

ARTHUR HENRY HOLMES

Experiences as a Prisoner-of-War, 1942-1945

Interviewed by
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Arthur Henry Holmes, West Vancouver, B.C., HCM 66-85

Charles G. Roland, M.D.:

Would you begin by just telling me, in two or three minutes, a bit about your background? Where you were born, who your father was, what education you have and so on -- just leading up to the late 1930s.

Arthur Henry Holmes:

Yes. Well, I was born in London, England. There were just two in our family, my sister and I. My father served in the First War in the London Rifles Brigade, and possibly because of this connection, later on in life -- actually, in 1937 -- I decided to join the local Territorial Army, which again was a branch of the Rifle Brigade.

I'd been a fairly keen scout -- used to go camping most weekends at Gilmore [?] Park. I suppose this is where, in a sense, I learned to more or less look after myself, although being a Londoner we didn't get too much opportunity for the country life type of thing. So I think this was an out that we were looking for.

I trained as a mechanical engineer. I was at London Technical College. I left school when I was 17, but continued my evening education, and later on I got a high national certifiical in mechanical engineering. So I've been working since I was the age of 17.

Then, on my 21st birthday, which was the 25th of August 1939, I was called up because I was on the key party of the

Regiment. I was a full corporal at the time, and we signed the chaps on here, because they had the general call-up on the weekend of the 3rd of September. No, probably the 1st of September. I think that was a Friday night -- two days before war broke out. We stayed in London for a few weeks. We used to go down to Joe Lyons [?] for our meals each day -- marching down the Whitechapel Road.

Then I was sent down to Tidmouth on the Salisbury Plains, where they had a motor training battalion. This was the beginning of the mobile rifle units, I guess, the Armoured Brigades and that sort of thing. I was an instructor there. We had groups from various regiments -- Northumberland Fusiliers, Loyal North Lancs, and the militia, because in Britain in 1939 they had conscription for the 21-year-olds who hadn't been in the forces.

Then, after a short time in Tidmouth a notice went on the board that they required people with engineering training, so I put my name down. Then -- I think it was in September 1940 -- I went to an engineer unit, No. 141 in Aldershot. Very few officers had been commissioned, or cadets commissioned, into Royal Engineers in 1940 because the unit was down at Shorncliffe. They were so busy coping with air raids and the like of that, so we had a fairly rushed course. I think it was only about five months. Then I was commissioned in, I think it was, March or April of 1941. I was asked where I'd like to go and what I'd want to do. I always had an idea of going to India, so I said I'd like to go to India.

Well, after commissioning a group of us were posted to Clithero, in Lancashire. We told the fellows there we're going out to India. They just laughed. They said, "Well, we've been here for ages, and this is a bit sudden."

Suddenly we were told we were off to India. We went to Halifax, in Yorkshire, and we waited there; we couldn't understand why. Then the news came that the Bismarck had been sunk and this, of course, was the reason, for our delay. So, very quickly, we got aboard a beautiful ship -- The Empress of Japan, which had been renamed the The Empress of Scotland -- had a wonderful six-week journey to Bombay, calling at Freetown on the Gold Coast, and Capetown. There were just 18 officers, engineer officers aboard. We had no troops and we just had a wonderful time. We were fed like fighting cocks. Arrived in Bombay in July of 1941. Being on ship for six weeks, it didn't do our health any harm in a sense, although we hadn't exercised too much. We were all young -- we were in our early 20s and quite reasonably fit.

Having arrived in Bombay, again, we were asked, or told, that some would go down to Bangalore, which was the headquarters of the Queen Victoria's Own Madras Sappers and Miners. This is one of the three groups of Indian engineers. Some went to the Bombay Sappers, and some to the Bengal Sappers.

I was in Bangalore for just a few days, and then again, I was asked what I'd like to do. I said, "I'd like to go to a field company," which is the company that goes with the fighting divisions, sort of thing, as opposed to specialized companies or others, stores companies, and the like. Then I was told that

there was a company up in Peshawar on the Northwest Frontier looking for officers. So I was sent up there. Actually, they posted me to a brand new company with just about 60 sappers, knowing nothing at all about the language or the habits of the people or anything like that. We were all fairly green. However, a regular company, No. 13 Field Company, was going overseas and they were short of an officer. They sent an officer from Bangalore who was more senior than the junior officers, so I was put in charge or was sent to this company going overseas instead of going to the newly formed company, which would give me time to settle down a bit and learn some of the customs. Anyway, we were quite busy out there. We used to do water supply schemes for the mountain gunners, and did a lot of bridge building.

Of course, although this was a regular company, they'd formed several other companies, so only probably 20% were regular soldiers, and all the rest were new recruits. The structure in the Indian Army was that we had a group of British officers, a major commanding the company, captain second in command, and three or four subalterns. Then we had Viceroy's Commissioned Officers who were like the go-between between the British officers and the troops. All the troops, of course, were native troops from the Madras area. We learned -- did our best to learn -- the Indian language, Urdu, or Hindustani, but unfortunately none of the troops spoke Hindustani, or very few. All of the regular soldiers spoke English, very good; the rest spoke Tamil, Taligo, Maliau, Caveries [?]. So communication was somewhat difficult to say the least.

My OC went off to Ceylon for a couple of months. The idea was that we, as a company, and possibly the division, would go to Ceylon if the Japanese threatened war. So I think, probably as late as October, it was decided that the Japanese weren't going to threaten war so we would go to the Middle East. So all of our trucks were painted yellow. We were issued with battledress, greatcoats, and water pumping equipment, and took the train down from Peshawar to Bombay and then to Poona, where we stayed awhile -- met the division. Of course, we hadn't met up with them before.

We got on this boat, we were aboard this little British Indian Steamship Line boat going up to the Persian Gulf somewhere. The next morning the OC said, "Well, I'm glad I didn't open the envelope, because they'd have taken it back again. The Japs declared war overnight." Off we went down into the southern Indian Ocean. A few days later we were heading for Java and Sumatra. I think it was then we heard the Prince of Wales and Repulse had been sunk. Obviously, there seemed no hope of us getting through, anyway. It must have been around about Christmastime. I don't remember Christmas '41, but we arrived in Singapore naval base, I think it was the 1st of January, 1942, having had no trouble from Japanese aircraft at all.

The naval base looked very secure to me and my impressions were good, you know -- there'd be no problems. So we got aboard a train and went up country to somewhere near Malacca. I think a place called Jason [?]. We didn't do very much, we were right in the bush, and we absolutely knew nothing about the country. We didn't know anything about the enemy at all. I think if we'd

gone to the Middle East it would have given us a chance to be broken in, and found our way, and even meet the other people in the division, because we'd only just met them, just a short time before.

So, as regards the war, we withdrew. I blew up three bridges, but of course they weren't defended. I don't think I did a terribly good job of them. Again, after you've blown a few, you get a bit more experience. So we withdrew to a town called Nor, on the Nor River, held by one brigade with about 50 miles of front; everything was pretty hopeless. We withdrew again to another position, but again forward of a road junction, a place called Bacri [?].

The Australians came to join us. We were attacked one evening by the Japanese -- we were mortared. My OC -- my second in command, rather -- was killed early in the morning. We had a lot of casualties amongst our troops, and with the Australians. The Japs, of course, got in behind and then we were ordered back. We broke off in small groups, and unfortunately the firing was always ahead of us. We kept off the road, and it's terribly boggy and marshy there. As a consequence of this we just lost touch with each other continuously. Each morning there were fewer and fewer numbers. I don't know, it's difficult to remember, I think probably after a week or so we were down to a small group when we ran into a Japanese group and people scattered.

I was on my own then for a day or two, and again, I just walked into -- well, I met a Malay and I said, "Any Japanese down

there?" He said, "No." Of course, the next thing I walked into was a group of Japanese. They tied my hands up, and of course, I didn't know what was going on. I was a bit dumb, after about a week, you know, we had had very little food. We just stopped and there was a log lying on the ground; I said to myself, "Arthur, off comes your head." I just said this to this little Jap alongside, "What are you going to do now?" And he said, "Oh, we'll take you back to our camp now." Why I should have addressed him in English, and why he spoke English, I don't know. However, they undid my hands. We picked up some loot -- they were a looting party -- we went down to a road where there was a little hut -- I guess I was about a mile into the jungle -- and this Jap officer said, "You're English?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, I was at Cambridge." He was a medical officer, and he said, "Your trousers look a bit wet; you've got to have some new trousers. Would you like a glass of whisky?" To my mind that was pure coincidence, the way things had happened in the last week or so.

Now, this must have been about the middle of Janaury, because I don't think Singapore had fallen at the time. These were a medical scrounging party -- they were way behind the fighting troops. They seemed to just carry me for a while, and we'd go off on scouting expeditions. Then, eventually, I think they got a little tired of me, because we got to Singapore and they just said, "Get out and go and join that group over there." This was a group of British troops -- I think it was the 18th Division -- and this must have been the day after the fall of Singapore.

Someone said, "Well, you need some boots." I had nothing, of course. They said, "You need some boots and these things," and they scrounged around and got these things, and off we went with them, to Changi. Within a few days in Changi, of course, I started picking up with people I'd known in India, who'd come out even after I did. I got back to some of the people in our own brigade. Changi was divided up into several areas. The Australians had one area. The 18th British Division had another area. Then there was this group called the 3rd Corps, which was General Heath's group, and these were all of the Indian Army officers, because naturally the Japanese had segregated the Indian troops from their officers.

We were here just for a week or so. Then they were sending working parties down to Singapore. These working parties were about 200 strong, with maybe four officers, and I was one officer of the four. The Japanese wanted these groups for working parties to godowns, these warehouses, because, obviously, they had a lot of loot and stuff they wanted to get together.

As officers we weren't required to work. It was just a question of going out with a group of maybe 40 or 50 men, just standing around. I spent my time doing a little scrounging, because all of the vehicles had been put in great car parks. First of all I wanted a hat -- I had no hat -- and then I found quite a lot of cooking pots and medical supplies in little tubes. I think they were what you would call some form ofI'll remember what I'm trying to say in a moment. Anyway, I'd go off and get these and bring them back into camp. Life was not too

bad, because at this stage there was still a lot of food around from the cold storage places and the likes of that. But we went on to rice, and there was lots of rice. Now, I make rice pudding still. I love it. I know with four ounces of rice you can make a great big rice pudding. Well, I think we were on something like 16, 20, or 24 ounces of rice a day. So much was cooked that we used to put a lot out in the garbage. Actually it wasn't garbage, it was clean containers; the Chinese would come around the back door and we'd help them out. Well, we had a little, I suppose, cold-storage meat -- I can't remember too much actually --but the immediate medical result was, of course everyone got constipated, and there were stories of so and so's gone for ten days or six days. I don't know, I think maybe four days, but the doctors assured us there was nothing to worry about.

While I'm talking of doctors, medical doctors, so many of our doctors, of course, were straight out from Britain. They had very little knowlege of medical diseases. This was the drawback from their point of view, and the same with ours. Shortly after (just sort of skipping ahead), a lot of Dutch troops came in from Java, and of course, possibly they don't have, shall we say, the same social system the British had. So, although a lot of them were colored, they were still called Dutch. Their doctors had served out in Java, and they were very good on things like local herbs and all this sort of thing. They were perhaps a little better -- well, they had better knowledge than our own doctors did on tropical medicines. So the first thing was this constipation, which we overcame. Then, very quickly, we began to become aware of vitamin deficiencies. Again, I think, none of us

had worried about this in life before. We, you know, had a fairly reasonable balanced diet. The effect on me personally was, as you know it attacks the genitals, and my scrotum shrivelled up and cracked, which was very, very, painful, and my penis also. I don't think I got sores so much, but it was just painful, raw. I'd turn the tap on -- we had these little standpipes -- and that was the greatest relief, to get some cold water on. Then there were medical supplies around.

C.G.R.:

Excuse me. This would have been roughly how long after...?

A.H.H.:

Oh, within just a couple of months. Two or three months. Let's say, we're talking of the middle of 1942. This happened very, very quickly. It's surprising. But we had some ointment around, because I made a little linen bag, and I put my scrotum in there and being surrounded with the ointment it did ease off. I'd never eaten an egg in my life until this time, I think because my dad didn't like eggs and I didn't like the smell of it -- anyway, I thought, well I'll be brave and somehow we were able to get food, extra food. Money was still around. So I got some eggs and I took them to the cookhouse. I said, "Hey, disguise these eggs into some form of pancake, or that." I ate them and it was surprisingly good. I suppose that once I got two eggs. We had Vegimite, you know, which is the Australian equivalent to Marmite. Some of this was around and we became aware of what was happening. I think then we started taking precautions.

Well, we were here for awhile. I say personally, I didn't

have to work; the troops didn't work more than they had to. Several people were going sick. One thing I noticed, and I've forgotten whether it happened then or not, people get skin complaints. Of course, then again, I've realized then and since, I've always thought about this, that if you have a skin complaint it's no good putting any ointment on because it's something inside; you bind this up and then your leg breaks out, and that sort of thing. Like, this was what was happening. Unfortunately, the doctors had very little they could do about it. I mean, they, of course, knew it was internal. Soon there after, several of my friends had gone back to Changi. I just said one day, "I'd like to go back to Changi." So off we went into Changi.

I continued to keep well. I think we got used to the diet.

C.G.R.:

Excuse me. Could I just break in? When you say Changi, this is Changi camp, not Changi Jail?

A.H.H.:

No, Changi camp. The jail, as you know, was used for the civilian internees, the men, women and children. So we were at Changi camp. There were lots of changes at Changi camp, if you were away for a few months; the area had been subdivided or something like that. As an engineer I was given a job by the chief engineer. I think I had to, well, help with the water supplies. You can imagine, we had water coming over from the causeway -- it was very limited -- so the water would be on in the morning for a half an hour or so. I did a little engineering work, you might say, around the camp. The camp was very, very

well run by our own people. When we got back, though, all of the senior officers had gone off to Japan or somewhere like that, including those that said they were engineers by trade. This is the worst thing to do. You either said you were a student, or one chap I remember said he was a golf professional. They wanted tradesmen in Japan. So we did find a change in structure there. We had a new camp commandant, although, again, you were only interested, I think, in your immediate superiors. The chap above you, I mean, he told you what was going on and you knew this was coming. Sometimes it doesn't help to know who's at the top. So I wasn't terribly aware, or perhaps, interested, because life was quite pleasant. We used to play cricket and soccer and that sort of thing. We were left alone.

We had these divisions in camp, where you had a barbed wire fence around, and a gate. If you wanted to go from one area to another, they had little flags so you'd form up, maybe a dozen or ten, whatever many, that may be up to a dozen or 20, and you'd march through. Whoever was with you would say, "eyes right," and "eyes front," but he didn't actually say those words. It was all a bit of a fun, actually. It was rather like being at school camp or scout camp -- it's a little unpleasant, but you knew in a couple of weeks time it would end. So we thought. I'd always imagined that, perhaps, being a little naive, that a few armoured divisions would land north of Malaya and they'd come down there and everything would be all right. Because the Japanese at that time hadn't really shown their worst side, because we didn't really see them. We only saw this one man and that was about the

only experience we had.

The beauty was that they allowed our own people to run the camps. I mean, there are a few mutterings to start with about, "We're all the same," went on, but once they got the discipline back, I think everyone behaved, in the true sense of the word. We ran ourselves and there was order and discipline, which I think was most important. Although we were a mixed group. We eventually -- my OC had been captured up-country and he was kept up-country, he came down. Unfortunately, we lost three officers -- one was killed and the other two just didn't make it back. He came down so we were then allotted two troops and maybe their officers had gone or something like that. So we ran our own little company, which was quite good.

Well, this carried on for a while. A Red Cross ship arrived at some date. We all got a nice little Trilby hat and a pair of boots, a tin of condensed milk, and a packet of biscuits, which we promptly opened the milk and dipped the biscuits in. That was the most wonderful thing, psychologically, to have something of your own. On the other hand, I think each man was allotted several tins of corned beef, which were all put into the cookhouse. Again, this, I think, showed up the part of the organization where food was put into central stores so for weeks on end we had a ration of that. To my mind that was one of the very, very few occasions when a ship did actually come in and we saw a result. I think a lot of other stuff was put in store somewhere and it was still there, I'm sure, four years later.

I don't remember getting any big medical problems. Naturally, our weight was going down all the time. I suppose in

a sense, then, that we needed this food. We weren't subject to physical labor. We did have working parties, of course, going out, but they were able to look after themselves because they had access to the food on the docks. Also, they scrounged very well. Then, of course, the British and Australians are very good at that. We did keep ducks. I made, we got made up, a duck pen. Unfortunately the hinges were rusty and we were putting in these little ducks one night. The next morning there were, I think, twelve beaks and 24 feet. Something had got in!

C.G.R.:

Nothing in between [laughter].

A.H.H.:

Anyway, we persevered and we kept some ducks. One night there was a big shout that someone was at the ducks. We chased this fellow down the hill. Anyway, I won't say what regiment he was with but they were noted for scroungers. You can't blame the fellow really, and anyway his own people tried him but there was no proof that the man we caught at the bottom of the hill was the same chap as at the top of the hill.

One day one of our ducks was lost. I say lost, seven came out and there should have been eight. I turned the whole of Changi, there wasn't a duck feather in sight [laughter]. Mind you, there wasn't much on them but we got eggs. This was important. I think there were about six of us in this place, and we'd perhaps get a dozen eggs between us and run for the cook. So these are things we did.

Again, we got to know, people told us about things that were

in the grass and herbs and that sort of thing. Of course, the ducks, we would, what we would call today, "free range," we would let them roam around and they'd feed on snails and the like and we would give them a little food. So again, here the story is that we became a little bit more acclimatized in two ways. First of all, getting used to the weather and the hot sun. I've always reckoned, as compared with POW's in other areas, we didn't need food to keep ourselves warm. I think this was a very big feature -- that you could go to bed at night with just a sheet, almost all the year round. So we conserved our energy.

Well, this went on. We did work in the camp, changing camp, moving things around. You've heard of the Selarang Square incident, have you?

C.G.R.:

Yes.

A.H.H.:

You know about that. We survived that. That was a surprising thing where, you know, all of us were put on this barracks square. You'd get together. I don't think I had a lot of friends as such, because I wasn't with a regiment. I was with a small company and there was only the Major and myself surviving. The few chaps from the brigade or division. But there would be a half a dozen of you, and someone would produce what we called a tin of oval fish. This would be a tin of pilchards, you can still buy them.

C.G.R.:

A tin of what?

A.H.H.:

Pilchards, or herrings in tomato sauce. We would sit down and have a banquet. Then the next morning someone would produce a tin of sardines or a tin of sausages. This was remarkable. This went right on through to August of '45. Just going ahead a bit, my birthday, again, was the 25th of August, so you can be sure that on the 6th of August, as soon as the atomic bomb was dropped, all of our supplies came down and we had a really good cook-up. This is one thing, again, which I think helped us -- the sort of morale and that type of thing, is that you had very, very little but you put a little bit by for special occasions.

Getting back in to Changi....

C.G.R.:

Excuse me, but how are you acquiring this "little" -- were you buying it or was there a black market?

A.H.H.:

Well, two ways. First of all someone had this and they'd keep it maybe for a year or so. We were paid as officers, I forgotten, I've got a diary at home, a few dollars a month. This is after the Japanese had deducted for our accomodation, etc. So a bar of soap would cost a dollar, type of thing. You had a little money and we had canteen of sorts going. People had valuables. I know this is way on -- a friend of mine, his OC had a silver cigarette case which he kept and kept; eventually he sold it. So my friend got some money from him and I gave a cheque. So this sort of thing went on all the time. If you knew someone they would share. Everyone shared things. But it's surprising what people found about them. You didn't ask where

the money came from, you know what I mean? Someone would have something quite valuable and get several thousands of dollars and they were prepared, now I've forgotten -- the ratio in those days was \$5 to a pound. It was pretty exorbitant. All of these checks were honoured after the war. I got a note from the bank one day, asking me if I'd write a proper cheque. So money was available.

Of course these working parties, they did extremely well because they would take the stuff from the camp, the goods, and trade it downtown, because the local people, obviously, don't want Japanese currency, they wanted gold or things like that, and an ordinary sewing needle. So we were able, every now and again, to get these little supplements to our diet.

Then the time came when people went up onto the railway. We didn't really know what was going on, we just knew that people were going up-country to this place called Thailand, which was a land flowing with milk and honey. Several groups had gone, and some of these went by complete units. I think the Northumberland Fusiliers, they went up, and another group would go up. Then they [the Japanese] would come around, they required a certain numbers of people. F Force went away; they were 7000 strong. They were getting a bit short, then, of fit people to go, and on F Force two of our officers had gone and they were regular soldiers, and I think they were in their 30s. To us, younger ones in their 20s, this was getting on in years, so we said we would volunteer for the next force before older the people were detailed. So, very shortly after, H Force was formed, again of about 7000. We volunteered for that, but they formed an officer

working party. Now, I've forgotten the numbers. It could have been 200 to 300. C.G.R.:

Excuse me. Why did you voluntarily, or I take it voluntarily, form an officers' working party?

A.H.H.:

Well, as I say, because they were beginning to pick on some of the older people who were being detailed to go because they were attached to formations. There were fewer fit people in camp, people naturally going downhill. We just felt, the few of us, that we were fairly fit. And perhaps maybe this is the point -- I was pretty fit all my life. You know, I used to play a fair bit of soccer, and as I say, this camping -- I was keen on outdoors. We lived fairly well in India for a few months before we went overseas. We used to play soccer with the troops, and we were always active. So a lot of us kept our health because we were just in our early 20s; some of the chaps in their 30s, and without saying anything against the regular soldiers, if a fellow was commissioned, shall we say, in the engineers, and if he'd been in some of the stores companies (now, some of these chaps would have been commissioned from sergeants), and they'd had a fairly easy life. I mean, I'm just using this in the broad sense. They weren't as fit as they might have been, because they'd been living too high off the hog. That was my feeling.

So anyway, we thought that it didn't seem all that bad. We got a little bored, maybe, being in Changi, because there was a whole group of us there and they sort of...We just probably were adventurous. We didn't know what we were going for, you see.

This is the whole point. It was just the change of camp, so we thought.

So, off we went; we took this train, and actually it was just a metal truck with doors on the roof. I think there were about 24 of us to a carriage or truck, with one Jap guard, and all we possessed, which wasn't very much. We set off in high spirits. This particular friend of mine, we has a pack of cards but I don't think we ever played cards because half of you could stand and the other half sit or lie down on this truck. We would travel most of the day until we stopped for a meal somewhere at a big station, perhaps, again in the evening. If you wanted to do any business, you had to lean over the side, which was very distressing, and also upsetting because there were so many of the local people lined alongside the track. This was sort of bad in more ways than one. However, I think we took four days to do the trip between Singapore and and a place called Banpong, which is to the east of Bangkok. I think it's about 800 miles to Banpong.

We just detrained there and we slept in some huts. These were just attap huts. As far as I remember there was no floor and the water just ran right through the hut, but it was a change from the railway truck. We just lay there the night or so. I'm not sure, now, the next day or so, whether we went from there to Kanburi by train or not. Kanburi, I think, is about 60 or 80 miles north of Banpong. Kanburi is right on the bank, southern bank of the River Kwai, the Big River Kwai, I think it's called there. We just laid out in the open. This was a small town. Then we heard, of course, of the railway, we learned all about

this and we were going up north.

A lot of us, or a lot of our group, were quite unfit at the time. I guess the railway journey had upset them or perhaps they shouldn't have gone in the first place. So we were subject to medical tests. Blood samples were taken from ear lobes. We were given a tetanus injection and probably some other injection; then, what I thought was rather undignified, we had a glass rod inserted into our anus which we were told was for a dysentery test. Then they'd make a smear on a slide. Anyway, we were declared fit, so a group set off carrying all of our belongings. I think we'd got now to Kanburi. From here we set off, carrying all our belongings and a cooking pot or two, and some tent covers.

I think we must have travelled the first part by train, but the train didn't go very far. The first River Kwai runs more or less east-west to Kanburi, which was the Great Kwai, and then this other river, the small Kwai, I suppose, comes down from the north and the junction actually is just at Kanburi. So we were virtually going in a northerly direction. I think we must have been on the train, because we went alongside this huge cliff with this very, very, insecure trestle; the train actually was just a truck running on the brake drums. At the back there's four wheels there and a sort of an articulated bogey at the front, and then these flat cars. So I think the first part must have been by the train. Then we got off, and then we just walked. It was a track and it seemed to be calf-deep in mud. We just struggled on.

I'm not quite sure of the sequence of events, but I think we must have camped fairly early along the line. Then, our job was to dig earth and carry it out and make embankments.

C.G.R.:

Now, this was what, 1943?

A.H.H.:

This was, yes, it must have been April of 1943. Incidentally, last year we went through Banpong, 42 years to the day after the event, which is kind of strange.

Well, it wasn't too bad. We used a tool called the chungkal, which is like a hoe, like a big hoe at right angles -- very efficient tool. The only trouble was that the ground was very, very rocky, extremely rocky, and we weren't exactly used to this manual labor. We were given a little basket, a flat basket, and you'd put the earth in here. Immediately we protested against the task. I think we were given a cubic metre each or something like that, I'm not sure. However, you didn't really overwork. We had a tent that leaked, so a friend and I, we got a couple of fly-sheets and tied them together, because I remember one day going out to work, and we'd crossed the little stream -- we jumped across it. Coming home at night it was about four feet deep. We were right in the monsoon season, which made life very unpleasant.

I think after a week in camp I was given a day off. I said, "I don't want a day off. I'm not sick." I think I was one of the few in our little group of I think about 24 -- we formed into platoons -- that worked continuously for seven days.

Then the thing I noticed, I cut my thumb or something and it

just oozed liquid, it didn't bleed. This was the beginning of tropical ulcers. Then we all noticed a strange smell coming from under our armpits; again, these were the tropical ulcers. This was the beginning of another complaint. We sort of knew about beriberi, but now we were into another area, quite apart from this. I think it was, I've read, that it was a breakdown in our bodily system. It was nothing to do with vitamins or anything like that. It was just that the resistance was breaking down and that we couldn't stand any injury to our skin.

C.G.R.:

The tropical ulcer, yes.

A.H.H.:

Yes. That was the beginning of that, but strangely enough mine cleared up and I didn't quite know why. The ones under my arm pits had just, they just went away. So I continued working.

C.G.R.:

Did you get any treatment for them?

A.H.H.:

Yes, we had, what would it be? Is it a sulfa powder or sulfanilamide or something like that, I'm not sure. Anyway it was a powder. We also had mercurochrome. Everyone would be red-spotted all over. Very often with these things they came and went, unless they got worse. Like everything else, you didn't go to the doctor because they were overworked with more serious cases.

I seem to remember again that we managed all right for food, in the early days. It was in this area that I think we first ran

across the Japanese type of beating. We'd been drilling holes in rock. There was three of us on sledgehammers, one chap held the rod, maybe about four people, and we just whacked away and crushed the rock and eventually we got a hole maybe three or four feet deep, which they filled with gun powder and exploded -- very little warning. You just had to run like crazy. On this day a young Dutch soldier was responsible for lighting the fuses, and he'd missed one or the one hadn't gone off, and the Japs beat him up. We all booed like crazy, so we were lined up. Of course the Japs very quickly would get reinforcements in. They just came along and whacked us all on the head with a chunk of wood. You just took it -- I mean there's no other way. So this was the beginning of that kind of treatment.

Well, then to continue, we went on, camp to camp. We'd do a section of the line and then we'd move on to another section. We prepared the roadbed, we built bridges, and we helped to lay track, although one particular battalion was very good at track-laying. Camps, generally, were situated down by the river. We just cleared the area, put up a tent. Lots of wood, of course, and bamboo. We made a platform a foot or so off the ground. Again, due to our own organization, almost the first thing we did was to dig latrines, but it was very difficult because the ground was so rocky. At least we'd have a trench with a few bamboo slats across, and of course you just squatted there. Millions of blue-bottles, clouds of blue-bottles and maggots, of course. Probably that helped to a degree.

Perhaps a typical day would be that the whistle would blow maybe at five in the morning. You'd fall out of bed. The rice,

ricey stew would be on the table alongside you, and tea. You more or less had to....

[Another voice:]

May I interrupt? "Fall out of bed"? What was bed?

A.H.H.:

Well, this platform, this bamboo platform.

[Other voice:]

And for clothing?

A.H.H.:

Oh, you just had a sheet around you.

[Other voice:]

Mosquito net?

A.H.H.:

No. We didn't have mosquito nets -- we did have them but we didn't put them on us. No, I was on the end. When I say fall out of bed, I was first in line.

Some people even couldn't manage this breakfast. One chap said, "Arthur I can't manage." Well, I mean, I didn't need to ask him again. The Malayan language is very simple. One word "legi" means more or again, so we had what we called a legi line. Having got your food, you made sure everyone else went in, and those that were able and willing would join the legi line because there would always be a little bit left at the bottom. This all helped.

So having got our breakfast inside us, and there's no time to wash up, so you'd rub your plate or messed it in something or other, and parade. Now, the Japanese would require 200 men. We

would have an officer party, and the other ranks, seperately. They'd get maybe 150, and then they'd get 160, and maybe 175. I'm reading in Hardie's book ¹, the doctors would always keep a reserve of 10 men who could be put up. Well, eventually we'd get a 190 or so, and then, unfortunately, they would go to the hospital and get out fellows who had these tropical ulcers and could hardly walk.

I did mention these tropical ulcers I had, and it was here on one particular job, I was just wearing shorts and a pair of boots, and I just scraped my knees and immediately I got two tropical ulcers, but fortunately they didn't develop into anything. I guess I got some treatment. Then I got a couple in my calf, and that couldn't have been due to any injury at all. They were just about a quarter-inch in diameter, but you could feel them biting into the skin. Again, they didn't do anything. The most unfortunate things were fellows that barked their shins, and these ulcers really just went from shin bone to ankle. They would put a bandage behind, or even spoons to scrape them out. Several chaps had their legs amputated. So this was the added problem we had -- first of all the vitamin deficiency, and then these ulcers came along. Also one or two camps moving up, we had cholera, which several fellows picked up.

C.G.R.:

I was going to ask about cholera, yes.

A.H.H.:

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Robert Hardie, Th Burma-Siam Railway: The Secret Diary of Dr. Robert Hardie, 1942-45 (London, Imperial War Museum, 1983), pp. 140.

I'll go into that thing a little bit more presently. So, going on for our working day we would then go from, maybe it would be about 6 o'clock at night and go out to work. Very, very, similar -- I live on the north shore in West Vancouver, we have an up levels highway, and we're down at the bottom. You can imagine we were down at the bottom, we had to walk up this mountainside, no truck at all, to the railway site. Other people would come down from there. Anyway, we would struggle up there, and jobs would be digging, building embankments, building bridges, or more of the like of this. Or in several cases, forming cuttings through the rock. This was pretty hard going. They had a machine there, a compressor, and then they would drill holes and blast the rock. We had, then, actually to carry the rock out of the cutting. We had a little construction track and this was probably working at four levels, and some of this would be thrown down into the -- for every cutting there would always be a fill right alongside. Well, we struggled along with this. You'd have a tea break, mid-morning. This again was just sort of hot water, really, with a little bit of cabbage, and we'd always try and get some of our elder fellows, who might be anyone around about the age of 40, to be on the tea boiling or looking after the points on this railway line.

We'd carry on through the day, and lunchtime would be just probably a bowl of rice with a bit more watery stew. On the way back at night -- we'd finish oh, I don't know, maybe six in the evening, it was a good day's struggle -- we'd actually almost run down the mountain back. Everyone would pick up some wood. We got back to camp, maybe three would be detailed to boil water.

This is the very first job. Then everyone's water bottle would be filled up for the next day. The river ran nearby, mostly; of course, everyone bathed in there and unfortunately a lot of native troops would do more. They would always defecate in the water. We had to make sure they were downstream from where we were swimming. Anyway, we boiled water so we filled our water bottles. We had a swim. Probably washed your pants and your shirt, and you'd have a dry one back in camp. Got back in. We'd have our evening meal and if we were lucky a couple of cigarettes. We'd then boil more water and then we'd have a cup of coffee and probably sit around until eight or nine at night, and then go to bed ready for the next day and the following day.

When you got back at night, quite often the fellow lying alongside you had died. This happened so often. Unfortunately you didn't always know the chap next you. You know him as Bill or John, but it was such that, I don't mean you just looked after yourself, but you had one or two particular friends, you were in a hut, and you more or less knew people, but you didn't know too much about their background or anything like this. All you'd hear, that in the morning, "Well, so and so is not going to work today, he doesn't feel very well."

I was a very good friend of Captain Willy Nash of the engineers, a regular officer about 32 years of age. One evening he came to me and he said, "Arthur, my face is swollen." Of course you know the beriberi, your limbs swell up and if you make an indentation it just stays in. He says, "I don't feel at all well," and he said, "they won't evacuate me by boat." When the

river was in flood they bring up barges and take people down. Willy died over night. And I think, from his conversation with me that evening, I don't think he gave up but I think he was pretty low. He didn't see any prospects by staying in camp. I think in this particular camp, it happened twice, one fellow alongside me, and then Willy Nash.

One of our sappers there got cholera. I went over to see him after he had recovered, and a lot of them recovered, and I said, "Well, what happened." He'd been down to the river to a local Thai camp and he bought some sticky pastries or something like that. This is one of the problems, that the local people survived but you, coming in as a stranger -- and just a little incident I heard recently, a friend of mine knew General Auchinleck, who was a very fine commander, Indian Army. He would purposely eat with the troops and subject himself to all sorts of, not necessarily diseases, but strange conditions, so that he would be prepared for war. (I think this is a very interesting observation: that if you go on holidays, we did to Mexico the other year, our bodies were so clean and pure that if there was anything going you picked it up. My wife got violently ill.) So that was just a typical day, and that was really hard work, because we were watched over all the time. Although you tried to do the minimum amount of work there still is a minimum you can do and get away with it.

The other feeling we had was, "Look, let's get this railway built and get out of here." Well, we continued from camp to camp. Of course, we got less in numbers as we went. We passed certain camps when they had cholera. We just, in effect, slept

on the road. They didn't want us in their camps. Eventually we got up to a place called Konkuita, which was just a little bit south of the Three Pagoda Pass, and this is where the railway joined. I think we might say we were a fairly select group then because we'd all kept fit.

[End of side 1.]

Yes. I think when we got to Konkuita we were rather a select band, because we were the ones who had kept fit and we'd worked together and perhaps helped each other. I think we were perhaps 24 in number or something like that, in our particular hut. In this particular camp there was one fellow who we heard wanted to die. That was one of the very, very few cases where I heard that. Now, it must have happened in other cases because talking to our Australian friends later on, we asked about someone, and he said, "Well, he walked into the river one night." In some camps they were told they had to complete a certain task. The Japanese didn't appreciate the fact that if you gave some people some food and a good night's sleep they'll work far better the next day. They just kept people working maybe for three days on end. Sometimes it would mean going over these half-complete bridges in the dark, and you'd go on your hands and knees and crawl over. To look forward to doing this the next evening, and the next evening, type of thing, was very demoralizing. But we kept going.

They had a small buffalo that we called a yak. So actually we did have reasonably fresh meat. I mean the animals weren't all that fat or perhaps healthy, but we did have a little meat.

I seem to remember we had some, I guess this was a sort of a melted lard. On occasion a little tin of jam would arrive and you'd have a little bit of money, or find some money -- so we had these luxuries.

One of the big things is, although I'd been a non-smoker, well, when you're hungry a smoke really does help. We'd had maybe two or three cigarettes of an evening. People were inventive. We had either a piece of rope which was smoldering away all the time or someone would have a tinder box. We'd go to bed on this platform in the tent. Half an hour -- we wouldn't have been in bed very long before someone would light a cigarette. Then suddenly everyone would be smoking, and then it would be quiet for another hour and then another cigarette would be lit. I think we survived because of these little things.

Again, I say, since we were the group that kept going we were the fittest ones. We did hear of people left behind who had dysentery, malaria, meningitis, and these other things. I don't think it was anything they'd done wrong. Just something that hit them. We all had malaria, of course. The Japanese would issue quinine tablets. Sometimes, you know, we'd have maybe six a day, if they were available. I suppose, when we were getting towards the end, that we were the ones that got the medical supplies, from the point of view of malaria tablets, because they wanted us to keep going. Whereas way back in the camps, where unfortunately there was so much sickness, all the sick people went back there and they must have been very hard pressed to return.

We seemed to survive on the food. We had a minimum amount

of energy. I suppose, in effect, there was just enough to keep us going, and we had enough flesh on our bodies that we could afford to lose a few pounds here and there. Other camps were less fortunate than we were.

Most of our camps were on the river. When the river was, not exactly in flood, but the waters fairly high, these barges would come up. We had a camp at Hintok, where there's Hintok Valley, which is a very, very bad camp. We'd get off the railway at night and we'd go down through it -- we were told to go down there. An 80-pound sack of rice (I'm sure it was 80 pounds), was stuck on your shoulder and you were told to deliver this to another camp and there would be two of you. I wasn't very good, but I had a very strong Australian companion and he carried it most of the way. We didn't complain because these chaps up there were starving and the only way was to get food to them.

The great thing was when the railway reached your camp, because then the supplies would come in. We found out afterwards, of course, that in the lower camps or where the Japanese were, like in Kanburi, there were lots and lots of medical supplies and food which they hadn't even tried to send to us.

As I mentioned earlier, each camp was different from the other camp. A lot depended on the Japanese people and to a great extent on your own people, and also, who you were working with and the sort of task you had to do, how far your camp was from the railway, and the type of work you had to do there.

One or two camps where they contracted cholera, this was of

course very serious, they isolated the people. Some recovered, some didn't. Disposal of the bodies was quite a factor. Some of these were cremated. It was very difficult digging graves.

The other unfortunate thing was the Japanese had pressed a lot of Chinese internal labor, and they had no way of looking after themselves. They had no organization. They really died. It's been mentioned in so many books that a lot of our people were told to bury these people before they were even dead, sometimes. You'd go to work and you'd see these shallow graves, and perhaps an arm or a leg sticking out. This was unfortunate in that they had no organization that would instruct them in hygiene. There were some areas which were just a complete mess with the mess from them. So it was very easy to get sick and very hard to get well again. We did what we could. Every time we went for a meal there'd be a bucket of boiling water. We dipped our mess tins and our utensils in there. You didn't touch anything that was uncooked at all. This was one little thing we did there. I suppose because of our training, we tried to keep ourselves clean. We washed and we kept our clothes clean.

When we were up at this far camp, I think then I was first aware of lice. A friend of mine said, "Arthur, I've got lice." Sure enough, he had lice in the band of his pants. I got an itch and I got my blanket out and I looked for days. Eventually I found it and it was just one louse in the middle there. Of course, they can carry disease, and we believe that there'd been an old railway survey camp there years ago, and these things had survived. They just were waiting for us.

Well, we were getting more lucky because I think when the

railway joined, maybe it was September, October of '43, I'm not too sure, we went back to Kanburi, where we met a lot of friends. Unfortunately, of course, we left so many behind who wouldn't return. We were told to get ready one day at six and we all got ready and I don't think the train arrived before one or two in the afternoon. A friend of mine had a very serious stomach complaint all the time, he stayed there. He'd get a plate of eggs and a tin of sardines and we had a most wonderful sardine omelette. These little delights, you know, a little thing like that.

So anyway, then we went back and I seemed to remember going through a place called Nong Pladuk. Again, in these steel railway cars, and back into Singapore. We went first of all to a camp called Sime Road Camp, which I think was on the old golf course. Again, we didn't do too badly here. We didn't have to do any work here at all. I helped to build a cinema theatre and we had shows. Then we were told that we were going to Changi Jail and the civilians would go to Sime Road Camp. This exchange took place and the people from....

We were in this camp at Sime Road, which was on the old golf course, and then we didn't do any work there, really. Then they decided to put the civilians in the camp from Changi Jail and we went to Changi Jail. Actually, again though the officers were not in the jail. We were just south of the jail, no, on the west side of the jail. They transferred a lot of huts from Changi. I think there were about 24 of us in a hut. Now, we didn't have much space only about two feet between the beds. I just had a

wood frame with a bit of chicken wire or something on there for a bed. The Australians were on the south side of the jail, and the hospital on the north side. I did a little construction in the hospital. We went up one morning. I don't know I was always getting the group of Australians to work with and they just sat around. I said, "Come on fellows the Japs are after us." They's say, "There's no point in trying to clear the bush here, or burn it off, because it's too wet." Of course they were very logical but the Japs would never see it that way. Anyway, we did erect the hospital then. I think I did part of building a bit of an operating theatre there, with a group of people. One day, a Jap came down and he told me again -- I had this group of Australians --to move this guard hut from one side of the road to the other. Well, we were doing all right. At 5 o'clock the Australians decided that it was time to go but the Japs had a different idea. There idea was, you know, you get this thing built and it doesn't matter how long it takes you. You just stay there. Well, so we did that.

There was a football field there which was sort of cut into the embankment there. They requested a lot of air-raid shelters, or cuttings made for the trucks to go. I didn't do a very good job of that, it fell down, so they took me off that job.

We had a huge garden operation there; we had our own little plots, I think we were given about two square feet each, so you joined in with someone. We grew things like tomatoes, or tried to, and tapioca, which was very good because you know the root grows maybe two, four, six, eight pounds. These were chopped up in slices and dried in the sun ready for celebrations. I got

hold of a little electric hotpoint type of thing, a hot plate. It kept breaking, but I got some asbestos and the steel springs on a tin helmet, made from nickel-chrome wire, and I'd use this to make the element. We got coconuts, which we'd grate, and got coffee beans. We'd have a wonderful brew of coffee with fresh ground coffee and the coconut cream and the gula malacca, which is the sugary stuffy you get off the trees there. We'd go in the gardens, I remember one fellow saying, "Do you see any frogs out, bring one back with you" [laughter] because the frogs got scarce after awhile. Then we got a whole lot of snails one day, and we got one of the fellows to boil them up for us. They weren't too appetizing.

Having overcome this problem of eating eggs, I still had a little reluctance myself to eat the unknown. I suppose the natives were far better -- when I talk of natives, people who lived in the country longer, I mean -- they can eat dragonflies and all this sort of thing. We ran out of meat quite quickly. Of course, most of our food was fish. There'd be all sorts of odd fish, but fortunately our cookhouse were pretty good, because they could grind this up and put it into a pastry type of thing and you didn't know what it was.

Here again, through experience we got away from just rice and fish. I don't know where the word came from, I think it must have been the Australians, they came up with this word called "duva." A duva was anything; it was something like an apple turnover or meat pie, or Scottish bridie. The cooks actually did very well.

When you get a whole group of people, you get all sorts of expertise. They were making soap, they were making paper. We had a nail factory that was run for the Japanese, really. Rice grind was where they made flour. Someone had got yeast from somewhere. We had a whole lot of soya beans. Before anyone knew anything about soya beans we lapped this up, and of course they just went straight through you, until someone got the idea of putting one in a banana leaf and a little bit of yeast; then eventually they broke down. The more hungry we got the more exciting the food became, because they got really expert. At night they'd have some rice, and you'd have this round pattie which may have fish in it, and this triangular one which had some vegetable of some sort in, and another had something else. They did very well.

Then, right towards the end, some Red Cross parcels arrived. Not one each but one between ten, and you suddenly found you had a pudding with a chocolate sauce or something like that. The British Red Cross parcels, they didn't contain cigarettes. So the Japanese, that was convenient for them, you see, they could keep the cigarettes. I think the Americans and possibly the Canadians had cigarettes in them. Here again, a number of people still were not smoking -- they never smoked. I say I haven't been a non-smoker -- I'd got the habit, but I smoked a pipe and it was mostly just the remnants of the leaves which we chopped up. We did have one type of tobacco which we called Sikh's beard. It was a black stringy mess, actually it came from Java, and we used to wash this and you'd get this horrible black liquid flowing out -- put a load of sugar with it and it came sort of

smokeable. But it's just something, I think, when you're very, very hungry -- oh, you can perhaps appreciate, when you've had a breakfast of a small mug of rice and a cup of tea, that there's a long way to go to dinner time. So, just a smoke of something like it took me till...

Back in Singapore, now, we got some stuff called blachang. I believe the way it's made is that they would catch fish and in effect bury it until it all, whatever you call it, putrify or whatever it was. They got this in a sort of a pinky plasticine type of thing. Very, very -- not scented so much, but rather smelly, but very flavorful. Again, it should have been used like garlic, you just wipe it around the bowl; but we would actually put it in, and just a little daub of it until it...We were lacking I think in flavors. This is the one thing, you got rice and you need, not really to get it down, but just something to make it a little more palatable -- garlic, if it was available and this blachang was a great help there.

The big thing, again, was anyone's birthday celebration. We were paid by the Japanese now and you did have a dollar or two. We had a canteen fund going. We tried to contribute to people in hospital who were sick. The Japanese idea, if you're sick you don't need food. Consequently the sick people very seldom got better again, because they were off rations. So we did try to keep this sort of thing going.

I was fortunate, I suppose -- we were released around about September or so -- I went back to India, where I stayed a short time. Then again, they said, "Well, what do you want to do?" I

said, "I'd like to get home." Went back home to England, again to London where my parents were living, and it was a very, very cold winter -- most miserable. I used to go to the cinemas as much as possible. Again, they didn't have too much spare food. I suppose I was thin and I was cold in those days. I got a job the following summer with construction. So I was in the field, which maybe helped -- I was outdoors. I've always eaten plain food and I still do. My wife calls me a "plain vanilla man." Maybe this is an advantage, that if you eat plain foods, and when you can't get fancy foods then you are acclimatized to the plainer foods, or at least your body can get the most out of that food.

Last year my wife and I decided to visit friends in Australia, and while we were about it we thought we'd like to drop into New Zealand and then go on up to Singapore. My wife was in Singapore after the war, and also in Hong Kong. So we were able to get a round flight, Air New Zealand to Australia, and then Singapore Airlines to Singapore, up to Bangkok; Cathay Pacific to Hawaii, and then I think Canadian Pacific from Hawaii back to San Francisco. Had a great time in New Zealand, and in Australia. We spent five weeks in Australia. While I was in Sidney we met people from the 2/30 Australian Battallion. They did very, very well in Malaya. They'd done a trip to Siam -- Thailand, it's now called -- just a few years before. One interesting thing was that they met a monk in Siam, or Thailand, and normally all the young men have to do two years as a monk. Well, this fellow stayed on for seven or more years. At Kanburi they'd set up a little thing called the Jeath Museum -- J-e-a-

t-h -- someone had commented that they spelt "death" wrong. He said, "No, this was to commemorate the Japanese, the English, the American, Australian, the Thai, and Holland, which was rather cute. They do actually have this little atap hut with all sorts of artifacts there, cartoons, paintings, photographs -- very interesting. They just charge you a nominal sum. This young chap Derrick had helped too, because he felt the Thai were very pro-ally, pro-British, that this should be commemorated -- the work we'd done on the railway. In Kanburi they have one of the original engines. This was a disiel driven truck. The wheels had been taken off the the back four wheels and the thing ran on the brake drums, and the front was an articulated bogey.

C.G.R.:

An articulated....?

A.H.H.:

Bogey, 4-wheel bogey, just so this would provide the steering. Behind us would be similar 4-wheel bogeys. They either had a platform which formed the truck itself, or else they would put railway lines across there. On top of that the railway ties and all the bits and pieces. This thing would be pushed forward. The Chinese laborers would each carry a railway tie and throw it down on the line that we had prepared on the road bed. A chalk mark would be put in the center of the tie, a string drawn up, and we would line all these up. A railway line would be pulled off either side, just clamped to the back line, a few spikes put in, this train would be pushed forward again, and the same process. There would be 100 yards of railway track line.

Then the thing would shoot off again. This is still existing, one of these engines, in Kanburi, just near the bridge. Also, they've got a steam train there -- rather massy when you consider where you go on this railway. The Thai have got this beautiful board up which gives the whole history of the room, and the number of people involved -- very, very good.

Just a point on the Bridge on the River Kwai. We got to Kanburi and we went across the River Kwai, which is running there, more or less, east-west, over a wooden bridge. Now, this wasn't as elaborate as the one in the film. It was just more or less a flat deck, and upstream we saw this steel railway bridge, and this is the one we came back over about a year later. The Allies, of course, bombed the railway as soon as it was finished and this bridge took a beating, and the three center spans were knocked out. Now they've rebuilt them -- two spans in the middle to help the navigation in the river, and they are differently designed.

Well, going back to this monk, our Australian friend wrote to this monk, and he's now the cashier of a place called The River Kwai Jungle Village Resort. This is now beyond as far as the railway now goes. So having got to Bangkok, we looked around for this fellow. We were hoping he might have a boat. However, I went to the desk and I was able to tell him where I wanted to go, so he called a taxi driver over. We had a most hair-raising drive through the streets of Bangkok. They were doing a lot of drainage works. As you can imagine, it really rains upcountry, as we know! All this water has to go somewhere. Over the years they've built Bangkok up and they've blocked up all of the

drainage channels. Every year now, for two or three months in the summer, the whole of Bangkok is under about 18 inches of water, which is very depressing for the local people. So we got all mixed up on this road and drainage work. Well, eventually we got to a place called Nathon Platong, where the largest pagoda in Siam is situated. We just dropped off there and then we'd shoot off again; we really did shoot off. We got to this place called Kanburi. Ah! We've been here before. Incidentally, we went through this little village called Banpong which I mentioned. This was almost to the day, and that would have been 41 years I saw Banpong. Of course, so different. Anyway, it just rang a bell. We got to Kanburi, and there's a sign that said, "River Kwai Bridge." Then the chap spoke to a policeman, turned around, "Now where's he going?" He took us to another place, and I said, "Now, I don't want to be here." So we carried on again. He didn't cross the River Kwai, we didn't go over the bridge. I couldn't see the railway. Again, I thought we were going in the wrong direction. I kept telling him to ask directions. Then we went over a little concrete bridge over the River Kwai, and again upcountry. Nowhere, the railway nowhere in sight. Anyway, eventually we got to the Kwai Hotel, and we met the monk. He looked after us. The next day we got up early and about 6 o'clock we took the train from the other terminal, back, and we came over the bridge on the River Kwai -- very excited -- and we went to Kanburi station. We got into a little pedicab and we went to the local hotel and we had lunch, no, breakfast, I guess, late breakfast. Then we walked through the town of Kanburi, past

the old entrance gate. Passed the new gate as well. Got on a boat and went up then, up the River Kwai, part way, to where there was some railway cutting very, very similar to what I worked on. Proudly I showed my worth, what work I had been on, and some of the bridges.

Then back down the riverbed to a place called Chungkai. We visited the cemetery there; this is where Captain Willy Nash was buried. I saw his grave there. The cemetery around has been given by the Thai government, and they are most beautifully kept. This camp was mostly British, some Australian, and Dutch. Most of them, of course, were about 23 years of age. This was my age. You know the old saying, that there but for the Grace of God go I. But the most wonderful surroundings. It's difficult to describe really. Then we walked along on the track and saw a couple of Thai girls -- gave them a few dollars. Came back to Kanburi and visited the cemetery at Kanburi. This, of course, is right where we'd stopped off first of all, the old airfield. Here again, there's a new town built up. Here again, the cemetery most beautifully kept and very wonderful there. Memories. We went back to the River Kwai bridge many times, my wife and I, and often I walked over.

The interesting thing is, I mentioned, when we went to the taxi, we didn't go over the bridge. Of course, it's only just a few planks there for the cyclists. We went upstream. When you go across the River Kwai bridge, very quickly you go through a couple of huge cuttings. This is this place called Chungkai. But where this little bridge is, upstream, is also called Chungkai. I think the Japs, so I'm told, read the map wrongly.

Instead of going upstream and just pulling the short bridge across the Kwai, they chose this place over the river where it's as wide as could be possibly, and all of that bridgework of the cutting would have not have been necessary. The only thing then, there'd never been a bridge over the River Kwai, and they'd never made a film. We would have been forgotten.

Oh, incidentally, I didn't mention it but -- well, we did but just going back again -- we then got on the train. I enjoyed it far better than the previous train journey! My wife didn't think much of it. When we came to this place called Nong Pladuk, and there again, I said we'd been through there 40 years before, and there were a couple of these steel railway carriages still on the side. It's very similar to the old French railway in the First War, wasn't it -- 5 horses or 24 men or whatever it was.

C.G.R.:

Eight horses or forty men.

A.H.H.:

Anyway, then we went into Bangkok. Again, at Kanburi, some most wonderful buildings -- beautiful architecture. On the other hand, some abject poverty. The same in Bangkok. Temples where they're spending millions and millions of dollars, and yet poor areas. We did also spend a couple of days in Singapore on the way up. We went past the jail, of course, we didn't see much of it. We didn't really want to. I mean it was just for old time's sake, I suppose. We went to St. Andrew's Cathedral, and we went to Kranji war cemetery again. A wonderful spot. I saw the grave of my OC, who had been killed upcountry -- my 2OC, killed

upcountry. They had these big pillars and slabs with the names of, I think, 24,000 with no known graves. This was the tragedy of the people that died on the railway. Those cremated, there's no way they could have got their remains back. But they are commemorated; the graves at Chungkai and Kanburi would be those, generally speaking, who'd died in camp, and there are pictures I think in Hardie's book of the cemetery as it originally was. So those graves would have been original. In Singapore it's got, "Near this spot lies buried the remains of...."

Well anyway, just to continue, I think I came to Canada in 1955 from Britain with a consulting engineer for most of the time, and was in Ontario for 20 years. Having suffered 20 winters there I decided to come to Vancouver and have been here 10 years and lived happily ever after. Still no sign of sickness.

One interesting thing, though, I went back to Britain. We were there for 5 months this year. I got a bug as soon as I got there and I was quite ill all the time I was there. My doctor said, "Well, we have different bugs here." I think maybe this is tied in to a lot of our troubles. Someone from Britain goes to India, Singapore, places like that, and they pick up things, different bugs.

C.G.R.:

I'm sure that's true.

I do have a few questions, if I could ask them. One of the questions I ask everybody is, what about sex? Was sex something that was in one's mind?

A.H.H.:

No. Thinking back I can't remember at all. I think it was only as far as -- again, just my memory -- when we got back into Sime Road Camp, I think we were hungry, if you know what I mean. I could just, one of the very few occasions, where I think, probably, masturbated or something like that. I think this was, we perhaps had half an ounce of raw section and I got excited, you know what I mean [laughter]. No, generally speaking, I think that, well, let's say take the railway, for example, you sit around at night. I mean you're absolutely worn out. This is the point. You just sat there. The moment you hit that deck you were asleep, however uncomfortable. There was nothing really to excite you, as it were. I think maybe things passed in the night type of thing. I quite honestly can't remember, even in the early days at Singapore. Now, one camp we were in, a very good friend of mine, we just put this ground sheet off because it was so wet. Again, as far as I remember we just crawled in there and just went to sleep. There was no physical contact of any description. Now, there is one mention of that, it's called, The Soap Man or something² -- not a very pleasant book where the fellow there mentions happenings, goings on, but this again was at a base camp. All I can suggest there was maybe they were a little overfed or something like that. But no, with all honesty I don't think I could say that I had any desires or anything like that, not that I can remember. One camp we were in, naturally there is always someone takes the girl's part. One of the

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Arthur S. Scroggs, The Soap Man and the Railway of Death (Philadelphia, Dorrance & Co., 1976), pp. 85.

fellows there was sort of made up, I know there's nothing there. But then there was someone else who grew his hair long and someone pointed a finger at him, type of thing. We just had a giggle over this type of thing. I wasn't witness to anything, if you know what I mean. I'm not aware of it. Well, did you have any other type of feedback from other people?

C.G.R.:

No. On the contrary, it's been much along the line that you said. It's interesting to me because we hear so much about homosexuality now, and yet so many people have said, not only they never saw it but many have said they weren't even aware that such a thing existed.

A.H.H.:

No, well I think it wasn't very popular in those days.

C.G.R.:

It was just beyond comprehension.

A.H.H.:

You have to remember now, again, that we were living very close to each other. At one stage in Singapore we occupied some old, well not old, they were quite new, what they called married quarters. These were where a married sergeant would live. Upstairs there may be, shall we say, two bedrooms. But there were four of us in each room. Where the troops were, there probably would be a dozen in each room. When we were in the huts in Singapore, when we first went down, there were 200 of us in a hut. This is on two levels on each side of the gangway. Then, when we got back to Changi Jail, we were living in huts. We had

two feet between, no there was two feet between the beds on this side and the other. So you were very, very close to people. Well, I don't think there was anywhere one could go, as it were. I have no doubt though in some areas that it did perhaps did exist between, I don't know. We weren't aware of it in those days, you know, Even, as they say, amongst consenting couple.

C.G.R.:

What was your weight loss?

A.H.H.:

Well, I seem to remember -- we work in pounds in England -- I guess I was about 154 pounds. I think I was 10 stone 10 -- what would a 22-, 23-year old, not big built be? -- about 10 stone, 154 pounds. I've got a diary at home and I've got an entry there of about 8 stone something. So we're talking here of maybe 112, 120 pounds. Now, I think I must have gone a lot below that. My wife said when I came home, my mother said I only weighed 80 pounds. I've got a picture at home where I'm certainly very, very drawn. Again, I don't think I had -- apart from the work and lack of food -- I had no serious illness that drew me down. One thing I noticed, you're getting an odd attack of malaria, and I think it would last, what, maybe three weeks, really, but I recovered. Now, so many people, before they recovered they got another attack. I think that sort of thing dragged you down. But I have to say that all the time I kept fairly well and I don't think I ever had to take to bed. I never had to take a day off because I was not well enough to go to work.

C.G.R.:

You must be one of a minority.

A.H.H.:

Well, there were a few of us there. Now, we visited another Australian friend, actually, who was in Greece, and he'd had half his stomach removed. It was internal problems, I think, what caused trouble, apart from [tropical] ulcers that were physical, you know. So many people had stomach upset. Maybe I'm like an ostrich. I guess I had problems, but it's the old business -- they were minor compared to all the other people. I've made a practice, and I think when we were back in Singapore at the jail, I'd always have a cold shower first thing in the morning. Maybe this kept me continent, I don't know [laughter]. Then we'd be working and I'd have another shower at lunchtime, another shower in the evening. I think this is perhaps something -- if your skin is clean. Of course, we didn't really have soap, and it's just a question of keeping this body clean.

C.G.R.:?

How about dysentery?

A.H.H.:

Well, I had it too, in just a mild way. My dad used to talk of "squitters" in the First War. I think that describes it. This is again, as far as I remember, I was never caught out. I could always get there. As you know, some poor people they couldn't even get there on time. So it was the early constipation, I think, it was the direct aftermath of that would be a looseness. No, I don't remember.

Another voice:

Did you have bed-bugs as well as lice?

A.H.H.:

Oh yes, yes. Well, in Singapore again, we had, where I was, we had a concrete platform against our hut. We could take our beds and drop them, you know, from a great height, and that would shake the bugs out. The mosquito net was the same. If a light would go on in the night you'd see all these things running around. Of course, they were the sources of disease. Do you know, I'm scared of flies today because flies are some of the worst things. And yet, well, of course, you see these poor people in Africa with the flies all over them. I'm sort of scared of flies -- I just get rid of them. Maybe this is something, sort of, that I've always been aware of. But keep them away from food and this sort of thing.

[Another voice:]

Did you have a fly campaign where you had to kill so many flies a day?

A.H.H.:

No. No, not that I was aware of. Maybe it was there but it never got down to us.

C.G.R.:

How bad was this experience? Sitting here today it's 40-some years later, and nothing that happened 40 some years ago seems all that bad, but how bad did it seem? Did it seem terminal? Did you assume this was going to be the end of everything?

A.H.H.:

You see, going back as I mentioned, perhaps, I always had

this vision of two armoured divisions landing in Northern Malaya and coming down to Tunesia, that sort of thing.

C.G.R.:

I bring this up again because we talked about that before the tape was on, so I wanted you to say that now.

A.H.H.:

Yes. I was just saying that as soon as I was captured, and I think most of us were of the same opinion, we had no doubts that we'd be relieved within a very short time. Then, of course, we began to realize that it was going to be longer than that.

We had some very brave men who operated radios everywhere we went, without them we'd have had no idea of the news. In a sense this was encouraging because, having got over the first year, where every thing was going down, down, we began to pick up. On one occasion, though -- you may have heard of Major Mel Portland, of the Guards? He was our camp adjutant, you might say, who would be visited by the Japs every day. This was when we were back at Changi. He kept a radio in his office where he listened every night. Royal Knox, who was quite a famous man, newspaper man, he would be our hut representative and would go and get the news from him, in the late afternoon. Then at suppertime he'd come back and tell another, maybe, six of us. On this one occasion, I think they were fighting everywhere in the world except in our area, which was a little depressing towards the end. But we knew that things were happening.

We had in Changi a great number of, not necessarily influential people, but people who were willing and able to teach

any subject under the sun. Because when you get a whole group of people together, you're going to get a very good cross-section. Maybe even a better cross-section than you would normally get, because there were a lot of people, as Hardie mentions, in the Land Defense Force and these various volunteer forces with very high calibre people that perhaps would have high office overseas. Yet here they were, just as privates and the like of that. Apart from that, in any group you get people who can talk on any subject under the sun. We had naval officers who could talk on deep sea navigation, or inshore navigation. We had airmen, and I took courses on astral navigation. Languages, musical instruments.

Not the best conditions, because it gets terrible hot there in the afternoon, and this is not very good for studying. I tried learning German from a Dutchman. We had a book on gas engineering, which wasn't the best. But although one didn't learn too much of the language, your brain was kept active. Lots of people played chess. Anyone would make you a chess set. I suppose one has to say, it was an experience, but possibly an experience one could do without.

I was in the army from August 1939. I was released, I think, in April 1946. Could you have done better outside? Well you don't know. I've never been one to look back and say, well, if only I'd have been there. If I'd been left in India, or I could have gone to Burma, and I could have been killed. I could have been in the Middle East and got killed. You know, all these things. Instead of coming from the railway back to Singapore we could have got off on those ships to Japan, and most of them, as

you know, were sunk. So I don't regret the experience, if you know what I mean, because I'm still alive and I haven't done too badly, all things considered. It's a big chunk out of one's life.

People say, "Well, have you suffered?" I think there was, perhaps, a slight effect on one's -- I don't mean one's learning ability or that -- but when you're remote or removed from civilization and female company, and that sort of thing, it has to leave a little scar, I think. Very often, and I think all people do this, somehow you come out with some expression and afterwards you say, "I shouldn't have said that, you know." I think maybe just something -- I don't know. People, again, talk about the effect, or what do you think of the Japanese? I wrote in one of the books in Kanburi that you can forgive but you can't forget, type of thing. I don't think it is something you should forget. I don't know whether you should actually forgive them is another point.

I think this is perhaps a different subject. Perhaps you might ask me what do I think about Japanese goods? Well, I've just bought a new car and I bought a North American car, purposely. What can you do if you're buying a camera or a hi-fi set? You're rather stuck. What I am grieved at, I'm annoyed of the fact that they have recovered the way they have, and that we've allowed them to -- I don't mean we've allowed the to, we've allowed them in the sense that we haven't kept up with this technology. This, I find very grievous. There is a ship-building outfit. It used to be Davy, and then it was something

else, and now it's another name, Versetile I think, a shipyard in North Vancouver. They wanted a dry-dock and they bought it in Japan, it was made in Japan and towed here to North Vancouver for shipbuilding. That worries me -- grieves me.

I worked for Ontario Hydro. We buy Japanese-made turbines. There's something wrong with us. Now, I think, if us POWs had been allowed to run the country, we would have established industry here and we wouldn't have been drawers of water and whatever it is. This is a disturbing thing I find. This is perhaps one of the scars that has been left with me because of this experience. Here we see a type of people, primitive to a degree, but terribly loyal to their own country. Maybe the type of loyalty that we couldn't put up with here. Very primitive in attitude towards human beings. The way they punish each other, from the very lowest rank. As you know, and I think this is perhaps even one of our troubles in society today, everyone is allowed to sue each other. With the Japanese they just give you a wallop on the jaw and it's forgotten. Of course, this is very strange for us but it saves all this filling in of charges and having you up on the mat before the court -- it saves an awful lot of time. But it can get out of hand, as we know, where people are actually beaten to death. Too much authority, I think, was given to the lower levels. Then, of course, the people at the top, they just closed their eyes to it. They didn't exactly condone it, but the authority was vested with these others.

C.G.R.:

Well, very good. I thank you.



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