

## CHAPLAIN'S EPIC STORY OF AUSTRALIA'S LOST DIVISION.

UNDER THE HEEL OF A BRUTAL ENEMY OUR CATHOLIC  
BOYS KEPT THE FAITH.

NOVEMBER 15, 1945.

The Catholic Weekly is proud to present today this story of the Catholic men of Australia's Eighth Division, as told by one of their own Chaplains, the Rev. Father L. Marsden, S.M. The valiant Eighth was swept into captivity at the fall of Singapore, after a bitter defence of the Malayan Peninsula against picked Guards Divisions of the Imperial Japanese Army. Many stories of their experiences have since been told, but this story is unique. It is told by one of that select band of men whose lives were devoted to the spiritual welfare of the best of Australia's sons. We gave it for publication unwillingly because he believed others could say so much more. Be that as it may, we feel sure that what follows will be an inspiration to Australians and a comfort to those whose dear ones will never return.

BY CHAPLAIN L. MARSDEN.

(as told to the editor of The Catholic Weekly)

Although Australia was taking the war seriously during the last months of 1939 and all through 1940, not even the most far-sighted people really anticipated war coming to our shores.

When the first Australian troops embarked on the Queen Mary on February 3, 1941, and learned that their destination was Malaya, they, at least, realised that war was not solely the affair of Europe and Africa.

And in spite of the bombing of Darwin, Japanese submarines in Sydney Harbour, and the Battle of the Coral Sea, one feels that returning P.O.W.'s of the 8th Division, and the small number of 6th and 7th Division troops that were caught in Java, are the only ones in Australia to-day who vividly realise what humiliation and suffering was spared Australia by the fact that no Japanese troops marched on our soil.

Back at last from Malaya, and walking in carefree Australian cities and towns, one is sure that the people will never know what they have been saved from, and, please God, the experience of the Philippines, Malaya, and the Netherlands, Indies during 1942-5 will never be Australia's in the years ahead.

With that first brigade (the 22nd) of Australians destined for Malaya there were three priests - Fathers Con. Sexton (2/20 Bn.), of Rose Bay, and St. Benedict's parishes; Bernard Quirk, O.F.M. (2/4 C.G.S.) of Waverley; and Harry Smith, S.M. (10th A.G.H.), of St. Patrick's, Church Hill.

On Good Friday morning of 1941, Father John Rodgers, O.F.M., sailed from Sydney with the 2/2 Convalescent Depot. In July of the same year Fathers "Mick" Dolan and "Paddy" Walsh, both of Rockhampton Diocese, were on their way with the 27th Brigade. The 13th A.G.H., to which I was attached as Chaplain, followed from Sydney on August 29.

Father O'Donovan, O.F.M. (Waverley) joined us in December, and the last priest to join us was Father Corry, O.P., who came over



on the Aquitania with the 2/4 M.G. Bn., which was just in time to take part in the last week's fighting on Singapore Island.

In early 1943, after 12 months in Changi Prison Camp, we had a fleeting visit from Father Kennedy, M.S.C., who was taken prisoner in Timor, and was passing through Singapore to the Thailand-Burma Railway affair. We never saw, but frequently heard news of, Father Tom Elliott, who had been taken prisoner in Java with 6th Division troops.

The 13th A.G.H. was hurriedly formed in Melbourne, and embarked for Malaya within eight days of formation. Maybe, there was a Japanese "scare" at the time, but, however that may be, we found on arrival at Singapore that the social life was undisturbed, and that hospital units were the last things wanted in that gay Eastern city. The staff and accommodation of the 10th A.G.H., at Malacca were easily able to cope with the routine sickness amongst Australian troops. Consequently, for two months after our arrival we were barracked at St. Patrick's College, and our days were pleasantly filled with a little work, a little play, and, for those who were interested in the problems of the teeming millions of the East, fascinating excursions into Singapore's squalid Chinatown.

But these pleasant days soon came to an end, and in November we were posted to our first operational station. We left the comfortable conditions of St. Patrick's with its beautiful grounds and private beach, and crossed the causeway to the State of Johore, on the peninsula of Malaya. On the fringes of the jungle we found our new "home". It was a very large modern mental hospital. The former occupants had vacated one half of this building, but as soon as the war commenced we were forced to take more and more of the wards, until all the former patients were herded into one small corner of the establishment.

During the first weeks here life was that of a military hospital in any peaceful part of Australia. But soon a change took place. Without a declaration of war, Japan had loosed its powerful war machine against unsuspecting Pearl Harbour, and unprepared Singapore. What happened between December 8, 1941, and February 15, 1942, is, bit by bit, becoming general knowledge, and some day the full story will be given to the world in official history.

The loss of the Prince of Wales and the Repulse shocked us beyond all description. In the first hours of war the Japanese fleet air arm, with their "crazy" old planes of bamboo had inflicted perhaps the greatest humiliation on the Royal Navy in its long and glorious history. They had done in a matter of hours what veteran aces of the German Luftwaffe had failed to do in a year of ceaseless fighting. We knew well enough now that our enemy was efficient, determined and fanatically courageous.

Soon the British and Indian land forces were thrown into confusion and retreat by superior forces in men and armament. When some British staff officer announced to the world that we would fight "every inch down the mainland", it did not convey to us a picture of British grimness and courage in face of over-whelming force but merely that we were inevitably committed to a policy of retreat before the picked imperial Guards of the Emperor of Japan.

And retreat we did. Soon it was the turn of the A.I.F. We tried to boost the local morale by claiming that one Australian was the equal of ten Japanese troops. Indeed, even without these rather boastful statements, the confidence of the local people in the courage and fighting qualities of the A.I.F. was astonishing. They literally thought that the moment the Australians went into action the tide of battle would turn.

Each of us will, for his own particular reasons, recall that night when we received our first battle casualties.



I was reminded, as one is so often reminded in war time that, the world, after all, is a very small place, indeed. The men were those of the 2/30 Bn. who had been wounded in the initial encounter of Australian and Japanese troops at Gemas, on the mainland of Malaya.

In the early hours of the morning the ambulances drove in, and the weary, wounded men were literally taken into the arms of our efficient, indefatigable and heroic nurses and medical orderlies, who soon has them bathed and "pyjamaed" and between clean, linen sheets, or else waiting in the resuscitation ward for immediate operation.

While doctors, nurses and orderlies were going about their work, the chaplains were expected to dodge in and out, and do their job without causing delay or inconvenience of the doctors and their assistants.

At the same time they were expected to help in any way they could with the hospital duties.

In war time the names of all one's friends and even casual acquaintances seem to crowd into one's mind, and as soon as one hears or sees a name on an identification card one immediately tries to place that person. On this night, as usual, I was doing a first hurried round of the wounded to give the Last Sacraments to the urgent cases. I stooped over one prone figure on a stretcher, and read his identification papers - Brennan, 2/30 Bn. - R.C. That must be the name of scores of Diggers, but somehow feeling that my question would be answered in the affirmative, I whispered in this Digger's ear: "Come from Blacktown?"

"Yes"

"Go to Christian Brothers', Lewisham?"

"Yes"

We had only been together through five years of schooling at the Christian Brothers' High School, Lewisham; sat side by side in class; travelled trains together, got into the same mischief together. So those "first" Last Sacraments have vivid memories for me. As it happened, they were not really the Last Sacraments, for we patched up Digger Brennan, and sent him to Australia on the last hospital ship to leave Singapore before capitulation in 1942.

But in those days one had little time for reminiscences of school days. The Japanese had prepared and planned for this campaign and because of our unpreparedness they were soon calling the tune.

They quickly penetrated into the A.I.F. defensive position. Soon the 10th A.G.H. at Malacca was forced to prepare for evacuation and re-establishment on Singapore Island. They sent their patients to us, but we had no sooner absorbed the huge influx of patients from Malacca than it was our turn to evacuate, and we providentially returned to St. Patrick's College in Singapore, where we remained until the capitulation.

The days before the fighting ended will never be forgotten by the men and women staffing the 10th and 13th Hospitals.

Ambulances bringing battle casualties formed an unending procession. Frantic efforts were being made to get the nurses away from the Island....

Catholic medical personnel were always of great help to the hospital priests; but this can also be said for all medical staff of whatever creed during those days when the battle casualties were coming in.

On one occasion I had done one of those hurried emergency rounds, and was about to go to some other part of the hospital, when Matron Drummond drew my attention to one man who, she said, was a Catholic. I thought I knew my Catholics, so I checked the casualty

As taken from the camp, we news of, 6th



lists, and found that he was not a Catholic.

However, Matron insisted, and based her assertion on the fact that the man had a Rosary round his neck. That settled all argument. The man was unconscious, so he was given Conditional Absolution and Extreme Unction.

Some time later he regained consciousness for a few moments, and on being questioned, in a whisper replied that he was not a Catholic, but his wife was, and had given him the Rosary before sailing from Australia.

When asked about his own affairs, he said he would like to become a Catholic before he died. That "operation" was only a matter of minutes, and although he gave us many anxious moments during 15 months of convalescence, he eventually did get well, and came home with other survivors of the "Lost Division".

The short, fierce battle for Malaya and Singapore Island, the key to the Pacific, soon came to an end with British, Indian and Australian troops beaten to their knees in humiliation and defeat.

But they were not disgraced, and not demoralised, as was to be proved over and over again during the three-and-a-half years under the heel of a barbarous and pagan conqueror.

During the first days of capitulation, we thought the Japanese were going to justify the boast that they were a civilised and cultured race. It seems that the barbarity and beastliness of their troops in Hong Kong had even shocked the Imperial Japanese Army authorities, and they were determined that there would not be similar disgraceful behaviour in Singapore, the next British city to fall to their conquering and front-line troops.

If this was the aim of the I.A. Command they were fairly successful, but even they were not able to prevent the terrible massacre at the Alexander British Military Hospital, when blood-crazed Japanese soldiery raced through the wards bayoneting patients and staff indiscriminately.

Perhaps the worst incident in this orgy of blood occurred when Japanese troops rushed into an operating theatre, bayoneting the surgeon and his attendants, killing several of the latter outright. And finally bayoneting the patient on the table.

Fortunately for us, the 10th A.G.H. was at this time in the centre of Singapore and I.J.A. troops were under control before they had penetrated that far into the city.

Although safe from the barbarity and personal violence of front-line troops, the 10th A.G.H. and 2/2 Convalescent Depot were in the centre of the heaviest I.J.A. bombing and shelling. Shells actually landed in the makeshift wards in the dress circle of the Cathay Theatre, and nine Australian soldiers were killed.

Apparently, some I.J.A. commanders were somewhat humane, or, at least, aware of the importance of world opinion, for the movement of wounded men and hospital equipment to the P.O.W. camp was orderly, and at no time were we molested by Japanese troops. Perhaps this considerate treatment was merely part of the Japanese policy of getting 53,000 prisoners of war to their camp with the least possible trouble to themselves.

One cannot pass on to the captivity period without saying a word about our Australian nurses. Their devotion to duty was, and always will be, beyond all words of praise. When ordered to return to Australia with the last shipload of wounded they protested most vehemently, and desired nothing more than to remain at their posts, and risk any hardship and humiliation in the fulfilment of their duty.



But wiser counsels prevailed, and those of us who sent them off did so with mixed feelings. We felt that their troubles were only beginning when they left us to run the gauntlet to Australia through mined sea-lanes, a powerful and unopposed navy, and an efficient and brutal air force.

We also knew that we were losing the greatest morale builders in the 8th Division.

Australia has known for a long time that our effort to save our nurses from humiliation and privation ended in tragedy. The ship with the last contingent of nurses was sunk off Palambang, Sumatra. Of the 65 nurses on this ship, three were drowned, and 30 who were injured in the sinking were captured by Japanese troops, who ordered them to walk back into the surf and machine-gunned them to death as they waded into the deep water.

The 32 who were uninjured became prisoners on Sumatra, and were subjected to almost unbearable privations and humiliations during three-and-a-half years, and the 24 who have at last returned to their homeland and dear ones had the sad task of burying with their own hands eight of their number who failed to survive the three last months of captivity.

These nurses suffered terribly, and many paid the supreme sacrifice, but always, in life and in death, they displayed all the best and most noble qualities of Australian womanhood, and when we read of the atrocities of Manila we realise that God was watching over our own Australian girls, and we are grateful for that protection.

After the surrender of the Japanese this year, when the 14th A.G.H. was posted to Singapore, to care for the sick prisoners of war, requests came from all parts of the Pacific from the lucky ones who got away safely, asking permission to join the A.A.H.C., going back to Singapore. Unfortunately, only a few of them were able to join this unit; but the second greatest day for us, greater than the arrival of Lord Louis Mountbatten and his army, was the return of our nurses. And the greatest day of all was the arrival of the 24 prisoner-nurses from Sumatra to the 14th A.G.H., to be taken care of by their comrades, who had come back to nurse them.

From the day of our arrival in the Changi prison camp, I was attached to the Australian Hospital. We had between 300 and 1000 patients, the majority of them being battle casualties.

Hardly a day went by without a death, and then to make matters worse, dysentery broke out, killing many of the wounded who otherwise had a good chance of recovery.

One of the unforgettable features of life in the Changi prison was the manner in which our Catholic soldiers lived up to their religious obligations. Just before the capitulation we had received a large quantity of altar wine from the Cusa Chaplains' Unit in Sydney and we were thus assured of daily Mass for many months to come.

The garrison church in the Changi prison camp had received three direct hits, and had been utterly devastated. We lost no time in looking round for new church sites, but in the meantime the Catholic boys gathered together at convenient places and times for the celebration of Mass and the recitation of the Rosary.

The camp had been divided into areas, and in a very short period Father Bourke, C.S.S.R., a New Zealand chaplain, had built a church, which he dedicated to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour, had established a branch of the Legion of Mary, and instituted a regular Question Box session.

The Senior A.I.F. Chaplain, Father M. Dolan, was working on a chapel in the Australian area, dedicated to St. Francis Xavier,



In the 11th Indian Division Area, Father Kennedy, S.J., had dedicated a church to St. Ignatius Loyola, and in the British 10th Division Area, Father Jackson, O.F.M., had set up his church under the patronage of Our Lady of Lourdes.

The material for the church in the hospital area was obtained at night. Every evening a few of the men would creep through the wire surrounding the camp, and bring back all the wood that they could find. During these scrounging operations, an unused military hut was completely dismantled, and brought back to the hospital.

By July of 1942 our chapel had been built and dedicated to the Immaculate Conception. It was complete even to the stained glass windows, which had been salvaged from the ruins of the old garrison church. Sufficient tiles had been found around the camp to cover the floor completely.

While the building had been in progress a choir had been formed under the direction of W/O Nicholas, an Indian medical officer who was an expert on Gregorian Chant. For our first Solemn High Mass this choir rendered the Missa de Angelus, and in a very short time built up a very creditable repertoire of sacred music.

All the camp chapels were opened with great solemnity, and we quickly settled down to a regular routine.

In our hospital chapel, we had three Masses every day, beginning at 6.30 a.m., for, besides myself, there were two Irish priests attached to the British wing. The Rosary was recited publicly every night, discussion groups were arranged, and instructions were given twice weekly. Benediction of the Most Blessed Sacrament was given on Wednesday and Sunday nights, and once every month we had Solemn High Mass.

Outside the hospital area the camp routine seemed fairly smooth. The Japanese formed men into working parties to go into Singapore. These troops were quartered in the city area, and their work consisted of looking all foreign stores and loading the stolen goods on ships to Japan.

Priests went into Singapore with these parties, and chapels were established at the different camps. Father Bourke was given a pass by the Japanese to move from camp to camp, and in the early days not only did he do his usual duties as a chaplain, but conducted regular eight-day missions, bringing many back to the Faith and making converts.

So great was Father Bourke's zeal that the Japanese became suspicious and sent him back to Changi. He was the first priest to go to Thailand, but before his departure he gave a mission in the hospital, which was attended by more than 400 every evening.

It was about this time that some 10,000 men, including about 3000 Australians, left us to go to Rangoon, and it was not long before we heard rumors that they were working on an air-strip. Father Smith, S.M., and Father Corry, O.P., were their chaplains.

For the rest of the year the Catholic life of the Changi prison camp was quite normal. By Christmas, working parties in Singapore had completed the tasks allotted to them, and all had returned to Changi.

Early in the New Year men began to move out in parties of several thousands for an unknown destination. The news soon spread, however, that they were bound for Bampong, outside of Bangkok, to begin construction of a railway into Burma. The party which had gone to Rangoon, having completed the air-strip, had begun work on the railway from the Burma end. It was the intention of the Japanese, we learned later, that these two parties should meet somewhere near Three Pagoda Pass.



All these men who were transferred from Singapore were placed under the Thailand-Burma Command, but the two parties which left later, and which were known as "F" Force and "H" Force, were not transferred from the Singapore Command, even though they went into Thailand. This fact explains why the Thailand Command took absolutely no interest in their welfare.

The situation at the time, as far as we could gather from the more friendly guards, was this: The engineer in charge of the Burma-Thailand railway project had made a pagan boast to the Emperor that he would commit hara-kiri if the railway was not finished by September, 1943.

While the tracks were being laid on fairly level ground conditions were not so bad, but engineering problems quickly cropped up when mountainous jungle regions were reached.

Rather than halt to make cuttings and tunnels, the engineer-in-charge decided to by-pass the worst country and return to it when work on the flat country had been completed. He then made an estimate of the manpower at his disposal and the work still to be done, and came to the conclusion that he needed more men. So he sent to Changi for "F" Force and "H" Force to put through about 20 cuttings through as many ridges. It was agreed that the men recruited for these forces should be returned to Singapore as soon as the work was finished, and it was estimated that this would take about three months.

The conditions endured by the first arrivals who had actually been transferred from Singapore to Thailand Command were brutal and primitive, but they were infinitely better than the conditions which faced "F" and "H" Forces, for the very simple reason that the Thailand Command looked upon them as Singapore's responsibility. Even the Japanese guards who accompanied these two forces were ignored by the Thailand Japs., and had to battle as best they could for their rations. Our own ration consisted of eight ounces of rice a day and sometimes a little dried fish or dried seaweed. "F" Force and "H" Force left Singapore in groups of 600.

Time of departure from Changi camp was usually about 2 a.m. and the men rode into Singapore in trucks - about 50 to each truck-taking their equipment with them. At the railway station the men were herded into steel trucks used in Malaya for carrying rubber and tin. The trucks were about 5 feet 6 inches wide and 15 feet long, with a small door on each side, and no other ventilation.

The railway itself was of 3 feet 6 inch gauge, which did not exactly make for comfortable travelling. During the day the side of the trucks became unbearably hot, and during the night the men shivered with cold.

Twenty-seven men were crowded into each truck, together with their baggage. So congested were the trucks that the men had to sit facing each other with their legs interlaced. At night they had to take turns in sleeping, but even when stretched out it was practically impossible to sleep.

On the first day our train travelled from 6 a.m. to 11 a.m. without a stop. We were then allowed to leave the trucks and buy fruit on the railway platform. The men had been without fruit for many months, and it had a disastrous effect upon them. Sickness broke out, and there were no facilities for coping with it. Many men were in agony by 11 o'clock that night when we reached Kuala Lumpur. Here we were given a container of cold rice, a small piece of dried fish and a bucket of black tea. We were given 20 minutes to get the food, dish it out, eat it, and return to our trucks.

In those five hideous days and nights we made, I think, only six stops for food, and on each occasion were given only a little rice and fish.



We arrived at Bampong at 3 o'clock in the morning of the sixth day, and were marched to a transit camp a mile from the station. This camp was used as a staging depot, and all parties came through it on their way to the railway line. None of the units passing through had any opportunity to exercise hygiene control, and the whole camp was little better than an accumulation of filth.

While we of "H" Force were resting in this camp for two days we heard rumors that "F" Force had been started out on a march into the jungle of 250 miles, and this proved to be true. With them had gone the amazing Father Dolan, the oldest of our chaplains and an inspiration to all who knew him.

"F" Force was at this time made up of comparatively fit troops, and in spite of great hardships reached its destination almost intact.

"H" Force was the last asked for from Changi, and included many men who had recovered from battle wounds, and many whose health had been broken by malaria, dysentery and various forms of beri-beri.

At 10 o'clock on the second night we left Bampong for the rail-head in the jungle. Altogether there were 3000 of us in "H" Force, made up of five trainloads of 600 each. We travelled with an Australian party of 600 under Colonel Oakes, commanding officer of the 26th Battalion. The medical officer was Major K.J. Fagan, of Yass. The senior medical officer of the entire party of 20 doctors and 100 orderlies was Major Marsden, formerly of Price Alfred Hospital.

One of the first tortures inflicted on the men was the issue of boots. For 12 months they had wandered around Changi camp barefooted, and now they had to set out on a long trek wearing hard new boots. Within an hour men were breaking down with blistered feet; others were cracking up through weakness and general debility.

The Japanese would not allow us to leave any men behind, and Korean guards with fixed bayonets were stationed at the front and rear of the marching columns. Their orders were explicit - the party must be brought intact - and when someone fell out through illness, his comrades had to pick him up and carry him.

On the first night began Major Fagan's medical problems, and on this, and succeeding nights he gained the respect, admiration and affection of the entire force. By the time the long march had ended Major Fagan's name had become a by-word among the men, and he will never be forgotten by those who survived the desperate hardships of Thailand.

The Japanese orders were that we should march for an hour and spell for 15 minutes, but Major Fagan had no spell at all. Each rest period he spent in tending the sick, and during the hour's march he was moving up and down the column, helping the men and encouraging them.

Each night we were supposed to cover 20 miles, and for six nights we maintained this pace. For the first four nights we enjoyed dry weather, tramping along roads about four inches deep in dust. On the fifth night, at 10 o'clock, while climbing the side of a mountain, the monsoon hit us, and the water fell in sheets. The night was pitch black; but the Japanese insisted on going on. The leading guard carried a torch, and our commanding officer followed him, the rest of us trailing behind, in Indian file, one hand touching the man in front. At least 20 times during the night some of us fell, and I think I was luckier than most.

At the end of that night's march we came to a clearing, and the men fell down exhausted in heaps.

"H" Force was in a pretty and sad condition when it reached its destination. An area of about two acres, which had been cleared of



heavy timber, was allotted to us as a camping site. It was practically covered with bamboo stumps, which has been cut off a foot or two from the ground. We were given 22 old tent flys a few blunt tools, six big cooking pots, 15 bags of rice, some dried seaweed and reas. We had to set up tents, control hygienic arrangements, put in a drainage scheme, build a kitchen, and make a shelter for 40 sick. We were given only a day and a half to complete this job.

At this stage there were 530 men in our party, and on the third day we were ordered to have 500 men ready to start work on the railway-line. The 30 men left in camp for general duties, including officers, doctors, medical orderlies, cooks, hygiene men and chaplains were hopelessly inadequate. Cooking arrangements frequently broke down, hygiene broke down, and the camp was in a state close to complete chaos.

The working parties had to walk three-quarters of a mile to the railway-line. Their task was to put a cutting, 70 yards long by 10 feet wide, across the side of a hill. At its highest point the cutting was 40 feet deep. The whole job was to be finished in three months.

Some of the men were formed into parties to drill holes. The Japanese placed the dynamite and set off the charges. The rest of the men then had to move the broken rock, and throw it over an embankment with their bare hands.

It was not unusual for the Japanese to pick out an unusually large rock, and ask three or four men to lift it. They would take no excuses. If the men were unable to move it, they would stand over them and scourge them with bamboo rods until they dropped.

When they had amused themselves sufficiently, the Japs would summon eight or ten men to shift the rock.

On one occasion an Australian soldier fell exhausted by the side of the embankment. The Japs wanted his comrades to push him over, and tip a truck-load of rock on top of him. The men refused, and several were beaten badly for not obeying the order.

All this time we were afraid of cholera, and felt that an outbreak was inevitable, because it was impossible for the men to eat sterile food, or to have sterile food-containers. The men were warned never to drink water that had not been boiled; but it was impossible to keep a check on all of them, and we knew that some, when overcome by thirst while at work on the railway, were drinking from jungle pools.

The condition of the men became progressively worse. Before leaving the camp at day break they were given about two ounces of rice that had been ground and bouled until it looked and tasted like glue. Their mid-day meal, which they carried in dixies, was a mug of dried rice, and sometimes a little dried fish or dried vegetable. When they returned to camp in the evening they were lined up for a check parade, which took from an hour to an hour and a half. It was always dark when the doctor began his sick parade, and up to 300 men would parade before him. This parade rarely ended before 10.30p.m. and at its completion the doctor would make up a list of the men who could not go out to work next day.

The medical list would be handed to the different officers who had to prepare the working parties, and by midnight these officers would have decided which men would go out and which would be presented to the guards for exemption.

The Japs at first demanded 500 men a day, and we would be able to produce only 470, so sick and exhausted men were forced to go out to the railway-line and were treated by their guards as if they were fit and strong. Inevitably, and in spite of all manner of threats, the numbers of men able to go to the railway-line fell



day by day. The Japanese always demanded about 50 men more than we could supply, and would never be satisfied unless they finally obtained 25 more than could reasonably be expected to go out. These were always, at least, 50 men in the party who could barely drag themselves to work.

Then the Japanese decided to work day and night shifts, and I have seen men coming back from a hard day's work, change places with sick comrades going out to begin a night shift.

The continuous torrential rain was now making conditions at the camp worse than ever. With mud and slush everywhere it was impossible to sleep on the ground. We built platforms of rough bamboo in every tent, and packed 27 men into each. They were so jammed together that if a man wanted to turn over during the night ten men lying with him had to turn over, too.

Some mornings the men would have to get up an hour earlier than was necessary in order to give their sleeping space to exhausted men coming in from the night shift.

In this veritable hell on earth God was not forgotten. On the first Sunday after our arrival Mass was offered on a table which had been hastily erected the previous day for an acute appendix operation. After that we had Mass every Sunday at a quarter to six, before work started, and every Catholic in the camp who was able to move attended. Apart from the Sunday Mass, daily Mass was celebrated whenever possible, from six in the morning till 10 at night.

One sight I will never forget. It was still dark, and Mass had just begun in the flickering light of two tiny candles when out of the jungle marched a battalion of Japanese fighting troops carrying great flaming torches and singing war songs. They filed through the camp, and passed within two yards of the altar. There we were, a handful of Australian Catholics, worshipping the gentle Christ in the heart of the Thailand jungle, and marching arrogantly past us were 500 pagans chanting to the god of War. The words of the Reemer must have come to other minds than mine; "Go ye, therefore, teach ye all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost".

During this time, due to the shortage of men available for camp duties, it was necessary for all fit personnel in camp, from the commanding officer down, to chop bamboo for hut construction, dig drains and latrine pits, help with the cooking, and general work.

The numbers of sick continued to increase, and then on June 15 we had our first case of cholera. The patient died four hours after reporting sick.

I think that was our worst day in Thailand. We had been hoping against hope that the camp would escape cholera, and we knew that when the first case was reported, others would follow quickly.

A group had gathered round the Regimental Aid Post tent, when Major Fagan came out from his examination. He looked more worried than usual, and when I asked what was the trouble, he just said; "I think we have our first cholera case in there".

The news spread quickly, of course, and it had a disastrous effect on the men's morale. They had endured the most incredible hardships; they had seen their comrades bashed and beaten; they had starved and suffered; but they had not lost hope. They could still joke about the Japs, and retain their faith in eventual victory. But you can't joke about cholera.

To make matters worse, all the men, were getting severe colic pains, and at some stage or other, every man in that afflicted camp felt sure that he had contracted the dread disease.



About this time, the Japanese announced that they proposed to move into our camp 350 British troops - slaves who had completed their own task further along the line. Both the commanding officer and the medical officer did all in their power to dissuade the Japanese. They asked that the British soldiers be left where they were, at least, until the cholera was checked, effective hygiene control established, and all the men given another anti-cholera injection.

The Japanese were completely unsympathetic. They were then asked to hold up work on the railway for one day to allow the entire force to get hygiene under control, and establish sterilisation centres for food containers. Again the Japanese refused, and only a handful of men were left in camp.

In no time cholera was raging. It was quite a common thing for the commanding officer, a few others and myself to go to the cemetery at 9 a.m., and dig a grave for one man. By 10 o'clock a messenger would come to say that another cholera patient had been taken to hospital.

Leaving my pick and shovel I would return to the camp, give the Last Sacraments, if the lad was a Catholic, and if not, say with him acts of Faith, Hope and Charity, Contrition and an act of love of God. Then back to the cemetery to help increase the size of the grave.

One morning we began digging in the hard, rocky ground to bury a boy who had died during the night. Seven times during the day I was recalled to the camp, and by dusk we had made the grave big enough and deep enough for eight of our deceased comrades.

The Japanese became so afraid of catching cholera themselves that they insisted on our burning the bodies of the dead. It is hard to know whether the work entailed in chopping up sufficient wood was a greater hardship or a more heart-rending task than digging the graves. Early every morning, the C.O. officers, and whatever other men could be spared, left the camp and spent the whole day chopping wood. In the evening a great funeral pyre would be built, and the burial service would be read besides the fire. Next morning the remains would be gathered and given a Christian burial.

The first cholera death occurred on June, 15, 1943. By September 7, when we had completed our work on the railway, and were about to evacuate the camp, I had buried approximately 149 Australians and 150 of the British force which had been moved in with us during the first days of the epidemic.

During the last few days of our work on the railway line only 50 men out of the original 350 were able to work.

I was fortunate in obtaining one concession from the Japanese which was not granted to other chaplains. I was allowed to visit other camps along the track to which no chaplain was attached, and was, therefore, able to bring the Sacraments to men who otherwise would have been completely deprived of their graces and consolation.

The Thailand camp was evacuated at the rate of 100 a day. Those who were able to walk had to carry the sick and dying on make-shift bamboo stretchers to the railway-line, a mile away, over a muddy precipitous track.

We got little satisfaction from knowing that our work had been completed to schedule, and that the engineer-in-charge would not find it necessary to commit hara-kiri.

During the last stages an additional 400 prisoners of "Don Force" had been brought in to speed up the work, and these were not so badly treated. The men of "H" Force, however, having had the heart worked out of them by slave conditions, were just discarded and left to die.



At the railway line we were picked up and taken in open trucks to a point about a hundred miles away. During this journey, which took three days, 15 men died, and were silently laid to rest beside the railway line that will bring sad and bitter thoughts to families of the 8th Division men for generations to come. A unique memorial stands there in the Thailand jungle, the work of our C.O. Colonel Oakes. With an axe he fashioned a great cross 20 feet high, across the arm he printed an inscription in memory of our deceased Australian and British comrades, and on the upright piece was the Latin inscription, "Amantes eorum Deus aspiciat". What we wanted was to give expression to our heartfelt wish that God would look with pity upon the relatives of these dead men - particularly the mothers and fathers, then in Australia hoping and praying for their sons' return.

Majors Marsden and Fagan, with British and Dutch doctors and orderlies, had preceded us to Camburt, outside Bampong, and here they established a base hospital. Within a fortnight we had 3000 hospital cases from "F" and "H" Forces. Many were seriously ill, and for two months after the hospital was opened - during the months of October and November - we lost from five to 15 men a day.

Conditions in this makeshift hospital were appalling. The stap huts were 50 metres long, and were set in two rows. Inside each hut a bench was built around the walls with bamboo rods, and on these hard, uncomfortable benches the sick were laid. Some had blankets, some had coats, but the majority were clad only in the rags that had survived the terrible conditions on the railway. Each man had only two feet of space; some had even less. They were suffering from all manner of tropical diseases - beri-beri, cerebral malaria, tropical ulcers, dysentery and post-cholera inanition.

Our doctors had to make official reports to the Japanese, giving the causes of death; and they did not hesitate, when the facts warranted it, to write "died of starvation". The Japanese did not protest nor ask for another cause to be stated. They merely shrugged their shoulders.

Hygiene conditions at this hospital were every bit as bad as in the jungle. It seemed the deliberate policy of the Japanese to degrade the white man in front of the natives. The food in this camp, however, was much better, the intention apparently being to build up the men before they returned to Singapore.

I left this camp towards the end of October with a train-load of 600 men on the journey back to Singapore. Our "F" and "H" Forces were completely evacuated from Camburi by the middle of January, 1944.

When "F" and "H" Forces went away there were 7000 men in the former, 3000 in the latter. During our absence of less than nine months, "F" Force lost 3000 men and "H" Force lost 992. For another 12 months many other deaths occurred from the after-effects of this terrible experience.

On our return to Singapore we were established in a new camp known as Sime Road. In this camp we had a considerate Japanese commander, as Japanese commanders go. The food was very reasonable and quite good - the best we had as prisoners. It still has a basic foundation of rice, but this was supplemented each day by an issue to each man of five ounces of the almost miraculous soya bean.

We had not been in this camp for a week when the Catholic soldiers were clamouring for a chapel where the Blessed Sacrament could be reserved.

The man who came to our assistance was Lieutenant Hamish Cameron-Smith, a Scottish Catholic, and an architect in civilian life. He drew the plans for our little chapel, rounded up a band of voluntary laborers, and with the help of his fine, persuasive, Highland personality, we managed to secure all the material we needed. He then built the chapel, from the first nail to the last stroke of the paint-brush. His assistant carpenter and general factotum was a young English convert, Lieutenant Hugh Simon-Thwaites. This young officer up endeared himself to our Catholic community by his enduring and ardent



enthusiasm for all things Catholic. He will have the good wishes and prayers of hundreds of his comrades when he commences his studies for the priesthood with the Society of Jesus after his discharge from the Army.

A beautiful garden was laid out around the chapel, and from the time it was finished until we left the camp in June, 1944, these two young officers spent hours each day keeping the church in repair, beautifying the garden and doing any odd job the chaplain required.

In front of the chapel a memorial plaque was erected, and on it was inscribed these words:

"This chapel is dedicated to Our Lady Help of Christians and in memory of our deceased comrades who died in Malaya, the Netherlands East Indies, Thailand and Burma, over whose remains there was no Christian symbol."

These last words were added to remind the Japanese that we Christians respect the remains and last resting-places of our comrades and to remind us - if that was necessary - to go back and gather up the remains of those we had left behind.

Within a week of our arrival at the Sime Road camp we began choir practice with a mixed group of Australian, British and Dutch soldiers. On Christmas night, 1944 we had the traditional Mid-night Mass, at which the men rendered the work of a great Dutch composer. I was the only chaplain of any denomination at Sime Road, so it was not surprising that we had large numbers of non-Catholics at the Midnight Mass. From November until January the treatment of the men at the camp was very reasonable. As they recovered in health, small parties were sent out for work in Singapore. Generally speaking, there was no brutality or cruelty, and the food was always reasonably good for P.O.W. conditions.

In January the Japanese decided to move all prisoners of war on Singapore Island into the great civilian gaol, which was not unlike Long Bay.

Until the time of our arrival this gaol had been occupied by civilian internees, both men and women. With them were two Australian Redemptorists, Fathers Cosgrave and Moran, as well as seven Dutch and Belgian priests. Here also were three Little Sisters of the Poor and two Canadian Sisters.

During their long imprisonment the priests had helped to care for the old and the sick, and the Sisters had worked in the hospital with the women.

The nuns had their own little, makeshift convent wherever they were camped, and when I visited them after the surrender of Singapore, I found them clad in almost immaculate white habits, cheerful, and impatiently waiting to go back to their work that had been interrupted by the war.

When we moved into the civilian gaol the civil internees took our place at the Sime Road camp. Here they were able to resume religious life in the chapel of Our Lady Help of Christians.

The movement of troops from the original Changi P.O.W., camp into the gaol was an unbelievable sight. All transport was effected with the chassis of old Army trucks, which were pulled by parties of 20 or 30 men. In this way all our camp materials, including hospital beds, hospital equipment, cooking utensils, hygiene tools were transported. The Camp huts from the Changi barracks were pulled down by the prisoners, and were graciously transported by the Japanese. Our engineers erected these huts outside the prison walls, but even then there was not sufficient accommodation, and another eight huts 100 metres long, was built, also outside the walls of the gaol.

When we were finally established in this camp we had 11,000 men in the whole area. Four thousand five hundred of these were crowded into cells and gaol workrooms. Within the gaol the overcrowding was shocking, but the men were consoled in their privation



and comfort by the fact that civilian men, women and little children had cheerfully and courageously put up with these conditions for three years.

We had demolished our churches in the old Changi barracks, and now, with the aid of voluntary labour we transported the material to the new camp site. This included roofing-iron, timber, floor tiles and two statues, slightly less than life-size - one of Our Lady of Lourdes and the other of St. Joseph.

Almost before the first essential construction work had begun in the new camp, the senior chaplain, Father Dolan, was already looking out for likely sites for new chapels. These were soon selected and under Father Dolan's energetic leadership the chapels were quickly erected.

One within the camp walls was named in honor of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour and another was erected in the hospital area. Once again Lieutenant Cameron-Smith, Lieutenant Simon Thwaites, and Lieutenant Meyer (of the N.E.I. Forces) gave up all of their daylight hours in helping with this work. Meyer was a landscape gardener, and while Cameron-Smith and Simon-Thwaites were getting on with the Church construction, he was planning a most beautiful garden layout.

Fathers Dolan and Sexton were also on the job for hours every day, excavating earth for the foundations, sawing timber and hammering nails.

As usual, we had choirs practising in a matter of weeks, weekly instruction classes and Solemn High Mass once a month and on all the big feast days. At this time we had two British priests, five Australian priests and two Dutch priests.

From July, 1944, until March, 1945, Catholic life in the camp went along in the usual, smooth manner, with every facility for regular Communion. At the end of this period, however, due to shortage of altar breads, each priest was permitted to say only two Masses each week. Except on special occasions the soldiers were asked to receive Communion not more than once a month.

We had a surprising number of requests for exceptions to this rule. Men wanted to receive Communion on their wedding anniversaries or on the birthdays of their children. Nor did they forget the anniversaries of comrades who had been killed in the Malayan campaign.

By April, 1945, thousands of men, who had been working on a new air-strip, were taken away from the camp into different parts of the city to prepare battle-stations for the Japanese final stand to retain the island fortress.

During this period the men were forced to work very hard for long hours, making tank traps, underground food store-rooms, trenches and gun positions. At this period also the food was very bad both in quantity and quality.

From April until August, when the surrender came, I saw men working from 10 to 12 hours a day on a few ounces of rice and a little dried whitebait. The issue of fish, which was our only source of protein, was very irregular.

To supplement the camp rations a vegetable garden was started. And a variety of Eastern spinach was grown. When this was added to the soup it was known by the men as jungle stew.

Although we realised that the war was fast coming to an end we felt, and with good reason, that if there was a landing on Singapore island, many of the men in the working parties would lose their lives in the fighting. Later, we were told by staff officers of the 9th Indian Corps, that the initial landing, with its prelude of bombing and shelling was to have commenced in the very area we occupied at this time.

Meanwhile, I was able to offer Mass only once a week, because of the shortage of altar breads and wine, but on August 15, the Feast of the Assumption of Our Lady, I celebrated Mass on the table of the operating theatre before the men went out to work.

At 2.30 that afternoon a crowd of Indians in a camp nearby



became very excited. Shortly afterwards a Catholic Korean, who had kept us well posted with the news, told us that the war was over. Immediately there was a change of attitude among the Japanese. The food ration was increased, and a quantity of new clothing issued. Nevertheless, they continued with their guard duties, displaying not the slightest emotion on their poker-faces.

On August 18 we moved back to Changi Gaol, where all prisoners were being assembled prior to the occupation of Singapore by the forces of Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten.

All working parties could not be accommodated in the gaol, so a mixed force of British and Australians were kept at the Adam Park Camp, where they had been working. Those of us who were in the camp were fortunate because we were well within the city boundary, and consequently witnessed all the British operational landings and the ceremonies of surrender. We were also able to contact Chinese and Eurasian Catholic friends of pre war days, and to renew acquaintance with the local clergy and religious.

After what seemed an interminable time we were at last boarding the ship to bring us home.

On the way home Mass was celebrated every morning in the ship's recreation room, and right until the last night, when we were off Sydney Heads, where our last Mass was celebrated at one minute after twelve, the splendid attendance of Catholic soldiers was maintained.

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