

OUR HOSTS

So began my three and a half years as a 'guest' of the Japanese. Changi was only the first of a succession of camps in which we were incarcerated, first in Malaya, then in Upper Thailand. Although Changi appeared bleak enough when we first encountered it, that camp seemed a paradise in comparison with those we were to know later.

During the four years of their ascendancy the Japanese military violated every civilized code. They murdered prisoners overtly by bayoneting, shooting, drowning, beating or decapitation; they murdered them covertly by working them beyond the limit of human endurance, starving them, torturing them and denying them medical care.

They also had special refinements for those prisoners who did not comply with certain orders. Some were tortured by having their hands crushed in vices; some were filled up with water and then jumped on; some were suspended from a tree by their thumbs; some were buried alive in the ground. The statistics tell their own grim story; four per cent of prisoners held by the Germans and Italians died, as compared with twenty-seven per cent of those in the hands of the Japanese. In the prison camps along the River Kwai the percentage was much higher than this.

It is difficult to keep these atrocities in perspective. They were the result of behaviour codes fostered by the military for their own ends, codes such as Hakko Ichiu, Kodo and

Bushido. These codes also held that the Emperor was divine, that Japan was a divine country and that both had a divine mission to rule the world. Therefore there could be no compromise; it was victory or death, and any cruelty could be condoned.

While the military were in the saddle, this vicious doctrine was unquestioningly accepted and even eagerly carried out. Once the situation changed, an organized attempt was made to expunge these acts of barbarism from the records, as indicated by two orders sent to all prison-camp commandants on 20 August 1945. The first was to the effect that all documentary evidence must be destroyed; the second commanded that all personnel known to have been responsible for atrocities must flee at the earliest possible moment and attempt to conceal all trace of their identities.

Many of the tormentors among the Japanese military delighted in carrying out the cruel mandate of their perverted codes. It is also plain that millions in the Western world still see no connection between their own consciences and mass slaughter and refuse to accept any responsibility for these manifestations.

In rebuttal, the Japanese can point to the thousands of innocent non-combatants killed or horribly burned and maimed by the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Both sides undoubtedly justified their cruelties as serving to shorten the war and improve their chances of winning it, as well as saving the lives of their own kind. The result in each case was the same. In the case of the Japanese, the effect on the perpetrators was to render them callous to man's individual inhumanity to man. In the case of the West, the effect on the perpetrators was also that of initiating an ignoble callousness to human suffering.

Changi was a huge camp located on the site of the former

British barracks at the east side of Singapore Island. The buildings still stood but they could accommodate no more than a thousand men. It was surrounded by a barbed-wire fence twelve feet high. Within the fence over forty thousand prisoners lived, cut off from one another in separate compounds.

By the time we arrived the camp was already a going concern. It had been in business for about three months, the time we were occupied in our frustrated voyage of escape. The Japanese had left it to their captives to organize and administer the camp. Officers were not allowed to show any insignia of rank, but they were permitted to command their own units. In this way the normal hierarchy of military life still prevailed and prevented Changi from degenerating into the chaos of anarchy.

The resourceful prisoners had already done much to make their situation bearable. They had built shacks from discarded lumber and fitted them with bunks. They had made bedding of sorts out of old rice-sacks, eating and drinking utensils from soup-tins, and kettles for cooking out of old oil-drums. Luckily we needed little clothing, for the temperatures were consistently high.

I was pleased to find the survivors of my battalion camped in one corner of the prison area. An old friend, Jack Hyslop, invited me to share his shack. The Argylls were better off than most, benefiting from the talents of a gifted rations sergeant, Percy Evans, an old hand at conjuring necessities out of thin air. As I had arrived at Changi bare foot, he promptly came to my aid with a pair of socks and boots.

I adapted quickly to the new life. Morale in the camp was low, especially among the officers, for a variety of reasons. The pain of defeat was keenly felt. Many believed that capture had been too readily accepted. The story going round at the time of surrender had it that the General had given his word to

Lieutenant-General Yamashita that the garrison would be handed over intact. I heard from several sources later that it had been considered bad form to attempt an escape. Later on the Japanese insisted that everyone sign a no-escape pledge. When the prisoners did not comply with this order immediately they were marched to one tiny corner of Changi and kept on a starvation diet until the order was obeyed.

Furthermore, most of the troops had just arrived in Singapore in time to be captured and were so overwhelmed by atrocity stories that they lived in fear and trembling. Such stories were not without foundation. Many of our troops left behind in the jungle had been tortured, bayoneted or shot upon capture. On Black Friday the Japanese had gone through Alexandra Hospital in Singapore, killing by bayonet all patients, doctors and nurses. They had tied hundreds of Chinese hand to hand and massacred them on the beaches or taken them out in barges to be drowned. There was nothing accidental about such massacres; they were carried out according to a well-established pattern. By these actions the Japanese made it clear that they had no intention of abiding by either The Hague or the Geneva Conventions governing the treatment of prisoners of war.

Another factor that contributed to low morale was the insufficiency of our diet. The basic ration was rice amounting to less than twelve ounces per man per day. Meat, flour, sugar and salt were provided in such small amounts that they were hardly worth mentioning. The rice was highly polished and therefore contained none of the essential vitamins, proteins or minerals. The immediate results of this starvation diet were hunger, general depression and 'blackouts'. Next came the host of diseases caused by vitamin deficiency – such as beriberi and pellagra.

Still another factor was the prevalence of 'bore-hole' rumours, so named because it was at the latrines that they were passed on. The rumours were excessively optimistic. For

example, although ten of us had just come from Sumatra where we saw the Japanese Navy and Air Force in complete control, we were told again and again that the Americans and British had already captured Java and Sumatra, that a counter-attack on Malaya was to be launched within a few days and that we would soon be released.

A fresh crop of such rumours started up daily; no one ever knew who originated them. Perhaps a rumour would be invented by someone who wanted to cheer up a chum. It would then be magnified by someone else for the same purpose. Before long it would gain velocity and spread through the whole camp, returning at last to the originator completely unrecognizable. The net effect, however, of hopes raised only to be dashed down was disastrous.

If spirits were low, life was not hard physically at this period. We either did chores around the camp, mostly of a housekeeping nature, or we were taken off in work parties to the city to clean up the debris of war or to sweat on the docks, loading loot into Japanese ships. Competition for these jobs was keen, because they made it possible for prisoners to slip into the shops and buy food.

I had not been long in Changi when I was assigned to supervise such a party, loading captured ordnance bound for Tokyo. An officer from another unit whom I knew only slightly came to ask a favour of me. A friend of his was dying of beriberi. He thought that if I could bring him a jar of Marmite – a yeast compound rich in vitamin B – it might save the man's life. I wrote 'Marmite' at the top of my shopping list.

It was my first time on such a work party, but the men knew the ropes well. While half of them pretended to load the ship, the other half systematically plundered the dockside warehouses. They had no difficulty in diverting the attention of the Japanese guards with horseplay, incidents staged for the purpose, or bold-faced bribery.

We were well along in loading a ship when one of the men in the looting details touched my elbow.

'There's a case of Marmite back in the warehouse,' he whispered. 'But if you want some you'd better hurry. They're already at it like a pack of rats.'

I followed him down and through the echoing interior of the warehouse between canyons of packing-cases. We came upon a group of POWs who had just breached a case and were busy grabbing the contents. I pushed in among them just in time to snatch the last jar for my friend. Tucking it quickly under my shirt, I went back to my post.

This was the first time I had ever consciously stolen anything. I realized that a moral problem had been posed. Did the desire to help another to survive take precedence over categorical morality? But at that moment I felt no single pang of remorse.

I found my officer friend pacing up and down, anxiously awaiting me. When I produced the Marmite he insisted on pressing ten Malay dollars into my hand. I had a twinge of conscience. I could justify my theft on the grounds that I had done it to save a man's life. But could I accept money for it?

I hesitated.

'Take it,' he said. 'It's worth much more than that.'

I needed the money. At the moment I had none of my own. This might mean survival to me. I took it and turned away. Our norms were changing.

A few days later I suffered a violent attack of fever. My temperature went up to a hundred and six. Again I was delirious, as on the *Setia Berganti*. I remember only vaguely the British medical officer drenching me with water in a desperate attempt to cool my burning body. My illness was diagnosed as malignant tertian malaria, grave enough to warrant my being admitted to the hospital, which was already overflowing with patients.

Atabrine was not available; there was no quinine; so I literally had to sweat it out. This was but the beginning of a long series of illnesses which were to lead me to the door of death.

When I left the hospital and returned to the Argylls a new problem plagued me: no longer could I stomach the daily ration of rice. Attempts to flavour it with boiled leaves of hibiscus helped little.

One afternoon, while I was grinding rice grains for my cereal next morning, I felt an acute stabbing pain in the abdomen. Examination revealed that in addition to the malaria I was also supporting a colony of intestinal worms. The doctor dealt with them, then broke the news that my appendix appeared twisted and inflamed and would have to come out. Fortunately, there were still some anaesthetics left, although I did not welcome the prospects of an operation under these circumstances. The orderlies stretched me out on a kitchen table, and placed a kerosene storm lantern where it would shed the most light. They laid a pad over my mouth, sprinkled a few drops of ether on it and off I went into dreamland.

Within a day or so I began to feel much better. The operation had been a success. I thought the time had come to speed my recuperation by adding some tinned goods to my diet. For five dollars out of my ten – exactly half my worldly goods – I was able to buy one tin of Campbell's Tomato Soup. I ate it straight from the tin, savouring each mouthful, and rolling it around and around on my tongue before swallowing it. I don't think anything has tasted so delicious since.

When I returned to the Argylls' quarters I was able to make a better appraisal of the prevailing attitudes. One noticeable change from ordinary barrack life was the obvious interest in religion on the part of so many. As disease spread, as spirits became depressed, as hope flourished and died and men had nothing to which they could look forward, they sought aid from beyond themselves.

Church services were allowed by the Japanese. They were held in the open and in general were well attended. Several men whom I knew to have no religious ties went regularly, listened attentively, sang hymns lustily, prayed fervently and read their Bibles. I was not interested in going. It seemed to me that for a good number of them, at least, religion was an attempt to find a quick and easy answer, a release from their fears. In general, although many already Christian undoubtedly benefited from this resurgence of religious feeling, and others received temporary solace from it, it led, in most cases, only to sterility. It appeared to me that, as human resources failed, men turned to God and said, in effect, 'Look here, Old Boy, I'm in trouble. I'll speak well of You if You'll get me out of it.'

So, with many, church-going became a kind of insurance policy to protect them against personal suffering, and religion became a thing of shibboleths, formulas and easy answers. They believed that if they cajoled God properly He could be persuaded to save them from the unpleasantness of their present existence. They prayed for food, for freedom or to be spared from death.

The Bible they viewed as having magical properties; to the man who could find the right key all would be revealed. One group assured me with absolute certainty that they knew that the end of the war was at hand. When I asked them for proof they told me that they had found it in the books of Daniel and Revelation. They went on to demonstrate mathematically how they had arrived at this conclusion. They had manipulated numbers and words from these two books in a way that seemed convincing enough to them.

The men who turned to religion in this and other ways were only putting into practice what they had learned in their impressionable years from their parents and Sunday School teachers, at least of certain persuasions. As children they had

doubtless been told: 'If you go to church you are being a good boy and God will reward your goodness by giving you what you want. If you pray for something God is bound to give it to you, provided you pray loud enough and hard enough. If you are in trouble turn to the Bible; there, in the written Word, you will always find the answer.'

The dominant motive for such a wholesale embracing of religion as happened at this time in Changi was not love or faith but fear: fear of the unknown, fear of suffering, fear of the terror that walks by night, fear of death itself. Fear made for division rather than for community.

I had not been long back in camp when word came that the Argylls were to leave for up-country. It was no 'bore-hole' rumour this time; the orders had been seen. The destination was thought to be somewhere in northern Malaya, or possibly Thailand.

I was still weak, but my friends thought that it would be wise if I went along; they surmised that there ought to be a better food supply in the north, and also more chances of making an escape, since it was not so far from Burma. I concurred. Packing was a simple business; I had only to wrap up my blanket, a pair of shorts, two tin cans and a tooth-brush.

Before leaving on our march to the railway station we were gathered together to hear an inspirational lecture by an English-speaking Japanese officer. He began with a long political preamble, reminding us that a new era was coming into being, one reflecting the wisdom and benevolence of the Mighty Emperor of Japan, the greatest ruler ever known. Everyone would benefit from the new justice, so in the place to which we were going we would have nothing to fear. He then went on to extol the glories of the prison camp that had been prepared for us. His phrases sounded like advertising copy for a health resort. Here, he said, we would find not only pleasant quarters

and the finest of food, there would be splendid facilities for recreation and the best of care in modern, well-equipped hospitals for those who had the misfortune to fall ill.

We had had enough experience of the promises of our captors not to trust them. At the same time we hoped that we just possibly might find things a little better than we had known. At least we would be in the countryside, where fruit and vegetables ought to be easier to obtain.

We were given two balls of cooked rice apiece, allowed to fill our water-bottles, and then we started for the station, where for the first time in many weeks we were again among other people. Malays and Chinese were waiting in crowds for trains to take them away from Singapore, but we were heavily guarded and forbidden to speak to them.

Finally our train was shunted in and we saw at once that we were not going to travel first-class. We were shoved into small, stifling metal box-cars and the doors were barred after us. There was no room to sit properly, much less lie down. The train moved out of Singapore Island across the Causeway, which the Japanese, in the meantime, had repaired. Through the slits in the cars we could see the bomb craters, the twisted and shattered equipment, the burned-out trucks, all bitter memories to the devastation of war. With a twinge of recollection, the memory of our march on to the island came back to me. It had been only a little over three months before – yet how much had happened in that short time!

As we passed, Malays, Tamils and Chinese stared up at us, sad and sullen. On one of the rare occasions when we were allowed out of the train to relieve ourselves I had the chance to speak to a Tamil who had been a foreman on a rubber estate. I asked him how things were.

‘Oh, bad, sir, terribly bad,’ he replied, ‘and they are getting worse.’

Up into northern Malaya the train moved. At any moment we expected to reach the site of our new camp. But the train kept on going, mile after weary mile, into Thailand. After four days and four nights locked in those cramped, fetid little cars we reached our destination at a place called Banpong.

Our hearts sank as we piled out. We weren't hoping for much, but Banpong failed even our dimmest expectations. It was nothing but a small clearing stocked with bamboo and atap palm. If there were to be any camp at all, it was obvious that we would have to make it for ourselves.

Not one of the promised improvements ever materialized. Nothing was offered in the way of recreation. We slept in huts built by ourselves in long Japanese style on bamboo platforms without bedding of any kind. The only hospital was a hut we so designated. We never saw any of the fresh fruit and vegetables we had envisaged. Latrines were open pits. For bathing we had the river. We hoarded our bits of soap for shaving, and washed ourselves with wood ash from the cook-house fires and dried ourselves with jungle leaves.

Banpong was a long step down from Changi, but worse was to come. Our rations were the same, a small portion of rice of poor quality, in spite of the fact that our regime soon changed to hard labour. We were sent out daily in work parties to hack away at the jungle, clearing ground for other camps such as this one.

As this was a small camp, the Japanese were right on top of us at all times, breathing down our necks. There was no privacy whatever. We were subject to all the diseases of malnutrition. Some men died. There was no chance of escape. We looked out at that thicket of jungle and knew that a thousand miles of it still separated us from the Burma jungle.

We were at the mercy of guards whose ugly native dispositions were not improved by the conditions under which they had to work. It was not uncommon for a guard to work

himself up into a maniacal fury over a trifle and strike out at everyone in sight. Once one of the prisoners dared to remonstrate with a guard for what he considered unreasonable behaviour. The guard immediately retaliated by bashing him over the head with the butt of his rifle and then jumping up and down on him until he lost consciousness. Apart from such acts of major brutality the temper of the guards found expression in acts of pettiness. If we passed a guard while walking anywhere we were required to bow low, or be punished. Whatever expression we assumed during roll-call parades we were open to the accusation of looking arrogant, which was regarded as a grave crime against the Emperor, punishable by beating.

These were minor infractions. The major ones were punishable by death. One of these was trying to escape. Another was to be caught listening to the radio. Yet the radio was a life-saver to us. We had smuggled in a tiny set built into the bottom of a water canteen. For this we were indebted to some unknown technicians of the Royal Signal Corps. When Singapore fell they had dismantled their large receiving sets, and from the parts made up a number of little ones. Some of these had found their way into the possession of prisoners at Changi.

With this set we had more news of the progress of the war than at any time before or afterwards. But we were almost daily reminded of the perils of listening to it. At a nearby camp, five men were surprised while listening and promptly kicked to death. This was ordered by a young Japanese officer who spoke English with a marked American accent. He was a graduate of Columbia University.

Most of us were never permitted to know the hiding-place of the set, lest we disclose it under torture. It made its appearance in a new location every night. The most rigorous kind of watch was set by the prisoners to warn against approaching guards. This wireless was to follow us through many camps. Its last

hiding-place was in a cook oven. But I never knew where it was concealed at Banpong.

One problem was getting the power with which to operate it. For a time this was supplied by one prisoner who had been pressed into service as truck-driver for the Japanese. Every night when he had finished work he would take the battery out of his truck, hoist it on his shoulder and boldly carry it into camp in full view of everyone.

One night a sentry challenged him as he was passing the guard-house.

'*Bagero!*' the sentry shouted. 'What are you doing with that?'

The truck-driver regarded him with sleepy, innocent eyes.

'Can't you see that it's a very wet night?' he said. 'This battery is very delicate and easily injured by the damp. Therefore I am taking it to my bed to keep it dry.'

The sentry beamed and gave him a packet of cigarettes for his devotion to the Emperor.

However, we could take little cheer from the progress of the war as we learnt it from the radio. Rommel was about to take over in North Africa. The Russians were being pushed back; Moscow itself was in danger. The cities of Great Britain were being pitilessly bombed. The Japanese were still masters in the Pacific.

In spite of these dour tidings, the same old rush of over-optimistic 'bore-hole' rumours started up again. Some of the officers, aware of the devastating effect on morale of the puncturing of these rumours, did their best to counteract their effects. We spent evenings making the rounds of the huts, giving long-range analyses of the war, its cause and consequences as far as we could see them, and the probabilities of the eventual outcome. Whether or not these talks did any good it was difficult to tell.

The officers spared no effort to help bolster sagging morale.

We rooted out all conceivable talent for Saturday-night vaudevilles. I made my contribution by singing some Scottish student songs, 'As Through the Street' and 'A Lum Hat Wantin' a Croon'. I cannot pretend that my efforts were warmly received. This was the first time I had ever sung in public. It was also the last.

All in all, these attempts at diversion and entertainment were something less than successful. Apathy and listlessness settled over Banpong like a miasmatic fog. Morale was low and sinking steadily. We were on the long, slow slide – and there was worse to come.