

Before Hiroshima: Forgotten Prisoners of War in Japan, Burma and the Far East

Dedication

This book is dedicated to all those who suffered as prisoners of war or interns in the Far East, those that sadly died there and those that returned, and those that waited for them.

In particular, it is dedicated to my Dad who survived his captivity through determination and a never-ending sense of humour. We miss him and are all very proud of him.



Gunner William Albert Halls

1922-1998

Foreword

Most people think of VE Day in May as the end of World War II, yet it did not officially end until Japan finally surrendered in August 1945 – now known as V-J Day on 15th August. 2015 is the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII and there will be lots of celebrations around VE Day (May). However, I know from experience that there will be less recognition of the Far East Prisoners of War (FEPOWs) who endured a further time in captivity until the treaty was signed between the US and Japan.

The treatment of prisoners of war (POWs) in Japan was particularly cruel and a higher proportion of them died in these camps than those held in Germany. Their personal stories are moving and demonstrate the courage and spirit of every FEPOW. But, the long-term impact spreads much further to include the lives of close family and friends.

This book aims to present the stories of FEPOWs and their loved ones, those that were waiting at home to hear news of what was happening in the Far East during the war, as well as those that lived with them in the years after they were released. Support was negligible, assuming they actually recognised that they needed help and were willing to ask for it. For families, there was no support at all. This book includes reflections from many people over the years, and it is clear that everyone was left to find their own way through these traumatic times.

It is also interesting to note the later discussion about more recent events where civilians or military personnel are held captive, often as hostages for very long periods of time, and how little has changed in the way governments react and families are left to handle the situation.

“We are starving, not melodramatically, but slowly” wrote Eric Cordingly in his diary. “The grim thought comes into one’s mind that many of these crosses cover the mortal remains of men reported safe after battle. Men who need not have died but for the facts and conditions of our captivity.” (Cordingly L. , 2015)

Introduction

While individual stories vary according to how and where they were captured, treatment was generally the same – namely cruelty, starvation and a total disregard for human life by their captors. The more I spoke with wives and families of FEPOWs, it became clear that their experiences were also similar, both during and after the war. No support, no recognition of the condition POWs were in on their return or the long-term impact of their experiences on wider family members and, crucially, a cynical lack of acknowledgement of how bad it had been for Japanese POWs in particular.

This is a more formal collection of anecdotal evidence, gradually building a wider picture of the families during and after the war. I visited many support groups around the UK and also made contact with families in Canada and Australia. In 1997, I was invited to lay the wreath at the Remembrance Day service in Tokyo, representing British prisoners of war who had not returned home and those who still suffered from the effects of the treatment they received.

In 2020, the 75th anniversary of the end of the war, there will be many remembrance events and celebrations of victory over adversaries. I believe this is an ideal time to present the human aspects of the brutal captivity of soldiers in the Far East, particularly Japan

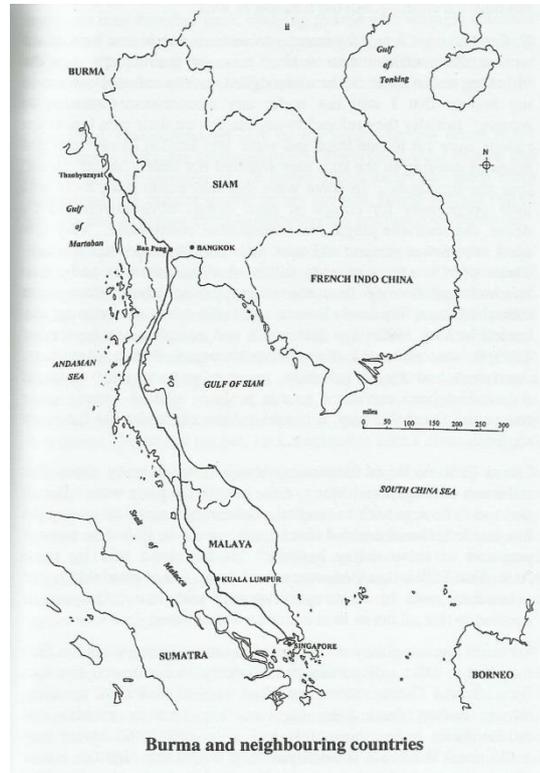
The Conflict in the Far East

Brief Timeline

- **1937 – Japan invaded China**
- **1938 – controlled Amoy in southern China**
- **1941 7-8 December Japan attacks Pearl Harbour**
- **1941 Japan attacks Hong Kong which capitulates on Christmas Day. They then enter Burma**
- **1942 – Japan invades the Dutch East Indies**
- **1942 – February – Singapore surrenders to the Japanese; Japanese land in Java**
- **1942 – May – POWs in A Force sail to Burma**
- **1942 – July – B Force sails to North Borneo**
- **1943 – March – D Force goes by train to Thailand, followed by F and H Forces**
- **1943 – March – E Force sails to North Borneo**
- **1943 – October – both ends of Thai-Burma railway meet at Konkoita**
- **1943 – December – survivors of F Force return to Singapore**
- **1944 – American forces return to the Philippines**
- **1945 – August 6th – Atomic bomb on Hiroshima**

- 1945 – August 9th – Atomic bomb on Nagasaki
- 1945 – September 2nd – Japanese sign official surrender

How it all started



- While the war in Europe was well underway from 1939, no-one recognised the extent to which Japan was preparing for its proposed reign over the whole of South-East Asia. After all, they had invaded China in 1937, took control of Amoy in Southern China in May 1938, and by the end of that year they were just 45 kilometres from Hong Kong. By 1941 they occupied the whole of Indo-China (Tett, 2002).

There is a lot of evidence in official documents, diaries and letters from serving men in the region, and commentators in Britain, America and Canada about the way decisions were taken to defend Hong Kong and later Singapore, the majority of this commentary being extremely critical about the whole venture. (Critchley, 1991) (Morris, 1987).

For example, Sir John Hammerton was mentioned in an article (War Illustrated published in WWII) as saying about the possibility of an attack by the Japanese “Presuming that they delivered their onslaught by land, sea and air together, their forces would encounter the determined resistance of a great fortress, a navy of strength at which we can only guess....an army which has recently been reinforced...and an Air Force much more than a match for Japan’s”. Not quite a true picture of the potential threat.

1,975 inexperienced recruits who had never fought in battle were sent from Canada to a tropical, rough terrain they were ill prepared for in October 1941. Within 3 weeks they were in the midst of

ferocious battle with little 'coherent strategy' to their defence action. By Christmas 1941 the battle was lost and Hong Kong was surrendered.

Nearly a quarter of the Canadian soldiers were lost even as they surrendered, and the rest taken prisoner. Overall, "4,400 men were killed, wounded or missing, but more than 11,000 survived" and were taken prisoner (Morris, 1987).

By the end of 1941, 60,000 Japanese troops took control of the Malay Peninsular and Singapore, capturing 137,000 British and Indian troops. A letter home from J Wyatt in December 1941 describes how he and a group of 9 others fought the Japanese desperately as part of the Battle of Kampar, a few of them only just escaping with their lives "tramping 30 miles that day" to reach the British lines.

Singapore fell soon after Hong Kong, the Causeway between the island and mainland blown up but still the Japanese advanced – much to the surprise of military leaders who thought it highly unlikely that they would be able to advance so quickly and across such difficult terrain. (Wilkinson)

A Japanese version of events

Another version of events, though still reflecting what we have already seen from other sources, is the book by Colonel Masanobu Tsuji (translated by Margaret E Lake) who was directly involved in the conflict. As the cover note says, there is "much in this volume that will be of interest to historians".

"The Capture of Singapore 1942: Japan's greatest victory, Britain's worst defeat" was published in 1997 (Tsuji, 1997) and gives a very clear picture of how the Japanese viewed these events at the time. He notes:

A few themes emerge that are as timeless as war itself: the difficulties of coordinating different branches of the armed forces, endless logistical problems, harsh terrain and unpredictable weather, squabbling between units for precedence and the "fog of war" that renders first reports from the battlefield unreliable".

I think we all relate to those statements whichever side of a conflict you take, and actually are very similar to those stated in translations of The Peloponnesian War from Ancient Greece in 450BC! When the Japanese entered the British barracks in Singapore, they found fresh food still on tables – a sign of how unexpected the assault had been. Notes were dropped by air advising the British to surrender, stressing the continued danger to civilians if they did not. After 70 days of fighting, on 15th February 1942, the British commander, Lt-General Percival met with the Japanese to agree terms of surrender and ask for "a guarantee of the safety of the lives of the English and Australians who remain in the city". This was agreed, though as we know these terms were not fully met (Tsuji, 1997).

Capture

As we know, the threat of war had been building up in the Far East since Japan had taken control of large areas of Indo-China. Pat Aspromourgos sent me a letter from Australia many years ago describing how her father, Staff Sergeant Gerald Golledge was stationed in Hong Kong. In 1940, she and her mother were evacuated to Australia via the Philippines, although many others did not see the urgency of the situation in time to leave safely. Her father was captured when Hong Kong capitulated.

Instead, F Force worked on the Burma Railway. Within the first 4 months, 90% of the men were sick and by the end 45% had died. He actually spent most of the year in the Kanchanaburi area, close to the railway, and when the main work on the railway was finished towards the end of 1943, he stayed on at the field hospital.

While approximately 100,000 romushas and 12,000 POWs lost their lives working on the railway, during the construction of the Pakanbaroe railway, 673 Allied POWs and 80,000 romushas lost their lives.

Ships sunk through Allied action

In the first instance, it is estimated that around 87,000 prisoners of war were taken and eventually 4,500 civilians were interned (Tett, 2002). They sent 60,000 British, Dutch and Australian POWs to Thailand from Singapore and Java to help build the Burma railway. Due to the difficult terrain, they were transported in cattle trucks, many of them sick already, in heat and cramped conditions travelling for around 5 days. Others were sent by sea to Rangoon where they worked on the track to meet those working from the opposite direction. (J Chalker)

Prisoners were transported to Japan cross the China Sea by ship, sometimes old un-seaworthy vessels likely to sink, always unmarked as POW carriers. There are many stories from survivors where they were crammed below decks, often in battened down holds so that they could not escape, and targeted by Allied bombers, particularly US bombers (*for example, the Lisbon Maru*). Many ships were sunk with few prisoners able to escape. Those that managed to break out from the holds were met by a handful of Japanese soldiers ready to gun them down. There is a list of vessels sunk at the end of the book.

Some managed to escape captivity during the fighting, often in small groups using whatever craft they could find. Unfortunately, even if they managed to reach shore with safe haven from Chinese locals, Japanese soldiers searched along these shores and small islands to kill or capture them.

In total, 23 ships transporting POWs are thought to have been sunk by Allied forces during the conflict in the Far East, with the loss of nearly 11,000 POWs and thousands of romushas.

Life in Captivity

Life in camp

All prisoners of war are treated poorly, but it is clear that the Japanese were particularly cruel to their prisoners. Dad recalled that each day, prisoners lined up and waited to see whether any of them were chosen to be beheaded, and who it might be this time. Some days it was no-one.

They were given rancid rice to eat and nothing else, sometimes resorting to eating grasses, although apparently there was some rumour that there had been a camp dog at one time that suddenly disappeared! Sadly, many more prisoners died when in captivity in Japan than in other POW camps in Europe.

At first, he also records that they were actually allowed quite a bit of freedom during the first few weeks, even though they were not allowed outside the barbed-wire fencing surrounding their camp. Eric Cordingly even records the efforts put into establishing the Church of St George's at Changi which the guards allowed.

A POW Ron Wilkinson noted: *Apart from the lack of food, life as a POW in Changi was to prove the best POW existence. Our leaders had negotiated conditions where, apart from daily roll call, we were inside our own compound without direct contact with our captors.*



St George's Mark IV April – September '45. St George's Mark III was moved to the Officers' Area of Changi Prison. It was surrounded by their chicken runs so it was affectionately known as St-George's-in-the-Poultry.

Painting by POW Eric Stacy

Eric also gave a talk in 1975 where he gave an example of help he received from a young Japanese soldier who professed to being a Christian rather than Buddhist. Any written materials were banned, so when Eric and an Indian doctor were caught with scraps of scribbled notes from men asking about friends, they were handcuffed together and put down a pit – around 12-foot deep and 4-foot square. In the night the young soldier came down a ladder with a banana each and some sweetened tea for the two captives, telling them to eat them quickly. He then disappeared. It was many hours before the two men were released from the pit.

I love the following quote from Eric's diary:

I would not have thought it possible to smoke a block of writing paper [air-mail paper]. I must consider a testimonial to the paper manufacturers ... "I have smoked your writing paper for the past three weeks and find it in every way satisfactory!" (Cordingly E. , 2015).

The War Artist Jack Chalker was a FEPOW and made sketches of his surroundings while in various prison camps, as well as the Thai-Burma Railway. These images were produced in dangerous circumstances, secrecy being paramount given the likely punishment if they were found.

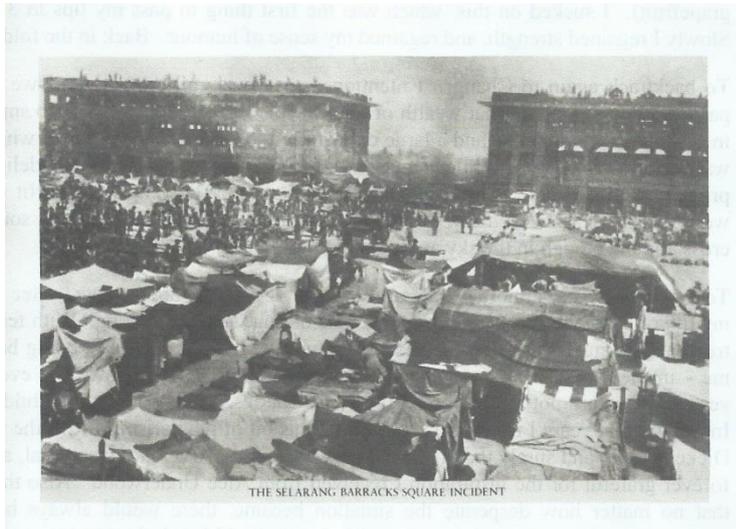
Conditions were appalling. The staple diet was rice, often with little else, to support working days of 16 hours at a stretch during the 'speedo' period.

During these three years in Thailand to the time of the Japanese capitulation in August 1945, nearly 20,000 British, Australian, Dutch and American POWs died as a result of the railway project together with 90,000 Asian labourers. Thousands more were unaccounted for. (Chalker)

Ron (Wilkinson, *A Guest of the Japanese Government*, 1997) recalls a week travelling in a truck to join others who had been working on the rail track. His story also notes his horror when meeting others who had been working there for some time:

This battalion of men, including their officers, were a spent force. To look into their eyes was, to me, one of the saddest experiences of my life. There was no spark there. Everyone had a vacant look, as

though their spirit had been broken. They were like living corpses. I will never forget and hope to God I never see this again.



The Selarang Incident

The Japanese High Command issued a form to all POWs at Changi requiring them to sign to swear they would not attempt to escape. Under military law, it was actually illegal to require POWs to sign such a declaration.

They all refused, of course, but this led to “swift and brutal action against the 14,609 troops. (Wilkinson, A Guest of the Japanese Government, 1997). Thousands of POWs, British and Australian, were herded into the square at Selarang Barracks originally used to house a single battalion of men. They held out for 4 days, staying outside in the heat, gradually becoming weaker and weaker.

Finally, with the threat that the sick in hospital would also be brought out to join them, and the very real fear of rapid outbreak of disease, they agreed to sign albeit “under duress”. This meant that their signed agreement was not valid anyway and they were still free to attempt escape.

Communication

The War Office and the British Red Cross were trying their best to locate POWs and to find information about the thousands of “missing” men. Unfortunately, this lack of real information had dire consequences for the families. If he was reported as missing or thought to be dead, payments to his spouse was stopped. If he was thought to be alive as a POW, then payments continued. We can all see how devastating that would be as it was often 2-3 years before news came of those originally thought “missing”. In March 1943, there were a reported 5,000 letters delivered to Changi jail – they had received none for over a year before that. Obviously, this contact with home meant so much to the POWs who had no idea what was happening back at home.

Working prisoners

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HDuckworth (1999) also describes their work existence in very graphic detail. *We were dragged out by the hair to go to work, beaten with bamboo poles and mocked at. We toiled, half naked in the cold, unfriendly rain of Upper Thailand. We had no time to wash and if we did it meant cholera. Our comrades died, we could not honour them even at the graveside because we were still working.*

An Australian, Jack, remembers the tools allocated for their first day's work on the Burma Railway all being gone by the next morning (Clements 2001 page 22). By the time the last plate was to be laid, "gold" rivets had been provided as there was to be great publicity – everyone was given decent clothes and bananas for the public occasion. Unfortunately, these rivets too were stolen, and after the ceremony the clothes and bananas had to be given back.

Given the poor state of equipment and materials they had available, it is no surprise that so many POWs were killed carrying out these jobs. Apart from work on the railway – where it is estimated a POW died for every rail that was laid – the loading on the docks was extremely hazardous, particularly exposure to coal and cement dust as well as hauling iron-ore in baskets on their shoulders (Clements, 2001).

Spreading the message

As we know, there was a lot of criticism about Hirohito (both alive and dead!) in the press, and indeed the Japanese Embassy voiced their disapproval of much of this coverage. But there is evidence of concern from younger generation Japanese who had been given a very narrow picture of what happened during the Japanese campaigns across Indo-China.

For example, Fred Seiker's book *Lest we Forget* (Seiker, 1995) contains graphic images about how POWs were treated. Fuyoko Nishisato, a young Japanese academic, was determined to bring information about this book to academics and the public in Japan, but permission had been refused for it to be published there. Crucially, Nishisato had wanted to teach students about conditions and the cruel treatment they received, but this was clearly impossible to do (Stubbs, 1997).

Following up long-hidden information, a significant landmark was the publication of the book by Yuki Tanaka featured in the *Fulcrum* newsletter in 1997 (Titherington, 1997). This tells the story of 656 Australian nurses and British soldiers shot, and 32 other nurses sent to Sumatra to become "comfort women". These were the women taken prisoner all around the region and forced to provide "comfort" to the Japanese soldiers. It was published in the UK rather than Japan.

Women and children in captivity

There is generally less recognition of the situation for women who were captured in the Far East although there were around 130,000 Western civilians captured, 41,000 of these were women, many of them Dutch (Archer, 2015). Clearly, so many women and children as internees was not what the Japanese had planned for and anecdotal evidence notes how they were unsure what to do with them once they were captured. Lavinia Warner commented that there seemed to be no reason

for the arbitrary movement of women, viewed as useless mouths, from camp to camp rather than just killing them (Warner, 1982).

The Japanese army invaded the peninsula and took Singapore on 15th February 1942. Like many other women she found herself taken, with one suitcase, all she was allowed, containing with other items some muslin nappies, to Changi Prison. As she was pregnant, she was allowed to ride on a truck with others who were elderly, pregnant or with small children, including her sister Diana who had a little daughter just 8 months old. Their youngest sister Isobel had to walk the long hot trek from Singapore city.

As they approached the gates of the prison, the truck halted and a column of less fortunate women who had walked about 15 miles in the hot sun, marched past into the prison. They were singing, "There'll always be an England, and England shall be free". Mother never forgot that.

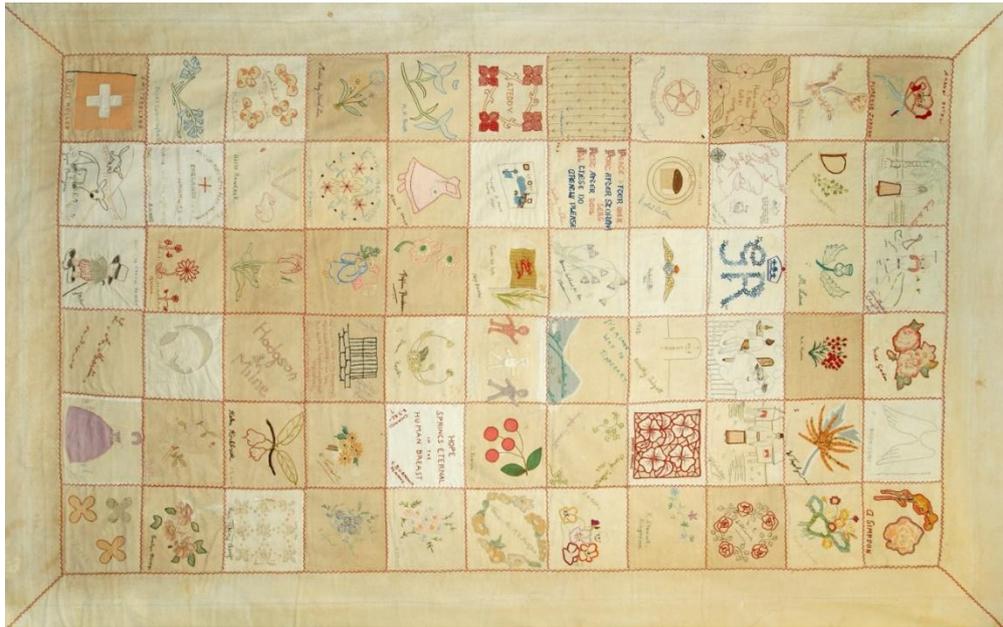
However, less well-recognised than the prison at Changi, many women were also imprisoned in camps in Sumatra, Borneo, Java and The Philippines and appear to have experienced a much more substantial death rate.

Banka Straits was notorious for Japanese ships sinking those trying to flee to the supposed safety of the Dutch East Indies. Women and children captured were first sent to Muntok, were frequently moved to other camps, then after suffering illness and deprivation found themselves back at Muntok. There appears to be no sign of their existence there now (Warner, 1982).

If survivors managed to swim to shore on Banka Island, they were likely to be massacred on the beach. A woman who survived the line-up of a group at the water's edge was shot through, just above the hips, and eventually got to Muntok. This remarkable woman, Margaret Dryburgh, then gave evidence at War Crimes Trials in Tokyo in 1946. Although groups of survivors from boats sunk in Banka Straits were then massacred on the beach, another group who reached the shore were given some coffee by one soldier and an officer provided a nurse dressed only in her corsets with a jacket. Nevertheless, treatment of the women was extremely brutal in some cases.

The Changi Quilts

This is an exceptional piece of evidence from Changi and a testament to the fortitude of the women interred for so long. The quilt is held in the Red Cross museum, so thanks go to the Red Cross for allowing us to reproduce the images. The Changi Quilt is made up of various squares stitched together, each depicting a scene or symbols that hold special meaning to the women producing it plus her signature. For example, there are scenes of a room remembered, hills of Tipperary, flowers and trees, toys and pretty dresses.



The special event “The dustbin parade”! When men and women prisoners took out the bins, this was the closest they could get to each other so, they often tried to arrange for husbands and wives to actually get a glimpse of each other. It clearly caused some amusement to the prisoners as they wondered what the Japanese thought of men and women all of a sudden wearing their best clothes to take out the rubbish!

The end of the war

Most people think of VE Day in May as the end of World War II, yet it did not officially end until Japan finally surrendered on 14th - 15th August 1945 – now known as V-J Day. The US dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, killing more than 70,000 people, then three days later dropped another bomb on Nagasaki killing a further 40,000. Until this point, the intention had been to “exterminate” all FEPOWs still alive if allied troops on the ground had moved forward on the Malay Peninsular. However, given the scale of the US attacks, Japan surrendered unconditionally to the Allies on board the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay.

Just before the war ended, every prison camp was issued with the following instructions (now held at the Imperial War Museum) to be carried out if Japan was attacked by Allied forces:

Whether they are destroyed individually or in groups, or however it is done, with mass bombing, poisonous smoke, poisons, drowning, decapitation or what, dispose of them as the situation dictates. In any case, it is the aim not to allow the escape of a single one, to annihilate them all, and not leave any trace.

This, of course, referred to all prisoners of war and internees. This did not happen, as we know, and the reprisals many expected in the camps once the Japanese surrender was confirmed did not take place.

Liberation

Plans were put in place to rescue the thousands of POWs in camps around the Far East, including many British, American, Canadian and Australian prisoners. My father described the day when they realised the war must be over.

“We suddenly realised the guards were shouting, well screaming really, at each other with lots of running around. Definitely panic in their voices, so we wondered if there were some Allied troops nearby. Then suddenly, it all went quiet and we looked at each other in our hut, waiting for something terrible to happen. Bu, we could hear the gate creaking, and when I looked out of the window, the whole camp was deserted. Not a Jap soldier anywhere. And the gates were open! Next, we heard the drone of planes overhead, and things started to drop from the sky.”

When they finally came to rescue my father, there were 50 men left from an original total of 500 in this camp. But again, he chuckled when he said they dropped food parcels before the troops came in to liberate the camp, expecting there to be more men. Even though they had not eaten proper food for so long, they did their best to eat as much as they could manage knowing they would just be sick.

Many of the prisoners were sent on to Canada to recuperate before coming back to Britain, generally because their health was so poor. A naturally tall, well-built man, my father only weighed 5 stone when he came back. His medical records for his War Pension notes he had had dysentery, malaria, malnutrition and beri-beri, pulmonary tuberculosis (the reason we were unable to emigrate to Canada 1952), dental caries and subsequent extractions (teeth broken with Japanese rifle butt), hearing loss and basal cell carcinoma left temple. Clearly, many of these conditions were found in the majority of other FEPOWs on their return.

Staff Sergeant Gollidge was held POW in Stanley camp then sent to Osaka in Japan. Although letters were sent regularly to him from his family, his daughter says they had no way to know if he received any of them. As he was so ill with beri beri when the hostilities ended, it was decided to send him home by plane. Pat says *“There was a typhoon at sea and the plane he was in crashed and never recovered. We were all devastated. The war was over and we thought we would all be together again, and then to receive that news was very hard indeed.”*

Repatriation

In all, it took three and a half months for POWs to be repatriated – very impressive given the size of the task. However, the Dutch POWs had to wait longer before they finally got home. They were moved to camps in Singapore while they were waiting, although they did have food and were allowed to move around the island as they wished. Finally, they were all repatriated by March 1946.

They were generally in such poor health, even after a length of recuperation, that people did not recognise them on their return. My grandmother didn't recognise my father when he got off the train in Birmingham, and she ran up and down the platform looking for him.

People at home did not seem to understand what these men had been through. Quote from an employer at the time *“while you have been lazing about in a POW camp, we've been keeping the country going”*.

An example of the lack of understanding by the authorities in Britain is a story in the 2002 COFEPOW Newsletter that says it all!

Martin [Prechner] tells me that when his father (a POW in Singapore and Java) was demobbed in 1946, he received a bill from the Royal Air Force for £1.18s. When he queried this, he was told it was the cost of the greatcoat he did not return after the war (Editor, 2002).

When British women were repatriated, the Home Office asked relatives and friends not to meet ships when they docked, there was no formal welcome back or press coverage and L Warner (Warner, 1982) refers to *“the shame-faced public attitude of the authorities towards these war victims”*. Just as sad is the fact that the War Graves Commission has scant records of women who died as Far East civilian internees.

In 1997, we were still fighting for compensation with Robin Cook pressing Japan for cash to compensate British prisoners (Harris, 1997). Crucially, all these efforts had been prolonged and FEPOW numbers were dwindling as they grew older and suffered long-term effects of the many illnesses they succumbed to in captivity.

Remembrance Day November 1997

In 1997, I was asked to take part in a Reconciliation Visit to Japan, and to lay the wreath at the Remembrance Service at Hodogaya Commonwealth Cemetery in Yokohama. I was there to represent British FEPOWs as well as my father who had been captured in Hong Kong.



Memorials

There are many Memorials to the prisoners who worked and died during captivity in the Far East. As noted earlier, Keiko Holmes' efforts on behalf of ex-FEPOWs resulted from seeing the memorial raised for those who had worked in the copper mine in Iruku, likely to include my father.

The JEATH museum is the open-air museum built in Kanchanaburi, Thailand in memory of those who worked on the “Death Railway” and the River Kwai bridge. It is based on the style of a typical hut POWs lived in and houses photos and artefacts from this terrible period of the war. It is interesting that their leaflet makes a point of saying it

“has been constructed not for the maintenance of the hatred among human beings, especially among the Japanese and the allied countries, but to warn and teach us the lesson of HOW TERRIBLE WAR IS. MAY PEACE ALWAYS CONQUER VIOLENCE”

The Kwai Railway Memorial museum and library was built at Hell Fire Pass by the Australian government as an official memorial to the workers of the railway. It was noted in 1997 that the British government would not support the project financially (Stubbs, 1997), and even by the end of that year, they were still refusing to add any assistance as “it had never been Government policy in this country to contribute to Memorials”.

However, this is not strictly true – they appear to have just been a bit picky about which ones they do support! For instance, Tony Blair’s government did contribute to the memorial for those who perished in the Potato Famine.

The National Memorial Arboretum in Alrewas, England is a wonderful example of a permanent reminder that also presents a message of peace. It took many years in the planning to get the site up and running and has steadily developed since it was first planned many years ago. Each distinct area representing the different arms of the Forces plus other related organisations, is now (2015) well established. For FEPOWs, there are poignant reminders of groups of prisoners and different camps where they were held.

The first tree was planted in the Burma Star and Far East Grove in August 1998, and a section of the Burma railway track is installed there. Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, opened the Field of Remembrance on 9th November 2000 and it was officially opened in May 2001

Conclusions

Government failings post-war

The general feeling has always been that everyone in the Far East area of conflict was let down by incompetence and lack of any “expertise”, including the “*low standard of some of the troop reinforcements which arrived late in the day*” (Elphick, 1995). The loss of Singapore in particular was seen as “*a critical event in world politics shattering the myth of white superiority and the end of European empire-building in the East*”.

The critical question of why no inquiry into what is described as such a disaster does not actually seem to have been answered even now. We can see why there was such dismay by ex-FEPOWs who felt everything was being swept under the carpet – but remember the scathing attack on actions by the American administration too (Critchley, 1991)

What of the Death Railway? While the main construction was completed in 1943, some POWs and local workers were needed to keep the supplies moving along the track. In 1945, Allied bombers destroyed several sections of the track around Brenkasi yard. While people had run for cover, the Japanese decided to move up the line to the Three Pagoda Pass.

POWs apparently went back to their camp, now guarded by the Koreans rather than the Japanese who had gone to Kanchanaburi. Basically, what was left of the track was ripped up by the local Thai people, bits being sold on to the Thai rail authorities – a nice touch!

In the 1980s, an Australian company started work there, found the train engine hidden inside a cave and transported it to the Museum at Kanchanaburi. This is also where skeleton remains of prisoners of war are held. (Lane, 2001)

There are still many more examples of what happened in different camps and the heroic actions of prisoners who had to “**live for the day and control imagination**” (Terry Waite).

To you all – we salute you!

Dr Jacqueline Jeynes

See the full book published as “Before Hiroshima: Forgotten Prisoners of War in Japan, Burma and the Far East” ISBN 978-0-9926100-9-8 Order on www.amazon.co.uk at £16.00 GBP