

70th Anniversary of V-J Day – Saturday 15th August 2015

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

The Malayan Volunteers Group would like to offer a warm welcome to you all, and especially to our Patron, Her Grace The Duchess of Norfolk, who is with us today, and whose grandfather was a Far East Prisoner of War. We are gathered here today, the 15th August 2015, to celebrate the 70th Anniversary of V-J Day and the true ending of all hostilities in the Second World War.

Our service today reflects the roots of many of us in the pre-war country which was then called Malaya, and which was often described as a 'Paradise on Earth.' Our fathers and relations lived, worked and raised their families in Malaya, and loved the country with its kaleidoscope of colours, many different races and fascinating history.

But in the late nineteen thirties and early forties all was soon to change as war clouds gathered in Europe, and the Second World War began. There was a call for all nationalities, races and creeds in Malaya to join the locally raised Volunteer Units, who were trained as Local Defence Forces to defend their country in the event of enemy action. When war eventually came to Malaya, the Volunteers were called up to fight alongside the Regular Allied Military Forces.

As the tragic events of 1941-42 unfolded, with the invasion of Malaya by the Imperial Japanese Forces, the peninsula was overrun and finally, on the 15th February 1942, Singapore itself fell. Our Volunteer relations who were captured there in uniform, became Far East Prisoners of War and endured 3½ years of brutality and starvation at the hands of their captors. Those Volunteers not in uniform when captured, were interned as civilians, together with the European families who had stayed behind.

Much is now known about their treatment. Less well documented, however, is the treatment meted out to civilians who were captured whilst escaping from Singapore in the final days before capitulation. This was equally degrading and horrifying in its savagery, especially in the more remote areas of the newly acquired Japanese Empire. So as well as the military POWs, we also include in our remembrance the hundreds of men, women and children who became civilian internees.

Thus our Service today has a three part theme:-

Malaya – the beautiful tropical pre-war paradise.

Remembrance – of those who were captured and became FEPOWs or civilian internees.

Thanksgiving – for the ending of the war, survival and freedom from captivity.

Finally, I would like to thank Canon Christopher Samuels very much for accepting our invitation to take our service here again today, after being with us in 2010 on the 65th anniversary of V-J Day. We are delighted he is here and offer him a very warm welcome.

THE LAST DAYS OF FREEDOM
SINGAPORE TO SUMATRA
15TH FEBRUARY – 17TH MARCH 1942

Extracts from the diary of John Hedley – of the Johore Volunteer Engineers

We arrived at Padang on the 10th of March 1942 during the afternoon, and were formed up and marched into the town. There was quite an organisation already set up in Padang, and we had not been there very long before we were detailed off to various billets. Our Group was now well split up, and I suppose it could be said that the first part of the escape trip, that to the west coast of Sumatra, had been accomplished. If we were to have any further success in escaping to India or Australia, the next part would depend entirely on the arrival of boats. It became a period of waiting and waiting and hoping and hoping.

After a few days in Padang, it became obvious that we were unlikely to see any ships in the harbour, and so this set our minds working on other means of escape. It wasn't long before we had a group of ten of us who had decided that if no ships were coming, then we must go and look for a boat that would take us over to India – a small matter of 1,800 miles – but this didn't daunt us at that particular time.

The problem was, of course, acquiring the boat, and although the expeditions up the coast had seen a number, we had not been successful in getting hold of one that we felt would stand the long trip. During this time the rumours were getting stronger and stronger that the Japanese were approaching fairly close to Padang, and it could only be a matter of time before we were taken prisoner. As always in cases like these, the end came sooner than we expected. It was a pretty ignominious end of our freedom and the date the 17th March 1942. All soldiers were told to report to a Chinese school, which we did and were herded into a small area. It is hard to describe one's feelings at a time like this.

The first thing, that we had to do was to hand in our arms, and following this we had a very long wait before being unceremoniously marched through the town and through the main gate of the old Dutch Barracks.

Thus started my "time" as a Japanese POW which lasted 3 ½ years. After a few months in Padang, we were transported by lorry to Medan from where we were to be shipped to the Burma-Siam Railway project. However, the ships that were due to collect us were sunk by the allies. We thus remained in a transit camp at Glugor, just outside Medan for eighteen months. During this time we were engaged in various manual work.

After eighteen months in Glugor, 200 of us were sent on a working party to build a road in the mountains of Atjeh in the north of Sumatra. A forced march on the road back was murderous - 85 miles in 84 hours constituted an atrocity. After a spell of "light work" in a coal mine we were transferred to the Moera-Pekan Baroe Railway project. We were directed to the rail head of the Pekan Baroe leg. Grim work this, equal to anything on the infamous Burma-Siam Railway – the story of which is well documented. The Sumatra project hardly at all.

The two halves of the railway – one starting at Pekan Baroe and the other at Moera were eventually joined together with a great fanfare of trumpets and ceremony. The Jap euphoria didn't last long, for the linking of the two parts coincided with the dropping of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombs in August 1945. The war and our incarceration were soon over. I survived. I was one of the lucky ones.

John Hedley died on 25th September 2009, aged 93

READING

Taken from "The Rainbow Through The Rain" by Revd. Geoffrey Scott Mowat Read by Alison Brierley

Geoffrey was one of the few POWs who escaped from Changi, was recaptured and sent up to the Burma-Siam Railway before returning to Singapore, first to Sime Road Camp and then Changi Gaol. Geoffrey dedicated the MVG's Memorial Stone at a special service held in the Arboretum ten years ago today, on 15th August 2005, using the small cross which he had used on the Railway.

This is an extract from his book telling of the surrender of the Japanese, and the end of WW2.

THE SWORD OF DAMOCLES

What momentous days! What an astounding finish! The duration of Y Party (**to dig fox-holes for the Japanese**), together with other similar groups, was cut short, providentially for us and all POWs in South East Asia, by the explosion in the Atom Bomb over Hiroshima, Japan, on Monday the 6th August 1945. I say providentially, for subsequently evidence of the Japanese intention to carry out mass-killings of POWs was discovered and, horrid though the Atom Bomb was at the time and in its dreadful aftermath, there is little doubt that its use saved the lives of tens of thousands of allied POWs. Within a week Y Party had returned to base and we were thankfully reunited with our various parent units in the Gaol again.

We were free! We had been liberated! But we were in the doldrums. Camp life continued as before, rations had to be drawn, meals prepared, fatigues of all sorts continued to be undertaken and outside parties for wood and gardening continued. Some ten days after hostilities ceased a small party was dropped in by parachute, a doctor and a few specialists to evaluate priorities. On the 5th September I saw the first evidence of a British presence, a cruiser lying off Keppel Harbour. Things were really beginning to happen!

While we waited for repatriation procedures to get under way, boredom was our chief enemy, so with my Thailand experience behind me I again volunteered as an orderly in the hospital, and to my delight was taken on as a dresser for Major Fagan, an Australian and a fine surgeon, who had done much brilliant work in camp hospitals on the Railway.

It was on such a morning, the 11th September, when I was busy on the ward, that I heard my name over the tannoy system. Would Lance/Corporal Mowat report to the Guard Room. Wondering what on earth this might be, and dressed in an old pair of khaki shorts, I went along to be greeted by none other than an American officer who introduced himself as Maj. General H.H. Fuller, Deputy Chief of Staff to Lord Louis Mountbatten, the head of SEAC (South East Asia Command). Was I Lance/Corporal 80588 Mowat of the Straits Settlements Volunteer Force? I assented. "Wa-al," he drawled, "I have some news for you. I saw your wife in Manila a month back. She is a Captain in the WAC (Women's Army Corps) and she is serving as confidential secretary to General MacArthur's Deputy Chief of Staff out there. I offered to contact you if it were possible."

My whole being surged with emotion at this amazing news and I didn't know what to say. The General then questioned me regarding my repatriation. To this I replied that I believed my wife to be in Australia and had asked for repatriation there accordingly. He said he would cable right away to Manila, with the information of my safety and intention to be evacuated to Australia. The interview terminated with my thanks, a handshake and a salute, and I made my way back to the lines with my spirits going over the moon!

On Sunday, the 23rd September, together with a number of other Volunteers, we boarded the **Highland Chieftain**. We had chores of course, were over-fed no doubt, but how could we be bored? Before me, day by day, was the shining yet awesome prospect, that fateful meeting with Louise, who had been my wonder and my lode-star for the past three and a half years.

Geoffrey Mowat died on 21st May 2008, aged 91.