boats moving, and the Americans didn't allow anything to move that close to their lines. And this was going from Muna, which is quite a way back from Haruku. So they got us out of Haruku just in time. The two aircraft came in blazing, with their guns blazing like mad. And several of the fellows grabbed sheets and bits of sacking and stuff and stood up on this poop deck, waving at these aircraft. We were so God damn happy to see the Yanks, you know, waving and yelling at them, and the machine-gunner, Japanese, he'd tried to fire his machine gun but it was out of action. I guess it was corroded with all this, nobody had given it maintenance or whatever, and it was just stuck there.

They made two sweeps over us and as they left on the second one they were wagging their wings, realizing that there were POWs on board, which made us feel pretty good. The boat was on fire and the Japanese took off just like that. There wasn't a one left. So our immediate reaction -- they'd left us all, we

had these 70 sick -- the concentration of the fire had been from the center section back on the bridge, so we were relatively untouched at that stage. The first, Doc Allen was on there and Doc Forbes, and I can remember Allen's first reaction was, get the machine gun. What's wrong with the machine gun, if we can get that working, and put out the fire, then we're home free, more or less -- happy POW thinking [laughter]. So a couple of fellows went up, I guess they were armorers or knew what they were doing, went up to see about the machine guns, and three or four fellows went back to see about the fire. I was, sort of, in the middle wondering about what in the heck can we do with these 70 bodies we've got, they were total stretcher cases.

C.G.R.:

The Japanese just went over the side?

A.H.C.:

Right over the side. And the Javanese troops, they were out, they'd launched life boats and they were away. So we were totally on our own. We couldn't get the machine gun going (and that was why the Japs had abandoned it in the first place), and the boat was on fire. So everybody started abandoning the boat -- our own, everybody, our own people. And I found I was left with one other guy, and the CO, and these bodies, our own POWs. So I started, I nailed this other guy and said, "Let's throw some hatches over." We had wooden hatches. So we threw the wooden hatches over, then we started getting the bodies, I'd like to say people but they were, you know, so damned near dead that we...we threw these bodies overboard to try and relate to the hatches, so that they could -- because they were so sick, you know, they

couldn't move, they were stretcher cases anyhow. So we were throwing the hatches over and were trying to throw four or five people over, to get the hatches.

This went on until we got the whole bunch off. And the flames were licking right at us. The wind was pushing the flames on the forward part of the boat. And the whole, naturally, was just an inferno. We got all the bodies off and I found myself (the other guy jumped), and I was left. I'm a good swimmer, I could swim, actually, before I could walk, because I'd been brought up in Singapore. I was standing on the deck there and the CO, the Major, with me, and he said, "Cowling, I can't swim." My God! what in the hell can we do at this stage, you know [laughter]. There's no alternative: you burn or you swim. So, I said, "Well, follow me if you can." And I jumped.

C.G.R.:

Was this Gregson?

A.H.C.:

No. This was an army major. I forget his name. He was a very, very hard disciplinarian. He'd incurred the wrath of many POWs because he figured he could impose discipline as much as the Japs could and that didn't go over very well. However, he jumped and I guess he grabbed onto one of the buoys that the POWs, our sick people, had. I swam out to a boat. Again, being very naive, I thought they would take me on. Stories of the sea; everyone's together and your battling the sea. And I swam out to this boat that was full of Japanese and there was this one guy standing up in the bow, and as I put my hand up to the

gunwale, this guy's got the rifle butt right over me, and he's yelling and shouting, and it's pretty obvious he didn't want me on board, so I let go and went over and grabbed a piece of hatch cover and stayed with that for awhile.

Advancing now to the end of the war -- do you know, we were asked to asked to make out, at the end of the war we were asked to make out any atrocity situations that we'd been in and I didn't think of the time I'd been beaten very badly, but this really struck me as being an atrocity, that they would do this at sea. So I made a report. I didn't know the date, I didn't know the year, I didn't know the person involved, I didn't know anything about it, other than I'd been the victim. In 1947, I got a phone call, when I was living in Singapore, from a British Army Major on the War Crimes Commission saying, "We have this man here. Do you want to press charges?" Isn't that incredible? I didn't know the date, the time, or anything, and they found him. However, we went from there....

C.G.R.:

And did you press charges?

A.H.C.:

No. They told me, actually, that the Dutch had other charges against him in Java, and their disciplinary system, their justice was much rougher than ours, and he said, "If you want this man really to suffer the justice that is due to him, leave him in Java."

C.G.R.:

Leave him to the Dutch.

A.H.C.:

Right. So I said, "OK," because I was enjoying my civilian life at that stage. So he was left there and I'm sure he got whatever was coming to him. However, at this stage we're in the water again, and the boats had gone. We were really frightened of sharks. There was a lot of blood in the water. The concentration of fire had been on the Japanese and the Javanese and there'd been a lot of wounded and there was blood, we could see it in the water. There wasn't a shark to be seen, thank God, nothing at all. "Mirage," that's what I'm trying to think of. We saw, collectively, all of us, a mirage of boats. We could see in the distance the islands in the background, palm trees and everything. And then, this must have been about noon, I guess, we were attacked about 10 o'clock in the morning, and then by noon we were looking over towards these islands, and every one of us could see sailboats, native sailboats coming out towards us to pick us up. There wasn't a sailboat anywhere. We saw that mirage for hours [laughter].

Actually the fellow next to me said, "This is too much. It's not worth it." And he let go of the hatch cover and just sank. Went right down, just right out of sight. I couldn't grab him or anything. He went, and then one of the lazy devils, a short time later, instead of paddling -- we were trying to paddle towards the island, the most of us were kicking our feet and I guess people got either lazy or testing the depth -- and he said, "Hey, we're on a sandbar!" And we were actually where we could stand. We were still, oh, about 2 miles away from the island, and we could stand on this sandbar.

So we stayed there for awhile and then continued on our way in. We got into the mangrove swamp area of the island, just before dusk. And it was just a mass of insects and mosquitoes, primarily. So much so that -- we thought we'd come out and we'd walk on land, and we'd stand up, you know, there we were, we'd be standing on hard land again. But, we couldn't, we were just covered with black mosquitoes, just black with mosquitoes. So we stayed underwater. And then soon after dark the Japs sent around some boats, power boats with big searchlights on. And they picked us up and put us on to a collecting spot on the ground and the trucks came and took us back to camp. So we went back to camp.

I had a buddy, Jock, who was my pharmacist buddy, who was much older than I was, and he was a pharmacist in the services, I guess. He was in civil life, he worked with Boots. He and I were buddies as the medical orderly part of it. Actually his was a real scam, because there was no drugs to dispense or anything of that nature [laughter]. He didn't do any orderly work, but he was in with the doctors and with us. He was a good guy. He and I were buddies there. And a fellow called Hardwick, I forget his first name, he was the cook. And this particular day he managed -- we were down to, our mid-day meal was 18 maize -- no, kernels, 18 maize kernels. And there was some supplementary food of rice; they made little containers about, oh, an inch and a half to two inches in circumference, and about two inches in depth. That was our rice ration. When it was rice you got that, and when it was maize you got that. So the maize would, I don't remember how many, I remember the lowest

meal we got was 18 of these.

On this particular day, we'd had rice and maize, so that there was a little bit of both. And Hardwick the cook, corporal-cook, he and Jock Bowman had got something going with him, and Jock had asked him to put some rice aside for him if there was any left over. You could imagine, rice was watched just like a hawk. They had the lugi, I didn't mention it, but the lugi, lugi is a Malay word for more, and we had a lugi program going so that if there was any more it was equally divided between everyone, and we'd go around a second time and get your little bit of lugi.

Well, Hardwick had managed to put some of this aside and there was a canister, the typical army can, full, so Jock asked me to go in. He said, "Hardwick's not there right now but he said, he'd leave it on his bunk for us. Would you get it?" So I went in to get this and the thing was absolutely black with flies. You couldn't see a grain of rice. Black as could be. So I flipped the flies off and I went back and Jock said, "Were there any flies on it." I said, "You bet your damn whatever, there was not a fly in sight" [laughter]. And we ate that and we didn't suffer one little bit. But it was just as black as all get out. That was one of our little perks.

We left, eventually we left under the same circumstances, with the two same doctors, Allen, Forbes and myself and Jock and about 100 men and we went into Makassa. We went by a little steamship, again to Makassa.

Medical supplies on Muna were, they had a little quinine,

which was given to the people, the worst of the people suffering from malaria. And, you know, an incredible thing: we had, as a rule, for a pillow, all you had was a block of wood, and when I took dead bodies out of the hospital, I would find two or three quinine tablets underneath their block of wood -- keeping them for a day when they'd get worse. The dying. It's a common human failing; we don't know when the worst is there, right? And there's 2-3 tablets of quinine there for when the days get really bad.

C.G.R.:

For a rainy day.

A.H.C.:

Right. Doc Forbes told us on Muna that the quinine was so low then that they were keeping a dose for the doctors on the camp and the medical orderlies. After that there would be nothing. So that when the last of the quinine was given to people with malaria there would actually be nothing left. I don't know what other medical supplies they had. I know that apart from the tooth being taken out from the one individual, nothing, there was absolutely nothing there, nothing at all. The fish was the big thing.

C.G.R.:

Could you sort of put together for me -- this is quite artificial -- but could you sort of put together for me a typical day as an orderly. I mean what, literally, did you do?

A.H.C.:

Right. Pot permanganate was the one thing we had. And I'd been warned when I first became an orderly, wash your hands

every moment you can, because that is how you're going to get sick if you do get sick, it will be through handling stuff. So we had a little bowl of pot permanganate. When I went out on duty, I would just look around the ward and the fellow who'd come off would say, "So and so hasn't got too long to go." And that would be about it. It would be a warning of who was next on the list.

People lay on their sides and you had a plate, what do they call that iron-covered plate -- enamel -- enamel plate, and when they went to the bathroom with dysentery, you would slip a plate under their buttocks and it would dribble down their buttocks onto the plate. You'd then get a rag that we had, that had been dipped in a different pot of pot permanganate, and wipe off his buttocks and dispose of the plate outside in a little hole that we had dug in the ground, dispose of that, and just wipe him off and clean him.

This one kid I mentioned with the big hole in his back -- after finding that we would try and turn the kids every so often, you'd turn them over. Basically you'd talk to them. I can remember talking to one fellow, it was midnight, and I was chatting to him, and he was saying, you know, "What are you going to have for supper when you get out of this?" something of that nature about meals. And he said, "You know, I don't think I'll live to my birthday." And I said, "Come on, now, when's your birthday?" He said, "Well, my birthday's the day after tomorrow." "Ah," I slapped him, I said, "Don't worry about that, you're going to be here for ages yet." Then I went on

chatting to him and he had a bowel movement, and pee-ed himself, and I didn't realize he was dead. I said, "What in the hell did you do that for, you so and so, Jimmy", or whatever his name was. You know, "you could have let me know." And I went out and got the plate and little rag and wiped his buttocks off and as I wiped his buttocks he just fell over onto his tummy. And he was dead. And I'd had no idea.

There wasn't a great deal we could do except try and keep spirits going, and encourage the guys, and make sure they took whatever pills they had. But we'd give them to them, and walk on to the next one, and whatever the dose was they probably got one third of it, you know, one quinine tablet at a time, and so you didn't watch them. They're not kids. And they would end up, they'd hold these things under their pillows.

You couldn't do a hell of a lot. You'd try and make them comfortable. I remember getting up in the middle of the night when some other orderly was on, and this kid was crying out for turning, he couldn't turn over himself. And your hip bone, if you got it in the wrong position, it would be cut on the bamboo, and so it would be damn painful, and there's not a hell of a lot you can do about it, so we would go up and turn the people over. And apart from -- well, mosquito, most people didn't have mosquito nets -- there wasn't a hell of a lot even in the way of clothing. We had our jowat, which was this string thing around your loin.

And that was it, that was a day. That was a day, just turning bodies around and wiping asses, basically. The heaviest job of all was to carry out the dead bodies. If there was a

little bit of cotton wool on them, we used to put cotton wool at the nostrils and the ears, try and close the eyes, and that was it.

I went out one morning, I was coming on duty, and there was a guy walking -- we had a little morgue at the back of the hospital -- there was a guy walking out of the morgue, walking, mark you! He said, "What in the hell did you bastards put me in there for?" [laughter] Somebody had made a mistake the night before and taken this poor character.

[End of Side 3]

C.G.R.:

He was still alive.

A.H.C.:

And he's still alive!

C.G.R.:

Oh yes. I interviewed him two weeks ago in Montreal.

A.H.C.:

Isn't that incredible.

C.G.R.:

Why did you survive. Why didn't you die?

A.H.C.:

I'll tell you why, and very definitely, that those bastards would only get me if they shot me. I was determined that whatever happened I would survive. There was only one way they could kill me and that was to actually shoot me or chop my head off or get me some physical way, but other than that, God damn it, I was going to come through. I had determined that -- and as

I say, all the way, I lived for three months -- they'll be here in three months, they'll be here in three months. You know, three years later I was still saying it and I knew I was still saying it, three months, but damn it it kept me going. They'll be here in three months. And this doctor at the very beginning had told us, "It doesn't matter how long it lasts," you know, "the human body...."

C.G.R.:

You can hang in.

A.H.C.:

Right. All those little things and your own determination, just make it a survival business. That's what it was. That's why now, I would like to get back and talk to some of these guys and see what their attitudes were, because at the time, you were all in it together, and you are all surviving together, so you don't really think of what this other fellow's philosophy in life, you're too damn hungry to worry about philosophy.

Eventually we got back to Java, about 2 weeks before the end of the war -- 2 or 3 weeks before the end of the war. When we went into Java, we'd been in Makassa, we went to Java -- we were considered to be the ultimate in humanity to man by our fellow POWs. We were kept by the Japs in a separate enclosure to the big camp, number 1 or number 2, I forget which it was, POW camp in Batavia.

We went in and the Japs kept us segregated because we knew what was going on, that they were getting the hell beaten out of them everyday in New Guinea and in Muna. And the Celebes generally. And they kept us separated but -- I'd say a friend

of mine, I didn't know the individual at all -- he came into camp after we were released and said, "I was related to your family some way back," and he looked at us and said, "You know, your just the end, we don't know how you guys ever made it." We were skin and bone compared to other POWs.

On the island of Ambon we had a small camp at Wyami, where there were quite a number of RAF. We'd been taken out from Haruku, put onto Ambon, we were a working party there and one day the Japs came by and in the usual fashion they chopped us off, 100 people off here and we didn't know what was going to happen. We were then separated and taken down to a camp that we called Wyami.

I was the medical orderly, there was a doctor, and 98 other people, so we were 100 altogether. The job here was probably the worst of any of the jobs I did for the Japs from a strictly inhumanitarian point of view. The Americans were advancing very rapidly up New Guinea at this time, and the Japs were bringing in freighters with gas barrels on them, to unload in Ambon, which was one of the Jap fortresses too. And we were taken, the 100 were taken down to this little camp, which was just a shack in the jungle.

I went down as a medical orderly, I didn't do any medical orderly business because we were all put to work, swimming out to a freighter, which was at anchor, at anchor in the little harbor; they would unload, with their slings, the gas barrels into the sea, and then we -- gas barrels, 45-gallon gas barrels have a little air, and this is enough to keep them just afloat, they

would unload these into the sea -- we would be swimming under them. Those people who claimed they couldn't swim or really couldn't swim would be on the shore, those who could swim were out there. We'd have to grab a gas barrel, swim in to land with the gas barrel, and then give it to the guys on the land.

If there wasn't enough men on the land, and usually there weren't because the Japs would try and get everybody into the sea that they possibly could, you'd have to roll this gas barrel up into the jungle at a dispersal point. And, of course, when you go into the jungle you're nearly naked, and you've got mosquitoes, leeches, and all the other insects in the jungle, right there preying upon this nice white body, or brown as we were then, or scrawny as all hell, but we were flesh, preying on us as you'd go into the jungle.

I heard, and I really have nothing to back it up, but I heard that 85 out of the 100 were dead within two months in that camp, from malaria and just in general the work that was going on there. It was totally at night, all of it was at night. They would sling a light over the barrels when they off-loaded them into the sea, and from there on you were in the darkness. You just pushed these barrels up into the jungle. And it was horrendous. There was no good in that camp at all. It was just the ultimate in slave labor, minimum of rations and the hardest of work, and directly contributing to their war effort, which hurt more than anything.

C.G.R.:

Yes. How long did that go on?

A.H.C.:

That was about a month, I think, three weeks to a month. I don't know if it stopped because they couldn't get any more ships through or if some other administrative business happened that they were going to take us all out. They took us from there to Muna.

C.G.R.:

Tell me again what you said, earlier, about Dr. Forbes. I'm not interested in muck-raking but, I mean, this is part of the story. Not everybody did as well as other people and....

A.H.C.:

Well, there's some doctors that can go along with the facilities they have available to them. And some of them, I think, like the rest of us, will give up in certain situations. You were trained to do a specific job and if you can't do this job, there's just nothing left to do. If it's a question of administering a few pills, virtually anyone can do that. We had certain diseases -- everyone knew there was dysentery, malaria, malnutrition, pellagra, and Java balls, and all these kinds of things. There were certain things that had to be done -- no skill involved at all, absolutely nothing.

So, if you're trained to dispense a skill and you don't do it, or you can't do it, what is there left for you?

C.G.R.:

And some people wrestle with that and find a way to do something, and others can't.

A.H.C.:

Yes, yes. You know there are those amongst us who are

hyperenergetic and will find something to do, even if it's not very effective. There's other who want to be effective all the time. And this is life, this is the nature of us all. Some of us will work all the time and other's won't.

[Tape off briefly.]

We had a day off to clean up the camp. And I'd had my lunch, if you want to call it that.

C.G.R.:

Excuse me, which camp was that?

A.H.C.:

This was in Haruku. And we were walking from the upper camp down to the stream to wash our dishes etc., when I was aware of the Japanese walking, two Japanese walking behind me. And they were chattering away in Japanese, and I was keeping my distance because you were always very much aware of just where every Japanese was, and when you saw one you had to stop and bow and scrape and be respectful towards them. And so I was just keeping a distance ahead so they wouldn't catch up to me. When they dropped, apparently, a bucket that they were carrying, a wooden bucket which had the leftovers of their rations in the bucket.

And the guys that were behind the Japanese working up towards them realized that they dropped this bucket so that we could get the scraps. And, of course, in the enthusiasm of the moment, I turned around with my empty little billy-can and dived into this bucket to get the scraps that I could. And I'd just put a few scraps in the bucket and I was surrounded by many other prisoners of war and it suddenly struck me, "God damn it Tony,

you're acting like a dog. You're fighting for scraps. Damn it I'm a human being. I don't want to do this." And I kept the few scraps that I had and I backed out and I thought, "damn it, I'm better than that," you know, "I've got to have some self respect." And I backed out and I ate what I had and just realized that I'm not a, not a dog, I'm not going to be made to look like a dog by the Japanese, even if it's for food and maybe I only do weigh 60 pounds but I've got better things in life than that.

And, I just left that place, going down to wash my little canteen out in the river. And I realized then that, "God, I'm not an animal," regardless of what they can do to you, you have a level that you're not going to sink below and it was just brought to me at that moment that I'm Tony Cowling, I'm not going to be that little scraping, hungry, morsel that the Japanese want to make you into. So I cut it right there.

It was really, when I looked back on it afterwards, it was a moment of realization in your life that however low, hungry -- and I don't think many people could be hungrier than we were then -- that you can, you have a standard, maybe, to live up to as a human being, that you must realize this, and if the realization comes when you have a few scraps in your hand that that's it, that's it, right there.

Yes, it was interesting because those terrific contrasts don't hit you every day in life, where you have incredible hunger, but you also have, maybe, a pride in the fact that you're a human being, the fact that you're not necessarily better than

the enemy but you're, you're just something that is good, and you're not going to sink to the level of a dog fighting for a bone. Who knows?

C.G.R.:

Seems to me that knowing you survived this kind of experience, must be a source of some pride, or it must be a good feeling to know that....

A.H.C.:

Well, you know, some years ago in the militia, right over here in Jericho, some of the fellows, when we were coming out of the mess, I can remember some of the fellows saying, "Well, how do you feel? You know, you've survived the war, and...." And at that stage I had been through university and I realized then that I had probably in the top 10 or 15 percent of the people that survived from an endurance point of view, and they say that only 10 or 15 percent go to university, so I'm fairly well up on that side of the education ladder. And you combine all these things together and you realize that, "Yes, maybe I'm a pretty good guy," [laughter]. Whereas I had been on the bottom rung in the RAF, you know, you're right in there fighting with the troops. And you end up maybe surviving and being like the rest of us, and, I don't know, other grades of humanity.

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and, I don't know, other grades of humanity.

In the Christmas number, December 1982/January 1983, Tom Orton ex 151 M.V. R.A.F. has written a letter which he states his sadness that very little has been printed about the area in which he was. Don Duff replies in the following way and he writes:—

Working party drafts went to the eastern islands of Indonesia, mainly to the spice islands or South Malaccas (about 500 miles north of Darwin, Australian). The main camps were at Liang on Ambon Island, Amahai on Seram Island and at Huruku, a small island lying between Ambon and Saparu Islands.

The original draft to Huruku was 2,050 of whom just over 600 were British and nearly all the others were Dutch. There was an Australian group captured at Ambon and they occupied their original camp overlooking the harbour and town. It was known as Seagull Force and to the best of my knowledge there was no contact with them. I believe the camp site is now the War Graves Commission Cemetery where all POWs in the area were re-interred.

We left Surabaya at 4 p.m. on 22nd April, 1943, the day before Good Friday, after six days moored in the harbour sweltering mostly in the hold of the Amagi Maru. There were 392 crammed in the forward hold of this ship with two tiers of bodies and head room of three feet, six inches. It was impossible to lie down and below us were bombs and benzine to add to the smell of unwashed B.O. It was gratifying to see a cargo ship a few hundred yards from us, fully laden with bombs and benzine, blow up. It was a sobering thought and lighters and matches were readily handed in, no smoking was allowed even if there were no cigarettes.

The full story of Huruku maybe written some day. Seven months of appalling conditions and tragic times, the sick were transferred back to Java. They left on two ships on the 24th November, 1943, and among them was my friend Claude Thompson, a fellow New Zealander (see Forum No. 8, 12 Series, page 7). There were 850 in the draft and this number included sick from Ambon. From Huruku we had 50 stretcher cases and 11 had to be left behind because they were too ill.

So with these departures and deaths over the few months (364 to 2nd December, 1943, at Huruku) we were reduced to 1,050 men. It was also during these few months there were at times most of the camp in hospital, so for those who remained it became the survival of the fittest.

Most of those sick men went on from Java to Pekan Baru.

Sergeant Mori (later Sergeant Major Mori) and the Korean interpreter Kasiyama (not Wasiyama) were inseperable companions and their combined efforts added a tremendous burden to our sufferings at Huruku. It was Kasiyama who called out in the notorious No. 1 ward at Huruku, "Why don't you hurry up and die?"

I cannot recall the names of the doctors mentioned in Tom Orton's letter but it was Dr. Stringer, a Dutch surgeon, and Dr. Bruning, medical officer in charge, also Dutch, who gave such wonderful service at Huruku. Tropical ulcer operations with the aid of a blade of a razor I obtained, needed some heavy human weights to restrain the patients.

(I think we'll leave the rest for the next issue. Editor).

* * * *

A letter from our man in Hong Kong, namely Jack Edwards, shows a picture of him standing by the War Memorial in Hong Kong where Welshmen paid tribute to their war dead on St. David's Day. The wreath was laid at the Cenotaph by the President of the St. David's Day Society, Mr. Hugh Pride. The main commemorative service was held on Sunday at Stanley War Cemetery when wreaths were laid at the special War Memorial erected last year by the St. David's, St. Patrick's, St. Andrew's and St. George's Societies. Another service for about 100 people was later held at St. Barbara's Church. (This is a very good photograph of Jack Edwards and is taken from behind). He says he organised the service at Stanley Cemetery and they later had lunch at the Fort with the Scots Guards. In answer to the Welsh choir singing one of Max Boyce's rugby songs, the Scots bought in the full pipe band into the mess playing Scotland The Brave. He says you can't win.

* * * *

Mr. A. A. Pilford, Member No. 3397 who lives at 45 Salisbury Avenue, Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex, would like to trace a Mr. Cliff Bradley, ex 1st Battalion Middlesex Regt. DCO D Company No. 6208194 who was taken Prisoner of War in December 1941 in Hong Kong. He would be grateful for any news. They were friends prior to capitulation.

* * * *

I am trying to trace any former Royal Marine who may have known my uncle Geoffrey Fox. He was a Royal Marine serving on board H.M.S. Repulse which was sunk in December 1941 and he was lost in that action.

As most of the Royal Marine survivors were later taken prisoner it has been suggested that you may print my request in the Forum as some among your readers may have known my uncle. Details are that his name was Marine Geoffrey Fox, aged 19 and came from Heptone Lane, North Wingfield, Chesterfield, Derbyshire and I think he had been in the Marines for between one and two years. H.M.S. Repulse was the only ship that he had been on. I would like to hear from anyone who knew him or knew of him or saw him during the action.

Yours sincerely, RICHARD WEST,

85 Houldsworth Drive, Hady, Chesterfield, Derbyshire S41 0BP.