

# **Prisoner on the Equator**

(Opgeborgen bij de Evenaar)

by Arie Kuijl

By kind permission of the publishers, Jumbo-Offset, Goes, Netherlands.

Slightly abridged and translated from the Dutch

1. **Our First Camp: Padangpandjang.** Flight from the jungle. We are interned. Financial arrangements. Catering, purchasing and sports. We learn to adapt. Our numbers increase. Token guards. Study and recreation. Introduction of Camp Money. Optimism about the duration of internment. Dogfights. Meeting outsiders. The Japanese General who didn't arrive. The dining room and eating arrangements. Going for walks. Toilet facilities. Japanese treatment of prisoners. An outing for the boys. We and the women are moved.
2. **To the Military Gaol in Padang.** We leave cool Padangpandjang for Padang by way of the Anai kloof. We arrive at the gaol where we are put into groups. Temporary supplies from the Women's Camp. Problems in the kitchen. Eating according to Dr Do Little. Typical Dutch complaints. Various free time activities. Compulsory Toilet fatigue duties. Rank and position are no longer of importance. Money pooled for the benefit of all. Selfishness. Sport, drama and music. Bodies on display. Private purchase instituted. Beds on prescription. The daily price of food. Drink smuggling. The Camp entrance attracts everybody. Our Great Feast in 1942. Four priests but no minister. Armed squads formed after false rumours. The women show us how. The Japanese raid the women's camp. Our secret radio is discovered. Noise and bedtime. Father Christmas in the camp. The Japanese confiscate our money.
3. **To Padang prison.** We join a larger community. Getting used to crowds. Exchange of experiences. Fewer possessions and less and less space and money. Getting used to our new surroundings. Taking care of each other. Courses with primitive aids. Bucket latrines, foul stench and fresh air. Airing our grievances at the weekly meetings. The Japanese find counting difficult. Activities in multi-functional sheds. A group of Britons join us. A glimpse of the sea. Food problems. Shopkeepers of various sorts. The demands of adaptability. The Japanese loot and plunder. We become rice pickers. A plague of bedbugs. A severe earthquake. Translators in demand. Food gets even scarcer. Contact with the Women's camp.
4. **To the Jungle Camp in Bangkinang.** We go deep into the jungle. What a shambles!. Inconvenience caused by poor accommodation. Camp police and a camp judge appointed. Minor but unpleasant incidents. Macho-types with the right of veto. The Tiger who could not go into the pot. Anything for a bit of protein!. The women arrive in Bangkinang. We are deprived of our view. Medical aid under appalling conditions. Division into four health categories. Achieving the golden mean when doling out food. Rumours concerning reunited families. Amazing the things you can do with hoop irons. Removal of rubber supplies. Introduction of a work schedule. Night visits to the women's camp. Even less food caused by a broken bridge. Dysentery

epidemic. Heroic resistance by the women. Much to do for little food. 100 kilos for the Japanese is only 75 for us. Scouting. We make our own clogs. A work creation scheme. Chance contacts with the women's camp. Disposal of the dead. Gardening by turns. Eating with obstructions. Our wretched diet causes much pain and anguish. Booming black markets. Our Buying Committee. Marie, our hot water mobile steam engine. In emergencies your possessions are vulnerable. Idle chatter about vitamins, calories etc. After lice ants, rats!. POW's pass by our camp. Our resident camp leader shows no fear of the Japanese. Wood vegetables prepared by Marie. Setting up the N.O.E.L. Club. We are ordered to go padi stamping. Our two leaders are summoned by the Japanese. Ingenuity is called for. Schooling carries on.. Illegal night meals. Making something solid from sago pudding. Occasional parades of the Skeleton Gang. The exceptional status accorded to the British. Meat from the Emperor on the Princess's birthday. We are ordered to pick cotton.. News items obtained from a Japanese.

5. **The Sudden End.** The atomic bomb saves us. We go to the women's camp. Various necessary measures are taken. Lice and mud to the bitter end. Recreation for the youngsters. Allied aircraft fly over our camp. Liberation celebrations. Behaviour of the Indians towards the population. Trench-digging just before liberation. Lady Mountbatten visits our camp. Our internment as a lesson for life. The Indonesian red and white flag is hoisted with us too. The Chinese too must beware. Alcohol reappears. We fly to Medan. We get back to normality in Medan. Our shady camp proves to be a safe refuge. Fierce National Movements. More and more military personnel and plenty of food. The KDP and RAPWI also look after the post. The Repatriation Office is set up. Repatriation for almost everybody. The British refuse native food. Permanent waves for ladies becomes a problem. Only for members!. The Red Cross renders first class service. Youngsters are well looked after. Terrible violence is evident. The last Japanese luxury. First reports from the Netherlands. Departure and a new beginning.

-----

I wish to thank Prof. Ernst Kotzé of the Department of Dutch and Afrikaans at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (formerly University of Port Elizabeth) and Mr and Mrs Kindermans for help with my translation from the original Dutch.

Port Elizabeth  
September 2005

## **Introduction**

These memoirs were for the most part written directly after liberation. By providing various factual descriptions the book may be used for reference purposes when the occasion arises. It was written with memories of our ordeal fresh in mind and thus the enemy came in for severe criticism and even our own people were not exempt. But now, almost 40 years after liberation, feelings have cooled. However, it would give a false impression if the measure of leniency acquired in the meantime were to be applied and so I have been sparing in my revision of the text. What is remarkable is that former enemies can now work together and visit each other in peace again. It seems to be an unchanging lesson of world history – yesterday's enemy is today's friend. This is fortunate; after all, we all inhabit the same planet.\*  
(\**We draaien toch ook allen op dezelfde bol* – literally, we all pull on the same rope)

## **Foreword**

I am delighted that now, almost 40 years after liberation from the hands of the Japanese, (1942-5), we survivors of the men's camps at Padang Pandjang, Padang and Bangkinang are able to recall our former experiences there in book form. Each one of us had to cope with the physical and mental ordeals of camp life in his own way under the heel of the Sons of Dai Nippon – and many still do. Many did not survive internment and now lie buried in one of the graveyards in the Sumatran jungle. And there are many who narrowly escaped but are now no longer with us. In my opinion, the author has given an accurate picture of what happened in the camps and it deserves a wide readership among ex-internees and others.

Dr J J C H Waardenburg (Former Internee and Camp Leader.)

## **Chapter One. Our First Camp: Padangpandjang.**

### **Flight from the jungle.**

Before the war we lived in a small Dutch community in central Sumatra surrounded by tropical jungle teeming with wild pig, tiger, elephant, bear and exotic birdlife. We were engaged in dredging work in search of gold mixed with silver and platinum. Our weekly supply of vegetables came from Fort de Kock,<sup>1</sup> 350 kms away. A Chinese baker supplied our daily bread and most of our groceries came from the company store, Bengkalis NV, a gold dredging business.

Our isolated position in the middle of this luxuriant tropical growth gave rise to all sorts of surprises from the jungle. It was not unusual for the Dutch accountant, sitting in his office, to put down his pen and seize a rifle to shoot a wild pig. The Chinese would then cut the carcass up and the whole community would have free pork for a day or two. The dredging would go on day and night and frequently the workers would see the floodlights reflected in the eyes of a tiger lurking on the edge of the jungle.

---

<sup>1</sup> Now known as Bukittinggi

At the beginning of March 1942 the Japanese army began to come dangerously near so we were obliged to leave almost everything behind and retreat to Fort de Kock on the west coast, a place we knew well as we had always gone there every year on vacation to escape the heat of the jungle. But this time it was different. After spending a short time there with friends, the Japanese arrived in the middle of March. Every hotel and pension was booked solid as people from outlying areas had come to seek refuge here. The Japanese however were concerned only for themselves and many were evicted from their rooms and thrown into the street, often with no time to pack up their belongings which were lost. All they had were a few clothes. Fortunately there were a few places where one could find refuge, the monastery being one of them. However, a strict curfew was imposed and people ventured outside only for shopping.

### **We are interned.**

At the beginning of April 1942, the Japanese announced that we would be interned. Women and children would remain in Fort de Kock but men and older boys would be taken to Padangpandjang where they were interned in the military barracks which had a large notice saying "The Netherlands will rise again" (*Nederland zal herrijzen*). The Japanese never removed this notice, probably because they couldn't read it and assumed it was just another advertisement.

The journey from Fort de Kock to Padangpandjang took place in open trucks and pouring rain accompanied the last part of the journey, causing many to catch cold. On arrival we were all divided up and allocated to sheds and, most importantly, food had to be prepared and served up. After a few days everything was well organised and we were all divided into groups according to our jobs – planters, policemen, government officials, businessmen etc etc.

### **Financial arrangements.**

We quickly set up a canteen where everything was available but a Japanese officer closed it down. It was too luxurious for a prison camp! If anyone thought the Japanese would provide food, clothing and other necessities, they were sadly mistaken. They had interned us but it was up to us to do the rest. We thus had to set up a financial system. Some had brought considerable sums of money with them while others had lots of money in the bank but couldn't access it while still others had squandered everything and possessed nothing. To begin with it was agreed that everybody would pay 50 cents a day into the Camp cash-box which would buy food for everybody. Moreover, those who had lots of money promised to hand it all over though later it proved not everybody had kept his promise.

### **Cooking, shopping and recreational facilities.**

Meals were prepared in two kitchens, one for rice and one for everything else. Meals in Padangpandjang were very good and there were plentiful opportunities to acquire extra goods from outside. Boozers had no problem getting supplies while others had roast chicken every day. Accommodation in the first camp was quite decent. The spacious gymnasium, for example, was much in use and one of the

internees, a gymnastics teacher, gave lessons and many people spent hours every day there.

### **We learn to adapt.**

Of course one comes across all sorts of types in internment camps. To begin with, many found it difficult to adapt to camp life. There were those who'd never washed up or sewn a button on but now they suddenly found themselves having to do all sorts of things. Others adapted quickly and mowed grass with the scythe as if they'd done it all their lives. Those who attempted to lord it over others and avoid unpleasant tasks were quickly disabused. They soon mucked in and everything went smoothly.

### **Our numbers increase.**

More and more internees joined us on a regular basis, often from remote areas. Many had been interned in places a good deal worse than ours, so they were pleasantly surprised when they arrived at our camp where everything was neat and tidy and everybody had a decent place.

### **Token guard**

In Padangandjang we had just one token guard, a Japanese soldier who stood by the gate while his mates sat in an office nearby. It never occurred to anybody to escape – how could a white man escape detection for long in a hostile population? Roll calls were held twice a day during which we had to bow to our Japanese captors, a little humiliating but of little importance. It was amazing how the Japanese vanished whenever somebody was absent due to malaria. As soon as they heard the word, they scarpered as if it were an infectious disease. You can imagine the reactions when later they heard somebody had dysentery.

### **Study and recreation.**

We found we had plenty of free time which we spent in the rooms with electric light playing chess, bridge and other games. Primary and secondary schools were organised, although there weren't many pupils to begin with. But after a few weeks, a large number of boys came from Fort de Kock, at first with their mothers but later they transferred to the men's camp where each had his own room where he could study after school.

### **Introduction of Camp Money.**

After a few weeks of internment, it was noticed that money was leaving the camp without being replaced. We had to do something about this otherwise we'd be in trouble. Everybody was given a part of the total amount of surrendered money for himself and the balance was put into a sealed envelope. Later Camp Money was introduced as the only permitted legal tender in the camp. This camp money consisted of pieces of cardboard with the denomination written on each one together with a drawing of the camp leader. Everybody received 15 cents a day which was sufficient

for all daily needs but even so, many managed to get more than others but little could be done about it.

### **Optimism about the duration of internment.**

In the beginning we were extremely optimistic about how long we would be interned. The Camp Leader was ridiculed when he suggested a period of 18 months for financial planning purposes. Was the guy crazy? If only we had known that our internment would last not for 18 months but 42! But the upside was that many of us remained optimistic that internment would end quickly. Rumours spread from Radio San Francisco that we would be freed in December 1942 and other rumours persisted for quite some time.

### **Dogfights.**

Starving dogs from outlying kampongs came to our camp seeking food and to get rid of these pests, a radical plan was adopted. Little meatballs laced with strychnine were placed around the camp and the sudden howls of dying dogs disturbing the evening calm showed that our plan was working. We were soon rid of these pests.

### **Meeting Outsiders**

After a few weeks the Japanese freed a number of “Indian Dutchmen”<sup>2</sup>. Most of their wives and children had not been interned so those who remained hoped that they too would soon be free. The hospital near the camp offered good opportunities to meet their wives and children who of course couldn’t enter the camp so that any man wishing to meet his family had to pretend that he had a headache or a toothache in order to go to the hospital.

### **The Japanese General who didn’t come!**

At first, the Japanese couldn’t care less about the condition of the camp but one day a Japanese officer ordered the camp to be cleaned up and made tidy. The pathways had to be weeded, the grassed areas properly mown etc etc. One afternoon, a Japanese soldier found somebody lying on his bed instead of working. The soldier did not share the view of Europeans who thought it better to spend the heat of the afternoon after lunch having a lie off. The various jobs were allocated equally among us and we all had extra work to do. We all had to practice marching and bowing and so on. When the great day arrived, we all had to stand in the morning sunshine and wait and wait. Then we saw the General’s blue car approach the camp – and pass on. The General never even set foot in the camp!

### **The dining room and eating arrangements.**

A large bell rang for mealtimes and we all hurried to join the queue in front of the cookhouse, about 180 of us shuffling forward towards the food cauldrons where

---

<sup>2</sup> Presumably Dutch Indonesians of mixed parentage.

on receiving our food, we would sit at the long communal table and shovel it down our throats. Everybody was present for mealtimes including the Controllers, the police businessmen etc. In the early days of internment there was enough to eat but later, in the other camps, the food got worse day by day and rules had to be made to control the leftovers so that each could have just a mouthful extra.

### **Going for walks.**

The long paved path through our camp offered splendid opportunities for walking. Amongst our number were those whose jobs had required them to walk long distances and they now used this path to cover 7 or 8 kilometres a day.

### **Toilet facilities.**

In the barracks the toilets were typical of those elsewhere in the East Indies – a hole in the ground between two stones over which you squatted. Youngsters got used to this after practice but older people couldn't so a solution was found in the form of benches made in the workshops and made to available to non-squatters.

### **Japanese treatment of internees.**

Quite frankly, the Japanese treatment of internees was appalling. Their mistreatment and callousness was mostly unnecessary. One of the worst acts was their refusal to allow any contact between family members in the Women's camp, only a few hundred metres away. No letters and no visits were allowed although contact was sought by other means. It happened once that a man, who had not known of his wife's illness and death, was summoned by a Japanese and given leave to visit his wife's grave. Everyone could imagine what sort of a state he was in when he came back.

Another man who was given the jewellery of his dead wife in the women's camps was forced to hand it over to the Japanese. He was informed that it was now Japanese state property. Such wanton acts occurred all over the occupied East Indies.

Of course, not all Japanese were like this but the exception proves the rule. For the most part they were a bunch of ill-bred, bandy-legged brutes. But among them were just a few who stood out and who would tell us interesting bits of news and smuggle letters out even though they were dead scared of their own Military Police. They told us that they missed their own families in Japan whom they hadn't seen for years. They listened with interest when we talked about Holland and also took a great interest in our school, encouraging the children to learn, making sure they all attended and did their best to provide the school with equipment.

### **An outing for the boys.**

One day a Japanese officer called all the boys together and marched them in rows out of the camp. Shooting practice was scheduled for that day and the officer wanted the boys to witness it. A few hours later they all returned, delighted at this unexpected break from the dull daily routine of camp life. This dull routine affected all of us – every day the same, day after day and it was no wonder that so many of us got bored and yearned for liberation. But we still had a long way to go.

## **We and the women are moved.**

On another day a Japanese officer informed us that the women's camp in Fort de Kock was being moved to Padang and he offered to deliver letters to the camp, an offer eagerly accepted. The following morning we learnt that the women and children would be passing our camp on the way to the station and so the two men who every day took it in turns to leave the camp decided they would go to the station too. The Japanese camp officer gave permission and the men were able to talk to the women, tell them about events in our camp and return with news that the women were in good spirits and looking forward to their move to Padang.

A few days later we were relieved to hear that they had been comfortably accommodated in a church, some schools and another building. On the same day we heard a rumour that we too would be moved to Padang. Although it was pleasantly cool where we were, the thought of moving to hot and sticky Padang was balanced by the realization that we would be near our families. We had of course no choice and a few days later we were all ordered to pack up and prepare for the move.

The camp leader addressed us and warned us to prepare for the worst. Not all changes, he said, were for the better. It could be, he suggested, the end of our "luxury" camp but we should all stick together. We understood then that we had been lucky in our first camp and that now difficult times awaited us. But we resolved to keep our chins up and meet whatever the future held in store for us.

The Japanese officer ordered us all to get our things ready and decide what to take with us to the station and what would be sent on ahead. We were all a bit doubtful about this because we reckoned that any stuff we sent on ahead would be the last we would ever see of it! So nearly all of us decided to send a (small) bundle and a pillow ahead and carry the rest ourselves after first throwing several things away.

The next day at noon we all stood ready at the camp exit to be loaded onto trucks but many remained close by their possessions until they were sure we were going. We were now going to witness some Japanese organisation. Suddenly a Japanese cycled up to us at great speed and went up to the camp leader. We would be staying where we were because they weren't yet ready for us in Padang. With that he got on his bike and rode off.

We all went back to our various quarters and started unpacking again. All the kitchen equipment had to be unpacked and food ordered for next day. But on that next day we were indeed moved and all our stuff was taken away and once again we stood at the exit awaiting orders. The day before a few Indians were set free but not before they had to lay out all their possessions on the ground for the Japanese to inspect who then took anything they fancied – shoes, bottles, knives, hats etc They had all come from Japan so I suppose we were lucky that we had anything at all.

## **Chapter Two. To the Military Gaol in Padang.**

### **We leave cool Padangpandjang by way of the Anai-kloof.**

About 150 of us left cool Padangpandjang for warm Padang on the coast. Although we hadn't expected it, many hand carts were available to load our



belongings on to so that we could march to the station unencumbered. After months of being locked up, it was pleasant to stroll down to the station. We attracted great interest from gawping onlookers who had never seen Europeans walking in a neat row, one after the other. Our things were loaded into luggage vans and we climbed aboard the special train waiting for us. The Indonesians approached us for payment for transporting our luggage but the Japanese chased them away for they were responsible for transport. We, after all, were just poor devils.

It all took time to get ready for departure. In the meantime hordes of natives had formed on the platform so as to get a better look at us. They obviously had nothing better to do and when a few of them got a bit too close to one of the policemen guarding us, without warning he let fly with his fist. The effect was immediate. This was obviously the way they dealt with such rabble and it was pretty effective.

At last everything was ready, some Japanese soldiers climbed aboard to guard us and the train moved off. The train journey from Fort de Kock via Padangpandjang to Padang is most spectacular. The Anai kloof (ravine) with its waterfall and tunnels and the beautiful scenery is extraordinary, especially when you see it for the first time. During the journey we stopped at a place 1154 metres above sea level where it can be quite chilly, especially coming up from the coast because Padang is a mere 8 metres above sea level. At times the train made use of rack-and-pinion such as in Switzerland and at the many stations there was a chance to buy lemonade, tea, coffee, fruit etc from native women who would spend the whole day on the platform waiting for trains.

### **We arrive at the gaol where we are put into groups.**

After a few hours we arrived at Padang station where the goods vans were soon unloaded and we fell in on the side of the road with our luggage. Eventually an officer turned up to give orders to our guards and then a number of trucks drove up and loaded our luggage. Four or five of us were detailed to go with the trucks to unload them at the other end while the rest of us walked to our destination – the Military Gaol.

Just before we got there, a pastor, who had spent some time in the Women's Camp managed to give us some information about the conditions there. He said the women and children were optimistic and in good spirits. He reckoned that we wouldn't stay long in the Military Gaol but would soon move to the Military Camp where there was much more room. But in fact it turned out to be worse in the latter.

As we walked through Padang, we passed the Salvation Army building for sick and convalescent women and there one of us saw his own wife standing at the door to whom he waved enthusiastically but without attracting the attention of the guards.

Coming from cool Padangpandjang, our walk through warm Padang made us all sweat like pigs and many of us arrived wet through at the Gaol where our stuff was all neatly piled up. Then we entered the prison with high walls covered with glass shards and the Japanese officer warned us that anybody who even poked his nose outside would be shot. Of course some of us had forgotten to bring various things but we now sat behind lock and key and our guards were no longer Japs but native policemen who changed shifts several times a day.

The Gaol consisted of a number of large and small rooms and a much larger number of cells, many for one person only. These cells were kept locked for the first night so we all had to squeeze in together in the rooms like sardines in a tin and hardly anybody got any sleep. But the next night they opened the cells and four people were allocated to each cell. Most of the cells had previously accommodated five persons and each were marked "5 Natives" or "5 Ambonese" Each cell had a small latrine niche which couldn't be used because of the foul stench and a small area which served as a washroom where one could hang clothes. The worst thing was the high, whitewashed walls which was all you had to look at the whole day long. In Padangpandjang we had a view and the camp was surrounded only by some barbed wire.

### **Temporary supplies from the women's camp.**

Getting water was a problem. Usually the pressure was too low and the rear cells often got no water at all so that if you wanted a bath, which in the East Indies you did at least once a day, you had to fetch the water yourself. Walking possibilities were very limited, just a narrow path through the camp, barely 60 metres long and a peripheral strip about 50 metres long. Walkers who wanted to do their daily stint had to walk up and down the path dozens of times. We felt we had all somehow regressed and the mood in the camp became quite pessimistic but fortunately there were enough of us who always preferred to look on the sunny side of life. But you can get used to anything, even life behind high walls, and so after a few days most of us cheered up. All we could see was the blue sky above us and one day we even saw an aircraft fly over. During the first few weeks there were no cooking facilities so we had to depend on the women's camp for our meals, bread being the only supply we had from Padangpandjang. Meals were brought over three times a day by horse and cart, simple but filling. Here in Padang we had to do everything ourselves which we preferred because had we left it to the Japs, we would have been much worse off. They assumed we had sufficient money and as everything seemed to go smoothly, they let us get on with it.

### **Problems in the kitchen.**

After a few weeks bread stopped coming from Padangpandjang so we were given a local baker whose bread was awful – yet another step backwards. But at least we had bread even though we couldn't tell how long it would last. Flour was getting scarce and the Japanese kept much of it for themselves.

About a week later native workmen arrived and started to build ovens and a kitchen for our use. We had to make our own kitchen utensils, pots, pans, covers, wooden stirrers etc using materials from outside. After a few weeks it was ready and so we could start cooking. But immediately we found that the ovens could not stand the heat and began cracking up all over. Fortunately this could be remedied and after a few days the ovens were working properly. The food was simple but good and sometimes so much was left over that it had to be thrown away. Anybody who wanted seconds could go and help himself.

## **Eating according to Dr Do Little**

After a few months many began to feel that they weren't getting enough to eat or that their vitamin intake wasn't enough so they went to the doctor to try and get a certificate entitling them to extra. They were put on to a Diet List. The doctor played along because there was money in it but of course every day the Diet List got longer and longer and soon everybody's name was on it. A joker then wrote underneath, "the rest will eat normally". For some time we didn't have a doctor because he had to remain behind in the hospital in Padangpandjang but one day he suddenly appeared, quite unexpectedly in the camp without any books or instruments. He put up a board outside his consulting room which said Doctor Do Little so that patients would know that he didn't do much so little could be expected. Health in the camp remained satisfactory and only occasionally was it necessary to send somebody to the town hospital because the camp itself had no hospital

## **Typical Dutch complaints.**

Complaining and criticising seem to come naturally to a Dutchman, even when he finds himself in prison. Everything was subject to criticism – too much salt in the food, or too much fat. Others said the camp management was not up to the job. A hundred and one stupid and petty points were raised which in normal life would have been ignored. But it was understandable. There was nothing much else to talk about and idle chatter was one way of passing the time. Later we often thought, what could we have done better instead of just complaining. It reminded us of the words of the well-known hymn; everyone strives for change but regrets it day by day, yearning for what used to be and what used to be seen.

## **Various freetime activities.**

Most of us tried to keep ourselves occupied during the day to help pass the time. Lectures were offered on all sorts of subjects such as gold mining, how to make sugar, growing rubber trees, making car tyres etc. There were a number of DIY enthusiasts who cobbled together with the simplest of materials houses, aircraft, ships and other toys for the children in the women's camp. Great was the joy when thankyou letters from the children to their fathers and uncles were delivered. We weren't of course allowed to have any official contact with the women's camp but sometimes we received permission and we even managed to smuggle some letters in the toys we sent.

## **Compulsory toilet fatigue duties.**

The toilets in the cells were unusable so it was decided to construct atap roofs above the gutter which flowed past each cell which could be used as a toilet which would flush everything away although a few of us preferred to use the camp toilet rather than squat over the gutter. But toilet duty was the least popular job of all, especially among those who didn't use the gutter so it was necessary to put up a roster whereby everybody was obliged to do toilet duty to keep them clean.

### **Rank and position are no longer of importance.**

At first rank and position were respected but that soon stopped. Whatever you were in civilian life, you were now treated just like anybody else. Everybody mucked in together although a few pretended not to be “at home” when called on to do various jobs; they preferred to let others do the dirty work but fortunately this didn’t happen very often.

### **Money pooled for the benefit of all.**

Gradually more and more people found themselves unable to pay the 50 cent a day contribution to camp expenses. They were broke. As a result another arrangement had to be thought out and many a long discussion took place about what to do. Those who had arrived with little or nothing often took a high moral tone as if they had casting votes. A system was adopted whereby a percentage levy of the total amount collected would be distributed for receipts. These receipts would then be redeemed after the war by the government. If this security had not been given, then of course nobody would have bothered to pay a cent. It needed quite a bit of persuasion and the moneylenders held many meetings to discuss the matter. Eventually everybody more or less agreed and camp money was issued. Each person received a fixed sum of 15 cents daily which many thought far too little, especially those who had lots of money and now had to make do with so little. But the have-nots made the most noise and came up with all sorts of hard-luck stories. If it costs nothing, it tastes better, they probably thought!

### **Selfishness.**

You might have thought that a group of Dutchmen sitting in a prison behind high walls and deprived of all the conveniences taken for granted in peace time would have tried to make life as pleasant and bearable as possible. But you’d be wrong. Selfishness and more selfishness ruled the day. Anyone who could steal a march over his neighbour did not hesitate to do so. There was no feeling of unity in adversity, no cooperation or partnership. It was every man for himself. There were even cases of counterfeit camp money!

### **Sport, drama and music.**

There was a small grassy patch in the middle of the camp which we used for gymnastics and badminton and on which the boys used to play football although it was far too small and the ball usually ended up more in the cells than on the pitch. Then one day somebody came up with the idea of getting any camp actors one could find to perform drama and cabaret. It was envisaged that such evenings would then be supplemented with music and lectures. The whole idea caught on quickly because everyone felt the need for entertainment. The daily boring routine was getting on peoples’ nerves and it was time to try something new. Those who had drama or musical talents were found or they put themselves forward.

The biggest difficulty was finding musical instruments because the Japanese had confiscated everything. But a splendid solution was found. Some of the so-called “Indian boys” knew how to use empty butter tins and bits of wood and string to make

a few instruments. The results were amazing. The first musical evening they gave was a great success. We hadn't heard any music for months so we were delighted, the more so because we knew we had to make do with what we had. Such events raised camp morale no end so when it was announced that there'd be a camp cabaret, everybody wanted to know where. There wasn't much room in the camp but after looking round we decided that the kitchen would be the best place. So the kitchen entrance became the stage and the grassy patch was our concert hall.

Those involved now began to study and rehearse their parts and pieces of music composed by some of them could be heard from the cells. At last the day of the first cabaret performance arrived and we listened to various acts, sung or recited and amused ourselves as best we could. Judging from the various acts it was doubtful whether there were any genuine talents amongst us. However, everybody agreed (a rare event!) that it was a very good performance and it was decided to hold such cabaret performances every Saturday evening. It wasn't always possible to have open air performances but in fine weather it was very pleasant to sit out in a comfortable chair watching the performance under a starry sky.

### **Bodies on display.**

The superficial veneer of behaviour and good manners that the average person displays in normal times began to wear thin during internment. In Padangpandjang there were sufficient bathrooms and it wasn't necessary to take a public bath in the nude. To protect one's modesty, one changed behind curtains or drapes and naked bodies rarely attracted more than a cursory look. To save our clothes, we usually wore during the day "camp trousers" or underpants but bathing was still done behind curtains. We were at the start of a long internment and who knows what else might happen! One of the advantages of wearing so few clothes was that we saved on soap and also, from a health point of view, we were able to expose our bodies to sunlight, especially early in the morning.

### **Private purchase instituted.**

There was a Chinese in town who sold frozen food items at a reasonable price and was able to deliver them both to us and the women's camp. Needless to say he became very popular and large orders were placed although it was quickly realised that with pocket money of f1.05 a week you couldn't exactly paint the town red. Everybody wanted to send something to their womenfolk and still have something left over for some tobacco or a cigarette. So it was decided to introduce a system of private purchase whereby anybody who had the means could spend over and above his weekly camp money allowance up to an agreed amount. Men with families now had the chance to provide for them in the women's camp and the Chinese delivered the goods against signature so we could verify that the goods we'd paid for had actually been delivered.

### **Beds on prescription.**

Because we slept on cement floors, many of us soon suffered from lumbago, rheumatism and other complaints. We therefore had to make wooden beds to insulate us which we could order from the camp carpenter for a fee or make ourselves

However, we had to consult the doctor to establish whether he considered it necessary as he could decide who had priority according to his needs. In the beginning all the money in the camp was considered public property but unfortunately as time went on this was less and less the case and anybody with money could buy what he liked, much to the detriment of those who had nothing. This of course gave rise to a good deal of grumbling for there were those who couldn't even afford a bed. But in general it was a sound principle otherwise total anarchy would have prevailed.

### **The daily price of food.**

Food was prepared with great care and the quality left little to be desired – at least for honest people. The cooks got better and better and the use of hand carts meant that food could be distributed at the same time. These carts were brought to the camp entrance from where they were taken to the kitchen. A large notice board hung on the wall of a large cell with important announcements and every day the cost of the food of the previous day was posted, calculated down to the half cent.

### **Drink smuggling.**

Our incorrigible boozers even found ways of smuggling drink into the camp behind the high walls. One fine day when vegetables were being unloaded and the head cook otherwise engaged, bottles of strong liquor emerged which appeared to be for the head cook himself. It seemed that for some time he had managed to smuggle drink into the camp in this way which he then delivered to the boozers and so earning himself a nice little bit on the side. His friends too were well supplied but the discovery meant the sack for him. He was replaced by somebody else but he too, we soon noticed, knew exactly how to smuggle the stuff in. The next day a number of kitchen assistants resigned. They too had been well supplied and resigned in sympathy with their boss. However there was no shortage of willing recruits for the kitchen nor lack of people with the necessary know-how. They always tried to get the necessary ingredients from outside for liver pâté, gingerbread and meat balls and mostly they were successful. Meat balls were sold for a reasonable 5 cents each and other items cheaper. As far as food was concerned, there was at first little to complain about.

However everybody knew that the good times couldn't last. Every day more and more cash left the camp and wasn't being replaced. People saved their shoes and went about in clogs available for 7 ½ cents a pair in town. We wanted to save our good things for as long as possible. After all there was no need to dress up to impress the ladies!

### **The camp entrance attracts everybody.**

The only place where you could get a glimpse of the outside world and members of the opposite sex was at the camp entrance. There were a few rooms there occupied by the "Poorters" (a pun on citizens and people who lived at the poort or entrance) who were much envied because instead of staring all day at white walls they had a view of the world outside. In the distance you could see trains passing to and fro and padi fields and you had a sense of the wider world. The Indonesian prisoners also

had the chance of seeing their wives pass by. These prisoners had long ago given up hope of being released and we too found it odd that the Japanese let some go free but kept others back. The sort of contacts we had in Padangpandjang were here impossible.

### **Our great feast in 1942.**

On the Queen's Birthday 1942<sup>3</sup> we prepared a great feast. Potatoes, carrots and many other food items were ordered the previous day and delivered promptly the following morning whereupon everybody knuckled down to peeling the spuds and at midday the "banquet" was served. This was a great treat because for months we had had only rice but now we could enjoy genuine Dutch mashed vegetables (stampot). Those in the kitchen helped themselves to extras and this time nothing was thrown away. Unfortunately we could not sing the Wilhelmus (national anthem) because we knew this would give offence and that we wanted to avoid but one evening before the feast at the end of a cabaret evening the anthem was played very softly on the piano - a very moving experience. Given our circumstances the raising of the Dutch flag and the sound of the anthem raised us all to a higher plane and some even felt shivers running down their backs.

### **Four priests but no minister**

Church services were held every Sunday in one of the cells. We didn't have a minister but there were four priests so the Catholics amongst us were well provided for. Fortunately there was electric light in the gaol so we could spend our evenings pleasantly enough playing bridge or chess. We once organised a very successful badminton tournament. The final was played between four boys, all excellent players and was watched by almost everybody in the camp. The baker had used the occasion to bake a huge cake (taart) which was then presented to the winners after they had made a speech which was loudly applauded

### **Armed squads formed after false rumours.**

Rumours about the progress of the war often circulated in the camp. It wasn't easy to get hold of a Malay newspaper but whenever somebody did, wild rumours would spread around the camp. We lost count of the number of times we heard that Germany had surrendered. Of course we always hoped for confirmation of these rumours but great was the disappointment when they were proved to be false.

But one day we heard from a reliable source that the Americans had landed in north Sumatra and it was said that people from the north had arrived in Padang with dollar bills in their pocket. Surely this could be no rumour, could it? It sounded so credible that we decided to take all necessary measures when liberation, only a few days away, came when we would have to defend ourselves against a hostile population.

So we organised ourselves the same day into squads and armed ourselves with clubs made in the camp. The idea was to defend the "poor women and children" in the Women's camp, it was said and with this in mind, we prepared for the invasion with

---

<sup>3</sup> Queen Wilhelmina was born on 31 August. It is presumed the feast took place on this day.

our “weapons”, some rather more credible than others. Some had studded their clubs with nails taken from shoes while others used four-inch nails which they reckoned was more effective. Only a few were detailed to remain in the camp to guard our possessions and these were all bachelors. All married men, however scared they might be, wanted to protect the women’s camp. Imagine if one’s wife learnt that her husband wasn’t brave enough to join the protection force!

Outsiders probably wouldn’t be able to understand what made us all act like a bunch of prize idiots. But we thought we had to be prepared for anything and that we were surrounded by treacherous and malevolent Minangka natives.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, we seldom or never had any news and so had no idea what was happening in the world so any news that did filter through to us was thought to be the truth. So it was a great disappointment when the rumour turned out to be false yet again. Some had even packed up their stuff and now had to go and unpack again. But soon the ridiculousness of it all got through to us and we started to laugh. A week later the whole comedy was repeated on stage and had us all rolling in the aisles.

### **The Women show us how.**

Letters from the women’s camp contained details of announcements about conditions, regulations, financial matters etc but often we men in our camp would shake our heads and reckon we could manage a camp much better. So we wrote them a letter making suggestions for improvements on the spot. In reply they told us to mind our own business and that they could manage their own affairs, thank you very much! Those women were really tough cookies!<sup>5</sup>

### **The Japanese raid the women’s camp.**

In a room next to a little garden which local policemen had to pass going about their business, a number of us discussed general camp matters and now and again, when the opportunity presented itself, they approached the policemen in order to transact some private business of their own such as purchasing something in town or delivering messages to the women’s camp. But the matter soon got out of hand and was stopped because nobody, apart from authorised members of the camp management wanted to hang about in or near the garden as we wanted to avoid at all costs attracting the attention of the Japanese for that would mean big trouble.

Very early one morning we heard that the Japanese had entered the women’s camp and confiscated all books, cards, games etc, leaving them without a single book, even including religious books, although they were returned a few days later. We now reckoned that we would be next so we had to make immediate plans to prevent ourselves being taken by surprise. All our books were hidden, buried in the ground behind the cells. But, miraculously the Japanese left us alone, despite our preparations.

### **Our secret radio is discovered.**

---

<sup>4</sup> Minangkabau is the name of that part of Sumatra in which Fort de Kock (Bukittinggi) and Padang are situated.

<sup>5</sup> The original has *Dat waren vrouwen met haar op de tanden* – These were women with hair on their teeth.



At first our news sources were always very poor, unreliable and irregular but after a while we began to receive “Allied News” bulletins. Nobody asked where they came from as everybody assumed that they had been received outside the camp and smuggled in. But we were in for an unpleasant surprise.

A few days before Christmas (1942) the gong sounded very early in the morning. This meant that the Japanese had entered the camp and we had to parade. We did so after a few minutes and calmly waited for what was going to happen next. We had paraded before so we thought this was just another routine roll-call which would soon be over. Roll calls usually took time because they had to count us three or four times before they could agree on a total.

But this time was different. A Japanese officer addressed us in his incomprehensible lingo which was then translated into simple and easily understandable Malay. The officer wanted to know where we had hidden our radio and ordered us to hand it over. We unanimously denied that we had a radio – and believed it, too. Nobody dared keep a radio in his cell for if he was found with it, he would be executed by firing squad. Of course he didn’t believe us and threatened us with a camp search. OK we said in Malay (“Boleh”) and a few moments later a large number of Japanese entered the camp and started searching. They turned the place upside down, emptied our cases and threw the contents around so that afterwards we had problems identifying what belonged to whom.

Afterwards it was like a scene from Jan Steen<sup>6</sup> At first no radio was found but after our “visitors” had spent a few hours searching and were getting fed up at finding nothing, one of us was summoned to his cell where we heard raised voices though incomprehensible to us. Then we heard heavy blows and wondered what was happening. Soon after a Sunlight soapbox was brought out and there was the radio. So it was true! We could scarcely believe our eyes. The secret had been well kept by the few people who were privy to it. We never knew how the Japanese found out about the radio and we presumed it had been betrayed. But whatever the case, we had lost our radio and would never again have such a reliable source of news. The men who had hidden the radio were taken away by the Military Police and we trembled for their safety.

After the Japanese had gone, we were told that this was not the end of the matter and that in a few days time we would find out more. We did not doubt this for a moment and the days before Christmas were a time of fear and anxiety. A radio in an internment camp in wartime – what could be worse! We expected the Japs to crack down hard. But believe it or not, we heard no more of the matter. However, everything now entering the camp was thoroughly examined. Sacks of rice were ripped open, baskets of vegetables tipped out. Nobody knew how the radio had been smuggled into the camp in the first place. Fortunately Christmas passed off peacefully. We heard that the radio men had been imprisoned but we knew nothing about how they had been treated.

---

<sup>6</sup> Jan Steen, 1626-79, Dutch painter of interior scenes, frequently of disorderly households or inn junketing.

### **Noise and bedtime.**

People like to go to bed at different times – nothing wrong in that. But when sharing a room or cell, those who retire early have to put up with others talking, humming, whistling etc. Sometimes people would stomp into the room in the middle of the night, laughing and chattering as if it was the middle of the day, heedless of those asleep. Such “gentlemen” were quickly told to shut up in no uncertain terms and suitably chastened they wished us good night and silence was restored.

### **Father Christmas in the camp.**

When you live cheek by jowl with others in a POW camp, you quickly get to know them quite intimately. Mr A knew exactly what Mr B had said in his sleep or that lately he had had reasons to go to the toilet while Mr B knew that Mr A carefully cleaned his teeth three times a day. We learned to put up with each other’s foibles because we were a relatively small group, only about 150 of us.

On Christmas Eve Santa Claus arrived on stage with Piet, his faithful black servant carrying a sack full of little presents. Santa then gave them out, making a little speech before each one. To his regret, he said, because of the war he wasn’t able to bring presents for us all but he’d brought the most important ones. We had a good laugh when Pietersen was summoned and presented with a toothbrush and told to brush his teeth punctually three times a day. Jansen received a nail file and a feather because he always took good care of his hands, spending an hour a day at the task. Such evenings had the effect of raising morale and providing distraction from the day-to-day monotony of camp life.

### **The Japanese confiscate our money.**

Exactly a month after our radio had been confiscated, something happened which was to bring about great changes to the camp. A large number of natives gathered in front of the gate and some Japanese entered the camp, summoned us on parade. A Japanese cleared his throat and began his speech.<sup>7</sup>

Japan, he said, was now able to take responsibility for our food and upkeep so would we mind handing in all our money, please. Little could be kept back because most of us didn’t have any money on us at that moment but everything was thoroughly searched and the money taken although some may have kept back a few guilders. One individual who by chance had all his money with him, quickly threw it in to the dustbin and was able to save it. The Japanese sat with triumphant looks on their faces at a table and counted the increasing piles of money being heaped up in front of them. Before they left, they told us that from today we would have to live on 15 cents a day. Then they disappeared with our 26,000 guilders, an amount which could easily have kept us for a year. We discussed the matter in detail. What sort of greenhorns sat on our management committee and why couldn’t we have done anything about it. A post-mortem didn’t make much sense. Somehow or other we had to make do. Everybody feared for the quality and quantity of our food. It was

---

<sup>7</sup> In Dutch *Geblaf*, a derogatory word akin to a dog barking.

impossible to live on 15 cents a day and still have something edible to eat so we decided to approach the suppliers directly to obtain more than the Japanese had allowed us. The suppliers themselves appeared to have no instructions to the contrary so on some days we ate well but for how long?

The doctor drew up a list of minimum food requirements specifying vitamins and calories etc and gave it to the Japanese with a request that we be allowed sufficient money to buy the necessary supplies. But we heard absolutely nothing from them, not a single word. But something else appeared to be on the cards and in a few days we found out what it was!

### **Chapter 3. To Padang Prison.**

#### **We join a larger community.**

We were suddenly ordered to pack up and get ready to move. We didn't know where to but an hour later we were told it was to Padang prison by the sea, so still in Padang. Nobody believed it.

We had often heard rumours that all Europeans would be evacuated from the East Indies so now we expected to be brought to Emmahaven<sup>8</sup> and embarked and we still kept looking out even where we were later in Padang prison.

All our stuff was brought out of the camp, chairs, tables, benches, beds etc and it all had to be left behind to be sent on to us. But we didn't believe a word of this either so we took as many of the light bulbs we could find with us as we didn't expect there to be exactly a surplus where we were going given that they had become so expensive and difficult to find. However some people had ulterior motives and later we discovered that light bulbs began to disappear to be sold at much higher prices in town. The proceeds, of course, were pocketed by the individuals concerned.

Our stuff was loaded up and we departed. On our way through town we passed the women's camp surrounded by a wooden fence about 2 ½ metres high so we couldn't see inside. But in the distance we saw a crowd of women although they saw virtually nothing of us. A few minutes later we entered the large grey building on the sea shore – Padang prison, our third POW camp. How often had we spent pleasant evenings on this sea shore before the war, never suspecting that one day we would find ourselves behind those prison walls topped with glass, as internees! But for the Japanese it was the ideal solution for here they could imprison large numbers of POW's without the need for barbed wire or many guards, just enough to man the four watch towers at each corner.

A large crowd of internees watched us entering the prison and welcomed us. We were pleased to see new faces for a change. But we noticed many differences from our previous camp. Here the men all had long, unkempt beards and there were large open *mandi*<sup>9</sup> areas where they all showered naked, cracking jokes. We'd seen nothing like this for up to now we had been clean-shaven and relatively neatly dressed. You rarely noticed, for example, the minister, whom you had known well before the war, suddenly standing naked in the bathroom. You don't even recognise him until he addresses you by name. Then another bearded man comes up to you with a smile and says

---

<sup>8</sup> Padang's port

<sup>9</sup> *Mandi* is Malay for bath or bathing facilities.

“Hi there old chap, how’s it going? You’re looking great!”

You stare at him but still don’t recognise him until suddenly the penny drops; it’s Klaassen, your old mate from the sugar factory you used to hobnob daily with.

But we saw straight away that our new surroundings were much more spacious than our old ones and we felt much less hemmed in here. A good path ran throughout the prison camp partly under long standing trees which offered shade in which benches had been set up on which we sat during the day playing games.

### **Getting used to crowds.**

The most important thing now was that we were with other people and could have different conversations. They too were glad that we had joined them although the cells weren’t ready for us because they had had only a few hours notice of our arrival so we had to wait around a bit. However, the Japs left it to them to look after us and this was speedily done.

Each cell leader received an allocation of new “guests”<sup>10</sup> as we were called because of our superior clothing and the name stuck even though we were soon reduced to their level. In Padangpandjang we had heard the wildest rumours about this prison, namely that they all had to run around naked and along the beach to dispose of rubbish. This was probably a bit exaggerated but certain things still took some beating. In the beginning they had had a pretty miserable time. Every evening after supper they were locked up in their barred cells until the following morning. All calls of nature had to be answered in an earthenware pot which often overflowed – not a very hygienic state of affairs!

Fortunately things improved but our food was much worse and much less than in our previous camp. We still had to make do on 15 cents a day although there was a bit more one could do with it because we were much more numerous, about 1000 men. all told. We tried to use as little fuel as possible because our 15 cents had to cover this as well but later we got a supplement of ½ cent for firewood. Generous guys, these Japs!

### **Exchange of experiences**

We related our experiences in great detail much to their amusement and they told us about theirs, both pleasant and unpleasant. Once somebody had told everybody to be at the prison entrance the following morning because something very important was going to happen. So everybody turned up and waited and kept waiting but nothing happened at all. The hoaxer then rolled up and said he must have been mistaken and that it must have been somewhere nearby. Exactly what we would find out soon enough.

### **Fewer possessions and less and less space and money.**

Our wooden artefacts were never sent on to us from our previous camp so we lost everything again. When would the bloody Japs ever keep their promises? Anyway, there wasn’t much room for chairs, benches and beds so as far as space was concerned, this was a step backwards. We were all crammed together, each one

---

<sup>10</sup> Father often described himself subsequently as a “guest of the Japanese”.

having a personal space of about one metre. Fortunately we could still buy a few extra things with our 15 cents. All our money had been taken from us when we entered the prison but we had been warned beforehand so a little bit was saved. But we received pocket money and fortunately things weren't quite so expensive. Those who previously had never paid a cent into the camp coffers now found themselves in possession of large sums of money and could buy whatever they liked. They had lived at the expense of the community, hoarded their valuables and now lorded it over everybody. It was a great pity that such people were not severely dealt with. Perhaps one day they'll get their come-uppance. Understandable that a few moneylenders from the previous camp now went about saying. "for months we gave these guys the wherewithal to eat and now they spit in our faces".

### **Getting used to our new surroundings..**

If you had any illusions about humanity before being interned, you quickly lost them in prison. Egoism, egoism - everywhere you looked. There was much talk of "collective interest" but what this really boiled down to was "personal interest". Of course normal life is like this too but there it is always done more discreetly, behind the scenes. The instinct for survival and self-preservation in the adverse conditions of prison life came visibly to the fore.

But many things were better organised in the prison and this included eating arrangements. In the previous camp we used to plead for a bit more rice or a slightly less fattier piece of meat but here everything was rapidly doled out and there was no favouritism – you got your helping and that was that! The food was cooked in huge drums, each one several hundred litres in size, at least five times bigger than our old boilers and four men were necessary to carry them to the dining room.

Wood was the main fuel in the kitchen which was brought in large quantities and had to be chopped up. The boys were organised to keep the camp clean, sweep up and clear up the rubbish.

At first there were some criminals in the prison who were kept locked up in their cells and after a while they were let out and had to prepare their own food in our kitchen. This had to be done during the night because we needed the kitchen by day. Their food was of much better quality than ours. They even had eggs while we had virtually forgotten what they looked like!

### **Taking care of each other.**

The youngest of us were well cared for. Every evening they formed a separate queue and received extra food. They got better clothing and were carefully supervised. Everybody was agreed that we had to do our best for the sake of the next generation. Eggs could only be given occasionally to the sick but we found a great substitute which we called "kunstei" (artificial egg). It consisted of different types of peas, fat and vegetables and proved to be an effective means of keeping one's strength up in the short term.

People began to lose weight and with each day bellies got smaller and smaller. Although our food could not really be called bad, it was far from good or sufficient. Our medics decided to weigh everybody in prison and every week we all had to be weighed. Everybody lost weight, some more than others but it gave the doctors a good idea of our general health.

The Japanese totally ignored all our requests for whatever. For many people, weighing did more harm than good. When some saw that they had lost another 300 grams or so, they got quite scared and wondered where it had gone to. When later people began to lose weight even more alarmingly, weighing was stopped. Only the boys were weighed regularly and looked after by the doctor.

### **Courses with primitive aids**

Various teachers and engineers offered to teach a wide variety of subjects in prison and many of us wanted to take advantage of our enforced internment to learn something useful or interesting. Book keeping, astrology, astronomy, mechanics and radio courses were all on offer among others and many people took several courses every day. A professional soldier, a sergeant, for example, studied English, mechanics and astrology and still found time to study book keeping and shorthand.

The biggest problem was lack of paper. Many had to erase their earlier notes so that they could carry on studying, not exactly conducive to effective learning. In fact, paper was scarce everywhere judging from what could be brought into the prison from various offices. We once found the divorce papers of a certain Mrs Hendriksen and a Mr Jacobus and on another occasion we used paper stolen from local government and Customs & Excise offices. The Japanese threw piles of school and exercise books into the sea or burnt them. If we ever regained our freedom, we would probably find few or none of our earlier possessions.

### **Bucket latrines, foul stench and fresh air.**

At night older men who were a bit unsteady on their legs used the bucket latrines which next morning were removed as quickly as possible by the criminals and emptied into the sea. But when the criminals themselves were removed away from us POW's, the task of emptying the buckets fell to the boys who gladly accepted because it gave them the chance to go to the sea shore and enjoy sea breezes. On their return they all described how five minutes in the fresh sea air had done them the world of good. They also brought back some sand which bit by bit became a sand pit for the children (all boys) to play in of whom we had quite a few because they were transferred from the women's camp.

There were never enough toilets and you often had to wait ten minutes for your turn. You were sometimes shoved aside by those whose need was even greater than yours. At first these toilets were situated next to the hospital, an ideal place and were flushed several times a day. But this still wasn't enough and those living in nearby cells complained about the appalling stench. Fortunately we had a sanitary engineer in our midst who rigged up an automatic flush system which soon solved the problem.

### **Airing our grievances at the weekly meetings.**

The weekly meetings held in our cells were an important part of our camp life during which everybody had a chance to air his views on all sorts of subjects. Inevitably, complaints dominated the proceedings; food, toilets, water supply, you name it, we complained! Such evenings were soon known as Whingers Evenings. The day after such meetings, the cell leaders would attend a meeting of the Camp

Management where all points raised were discussed, decisions taken and duly announced. Of course not every complaint could be rectified. Those who criticised most did the least to remedy the situation. We too had our back seat drivers.

### **The Japanese find counting difficult.**

Now and again we had to parade to be counted. A few of us dodged about and when the numbers didn't tally they said that they probably hadn't been counted. The Japs always fell for this. They were very careless and inattentive and clearly hated the task but they couldn't get out of it so they believed us.

### **Activities in multi-functional sheds.**

On first arrival, little was done to organise primary and secondary schooling apart from a few primary level classes. But virtually nothing had been done for the older boys so their education remained neglected.

One of our number had been the headmaster of a secondary and he was very keen to get schooling organised in the prison. He soon opened a school but he couldn't find a quiet spot anywhere so he was forced to use the big shed more or less in the middle of the prison which also housed the workshop so that there was always noise and bustle. The other great disadvantage was that all the classes sat close to each other so that in one class English was taught right next to another where a botany class was in progress right next to another where a teacher was reading aloud from a book. But they more or less got used to this after a while and after a few months some of the boys, who, before internment were already in the third grade, were able to take the school leaving exam

The big shed had electric light so many of us came there every evening to play cards or chess or just to have a chat. A shed for a thousand men is barely adequate so you had to reserve a place with a pack of cards or a cushion or you wouldn't get in. You couldn't sleep there of course because during the night many took advantage of the light to study and the boys did their homework. During the day it was always noisy. On Sundays Protestant and Catholic services were held so the shed was always busy and never without people.

### **A group of Britons joins us.**

After we had left our previous camp, (the military gaol), the Japanese interned there a group of about 50 Britons.<sup>11</sup> They had plenty of space but their food was very bad. Unlike us they didn't have 15 cents a day to buy food and they had to make large bonfires for cooking and roasting. So you can imagine how relieved they were when on 22 April 1943<sup>12</sup> they were transferred to our prison. They were absolutely starving and didn't know whether they were coming or going. Some of them were mere skeletons and had to be quickly rehabilitated. Many had fled from Malacca by way of Singapore and the Riau archipelago to Sumatra and a number of them had been machine-gunned and bombed by Japanese fighter aircraft and had had appalling

---

<sup>11</sup> Actually 51, among whom were Gwilym Owen (my father) and his then superior, H J Page, director of the Rubber Research Institute of Malaya (RRIM) They had been moved to the military gaol of 13 February so the Dutch must have been evacuated sometime during the first six weeks of 1943.

<sup>12</sup> The date tallies exactly with my research in the PRO and Imperial War Museum.

experiences. Among them was a woman desperately in need of help because she was lame and had to be carried. She was the only woman in a sea of men. A pity she was barely 1000 weeks old<sup>13</sup> but already looked elderly.

There was also a small boy<sup>14</sup> among them whose mother had been killed by a bomb at sea. His father had been able to rescue his son and now looked after him with tender solicitude. The Britons brought part of their wooden furniture with them and were able to rebuild their benches or chairs.

The prison was already full when we arrived so when now another fifty or so turned up, we had to find more space to accommodate them. This was possible because another large open shed bordered on the prison which could take another few hundred men with a reasonable amount of living space for each one. But we first had to obtain permission because access to it was by way of a locked door from our prison. Fortunately the Japanese agreed and also cleared a fire-escape route for exercise. This was a slight improvement as far as our living space was concerned. The Japanese considered we had sufficient space for meals – after all, there was a war on and sacrifices were needed!

But when you looked at the Japanese “Master Race”, you wondered who was making the sacrifices. They all looked pretty well-fed and the myth that there are no big Japanese is absolutely false. We often saw huge, giant-like specimens visiting us but even so they all had slit eyes, bandy legs and looked like monkeys.

The British internees were accommodated in this new shed together with a large number of our own people. Understandably many of them were asked to give English lessons and conversation classes were arranged although great difficulties were encountered because hardly any of them spoke a word of Dutch. An Englishman can use his own language all over the world so therefore finds it totally unnecessary to learn another language.<sup>15</sup>

The Japanese also returned to us some of the musical instruments they had confiscated. During the evenings large groups of boys could be heard singing enthusiastically with a few musicians in their midst and of course with a large audience.

### **A glimpse of the sea.**

Every morning saw large numbers of men waiting by the prison entrance for the gates to open for the delivery of vegetables and what little meat was available as well as a few other articles. There they had a glimpse of the sea and in their imagination felt they were already “going home”. We yearned for freedom after being locked up for months on end in the same place. We take freedom for granted in normal times but as soon as we are deprived of it, we begin to value what we have lost.

---

<sup>13</sup> A curious expression. 1000 weeks is about 19 years. I have found no reference to her in the archives.

<sup>14</sup> This was Jimmy Cairns who had escaped from Singapore with his father, his mother having been killed during a bombing raid on Singapore docks. His story is told in Gilmour’s “Singapore to Freedom” (page 47) and my father noted in the margin “Mr Cairns and Jimmy survived internment”. However there is some doubt as to whether Mr Cairns did survive because at liberation Australian sources mention that young Jimmy was being looked after by an Australian soldier. Mr Cairns (junior) now lives in Scotland.

<sup>15</sup> An observation even more telling nowadays!



## **Food problems.**

When food became scarcer and barely worthy of the name, extra rations had to be procured for those engaged in camp tasks at the expense of everybody else. Carrying out tasks was very popular because that was one way of supplementing one's rations. But of course officially such work was never recompensed in any form but everybody managed to scrounge a bit extra. When there was sufficient food, nobody said anything but when food became scarce, scrounging became a problem. As much food as possible had to be prepared for general use and any attempts to keep a bit back had to be suppressed. But it was difficult to carry this out and one of the cooks resigned because he said it wasn't his job to be a policeman.

One of the camp leaders was also head of the kitchen and he had his own ideas about how our food should be prepared. The result was that it was often much worse than before. People grumbled but nothing happened. But the matter was not allowed to rest – food was far too important for that! Pressure was brought to bear and the situation rapidly improved.<sup>16</sup>

## **Shopkeepers of various sorts.**

There were a few little shops, so-called “lapau's”, set up by those who had little or no money and who wanted to earn something. They had no desire to sit in front of a fire baking or roasting and preferred to be served instead. The articles they sold, mainly little cakes with sugar and oil, found a ready market. As demand far exceeded supply, the shopkeepers saw their chance to make a killing and kept increasing prices as there was no competition and you had to be first in line if you wanted to buy anything. Their profits of course remained in the camp but even so it created an unhealthy atmosphere.

There were also cigarette shops selling different makes, some better than others and some even sold lottery tickets. Every few weeks there would be a draw and the winner would receive cigarettes, cigars or home-made cakes.

Various alcoholic drinks were brewed up, mainly by the British who had extraordinary talents in this area. Needless to say, the demand for their products far exceeded that for cakes. On festive occasions we would all sit drinking this home-brewed liqueur, feeling quite happy and spending freely, much to the benefit of our shopkeepers.

## **The demands of adaptability**

There was a great shortage of pots, pans, knives, forks and everything else needed for everyday living. When people heard that they were going to be interned,

---

<sup>16</sup> The author does not give many details of the prisoners' diet but in an unpublished document I found in the archives of the Imperial War Museum, the author, a female internee in the women's prison in Padang gives the following information;

Breakfast, two bananas. Lunch, rice porridge and coconut milk. Supper, rice and a vegetable, very occasionally a little meat. The wood was often wet so the food wasn't ready until as late as 10 p.m. Judging from Kuijl's description, the men's camp appears to have been slightly better provisioned. The author adds that diphtheria, dysentery, typhus and tuberculosis were the main causes of death.

they became so nervous that they forgot to take basic necessities with them although they had other things which were never needed during the whole of their internment. There were also people who had had no opportunity to bring anything with them into the camp so that they had to use the same vessel, a saucepan or dish, for eating, washing and using the toilet – hardly conducive to hygiene. Moreover the Japanese issued very little soap which we used every day so it was no wonder that the hand towels began to look like sacks of coal although once they were pure white.

Our clothing did not improve either. Trousers began increasingly to resemble the colours of the rainbow as they were patched and re-patched with any rag that came to hand. But what could you expect of men who had never wielded needle and thread before? They were now forced to do so. Some of course sewed for others but not everybody could afford to pay for the service. It was noticeable that those who previously dressed very smartly now couldn't care less how they looked. When one of them took to strolling about wearing nothing but a rag to cover his private parts<sup>17</sup>, protests erupted from all sides but he ignored them. Then one day he was told that he would not be allowed any food if he continued like that. So that same evening he turned up for supper in a thick bathrobe, a hood and black Dutch stockings and enquired with a straight face whether perhaps the gentlemen considered this more appropriate. We had of course to strike a balance between a reasonable level of decency and descending to the level of wild natives in the jungle.

### **The Japanese loot and plunder.**

The Japanese carried out raids in the prison itself during which they turned everything upside down or chucked things out and took anything they fancied. They tore up portraits and sliced open locked cases to help themselves to the contents. Even the Normans could have learnt a thing or two from them. Both they and the native policemen preferred to take rather than give. Fortunately for us they overlooked many things and valuables could be quickly hidden in one's pockets.

After such raids, some of us were totally ruined. Even the clergy were not spared as the Japanese rampaged through their rooms, smashing everything they could and leaving only bibles and other religious books behind. Lorries took everything away and only those who had lost everything were sometimes able to get back a pair of trousers or a shirt but only after constant asking.

A few days later another large group of prisoners arrived, mainly doctors and planters who had been forced to work for the Japanese in various places before being interned. On arrival they were paraded and searched and their cases examined and items taken that the Japanese wanted.

### **We become rice pickers.**

Hitherto the quality of our rice had always been good and we couldn't complain. Now suddenly our rice was delivered in husks and had to be de-husked. Rough rice, i.e. rice in its husk, is very spiky and indigestible so the task of rice picking, that is, removing the husks, fell to us. Every morning each cell received a few buckets of rough rice which had to be de-husked and returned to the kitchen in

---

<sup>17</sup> *Schaamlapje* – something like a *cache-sexe*.

about three hours. Everybody set to, providing his sight was good enough and mostly it was done sitting at long tables during which we could chat and time passed quickly. People with poor sight were disadvantaged because it was quite difficult to recognise good grains from bad ones but youngsters had no problem. Volunteer rice pickers, mainly older men, sat picking for hours and were encouraged by being excused prison chores such as room duty. The husks were formed into blocks and used in the kitchen and the extra rice was added to the stores.

### **A plague of lice.**

One of the biggest problems in prison was keeping our possessions free of lice, a task which proved impossible because they got everywhere, up, down and in between. Nourished by our blood as we slept at night, they bred with incredible speed. Once a week everything was dragged out into the open, examined and washed in warm water but a few days later it was all back to square one. It was impossible to destroy them and it just needed a few of them with their eggs to make our lives a misery. At night people couldn't sleep as the bugs crawled over their necks, hands and legs. You just had to squeeze and smell in the dark to know what you had in your hand. A filthy stench emanated from them, especially in the hospital even though all beds were regularly examined. Dead or killed bugs also left ineradicable stains in one's clothes so that you couldn't really wear them if you wanted to look decent although that didn't occur in our camp. Nobody knew how they got into the camp in the first place but they were present in virtually all the prison camps in the East Indies. After the war similar reports of the ubiquitous presence of lice were received and we too could confirm these reports. Scabies occurred regularly in some camps, not through lack of cleanliness but through various other causes.

### **A severe earthquake.**

On 9 June 1943 there was a severe earthquake, so severe that people who had spent 25 years in the same area said they had never experienced one like it. Everything trembled and shook, the ground heaved, buildings shuddered and huge cracks appeared in the walls. Even the little stream broke its banks. It was impossible to stand upright and one of the large prison walls collapsed almost killing a number of people. For many days nobody was permitted to sleep indoors. People were panicky because they feared aftershocks. Fortunately the shaking stopped after a few days otherwise everybody would have become quite neurotic. Once you've experienced this sort of thing, you automatically make for the door when you feel a movement in the ground. Fortunately the quake didn't last long enough to destroy every building.

A Japanese came and told us that everything was still OK in the women's camp even though parts of the camp buildings must have been made uninhabitable. In case of further earthquakes, various security measures were taken including evacuating the sick as quickly as possible into the open. We hoped there'd be no repeat of the earthquake and fortunately there were only a series of minor aftershocks, some of them in the middle of the night. Everybody then woke up and did his utmost to get outside as quickly as possible, resulting in a wild scramble; mosquito nets were torn and trampled underfoot. Nobody then returned to bed and the rest of the night we sat in pitch darkness under the trees waiting for dawn. From the newspapers we learned later that many houses had been destroyed in the neighbourhood and there had

been many casualties. The quake had been felt over a wide area and we had probably been at the epicentre.

### **Translators in demand.**

A few months after our arrival in the prison, the Japanese announced that they wanted to compile a list of people able to carry out translation work. Such people had to have a good command of the English language and would be accommodated in a house outside the prison and would even receive a fee. Furthermore, they would receive more food. Now this was a proposition that had to be considered carefully before a decision could be reached. Many who were capable of the work were reluctant. However, the Japanese were perfectly entitled to make this demand according to various legal experts in camp although others said it would be committing treason. "Let the yellow bastards do it themselves" they said.

So the next day the Japanese were told that nobody would volunteer. Two days later a group of Japanese arrived and said they had been given orders to round up some translators and take them away. Again they were told that nobody had volunteered and that nobody would unless the Japanese expressly ordered them to. The Japanese withdrew but returned in half an hour with fresh orders and this time a group of translators, both Dutch and British, was lead away and taken to a house close to the women's camp. Now and again the translators were able to make contact with the women through a fence near the house.<sup>18</sup>

### **Food gets even scarcer.**

The amount of food got smaller and smaller because prices rose but the Japanese did not increase what they paid us. The left-overs were in great demand and you had to stand in line for about half an hour on the off-chance that you might get a little extra. Bellies shrank and many people found that now two people could fit into their clothes. It got even worse later which I shall describe in due course. One man weighed 139 kilos when he first arrived. At liberation, much debilitated and with poor eyesight, he weighed a mere 71 kilos, having lost 68 kilos, the weight of a normal man. My own mother weighed just 39 kilos at liberation! That was exceptional but many of us lost a dangerous amount of weight. However, those who got rid of their large bellies and still felt fit were quite pleased and hoped they wouldn't put it back on again.

We constantly talked about food – ham and eggs, kale and Gelderland sausage, pea soup etc. All this was unobtainable and we had to make do with rice, potato and sago. Only now did we appreciate the good times we had previously taken for granted. In the Military Gaol we had received *f* 1.05 pocket money a week about which we complained. Now the same amount had to last us a whole week!

### **Contact with the women's camp.**

The women fortunately found unofficial ways and means to maintain contact with us. Normally letters were delivered to the camp director from where they were

---

<sup>18</sup> My father mentioned this episode to one of his nephews who told me many years later. It is not clear whether he was one of the translators but he did acquire a good knowledge of Dutch while in camp.

taken and delivered by a postman. Handing over letters to native policemen had to be done very carefully. It often took a long time before you could be sure.

Then somebody would walk back and fore in the garden near the front gate to give the agent an imperceptible sign. Subsequently meetings were arranged in the toilets, used by both us and the agents and money always changed hands there.

The Japanese probably had a strong suspicion that we were maintaining contact with the women's camp because suddenly, one morning, all the policemen who had just entered the camp were ordered to parade and then searched. Miraculously, one of the policemen, by chance the one who had letters for us, arrived slightly late and was thus warned and managed in the nick of time to deposit the letters in the toilet. It was a near thing! But the policeman was not so lucky and was taken away by the Military Police who used beastly and indescribable methods of torture in the cells on their victims. Even a bullet is too good for the Japanese responsible for these despicable acts.

#### **Chapter 4. To the Jungle Camp in Bangkinang.**

##### **We go deep into the jungle.**

There were so many different opinions about the date of our eventual liberation that we used to make bets with each other and because we all had so little money we used to say, "make a note and pay me after the war".

On several occasions rumours had reached our ears that we were going to be moved yet again but when the guards told us that a transfer to a new place, Bangkinang, was in the offing, then it seemed that the rumours were true. At first, nobody believed it. Bangkinang? A little place in the wilds of Sumatra – what was going on? But we could get no sense from the Japanese. They would have to transport everything there despite a severe lack of petrol. Besides, where would they accommodate us? However, after more information was forthcoming, we were informed that "almost certainly" we would be moved to Bangkinang.

The Japanese kept silent. But at midday, a few days after the official announcement, a Japanese arrived and told us that vegetables would be brought in during the evening in two day's time and that we should eat as much as possible. The more "Sons of Nippon" arrived and "borrowed" our kitchen equipment because they said they had to cater for a number of pilots at the aerodromes but they would return it in a few days. We knew that this meant we would have to prepare ourselves for the journey and indeed, on the following morning, 17 November 1943<sup>19</sup>, we were ordered to parade and told that some of us would be leaving immediately. We weren't told where we were going to, only that it would take place in two stages

---

<sup>19</sup> Archive sources give various dates for the move to Bangkinang. Some 500 men, including the British were apparently moved on 20 October 1943 and the transfer took place in many stages over a period of nearly two months, the last arriving in December. The camp itself was a disused latex processing plant. The women's camp in Bangkinang was a few kilometres away from the men's camp and held some 2320 women and children. A modern Dutch guidebook says it is still possible to visit the camp provided you have written permission from the mayor of Pekanbaru as it adjoins a military barracks. There is now little left to see, just a few squat loos, the kitchen and a large bathing pool fed by an adjacent river.

That day saw a bustle of activity. Everybody started packing up and food had to be prepared in the kitchen for those leaving as all the essentials had to be taken with them. We could be pretty sure that no food would be provided during the next few days so we had to hold out somehow. A few eggs, bananas and other fruits were brought in with which we could make some emergency rations. However, many of us were so pleased to see an egg at last that these “emergency rations” were gobbled up in five minutes. We had almost forgotten what an egg tasted like, even what it looked like!

“What will happen, will happen” many said and indeed they were right. We all tended to worry too much, often about things which later turned out well. We had often nothing to fear except fear itself.

We had to walk to the station a couple of kilometres or so away and everybody planned to take as much as possible with him, carrying or dragging it with bamboo sticks, ropes and hooks which had somehow been cobbled together. Evening came and the first group was packed up and ready to depart. Some Japanese officers and a number of soldiers had already entered the prison but seemed in no hurry. We were sure that our journey would take place at night and that they were waiting until darkness fell and indeed, as soon as it got dark we had to parade with all our stuff. However, that was easier said than done because some had a lot of stuff, others little. The soldiers quickly became impatient and started hitting and kicking us and the whole parade descended into chaos. Marching orders were then given and we staggered out of the front gate.

Now we discovered that we had vastly underestimated the weight of our belongings. Bamboo sticks fractured, ropes parted and cases burst open. Everything which fell by the wayside was left behind because the soldiers herded us onwards like cattle. It was impossible to bend down and retrieve something and anything you dropped you had to leave behind. But about half an hour after we had left the prison, a truck drove up with all our stuff. Amazingly, the Japanese had picked it all up – this was something we had certainly not expected.

The first group had had a rough time but the second group was more fortunate because the Japanese realised that they had bungled the operation and so next morning they ordered us to leave all our stuff in the prison and said they would bring it themselves to the station in trucks. Bulk items had to be stored in one of the big rooms and we were assured that they would all be forwarded to us. Nobody expected to see them ever again. 24 hours later it was our turn to leave the prison for the station.

Although we didn’t have so much stuff to carry, the walk to the station was still an ordeal. Nobody was used to lengthy walks and by the time we got to the station we were soaked in sweat. As it seemed we would have to wait before we could get on the train, the Japanese indicated that we could sit down but nobody did – we weren’t natives! But we noted that we were still weak and hardly any of us had worn shoes so we all developed blisters which caused us no end of trouble. After we had waited a while, the order was given to parade in front of the station and later to enter it where a long train was standing ready for us.

We left Padang on our night journey. As we climbed, the cold got to us and those who had coats put them on. Towards morning we arrived in Pajacombo where we got out and waited. Later in the day, lorries arrived and took us through the jungle to Bangkinang. We were packed in like sardines in a tin together with all the stuff we had been able to bring. Those who know what the road is like between Pajacombo and

Pekanbaru can imagine what soon happened to us. The lorries lurched into an endless series of bends and all of us became road sick, emptying the contents of our stomachs over the sides of the lorries. It also got warmer and warmer so that we were soon baking in the heat. It was not exactly a pleasant journey. Fortunately the lorries paused from time to time because the Japanese guards were also affected. One of them broke down, sat next to one of us and was promptly sick over the side. Later he fell asleep and we could easily have done him in! Friends and foes sitting next to each other on the back of a jolting lorry vomiting their way through the Sumatran jungle – for anyone still fit enough to appreciate it, a droll sight.

Exhausted, hungry and thirsty we arrived at our destination, a disused rubber factory surrounded by a fence. We were received by our people who had arrived the day before and had already installed themselves in the large sheds. A meal was being prepared for us in the kitchen but we first had to wait a few hours until all the lorries had arrived and we could begin to unload them. Then we had to parade to be counted by the soldiers but this turned out to be a shambles because first we were ordered to parade in fours and then later in fives. Eventually an officer appeared and the matter was quickly concluded but not before we had to listen to a boring speech after which we were allocated to our sheds. The camp consisted of several small sheds and three large ones, about 12 metres high previously used to hang rolls of latex. The Japanese had installed scaffolding to make two storeys and this slightly improved matters.

### **What a shambles!**

Our camp was nothing more than a neglected pig sty. The open air bathrooms were mired in filth and mud and the toilets were deep holes in the ground. Every time you went you ran the risk of slipping on the mud and falling in, especially at night when there was no light so a visit to the loo was suicidal.<sup>20</sup>

We quickly had to set about improving our situation. At first we thought the Japanese had put us in this filthy place temporarily while a better camp was being prepared for us. Fortunately we were not to know that we were destined to spend two years here.

Each of us had a space about 63 centimetres wide and two metres long, jammed up against the next person. At night you couldn't possibly turn over without waking your neighbour – and it was always pitch dark. Each shed housed about 200 men. The Japanese had tried to give us even less space but fortunately a few other, smaller sheds were made available to accommodate us. We had to hang our clothes and cases on the many beams above our heads and fortunately we could cover the bed planks with sheets of rubber latex which were available in large quantities.

Many were relieved that after such a long journey they could now stretch out their limbs and crack jokes such as “there lies the rich uncle from the East Indies on his rubber mat”, or, “shouldn't you put the chamber pot under the bed?” or, “shut the door; there's a draught”. After a few weeks, however, the rubber mats weren't as comfortable as they had been at the beginning. It wasn't because they weren't soft but rather that they attracted no end of bedbugs. We therefore started to burn the rubber or

---

<sup>20</sup> Compare the account by John Robins, one of the British POW's. Bangkinang was the “worst we have ever experienced, terribly congested, hopelessly inadequate bathing arrangements, lavatory hygienic but surrounded by oozy clay soil, all gimcrack, dirty, squalid, dusty or boggy depending on weather”. (Diary, Imperial War Museum, London).

throw it away. It burned very easily but unfortunately gave off thick black smoke so burning soon had to be forbidden.

It was appalling; bedbugs crawled absolutely everywhere. We didn't have any sleeping bags so we had to lie on the bare planks which caused many of us at first sleepless nights. In the end we fixed the problem because the situation was totally unbearable. At night dozens of us took blankets and pillows and searched feverishly for the bugs to kill them. At first we tended to blame our neighbours for not being clean enough but we soon realised that we all suffered from this vermin and nobody was to blame. Even the planks, often cracked and broken, teemed with them. We quickly realised that we had to break everything open, a hell of a task because we needed large nails to do so, but it had to be done. We instituted so-called "clear-out" days when everything had to be carried outside. It's worth describing these days. At dawn we dragged all our belongings outside and tried to find a good spot. Space was at a premium and good places were hard to find. After a meagre breakfast of potato<sup>21</sup> and a plate of sago, we set to work. Tasks had been allocated the day before so everybody knew what to do but many tried to shirk and dodge their duties but they were soon found out and dealt with.

First of all the planks were broken open with jemmies we had had to make ourselves. Hundreds of bugs emerged. The planks were then taken outside and boiling water was poured over them while others swept the interiors of the "pig sties" clean of all dirt. The planks were then dried in the sun and were now theoretically free of bugs. They were then put back in place. The Europeans were now, it seemed, free of bedbugs for a few hours but the process had to be done regularly because the planks tended to split and crack, providing splendid breeding grounds for the bugs.

### **Inconvenience caused by poor accommodation.**

Those lying in bunks below their neighbours above had problems because dirt and dust from above would fall on them through the wide gaps in the planks, especially during cleaning. We always tried to walk barefoot but this dirt couldn't be avoided. When the neighbour above started to clean up, he gave a warning, "Watch out" and the person beneath then took steps to avoid getting a load of rubbish on his head. Sometimes the rubbish arrived before the warning followed by a friendly "sorry" while the man beneath cursed loudly.

Accommodation and conditions in Bangkinang can be summed up in one phrase; bloody awful.<sup>22</sup> There was just one narrow passage between the beds and whenever you wanted to pass somebody, one of you would have to squeeze flat against the wooden wall of the shed. The small number of shutters in the sides of the sheds had to be opened to let in a small amount of light because there was no other way light could enter. When it rained, the wind blew the rain inside but then we could quickly close the shutters but at night it was impossible so that everybody, especially those on the upper bunks soon got soaked to the skin. We tried to roll all our belongings up in a mat but they still got wet. Those who slept below at least had the satisfaction of seeing their upper neighbour get wet first before the rain seeped down on to them. We often sat up watching and waiting for the rain to stop, dozing until we could sleep again.

---

<sup>21</sup> *Ubi* in Malay.

<sup>22</sup> *Allerberoerdst* – literally, extremely rotten.



Fire was always a hazard so we organised a fire watch roster every night. Four men per night took it in turns to stay awake and each individual had to do fire duty about once every three weeks for about two hours. There were dozens of mosquito nets in the sheds which could easily have caught fire and so those on duty had to see that nobody was caught smoking in their bunks. But still people continued to smoke so it was decided to give those on fire duty authority to report all offenders to the camp magistrate.

### **Camp police and a camp magistrate appointed.**

After about 18 months without a camp magistrate or police, the camp leader suddenly thought it necessary to appoint them and all sorts of childish matters were brought before them. For example, you were only allowed to urinate in the proper place and you were always supposed to clean the area around the gutter and many other similar examples of nitpicking. It was hardly likely to improve the morale of the camp. The “trials” were farcical. The magistrate, looking stern and serious, sat behind a pile of precious paper and handed down judgement on a series of minor infractions of no import whatsoever.

### **Minor but unpleasant incidents.**

The toilets in Bangkinang consisted of a number of closets<sup>23</sup>, some of them with zinc plates intended to be used as urinals. Every morning queues formed in front of them, each man waiting impatiently for his turn. Sometimes people would use other closets and an Englishman was one day caught doing this and was hauled before the magistrate that same day. Through an interpreter the magistrate asked him why he had committed the offence. The Englishman had a fine excuse. For years, he said, he had suffered from something wrong with his bladder and had consulted the Institute of Tropical Diseases on the matter. His condition obliged him to relieve himself as soon as possible and therefore he couldn't wait in a queue. The magistrate ordered him to appear on the next day with a doctor's certificate.

Next day we all waited with interest to see what would happen. Exactly at the appointed time the Englishman appeared with the certificate in his hand. His story was totally invented and the doctor had treated the matter as a joke and had given him a letter. He reckoned the matter was too unimportant to spend much time on. The magistrate, to his chagrin, had to dismiss the man with a warning.

Soon, however, everybody thought they could go to the doctor and get a certificate to exempt them from punishment so something had to be done. A boy who had pelted another boy with stones was sentenced by the magistrate to a few days work on a wall. His father complained that this work was far too strenuous for a boy so the magistrate ordered him to be examined by the doctor and given an official declaration. The doctor, now realising he could not issue certificates at variance with the truth, found the boy perfectly capable of the work.

### **Macho types with the right of veto.**

---

<sup>23</sup> *hokjes*

The Resident and the Camp Leader (he always styled himself “Resident Camp Leader”) was something of a dictator. He always had the last word and demanded that only he should have contact with the Japanese. Setting up a committee thus didn’t make much sense because whenever it made a decision, the Camp Leader simply vetoed it. If the committee then resigned, the camp leader promptly set up another one consisting of an assistant camp leader and inspectors.

The Camp Leader remained at first in the background but one day took centre stage, saying that the responsibility of the internees lay on his shoulders and that after the war he would have to answer to the Dutch government for his actions. But our camp lawyers claimed he did not have this right and treated him as if he was just another internee. Protests had no effect - he remained. But for most of us it wasn’t worth bothering about. Committee or no committee, life went on.

One day the magistrate resigned, convinced of the futility of his work whereupon the Camp leader immediately appointed somebody else. Sanctions in the camp were much more effective in maintaining discipline than the Dutch government.

### **The tiger who would not go into the pot.**

The camp police were extremely officious and many of us did not agree with the sentences handed down by the magistrate. Offenders were sometimes locked into a dark cell and food was denied them, in the circumstances a shocking practice.

“We’ll get our own back” they said, “Our time will come”.

But it was actually quite difficult to find a fitting punishment for the offence. Even so, depriving men of food should never have happened. We all had need of as much food as we could get and everything that was edible was eaten, irrespective of whatever it tasted like. Main thing, it filled the stomach.

Cases of prussic acid poisoning would occur mainly due to eating rubber seeds. Ne day the Japanese brought a tiger carcass to us and enquired whether we could skin it and return the skin to them. It was then suggested we boil the flesh as this was too good a chance to miss, even though the animal stank, having been shot 24 hours earlier. The doctor was summoned to examine the meat. After carefully cutting, examining and smelling it, he decided to his great regret that it was unfit for human consumption so it was buried. It was very sad; the only chance we got to taste meat – and it turned out to be rotten!

### **Anything for a little protein!**

One day the Japanese brought us some iguanas which were slaughtered, cooked and served up as a great dish – iguana soup. But not everybody rejoiced at such events. Some remained quite choosy about what they ate and only later during internment were they forced to descend to the level of the rest of us and eat anything. They talked about “unclean flesh” and “carrion eaters” and tempers flared. Most of us were glad to get some meat and were disappointed that it was so little. The general rule was that you ate whatever was provided. Opinions were divided about the taste of the iguana meat – some said it was like chicken, others like horse. But there is of course no accounting for taste.

At other times the Japanese brought us wild pigs that had been shot which we then washed, scraped and cut up and quite often we sent various cuts and occasionally a whole pig to the women’s camp. Some of the women were perfectly capable of

slaughtering pigs. Whenever a pig was brought into the camp, cries of joy erupted at the prospect of eating pork although one pig did not go far among a thousand men. Later the Japanese stopped bringing us anything at all. They said they were now only going to shoot two-legged pigs by which they meant Americans.

### **How the Japanese provided us with “meat”.**

The only parts of buffalos we got were those which in normal times would have been thrown away – intestines, stomachs, heads without tongues etc. It was an appalling state of affairs especially as we were in an area which swarmed with pigs. We asked the Japanese to allow a few of us out of the camp but they refused saying that ammunition they had could be used for better things than guarding prisoners. They also said that everybody was hungry, even outside in the villages so we had simply got to tighten our belts. Sometimes frogs and snakes were smuggled in which were then killed and a fine, fatty soup prepared which we all consumed with relish. We even caught rats and ate them.

It was even worse in the women’s camp where only the sick were allowed rat meat. The rats were examined by the doctor before being prepared for consumption. We had a sweet little dog in our camp but one morning he was nowhere to be seen. It turned out that some boys had killed and eaten him during the night. They were hauled up before the magistrate and sentenced. He found it a “disgusting deed”.

### **The women arrive in Bangkinang.**

A few months after our arrival in Bangkinang, a start was made to bring the women and children from Padang to Bangkinang. Their camp was only a few hundred metres from ours and consisted of a number of huts with atap roofs. They had very little space but often they were able to install themselves quite comfortably and mothers with children could almost create a little “home” for themselves.

A friar accompanied one of the transports and as he had been with the women all along, he was well informed about their living conditions and had been responsible for their welfare. Now the Japanese put him in charge of a number of orphans and transferred him and them to our camp. He proved to be a mine of information about the women’s camp and the ordeal they had been through.

After we left Padang prison, the Japanese transferred all women and children there. It was an appalling experience for them because there were not enough toilets; there had been a shortage even for the 1000 or so of us men. But there were 2300 of them and how they put up with the humiliation and hardship remained a mystery to us. The friar was pumped for information because he knew almost everybody and didn’t want to disappoint anybody so that he hardly got any rest from morning to late at night.

The orphans were put under the care of a pastor. For a while they were accommodated in the dairy and were well looked after and fed. Then they were suddenly removed and hundreds of cows were left to their fate. The Japanese looked after them but later we heard that most of the cows had perished.

### **We are deprived of our views.**

During the first months we were able to sit and watch the monkeys playing in the trees nearby. We could look through holes in the fence and had a good view of the

padi fields. But it didn't last long. One day the Japanese repaired the fence and we were deprived of our views.

### **Medical aid under appalling conditions.**

There were a few doctors in the camp but they couldn't do anything because there were no medical supplies. The same was true for the whole of the East Indies; degrading and humiliating treatment. The captors took the greatest pleasure in hitting, kicking and punishing us. If we had resisted, we would have been shot.

We had one excellent surgeon in the camp who rendered invaluable service and who deserves the highest recognition. He was able to operate successfully in extremely difficult conditions, a truly brave and persistent man. By chance a woman doctor from Medan had brought some surgical instruments into the women's camp and the surgeon was able to use them to carry out some successful operations on appendix removal and bladder disorders among others. But patients took a long time to recover because there were simply no special foods, at the most a piece of meat. Milk and eggs were not available.

The surgeon dealt with emergency cases, despite the risks involved. A little room abandoned by the Japanese served as an "operating theatre". It was swept clean because the chance of infection was very high and very probably fatal in those circumstances. There was initially no operating table but one was soon produced in the camp workshop.

Whenever the doctors attended the women in their camp, they were always assured of a hearty welcome. They would meet their wives and children, find out about their state of health and bring back information to us in our camp. We also had a pharmacist in the camp who had a good knowledge of local herbs. We could expect absolutely nothing from the Japanese so we had to fend for ourselves. Permission was sought for the pharmacist and a few doctors to leave the camp once or twice a week to look for herbs in the jungle. Fortunately this was granted so it was possible to prepare a few pills and medicines for the sick but they were of limited use. Anybody who had recovered from one bout of malaria could be sure that he would have a relapse during the following three weeks. They would be given more pills but never enough. If the internment had lasted just another three months, half the men in the camp would have died – of that every doctor was convinced.

Everybody lost weight and became thin. Wounds were almost certainly liable to become infected and sometimes tropical ulcers took six months or more to heal. Pellagra<sup>24</sup>, large red spots on the body, beri-beri, hunger oedema were frequent and we had no medicine to treat them. All the symptoms of under-nourishment were everywhere visible. Many people died in hospital and we could do nothing to help them. Only boiled rice with a few green vegetables and a few lumps of meat could be provided – not exactly nourishing fare.

The supply of bandages soon ran out and one had to make do as best one could with rags which were constantly re-used with consequences one can easily imagine. In the middle of the camp there grew a rubber tree which produced an ideal adhesive, latex. At first people tapped the tree at random but it was soon realised that this would have been fatal for the tree so access to it was controlled and every morning one person tapped the tree and the resulting latex was made available to all comers who

---

<sup>24</sup> Charles Samuels, a lawyer from Penang, died of pellagra in camp in 1944. His diary of the first few months of internment is now in the Rhodes House library, Oxford.

used it to secure their dressings. This tree served us right up to the end of our internment, for without it our plight would have been worse. Who would have thought that a single tree could have become so valuable!

### **Division into four health categories.**

The doctors decided to divide everybody in the camp into four health categories in order to obtain an oversight of the prevailing health conditions. We all had to stand in line to be examined before being allocated to one of four groups, A, B, C or D. Those in Group A were the weakest and most in need of help. They formed the Skeleton Team and had priority for leftovers which helped them a little. Cleaning the cooking pots was the job of the boys and they formed themselves into licking and scouring teams. They took it in turn to lick and scour and the pots came back spotlessly clean.

### **Achieving the golden mean when doling out the food.**

Doling out the food was a major business and was one of the most thankless tasks in the camp. The trick was to give everybody an equal share and leave as little as possible left over – no easy task with 1000 men needing to be fed three times a day. A special measuring jar had been cobbled together and anybody who thought he wasn't getting his fair share could use this jar to decide. If you reckoned you'd been short-changed you went to the kitchen to complain. At first everybody used a medley of pots and pans but we soon introduced standard-size spoons and plates to avoid disputes. But still there were complaints; the food hadn't been stirred sufficiently or there were too many leftovers – there was always something to complain about.

Those who doled out the food were appointed on a permanent basis and as a result cases of favouritism began to be noticed which had to be dealt with. Sometimes one noticed dozens of men standing in line in front of one of the pots but none in front of the other. They were then reminded that food was doled out at both pots.

Hunger caused many to try and get two helpings despite strict controls to prevent it but it still happened and offenders were sent to the camp magistrate who ordered them to be denied food as well as those implicated.

### **Rumours concerning reuniting families.**

Rumours began to circulate that the Japanese were going to reunite families by interning them together and plans were supposed to be at an advanced stage. It was even thought the Japanese had given orders to build a new shed to accommodate them. Our 'administration' set to work and started to form groups on the basis of families with a view to helping the Japanese as soon as they gave the order. Hopes were high that families would soon be reunited. But some went to the administration and asked if they could remain bachelors.

"For God's sake, don't put me with that hag of my wife again!"

Fortunately there were exceptions. But of course, nothing ever came of the proposed plan.

### **Amazing things you can do with hoop irons.**

When we first arrived in the camp we came across a large number of hoop irons which had previously been used to bundle sheets of rubber together. Soon they were made into iron baskets, boxes and toys and other useful things. A toothbrush factory was set up because toothbrushes were unobtainable outside and every time a wild pig was brought into the camp, its bristles were carefully preserved to make more toothbrushes.

### **Removal of rubber supplies.**

One day the Japanese took away large amounts of rubber in the camp. We had used these piles of rubber to throw lice on to so that they were crawling with the filthy creatures and now at a stroke we were free of them. Or so we thought. But they were still there in abundance. Many of us went outside in the midday sun to try and rid our clothes of them instead of having an afternoon nap. At least they had a slight chance of sleeping at night.

### **Introduction of a work schedule.**

In our Padang prison we had hundreds of coconuts at our disposal every day. They were added to our vegetables so that we had some vegetable fat in our diet. The meat was grated and some of it baked so that we could sprinkle it over our rice. But in Bangkinang we seldom or never had coconuts. They did not grow in our gardens and the Japanese never bothered to supply us with any. But whenever we did get some, they were made into all sorts of useful things such as ashtrays and mugs and an Englishman even made a splendid teapot.

Those who had some skill or other tried their best to turn it to their advantage, especially when it came to getting extra rations. Gradually a buddy system or clique emerged and such people were considered indispensable and irreplaceable. Only a few outsiders were admitted and they were replaced by others after a few weeks. But when they wanted to get rid of someone, they ganged up and gave him all the meanest and filthiest jobs to do but this was noted and the whole camp was up in arms about it. That just wasn't done! It had to be stopped and any management committee which allowed this to happen had to be replaced. So next day we had a new committee but a few weeks later it too was replaced usually for the same reasons.

The fact that new people constantly tackled new tasks wasn't so bad. They weren't arduous and anybody could try his hand. There were those who specialised in specific tasks while others were just casual workers. So it was quite possible for a former salesman of women's brassieres to pose as a first-rate cook while a sea captain turned out to be the only man in the camp who knew how to make soap.

### **Night visits to the women's camp.**

One morning we were ordered to parade and informed that some of our number had escaped during the night. They had gone to the women's camp and had gained access by digging a hole beneath the fence. However they had been observed by the local police, arrested and brought before the Japanese Military Police. The next day one of them was brought back to us, the others having escaped unrecognised. He had been badly beaten and all the joints of his fingers had been broken. The Japanese

always held roll-calls and one of the officers showed great sympathy for the man and every day went to his room to comfort him.

For seven months he went around with his hands in splints and even then his fingers were stiff and barely usable. He had paid a severe penalty but at least he had met his wife and spent a few hours with her. His wife, who had been with him when he was caught, was worried to death about what had happened to him as nobody told her anything. However, she was much relieved when she learned later that he had survived, even though an invalid. At least his life had been spared.

### **Even less food caused by a broken bridge.**

A large wooden bridge had been constructed by the Japanese during the war on the road between Bangkinang and Pajacombo along which all our supplies were transported. One day the Japanese announced that the bridge had been washed away by a flash flood and so all vehicles had to be ferried across. The result was that our already meagre rations were further reduced by a third until the bridge was repaired. But it was all a pack of lies as we later discovered. Did the many local officers and guards steal from us during the internment or were they obeying orders from above? Probably the latter because it was the case in all the camps. Some of us now produced brown beans which they had received before being interned and decided to keep for emergencies. They were immediately arrested and interrogated but it turned out that the beans we had all been given when we were moved to Bangkinang should have been handed back but those arrested had decided to keep a few back, just in case – and now they were vindicated.

### **Dysentery epidemic.**

There was a dysentery epidemic in the camp with appalling consequences. People died every day and the doctors could do nothing. There was no *imitime*<sup>25</sup>, the only medicine which could have been effective and all we could do was offer a drink which was of little use. With each death announced to the Japanese, six planks were delivered to make a coffin.

That April forty people died, including some very young ones, one only eighteen. There were days when four bodies were taken away on a cart or vehicle. Graves were dug by a few boys who received extra food from the Japanese for their labours. They were often able to take messages to the women who came to the graves.

No visits were allowed during the epidemic and many died without seeing their families beforehand. It was a great privilege to be allowed to bury a member of one's family. But usually the women knew nothing about the fate of their husbands or sons until a week or so later when they received a communication informing them of their deaths. In a word – heart-breaking.

### **Heroic resistance by the women.**

The women were forced to forage for wood in the jungle outside the camp and returned hours later deadbeat carrying wood, mostly rubber trees, on their shoulders. Only then were they able to prepare their food. But they kept up their spirits to the

---

<sup>25</sup> I have been unable to identify this medicine.

glorious end despite the prevailing misery. When the Japanese came one day to take away the prettiest girls, the women confronted them and held them at bay with an assortment of weapons, forks, knives, pieces of wood etc. Fortunately the Japanese beat a retreat otherwise they would have been killed while the pretty girls lived to see another day. Their mothers would have preferred death by bullet or bayonet rather than let their daughters fall into the hands of such filthy scum.

### **Much to do for a little food.**

Our men also left the camp regularly to forage for wood in the jungle and have the chance of meeting the women there without the Japanese knowing. In the camp we made a large cart with two large wheels which had to be pulled by about twenty men because of the heavy loads of wood it was designed for. Twice a week we also had to fetch wood for the women's camp; on other days they had to shift for themselves. It was a sad sight to see the men, their rib cages prominent, sweating and groaning with fatigue as they pulled the cart, but we had no choice. Men volunteered to pull the cart because they received a little extra *ubi* and even men in A Group, the sickest and weakest with festering wounds, tried to volunteer - anything to get that little bit of extra food! All sorts of tricks were tried out and the doctor couldn't possibly control everybody, but whenever anybody was caught out, he was excluded for good from extra rations.

Nobody worked very hard outside the camp but being outside meant that the Japanese supplied one with a few extra kilos of potatoes but quite a lot of it was rotten because the Japanese kept the best for themselves. Later we were able to grow more of our own potatoes and increase our supply but when the Japanese found out, they cut back our rice ration so that we had to stop growing them because rice contained far more vitamins than potatoes.

The boys were keen to get outside the camp and always found a way to get round the Japanese. If they were caught, they were beaten and often put on half rations. After we had had one of our periodic food shortages, the Japanese suddenly began to distribute extra rice to the workers, thus taking from some to give to others. Did they intend to sow discord in the camp? How else were their actions to be understood? Some of them showed their disapproval by refusing to accept the extra portion but in the end the workers got more than the rest and only on special holidays was extra food given to everybody.

### **100 kilos for the Japanese is only 75 for us.**

Some of us had to go to Pekan Baru, about 60 kilometres away to fetch our supplies from the warehouse. There they had to load the lorries themselves, really hard work in the circumstances. All the sacks weighed 100 kilos according to the Japanese. In reality, most of them weighed only 75 kilos. And the pap the sacks contained was appalling; it tasted like paste for hanging wallpaper and moreover, we had to eat it without sugar!

### **Scouting.**

A former member of the local government organised scouting activities for a number of the boys including football, running and tig and taught them several useful



things such as semaphore and tying knots. But when the Japanese saw them using semaphore, they stopped it. Later it stopped altogether mainly because the boys no longer felt like playing, especially after such meagre rations. In general the boys remained in good condition in the camp. They were hungry of course but it was their parents who really suffered and aged prematurely.

### **We make our own clogs.**

At first we still had our clogs or could at least buy them but now we had to make our own. The wood came from outside and were made into clogs by our own clog makers using bits of rubber they found lying around. There were no nails to be had but we managed to make pins out of rolls of barbed wire which were adequate substitutes. Prices rose daily and people were not ashamed to demand two and a half guilders. Anybody lucky enough to still have a watch could demand at least 2000 guilders with which he could live well for a time even though a kilogram of filthy horse sugar cost thirty guilders. Peanuts later cost ten guilders an ounce.

### **A work creation scheme.**

Work had to be found for the work parties otherwise they wouldn't get their extra ration of sago so the maddest tasks were dreamt up. Thus two large concrete rings lay in a dip and had to be hauled up, a task worth plenty of extra sago in itself. Sometimes other tasks were carried out without rhyme or reason but these rings were finally raised and used to construct WC's in the camp's little garden. For days on end we all dug the soil and even a clergyman did his bit, looking just like Daniel in the lion's den. When the rings were put in place and the loos built, everybody immediately started complaining about the appalling stench so the rings were then filled with soil and became fertile gardens. All this activity served to generate extra food for everybody involved.

### **Chance contacts with the women's camp.**

The boys often had to carry out tasks outside the camp and sometimes had the chance to exchange a few words with their mothers or sisters but this was seldom and weeks would go by without any contact at all.

### **Disposal of the dead.**

As so many people died in camp without dependents, an agreement had to be reached about what to do with their belongings and so the Orphan's Committee was authorised to receive everything the deceased left behind. Regular auctions were held so that clothes and other useful items could be re-distributed amongst us and if the bids were too low, the items were withdrawn and put up for auction again at a later date in the hope of attracting higher prices. People dying in hospital could make a will and witnesses were provided.

### **Gardening by turns.**

Occasionally the Japanese would allocate us a small plot of land for cultivation of vegetables, *ubi* or *terrong*.<sup>26</sup> Now and again it would yield some bananas. We grew them for preference on previous dung heaps or rubbish tips because there they grew more quickly and yielded more fruit. Once the head gardener, a planter, delivered some bananas to the hospital but when the Japanese saw this they beat the poor, fifty-year-old man up. That was his “reward” for his good deed. “You have to get permission first” the Japanese said and this also applied whenever we wanted to harvest some vegetables. We had to ask the camp commander first who usually granted our request. We grew potatoes on any free patch of ground we could find and in this way private plots evolved. However, everyone wanted their own private plot so a committee was set up to allocate plots to individuals by lottery for a period of five months after which you had to give up your plot to the next man. Nobody expected to feed himself from his own plot because by then everyone thought they would be liberated. But the plots changed hands four times before the long awaited liberation arrived.

### **Eating with difficulties.**

In Bangkinang there was no communal table at which we could all eat together. We all took our helpings back to our own little spot and squatted down like tailors to eat. Those who had finished their meal then began to lay out their mats for a siesta but not before beating the dust out of them. This all took place in one room and tempers would often fray. Afterwards we would sit together and ask each other, “Well, how many bits of intestine did you get today?”. Sometimes it was as many as four bits.

Despite the shortage of food, some men sold their ration of rice to get money to buy tobacco. The result was that when they went into hospital, the little medication available had to be administered to them – and it was their own fault that they were there! In other cases some men left the camp as corpses and during a dropsy epidemic the death rate was four times the normal number.

### **Our wretched diet causes much pain and anguish.**

Bones and swollen bellies were in evidence everywhere due to lack of vitamins. Ulcers had to be cut open and every day the exposed flesh would rot further away. The tendons of the foot were clearly visible in some cases. One man happened to have a minor accident causing a small wound which wouldn’t heal. After months of pain during which the flesh on his leg rotted away, the doctor had no choice but to amputate his leg. 45 minutes later he reappeared minus his leg with a little stump where the leg had been and it was reverently laid to rest in a graveyard. At first everything went well but soon he began to bleed because an artery had been ruptured. He eventually died of a stroke. Such was the dreadful result of a minor injury. It was a

---

<sup>26</sup> Malay for aubergine, known in South Africa as brinjal.

very sad case and served as a warning that minor wounds and injuries could have fatal consequences.

A boy accidentally cut himself in the leg while hacking wood. It was extremely painful for him and at one stage amputation was considered but the lad said he'd prefer to die than lose his leg. Fortunately he survived and after liberation was given proper medical treatment.

### **Booming black markets.**

Fortunately for us, the local policemen were susceptible to bribery and so the black market thrived mightily. Everybody sold their clothes, some even down to their last pair of trousers and had to go around with a towel when the trousers were being washed. We had little choice.

The market was most active at night. Then the local policemen left their posts and entered the camp. The camp management had appointed permanent members of the police to whom one could entrust one's goods for sale and the haggling went on all night. Clothes, watches, gold rings, musical instruments, knives, everything disappeared over the wall. Even during the day haggling would go on when the police were guarding us from their watch towers situated at all four corners of the camp. Objects for sale were laid out in front of them and sellers asked what the guards would give for them. In this way these police guards earned about twenty times what the Japanese paid them to guard us.

Now and again they had a few days leave during which they went to Padang, Fort de Kock or Pajacombo where they would sell our things for greater profit. Dealers also came to us from the west coast to buy what they could but the police guards were always the middlemen. On a few occasions they guided some of us to the women's camp under cover of darkness for which they received large sums of money. It was risky because there were spies about but they were never caught. They were too experienced in the ways of smuggling people around and besides, it was a nice little earner.

### **Our Buying Committee.**

For a while the black market had to be suspended when articles were being purchased by the policemen which were then sold on at an extremely high mark-up. But in the long term market forces reasserted themselves because everybody yearned for that little extra. The Buying Committee at one time controlled all purchases in the camp and organised the distribution. You could bring anything you liked into the camp but you had to offer it to the committee which would decide the selling price but it was usually so low that no profit could be made so in the end people tried to dodge the rules. One day some boys caught a little monkey in the jungle and brought it to the Buying Committee who had no idea what to do with it. So the boys kept the monkey and a few days later it escaped – fortunately, because otherwise it would definitely have ended up in the pot!

### **“Marie”, our hot water boiler.**

Anybody who had managed to keep a supply of clothes could get extra food and thus just about get by. Others pretended to be too weak to carry their own bags in order to get them loaded onto lorries or cars.

We had discovered an old boiler in the camp and our engineers had managed to convert it into a splendid hot water kettle with a number of taps so that anybody could help himself to hot water. We made great use of it for even a little hot water poured onto coffee one one's mug was an absolute treat. We often asked the Japanese to let the women's camp use it but they refused, saying the women could boil their own water. It was also extremely useful and effective in getting rid of lice.

### **In emergencies your possessions are vulnerable.**

The policemen who guarded us were dead keen on making a profit but if there was no gain they just sat at home and left us to our own devices. Basically they were just kids who liked to play around with their rifles. One Sunday morning, during Catholic mass, a shot was suddenly heard. A bullet flew over the heads of the congregation straight through a fence. Fortunately nobody was hit but the bullet went literally through the church. Furthermore, they were inveterate thieves who helped themselves every day to our stores which were kept in a small unguarded room. The Japanese never intervened. Once a large can of petrol disappeared from our supplies which we used for lighting purposes. But the worst was when we confiscated a large quantity of sago from somebody which appeared to have been stolen by the police guards from our own stores.

In this way our own people colluded with the increasing number of gangs in the camp. Theft was rife. Clothes disappeared from clothes lines and out of the camp. You could hang nothing up to dry and leave it there otherwise it would vanish. You'd have to sit and guard it. One night a pastor hung up on the wall his cassock, trousers, a coat, a pair of socks, a purse containing money, a pocket knife and two khaki shirts worth several dozen guilders. It all vanished and was probably whisked out of the camp that same night. He was one of the few relatively well off but now he had nothing.

### **Idle chatter about vitamins, calories etc**

Some of our camp comrades considered themselves to be experts in the fields of vitamins and nutrition and in the evenings took it in turns to deliver long lectures on the subject. You had to eat this to prevent that and this was good for that and so on and so forth. Often until late into the night. Calories were also discussed. You had to take it easy and lie down, it was thought, otherwise you would use up too many calories. If you received a definite amount of sago for carrying out a task, was it worth the trouble in the end? Wouldn't it have been better to remain lying on one's bed? The teachers received 25 grams of sago for each lesson but they said they should receive more than an egg a day because they needed the protein and the phosphate. But it was all to no avail – there was none, even for the sick.

### **After lice, ants and.....rats!**

Suddenly one of the sheds was totally free of lice. What on earth had happened? It took some time before we found out. Ants had now arrived and had

driven the lice out, possibly by eating up their eggs. It turned out to be a splendid way of getting rid of them; such a pity that we found out about it shortly before liberation. But what came in place of lice? Rats, everywhere rats. At night they ran everywhere, between us and over us and many were caught in traps and then eaten. Some of us swore that they were delicacies. One night somebody was bitten by a rat, leaving a horrible wound which for months refused to heal. Later a little boy suffered the same fate. The women's camp also had huge problems with them and anybody without a mosquito net could get no sleep. The rats consumed everything they could reach, including tobacco.

### **POW's pass by the camp.**

One day, quite unexpectedly, a large number of POW's passed by our camp on the way to Pekan Baru from Padang. Women and children climbed on to the fence to get a look at something quite out of the ordinary. Many of the women recognised their husbands and no shouting Japanese guard could haul them back from the fence from where some of them were able to exchange a few words with them. Days passed before the last prisoners finally passed by.

Cries of joy erupted when the men passed by despite the many blows they received from the guards. The men looked well and some still had the healthy look of their homeland on their faces. From Pekan Baru they were later sent to other parts. In the Straits of Malacca, we later heard, some of the men had been bombed and strafed with great loss of life.

Once we heard very clearly the sound of bombs exploding on Pekan Baru's aerodrome. Military doctors in our camp were then summoned by the Japanese and sent to Pekan Baru, together with a pastor and an army chaplain. They were later bombed at sea and they drifted for hours before being picked up and saved. When we met them later after liberation, they told us about the other POW camps in Java, Burma and Malacca where appalling conditions had obtained resulting daily in many deaths. The construction of the terrible "railway of death" from Pekan Baru, 220 kilometres south through the jungle, is a terrible chapter in Japanese history. Malaria affected some 95% of the men in the Pekan Baru camp and there were no remedies for it. Many died also of dysentery and starvation.

After liberation, all camps were provided with food and clothing as quickly as possible but at Lantak-Pajah one camp was overlooked and it was a week before they got anything at all. Just about everybody was totally unfit for duties and needed a lengthy period of recuperation abroad to recover their health but this could not be done overnight.

### **Our resident camp leader shows no fear of the Japanese.**

The Japanese didn't always have it their own way and were frequently confronted with the truth of the situation. Our camp leader, despite many imperfections, appeared to possess some very good qualities and did a lot for the camp, constantly pushing for improvements, but without success. He sometimes got up the nose of the Japanese, especially when he complained about the vegetables. We used to get the worst potatoes and the oldest. Even the buffalos outside the camp wouldn't touch them. When we asked the Japanese whether they couldn't improve our lot in the camp, they replied that we were a lot better off compared with other

camps. And besides, they added, the women's camp was very well provided for. But we knew better from the many letters we received from them which were all smuggled to us for a hefty bribe.

### **Wood vegetables prepared by “Marie”.**

The gardeners would bring in to the camp so-called “wood vegetables” which were not destined for the camp pot but only for private consumption. All sorts of junk was consumed without being properly cooked, just lightly steamed before eating and sometimes not even that. There was always a long queue in front of “Marie” waiting to steam their rice or vegetables from one of the two steam pipes.

### **Setting up the N.O.E.L. Club.**

Because the eternal talk of delicious food that everybody hoped to enjoy in the future never stopped, five or so men decided to set up a club called the NOEL Club – the “Food is a Four Letter Word” Club<sup>27</sup>. They solemnly swore never to talk about food and anybody could join the club who could swear the oath. You just cannot imagine how boring it was to hear everybody prattling on about food day in day out.

### **We are ordered to go “padi-stamping”.**

Hitherto the Japanese had always provided us with rice which had been de-husked although occasionally we had to do it ourselves. One day we were informed that from now on the rice delivered to us had to be “stamped” (de-husked) by us. We were now being humiliated by doing the work of the poorest native. Our rice deliveries then stopped and tons of padi were then brought in to the camp and straight away we set to work de-husking it both for us and the women's camp. We got through about a ton of padi a day, yielding about 600 kilos of rice (200 for us, 400 for the women). It was hard work for our weakened bodies, especially at first when we felt sick and dizzy although later things improved.

On the first evening we “stamped” by moonlight and sang songs accompanied by whatever instruments we could find so as to make the work a bit more bearable. What a sight! A large number of swaying Europeans, stamping and singing to keep their spirits up. We had now plumbed the depths of civilisation, at least outwardly. But it had one great advantage in that it yielded more rice than the Japanese had let us have before so we now had more to eat, a very important factor. The second advantage was that large amounts of rice husks were obtained which could be administered to beri-beri patients and others with vitamin B deficiency. A drink was made of this extract with some lemon juice but it was also eaten in dry form. In other camps it was even injected, frequently with positive effect.

After a few months we went over to normal white rice without vitamins because the padi was finished. Then we were ordered to make rice husk mills which we used the following year instead of de-husking by hand, a considerable improvement. The mills were water driven so only a few people were necessary to fetch and carry thus relieving the rest of us from any work.

---

<sup>27</sup> *Niet Over Eten Lullen* in Dutch. As a young man I once came across a notebook my father had kept in the camp. Long lists of menus with mouth-watering foods were juxtaposed with lists of Dutch words and mathematical formulae which my father used to keep his mind active. Understandably, food was an obsession. The notebook was accidentally destroyed in a warehouse fire many years ago.

Liberation day arrived before the padi supply was exhausted. When the padi was brought in to us, it was frequently still wet and we had to take care that it didn't get too hot because that was very dangerous. Drying it in the sun was something not everybody understood how to do properly. Fortunately we had a number of men in the camp who could almost pass as "natives". Previously they had lived on the fringes of the kampong and knew all about handling rice. It was also dried in the kitchen ovens. These people spoke Malay all day long and you would never think that they were in fact Dutchmen. Actually, many of them weren't, however much they might have thought. The Japanese had interned everybody who could speak a little Dutch, both with us and in the women's camp. Many women there were interned with their maids. There were more black and yellow people than "totoks", that is, genuine Dutch people.

### **Our two leaders are summoned by the Japanese.**

One day our two leaders were taken away in a luxury car to Pekan Baru to confer with the Japanese. Many thought this a change of management, especially when they didn't return the same day. When they came back after three days, they were still wearing the same clothes. They had had a good time. On the first day they had been offered tea and four eggs. What a treat! They were well fed and the Japanese only asked them a few questions about their functions. The rest of the time they just hung around.

### **Ingenuity is called for.**

We had somebody in the camp who was very skilled at making dental instruments which our dentist could put to excellent use. True, he couldn't make fillings but other things such as extraction or dental hygiene he could perform perfectly, a great boon for those who suffered from toothache. By way of a fee, he received an extra plate of soup and half a portion of rice, but only on the day he actually performed the operations.

Other doctors received each day a little extra sago and once a week some salt and liquid soap. The soap was made in the camp out of the ash from the boiler "Marie" mixed with coconut oil and other things. It was very good soap, if a bit too strong for washing clothes. It was sold at a very high price. Sago cost 65 guilders a kilo but much of the work making things was done on a voluntary basis.

One such example was the camp shop set up by a group of people out of love for their fellow men and on a non-profit making basis in which items could be bought at prices much lower than on the black market but still quite high. But what happened after a few months? A report was published alleging that various items had been given to the shop assistants together with a salary of 20 guilders during a specified period. What a scandal!

Later practically all the items disappeared because the Japanese hired native guards armed with crowbars instead of rifles. Those housed in rooms next to them at night could get no sleep because of the noise they made and had to move elsewhere. These shameful traitors were well fed and sometimes we managed to raid their dustbins and find something edible. Once the Japanese brought a couple of pigs in which had to be fed with potatoes and roots, a much better diet than we ever had

during our internment. Those responsible for feeding them took the lion's share and the pigs got rather less.

### **Schooling carries on.**

In the beginning there was so much work to be done to get the camp up and running that there was no time to organise schooling but the headmaster was keen to start it as soon as possible. Later, things calmed down and we started to build a classroom in the back garden, a process which took 12 days but unfortunately only one day of teaching took place before the Japanese closed it down. The building had to be dismantled and re-erected inside the camp perimeter fence before any more teaching could take place, three hours in the morning and three in the afternoon. Everybody had three hours instruction a day. In other camps they had much less and credit is due to the priests of Padang who taught the primary age children despite many difficulties.

There was no paper so the boys had to write on wooden boards with the very few available pencils and after the lesson the boards had to be erased for the next lesson. Nothing could be repeated so perhaps about 10% of the lesson was wasted but it was better than nothing. Although no final leaving exam could be held, about seven boys did actually sit the secondary school leaving exam a few months before liberation. They had worked very hard under very difficult circumstances and fully deserved their diplomas. The Camp Leader and the headmaster had no doubt at all that their diplomas would be recognised in future. The priests prepared a few boys for the lower Civil Service exam, English correspondence etc so that for many boys their internment was not wasted.

### **Illegal night meals.**

We got so little to eat, especially in bulk, that it was quite normal to go to the toilet only once every eight days. The latrines lay close at hand as I have already described in some detail. Once two men sat there side-by-side, one suffering from dysentery while the other remarked that he wasn't able to go every day as that was a luxury reserved for the black market dealers and other favoured people. It was indeed amazing how many of these people put on weight through eating sago. What happened was that they stuffed themselves at night because they were too ashamed to be seen doing it by day.

### **Making something solid from sago pudding.**

Suddenly, a Japanese officer felt it necessary to deliver a speech. He told us that our possessions wouldn't be worth anything in a month's time so we had better sell them. This was clearly a ploy for the Japanese to get their hands on everything we had but nobody fell for it.

Nothing was said about food nor did we ask because it would have been useless. By now virtually nothing was being brought into the camp so we had to survive on very meagre camp rations which in the last few months was very little indeed. Activities in the kitchen were reduced to just warming up or steaming whatever was available and many of us got swollen faces and bellies and so tried to take in as little water as possible. One's ration of sago pudding, 98% water, was held over a small flame in order to steam away the water and leave about three spoonfuls



of solid matter. The “Skeleton Gang” of seriously undernourished people grew daily. Then somebody came up with the bright idea of adding less water to the sago, what we called “bamie”. So Sundays were “Bamie Days” for those who still had money and could buy sago and all sorts of ways were tried out to make the stuff a bit more palatable.

Because of the total lack of fat in our diet we began to feel the cold and every morning we sat out in the sunshine as if we were living at the North Pole! We lay for hours in the sun and felt much better as a result. Some of us got very deeply tanned but it was a real pleasure to lie there and bask.

### **Occasional parades of the Skeleton Gang.**

When the visit of some Japanese Big Cheese was announced, everybody was summoned to parade and all the most emaciated POW's were rounded up from wherever they could be found and ordered to stand near the hospital. The promise of extra food meant that one had to become an exhibit from time to time and the Japanese all looked on with grinning faces as much as to say “This is how we'll do you in!”

The doctors asked repeatedly for improvements but all to no avail. The Japanese avoided the hospital like the plague for if there was one thing they feared more than anything else, it was disease or a diseased person who might infect them. They would prefer to go into battle with bullets flying all around them. They were no cowards in battle and did not fear death because they were convinced that by dying in battle they would go straight to their Sun God. In extremis, they would often prefer to commit suicide by exploding a hand grenade in their own hand – a quick and painless death.

### **The exceptional status accorded to the British.**

The British heard from the Red Cross or other official bodies and often received post directly from England, Scotland or Australia. But the Dutch got nothing and weren't allowed to send anything – only the British were. One often hears flattering things about the British, their gentlemanly ways etc but we saw no evidence of this in our camp. The British with us were pure egoists, shameless scoundrels and we were able to confirm the observation of one Englishman who said “*The scum of our nation is poured into the colonies*”.

They had come to the camp as poor as church mice and many of us had taken pity on them and given them clothes but later we found that these “gentlemen” had sold them and kept the proceeds for themselves. They often tried to jump the food queue although without success. Once a large Red Cross parcel arrived, probably by way of the Dutch government, but we were told that the British would receive twice as much of the contents as the Dutch – and they insisted they did. Previously they had shared our pocket money but not one word of thanks did we hear from them. No, these people were very unpleasant indeed. There may have been exceptions but human behaviour in the extreme conditions of a POW camp is a world apart.

### **Meat from the Emperor on the Princess's birthday.**

On the occasion of the Emperor's birthday, the Japanese gave us a pig which we kept for the following day which was the birthday of HRH Princess Juliana<sup>28</sup>. It provided a tasty meal and served to strengthen our longing for liberation.

The bones, first served up with vegetables, were then scraped and re-used. They were then broken open and the marrow extracted to provide a little fat and administered to the sick as "Bone Water". If it didn't help much, at least it gave them courage. When the Japanese were told that 220 people were buried in the Bangkinang churchyard, they replied that there was room for 1200. "Die in peace" they said.

### **We are ordered to pick cotton.**

The Japanese claimed they had no transport available for provisions but there was no problem when it came to bringing in a huge consignment of raw cotton which we were ordered to rid of seeds. For every kilo of seeds we would receive a quarter kilo of white sugar which sounded a lot but actually wasn't and sometimes we never got any at all. It was hard work and some of us got damaged fingers as a result. Then somebody invented a "machine" to make our work easier, a piece of barbed wire hammered into a plank secured by a clamp across which we could pull the cotton and this did the trick and earned us more sugar. But then something totally unexpected happened; a lorry drove into our camp with two buffalos, a gift from the Japanese governor of Riouw for our hard work with the cotton. The women's camp was also surprised with a gift of genuine meat.

### **News items obtained from the Japanese.**

We had an excellent news source in the Bangkinang camp, a Japanese soldier who secretly brought us Japanese newspapers. His price was high but he proved a reliable source. We were thus kept abreast of the news. The Japanese newspapers of course always gave good news but at the same time, whenever there was a reversal they gave details. We had to buy towels and socks and anything else of value to the soldier which we bought with the money we received and these were then exchanged for the news. We had to be extremely careful that no Japanese were around when the news was read out in our various sheds. When the call "Red Alert" came, this meant danger so we immediately switched over to reading routine camp announcements until the danger passed after which we resumed reading the Japanese news. Amazingly there was somebody in the camp who could read Japanese and was able to translate it into Dutch but this was done at night in order to prevent the Japanese from finding out.

During the last few months of internment we noticed a change in their behaviour towards us. They no longer used violence or threats. We however had been through too much to meet them halfway. Many of us were itching to get our hands on them but under the circumstances still prevailing it would have been suicidal. So we calmly bided our time.

---

<sup>28</sup> 30 April

## **Chapter 5 The Sudden End**

### **The atomic bomb saves us.**

Although as I have said we had a very good source of news, the end of the internment was totally unexpected. At about 11 pm on 21 August 1945 we were informed that from now on we would receive 600 grams of rice instead of the previous 200 grams. Also that we would get better meat and vegetables. And indeed so it turned out for the next day we got two large rice meals, an enormous improvement and we quickly guessed that something was up. Nobody knew what it could be but we were all hopeful.

Then we heard that the camp leader had been summoned by the Japanese together with a representative of the British. We waited in a state of intense excitement for the gates to open and allow them back in. When he came he was greeted with shouts of joy and a bit later he gave a short speech at which everybody was present. The Japanese, he said, had surrendered because a new sort of bomb, the atomic bomb, had been used against them by the Americans.

The mood in the camp that evening was indescribable. Three and a half years of misery was now about to end. Food was no longer the main topic of conversation as now all bellies were full. The camp leader reckoned we would be in Padang in about a week.

During the next few days we stuffed ourselves with food. Chickens were slaughtered and dozens of eggs appeared and legs of ham. But there were casualties. One man ate so much rice, dry nasi goreng and drank so much liquid that the rice expanded in his stomach, tearing it open and he died in agony and was buried the same day. Very sad but it was his own fault.

### **We go to the women's camp.**

Next day we made our promised visit to the women's camp. We spent the morning making preparations until the first of our three groups left the camp and in ten minutes arrived at the women's camp. Needless to say, we were received with hugs and kisses, crying and sobbing. Many men were appalled at the appearance of their wives and children and many women hardly recognised their husbands. We had all changed and aged and even although we had been separated from each other for three and a half years, we could only exchange inane remarks. But we were happy, so happy in fact that we were disappointed when, after an hour, we had to return to our own camp to make way for the next group of visitors.

The women were well prepared and laid on a great feast with cakes, biscuits and home-made salads all arranged on various tables with tablecloths. All the women had put on their best clothes and even though there was no strong drink, we had never partied so intensively in our lives before. We took our leave but only for a few days, we hoped. In fact from then on we could spend a few hours every day with wives and children as long as we were back before darkness fell.

### **Various necessary measures are taken.**

The state of our clothes was now ruinous. Many of us couldn't go to the women's camp because we had nothing to wear. Even our trousers were totally worn

out and it was high time to do something about it. A few days later the Japanese delivered blankets, socks, clothes and soap as well as a large number of cigarettes, army supplies which had now been liberated. Indeed, the Japanese cooperated with us from the day of surrender and did everything they could to improve our lot. Medicines were made available and the doctors could now treat various illnesses, mostly with vitamin injections. Ointments and bandages also became available and coolies did the work we previously did; we were now once again the Top Dogs (“Mijnheer”)

Leaders now had to be appointed and were quickly found because they had the right to go to the women’s camp outside the stipulated hours and remain until 10 pm. The police turned out to be very useful, especially concerning the children who were always a nuisance and were very difficult to control. For example, they would sit around in the women’s camp and bawl out loud instead of singing nicely. Many times they had been told to be quiet but they paid no attention. Then an officer called them together and told them in no uncertain terms that they had better behave themselves and that if they wanted to sing, they should do so properly. It worked, for the next time they sang, we heard a solemn rendition of the national anthem.

Children turned out to be troublesome and much had to be overlooked. Mothers had problems trying to bring them up properly in the confines of the camp and many older children were put in with the women they did not belong to. When the ladies changed their clothes, for example, they were present and witnessed things they perhaps shouldn’t have done. Not surprisingly, they became unruly after liberation and had to be kept in check.

### **Lice and mud to the bitter end.**

As already mentioned, the plague of lice never let up but now the end was in sight and we did our best to ignore them. But conditions in the women’s camp deteriorated in the final weeks due to incessant rain which turned the ground into a quagmire and we all squelched around in mud up to our ankles. The women had put up with all this for two years and during the so-called “sago time” when only sago was available, they had to visit the WC at the back of the camp sometimes seven times a night. No wonder that the policemen on duty at night sometimes got a pot-full on their heads – quite “by accident” of course!

### **Allied aircraft fly over the camp.**

Unexpectedly one morning a group of our allies turned up and told us that the war was indeed over but that it would take several months for everything to get back to normal. They were probably right. The previous day they had flown from Colombo to Pekan Baru from where they had come by car to our camp.<sup>29</sup>

We heard some stories about Holland and we were further told that in a few days we could expect aircraft to supply us with Red Cross parcels. Next day a large British Liberator bomber flew over – at least, that’s what an officer told us because we of course didn’t have the faintest idea what sort of aircraft it was. That was something we did not learn from Japanese newspapers! But what an event it was! The aircraft circled around for a while above our camp then dropped a large number of

---

<sup>29</sup> See G F Jacobs “Prelude to the Monsoon” (Cape Town 1965) for an account of the liberation of POW camps in Sumatra. Jacobs had been chosen by the British because, as an Afrikaans speaker, it was thought he could communicate more effectively with the Dutch.

steel containers which landed very obligingly close to the fence. At the men's camp, their aim was spectacular; the containers landed in a padi field nearby and were hauled out dripping wet but that of course was no problem. They were speedily unpacked and the contents were just what we needed. During the following days more aircraft dropped more gifts from the skies and were received with shouts of joy. On one of the parcels was written in Dutch;

Greetings from the crew and *smakelijk eten!* Jan, Piet, Klaas, Gerrit and Wim.

The containers all had the same contents so we had about three times as much supplies as we needed, so for example, we each had three shaving brushes and shaving tackles etc although we only needed one. It would have been better to have sent us more food but we were not disposed to look a gift horse in the mouth and everything was gratefully received.<sup>30</sup>

One aircraft dropped seven parachutists right by our camp representing the "occupation" – three Dutchmen, three Englishmen and a Chinese<sup>31</sup>, the latter landing right in the middle of the Kampar river from which he emerged soaking wet. The parachutes provided much needed material for clothes and a few days later the ladies were to be seen in the latest fashions. What was left of the parachute material was in great demand by the locals who thronged the camps and we could buy what we needed. But money played no part. The question on everybody's lips was, *Berapa telur?* (How many eggs?)

### **Liberation celebration.**

Church services were held with flags to commemorate the many who had died during internment. We all had mixed feelings. Many were beside themselves with joy at having survived but many women wondered about the fate of their husbands. Women whose husbands were posted "missing" were those who suffered most. It was better to have news of their deaths rather than to remain in a state of agonising suspense.

During the evenings the youngsters danced and some even announced their engagements but no marriages took place; couples did not remain together long enough for that to happen.

### **Behaviour of the Indians towards the population.**

Both camps, our and the women's, were guarded by Indian soldiers with bayonets on their rifles. These chaps dealt with the locals in their own special way. When one of these locals came along with a basket, they would help themselves to whatever they wanted and pay them whatever they thought they deserved. If any of us wanted something, all they had to do was ask one of these Indians and he'd take care of the matter. We paid five guilders for an egg but an Indian paid just one. A bunch of bananas cost us seven guilders, an Indian two or in some cases nothing at all. The

---

<sup>30</sup> Jacobs describes this episode thus; our visit to the women's camps coincided with the arrival of three Liberator aircraft. They swooped low over the camp before discharging their loads and it was a wonderful, thrilling sight. The dropping could be clearly seen from the huts and many of the women became hysterical with joy.

<sup>31</sup> The British were Capt Langley, Medical officer Capt Clark and his orderly Sgt Atherton. The Dutchmen were Lt Ledebor, Sgt van Onselaar and Sgt de Man. The Chinese was Tan Tjeng En, wireless operator.

locals were scared to death of them and did their best to avoid them. Every time they passed an Indian, they were forced to salute him. Only the women were allowed to pass unmolested. They also had a free hand in the women's camp and this was the reason why they were replaced by our own ex-internees. Not that the Indians weren't any good of course – they were excellent – but their behaviour towards the locals could not be tolerated for long.

### **Trench digging before the liberation.**

Just before the sudden liberation the Japanese told us that the Allies had begun to shoot up and bomb POW camps so we had to start digging trenches by the camp. The fact that machine guns now appeared was enough to suggest to the ex-internees and also to convince ourselves that these trenches were in fact going to be our mass graves. But who could be sure? The dropping of the atom bomb on Japan made our longing for liberation all the more necessary.

### **Lady Mountbatten visits our camp.<sup>32</sup>**

One morning just after liberation a detachment of Japanese arrived at our camp with pick-axes, hammers, chisels and crow-bars to break up our sheds, smarten the place up and generally make it presentable but they didn't get very far because we stopped them in their tracks. Everything should remain as it was and handed over to the Allies as evidence of what the Japanese had done there. A South African officer<sup>33</sup> took several photographs which were later made public. We also received an unexpected visit from Lady Mountbatten who inspected the conditions in both camps and took many notes. She was a delightful lady and had friendly words for everybody she met. We were pleased that this lady, wife of the Supreme Commander of the South East Asia Command was able to see for herself the conditions we had lived under in our camp.

The policemen who guarded the women's camp were ordered by the camp management to warn those women who were too scantily dressed not to venture outside the camp. They were right to do so. They were almost naked as they ran around the camp, a disgraceful sight - and it was the youngsters who were the worst offenders.

### **Our internment as a lesson for life.**

We had tried to make the best of our years of internment now behind us. Although we couldn't realise it at the time, our internment had its uses. Things occur in our lives which we cannot explain and whose deeper meaning eludes us but how

---

<sup>32</sup> The visit took place on 16 September 1945.

<sup>33</sup> This was Major Jacobs. Of Lady Mountbatten's visit he wrote; "For everybody she encountered she had a kind word, a ready smile and some encouragement. She appeared to have a knowledge of various languages for I heard her on a number of occasions use phrases in Dutch and when she visited the Indian camp she spoke Urdu". Of the conditions in Bangkinang on liberation, Jacobs wrote "The general living conditions in the Bangkinang camps were somewhat better and the spirits of the women internees higher than at some other camps. At the men's camp which was about a mile away the morale was low....Perhaps the women were more adaptable or had greater inner resources than the men but they seemed to withstand the rigours of internment more stoically".

often do we say afterwards “it’s just as well this or that happened”. Internment was for many of us the most difficult lesson we had ever learned in our lives.

### **The Indonesian red flag is hoisted with us too.**

When we were liberated we did not notice what was happening around us. We all took it for granted that we would soon return to our old plantations or businesses, but we were very much mistaken. During the first few weeks of liberation we could not go anywhere because there was no means of transport. The Japanese needed all their cars and trucks for themselves and totally ignored our needs. However, they looked after our provisions and we received plenty of rice, meat and vegetables and were soon in Seventh Heaven.

The people in the kampongs remained calm but we could soon see the effects of the propaganda from Java. Red and white flags began to appear on roof tops and windows but when they were banned by the Japanese they quickly disappeared.

### **The Chinese too must beware.**

We couldn’t act very strictly because our powers were limited but it wasn’t really necessary because the locals kept bringing us fruit and eggs, albeit at high prices but as we had easy access to Japanese money, this was not a problem. In Padang the situation was different, so we heard from the Chinese who now came to Bangkinang to do business. During the war they had kept a low profile but now they were active in helping people and without them we would have been much worse off. In Padang they had run the risk of being shot if they had shown themselves.

The Japanese had distributed many weapons among the local population, even tanks and aircraft but much more so in Java than in Sumatra, a fact which was clear from the news bulletins we heard from Pekan Baru. We had no doubt that any resistance would be nipped in the bud and did not know that the conflict would go on for months. But we were convinced that we would win in the end. It was impossible to believe that a great nation like Britain would succumb to a local threat. That would have been unheard of.

### **Alcohol reappears.**

The last days in the Bangkinang camp were chaotic. POW’s from Pekan Baru had brought drink into the camp although alcohol was strictly forbidden to avoid fights and drunkenness. But one evening there was a wild engagement party and everybody got blind drunk and bottles were thrown to the accompaniment of swearing and cursing although fortunately fights were prevented. Many women fled to the safety of their rooms at the sight of drunken Japanese while others ran over the road and concealed themselves in ditches. The alcohol was of very poor quality but fortunately for those concerned it was soon vomited up and they felt better.

### **We fly to Medan.**

After many rumours we heard that at last we would be leaving the camp. Those destined for Medan, in total no more than 125, were divided into groups of 25 ready to be flown there in a Dakota. These men were only from the Raoul, the rest

went to Padang or Palembang. At first the Resident tried everything he knew to prevent himself being taken to Medan, Palembang or Padang but all to no avail. But he had acquitted himself bravely and done much good, especially when the Allies arrived so not for nothing was he called the Lion of Riouw. Soon the first 25 took off, waved goodbye by their fellow prisoners for after knowing each other so intimately, they might never meet again. In ten days all those bound for Medan had left the camp.

One of the aircraft landed at Pekan Baru narrowly missing a small mound on the runway. The British pilots were not familiar with the aerodrome nor with the surroundings and besides, rain had turned the ground into a swamp. Fortunately nothing untoward occurred but just imagine spending three and a half years in an internment camp only to be burnt to death in a British Dakota.

The flight to Medan took two hours and the pilots were very kind and obliging. On arrival we were taken to a small shed and served some cold tea by a number of Japanese still in service. Iron discipline prevailed, for these people would never dream of changing sides. They clung to their code of honour to the end. Soon we were taken to the Beatrix School, the European Quarter of Medan where we were heartily welcomed and served a complete *rijstafel*. We were allocated a house in the European Quarter which was situated between two rivers and was thus easier to defend. No locals were permitted entry and if they ever tried, they were immediately stopped by the Japanese whom they still held in awe.

### **We get back to normality in Medan.**

The Indians used to come to our houses regularly to sell their wares, milk, fruit, cakes and many other things, all at high prices but we didn't care. The houses were in good repair and there was plenty of bedding and furniture which was evenly distributed. The Japanese had not plundered Medan to the extent they had elsewhere. Of course they had confiscated all jewellery, gold and watches but at liberation their owners were able to recover them although those who arrived later were not quite so fortunate.

There were some 7500 of us now in Medan, all internees, for that was what we still called ourselves even though we had been liberated and were completely free, reunited with our families and able to move around freely within the confines of our Quarter. If you wanted to go into town you simply asked the British and large buses were laid on to bring us there and back. Many made daily use of them for one purpose or another such as getting supplies or going to the information bureau.

After years of soul-destroying idleness, almost everybody now felt the need to work, especially as each day our physical strength returned. Bellies began to swell again and we felt fitter although appearances were often deceptive. Many of us began to show symptoms which we had not had during our internment such as swollen legs and faces and high temperatures. We didn't know the cause of these symptoms but the doctors thought it was because after years of being deprived of protein, the body was now unable to metabolize it.

### **Our shady camp proves to be a safe refuge.**

Hundreds of tall old trees provided welcome shade during the day which was especially welcome because Medan is very warm for most of the year. Whereas once we suffered from the cold because of the lack of fat in our diet, now we complained of



heat. Food was now much better but we couldn't change our clothes because of the presence of so many "ladies", so-called because they now walked around with hardly anything on at all, just a skimpy skirt and a bra. Sad to say, but true, many such "ladies" had slept with the Japanese or local policemen during the occupation to earn money. Almost all the women had stopped menstruating but after liberation and improved diet, things rapidly returned to normal and they began to complain of headaches, backaches and fatigue. The doctor often said to those who came to him, "Ladies, be thankful, things have got back to normal again".

### **Fierce national movements.**

The National Movement in Medan was quite different. Although there were no hostilities, almost every one of the locals wore a red and white badge. Many buildings were painted white on which slogans had been daubed.

"Down with Imperialism"

"What is good for the English Labour Party is good for us too"

"*Merdeka atau Mati*" (Freedom or Death).

The British totally ignored all this but when the locals began to shoot and throw grenades, sometimes even into our camp, they intervened and punished the offenders. Once during a film in the Beatrix School, the sound of gunfire could be heard, not only on the screen but also in our camp so we all had to evacuate the hall and retreat to the nearby garden. But an Englishman kept good order by simply saying "be quiet" and soon we carried on where we had left off.

The British and Indian Military Police in their impressive red hats rode around all day in their jeeps, both in town and in our camp. The locals were scared stiff of them and that of course was the intention – to show them who the masters were. During performances of plays and films they kept order and removed drunkards of whom there were, as always, many.

A canteen was opened with a special section for "Ex-internees and British troops" only but soon entry for the troops had to be prohibited because their behaviour left a lot to be desired. They would get drunk, go on the rampage and paint the town red and they also dated all available females, leaving none for the Dutch boys who didn't stand a chance. But they said, "our time will come and then we'll treat you as you treated us". Many women were scared of the coloured Indian soldiers and tried to avoid them as much as possible but the soldiers were in fact very friendly and were happy to protect us. But their appearance was intimidating and the women's apprehension understandable.

### **More and more military personnel and plenty of food.**

Every day more and more Indian and British troops arrived at the port of Belawan as well as tanks and machine guns, all making us feel very safe. Meals were prepared in a central canteen by a large number of Chinese who were paid for their services and who also received free board. They prepared a variety of dishes three times a day but many of us found that only one meal sufficed for the whole day. There was indeed plenty of everything and we didn't get any tinned food in the first few weeks at all.

Clothes were still a problem and three months after liberation saw us still wandering around in our Japanese trousers and skirts made from parachutes. But at

least we now had full bellies and no longer lay awake at night because of hunger. It was a great event to have meat and bread again after three and half years of deprivation.

We lived on charity, as we called it, because we were as poor as church mice. All we had was some worthless Japanese banknotes with which we could buy only some fruit and biscuits. The situation in town was still not normal and every day many aircraft flew overhead to land and take off from Medan airport which the Japanese had extended during the occupation and now came in very useful for the allies.

### **The KDP and RAPWI also look after the post.**

The Displaced Persons Office (KDP) and RAPWI (Relief Allied Prisoners of War and Internees) organised postal deliveries to our houses. No letters passed through native hands and we could be sure that letters and parcels were correctly delivered and not lost. Many other buildings were controlled by the Nationalists who organised their own postal system. However very few of these people were armed which was something of a relief.

### **The Repatriation Office is set up.**

On 25 October 1945 the Repatriation Office was set up in the KDP building in Medan, initially with three officials but the number quickly increased to 21, working six hours a day and often at night so that they managed to repatriate many people safely and efficiently. Thus a large number of British, Danes, Swedes, Swiss and Indians departed as well as some Dutchmen who had to get back to the Netherlands as quickly as possible.

Every day these offices were besieged by people wishing to be repatriated. They had to register themselves three times with different officials but many of them changed their mind after a few weeks and changed or cancelled their requests so as to trick the system and not wait for six months or more to be returned to Australia, New Zealand, India, Singapore or the Netherlands. Such people felt themselves fit and full of energy. But most of us ex-internees were still quite weak and urgently needed some rest and recuperation abroad, especially in a cooler climate and above all for those who had been suffering for three years from the effects of malaria. They swallowed large doses of atebine tablets and looked as yellow as saffron but they cheerfully took it all in their stride.

### **Repatriation for almost everybody.**

A Medical Commission of Enquiry found that almost everybody had to be repatriated, including the doctors who had had a difficult time during internment but had done their best, often at the cost of their own health. All praise to them! They had saved hundreds of lives, not so much with medicines but by their presence which had a calming effect.

### **The British refuse “native food”**

The British couldn't get used to eating rice and often refused it. They could afford to do so because there was always plenty of bread, sausages and herring. Rice is "native food" they said, not fit for us British.

### **Perms for ladies becomes a problem.**

Unfortunately the ladies couldn't get their hair permed in the local hairdressers so they had to go to a Chinese lady in town who demanded 450 Japanese guilders, a very high price because although Japanese currency was reckoned to be worth 4% of the pre-war guilder, this still means that they had to pay eighteen guilders whereas before the war ten guilders would have bought them the best perm. Moreover the quality wasn't as good and didn't last as long.

### **Only for members!**

Some of us were able to obtain clothes through the so-called "CCC Organisation", (Corruption, Connections and Cents) which was rampant. It was who you knew what counted; friends always had priority.

### **The Red Cross renders first-class service.**

What a splendid organisation the Red Cross is! They provided us with everything we needed except for clothes. All we had to do was tell them what things we needed for how many people and it was speedily delivered to our front doors. Dozens of Red Cross parcels were delivered. Each woman had 18 tins of toilet powder<sup>34</sup> while the soldiers had to make do with 12. They didn't need that many but they had to keep up with the ladies of course. But they had no grounds for complaint because they each received three shaving kits and five brushes. Paper was available in large quantities but we couldn't put stamps on our letters because there weren't any. Our families in Holland had to pay the postage due – poor devils. But in fact we wrote as little as possible.

### **Youngsters are well looked after.**

The youngsters could not go to school so other activities were organised for them to prevent boredom. In fact nobody could go to work so we rested, literally and figuratively, on our laurels. A special building was made available for scouting activities and tennis matches were organised on good, mostly grass courts. We also successfully organised football matches, mainly Holland against England which were mainly won by the Dutch in spite of having spent three and a half years in a prison camp with appalling food. Dozens of others throughout the archipelago had not fared so well and had died of starvation.

Primary schools were started up but the pupils had to provide their own materials, mainly a slate and a pencil. Early every morning you would see teachers with their pupils wandering around looking for an empty house in the camp to conduct their classes. Their young brains now had work to do and the grey cells began to buzz with intellectual activity.

---

<sup>34</sup> *toiletpoeder*

### **Terrible violence is evident.**

One evening one of our number was shot twice in the chest by a native and died a few hours later. It was even worse in Padang where one morning the bodies of two girls were found with their breasts cut open and all their limbs chopped off with an axe which lay nearby. They had been locked up in a house which had been firebombed. Flight was of no avail. The day after some men were shot in Padang market, among them a pleasant young Dutch boy who had lost his mother during internment. Fortunately he survived although for weeks he lay at death's door. When the crisis was over, he recovered quickly.

### **The last Japanese luxury.**

The Japanese still drove around in their large luxury cars while we had to pack ourselves into buses. But they were welcome to it because it was not long before they were rounded up and taken to Rempang, an island in the Riouw archipelago.

### **First reports from the Netherlands.**

The great moment arrived when we received letters from home. We had already received telegrams but this was different. What an event it was to hear from our families again after four and a half years. The letters from Holland gave us the impression that they were far worse off than we were but in fact both of us had probably suffered equally.

“We have all suffered so much that it is better not to talk about it” was a common refrain in the letters.

### **Departure and a new beginning.**

Many deaths had been announced over and over again and we had mixed thoughts of relief and gratitude on the one hand and regret at the loss of so much life through war and internment on the other. On warm Sumatra we had never really felt cold whereas in wartime Holland they had had to put up with extreme cold together with all the other deprivations. We all fervently hoped that the balance of war would turn out favourably for us in the future and that we could come to terms with our experiences.

We boarded the *Tjisidane* in Belawan harbour on 11 June 1946 and set sail with a large number of ex-internees. We arrived in our beloved country again on 9 July.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> It seems the Dutch had to wait much longer for repatriation than the British. My father arrived in Southampton aboard the *Ranchi* on 24 November 1945 and was reunited with my mother on platform 3 of Cardiff General station a day or two later after three years and ten months absence.