

## THE VALLEY OF DEATH

**I**n September the order came for us to move again. We were to be transferred to another area, somewhere farther north. This time there was no train. We were to march to the next camp, carrying our personal kit, our cooking utensils and our tools, which meant that we were loaded to capacity.

I had not recovered from the effects of my operation; I still had intermittent attacks of malarial fever. Now something new was added to my growing collection of diseases. Shortly before we left I suffered an attack of amoebic dysentery which left me in a constant state of weakness.

In this condition I set out with the others, many of them also feeble with illness, along a jungle road under a scorching sun. I have often thought about that march and the hidden resources of the human mechanism it disclosed. My legs moved of their own accord, as if they had no relation to me, yet I plodded along, almost able to keep up with the column.

As the pitiless sun rose in the sky, its heat intensified our thirst. We walked past endless rice paddies. There, within reach, were lovely enticing pools of muddy water. We had but to lean down, scoop it up with our hands and drink. To do so, however, would be to invite death by cholera or typhoid.

The sun reached its zenith and began to descend. The blaze lessened, but now our bones ached with weariness. In spite of their best efforts, some of the men fell behind.

Twilight came. The guards, who were travelling by truck,

were sent to round up the stragglers. They shouted insults at us which we did not hear and rained blows on us which we could not feel, so great was our exhaustion.

Camp that night was no more than a place to sit on the bare ground. For our supper we were handed a cup of water and a ball of cold rice each. We stretched out where we were and slept.

The guards roused us early for the last lap of our journey, marching us past a village named Kanburi to the bank of a wide, brown, muddy river. The river bustled with activity. Strange native craft, propelled by poles or outboard motors, were busily ferrying supplies from one bank to the other. No one knew the name of the river. We hadn't a clue that this was the River Kwai, and that we were at the very spot where later we would be forced to build a bridge.

Heavy, open wooden barges waited by the river's edge. The guards herded us aboard, until our entire contingent – all two hundred and fifty of us – were jammed into four of them. A ridiculously small motor-launch appeared and began to tow the string of barges. For several hours we stood unprotected in the scorching sun while the spluttering launch pulled its heavy load slowly upstream against the current some two and a half miles to the site of our new camp.

I staggered up the muddy bank from the river and had my first glimpse of Chungkai. Nearby, I saw only loose stacks of cut bamboo, other loose stacks of atap grass and a scraggly, unkempt grass hut, which I took to be the guardhouse. Beyond, wherever I looked, was the jungle – powerful, lush, dark and green, threatening and confining. In front of me was a small clearing.

I sat resting on the ground, trying to acclimatize myself to the jungle environment. We were part of it, hemmed in by the rawness of untamed nature. Above me I could see the fronds of the bamboo forming a lacework pattern against the infinite

blue of the sky. A tree rat scampered along a bowing branch, paused, sniffed and scampered again. A tiny delicate bird hovered busily for a while by a trembling leaf, then darted quickly to another tree in its quest for insects. A monkey chattered angrily, scratched itself and swung by, looking for its mate.

I was not allowed to rest for long. The guards came up, shouting, and we were organized into work parties, building our own barracks – the usual scraggly huts of bamboo, roofed with atap palm, with sleeping platforms made of split bamboo rising just above the mud and extending down either side of the long narrow interior. A hut housed about two hundred men, and each man had to himself an area about six feet long and two feet wide – roughly the room of a narrow grave.

We cleared an area of something like three-quarters of a mile long by half a mile wide, pushing back the jungle for a time. Between the huts was earth – trampled earth, the dark-brown colour of mud in the wet season, the light-brown colour of dust when it was dry. In the wet season everything we touched oozed mud. The dust in the dry season caked our skins, stung our eyes and choked our throats.

We had not been long at Chungkai when we found out why we were there and why the camp existed. We learned it piece by piece from what we saw, from ‘bore-hole’ rumours and from remarks incautiously dropped by the guards. The more we learned, the greater grew our foreboding.

In violation of all international conventions, we prisoners of war were to be used to build a railway for the Japanese Army. Field Marshal Juichi Terauchi, of the Japanese southern army, had formally filed the request for our services and Tojo himself had approved it. The enemy was planning to go on through Burma and ultimately to invade India. Since their existing supply line was by sea, and therefore vulnerable to submarine attack, they planned a substitute route overland. The Japanese

wanted to take advantage of two rail-lines already in operation – one running from Singapore to Bangkok and one in Burma between Rangoon and Ye. All that was needed to join the two lines was a railway to be cut through hills and jungle running from Banpong up along the River Kwai and thence through the Three Pagodas Pass to connect with the Burma line north of Ye on the way to Moulmein.

This railway was to be several hundred miles in length through difficult terrain. When the Japanese engineers made their first calculations they estimated that it would take five or six years to complete it. Once they received the go-ahead to use prisoners as labour they cut the projected time to eighteen months.

The building of the railway was scheduled to begin in June 1942. But for reasons which we never knew construction did not get under way until almost November. In spite of this late start, the target date for completion, to fit in with the Japanese invasion time-table, remained the same – October 1943. An undertaking that appeared impossible to bring off in eighteen months thus had to be compressed into twelve. To hide their nervous tension, the Japanese took to bawling and shouting, which only compounded confusion with confusion. The prisoners bore the brunt of their wrathful frenzy.

To get the job done, the Japanese had mainly human flesh for tools, but flesh was cheap. Later there was an even more plentiful supply of native flesh – Burmese, Thais, Malays, Chinese, Tamils and Javanese – more than sixty thousand of them, all beaten, starved, overworked, and, when broken, thrown carelessly on that human rubbish-heap, the Railway of Death. But in the earlier stages of the construction the Japanese used chiefly the helpless bodies of their prisoners of war.

Thus began the most gruelling phase of our ordeal. Every morning, as soon as dawn streaked the sky – at about 5.30 or 6 o'clock – we were marched out of Chungkai to work at hacking

out the right of way for the railway. We were not marched back until late at night. Sometimes, if there was a job to be finished, we were kept at work into the early hours of the next morning. As officers, we did not actually work with pick and shovel, but had consented to supervise our men while at work. We kept the same hours as they did.

This was our routine seven days a week. There was no day of rest, no holiday, no hiatus of any kind. We lost all consciousness of time. There were so few meaningful incidents to serve as markers. Was it Tuesday the fourth or Friday the seventeenth? Who could say? And who would care? One grey day succeeded another – with no colour, no variety, no humanity. Misery, despair and death were our constant companions.

Our first tasks were to hack out the jungle, to swing our picks, to shovel earth into big grass baskets and carry them to fill in a level roadbed. Except for our G-strings, we worked naked and barefoot in heat that reached one hundred and twenty degrees, our bodies stung by insects, our feet cut and bruised by the sharp stones.

The monsoons came early that year and with them a new adversary was added. We worked and lived in a world of wetness. One day's labour would be washed away by the floods of the next. Torrents strewed rocks in our path. We understood then how unfortunate was the location of our camp at the juncture of the Kwai and the Mea Klong. When the rains came both rivers overflowed and left us living on a raft of mud. It spread its clinging ooze throughout the whole camp and came nearly up to the level of our sleeping platforms.

Towards the spring of 1943, the Japanese grew increasingly nervous that the railway wouldn't be finished on time, and vented their anxiety on us. Somewhere the guards had picked up the word, 'Speedo'. They stood over us with their vicious

staves of bamboo yelling 'Speedo! Speedo!', until 'Speedo!' rang in our ears and haunted our sleep. We nicknamed the project 'Operation Speedo'.

When we did not move fast enough to suit them – which was most of the time – they beat us mercilessly. Many no longer had the stamina to endure such beatings. They slid to the ground and died.

Our work parties moved on into the hills, where the right of way had to be dug and blasted from solid rock. Here the job was not only harder but a good deal more dangerous. In any undertaking so arduous there were bound to be accidents. But our overseers multiplied them by causing many unnecessary deaths and injuries. Human life was cheap; they simply did not care.

A guard, enraged over some trifle, would shriek a curse, then hurl a hammer at a prisoner's head. A Japanese engineer carefully instructed two prisoners in making ready a dynamite charge. While they were still carrying out his instructions he touched off the charge and blew them to pieces. A boulder was mysteriously pushed off a ledge, crushing a group of workers clearly visible below. The white of the limestone was stained red with prisoners' blood.

Death was everywhere. Men collapsed in their tracks, from thirst, exhaustion, disease and starvation. But Death did not work fast enough for the Japanese, so they tried to assist him in his grim harvesting, as they drove on the work of the railway.

The bridge over the River Kwai, an important link in the rail system, was built in the spring of 1943. Since the Japanese had no steel to spare, and no heavy construction equipment available, the bridge was built by hand labour – our labour. Several hundred yards in length and about five storeys above the water, it was a sizeable engineering job, but one that was primitive by modern standards.

Heavy square beams of timber were floated out into the river by work parties. The beams were then tilted upright and driven into the river-bed by hand-operated pile-drivers. They were then held in place by cross-beams. Other sections, also held together by cross-beams, were erected on top of them until the bridge rose to the level of the track.

Much has been made of the building of this bridge, but it was, in fact, a relatively minor episode in 'Operation Speedo'; there were in fact other bridges of a similar nature. Construction of it was finished in less than two months, whereas it took a year to build the railway. The bridge claimed its toll in lives, but men died in thousands on the railway.

At first the Japanese had respected the international law which stipulated that officers were not to perform manual labour, and were to be employed as supervisors only. But the time very soon came when they ordered us to work with tools. This was a difficult dilemma, for this meant that we were being forced by the Japanese to contravene the international law which forbade the use of officer-prisoners as manual workers. We refused to obey the Japanese command, whereupon we were told that unless we worked we would get no food at all. Still we refused.

'Very well, we'll kill you if you don't,' said the Japanese.

We replied, 'All right, go ahead.'

Then we waited for our answer. It was not long in coming. All ranks were ordered on parade. Officers were lined up on one side – the other ranks across from them. The guards 'rammed one up the spout' and trained the sights on our Jocks.

'Now will you work?' the Japanese asked us once again. This time we could only answer 'Yes'. And so it was that British officers joined their men, as coolie labour, in building the bridge over the River Kwai.

One interpretation of this situation – namely, that British officers built this bridge in record time to demonstrate their

superior efficiency – has been widely publicized through Pierre Boulle's novel *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, and the film based on it. The story was an entertaining fiction, but to let such an impression go unchallenged in any factual account would do an injustice to the officers and men – living and dead – who worked on that bridge. They did not do so willingly, but at bayonet point and under the bamboo rod, and they risked their lives continually seeking for an opportunity to sabotage the bridge.

These jobs were done by men who worked out from Chungkai and such camps in the vicinity. Chungkai itself was the base for similar camps strung out eastward along the river and the railway for several hundred miles to the Three Pagodas Pass over near the Burmese border. To begin with, Chungkai was a busy staging area, a mustering point of materials and fresh men; in the end it became a fetid hospital camp where the broken returned to die.

The sleazy huts grew to number forty. At the peak they housed nearly eight thousand, a battered population, but one that was ever changing, ever shifting. Batches of new POWs arriving from Malaya replaced old hands as they were marched off to other camps farther up country. Friends, old comrades-in-arms, came and went, appeared briefly and disappeared. A few we saw again months later; many we saw no more. A thousand men left us to work on some unnamed project and were never heard from. Smaller groups vanished often without trace. Now and then I recognized in a batch of new arrivals the face of a former barrack-mate. He would be gone before I could greet him. We lived in a constant state of flux, never knowing what the next day held for us.

In Chungkai we were being slowly starved. We were doing heavy work now, but our rations were no more than when we had been on light work. There were meagre quantities of meat, oil, tea and sugar, very occasional vegetables, and sometimes

salt, but these were in such tiny quantities that they were of hardly any nutritional value. Our diet was rice, three times a day; and it was rice of the poorest quality, the sweepings from the godowns. Much as we hated it, rice might have kept us going had there been enough of it. But the most officially allotted to each man was four hundred and twenty grams a day. This figure was purely hypothetical, for so many Japanese quartermasters dipped into the supply along the line that far less than that was left by the time the rice reached us.

Rations were issued on the basis of heads counted for work; no rice whatever was allotted for the sick. It seemed to be the fixed policy of the Japanese High Command to write off the sick as quickly as possible and to waste no food on them while doing it. After a few months even these scanty rations were further reduced to provide, so we were told, better sustenance for the workers back home in Japan. It can be imagined how happy this news made us.

Starvation and the lack of proteins and vitamins in our daily diet gave the diseases of malnutrition a chance to get in their deadly work. More and more men went sick every day.

We thought much of escape, but escape was next to impossible. It was fairly easy to break through the flimsy twelve-foot bamboo fence. Although guards were stationed at several points around the perimeter of the camp, and others patrolled at regular intervals, they could be eluded. But if a man broke through, where could he go?

A thousand miles of jungle was the stoutest fence that could surround any camp. To be caught outside the camp meant death — immediate death at the hands of violent guards or slow death by starvation. We were not deterred by the wild animals or by the multitude of poisonous snakes in which the jungle abounded. It was the jungle itself, impersonal, menacing, trackless, that shut us in. More actively hostile were the natives, for the POW had a price on his head and the Japanese

had set the price high. Of those who attempted to escape there is no record of any surviving.

Four of our number proved how slight the chances were. They slipped through the bamboo enclosure only to be reported by natives, captured and brought back. We next saw them pegged out on the ground in front of the guardhouse. The Japanese made a point of letting us all know that they had been tried and sentenced. Next morning at dawn we reported as usual for work parade, knowing full well what was to happen at that moment. A ragged volley of rifle-fire rang out; a short silence followed; then, one by one, four single shots from a pistol.

Our friends had made good their escape – in the only way possible from Chungkai.

The same fate might have been mine. Jack Hyslop and I had long plotted an escape. But when the hour came I went down with one of my recurrent attacks of malaria and could not join him. Jack went anyway. But his native contacts whom he was to meet outside failed to appear as they had agreed to, and Jack was fortunately able to get back inside the fence before he was missed.

The only purpose in breaking through the fence, therefore, was to trade on the black market with the local Thais or to forage for fruits and plants that could be used as substitutes for medicines. The villages were tiny, collections of no more than six or seven huts scattered along the Kwai not far from the camp. Here the Thais cultivated their rice paddies or fished in the river. Their existence was frugal and they had little to spare.

Many of the prisoners still had an occasional penknife, fountain pen or a remnant of clothing such as a pair of shorts or a shirt. These were prized by the Thais and brought high prices. From time to time enterprising traders turned up, travelling by river. Then wares were available at a price, including tinned milk and tobacco.

Lime trees, some banana trees and red chillis grew in a semi-wild state at the edge of the villages. We also bartered for these, or, when the occasion permitted, helped ourselves. Such expeditions were always dangerous.

Death called to us from every direction. It was in the air we breathed, the food we ate, the things we talked about. The rhythm of death obsessed us with its beat – a beat so regular, so pervasive, so inescapable that it made Chungkai a place of shadows in the dark valley.

It was so easy to die. Those who decided that they had no further reason for living pulled down the shades and quietly expired. I knew one man who had amoebic dysentery. Compared with the rest of us he was in pretty good condition. But he convinced himself that he could not possibly survive, and he did not. An Allied naval lieutenant reached the point where he could no longer endure his misery and tried to commit suicide. He did not succeed in his attempt, but died shortly afterwards with nothing wrong with him; he died from failure of the will to live.

These were the day-to-day cases of death retail. At times we were also brought face to face with death wholesale. On one occasion a whole string of barges came floating down-river to our camp. They were the barges of the dead. Their cargo consisted of corpses – the bodies of men from up-country who had been starved, overworked, corrupted with disease – no more than skeletons covered with skin. When the Japanese could use them no longer they loaded the bodies on barges. Why, no one knew. Perhaps they planned to reload the barges with living POWs and send them upstream as replacements.

Without warning, cholera struck. All around us, on the job, in the hut, men suddenly became violently sick. They were carried away to the isolation area. We knew that we would never see them again. Cholera victims were not buried as were those who died daily; they were burned. Details were assigned

to drag the bodies to the river-bank. On great blazing pyres were placed the remains of men who had once been husbands, sons, lovers, friends. While the flames crackled around them in the shimmering heat, they would turn, kick, bend and reach, then rise in a macabre dance – their eerie dance of farewell.

As conditions steadily worsened, as starvation, exhaustion and disease took an ever-increasing toll, the atmosphere in which we lived became poisoned by selfishness, hate and fear. We were slipping rapidly down the slope of degradation.

In Changi the patterns of army life had sustained us. We had huddled together because of our fears, believing that there was safety in numbers. We had still shown some consideration for each other. Now that was all swept away. Existence had become so miserable, the odds so heavy against survival, that, to most of the prisoners, nothing mattered except to survive. We lived by the law of the jungle, 'red in tooth and claw' – the law of the survival of the fittest. It was a case of 'I look out for myself and to hell with everyone else'.

This attitude became our norm. We called it 'The Ladder Club'. Its motto was 'I've got the ladder up, Jack. I'm all right'. The weak were trampled underfoot, the sick ignored or resented, the dead forgotten. When a man lay dying we had no word of comfort for him. When he cried we averted our heads. Men cursed the Japanese, their neighbours, God. Cursing became such an obsession that they constructed whole sentences in which every word was a curse.

Everyone was his own keeper. It was free enterprise at its worst, with all the restraints of morality gone. Our captors had promised to reduce us to a level 'lower than that of any coolie in Asia'. They were succeeding only too well.

Although we lived by the law of the jungle, the strongest among us still died, and the most selfish, the most self-sufficient, the wiliest and shrewdest, perished with the weak, the generous

and the decent. Dostoevski described a condition like ours when he said in *The Brothers Karamazov*:

For he is accustomed to rely on himself alone and to cut himself off from the whole; he has trained himself not to believe in the help of others, in men and humanity, and only troubles for fear he should lose his money and the privileges he has won for himself.

This pervasive selfishness was not universal. As I had occasion to learn myself in a practical way, there were several men who, in the midst of the widespread degradation and despair, kept their integrity inviolate and their faith whole. The officers, as much as the other ranks, however, became subject to the same decay of morale. In the early stages of Chungkai, when they supervised the men instead of working beside them, as later, a number of them had that eroding leisure that, in such conditions, leads men to brood on their own miseries; others, too, with the props of the military structure removed, became cynical, bewildered or despairing.

For most of us, little acts of meanness, suspicion and favouritism permeated our daily lives. Even the drawing of our meagre ration was a humiliating experience. To get our meals, we formed a line in our huts. Our server would dip his can into the rice bucket and dump its contents into our mess-tins. Another server would ladle out a watery mess of green leaves.

I always watched warily when my turn came. I knew that the servers would give me short measure so that they would have more for themselves and their chums. Yet I dared not protest, lest I should draw even shorter measure at the next meal-time. I knew this – and I knew that they knew that I knew. I hated them for knowing. And I hated myself for hating them.

There were depths below depths to which some, discarding

the last pretence of self-respect, yet descended. The minute roll-call was over in the evening there would be a rush to the Japanese cookhouse. The cooks would bring out swill-pails and set them on the ground. Standing back, they folded their arms and looked on with self-satisfied smiles while prisoners pushed, kicked and shoved one another out of the way as they fought for scraps from the enemy table.

One evening this too-familiar scene was taking place as I passed by. A wretch broke away from the pack and stumbled towards me. In his hand he clutched a soggy mess of rice and stew. Drops of gravy dripped through his fingers. He had turned his back on the others, lest they should see what he had and be tempted to rob him. A wolfish leer contorted his face as he craftily licked at his spoils.

‘Rather than do that,’ I thought to myself, ‘I’d die!’

He passed me at a kind of trot, like an animal going to his lair, except that an animal would have had more dignity.

It was common practice for prisoners to steal from one another. A Malayan rubber planter named Iain Stewart, whom I had known in Singapore, turned up in Chungkai. He was pleased to find someone he knew. The next day when I saw him again he was disconsolate.

‘What’s wrong, Iain?’ I asked.

He could hardly speak.

‘My pack’s been taken,’ he said at last. ‘Some lousy bastard snatched it right from under my head last night. I’ve lost every bloody thing that I had in the world – my fiancée’s photograph, my knife, pen, notebook – the things I’ve hung on to all the way. But what hurts worst is to be robbed by your own kind.’

‘Did you shout?’

‘Yes I shouted. But no one lifted a finger to help me. I ran after him, but he got away in the confusion. By God, I never thought I’d see the day when a thing like this could happen.’

Overcome with emotion, he removed his steel-rimmed glasses and wiped them on the strip of canvas that served to cover his loins.

‘At least you have those,’ I said, trying to cheer him up.

‘Yes, I’d be as blind as a bat without them and that would have been blinking awful, wouldn’t it? I stuck them in a piece of bamboo at the foot of my sleeping platform so I wouldn’t roll on them. It was lucky I did.’

‘Have you reported this?’

‘Oh yes. I went straight off to see the British colonel. Nothing can be done about it. Goes on all the time. We can’t control it among ourselves, and the Nips don’t give a damn. In fact, the more depraved we become, the more it pleases them.’

‘How they must be gloating over us! The white man and his civilization! What a pompous fraud!’

‘Damnable, isn’t it?’ said Iain, as he adjusted his glasses.

Even more damnable than those who stole from the living were the human jackals who lurked about waiting to rob the dead. Most of the prisoners left this world picked as clean as Iain. The jackals were not above snatching their last few rags. What added spice to their nefarious game was the hope that they might find a watch, a ring, a knife, a pen or even a pound note stitched into a loincloth that had been overlooked. Such items were invaluable, for they could be sold to the Japanese guards or bartered to Thais in the villages for food, canned milk, cigarettes and, on rare occasions, medicines.

This ghoulish activity characterized our general attitude towards the dead. We could see only one end for us all and that was death. Death pressed in all around us; it was never far from our thoughts.

We had no church, no chaplain, no services. If there were men who kept faith alive in their hearts they gave no visible sign. At Changi many had turned to religion for the first time. But the crutch had not supported them; so they had thrown it away.

Many had prayed, but only for themselves. Nothing happened. They sought personal miracles – and none had come. They had appealed to God as an expedient. But God had apparently refused to be treated as one.

We had long since resigned ourselves to being derelicts. We were the forsaken men – forsaken by our friends, our families, by our Government. Now even God seemed to have left us.

One hot afternoon, while we were digging to make a flat foundation for the railway bed, our guards moved away for a minute. Our detail had a chance for a brief respite; we stood mopping our foreheads, slapping at insects or leaning on our shovels. Suddenly a work-mate standing next to me said, ‘Have you ever thought how deliberately we choose death?’ I told him it hadn’t occurred to me. ‘From quite early in life we rush to throw in our lot with it,’ he went on. ‘Our education prepares us for it. We’re taught that it’s manly and heroic to die; the finest thing that can happen to us is to have our names inscribed on a bronze plaque.’

He wiped the sweat from his forehead with his arm.

‘Now, women have more sense. They choose life – and they fight like hell for it – for the life they carry in their wombs and the children they have borne. Why can’t we see things the way they do?’

He gazed out over the impenetrable green mass that separated us from the lives we had known.

‘I had a woman once. She loved me. In fact, she was crazy about me. When I was called up I went round to see her to tell her it was all over, thank you very much. She couldn’t believe what I said to her, so I had to tell her all over again: “It’s finished, washed up, *kaput*,” I said. “There’s a war on or going to be very soon and I’m off to it. Love and war don’t belong together and I don’t want you grieving, so that’s that.” I’ll never forget the pain in her eyes; God, she was lovely – lovelier even than she had been before, now that I was leaving her – with the pain showing in her eyes and all.

'Before I went away she came to say goodbye. She said that she wanted me to have a book and she handed it to me. I looked at the name on it. It was by some Chinese bloke and it was called *The Importance of Living*. Bloody rummy, wasn't it?' He sighed. 'What a fool I was!'

Then he went on to recite something like this – a poem he had made up or memorized:

*I looked within your eyes  
and saw the pain you felt –  
pain that was for me  
because I did not understand  
why you gave so much  
nor why you tried to cross the chasm  
that separated me from you.*

*We had touched, my love,  
that we had, flesh to flesh,  
but I had never met you  
and you were hurt  
yet though you were hurt  
you waited –  
and then I came to tell you  
I was going away  
with a flip 'goodbye'  
not caring, not caring for you  
with the pain-struck eyes.*

*And I went, went to the battle  
that called me from you,  
called me from love,  
called me from happiness,  
called me to where the bloody gutters  
run with life,*

*life that once had danced and laughed  
and dared to hope –  
and there's no return.*

When he had finished he fell silent. This was one of those times when silence is the only bond of understanding. I was silent, too. The Japanese guard came back. We picked up our shovels and resumed digging.

For days afterwards I looked for this work-mate – but I never saw him again.

The hospital in this camp was known as the Death House. So far I had been able to keep out of it. Despite my dysentery and bouts of malaria, I kept on my feet. But one day I had a very sore throat. I borrowed a mirror. At the back of my throat was a great yellow-white patch of blood-flecked phlegm. I didn't pay much attention to it; we couldn't concern ourselves with minor ailments.

Every now and then I tried to remove the patch, thinking that would help. Eventually I succeeded and forgot about it. But I awoke one morning to find that I couldn't talk properly. What was more troublesome, I could neither eat nor drink. Every time I tried, the rice or water would come gushing back through my nose.

I reported to one of the medical officers, a doctor from Glasgow. He found my attempts to speak to him more amusing than I did, and he responded by mimicking me.

By that time I had a pretty good idea what was wrong with me. The blood-flecked patch and the fallen palate were both symptoms of diphtheria. I was sure the doctor knew too. But the pressure on him to produce workers must have been too great for him to pay any regard for my plight. So back to work I went. I soon noticed that I was losing sensation in my legs. They felt as heavy as lead; before long I couldn't lift one after the other.

I went back to the MO. This time he diagnosed the trouble as

polyneuritis, a consequence of the diphtheria. Work was impossible because I couldn't stand.

'The hospital for you,' said the doctor.

This time I was headed for the Death House. However, I was so ill that I didn't much care. But I was hardly prepared for what I found there. The Death House had been built at one of the lowest points of the camp. The monsoon was on, and, as a result, the floor of the hut was a sea of mud. And there were the smells; the smell of tropical ulcers eating into flesh and bone; the smell of latrines overflowed; the smell of unwashed men, untended men, sick men, of humanity gone sour, of humanity rotting. Worst of all was the sweet, evil smell of bed-bugs by the million, crawling over us to steal the little flesh that still clung to our bones.

Men lay in rows head to feet. Yet one of the worst features in this jam of humanity was the loneliness; one never really knew one's neighbour. Everyone was crowded together, but there was no conversation, no communion, no fellowship.

On my first day there I passed the time watching the man whose head was at my feet. I wondered where he'd come from and what his name was. He lay there, scarcely moving. Suddenly he jerked up into a sitting position, twitched, fell back and lay still. Flies clustered on his nose and mouth. Then I knew that he was dead.

The swarming flies struck me as obscene. I leaned down and tried to wave them away from him. It was no use. I shouted for the orderlies. It was a long time before they came. Poor chaps. The living were their first concern. What could they do in the face of such suffering?

As the days dragged by, I grew more and more frail. I was no longer hungry; I had passed that stage. I did not suffer, for my body was beyond pain. Yet I continued to live.

Since I had no way of looking at myself, I was unaware of the change in me. I was lying there in a half-stupor, watching the

pattern the light made through the ragged atap palm, when I saw two familiar figures. One was my old ship-mate, Edward Hooper, who had been skipper of the *Setia Berganti*, the other was Joe Allen of the Argylls. They must have recently arrived at Chungkai and had come to the Death House looking for me. Slowly they moved along between the sleeping platforms. I called out to them. But it was as in one of those dreams in which you shout and shout and cannot make yourself heard. Although I strained my vocal cords, I could barely whisper.

They had reached the end of the hut and had not seen me. They turned and were on their way out. Just in time I caught the attention of an orderly. He ran and stopped them at the door and brought them to my side. They stared at me, but there was no sign of recognition in their eyes. I plucked at Hooper's wrist. He bent over me. When he was close enough to me I muttered my name.

'Good God!' he exclaimed. 'You can't be Rosie!'

I nodded. On the prahu, when he had given me my nickname, I had a good two hundred pounds of energetic flesh on a solid six-foot-two frame. We chatted a while – or, rather, they chatted – and I nodded or shook my head, and then they left. After they had gone I asked for a mirror. I did not recognize myself. Haunting, sunken eyes stared out at me above a beard. Waxy skin stretched over protruding bones. The swelling at my ankles, the oedema caused by beriberi, was the only fleshy part on me.

The last shreds of my numbed sensibilities rebelled against my surroundings – against the bed-bugs, the lice, the stench, the blood-mucous-excrement-stained sleeping platforms, the dying and the dead bed-mates, the victory of corruption. This was the lowest level of life. The doorway to death was no noble stepping-off place – but a sordid snuffing-out place, a 'not-with-a-bang-but-a-whimper' sort of place.

A couple of nights later I signalled a passing orderly.

'For God's sake, get me out of here!' I begged with as much force as I could muster.

'Can't,' he said with a shrug.

'Why not?'

'No other place to go.'

'Come off it. There must be somewhere.'

'No.'

'How about letting me lie at the entrance? It's cleaner there and I'd get some air.'

'Can't. The MO wouldn't stand for it. You'd be in our way.'

'How about the far end, then?'

'Can't. That's the morgue.'

'What's wrong with the morgue?'

'Nothing. Except that that's where we put the dead bodies.'

'It's cleaner than this, isn't it?'

'Aye.'

'Then move me!'

'Okay, then. If that's how you want it. You won't be in the way there.'

He had an afterthought – a grisly one.

'But mind – if anyone puts a rice-sack on you while you're sleeping make a noise or move or something. We wouldn't want to bury you unintentionally.'

He called down the hut to his mate.

'Hey, Bill! Here's a live one who wants to go to the morgue. Come on – give us a hand.'

Bill came along and between them they dragged me to the far end. There was no sleeping platform there. I had to lie on the ground, but at least the ground was dry.

As I slept that night I dreamed. I was happy with my dreams. Then my waking senses, dragged reluctantly from their drowsing rest, experienced anew the corrupt smells of dying things – of decaying flesh, of rotting men.

The harsh light of dawn filtered through the ragged atap roof.