

MAJOR VINCENT BENNETT - ROYAL ARMY MEDICAL CORPS 67846



Major Vincent Bennett RAMC

Vincent Bennett was born in County Cork, Ireland on 5 August 1910. He graduated in medicine from University College, Cork and enlisted in the British Regular Army (RAMC) on 23 February 1936.



**On board battleship HMS 'Cumberland'.
En route Hong Kong to Shanghai - 6 October 1937¹**

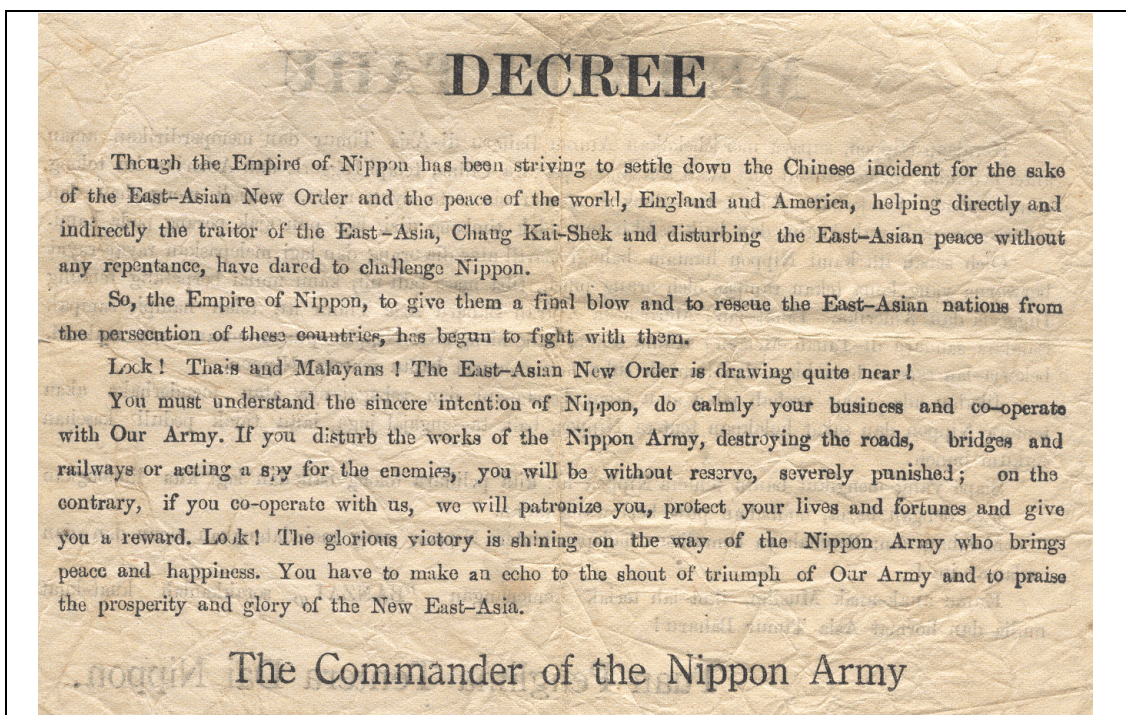
In September 1937 he embarked for service in China, as part of the build up of British reinforcements in Shanghai during the Sino-Japanese war. Following a short interlude in Hong Kong he was stationed in Shanghai between October 1937 and March 1938. He was subsequently posted to Meerut, India before being sent to

Singapore where he arrived in September 1939. He remained there until capitulation on 15th February 1942, when his army records reported him as 'missing'.



Result of Japanese air raid on Shanghai, 19 October 1937¹

In Singapore he was based at the Military Hospital, Tanglin until October 1940 when he was transferred to the Alexandra Hospital. From February until September 1941 he was attached to the 2nd East Surrey Regiment before returning to hospital duties.



Japanese leaflet dropped in advance of invasion¹

Following the Japanese landings in Northern Malaya there was a call for additional medical teams. He volunteered and saw action at the front but following the set backs and retreat down the peninsular he was posted back to Singapore.²



British battleship off Fairy Point, Changi - December 1941¹

On returning to Singapore he was engaged in treating / operating on casualties being brought back from the front and also as a direct result of Japanese bombing in Singapore. He was MO at a hospital that had been set up in the Union Jack Club, which was subsequently hit during an air raid and set on fire.³

General Wavell's Message to Singapore Garrison.

10th. Feb. 1942.

General Percival:-

It is certain that our Troops in Singapore Island heavily outnumber any Japanese who have crossed the Straits. We must destroy them.

Our whole fighting reputation is at stake and the Honour of the British Empire, the Americans have held out in the Iloilo Peninsula against far heavier odds, the Russians are turning back the picked strength of the Germans, the Chinese with almost complete lack of modern equipment have held the greater part of the country, against the full strength of the Japanese, for four and a half years, it will be disastrous if we yield our boasted fortress of Singapore to inferior Enemy forces.

There must be no thought of sparing troops or Civil population, and no mercy must be shown to weakness of any shape or form. Commanders and Senior officers must lead their troops and if necessary to die with them. There must be no question or thought of surrender. Every Unit must fight it out to the end in close contact with the enemy.

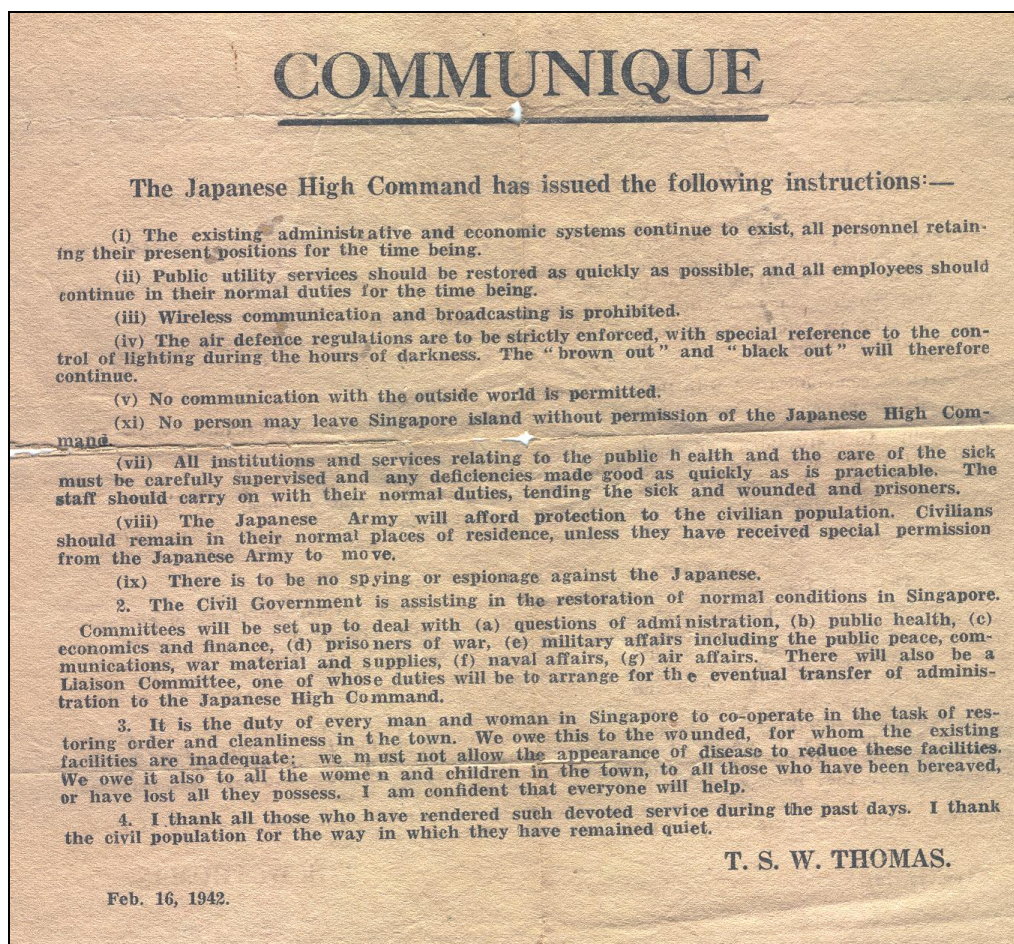
Please see that the above is brought to the notice of all Senior Officers and by them, to the troops.

I look to you and your men to fight to the end and to prove that the fighting spirit that won our Empire still exists to enable us to defend it.

Sgd. A.P. Wavell,
General.

General Wavell's message to the Singapore garrison¹

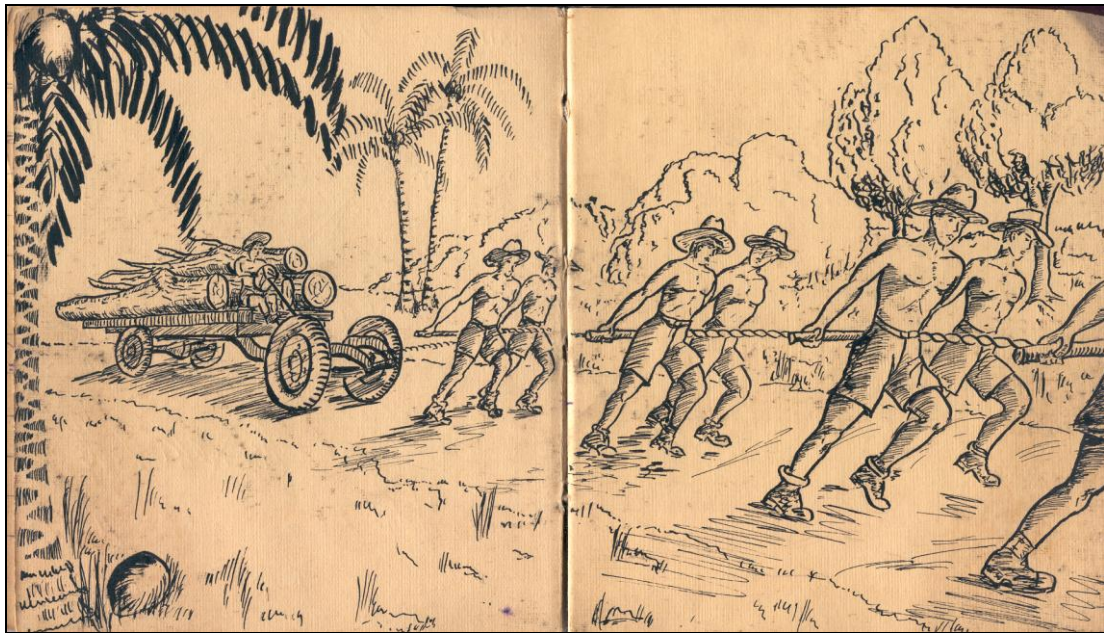
Following capitulation Major Bennett ('the Doc') was interned at River Valley Road Work camp. In the confused aftermath of the surrender and in his capacity as a doctor, he was given limited permission by the Japanese authorities to go out of the camps and to use his time to forage / acquire medicines.⁴



At River Valley Road he was to form an enduring friendship with James Taylor (Jim) Rea MCS (Private in SSVF and later President of Singapore City Council) and Bill Goode (Corporal SSVF and later the last Governor of Singapore and North Borneo).

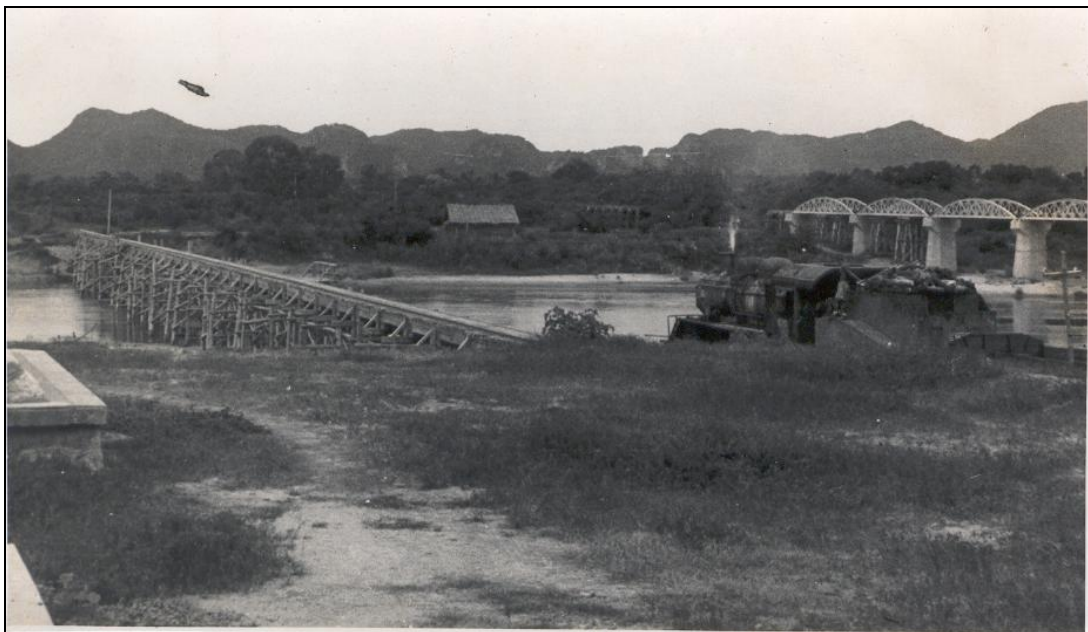
As a relief from the drudgery of camp life the men would meet beside the wire in the evenings to discuss events leading up to their present plight, including the performance of individuals under duress: -

"Later we sat outside and gossiped until very late about the war, the local campaign, the standard of army officers and leadership and the quality of men etc. Only eight officers were decorated in Malaya. Two were Colonels who did good work when the Asia was sunk, one was Tom Smiley and one was Colonel Stewart of the Argylls – the best officer in Malaya both in foresight and in action. Army nurses were excellent going about their wards during the bombings just as though nothing was happening and so giving confidence to their patients. Bill well remembers helping a hospital to get settled in at St Patricks School and seeing how steady the nurses were during the air raids".³



Sketch from Major Bennett's note book showing a stripped down army truck. The engines were removed and sent to Japan to be re-used as part of the war effort.¹

THAILAND



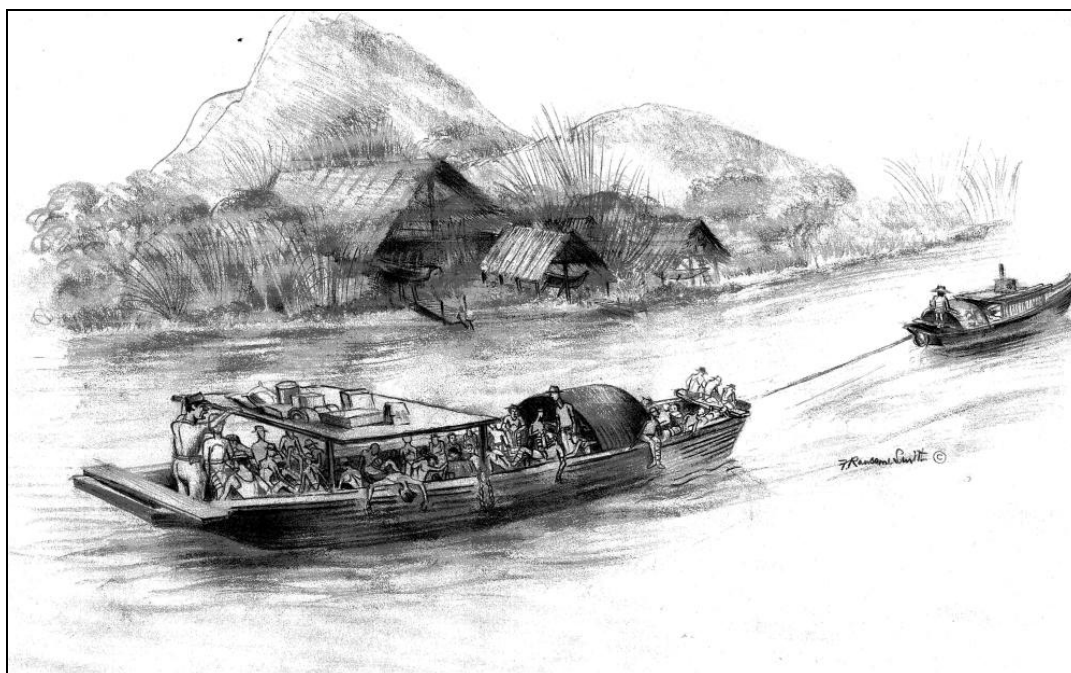
Kanchanaburi (1945). Wooden bridge; bombed iron bridge to right. Train about to cross the timber bridge in foreground.⁵

In mid October 1942 Major Bennett left River Valley Road, Singapore with a group of prisoners ("F" Battalion) for an unknown destination. In the event they were transported to Ban Pong, Thailand by rail in cattle trucks, arriving there some 4 days

later. There followed a forced march from Ban Pong to Kanchanaburi where he arrived on 22 October 1942.³

*“Next day the following party came in and with it was the Doc. He had fared pretty well on the way. On the train he had left his crowded compartment and gone into the luggage van. On the road from Ban Pong he had got along with the help of rickshaws. At one stage a Japanese guard turned him out of his rickshaw. Later he found this guard lying on the side of the road unable to move with blisters. The guard asked for help so the Doc cut all the skin off his blister, put on a bit of plaster which eventually crinkled up and left him in a worse condition than ever. The last the Doc saw of him was Japanese NCO beating him for not keeping up with the column. Though the guards were only carrying a rifle and bayonet they had as much difficulty in making the march as we had”.*³

On Friday 23 October “F” Battalion started a three day forced march north to Tarso (distribution camp) – the first night being spent at Rajah where they were billeted in a temple compound on the River Mae Khluang – they arrived at Tarso on 25 October 1942. From Tarso the men were then distributed by barge along the Kwai Noi River to the railway construction areas.



POWs being transported on the River Kwai Noi (1943)⁶

WAMPO

By 21 November 1942 Major Bennett had arrived at Wampo, having been moved down river by barge. The camp administration was structured as follows: -

- “D” Battalion: O/C Major Clark, S.S.V.F.
M.O. Captain Pavillard, S.S.V.F.
“B” Battalion: O/C Lt.-Col. Lilly, Sherwood Foresters
M.O. Captain Richardson, R.A.M.C.
“F” Battalion : O/C Major Brodie
M.O. Major Bennett, R.A.M.C.

The camp commandant was Col Lilly and he was ably supported by Major Brodie. Both were described as:-

“...officers in name and in deed and they tackle the Japanese here in a resolute manner and get away with it. It is said that this one is one of the best camps on the river”.³

Construction work on the Wampo section of the line was approximately 12 kilometres in length, with the viaduct (one of the major engineering feats of the railway) at one end and a bridge at the other. The viaduct camp was Wampo South and the bridge camp, Wampo North with Wampo Central being the headquarters.



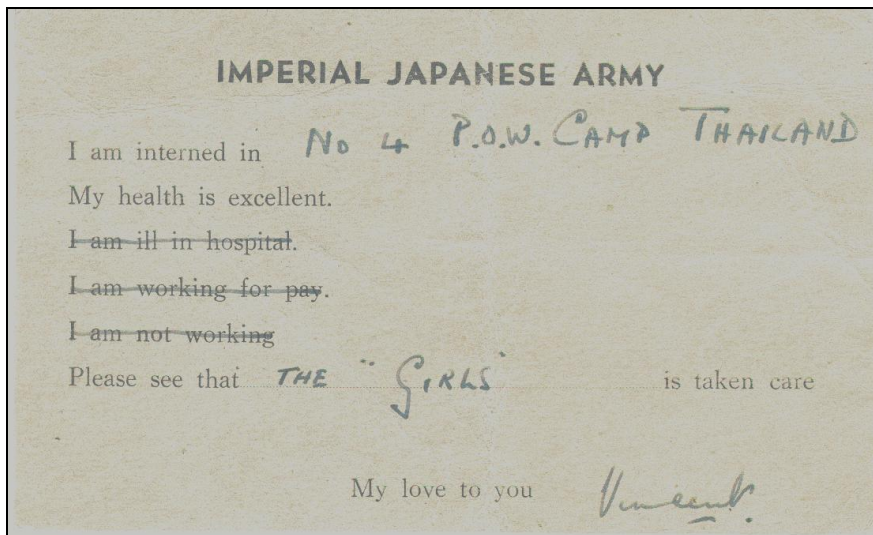
Wampo South Viaduct looking up river (1950)⁷

With the increasing numbers of prisoners being brought in to work on this section of the railway, conditions deteriorated as a result of the poor diet and absence of adequate medicines and the number of men reporting sick increased rapidly.

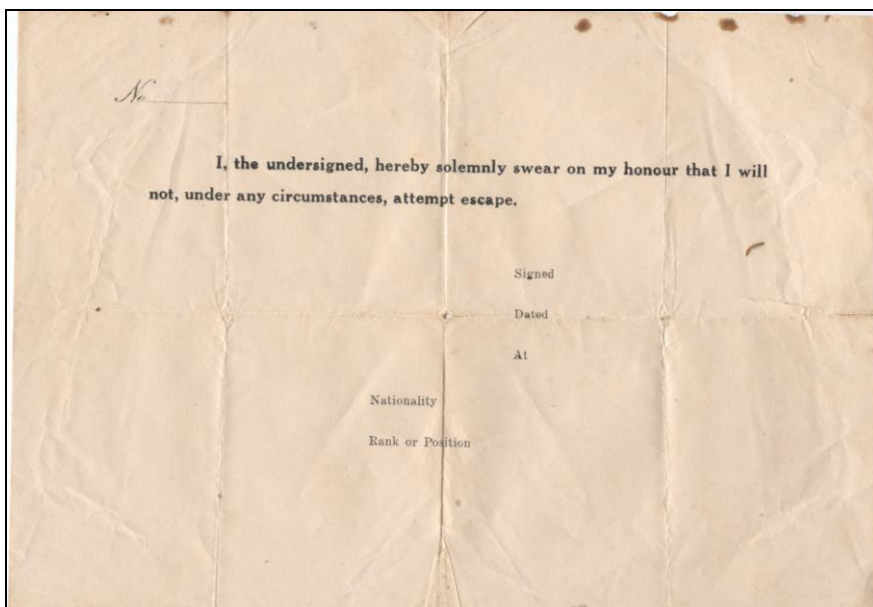
On 8th December 1942: -

“The Doc took our sick parade yesterday and said he was shocked at the change of appearance of so many men, though the Volunteers had flourished in River Valley Road many were now gaunt specimens. He said that though the Volunteers may have put up a good a show as anyone on the march up from Ban Pong they now showed the effects of this effort....”³

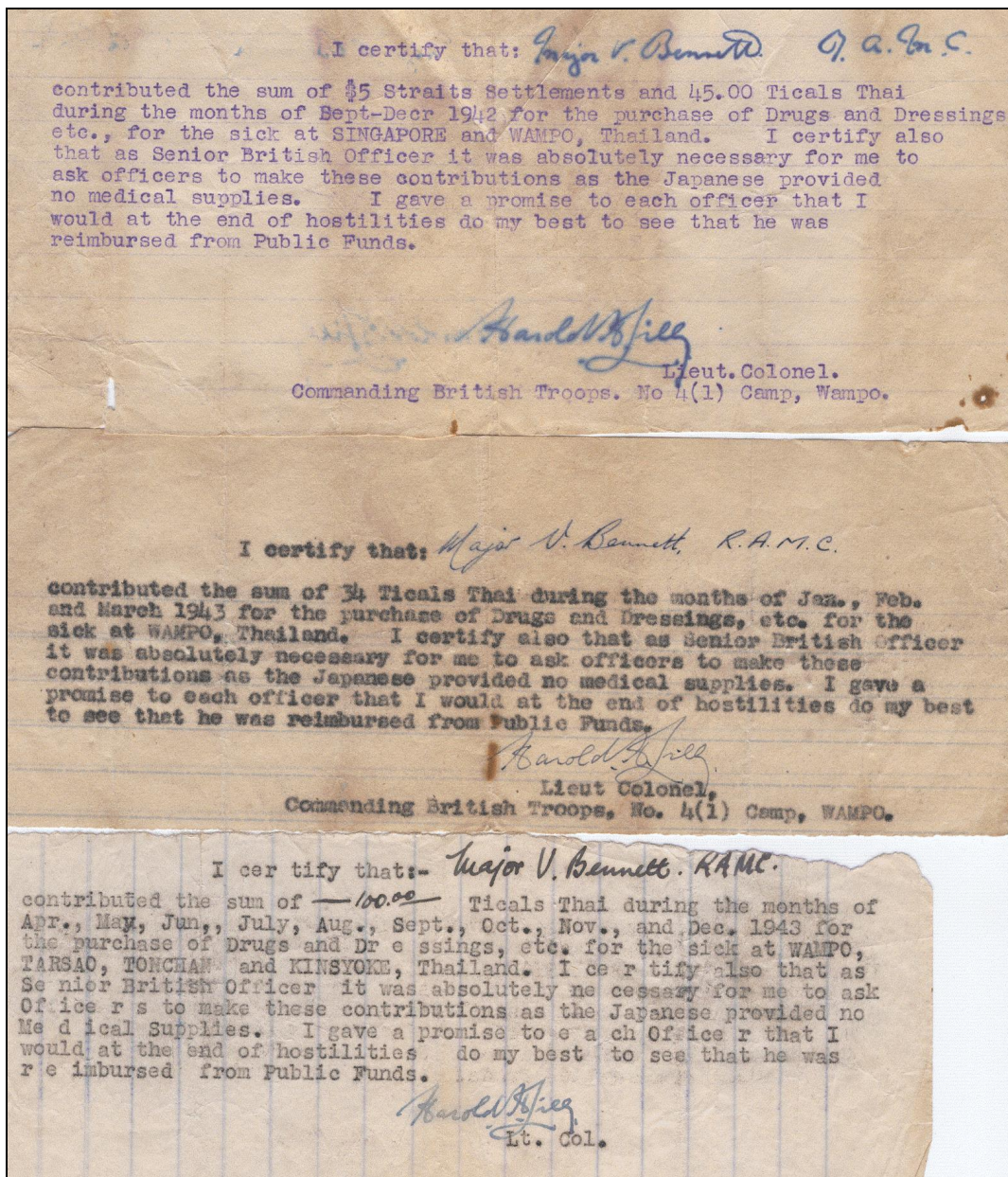
By this time Major Bennett’s sight had been adversely affected by the poor diet.



Typical postcard issued to POWs by IJA. The "Girls" was a phrase used by the family which Major Bennett knew would be recognised by them as coming from him ¹



IJA non-escape form ¹



Typical IOUs issued to officers who were asked to contribute funds for the purchase of medicines for the sick.¹

As Senior Medical Officer (SMO) he arranged for an additional hospital hut for dysentery cases and his remit also included responsibility for evacuating the sick downriver to Ban Pong.

At about this period (December 1942) the officers would sometimes meet in the evenings to discuss the progress of the war, captivity and the life that they were presently leading. One of the officers, Major Mackenzie (a pharmaceutical chemist and owner of the secret camp radio) was part of the group. Major Bennett recalled that one of the bravest acts that he witnessed during his time in captivity was at the start of a search of one of the camps by the Kempei Tai. The prisoners had been ordered out of their huts when Major Mackenzie realised that the radio had not been properly secured. He immediately left the group that was assembling, walked back into the hut, hid the radio and then rejoined the parade.⁴

By 28 January 1943 there had been a general improvement in the rations and health at Wampo, but Major Bennett observed, at the time, that even if prisoners were released they might be ill for years and might never completely recover.

In April 1943 with a further influx of prisoners into the area to accelerate construction (during the Speedo phase), conditions once again began to deteriorate at Wampo.



Figure 1 Wampo South looking down river (1950) ⁷

Tonchan South

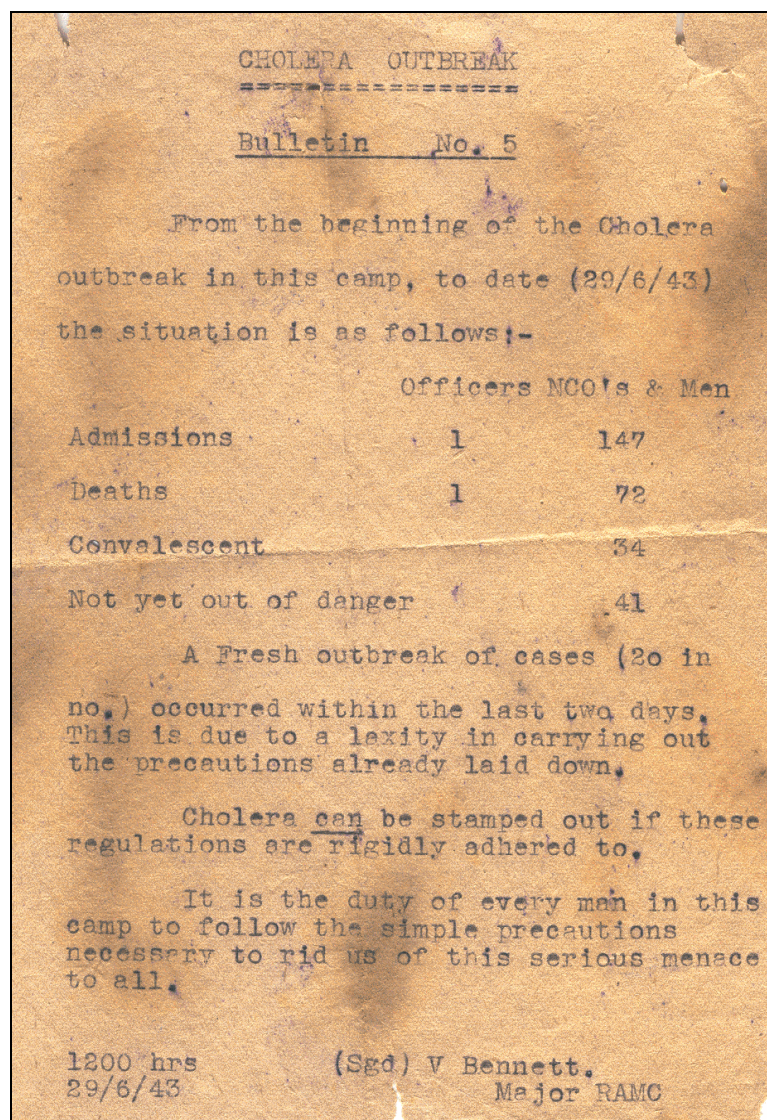
Major Bennett left Wampo by 2 May 1943, when “B” and “F” Battalions were moved to Tonchan South. Jim Rea commented in his diary entry dated 19 May 1943: -

“The man in charge of this camp is a Japanese warrant officer known as the Tiger (Lt. Hiramatsu) because of the noises he makes. He seems to have broken the spirit of all the people who have been in this camp for some months. He has made everyone including the sick to go out to work. He allows an inadequate staff for the kitchen and for sanitary work. The British Officers say they can do nothing with him and seem to have given up trying. The men are one long doleful wail. It is no wonder really but they have let themselves go and refused to be cheered. They can talk of nothing but their misfortunes. When “F” Battalion arrived here a short time ago they began to improve things. They have cleaned up the stream from an anti-malarial point of view and have made proper banks along it. They have got talks and concerts going in the evenings. We believe Lt. Hatori who is at the Tonchan Central Camp now has been some help in this. There was a medical officer here called Ross. When he was leaving he handed things over to the Doc and said he had evacuated all the sick to Tarso hospital. The Doc then held a sick parade and he found about 80 men quite unfit for work – one man had an ulcer on his leg and the leg was swelled to twice its size. The Doc told the Tiger he wanted to send 60 of these men to Tarso. The Tiger just roared at

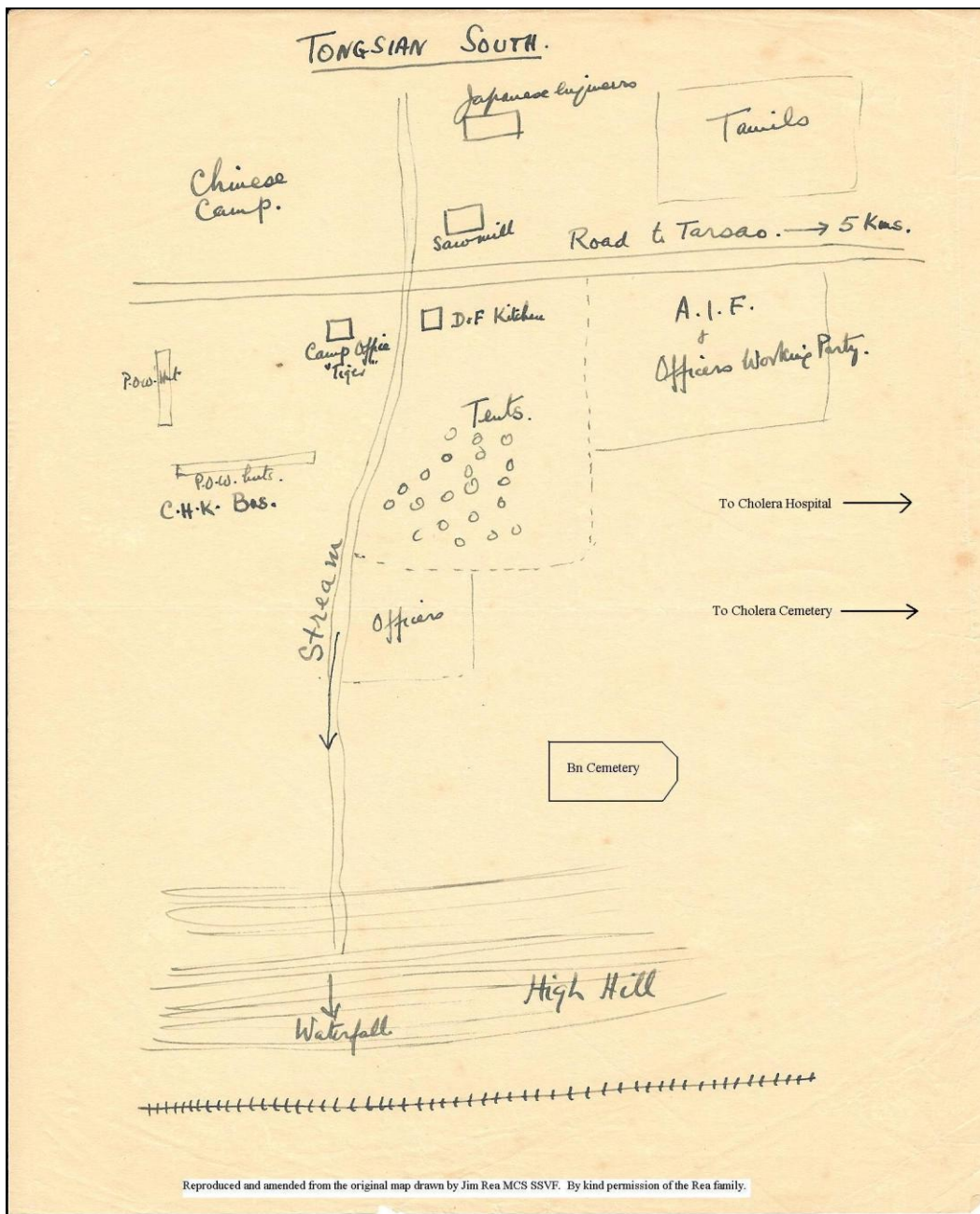
him but the Doc persisted and kept on making his requests after each outburst. He has now got his way and can send the very sick to Tarso and the not-so-sick may stay in camp and do not have to work. So the Doc has really achieved a great deal. The Tiger has even consulted him on his own ailments”³.

On the 8 June 1943 cholera broke out at Tonchan South Camp. Captain Stanley Pavillard, records discussing the event with Major Bennett.⁸ The event was reported to the Japanese Camp commander (Tiger) who ended up screaming and brandishing his sword at the two MOs. He insisted on the patient being transferred to Tarso. Following protracted negotiations and eventually consultation with the Japanese MO at Tarso, it was accepted that a working party should construct an isolation camp for the patients at Tonchan South to prevent the spread of cholera. By that afternoon 10 more cases were admitted and the first patient had died.

The cholera outbreak lasted until 8 August 1943. (Major Bennett’s medical notes record in detail the outbreak – see Appendix 1).



Cholera Outbreak - Bulletin No.5¹



During the period in Tonchan South considerable difficulties were encountered in getting sick men away to the base hospital at Tarso; days of waiting in the rain by the river for barges that never came.

“We sometimes discuss our treatment as POWs. At the beginning the Japanese thought that they would win and didn’t care what happened to us. That was Hiromatsu’s outlook at Tonchan. He told the Doc not to worry about the sick – they would die anyway – so it was no use evacuating them to the Tarso hospital. The Japanese have not yet won the war and we are becoming rather a liability. With constant fever we are pretty useless for work. It is wicked of them to keep sending parties up river without supplies of quinine. Many men are dying of cerebral malaria. The Japanese regard all Red Cross supplies as primarily their own. Lt. Tanaka took a whole box of American Red Cross stuff for himself. We got 2/13 of a box each.”¹

Lt. Hiramatsu, like many of the camp guards, was prone to bouts of heavy drinking and consequently was unreliable in temper. In the war crimes trials post war he was convicted and sentenced to 'Death by Hanging'.

Tonchan Central

Major Bennett arrived at this camp on 15 August 1943 although there is no formal record of his brief stay here.

Kinsayoke

"F" Battalion arrived at Kinsayoke on 24 August 1943. Lt Col Lilly was Camp commandant.

The camp had been free from cholera for 10 days but one new case developed during the morning of 25 August 1943. Major Bennett was the SMO - men who were sick and deemed not fit to work were given light duties where possible. The duty of keeping the medical records at the camp was given to Jim Rea (Note: in The War Diaries of Weary Dunlop entry 29th September 1943; there is reference to a Private Rees - this is in fact Jim Rea).

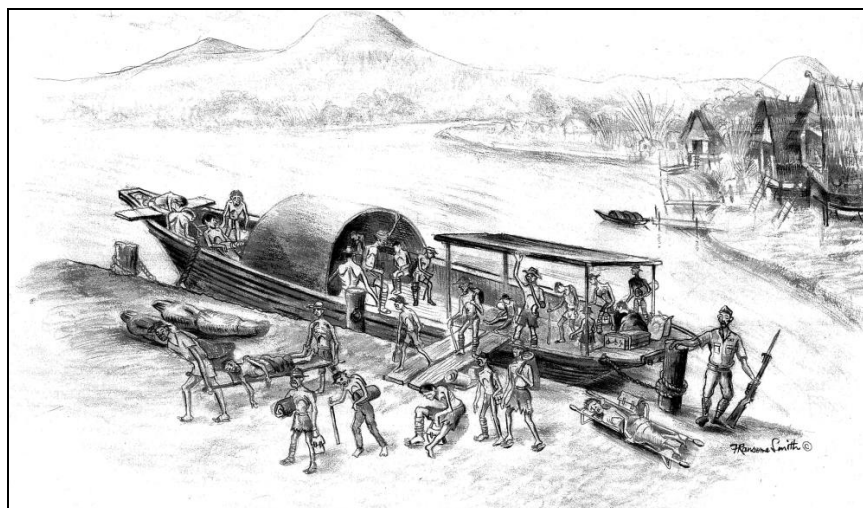
*"My job is to collect figures of the sick from all the nine or ten battalions in the camp. I make a summary showing how many cases are in each category, malaria, dysentery, beriberi, etc. I give this to the Japanese and get from them the day's ration of quinine which I distribute to the different battalions according to their numbers - 8 per man with fever, 2 per man for the rest..".*³



Major Vincent Bennett RAMC⁶

“D” Battalion arrived 28 August and by 8 September the Korean guards, who had moved up river from Wampo, were becoming awkward as a result of the push to accelerate construction of the railway.

A number of MOs have been identified as being in Kinsayoke (Maj. Corlette AAMC, Capt. Godlee AAMC, Capt. Allen RAMC and Maj. Richardson RAMC). Lt. Col. Dunlop was also in the camp from 13th September 1943 to 25 October 1943. Arrangements were made for a new hospital to be constructed, but requests made by all the MOs to remove the sick to the hospital camp at Tarso were thwarted by the Japanese administration, because of the need for labour on the railway.



Sick POWs being transported on River Kwai Noi ⁶

In 2 November 1943 Major Bennett, who had removed a party of sick to Tarso was reported to have been shocked by conditions there. This observation was also supported by similar reports being received from other sources along the railway.

On 13 November Lt. Hatori left to become second in command of Tarso. This presaged regime change and a difficult period for the POWs at Kinsayoke. Life in camp was summed up in an undated entry in Major Bennett's note book: -

“no foreign coins allowed – no diaries. Pigs not allowed to be bought. No sports – drunken Jap Officers with their coolie women. Harlots arrive for Japs in Kinsayok \$2 a visit..... Okada and stoppage of drugs. Kicked by Maroka and Okada. Changes from hut to hut frequent. No classes allowed on any subject. PT recommended for malaria. Tiger rides through huts. Silver Bullet – Bombay Duck – Music Master – Snake hips – Baby Face – Joe Onion – Kanu Kid – Black Prince – Mountain Lion – Mad Mongul – Box Head – Uki – Gorilla – Peanut – Bull – Dr Death – Bull Frog – Uncle Chunkal – Homo – Bamboo Charlie – Spider – Big Joe.

Officers rat party 8000 – Hut commanders O.C. Ducks – Officers carry pig and cattle soil for Joe Onion (Middleton). Nightly wood fatigues – hours on Roll Call – numbers in Jap – Tokyo Time – up at dawn. Chinese sausages. Eggs – dried meat (buffalo). Eating of snakes, iguanas, lizards and tree rat, monkey. Many monkeys around – saw armadillo – Japs gouge eyes out of pet bird. Blue Kingfishers – Pea fowl – Jungle fowl.

The elephants towing guns and bringing rations. Shows by Latham and Rosenthal. Canteen robberies and hospital s-d-y Hall. Australia house- Bill James Babette – Johnny Hall-Woodhams ballet. ‘Sleeping Beauty’ Xmas Show. Uki bashes Padre and Peter Fane. No talking – laughing whilst aircraft overhead.

Bathing in organised parties – after working hours. Pass for doctors to go from Hospital to Camp.

Kinsayok

Beating up of 6 doctors. Corlett – Godlee – Matheson – Allen – Richardson – Self.

Barney Hodgkiss with mal. on Xmas day outside guard room. My beating up by Chiba on New Years Eve in company with 50 sick.

Examination of sick by Jap soldiers daily. Roaring and beating up. Short course of quinine. Worko then.

No cheering at matches – interpreter present at all religious services and concerts. Altars knocked down. Ducks were not to die. No prayers or wishing for victory. No flag over bodies. No last post blown. Words of all musical pieces rendered to Japs before played or sung. Patients ½ rations. No watches or fountain pens – pencils – razors allowed. Nothing over \$20 to Officers & 5 for men. Patients lie at attention. Library books (technical – dealing with planes or cars confiscated. No waving from lorries to THAs. Bowing or saluting Sentry. We’re not to pick up pamphlets or read them. Stay in hut during raid. Mail held up for 3 months in Camp. Red X parcel for one POW (USA). We get 1/13 share.”¹

In common with many of the doctors in the camps along the railway Major Bennett was beaten up on a number of occasions when resisting Japanese demands for more of the sick to be included in the working parties on the trace. As a result of this treatment he lost a number of teeth and had to wear a plate for the rest of his life.⁴



Wrecked rolling stock adjacent to repaired section of railway (1945)⁵

In early February 1944 Major Bennett was struck down with Typhus and was ill for a considerable period as a result.³

Tamuan

It is believed that Major Bennett moved to Tamuan in mid March 1944.

In early June 1944 the Japanese called for working parties to go to Japan. Col. Lilly the camp commandant was ill at the time. The Japanese authorities consulted other officers from a nearby camp and as a result it appears that the Japanese gained the upper hand in these particular dealings: -

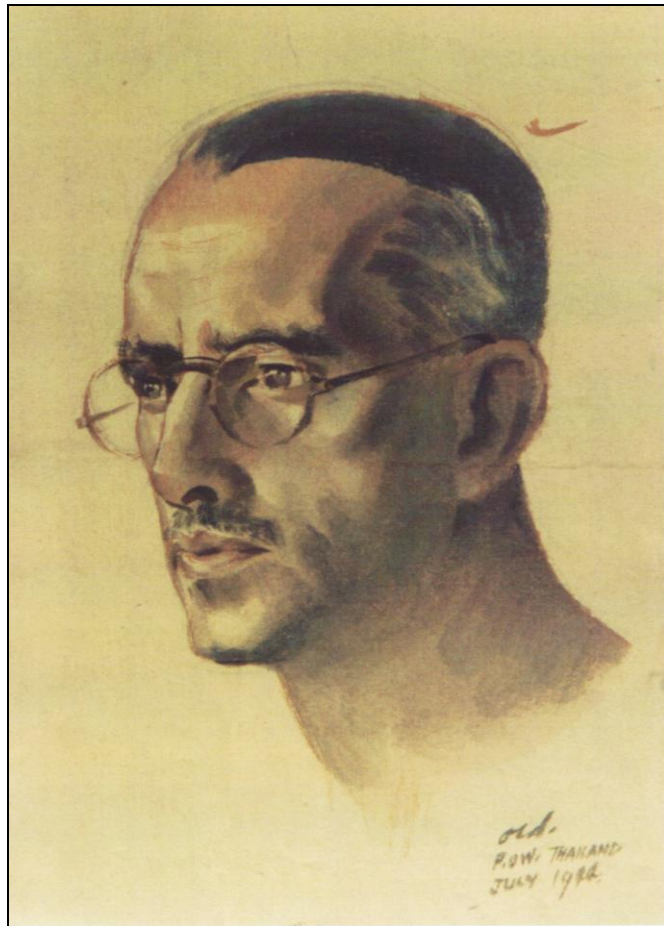
“Col. Lilly was always untiring in his efforts and was more often than not successful. But it is significant that two of the men who stand up best to the Japanese have been passed over, that is Col Lilly and the Doc. Sgt Okada, the Japanese medical Sgt. will not allow the Doc to have any part in the hospital administration and makes him live outside the hospital area.”³

NAME, MAJOR V. BENNETT, RAMC, REGIMENT.							
Date	Period	Total Amount Due	Deductions for messing Accond. etc by T.J.A.	Amount Banked by Japs.	Mess Welfare Hospital Deductions.	Personal Cash Recd.	Sta. Comdr's Signature.
	AUG. 16-31	87.74	30.00	41.30	-		Indrodi Mayo RA
10-42	SEPT. 1-30	170.00	60.00	80.00	5.00	135.00	Indrodi Mayo RA
16-10-42	AUG. 16-31 including Banked money for Sept.					135.00	Indrodi Mayo RA
28-12-42	OCT. 1ST. DEC. 31ST	510.00	180.00	240.00	45.00	45.00	Indrodi Mayo RA
28-2-43	JAN. 1ST. FEB. 28TH	340.00	120.00	160.00	24.00	36.00	Indrodi Mayo RA
26-3-43	MARCH 1-31	170.00	60.00	80.00	10.00	20.00	Indrodi Mayo RA
17-5-43	APRIL 1ST. MAY 31ST	340.00	120.00	160.00	5.00	55.00	Indrodi Mayo RA
25-7-43	JUNE 1ST. JULY 31ST	340.00	120.00	160.00	10.00	50.00	Indrodi Mayo RA
27-9-43	AUG. 1ST. SEPT. 30TH	300.00	40.00	200.00	20.00	60.00	Indrodi Mayo RA
8-12-43	OCT. 1-30	310.00		240.00	10.00	60.00	Indrodi Mayo RA
31-12-43	NOV. 1-30	110.00	20.00	110.00	5.00	25.00	Indrodi Mayo RA
20-1-44	JAN. 1-31	110.00	20.00	120.00	10.00	10.00	Indrodi Mayo RA
11-3-44	FEB. 1-29	170.00	20.00	120.00	9.00	21.00	Indrodi Mayo RA
1-4-44	MARCH 1-31	170.00	20.00	120.00	9.00	21.00	Indrodi Mayo RA
10-5-44	APRIL 1-30	170.00	20.00	110.00	9.00	21.00	S. Racey Captain
28-5-44	MAY 1-31	170.00	30.00	110.00	10.00	20.00	S. Racey Captain
19-6-44	JUNE 1-30	170.00	30.00	110.00	10.00	20.00	S. Racey Captain
1-7-44	JULY 1-31	170.00	30.00	110.00	10.00	20.00	S. Racey Captain

I certify that the amounts deducted from the above are used for the purpose of Purchasing Drugs and Dressing at various P.O.W. Camps. I certify also that the Senior British Officer (Lt. Col. Lilly, T.D. 1/5 Foresters) ordered these contributions as the Japanese provided no Medical supplies - Lt. Col. Lilly has promise to see that each Officer was reimbursed from Public Money.

Major R. [Signature] Bn. No. [Number] Camp [Number] LAIND.

Records of messing and IOUs in respect of contributions to welfare and hospital



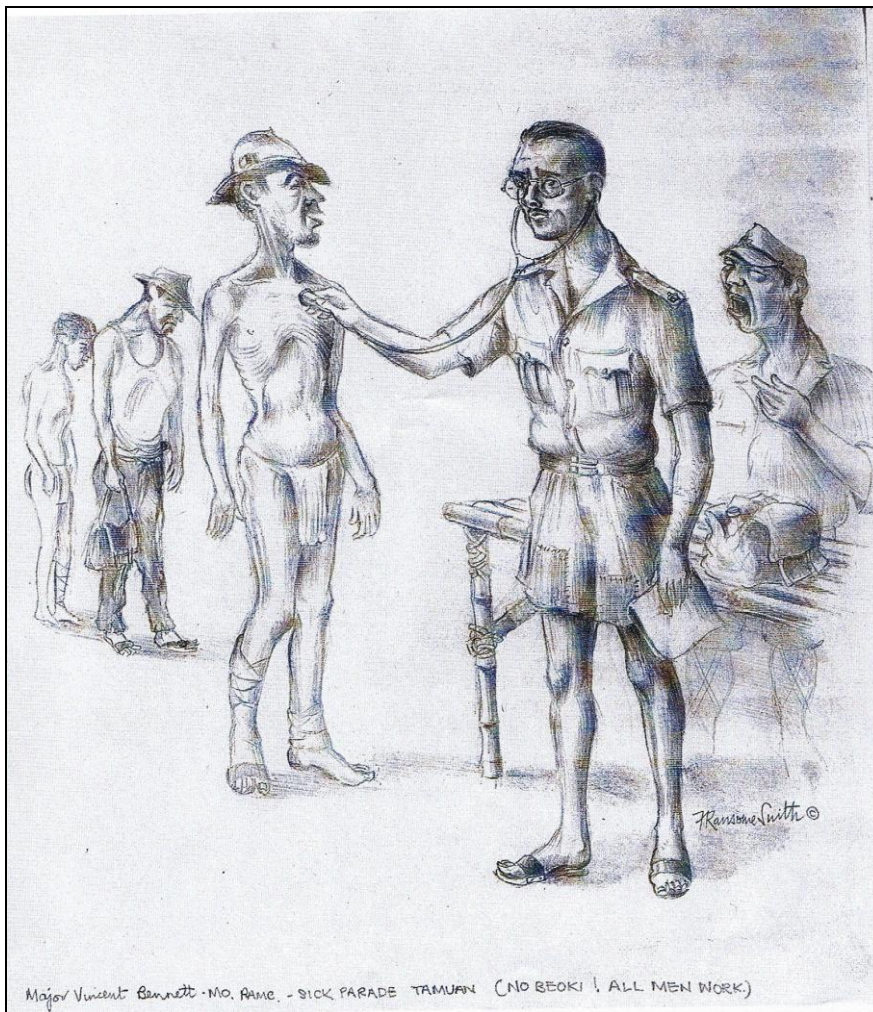
**Watercolour portrait of Major Vincent Bennett
by George Old - July 1944 ¹**

Life in this camp appears to have been monotonous following completion of the railway. Major Bennett's entry in his note book for the 29 August 1944 states: -

“One dull day after another....Evacuation to Chungkai with many bad hats. Hospital Robbers and drug looters..... Prices going up – eggs 15cts, corn cobs 2 for 15. Bananas 1ct each..... Getting impatient and restless. I hope we get out this year. We were inspected a few days ago by a Jap General – no bad clowns to be seen – Special diet for the day. He saw two or 3 huts and drove away. Band concert allowed that night.”¹

Jim Rea, in his diary entry of 12 April 1945, makes an interesting observation on the behaviour of a Japanese Medical Officer: -

“While Dr Maroka was making an inspection of the sick one day he hacked the Doc on the shin. Immediately afterwards he appeared to appreciate that this was not the usual custom between doctors for he stopped his inspection and went away. Somedays later he did the same to Major Corlette and slapped his face as well. The veneer is very thin.”³



Major Bennett RAMC taking sick parade at Tamuan ⁶

In another undated entry about this time Major Bennett again describes life in camp: -

“No smoking out of doors. No whistling, no singing – no musical instruments. Smoking around hole. No talking to Thais. Saluting all. Organised parties passing guard road – Koshira Naka – Koshira Hidare. No sale of sugar. No selling of raw eggs. No playing of cards or reading of books during working hours 9 – 5. Two lamps only allowed in hut. All men stand to attention when Nip enters hut. No crossing of drains except at recognised bridges. Nothing to be seen on inspection days – nets down. Searches once a week with digging. No pencils except registered ones allowed. All note books handed in nightly. Boots taken from sick officers and men. No concerts or band except when allowed by Japs. Night counting in huts..... Sick not allowed to go to hospital after 5pm without asking 6 Japs. No private fires.”¹

Major Bennett left Tamuan on 2 April 1945 for Nakhon Pathom. This was the hospital camp established by the Japanese for up to 10,000 patients, although it never had more than 7,900 patients.

Mergui Road

Little is generally known or has been written about the Mergui Road

It was from Nakhon Pathom in April 1945 that he, among a number of Medical Officers, was selected to join a party of 1,011 POWs (considered by the Japanese as lightly sick) and sent to the south of Thailand to work on the ill fated Mergui Road between Prachuap Khiri Khan and Mergui on the west coast of Burma. The men had already been separated from their officers.

The road was being built (as “Speedo job”) by the IJA to extract their armies from Burma following significant military reversals there.

The party left Nakhon Pathom hospital camp at 1130pm on 11 April 1945 and arrived at the station at approximately 0230 hrs on 12 April. The POWs were then loaded into open railway trucks and the train departed at approximately 0400 hours. They were exposed to the elements throughout the journey to Ratburi where they detrained. They were then marched approximately one kilometre to the river where it became clear that the railway bridge had been bombed. The POWs were then ordered to cross the river on a dangerous makeshift footway constructed by the Japanese over the remnants of the bridge and were corralled in a field on the other side to await another train that night.

During the day some of the POWs were forced to return across the bridge, unload and bring up further provisions.

The train left Ratburi at 2000 hrs on 12 April and arrived at the destination, Khirikhan, just before dawn on 13 April and the men were then marched to a camp near the East coast. Here they were given a meal and were informed by the Japanese that they had to march 48 kilometres in two days, starting immediately. Major Bennett, who was the SMO asked for a nights rest as the party had been travelling for the previous two nights and had not been able to rest during the day. This request was refused but after a lot of argument the Japanese conceded that the men could take three days instead of two to complete the journey. In fact, they marched for four days.

The march started on 13th April. On the morning of 14th April, it was reported that 13 men were too ill to continue and Major Bennett remained in camp with the sick whilst the rest of the party were forced on – arriving at Top Road Camp on 16th April 1945. Major Bennett’s notes record him arriving at Top Road Camp on 17th April, one day after the main party had arrived. There are no records of what happened to the sick.

The men at Top Road Camp were put to work immediately on 17th April 1945. Major Bennett’s affidavit (Exhibit No.1585-A) completed after the war stated: -

“The Top Camp had been used for the accommodation of coolies who had left before we arrived. There were three very broken down huts, one without a roof. This was the season when it rained almost continuously and in view of the fact that the huts were situated in a ravine surrounded by high trees, we never had the chance to dry our kit and clothing.”

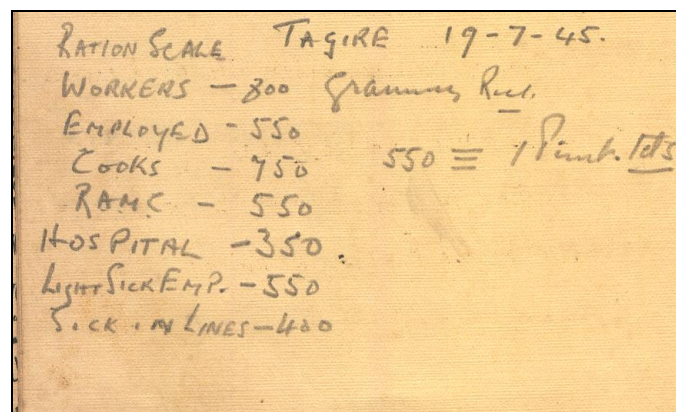
The food consisted of rice and dry vegetables and was so short in quantity that after about three weeks most of the prisoners were suffering from beriberi and other deficiency diseases. Added to the shortage of food, prisoners were subjected to excessive work, and I remember a period when work went on from about 0830 in the morning until two or three o'clock the following morning. When this was the case there was no opportunity for prisoners to have meals in camp, and buckets of rice and vegetable stew had to be sent out to the working site.

The sick rate which had been about 30 to 40 men per day rose after about three weeks to 60 to 70 men per day, the most usual complaints being deficiency diseases and malaria. In view of the high sick rate as aforesaid, I had to ask for some of the worst cases to be evacuated. This was always refused.....

Medical supplies were meagre. Although no deaths occurred among prisoners of war at this camp, of the total of about 1000 men who set out from Nakompton to build the road, about 250 died in four months owing to the lack of medical supplies, overwork, inadequate food and the disgraceful living conditions.”

Initially the work was very hard and involved moving considerable quantities of rock by hand to form the base of the road, felling trees and removing bamboo root systems.

The food mainly comprised rice with small quantities of dried vegetables with some dried fish and was totally inadequate for the hard manual labour to which the POWs were exposed.



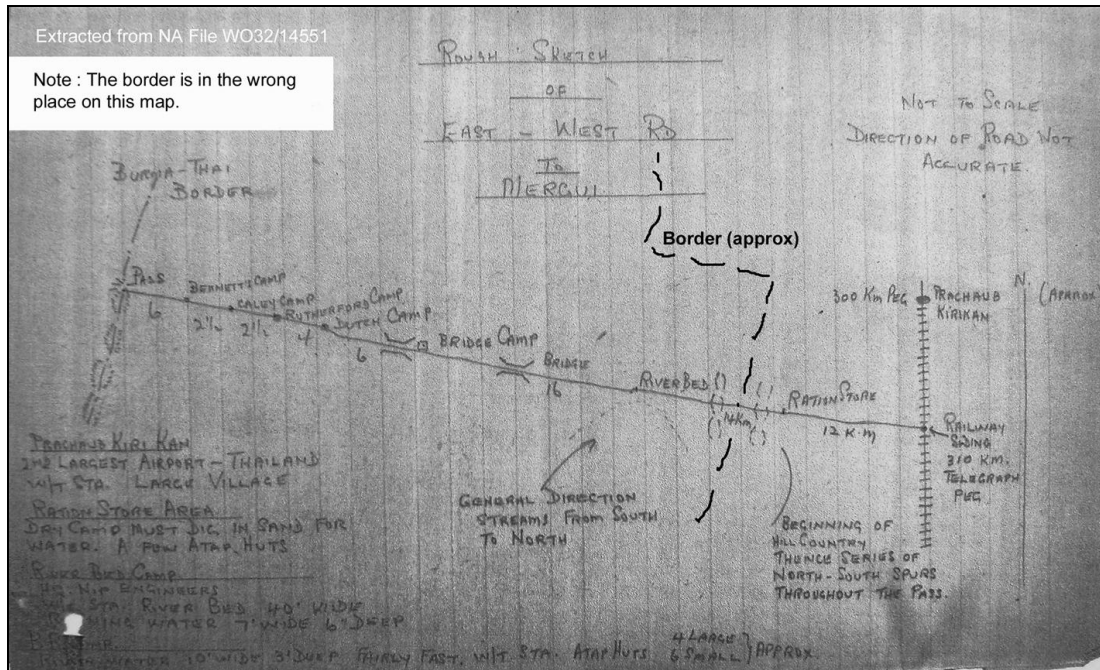
RATION SCALE TAGIRE 19-7-45.
WORKERS - 800 Gramms Rice.
EMPLOYED - 550
COOKS - 750 550 = 1 Pint. ltr.
RAMC - 550
HOSPITAL - 350
LIGHT SICK EMP. - 550
SICK IN LINES - 400

Rice ration – extract from Major Bennett’s notes¹

Many cases of beriberi were recorded due to the lack of vitamins and the general health of already sick men deteriorated rapidly through disease (malaria, dysentery, ulcers and malnutrition) exacerbated by working in deep jungle in damp, twilight conditions.

Major Bennett’s personal notes do not contain details of the general state of the POWs or the medical records at Top Road Camp. However, by 25th April over 33% of the men were reported as being sick and by the 4th May over 50% of the men were said to be ill.

On 17th May 1945 Major Bennett is recorded as having a patient with a serious eye condition who was included in a party of 25 sick men who were to be sent back on the first part of their journey to the hospital camp at Nakom Pathom. At the time he had requested the evacuation of 200 seriously sick men, but this was refused by the Japanese camp authorities.



Map of Mergui Road Camps⁹

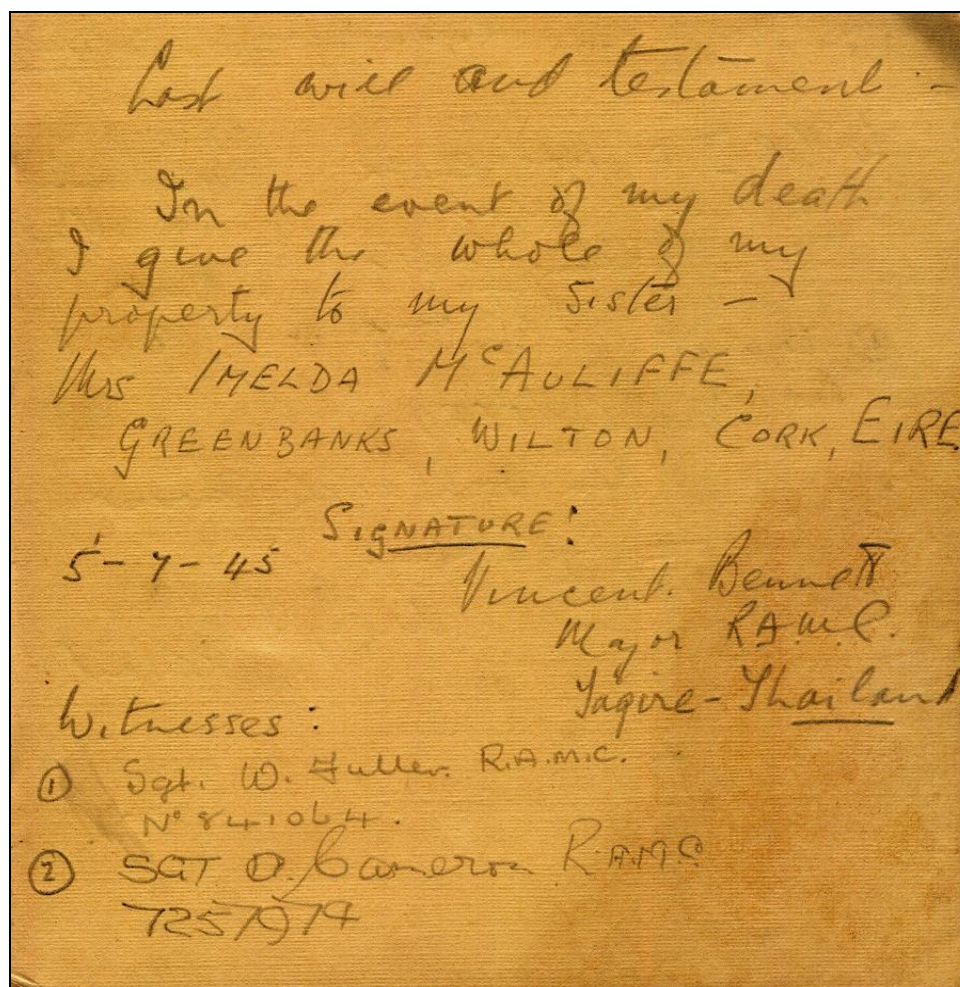
He appears to have been based in Top Road Camp until he left for Tagri Camp where he arrived on 25th June 1945.¹ Tagri Camp also known as Bennett's Camp (the Japanese named the camps after the senior officer present) was located 58 km west of Kirikan.



Tagri Camp - showing huts and river in jungle.¹

Major Bennett's available medical records and a sketch of the Tagri cemetery confirm the 'known' deaths of over 64 POWs between 8th May and 20th August 1945, at that particular location. These records start over a month before he was permanently based at Tagri. (See Appendix 2).

It is, perhaps, worth mentioning that Major Bennett, whilst having a cheerful disposition and having survived the camps on the railway itself, appears to have had serious doubts at this stage about his own survival on the Mergui Road. He drew up his last Will and Testament on 5 July 1945: -



Last Will and Testament ¹

He records his assets as being: -

1. *Pay as Major RAMC from October 1941 to present.*
2. *£1,000 due from Army – as my 5 year gratuity.*
3. *Insurance Policy Prudential worth £1,500.*
4. *Monies in Chartered Bank of Australia – India – China.*

On 7th July 1945 Vincent witnesses the receipt of monies (Australian) received from deceased AIF men: -

A\$ 11.00 – Griffen

A\$ 11.00 – Hedgcock

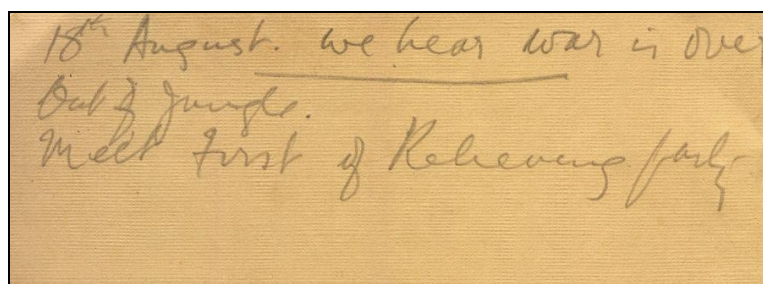
A\$ 10.00 - Nolan

Received the above sum \$32.00. From this \$5.00 was expended on welfare work i.e. Sugar. Also \$4.00 had to be deducted for debt.

*Signed A.G.Crosby (Sgt)
NX60046*

V.Bennett Major RAMC

The POWs on the Mergui Road eventually heard the news that war with Japan had ended, on 18 August 1945.



Extract from note book¹

Lt/Col McEachern of the 4th A/Tank regiment set up an HQ in Bangkok to assist in the control of ex POWs in Siam. The relieving party, under the command of Major Stringer (QX6449) of 2/26 Inf Bn, AIF, arrived at Kirikhan on 26th August 1945. By that time the Japanese had started to move men down the road out of the jungle. Many were too weak to walk and were drawn out on carts. Major Stringer's affidavit records in some detail as to what he found and the following is largely extracted from it: -

It was estimated that there were 749 men in the area at the time. The MOs in the camps on the Mergui Road were: -

Capt. Dahler	Dutch Medical Officer
Capt. Cayley	R.A.M.C.
Capt. Brouwer	Dutch Medical Officer
Major Dewe	I.M.S.
Major Bennett	R.A.M.C.
Capt. Watson	R.A.M.C.
Capt. Slachter	Dutch Medical Officer

The MOs were described as being in extremely bad health (both mentally and physically). All agreed that the causes of death and sickness among the POWs were due to: -

- a) employment of sick men on heavy work.
- b) starvation diet.
- c) lack of camp facilities. (Some camps were roofless huts in ‘twilight’ jungle, with incessant rain.)
- d) entire lack of medical supplies, equipment and hospital facilities.
- e) lack of clothing, mosquito nets and blankets.

Of the POWs 70% were described as being ill or dangerously ill – no man really fit. The condition of the men was evidence of the MOs information: -

- 1) A large percentage were too weak to move.
- 2) Many resembled living skeletons (4 stone in many cases.)
- 3) Mental condition of majority was such that no coherent information could be obtained. Some did not even know their own names; and in a group a man’s intimate friends had forgotten his name.

With the supply of drugs, Red Cross stores (which had been kept back by the Japanese), blankets, clothing, mosquito nets, eggs, chickens, greens and accommodation the death rate fell immediately from four daily to four in fourteen days. At this stage the men had been placed back under the care of their MO’s.

“....He (Tillbrook) has arrived. He was in one of the camps formed from the partially fit men taken from Nakom Patom base hospital. The work was making a road somewhere near Mergui. The Doc had 1000 men there and many died of malaria and malnutrition though I believe the work there was not too severe. Tillbrook was in a camp of 315 men and of these 175 died. They never had any quinine. When capitulation came they were given 18 bottles of it. Then they went to a nearby Japanese hospital – 400 yards away – and found a supply of 80,000 tablets...”³

Stringer in the affidavit stated that 1,111 men were sent to work on the Mergui Road in April 1945. Of the 984 that were known to be in the area (after taking into account those who had been evacuated as sick back to Nakon Paton) at the end of the war in August 1945, 264 had died and 720 survived.



Major Bennett - December 1945 ¹

POST WAR



Entrance to Chungkai POW Cemetery ¹

Following the Japanese surrender Major Bennett recommended the following for awards for exceptional service: -

As Senior Medical Officer I wish to recommend: -

- a) Capt. Best IMS, Sgt Riches RAMC and S/Sgt Dunlop RAMC for exceptional devotion to duty during a cholera epidemic in my camp at Tonchan South, Thailand June 8th to August 9th 1943. They worked night and day in the most indescribably filthy conditions. They literally risked their lives daily doing their duty. Personal protection against cholera was non-existent. Sgt. Riches RAMC got cholera and luckily survived.*
- b) Capt S.S. Pavillard, MO 1 SSVF. For devotion to duty and taking grave personal risks in contacting the Swiss Consul to enable us to get more drugs and money for our sick soldiers. These duly arrived and many lives were saved thereby.*
- c) I wish that No.841064 Sgt. W. Fuller RAMC may get some recognition for his exceptional devotion to duty night and day tending the sick and dying on the Mergui Road party. Even while suffering from malaria he continued with his duty. He never at any time gave a thought to his own welfare.*

Signed

*V. Bennett
Major RAMC*



Japanese memorial to POWs - Kanchanaburi (1945) ⁵

Major Bennett was mentioned in despatches for his services, particularly during the cholera outbreak at Tonchan South.

FOR WIRELESS TRANSMISSION.

I am not going to produce an atrocity this time. On Christmas night in a P.O.W. Camp in Siam one of our lads left the camp and betook himself to a nearby village. With the British Tommies faculty of making himself understood in any language, he was duly entertained and partook of the hospitality of the headman and vilage lovelies. The fare provided was excellent.

The Jap Camp guards were ~~not~~ to say the least of it somewhat dismayed when they heard the ~~strange~~ strains of the Londondery Air coming from the jungle at 0300 hrs. Our lad was duly pinched by the Japs, and lodged in the 'no good house' for the night. The following day he was tried by a Jap officer and sentenced to the following:- He was to carry two boards a la London Sandwich man. On the boards back and front was written 'I took whiskey. This very bad thing'. Two Jap guards with rifles and fixed bayonets were placed on either side of the culprit. The camp band was ordered out, and in the words of the solemn Jap officer was told, 'You must play tunes'.

The procession started and had to go around the camp three times, so that ~~that~~ disciple of Bacchus should be thoroughly disgraced. This was to be a lesson to the other six thousand prisoners. The Japs looked as solemn as Musse when he posed for the camera as future Roman Emperor and grand Admiral of Mare Nostrum. The band struck up the following tunes with great noise and clashing of cymbals:-

1. 'Roll out the Barrel'.
2. 'Rolling Home'.
3. 'Here's to th good old whiskey, mop it down, mop it down'.

and finally 4. 'Colonel Bogey'.

With six thousand P.O.W.s looking on, I leave the rest to your imagination !

As supplied by Major Bennett. R.A.M.C.

From papers of Major Bennett ¹

After the war he returned to the UK and following a brief period of convalescence in Northern Ireland he discharged himself and returned to duties. He was stationed at Woolwich Barracks, London and for a period he was attached to the Irish Guards and was MO at the Tower of London.

After his release from the army on 20th December 1946, he married and returned with his wife, Rosamond, to Malaya in 1947. He went into private practice in Segamat and Muar (Johore) and subsequently Malacca, looking after the labour forces in the tin mines and on the rubber estates.

In 1959 he moved with his family (three boys and one girl) to Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and again went into private practice looking after labour forces on farms and mines. He was also one of only two doctors providing medical services for the government in a large area in the northern part of the country.

Vincent Bennett died on 27 July 1962 from a cause attributed to his treatment as a POW.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND SOURCES

1. Papers and notes of Major Vincent Bennett.
2. Discussions between James (Taylor) Jim Rea and Desmond Bennett.
3. Private Diary of James (Taylor) Jim Rea – now in the Imperial War Museum, London. By kind permission of the Rea family.
4. Private discussions between Major Vincent Bennett and his son, Desmond Bennett.
5. From the photograph collection of Jim Rea. These photos were given to him by a friend, Bill Mussett (Accountant Malayan Railways) shortly after the war. It is believed that Bill Mussett was charged with trying to recover Malayan Railways assets from Thailand post war.
6. Sketch drawn from memory in 2006 by Lt Fred Ransome Smith (5th Suffolk Regiment) – from the collection of Lt Col Peter Winstanley OAM RFD (Rtd) JP.
7. From the photograph collection of Jim Rea. These photos were taken around 1950 by Harold Helps and given by him to Jim Rea in 1952.
8. Bamboo Doctor – Stanley Pavillard.
9. National Archives.
10. Source Rod Beattie. Thailand-Burma Railway Centre, Kanchanaburi, Thailand.

The above article about Major Vincent Bennett was put together as a collaborative effort by his children Desmond, Clive, Patrick and Carolyn. Desmond's wife Mary Jane, who is the daughter of another ex POW J.T. Rea (a close friend of Major

Vincent Bennett), also contributed. Each one of the children held some memento of their father's which in one way or another contributed to the story.

I am delighted to have this article on my website www.pows-of-japan.net Lt Col Peter Winstanley OAM RFD JP