

A P P E N D I X

E S C A P E f r o m S I N G A P O R E

Last Days in Singapore

Friday February 13th 1942 dawned I knew it was going to be a bad day, the end of our ammunition was in sight, only 1,000 rounds per gun left and as the Depots had been over-run by the Japs no hope of further supplies. The Japs started to bomb and shell the Town systematically causing terrible damage to civilians and property, it was increasingly difficult to move through the streets owing to debris, fires and shelling.

At about 5 pm I made my way to Divisional HQRA to report to the CR Brigadier Rusher and collect orders and Information. The two mile journey through the streets was hazardous, Bdr Smith was driving the open Austin as usual with Gnr Hamilton, my body guard, perched on the back with Tommy gun at the ready when we ran into a mini battle. John Barrett with drawn revolver was crawling up the ditch leading his Company of Norfolks to try to clear the road block established by the Japs, I gave him local information, Bdr Smith reversed the car which immediately became a target for small arms fire and the odd grenade, luckily without serious damage. We drove round the block and arrived at HQRA to find the CRA a bit shaken by a shell which had passed through his room and exploded outside, there was a gaping hole in the ceiling and opposite wall, everything was covered in dust. The C.O.s of the 5th, 118th and 135th Field Regiments arrived, the CRA decided to move his HQ next to our RHQ to take advantage of our communications and protection and was in the middle of his briefing when he was called to the phone by General Key the Divisional Commander.

Brigadier Rusher came back with a long face, Force Headquarters had ordered 500 Officers and men to be evacuated as Training Instructors to a relieving Force based on India, each Regiment and HQ was ordered to provide an "Escaping Party" of one Officer and 6 O.R's to report to Brigadier Paris by 7pm at No:2 Dock Gate Keppel Harbour. In spite of my protests The CRA ordered me, with the other C.O.s as witnesses to take charge of the Div Gunner parties in person. He took me aside and explained his ideas, that we were to make our way to The RA Depot at Deolali to start training against the Japs in jungle warfare, he gave me messages also to his family at home.

I returned to our RHQ to start this unenviable task passing Force HQ en route with a Surrender Jeep" covered in white flags already standing outside. I found the 2IC Gerald Sanderson and Fraser Stewart the Adjutant in some despondence, bursts of small arms fire were going on all round the area and they had no information. I told Fraser Stewart to assemble our Regtl Party at once with the HQ cwt truck, sent instruction messages to all the Gunner Units in the Division and then went off with RSM Scullion to stop the panic firing. I knew from our OP reports that there was no large formation of Japs in our area and guessed that some of our own troops had become demoralised and in the darkness were shooting at each other, such was the case, by dint of shouting at the top of our voices and identifying ourselves we collected these shaken detachments and slotted them in to our Regtl perimeter defences.

I handed the Regiment over to Jim Fassen and gave instructions re-demolition of guns and equipment, Gnr Cartwright my batman loaded my kit into the Austin; he brought me a welcome plate of tomato soup and a couple of hand grenades to put in my pocket, checked my assembled party and by 9.30 set off in the 2 vehicles for Keppel Harbour. The Members of our Party were B.S.M. Roadnight, Sergeants Browne, Lindup and Noble, Bdr Smith and Gnr Johnstone drivers and wee Jock Hamilton my bodyguard. All hand-picked tough intelligent men and good instructors.

It was pitch dark when we set off in the 2 seater Austin and the 15cwt truck, there was sufficient light from the burning buildings for the drivers to pick their way along nearly deserted streets, there were a few bursts of fire aimed at us by scared sentries and many corpses, mostly Chinese killed by the bombing, which abated during the night but spasmodic enemy shelling continued, their targets being apparently the Docks, our destination!

After much frustrating touring round the vast Dock area to find our rendezvous at No.2 Gate, there was no one to ask in all the shambles, we did arrive at last to find Colonel Sydenham CRE 18th Div in charge of the 500 strong assembly. He confirmed with Force HQ that a Naval Vessel would come in during the night to take the parties off to Java, where they could help the small Dutch Force repel the Jap landings, meanwhile we should all wait at the end of the pier to speed embarkation. There was a complete absence of Naval or Dockyard personnel. We made our way along the quay through the rubble, twisted metal and remains of derelict cranes and waited and waited sitting on our haversacks. Around midnight Col Sydenham managed to contact Force HQ again on the Dock telephone, no change in orders but the boat could be delayed by the shelling.

The spasmodic shelling seemed to increase and shift target to our quay (5th column information?) stone splinters and bits of metal were flying in all directions. I took our party to the narrowest part of the jetty so that short or over shells fell harmlessly in the sea, there was no semblance of cover, we lay flat pressing ourselves into the stone paving and waited, hope dying hard. The warehouse at the entrance to the Dock and the Dock Gates themselves were on fire, casualties began to mount our pile of kit was blown to bits, good riddance to my gas mask, a red hot length of wire hawser entangled us, we all burnt our hands escaping from it.

As it started to get light for the 14th February it was obvious that we had spent the most uncomfortable night of our lives to no purpose. Orders filtered through that all parties were to rendezvous at the YMCA building in the centre of the City to wait for a ship later. I collected our party and the remains of our kit and returned in our transport to the Regiment by 7am without much difficulty nor sleep.

I had breakfast then lay on my bed for an hour, not much chance of sleep owing to the bombing. the Jap pilots had become much more daring flying low over the City straffing and bombing any likely targets. The previous day I'd found a lost AA Troop of Beaufors and taken them under command, helped by the men from F Troop they got 2 kills, one of which I witnessed with satisfaction. Our OP's were still manned for information purposes, they were the front line there was no Infantry to support. From his OP Captain Anderson made a recce 6 miles along the Changi road, he reported no major Jap formations but had been passed by a Jap Company on bicycles pedalling towards the City.

At about 10 am I started a tour of the Regiment, all gun positions, OPs. defensive posts, wagon lines, cookhouses etc the lot, to spread encouragement. Everyone seemed to be in reasonably good spirits, there was no disorganisation nor panic, naturally they were all anxious to know what was going to happen next.

While I was at E & F Troop gun positions, either side of a tennis court we were shelled for several minutes by Jap 75 mm guns without too much damage, one gun set on fire and 2 men wounded, the position was well camouflaged it was difficult to understand how the Japs could have spotted it so accurately without local hostile information. We took cross bearings on the enemy guns and studied the map to locate their probable position, I fired a Battery concentration on this target, there was no reply, the gunners were delighted and naively thought we'd wiped it out.

Ammunition was getting low, firing had to be restricted. I sent a party off to try to recover some which we had buried in our original position on the Island, unfortunately this party was ambushed, lost 2 men killed and a 3 ton lorry and came back led by a shaken BSM Brookes empty handed.

Jim Fassen was at C Bty gun position as always imperturbable and in control, we had a plate of bully stew together and then went round inspecting and tying up local defences. On my way in the Austin to C Bty in action near the watertanks close to Government House we found ourselves in the middle of a pattern bombing attack, 27 Jap bombers in formation came over at about 5,000 ft, their target was probably the water supplies, it was just unlucky we were there too. Bdr Smith slammed on his brakes and dived into the muddy sewer ditch beside the road, I had told him to drive on through the bombs but as always Bdr Smith was right, a stick of 500lb bombs fell across the road 50 yds ahead of us. The ditch was too smelly for me I straddled across it preferring the welfare of my clothes rather than my person, I had become a bit fatalistic, any how all my teaching had been not to let enemy activity interfere with the job on hand, I tried to set an example. We drove on through a hail of rubble and bits of brick pattering on the car to the gun position, one gun had been hit badly and one buried in rubble, Sergeants Farmer and Lockhead had both been wounded. I gave Gilly Campbell a new location for his guns closer in and away from obvious bombing targets and waited to see the guns on the move. The OPs were still in action near the Chinese Cemetery, there was no organised Infantry front line, they reported what appeared to be a confused running battle and withdrawal providing no visible Artillery targets.

One OP Officer reported that he had seen a Padre walk forward across a damaged river bridge to tend 2 wounded soldiers the otherside, Later he walked back over the bridge, the Jap engineers were already working on it but paid no attention to him.

On return to RHQ found all in order and functioning, Fraser Stewart desperately trying to keep the telephone lines open to the Batteries and Div HQ, the cables were being constantly cut by bombs and thieving civilians. Gerald Sanderson was coping with cooking and supplies, he had amassed enough food for a week and had taken over and guarded sufficient wells to provide indefinite fresh water. The main water had been cut off after the bombing of the reservoirs.

At about 5 pm Brigadier Rusher arrived with his HQ vehicles, we were just sitting down to tea when the HQ bungalows were attacked by low flying Zeros with canon and bombs, they must have spotted the new cluster of vehicles. Several men were wounded and one Signaller killed,

We cleaned up the Mess, let the dust settle and as soon as clean cups were brought carried on with our tea. The Brigadier expressed his surprise and displeasure at finding me still with our Regiment and ordered me to report to Brigadier Paris in charge of all the escaping parties at Raffles Hotel. I went to Raffles, for the first time, it was not badly damaged and found it full of people mostly soldiers some in full battle order others lounging about with cocktails, there were a few civilians and several women who looked like Cosmopolitans well able to look after themselves.

I found Brigadier Paris' room and banged on the door to be told there was a Conference in progress and I'd have to wait. A moment later a tall Scots Major appeared carrying a load of haversacks, he said he was Brigade Major for the evacuation and that "It would be no picnic," "Just been collecting some supplies" he said, this chance remark opened my eyes to the stark fact that there was no organisation and "Sauve qui peut" was already in progress at HQ. Brigadier Paris had gone ahead, I never saw him, he and his party were evacuated in the last Naval vessel to leave Singapore, later to be sunk by the Japs, a total loss.

I made my way to the Y.M.C.A. and found a fearful crush of soldiers and no organisation, Col Dillon RASC was supposed to be in charge, he was overwhelmed and fraught but told me the first parties would be leaving for the Docks at 9.30 that night.

I went back to our Regiment and told Fraser Stewart to assemble our party again with a weeks rations and double ammunition (the Docks were being looted by armed gangs), Cartwright loaded my kit into the Austin, unfortunately there was a muddle he put my webbing equipment with field glasses, compass and revolver in my room ready for me to put on and only loaded my shaving basin, tin box and haversack in the car. The order to Ceasefire came over the telephone, this may have been a hoax it was cancelled within half an hour, I went round the perimeter defences with RSM Scullion as cheerful and pugnacious as ever, handed the Regiment over again to Jim Fassen, drank a bowl of soup and at about 8.30 set off with my party for the YMCA in our 2 vehicles, this time using sidelights as thought we were less likely to draw fire.

We arrived to utter chaos and pandemonium in the YMCA, it was being shelled spasmodicaly causing a few casualties, Col Dillon had disappeared, there were no orders, no intructions, no transport just a milling throng of several hundred hungry and bewildered soldiers. I appeared to be the senior Officer so sat down at a table flanked by bodyguards and got the party leaders together to make a list, (which has survived in my archives) then set them off

in five separate columns to march the 2 miles down to the Docks, There were a few vehicles which we crammed with odd soldiery, as we left the YMCA building received a salvo of shells, 27 men were killed, the wounded uncounted.

We arrived at No2 Dock Gate Keppel Harbour at about 10 pm and with some difficulty found the Harbour Command Post, a concrete rabbit warren packed to bursting with Officers and men all seeking for information and orders. At last I found a Naval Staff Captain, he told me all the senior Officers including Col Dillon had already left in the two launches available, that there were a few scattered Chinese fishing boats we could take, and that we could help ourselves from the Naval Stores, he advised heading for Indragiri, which I thought was the name of a town, he shewed me a chart pinned up on the wall, I got Sgt Browne to make a copy which he did neatly on the back of an envelope.

By this time the marching columns were beginning to arrive, with great effort we launched 2 old lifeboats standing on the quay, the first split when it hit the water, the second stayed up-right and was allotted to Lt Murray of 22nd Mountain Regt and his Indian soldiers. Another large boat was allotted to Capt Nandi with 20 Indian Staff from HQRA and launched, both these boats rowed successfully to Sumatra, no mean feat for Indians who had never been in a boat before. It is difficult to image the scene, it was dark the only light from burning warehouses, shells were falling intermitently, hundreds of soldiers milling round desperate for orders and some means of getting away, armed gang were busy looting, the burning City behind and the sea stretching away in front.

I sent parties off to collect stores, under Roadnight to find boats, Sgt Lindup to find oars, Sgt Noble for ropes and Bdr Smith to fill petrol cans with water. Roadnight found a suitable boat for our party and set a guard on it, when he took me to look at it the boat and guard had both gone. While Smith was providing water for other parties my Austin car was stolen with all my kit in it and more important our rations.

I was very tired, everything assumed a nightmare quality, I kept saying to myself "Think, if only you think clearly it'll be alright." By 1am there were still about 100 soldiers on the Quay and no more boats, I split them into parties of 10 and sent them to look on other Docks. I took the 15cwt truck with Johnson, Smith and Browne to try to find any sort of vessel which could take our party. We drove to several other Docks and Quays, they were all derelict with no boats of any sort. I had the idea of going to one of the quays which was on fire as perhaps no one had been foolhardy enough to search there.

"MARIA" THE JUNK

We drove through a sheet of flame from a burning rubber ware house, it was surprising that our petrol tank did not catch fire, but all was well, we got nearly to the end of the pier when I spotted a dinghy in the water tied to the pier, I climbed down into it, it was in good order with oars and a sail but too small for us, at the most it could only hold 6 people, I gave it to a party from the Beds and Herts who had followed us.

While in the dinghy I thought I could see by the light of the fires a dim shape right at the end of the jetty. I went to inspect but was halted by a barbed wire barricade. I told Bdr Smith to smash through the barricade with the truck, there was not much room and evry chance he would finish in the sea, with great skill he managed it. There was a boat, I pulled her into the side and climbed down the iron steps in the seawall to get aboard. She was a Chinese fishing boat about 20ft long, sturdily and heavily built to sail, there was no provision for rowing, she was derelict and had been burnt, her mast , sails and rigging were in ashes and the hull badly charred. There was about 9 ins of water over the floor boards, she did not appear to be leaking fast so I hoped it was only rain water. I shut my eyes for 30 seconds to try to think, said a quick prayer then called up to the others waiting on the jetty "OK, she'll do."

It was 3 am on the 15th February, only 3 hours 'til dawn by which time we had to be far enough out to sea to be out of sight of the Japs and out of range of their machine guns. I sent Bdr Smith back with the truck to pick up the rest of our party and stores, particularly oars, rope and cans of water.

Two lone figures appeared on the jetty and asked if they could join us, they seemed sensible and as the boat could easily hold a crew of 10, I agreed. One was Lt "Jack" Tarr of 2nd Ghurkas, a tough and reliable Officer, he had once worked in a Bank in Japan so could speak Japanese and fair Malay, he became our invaluable interpreter. The other Sub Conductor Handyside a very senior Warrant Officer in the RAOC though fit and willing he had a desk worker's physique and was more at home with ledgers and stores than in an open boat. Poor chap, I gave him the simple but tedious and never ending task of bailing out,

As soon as the truck came back with the rest of our party and stores we started to load them into the junk. We made holes in the gunwhale with a pickaxe, threaded through rope grumets to act as rowlocks and fitted 4 oars, one oar we rigged as a rudder the 6th was our only spare.

Everyone was doubly armed with rifle and Tommy gun, we had a box of spare ammunition and one of Mills Bombs, a haversack each except for me, 2 petrol cans of water but no rations except for titbits in our pockets. We took the tools from the truck, some petrol in lemonade bottles, I wished later we had taken the canvas cover and spare tyres.

By 4.20 am I could delay no longer and cast off, there was a gentle off shore breeze and the tide seemed to be going out, we drifted smoothly away from the jetty, Docks and Singapore. I took the rudder oar sitting up on a sort of dog kennel glory hole, Hamilton was look-out in the bows, the other 8 under Tarr's tuition started to man the oars. Two men standing up facing each other at each oar, one pushing the other pulling, Tarr set a very slow stroke and after many crabs and mistakes an unsteady rhythm was achieved, I reckoned we were making about 4 knots towards the South. I luckily had a small pocket compass, which was not needed at the start, the pall of smoke from the burning oil tanks in Singapore being only too visible. Our immediate danger was that we should be picked up in the beam of searchlights sweeping the harbour and become a target, the searchlight beams crossed us several times but did not pause, probably looking for ships.

We found a bamboo awning in the boat and with the oars as masts made a sort of sail, which worked quite well until the sun got up and the breeze died away, then back to rowing, hardwork and slow progress, when the tide turned against us in spite of frantic efforts at the oars we started to drift back towards Singapore. We got caught in a tide race off shore and tried desperately to tie up to a buoy, in spite of superhuman efforts by Tarr and the exhausted rowers failed to reach it and we were swept away on to the beach of a small island near Blackamati about 4 miles from where we had started.

It was full daylight so we decided to disembark to get some food and rest. We found a small native fishing village, the Malays were all frightened of the Japs and very unwilling to help us, however Jack Tarr with a little bribery was able to obtain some tea and water. I made the men shave and clean themselves up, sort out and stow the heap of stores lying all over the boat, Tarr and I got a fisherman to rig us a native sail with some old canvas and a jury mast, sailing was obviously going to be more profitable than rowing our heavy junk.

At dawn the first air raids started, squadrons of bombers came over in formation from the South, first dropping their bombs on the Blackamati AA gun sites and then on Singapore City.

To appear less conspicuous to enemy airplanes I made the men disguise themselves as native fisherman, though this might fool the Japs it exposed us to sunburn, Bdr Smith won the prize by finding and wearing Chinese trousers made out of flour bags.

After an hours rest, the wind got up and we set sail, attempting to tack away from the shore the sail split into shreds, it was completely rotten, we rowed back to shore and ourselves re-rigged our square bamboo matting as a wind scoop, which worked well as long as the wind blew from behind. At 10 am the tide turned in our favour, we set off in style and made good progress to the SW. so well that we took another small rowing boat in tow, containing a party of Northumberland Fusiliers led by Major Leach and Captain Beamish (years later an M.P.) as they were overcrowded we took some of them on board our junk. The wind started to get up and blow hard from the East, it became rough, the rowing boat was in danger of being swamped and cast off her tow, there was some difficulty and confusion in transferring the passengers back, Beamish left his trousers behind containing his wallet and revolver or so he said afterwards.

We were being blown off our Southerly course, I decided to head West over the minefields marked on our sketched chart, then if and when we made Sumatra to tide hop down the coast. The crew started to be seasick, useless and miserable, It was getting increasingly difficult to control the boat with my steering oar, at about 5 pm while I was trying to round a headland we were blown on to a lee shore and stuck fast in the mud. I decided to stay there to give the men some rest and a chance to recover, anyhow we should have to wait for the next tide to float us off. I realised that in future on our journey the tides were going to be our main help and enemy. In the narrow channels between the small islands the tides ran like a mill race, no place for a heavy and unweildy boat with a scratch crew.

We waded ashore through the mangrove swamp, leaving as always a guard on the boat, and found a fisherman's hut, I sent off a foraging party with Jack Tarr, we were getting very hungry, I went back to the boat and tried to rig a more effective and manageable sail, searching the glory hole I found an old iron anchor, we rigged this to the boat, waded 50 yds out with it through the shallow sea, a very heavy awkward load, and dropped it, it held fast and would I hope be a help in getting us off the mud when the tide turned.

We had a meal consisting of a packet of Ryvita and a half-pound tin of marmalade between the 10 of us, it was too obvious we were going to be very short of food, I called in all we had and put Sgt Noble in charge with Bdr Smith as Cook to ensure it was evenly distributed.

I allotted jobs to each man to give them something to do and be responsible to the rest of the crew. Lt Tarr was Interpreter in charge of Public Relations, the rowing drill and also Doctor, we pooled all medicaments, a motley collection. Handyside was in charge of water supplies but de-moted, when he let one of our precious petrol cans be kicked over and spilt, to Bailer-man. Sgt Lindup took over water supply. Hamilton in charge of Look-Out and Bailing with Handyside as his assistant. Johnstone was in charge of arms and ammunition, also me as my batman. Roadnight in charge of discipline, guards and turn out, while Sgt Brown was responsible for all stores and equipment.

The foraging party got back after dark with some fish which we left with the fisherman to cook for our breakfast. We arranged a guard and settled down to sleep to be roused almost immediately by the sentry who had spotted figures stealing along the shore towards our boat, it looked as though we might be attacked, in the dark we could see 6 figures it was impossible to see whether they were armed. We picked up our guns, not wishing to be caught all huddled together I posted Smith and Johnstone in the sea up to their waists 20 yards to a flank and sent Tarr, Roadnight and Hamilton away from behind the shelter of the boat to work their way round and come up behind our assailants.

We were still only about 9 miles away from Singapore, so they could be a Jap patrol, a gang of looters or native thieves. After what seemed a long wait there was the sound of a scuffle on shore, then Tarr and his party appeared wading back pushing 10 evil looking Malays in front of them at gun point. They said they had come to sell us food, but really to steal what they could. From their filthy clothes they produced 2 live chickens, probably looted, which we bought standing haggling in the sea. The chickens were dead by morning and stank, they were diseased and certainly not fit to eat.

It was cold that night, we all shivered miserably, a strong wind got up and drove us further on to the mud, I doubted when morning came that we should be able to get off again.

After a wretched night at the glimmerings of first light we waded ashore trying to avoid the dangerously sharp mangrove spikes, the sea was filthy covered with a scum of black oil from the bombed refineries, We found that our breakfast fish had not been cooked just covered in salt, hungry as I was, I tried to eat one but it stuck in my throat, the others managed a few mouthfuls washed down with brackish water from the fisherman's well. We took the remainder of the fish on board, but by midday they stank so much that we threw them over the side.

The tide was coming in and gradually the boat started to float by dint of shoving and heaving on the anchor we were under weigh again before 8 o'clock. Just as we left a queer figure dressed in mackintosh and sun helmet appeared and asked if he could come with us. I interrogated him, an Australian deserter named Brakespear, his only equipment a lemonade bottle and a pack of cards. I allowed him to come as long as he did his fair share of work, a mistake he didn't and became a nuisance to us all, he had plenty of loud mouthed advice to give while avoiding any help himself.

The sun was shining, a good NE wind blowing and the tide with us, under these conditions we made good progress steering by the sight of the palls of black smoke rising from Singapore. I was confident enough to take a short cut between two islands, the fast tide raced us through at a dangrous speed. It began to get very hot and as there was no shade we started to sun-burn. The crew in the waist could get some protection but I was sitting up on the dog kennel with the steering oar and got none. I remained at the tiller day and night for the whole voyage, gave all the orders and decided on course, I reckoned it was my responsibility.

We continued hungry and thirsty to make good progress in a SW direction 'til about 4 pm when the wind got up, the tide turned against us and the sea became rough, steadily becoming very rough, the crew one by one became sea sick quite unfit to man the oars I no longer had any control with the rudder, it became quickly very dark, the junk drifted broadside on to the waves rolling frantically, we were in real danger of being swamped or capsized, I made the men sit in the bottom of the boat to keep her as steady as possible and to bail with evrything they had. The steering oar was threshing about, I couldn't hold it and called Roadnight our most powerful man to help, too strong it proved, we managed to hold the boat steady for a few moments then the steering oar snapped under the strain.

Again we were out of control rolling dreadfully and drifting South down the Philip straight driven by wind and tide at a furious rate, we passed two marker lights at the rate of knots, a Jap patrol boat picked us up in it's searchlight but did not approach over the minefields. After 2 hours of this frightening experience, the most lethal of our voyage, the tide turned again, the waves became less violent and a NE breeze set in. The men began to recover, a fresh rudder was rigged with a spare oar and a bit of bamboo mat hoisted as a sort of sail. Realising thankfully that we had come to no harm in the mine-fields I decided to go straight across them to hit Sumatra somewhere and then work down the coast with the tides to some form of civilisation.

The route indicated on our chart twisted between the islands, we had already been blown a long way off course and it was doubtful if with our lack of control we could follow the chart even if Brown's rough sketch was accurate.

It was pitch dark at about 2 am and we were still flying along at top speed when the 2 look-outs in the bow shouted there was land ahead, we could hear breakers a moment later and immediately cast out the anchor. The anchor dragged and then held, we were pulled up with an almighty jolt, but too late we were already on the rocks with the tide going out, a seaman's nightmare. At first the junk bumped fairly gently, then thudded down on the rocks to become hideous crashes, a battering no boat could stand for long, I expected the timbers to split any moment, this awful pounding went on for half an hour 'til the boat rested firmly on the rocks, it was still very dark all we could do was to wait for dawn and then try to improve our plight. As soon as it was light enough we inspected the damage, unbelievably no planking was broken but water was coming in through large gaps in the seams. We bailed out and caulked the gaps tightly with bits of canvas and clothing, this was partially effective but for the rest of our voyage had to keep one man permanently bailing.

We found ourselves on the rocky shore of an uninhabited and jungle covered atoll a few hundred yards long, and could see a much bigger island to the West on the horizon. We scrambled ashore over the sharp rocks and made a fire, Bdr Smith brewed some tea and opened one tin of bully, a frugal breakfast for 11 famished men.

Worst still we were getting very low in drinking water only 1 gallon left for us all, dangerously low, I sent a party off on a fruitless search, the rest on to making collision mats to try to save the boat being smashed on the rocks when the tide came in, I climbed to the top of the atoll through thick prickly jungle to get a view for our next course, there was nothing to be seen except the one island in the distance. It was very hot, I lost my way in the jungle and had to make a long detour back to the boat.

Brakespear had been making an infernal nuisance of himself, I asked BSM Roadnight, a heavyweight boxer, to lean on him, when I got back from my recce Brakespear was lying on the ground, no one said anything to me, but thereafter Brakespear mended his ways and took his turn at the oars.

We settled down in the heat to wait for the tide, at last the boat floated but not before taking crashing blows on the rocks. The anchor was stuck fast, nothing we could do to raise it, not relishing another bashing on the rocks we cut the anchor rope, buoyed it and prayed we should not suffer the proverbial fate of a ship without an anchor.

It was now Feb 17th our third day at sea, it was very very hot and we were getting desperate for water, I decided to make for the island we could see to the West about 8 miles away. There was a faint breeze to help but the crew rowed nearly all the way arriving parched about midday. We found a fisherman's hut, the Malays were only too anxious to get rid of us, they feared our boat would attract the Jap planes occasionally circling around. On the whole, in contrast to the Chinese, the Malays were always unhelpful by day but at night only too ready to take advantage of our plight and sell us bad food at exorbitant prices.

We filled our petrol cans with dirty brackish water from a well, putting in a few chlorine tablets, and had a good long drink ourselves, there was no food though there might be some fish in the evening from the traps. By midday it was blazing hot, more rowing was out of the question, the wind died down and we were becalmed. I tied up to a fishing stake and made all the men including myself strip and go overboard to get a bit cleaner and relieve constipation. We were unshaven, dirty, and our skins were peeling from bad sun-burn, sea water was painful but somehow refreshing.

It was difficult to avoid getting sunburnt, some fair skins were in a bad way, the darker ones did better, my legs and lips were raw and bleeding, I put on some scarlet lypsy which raised a laugh. Some of the crew had badly cut feet from the rocks when trying to launch the boat in the morning., I called a sick parade, Jack Tarr as Ships Doctor did a good job with my Dettol and Elastoplast, we all felt more comfortable but very hungry.

Bdr Smith made a hot meal of one tin of bully, one of macaroni and some Chinese vegetables mixed together and stewed in the sun, very good but not nearly enough to satisfy.

Towards evening it got cooler and we took to the oars again for a couple of hours, there was no wind but the tide, if any, seemed to be in our favour, we made good progress. As the sun set we were passed by a tug understeam full of escapees, we hailed them and asked for a tow to nearest land, they rudely refused, we then asked for some food and water, this too was nastily refused. One of the passengers lolling over the rails advised us to row back to the island and get some coconuts, this so enraged us that Brakespear took up a rifle and shot at the good Samaritan, the shot missed but I believe we one and all wished it hadn't.

We had our revenge on that tug later when we were able to pass through a narrow channel and it was stuck fast in the mud.

By nightfall we were not near any land when we came across a God sent stake sticking up solitary out of the shallow sea, we tied up to this stake, we had a slice of bully each, cut very thin and a cup of water for supper, we were all dreadfully hungry and it was beginning to take effect on the men, they could talk of nothing but food and drove themselves to a frenzy, I had to ban all talk of food except at meal times!

We spent a quiet night with no alarms and cast off from our mooring at 5 am on 18th February. Starting before first light in the cool of the day with 2 men at each oar, by now rowing rhythmically together, we covered a good distance, by 9 o'clock we had reached an island with a Kamponng or large fishing villlage on it. As usual the natives were most anxious we should not approach, but we knew the form by now, made a show of force, landed had a good drink filled up our watercans and came away with a bag of greasy rice, some dried shrimps and nuts. Bdr Smith made a grand feast by mixing them all together and roasting it in the sun. I enjoyed my bowlful and was amazed that some eat 3 or 4 huge helpings with gusto.

It was midday by the time we had finished this breakfast, the sun was scorching down, there was a slight breeze, the tide was with us and we were making good headway. Suddenly the look-out reported land, in the far distance we could see a long low smudge of coastline, the mainland of Sumatra, rowing in easy stages we gradually approached.

I had originally thought it would take us 4 days to reach Sumatra and here we were on our 4th day miraculously in sight of the coast, what I hadn't bargained for was the coast being miles of uninhabited jungle, accessible only through impassable mangrove swamps, with no towns, villages nor friendly Dutchmen to welcome us.

We were dispirited as slowly we made our way South along the swampy coast keeping Indragiri in mind as our destination. That night was calm and still, we tied up to the stakes of a fish trap some half mile out to sea, we were all tired and hungry again, between watches every one got some sleep huddled together like a litter of puppies in the bottom of the boat for warmth, it was cold and bedding of course non existant.

The next morning we were on our way by 4am to catch the tide, when dawn came we were opposite a small native hovel, we drove the boathook deep into the mud and tied up to it, set a watch on the boat and the rest of us waded ashore, it was hard going through the mud, sometimes up to our waists and took us all of half an hour.

The hut belonged to a very old Chinese boat builder, a man of some standing as he had several employees, he welcomed us gravely and courteously, when Jack Tarr told him I was a "Tuan Besar" or Great Lord he disappeared and came back presently in his best robes. He provided us with a meal of ducks eggs, sweet biscuits and China tea in long glasses, he then ordered a special ceremonial cake to be made in our honour, which he carried up with great dignity to his Altar to be blessed, before helping us to generous slices.

The old man called his village "Nibong Tabal" and with signs and sketches showed us how to proceed to the nearest town, he refused payment so I made him a formal presentation of my silver cigarette case to his evident delight. As a farewell gesture he ordered 4 of his boys to push us out through the mud in a canoe to our boat with food for the guard left on board. We gave the boys for their hours toil in the mud our last 5 cigarettes, they were very pleased! Thereafter we were reduced to native cigarettes, when we could get them, tobacco of a sort rolled round a straw.

No sooner had we got back on board than our boathook mooring came out of the mud and we slipped away on the tide. The sun was beating down, it was very hot all that day with no breeze, I was content to let the tide drift us Southwards along the coast. Though the men were in poor physical shape due to exhaustion, lack of food and water and all dreadfully sunburnt they were in much better heart having reached Sumatra and received a welcome.

The men wanted to row to get to the town the Chinaman had told us about quickly, I wouldn't let them in that heat as wished to conserve their energy and let the tide keep us going. In the evening we came to a channel between the mainland and a large island the crew at the oars as the tide turned had an exhausting struggle to get us through without being swept back out to sea. The junk was terribly heavy to row against the tide with our makeshift equipment.

We came out of the channel into the mouth of a large river, there about 2 miles wide, the water was only slightly salt, I decided to row across the river mouth and then tie up for the night to wait for the morning tide to take us on South.. However after an hours back breaking toil at the oars we failed to cross the river mouth, a strong on-shore wind sprang up and we were deposited on the mud of a mangrove swamp on the near bank, the tide went out, we were well and truly stuck in the mud once again.

We were all dispirited, to raise morale I decreed a bonfire on the mud, we threw our hatch cover over as a base, collected dry rubbish and Bdr Smith with his petrol bottle soon had a fire going and brewed tea with the river water in a petrol can.

It tasted vile even with the last tot of rum added from my flask. The fire and the scalding tea made us all feel better. I heated some water in my basin over the fire and had a wash and shave encouraging the crew to do the same. A full moon came up, someone started to sing and before long we were happily into a chorus of nostalgic songs before drifting off to sleep. It was my turn to stay on watch. By 3am the tide had floated us off the mud but a strong wind drove the boat further and further into the mangrove swamp.

In the early morning I hailed a sampan of fishermen paddling up river from their fish traps, they were surprised as had not spotted our boat and at first suspicious. However they took Jack Tarr and Hamilton into their sampan and set off upstream to the nearest village, the rest of us tidied and sorted the boat and remaining stores, just one tin of food left.

Tarr and Hamilton returned about 11 am in another sampan with a good load of pineapples, coconuts and bananas. Tarr had met an English Officer in the village who could speak Malay fluently, but as he had been badly wounded was hiding up until he had recovered. From this Officer Tarr had learned that it was not possible for our boat to reach the Indragiri river by sea, a headland jutted out for a hundred miles and the currents round it dangerous, we would be foolhardy to try. The only feasible way was to go up river by canoe, cross the jungle to the next river flowing South which would eventually bring us out to the sea the other side of the jutting headland. I was somewhat dismayed at this news.

We persuaded the sampan to tow us up river to the Village, which was called Katiman, a series of hovels built on poles sticking out of the mud, however there was a basic coffee shop and a Sub-Assistant Malay Official. I went to call on him, he gave me a clean glass of water out of his office filter, a real treat, and showed me some instructions on a mill-board written in English. They had been prepared by a white officer who had lived in the village for some weeks a few months ago and were instructions for escaping parties. I copied out the instructions which confirmed Tarr's information, we were directed up river by sampan, then across country by jungle track to another river and so on. I decided we should follow these definite instructions and set about hiring a sampan to take our party of 11 men.

We had very little money between us, it was going to be necessary to buy food, hire canoes and guides. so to raise some cash I decided to sell our faithful junk "Maria" to the local fishermen. Jack Tarr and I spent the morning negotiating and haggling, eventually agreeing to the paltry sum of 41 dollars for the boat, which actually had been stolen by me the week before.

SUMATRA

We unloaded the boat and threw into the river everything we could not carry nor sell. There was a quantity of ammunition and grenades, although there was a market for them I decided they were best dropped in deep water. It was always a marvel to me the number of odd and useful things we had on the boat, but I suppose a party of sensible men setting off into the unknown take a wide variety of odds and ends with them. We had never been stuck for a necessary piece of equipment, someone always seem to have something which would make do.

We made the remaining equipment up into man packs to the limit which we could carry with our rifles and in the late afternoon loaded ourselves gingerly into a large sampan with a native guide and 2 boys to paddle. The boys sat in the stern and paddled gondola fashion, we were made to lie under a sort of canopy of matting in case we were seen by any Japanese patrols or spies. I could see out of the front, Jack Tarr out of the back, the others could not see out at all.

We set off at about 5 pm with the boys paddling strongly up the side small waterways away from the main stream, but at 8pm they stopped, at first we could not understand why and thought they might be ransoming us for more money, at length we understood they were waiting for the tide to turn before the next stage up the main stream. We were glad to get out of the cramped sampan and stretch our legs, made a fire and brewed some tea.

A party of villagers appeared with their Headman, who wanted to know who we were and how important a man I was, how many wives etc. To save face Jack Tarr told him that I was waiting to marry the Prince's daughter as soon as she became of marriageable age but that already I had many, many concubines! He was obviously impressed, courteous and helpful, the villagers brought us an excellent meal of curried chicken and rice.

Around midnight the tide turned, we woke the boatmen and squeezed ourselves back into the sampan, I had the best place in front and with my air cushion managed to get some fresh air and sleep.

The air cushion, used also as a water bag and life-buoy, was in my extraordinary collection of luggage, a basin with a canvas lid (chilumchi) containing shaving kit, a piece of soap, nail scissors, a comb and all the few medicaments we had, a black tin box containing spare clothes, some papers and useful odds and ends, the most useless a heavy steel thermos flask. I wore bush shirt, shorts, Herbert Johnson Officers nap with a webbing belt, revolver and small haversack attached.

I still wore 2 Rolex wrist watches with stainless steel straps on each arm, an obvious sign of great wealth which caused excited comment wherever we went. Between them Bdr Smith and Gnr Johnstone looked after all my belongings and transported them.

At 5 am the sampan pulled into a small clearing, the start of our jungle trek, we disembarked, the men had a breakfast of raw pineapple, but with my cracked and bleeding lips it was too sharp for me to eat. To add to my discomfort the slight splinter wound in my ankle had turned septic, which with my sunburnt and bleeding shins made walking really painful.

As soon as it was light we shouldered our pack loads and set off in single file behind our guide along the jungle path. The guide said it would take us 5 hours, the path was too narrow for 2 men to walk abreast and completely enclosed overhead by the sweating jungle, still and airless. The surface of the path varied, at best beaten earth sometimes ankle deep swamp and the worst criss crossed with snaking roots so that each step had to be made slowly and carefully.

BSM Roadnight marched close behind the guide with orders to grab him at the least sign of trouble followed by Tarr as interpreter, the men in pairs at 10 yards interval, I brought up the rear to keep an eye on anyone in difficulties and organise help also not to display my lameness to the others, they knew of course so kept a slow pace and shared my load. The loads themselves were heavy enough but we also carried our arms at the ready and spare ammunition. We had no idea whether there were any Jap forces in the area, we knew they had landed at Palembang in the South of Sumatra several days ago and were moving North, I had no intention of falling into an ambush.

We squelched, slipped and tripped making slow progress, the guide seemed to slide along easily through the festoons of creepers, which always caught in a tangle on our loads and then tediously had to be unravelled. When Handyside had fallen for the third time and found difficulty in rising, I called a halt and re-arranged the loads. We had surplus grenades so had a training practice hurling the de-fuzed bombs high into the jungle, less weight for us to carry. After another long stretch we met 3 natives coming the opposite way, we impressed them to turn back and carry some of the loads, surprisingly they seemed willing enough.

It was getting stiflingly hot when we next stopped for a 10 minute rest at a cross track, I was near exhaustion but the guide heartened us by indicating we were half way. We had a sick parade for 1st Aid, my bleeding shins were bound with semi-clean handkerchiefs, the men begged for another 10 minutes rest

but I wanted to push on before the sun got really hot, am not sure that it made much difference as we were in a jungle tunnel shielded from the direct sun's rays.

Somehow the second leg of our journey didn't seem so bad, we were over half way, 3 native bearers were sharing the loads, I got my 2nd wind and was even able to take an interest in the jungle trees and entwined plants. At 10 am we reached a broad river, the end of our march, it had taken just about 5 hours. One of the native bearers swarmed up a palm tree and cut down coconuts, we were dreadfully thirsty, the milk was cool and refreshing, it tasted like nectar.

After much hard bargaining and palaver we hired 5 small sampans to take us down river, they only held 3 passengers each. We piled into these small canoes and set off, the cool of the river and the end of our sweltering trip through the jungle made our spirits rise, the boatmen seemed to catch our mood and raced each other urged on by our shouts and laughter.

The river was wide and calm with no current nor tide, the surface covered with scum and debris only an odd water lily. The jungle and mangrove swamps came right down to the river banks on either side, there were no habitations, insects abounded we were bitten to distraction.

A Japanese reconnaissance plane flew over and circled round twice before flying away, there was nothing we could do but keep going, at 1 pm we reached the village of Chariah.

The instructions at Katiman had noted the Emir of Chariah as a contact well disposed to the English, I had expected a noble and imposing personage rather than the fat and greasy Malay/Dutch official in horn rimmed spectacles who greeted and welcomed us in broken American slang. There was no doubt he was a Great Man in his own district whose word appeared to be law. He ordered a meal for us but insisted we should pay for it in advance, then cleared the villagers away from the well, and invited us to make free of the clean, clear water. posting a policeman to ensure we were not embarrassed by prying eyes, with the aid of a rope and bucket we all had a marvellously refreshing bath, only to find the local barber waiting for us, we then had a shave and hair trim, it was very noticeable when beards were removed how thin and haggard our faces all looked.

Next we were taken to the Emir's Hospital where a Chinese Dresser cleaned and bound up cuts, anointing our grievous sunburn sores with Mexican balm, we all began to feel much better almost human again.

The Emir ordered 2 rooms in the best house in the market to be cleared and cleaned for our use, one for the Officers and one for the Men, where we

could have some privacy and rest until our meal was ready, but the rooms were so stuffy we preferred to sit on the verandah outside surrounded by a squatting semi circle of inquisitive natives.

The Emir sent for the head boatman to arrange the next leg of our trip on the river, we had a long fruitless argument as the Boatman demanded more money than we had in the kitty. So I went back to the Emir for help, he reckoned the Boatman was asking 4 times too much and made the suggestion that we should give all our remaining cash to him and he would settle with the boatman. This was OK for us and agreed, the Boatman only was unhappy, he doubted with past experience whether he'd ever get paid.

An excellent meal was brought, which we had smelt cooking with mouth watering anticipation for some time, consisting of chicken soup, mounds of rice chicken and eggs then pineapples. When we had finished stuffing ourselves we settled down to gorged sleep, the first time for many days when I didn't have to set a guard. Too soon the Emir sent for us to explain his new plan.

The Emir told us that he had managed to obtain a sea going canoe, a "seerang", so we should now walk to another river, about 2 miles away, go down it in the seerang to the sea, then along the coast to a big river the Uragiry and go up this in the seerang to Tembilahan, the first sizeable town where we should meet other Englishmen. This sounded much more like the instructions we'd had at Katiman so were happy to agree, the Emir said he would make all arrangements at no further cost but we should start at once because the tides were favourable. I think for fear of Jap reprisals he wanted to get rid of us quickly, All his arrangements worked like clockwork, he was a kind and efficient man, I shall always be grateful to him.

By 4 pm we donned our packs took up our arms, said Goodbye to the Emir with a long speech of thanks and set off following our guide to the new river. The track was comparatively easy going, we covered the 2 miles without any problem and arrived at the river bank to find the seerang tied up to a bamboo jetty. The seerang was much more heavily built than our previous sampan, there was even less room in it. Our guide found 2 boatmen or rather boatboys they both looked about 15, who the guide said had been instructed by the Emir to take us to Tembilahan, I don't know what the Emir had told the boys, anyhow he had put the fear of God into them, without any argument or directions from us they accomplished an astonishing feat.

We squeezed ourselves into the seerang, the smaller boat boy with paddle in the front and the larger and stronger at the back, it was very very cramped and uncomfortable, as soon as it started to get dark the boys picked up their

paddles and we were off down stream. The boatboys were amazingly tough they paddled that heavy boat loaded with 11 men non-stop all night until 10 am the next morning, we begged them to stop and rest but on the Emir's instructions they refused, covering the 40 miles of waterways including a sea passage and the last 12 miles upstream in 16 hours.

We were packed in the seerang like sardines, uncomfortably lying on top of each other under a canvas cover, it became stiflingly hot as soon as the sun appeared. Bdr Smith produced a slab of chocolate which had been a Christmas present, he divided it up a square each for breakfast, it was the only food we had left on board.

When we arrived at Tembilahan, a small busy town on a wide river, to our surprise and delight we were greeted on the landing stage by a British Naval Officer in uniform, it was wonderful to see his Naval Launch flying the white ensign plying up and down. We disembarked, the smaller of our boatboys collapsed on the landing stage and slept where he fell.

The Officer told us that with the help of the Dutch Authorities he was arranging for all escaping parties to be taken up river to Rengat, the major town on the Indragiri. Several launches carrying parties had already arrived and been directed up river, but we should have to wait until a boat could be found.

While waiting a large pleasure launch came in with Geoffrey Rowley Conway in charge, he had already rescued one party marooned on an island in the Rhio Archipelago and was going back to collect those left on other islands, he gallantly made several successful journeys.

The Naval Officer took us to the Customs shed, a large airy building where we could camp while waiting may be for several days. We had a meal of hard boiled eggs, rice and tea, I left the men to get organised and settle down while I went off to explore the town, it was very hot, siesta time for the inhabitants

The town was smaller than it appeared from the river and dirty, apparently a large group of Australian escapees had gone through several days back and the locals were not now at all well disposed to soldiers. After much bartering both Tarr and I got a stock of hard boiled eggs and native tobacco, am sure our men were bartering too.

While exploring the boats along the river I found an abandoned junk loaded in it's hold with 2 new British Light Tanks. I went to the Dutch Controller as thought the Dutch Military would be only too pleased to have the tanks to help against the Jap advance and might well send a tug for them, on which we could get a lift to Rengat 80 miles upstream.

The Controller came with me to see the tanks, no one seemed to know anything about them, he telegraphed to his Headquarters and shortly heard that a tug would be sent that night.

I returned to the Customs shed to alert our party and tell them not to stray, then spent the night on the look-out in the Harbour Master's Office, bitten to distraction by mosquitos,

At dawn I was having a bath with the aid of an old petrol can when the tug arrived, it very smartly took the junk with it's 2 tanks in tow, we together with 2 other parties and many odd single men clambered on to the deck. The tug set off back upstream without any delay, as we proceeded slowly we picked up more small parties and stragglers until over 100 men were crowded on the decks of the junk and tug.

There was insufficient food or water for this number so the tug Captain goodly halted at villages to gather supplies. Jack Tarr capably took charge, collected cash all round, some people seemed to have plenty and bargained for rice, eggs and pinapples. Bdr Smith made us a good meal with a tin of fruit added by a stray CSM who had joined us. All day the tug going upstream towing the junk was moving slowly about walking pace, it was not too hot on the river but we were very crowded, there was no room to lie down, night came on I propped myself against the foremast of the junk in a squatting position and dozed and planned.

About mid-day the next day, 24th February, we sighted Rengat, an hour and a half later tied up at the jetty. We were met by a British Doctor and a Major who told us the form, the Japs were moving steadily North from Palembang, meeting only little resistance, but were probably still 2 days away. There had been a few Recce planes over but no bombing.

I went to find the Dutch Army to hand over the tanks, I found a Lieutenant who had heard a rumour of their existence and was delighted to take them, Neither of us had any idea how to get the tanks out of the ship's hold without a crane, there were none. Finally we beached the junk, sent for a team of ships carpenters to dismantle it, while a posse of mechanics got the engines started, 6 back breaking hours later the tanks were driven out on to dry land!

I went to the Rest House and had a bath in cold water from the well and a shave in well water which had been allowed to heat up in the sun for 20 minutes, quite hot. We had a meal supplied by the local gaol and brought to us by shackled prisoners, it was probably meant for their dinners, though thin and watery by our hungry standards very good.

As I was "persna grata" with the Dutch Army on account of the tanks they provided a lorry to take us to a Rest Camp at Ayer Moloh 40 miles north of Rengat. As soon as we had finished our prisoners meal we piled into the lorry cramming it full with odd escapees.

The lorry was a brand new Chevrolet, the Dutch driver equally new and furious at being made to start so late in the day. I sat in front beside the driver, a veritable Jehu, the roads were rough, un-metalled and un-cambered, we proceeded at 60 mph in the half light of dusk frightened and bumped unmercifully. There was one respite when we had a long wait for the ferry to cross the wide Indragiri river. We arrived at Ayr Moloh well after dark, as soon as we had dismounted the driver turned his lorry and hared off to keep his date?

The Rest Camp was well organised in a large rubber factory divided into 2 Camps, one for about 500 men the other for about 60 women, mostly Nursing Sisters. The Nurses had been through a terrible ordeal, originally being evacuated with the wounded from a Singapore Hospital, their ship had been bombed and sunk, they had swum 200 yards to a small island making several journeys to rescue wounded patients. They had been marooned on the island for a week without food or water, their patients had all died one by one and some of the Nurses too. They had been rescued by a tug and brought to Rengat, they behaved splendidly, were always ready to help others and well able to look after themselves.

I found the voluntary Camp Commandant Col Dillon, last met in the Singapore YMCA distraught and out of control, he was now a very different man calm, competent and friendly. He had established good relations with the Dutch Authorities who were providing food and one truck a day to railhead at Solok. We had a long talk and agreed that the best way to select the flood of refugees for onward transmission to Solok was the principle of "First in, First out", though this meant parties might have to wait several days in the Camp.

Our quarters were on the second floor of the raw rubber store, no windows so permanently dark and reeking of rubber latex. Gnr Johnstone made me a couch of rubber slabs, we were soon asleep though had a disturbed night, five of the men were very sick. There were 2 meals a day at 10 am and 5 pm prepared by self appointed Australian cooks, the invariable menu black tea and burnt bully stew, we always queued for 2nd helps.

It was hot and steamy in the rubber plantation and we were all impatient to get on the move again, though the enforced rest and regular meals probably did us good.

I spent the time writing, walking and sleeping. There were plenty of planks in the saw mill, I made myself a very serviceable bench and desk in the shade and started a long epic letter of our adventures to Mother.

We spent many hours lying on our rubber mattresses in the dark smoking native cheeroots, to keep fit we went for marches morning and evening round the rubber plantation on good gravel roads, usually in small circuits as didn't wish to go far from the Camp in case transport arrived un-expectedly.

Also in case native 5th Column should inform the Japs advancing fast of our presence and the Camp become a bombing target. Our Dutch grapevine reported Jap columns with motor cycle combinations advancing 60 miles in a day with a screen of local informers ahead.

My small party was fully armed, between the 10 of us, we had a Lewis Gun, 2 Tommy guns, 6 rifles, 2 revolvers and 2 automatic pistols all with plenty of ammunition, in addition a box of grenades. The only organised, disciplined and armed party in the Camp. Where ever I went my bodyguard young Hamilton accompanied me armed to the teeth.

The rubber factory was still working, we were able to bath and wash our clothes in the huge porcelain vats used for washing the latex, Our clothes were getting ragged but my Yeoman all wore proper uniform, many of the other parties had taken to native dress. At all times Bdr Smith and Gnr Johnstone continued to look after me and my equipment, Bdr Smith was always cheerful, resourceful and full of initiative, Gnr Johnstone a reserved, totally reliable and impeccable batman. I owe them both a debt of gratitude.

We had our first serious casualty, Sergeant Major Roadnight, a tower of strength, went down with malaria. He had been sick the night before, though he tried to carry on, the following day he collapsed. We half carried his huge frame to the Factory Hospital, a small 3 bedded building, spotlessly clean, run by the Manager's Dutch wife with the help of 2 coolies.

The hospital though kind and helpful had limited resources, we got Roadnight in bed dosed with quinine, Bdr Smith kept him fed with squeezed lemon juice, weak tea and soup skimmed off our bully stew. We had all been bitten thousands of times by mosquitos, we had a small supply of Mepacrine when we started, but that ran out after a couple of days, it was then a matter of luck who got malaria and when.

Two days later we were warned by the Camp Staff that transport would be ready for our party at dawn the next day 27th February. We were up well before dawn, Sgt Lindup and Bdr Smith collected BSM Roadnight from Hospital, he was very ill and could hardly walk.

We waited 2 hours for the bus, when it came the driver said it had broken down, judging by it's dilapidated appearance this seemed only too probable.

It had no springs, the body was home made of wood, the seats 2 planks. 22 men crowded on to this dubious vehicle and set off for Solok 120 miles away. By virtue of my rank and septic leg I had the front seat on the plank and tried to support Roadnight's great bulk, he was sick all day and became very distressed towards evening.

The truck halted at Toloh mid-day to fill up with petrol and so that we could get something to eat. We were given hot tea and eggs by an old crone, who made us very welcome, she refused payment and was so kind and helpful that we gave her a formal presentation all standing in line with the villagers watching, Jack Tarr nobly gave her his silver cigarette case, the last barterable item of value.

Toloh was a crucial stage in our journey as the East West road on which we were travelling crossed the North South road on which the Jap forces were advancing, there was no reliable information, we learnt afterwards that the cross-roads was blocked 2 days later.

Soon after Toloh it started to pour with tropical rain, the truck kept breaking down and finally came to a halt. There were 2 Dutch/Malay mechanics on board who diagnosed a burnt out coil, as they were used to keeping old corks on the road they could do a make-shift repair if the wiring was kept dry. The driver wanted to wait for help, hours and days were all the same to him. so we rigged a sort of tent over the bonnet, the mechanics set to work and got the engine going, their repairs were very temporary, everytime we tried to go uphill the engine stopped again. We were a strong enough party to push the cork up the hills in the deluging rain then clamber on board to coast down and along the flat to the next hill. At 9.30 pm we got to the top of the last hill and coasted down into Solok.

Our first care on arrival was to get Roadnight into Hospital, this proved surprisingly easy, Roadnight was a Freemason and the local Lodge came forward and took him in charge for treatment.

I contacted the Dutch Authorities, who showed us to a large railway Go-Down half full of the previous week's evacuees from the Ayer Moloh Rest Camp. There was a Dutch Officer in charge and a Private who seemed to us the more important as he was ladling out hot soup to anyone lucky enough to have a receptacle. The Officer directed Tarr and myself to an Hotel in the town, where we should get an "Officers meal".

It was midnight before Tarr and I found the Hotel and sure enough there was a meal waiting for us. We sat down to a white table cloth, white bread and proper knives, fork and spoon, for the first time in 3 weeks. I was tired, my memory is hazy I can't remember what we had except that it was very good nor that we were asked to pay. As there was hot water and electric light in the hotel we both had a good wash and shave, then walked back to the Go-down.

Several more parties had arrived from other rest camps including a party of wounded sailors led by a bearded Lt Campbell, himself wounded, a good go-ahead and pleasant Officer. The Go-down was packed full, Johnstone had made a cosy nest of straw for me on the floor.

After a short sleep we were woken at 3.30 am and told to board a special train, which was due to leave at 4 am. to take us to Padang, a small port on the West coast of Sumatra. The railways had almost come to a stand still, trains were few and far between, this special was to be the first out of Solok for 5 days, so I was anxious we should not miss it.

We found the train in total blackout and crowded into it, but without Roadnight, he was lost. I sent Sgt Lindup to find him and bring him to the station but the Freemasons had hidden him away and would not say where. We searched the hospital and likely places in the town, no easy task in the dark and torrential rain and sent "town criers" round, all without success. I expect he was in some Freemason's house and had been given sleeping pills. I left written instructions for him with the Dutch Authorities and as dared not keep the train waiting any longer, called off the search and gave the order to board.

* I was very down-hearted to lose one of my faithful band of Yeomen, especially Roadnight the most senior, the toughest and the most capable.

After an uneventful but long, slow and very crowded railway journey through some lovely looking mountain scenery and the coastal paddy fields, we arrived at Padang Station about mid-day, to be greeted by an immaculate looking Staff Captain representing Col Wolfe Murray, self appointed Garrison Commander.

I was given orders how to dispose of the motley crowd of passengers, most of whom I had never seen before. We loaded Handyside with the heavy luggage on a tonga and marched about a mile to the local school, our temporary billets.

I went at once to the HQ Office to arrange the next step and found the imperturbable Col Sydenham CRE 18th Div, he had plans for all eventualities but none for a ship to take the evacuees on from Sumatra to India. I went back to the school, which had been given over for our use, no beds a tiled floor to sleep on but someone found me a Li-Lo, we were brought regular good food, stew and greyish sort of bread.

Jack Tarr and I drove down into the town in a tonga to recce and search for a restaurant, we found a very adequate eating house, which even produced a can of beer each on tick. The town was clean, well conducted by the Dutch with some reasonable looking small shops, there was no evidence of panic nor evacuation of the inhabitants.

The next morning I went the rounds of the 5 main billeting areas with Col Wolfe Murray to organise the inmates into Companies and Sections each with a leader so that there would be some form of control.

At that time there were over 500 escapees in Padang, they were a very mixed lot about half of them Army mostly from the Service Corps and not the teeth arms, a party of 42 Australians, a Naval Detachment mostly walking wounded,, some 30 Nurses and countless civilians of all nationalities mostly from the P.W.D. many had donned uniform with bogus rank badges.

After a lunch of bully stew, no tea as there was no milk left, I took my party of Yeomen to the town. As we had no money at all I went first to the British Consul, I found a fat, worried, half Dutchman sitting sweating in his Consular Office, at first he was unhelpful but relented under persuasion and advanced us some money against our credit with the British Government, I received gratefully 20 guilders and the men 5 each.

With this wealth I sent the men to the bazaar to kit themselves out, mainly socks, soap and razor blades. I treated myself to a badly needed haircut in a Beauty Saloon run by a sensible Frenchman and felt almost respectable again,

We spent 4 long dreary days of waiting in Padang, the Dutch Authorities were as helpful as they could be in a time of war, the town had already been bombed twice, but just were not geared to cope with the influx of so many people in such a sorry state. Nor had they any idea how we could possibly be evacuated to India, the Docks had been thoroughly bombed, there were no ships left, none were likely to come in, any fisherman with a boat either hid it or demanded a King's ransom for it's temporary use.

Many schemes and plans were worked out, some parties collected stores for a march to the port of Sabang in the North of Sumatra, which had not yet been bombed, others started to build and laid down the keel of a 20 ton Liberty Ship. I got in touch with a Chinese fisherman who professed he had a sea-worthy junk with an engine hidden down the coast, but as he was slippery enough not to let us see his boat until he had been paid, any deal was off.

Through the French barber, I was taken to see a man living native in the jungle some miles away, he looked peculiar, spoke Englishman's English and behaved in a very furtive manner, he was supposed to have some contact with British HQ. He was suspicious but after some theatrical behaviour accepted a message to Naval HQ stating the numbers of evacuees at Padang awaiting transport and also a message home. He hustled me away as quickly as he could and said I was firmly told not to visit him again.

On Sunday 1st March we were woken at 6.30 am by the Air Raid sirens, rumours were flying round that the Navy was coming in to take us off.

Colonel Wolfe Murray and I went round the Camp billets, but no bombers came over, we then had a good lunch together at the Oranje Hotel with some locally brewed beer, Col Sydenham joined us and told us the rumour was true the Navy was about 30 miles off the coast.

A Conference was hastily called for 2pm at Camp HQ, attended by the British Consul, he gave out that he had heard from a usually reliable source that a British ship would enter Padang harbour after dark and take off any evacuees waiting on the quay, the ship could not stop for more than half an hour. Splendid news, morale rose high.

I never knew whether my message to the furtive Englishman was responsible or whether perhaps I had naively muscled in on an established clandestine channel of communication, probably a bit of both.

But my message home did get through in 8 days. It arrived at Hollies on 8th March marked "Sans Origen", it was the first news to reach home since the fall of Singapore. Mother noted in her diary for that day "Oh My, Oh My!",

The Dutch Railways agreed to run 2 trains from the Town Station to the Docks, which had been severely bombed, the first train to leave at 4 pm and the second at 6 pm. All the refugees were collected into 2 main parties except for the Australian contingent who decided to wait for a promised ship to take them direct to Australia. I handed Brakespear over to the OC of this contingent, not sorry to be rid of such an ill-disciplined and un-reliable man.

I found myself in charge of the 2nd train and mustered the miscellaneous crowd at the Station by 5.45 pm, at a rough count 313 people boarded the waiting train with a quantity of baggage. It was very crowded in 2 coaches, but everyone waiting was squeezed in somehow, including women, wounded and Chinese civilians of doubtful status.

The train arrived at the bomb damaged docks just as it was getting dark, we could make out a troopship packed with Javanese soldiers lying out in the approaches. Captain Petit was on the spot making all the arrangements, he said

that there were 2 British Destroyers coming in to the far jetty, the first train party was just loading into one Destroyer which would soon go out leaving room for the 2nd Destroyer to come in to berth at the far end of the pier. Captain Petit, stayed behind in case more evacuees arrived later, he was an admirable RTO, transportation was his civilian job and he loved doing it under any conditions.

It was quite dark there were no lights as the 2nd train load lined up on the quay and moved off in a long queue picking their way through the debris of the smashed and derelict docks to the furthest jetty. We saw the first Destroyer go out, a few minutes later the 2nd Destroyer came slowly and carefully in and put out two gangways. We were invited over the loud hailer to climb aboard quickly.

I was nearly at the end of the queue, the CPO at the head of the gangway counted me 323 as we shuffled on board. Just ahead of me was Lt No and his party of Chinese soldiers, one had a bicycle which he pushed up the gangway only to have it seized by the CPO and flung back on to the jetty with a loud clang. The wail which the Chinaman let out made us all laugh and released the tension.

By SEA to INDIA

We were packed by the Petty Officers standing as close together as possible on the decks or where we should be least in their way. The Destroyer was hugely overloaded, we were told not to move about at all for fear of altering the trim. Seldom can a Destroyer have carried such a large and motley load of humanity.

The moon was rising over Padang Harbour as the Destroyer slowly and carefully put to sea, the whole embarkation had lasted just half an hour, The first Destroyer HMS Scout was stopped half a mile out in difficulties with sea water in her boilers, we waited beside her for an hour until she was ready to proceed.

It was 10 pm, we were packed uncomfortably tightly like standing in the rush hour Tube, no moving, no lights, no smoking, no talking. Mugs of scalding tea were passed round hand to hand, a sip each. We were all so gloriously happy to be on a British Naval Ship that no physical discomfort could possibly cause us worry.

At 11 pm the Destroyer increased speed to 20 knots, a CPO came round explaining carefully that as the Destroyer could not go far with such a heavy load we were to transfer to a Cruiser waiting for us 50 miles out to sea.

After an hour and a half at speed a huge shape loomed up in the moonlight ahead of us, as we approached we made the shape out to be that of a Cruiser HMAS Hobart. The Captain of the Destroyer spoke on the loud hailer, he said "I am going alongside now, Owing to the danger to the Ships in this swell I can only stay alongside 5 minutes. All passengers on my Destroyer will now board the Cruiser!"

The Cruiser towered over the Destroyer, there was a 50 ft difference in the height of their decks, as the 2 ships manoeuvred ever closer together, the sides of the Cruiser appeared in the darkness higher and higher. As we touched there was a grinding bump and a splintering crash as one of the Destroyer's lifeboats was smashed to pieces.

Immediately rope ladders and scrambling nets came down over the Cruiser's side "Now" shouted the loudspeaker, the wounded and women passengers were pushed up first. The Nurses were marvellous shinning up like Cabin Boys, far better than the soldiers encumbered with their packs and rifles.

The ships were rising and falling in the swell so the distance between their deck rails varied from moment to moment. The Captain's voice kept coming over the loudspeaker "Hurry, Hurry. I can't hold it much longer." There was still a milling throng waiting their turn for the ladders so I called to those nearest me to come on to the top deck. A sailor on the top deck hoisted me up the davit of the smashed lifeboat and as the Cruiser's rail came down with the swell shouted "Jump". I caught the rail and was immediately heaved on to the Cruiser's deck, 20 or 30 passengers followed this route. When I looked back our noble Destroyer was slipping quietly away. All the passengers were safely transferred, there were no casualties except for the inevitable loss of rifles and equipment. Full marks to the Navy.

The Commander of the Cruiser had a team ready to sort the passengers and stow them on various decks I went round with him trying to collect the disorganised parties into their allotted spaces. Our Yeomen were already formed up together and ready for anything, they had lost nothing, Bdr Smith and Johnson had all my kit including the useless steel thermos.

There was a meal ready for those who wanted it, most went straight to sleep. By 3 am we had finished our "Rounds", the Commander took me to the Ward Room and gave me a glass of rum, by the time I'd swallowed it gratefully I too was asleep in my chair.

Monday morning 2nd March we were well out to sea, as I was the senior Army Officer on board so appointed myself O.C. Troops with Lt Creese R.E. as Ships Adjutant.

We arranged a Roll Call and found 513 evacuees on board, 300 Army personnel the rest civilians, how the numbers had increased from Padang was a mystery, anyhow they were all grouped into parties for accommodation, messing and Action Stations.

The Captain, a highpowered and pleasant Australian, summoned me to report and stay to lunch with him in his cabin. We exchanged news and experiences. The Squadron consisted of 3 Light Cruisers, the Hobart, the Dragon and the Danae with 2 Destroyers, which turned back towards Australia the next day. They had all just come from the Battle of the Coral Sea, her sister Cruiser HMAS Perth and the heavy Cruiser HMS Exeter had been sunk, the Hobart had been bombed several times, though damaged and in need of repairs was still operational.

He had thought the Jap forces had already taken Padang when he was ordered to go there, now he was heading for Colombo, as Jap Naval Forces were reported in the area he would take a zig zag course so the journey might take several days.

I told him of the disastrous Malayan Campaign and fall of Singapore, we sadly agreed it would be at least 2 years before we had gained sufficient Air cover and electronic AA equipment to make a successful assault to retake Singapore.

He asked for the passengers help should an action with the Japs occur, a polite way of saying keep out of our way, and gave orders that we were to be made as comfortable as possible. As a result the Ship's Company could not have been kinder nor more considerate, we were all provided with beds of a sort, sometimes hammocks and given excellent meals. I shall always be grateful to the Hobart, Captain and Crew.

The weather was fine and warm, the Indian Ocean was calm, with nothing to do we all enjoyed what would have been a pleasure cruise except for the crowding. I spent the time with the Gunnery Officer learning Navy Fire Control, once we practiced firing pom-poms at Targets laid in the sea. One day a ship was sighted which did not answer the Challenge Signal, Action Stations was sounded and we accelerated to close, only to find a bemused Dutch Merchantman running for safer waters. The third day out we stopped to pick up 2 natives clinging to a raft, they had little information except that they had been on a ship with white men when it had been fired on and sunk.

The day before we reached Ceylon we took the Danae's passengers on board as well, they were rowed over in Life boats and made a very leisurely arrival. The Danae and Dragon then left us and went on a new mission. Colonels Sydenham and Wolfe Murray were among the new arrivals, as the latter was the Senior Officer, with the Captain's permission I handed over the responsibility of O.C. Troops to him.

At 10 am on Thursday 5th March we entered Colombo harbour, it was good to see the battleship Ramilles there as information persisted that a Jap Fleet was heading for Ceylon. I went ashore in a launch and reported to HQ where I was told to transfer all the soldiers to the Merchant Cruiser Chitral which would be sailing for Bombay that afternoon.

I wheedled a large lighter from the Harbour Authorities and in 2 trips transferred my party of Yeomen and all the Army passengers to the Chitral, as they had had no orders our new hosts were surprised to see us. However Commander Seager, who was Commanding as the Captain was ill ashore, made us very welcome and soon had us all accommodated.

Only then did a signal arrive ordering the Chitral to sail at 3 pm, there was just time for me to go ashore to visit A Battery of our Yeomanry Regiment. I found their Gaulface Barracks but unfortunately they were away on an Exercise up-country, only Sergeant Martin the Signal Sgt was left as i/c Rear Party, so I collected limited news and wrote a message to the B.C. Brian Johnson Ferguson.

Then galloped to the Gaulface Hotel for a quick meal with some of the other Officers, we took a cab back to the Docks to find the cutter ready and waiting, for us at 2 pm as promised, so got back just in time as the Chitral sailed promptly at 3 pm.

A rushed visit to Ceylon and my only one. The Movements Staff had worked miracles, 500 odd refugees unexpected and unheralded had been cleared from a Port under threat of invasion within 5 hours!

On calling the roll found there were only 2 absentees, both Officers, who had gone ashore and missed the boat by mistake or design. Col Wolfe Murray ex Seaforths joined the ship at the last minute, so again I handed my embryo organisation over to him. He and I shared a large comfortable cabin. Pre-war the Chitral had been a P. & O. liner, it had a good library in which I spent many hours reading and preparing notes for lectures, presentations and training programmes.

Though food was a bit short and no drinks allowed we had a pleasant and uneventful 5 day voyage. Col Wolfe Murray rightly insisted on twice daily parades and inspections to try to bring some soldierly behaviour back to a crowd of scruffy and disorderly riff raff escapees.

We arrived in Bombay the evening of the 15th March, just a month after starting our travels. We disembarked and were escorted to Colaba Transit Camp, this time our arrival was expected and impeccable arrangements made to receive us. I was proud of my party the only fully armed co-herent Military detachment present.

As soon as I had seen all the men well fed and accommodated I went to the Taj Mahal Hotel where I was given a suite and enjoyed the luxury of a long hot bath, room service, drinks and an air conditioned dining room.

I was the first senior Gunner Officer to arrive in Bombay from Singapore and everyone I met wanted to hear the story and what had happened to their friends, I was inundated with questions about others, only a few could be answered with first hand knowledge.

The next morning I went straight to the Bank for cash and then to the Transit Camp at Colaba. All was going smoothly, each man being interviewed, kitted out and arrangements made for returning to their various Units or Depots. Our Yeomen were going to the R.A. Depot at Deolali the next day.

I found Jack Tarr in the Mess and said Good-bye, unfortunately I have never seen nor heard of him again. An unperturbable and splendid Officer.

The afternoon was spent at the Army and Navy Stores, the Manager was most helpful, on the strength of an old Credit from Mother kitted me out with new clothes, bedding and equipment.

The next day I took the train to Delhi to report to the MGRA General Akerman, there I booked in at Maidens and found Johnny Hope at HQRA who took me to the General at once, he was extremely interested and nice and insisted I stay with him and his family. He kindly noted my requests for the future postings of our party.

The following day I trained back to Deolali and had no difficulty in obtaining a weeks leave as the Governor of Bombay Lord Scarborough had asked me to stay, previously he had lived in Lanark and had always taken an interest in The Yeomanry. I arrived on 23rd March and stayed 2 nights at Government House overawed by semi-regal splendour, both nights we sat down 24 to dinner, the first night I was Guest of Honour and sat on the Governor's right!

I went back to the Taj and with the Greatest Good Luck in the World met by chance my Doctor Brother Stephen, who had just disembarked with a Field Ambulance en route for Bangalore. We played together for 3 days, exchanging news and sending letters and cables home, then he went on to Bangalore and I to Deolali.

Our postings came through exactly as requested, the original Yeomen Smith, Johnstone and Hamilton to A Battery in Ceylon, Sgts Lindup and Brown to the School of Artillery, Sgt Noble and myself to 158 Field Regiment under orders for the Burma front. Before we split up Sgt Lindup took a snapshot of us at Deolali, I still have a copy.

On 8th April I took train to Ranchi to join my new Regiment and resume the normal life of a Battery Commander again.