

2014

## Chapter 9. “The Battle for Concerts”: Kanburi Officers’ Camp

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### Recommended Citation

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## Chapter 9: “The Battle for Concerts”

### Kanburi Officers’ Camp

Kanburi Officers’ Camp was established by the I. J. A. Southern Command in late January 1945 as a place to house captive Allied POW officers. As the war turned against the Japanese, there was growing concern that these officers might lead their men in a breakout.<sup>1</sup> To forestall such a possibility, all the POW officers—even those from as far away as Saigon in French Indochina [Vietnam]—were ordered sent to Kanburi/051 Kilo, a camp just north of Kanchanaburi in western Thailand. Under the repressive and vindictive policies of the I. J. A. commandant at Kanburi, the POWs’ integrity and fortitude would be tested to the utmost—in no area more so than their struggle to provide some sort of life-sustaining entertainment for themselves. Lieutenant Louis Baume, one of the junior officers imprisoned in Kanburi, would call this struggle the “battle for concerts.”<sup>2</sup>

Whether published or unpublished, the records kept by POWs at Kanburi all suffer from similar deficiencies. They are written either in vague chronological order with few details and significant time gaps or as summary paragraphs in official report style, each focused on a particular topic or time period. Rarely is a specific date given for any event. This sketchy recordkeeping stemmed from a ban on the possession of writing paper and instruments in Kanburi, so strictly enforced through frequent unannounced searches that trying to maintain a secret daily diary became just too risky. Afterward, when these men sat down to transcribe their jottings or write their memoirs, they had difficulty remembering many of the details of what had taken place when at Kanburi, except for those few occasions when an event was so memorable—for good or ill—that images of it remained vivid.

Inexplicably, the memoirs of Lieutenants John Coast and Norman Carter, two of our most important sources of information on the entertainment that took place on the Thailand-Burma railway, are practically silent on the subject of entertainment in Kanburi Officers’ Camp. Explanations for this omission exist, as we shall see. One of the few observations Coast did make was that “nearly everyone used to look forward to the Monday nights of concert, variety or revue,” though in his opinion, under the circumstances, “the shows couldn’t be first-class.”<sup>3</sup>

But Lieutenant G. E. Chippington disagreed. He thought the shows in Kanburi Officers’ Camp were “of superb quality. Once again there proves to be considerable pool of talent in the camp.”<sup>4</sup> While Coast and Carter seem to have lost interest in detailing the entertainments in Kanburi, Captain C. D. L. Aylwin and Other Ranks John Durnford, along with Louis Baume, provide us with the best records we have of the camp’s entertainment.

The ban on paper and writing instruments also had a negative impact on the POWs’ ability to produce performance-related artifacts, such as souvenir programs, publicity posters, and costume renderings. In contrast to other POW camps in Thailand, where many of these artifacts were produced and have survived, there are practically none for Kanburi Officers’ Camp. Since posters and souvenir programs have been a primary source of detailed information on camp entertainment, their absence here means that we know little about what concert parties were produced and even less about who the producer-directors, designers, and performers were. But that does not mean we know nothing: the series of skirmishes that took place in the “battle for concerts” are well documented.

This narrative of the entertainment that took place in Kanburi Officers’ Camp is, therefore, more than for any other camp, a conjectural reconstruction.

## Backstory: October 1942-January 1945

### Kanburi POW Camps/050-053 Kilo

A cluster of Japanese administrative and POW camps all stood within a mile or so of each other outside the provincial city of Kanchanaburi<sup>i</sup>: Kanburi Hospital Camp/050 Kilo; No. 2 Base Camp/051 Kilo, which contained two aerodromes and a railway engineering workshop; and Kanburi Base Camp/053 Kilo, headquarters for the 9th Railway Regiment, responsible for construction on the Thailand side of the railway. In late August 1943, what came to be known as “the Radio Incident” occurred in Kanburi/051 Kilo when a secret radio was found by the Japanese during a surprise search and five men were beaten severely, two to their deaths. The three survivors of that initial beating were then interrogated and tortured by the Kempeitai to obtain further information about the operation of their radio.<sup>ii</sup> News of this incident spread quickly up and down the railway grapevine, producing a chilling effect on those POW camps that still possessed secret radios.

With major construction on the railway completed in October 1943, Kanburi/053 Kilo joined Kanburi/050 Kilo as a hospital camp for the “F” and “H” Forces evacuated from up country. Russell Braddon recalled a night sometime in late 1943 during which an impromptu sing-along by British POWs in a neighboring hospital ward took place, joined in succession by patients in the next two wards. And with that, Braddon concluded, “the worst of Thailand was over.”<sup>iii</sup> Comic lectures given by “Professor” Alan Roberts and “Hot Piano” performances by Bill Williams took place in the days that followed.<sup>iiii</sup>

On 5 December 1943 a simple evening of entertainment was recorded by Medical Officer Roy Mills: “There was a wonderful camp concert of one hour’s duration tonight. Artists simply sat on boxes or stood. Piano [accordion]—candlelight only but the excellent performance made light of such deficiencies as a stage.”<sup>v</sup> Given the date, this was most likely a Dutch cabaret for St. Nicholas’ Day. One might suspect that some sort of Christmas and New Year’s celebrations took place as well, although no records of such have been located.

Once the New Year was past, the remnants of “F” and “H” Forces were evacuated to Singapore,<sup>vi</sup> and POWs who had worked on the Burma side of the railway took their places. In February, Van Dorst and his “Rimboe Club” troupe performed their first cabaret in Kanburi/050 Kilo. As the hospital filled up with more Burma POWs, Van Dorst and his cabaret troupe were transferred to Tamarkan. Shortly after his arrival in March suffering from recurring bouts of malaria, the Dutch entertainer Wim Kan experienced a relapse and broke out with sores all over his body. After a brief period of steady recovery, he had another relapse on 9 April and was readmitted to the hospital. This time he came close to death, even to the point of having the priest at his bedside. On 2 May, he was moved down the line to the hospital camp for chronic cases at Nakhon Pathom.

In mid-May an announcement was circulated throughout the hospital and relocation camps that the I. J. A. wanted to establish a “consolidated” concert party to tour the railway maintenance camps. It would be based in Kanburi/051 Kilo and performers would be given substantial resources and perks.<sup>vii</sup> Among the POWs from other camps answering the call were several Chungkai performers, including “Tug” Wilson and “Frankie” Quinton. Later that month, Quinton teamed up with a Dutch accordionist, “Matzie”

<sup>i</sup> “Kanburi” was the shortened name most often used for these camps even by the Japanese.

<sup>ii</sup> See Eric Lomax’s extraordinary memoir of his experience, *The Railway Man*, for a powerful description of this event and its unexpected consequences.

<sup>iii</sup> Both of them had performed in Changi prior to being sent Up Country.

<sup>iv</sup> There, in Sime Road Camp, and later, in Changi Gaol, Bill Williams and Alan Roberts would become major concert party producers and performers.

<sup>v</sup> The most logical choice for the location of this concert party should have been the large hospital camp at Kanburi/050 Kilo, but all the evidence points to Kanburi/051 Kilo as its location.

[Will Matser], and appeared in an N.E.I. cabaret, *Boerenbruiloft* (Peasant Wedding) as one of Kanburi/051 Kilo's first concert party offerings.<sup>vi</sup>

On 13 June, Gus Harffey and a few additional Chungkai performers arrived in Kanburi to take up the offer as well. What they found was that the Japanese appeal had paid off handsomely. A large concert party ("Kanburi Productions") had been formed by David Gregg and John Lovell,<sup>vii</sup> and they were about to open their first major production.

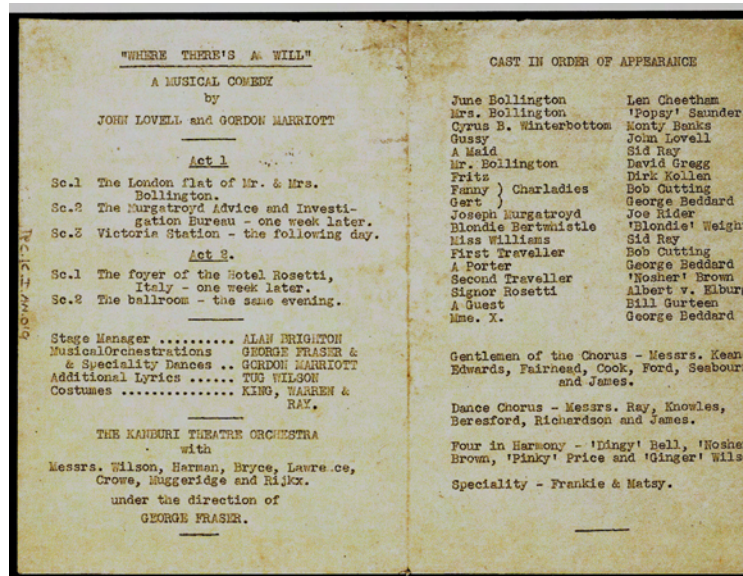


FIGURE 9.1. PLAYBILL FOR *WHERE THERE'S A WILL*. COURTESY OF NIOD.

*Where There's A Will*, an original musical comedy by Lovell, and Gordon Marriott, opened on 17 June. It was a large-cast full-scale production with settings, costumes, and dance numbers supported by a seven-piece orchestra led by George Fraser.

In late June six musicians from Tamarkan, including the American Wilbur G. Smith, arrived to join the concert party. But for some reason the grand scheme for a touring concert party never materialized and it was Chungkai that supplied the maintenance camps with entertainment.

With the influx of new personnel, the original concert party was reorganized and a lean-to theatre—"The Playhouse"—was built so they could perform during the monsoon season. In the future, all shows in Kanburi would be produced by "Playhouse Presents."

The inaugural production in the Playhouse on 8 July was *A Night of Comedy, Music & Drama*—three one-act plays produced by Lovell and Gregg—that included: "The Boy Comes Home," "Hen-pecked," and "The Mask." Among the performers was camp quartermaster Captain "Jock" Fraser. Len Cheetham, Syd Ray, and "Blondie" Weightman played the major female roles. From the program credits it is clear that Harffey had taken over leadership of the "Kanburi Theatre Orchestra" from Fraser as it was now "Gus Harffey and His Orchestra" that performed the Entr'acte music.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>vi</sup> As there is no date on the extant program, this placement is conjectural.

<sup>vii</sup> They may have been former members of "Fizzer" Pearson's "Players" at Chungkai.



FIGURE 9.2. PHOTOGRAPH OF KANBURI ORCHESTRA. COURTESY OF WILBUR SMITH. FROM VIEWER'S LEFT TO RIGHT BEHIND THE OSTENSIBLE CONDUCTOR, JOCK FRASER, THE MUSICIANS ARE FRANKIE QUINTON (BRITISH, ACCORDION), HARMAN (BRITISH, ACCORDION), WILBUR G. SMITH (AMERICAN, IN BACK WITH ONLY HIS HEAD VISIBLE), "NODDER" SMITH (A.I.F., HORN), JIMMY BRYCE (BRITISH, DRUMS), "TUG" WILSON (BRITISH, VIOLIN), RON MUGGERIDGE (BRITISH, CLARINET), HANS RYKE (DUTCH, GUITAR), REG LAWRENCE (BRITISH, GUITAR), AND NOEL "JIMMY" CROWE (A.I.F., GUITAR).

This photograph of the orchestra was taken by a Korean guard as the group was rehearsing. In the foreground, apparently leading the orchestra is Jock Fraser, who actually had just happened by as the photograph was being taken and was asked to stand in front of the group as their conductor.<sup>9</sup> Although he is in the photograph, Wilbur Smith was no longer in the orchestra. He had become involved in staging productions instead.

In the background is a glimpse of the Playhouse. A slanted roof and part of the façade of one of the shed-like side wings is just visible between the two figures at left. Judging by the height of the musicians in relationship to the size of the proscenium opening behind them, it looks like a fairly small performance space.

Following this 8 July production there is a gap in the entertainment record at Kanburi, due, perhaps, to the heavy monsoon rainfall. So it may have been September before *Live, Love, & Laugh* was performed.<sup>viii</sup> This was another large-cast full-scale original musical comedy by Gregg, Lovell, and Marriott, with twenty-five musical numbers, dance "arrangements" by Jock Fraser, and, for the first time on the Kanburi stage, lighting, with credit given to Wilbur G. Smith for this new feature.

*Music Hath Charms* was a concert of semi-classical and popular music that was probably the concert party's offering for the command performance in "celebration" of the joining of the Burma and Thai ends of the railway. But the inclusion of "China Tango" would be conductor Gus Harffey's ironic commentary on the event, reminding listeners of the brutal treatment of the Chinese by the Japanese. Even

<sup>viii</sup> Since there is no date on the souvenir program, this placement is conjectural.

Harffey's title for the concert, with its unvoiced completion, carried subversive significance.

Harffey's orchestra had now grown to fifteen players (see **Figure 9.3** in the Image Gallery for a playbill giving information on performers and selections.)



FIGURE 9.4. PROGRAM COVER FOR *A New Revue*. COURTESY OF NIOD.

The next Kanburi production was David Gregg's *A New Revue* that opened on 10 November (see **Figures 9.5 a-c** in the Image Gallery for the playbill of this production). The souvenir program cover above shows the Playhouse Presents' new stylized "double P" logo. A large version in wood was placed at the apex of the proscenium's header.

*Nite and Day* was "The Playhouse's" Christmas show. Little about this production is known except Wilbur Smith's pride about a unique lighting effect he had produced.<sup>ix10</sup>

## 1945

After the first of the year, the lives of the POWs in Kanburi/051 Kilo suddenly changed when the other ranks POWs were hastily ordered elsewhere in preparation for the camp's conversion into an officers-only camp. Exemptions to this policy were other ranks who worked as servants for the Japanese or batmen for POW officers.<sup>11</sup> Given this ruling, the concert party was able to retain a few performers and musicians, including several "Les Girls." Wilbur G. Smith was sent to the new airfield construction site at Nakhon Nai. David Greg, on the other hand, was included in a draft for Japan. He would later appear in a series of camp shows at Keijo in Korea.

<sup>ix</sup> More fully explained in the "Lighting" section of "Chapter 12: 'Jolly Good Show!'"

## The Officers' Camp

Lieutenant-Colonel Philip Toosey and the officers from Nong Pladuk were among the first outsiders to arrive in the newly designated officers' camp on 25 January. Toosey's "Official Report" contains a succinct description of the camp they found on arrival: "one of the smallest in Thailand, dirty, badly broken down Huts and generally unpleasant. We were put in before the Camp had been extended or improved and for the first few weeks conditions were very unhappy."<sup>12</sup>

Their I. J. A. commandant was Captain Noguchi, whom Toosey thought "an arrogant sadist of the worst type."<sup>13</sup> But Noguchi would not be a full-time presence in Kanburi until after 17 February, when he was relieved of command of Chungkai across the river. Toosey believed one of Noguchi's goals was to break the men's spirit by threatening and harassing them in any way he could, even to the point of rebellion, so that he would have justification for killing them all off.<sup>14</sup> In response, Louis Baume revealed the POWs' strategy: to "dig our heels in right from the beginning and endeavour to resist the Nips every inch as far as it is possible—and there has already been plenty of trouble as a result."<sup>15</sup> As the months passed, a battle of wit and will played out over who was really in control of the prisoners' mental and emotional well-being.

Slightly over three thousand POWs would eventually be imprisoned at Kanburi: two thousand British, Australian, and American officers, one thousand Netherlands East Indies [N.E.I.] officers, and one hundred and eighty other ranks from all nationalities, officially listed on the rolls as "cooks and batmen."<sup>16</sup> Ninety-eight of the officers were Field Grade (lieutenant-colonels and majors). The British lieutenant-colonels and majors were housed together in a hut nicknamed the "Imperial War Museum."<sup>17</sup> With this many members of "the old school tie" tradition in the same camp, what would matter wouldn't be only rank with its privileges but also nationality and class: one was either British or one wasn't; Regular Army or not.

The beginnings of the POW administration at Kanburi were chaotic as the lieutenant-colonels jockeyed for position. Lieutenant-Colonel McKellen, an Australian, was initially designated as POW Officer in Charge.<sup>x</sup> But when those with more time in grade—and Regular Army—arrived, McKellen was replaced by British Lieutenant-Colonel G. E. Swinton, Malaya Command. As Swinton's health was not good, a committee of lieutenant-colonel liaison officers, two from each major constituency (British, Australian, N.E.I., plus the sole American) actually ran the camp.<sup>18</sup> At Japanese insistence, Toosey, initially left out of this grouping, was later "put in" as the British liaison officer.<sup>19</sup>

But this cumbersome arrangement eventually proved unworkable, and in mid-April the Japanese installed Toosey as the sole liaison officer to run the POW camp, along with a British and Dutch adjutant.<sup>20</sup> This change did not happen without a lot of grumbling from the Imperial War Museum or the Australians, who felt slighted and, it now appeared, had been excluded from the administration altogether.<sup>21</sup> As a junior officer in charge of others more senior than himself in time in grade, and as a member of the Territorial Army, Toosey found trying to command Regular Army officers, many of whom were more interested in their own welfare than the good of the camp, to be "one of the most difficult experiences of my life."<sup>22</sup>

Work on rebuilding the camp started immediately. Since Kanburi was designated an officers-only camp, the officers, not the few other ranks in their midst, became the primary work force. From Major Jim Jacobs' point of view, "it was better for our bodily and mental health that we should have some occupation. With 3,000 of us confined in such a small area, mental and physical stagnation would have been the inevitable consequence of idleness."<sup>23</sup> Besides rebuilding huts for accommodation and cooking, the men leveled the ground for better drainage, dug extra latrines, and constructed facilities for a water pump, among other tasks.

<sup>x</sup> Major Jim Jacobs (A.I.F.) states that the first Allied camp commander was actually Lieutenant-Colonel McEachern [see Jacobs, 135].

But when ordered to erect a ten-foot-high bamboo stockade around the perimeter of the camp and to dig a deep ditch inside it (with the displaced dirt used to create a high bund “to make sure that none of us escape from this cage”<sup>24</sup>)—construction the POWs considered military defenses and against the Geneva Convention—they refused to do so. Briefly. Their initial refusal was met, in Toosey’s words, with “immediate and savage punishment.”<sup>25</sup> Later they were warned that if they approached within two yards of the stockade, they would be shot.<sup>26</sup> As at Nakhon Pathom, machine gun placements would be strategically located on the bund, facing inward.

From the failure of this protest and others like it, the Kanburi POWs learned that their future resistance tactics had to be subtle and clever, not confrontational—unless absolutely necessary. If there was little they could do to win any open physical conflict with their Japanese overseers, they could at least outwit their captors in ways that would empower them and preserve their self-esteem.

### “A Propaganda Stunt”

On Monday, 30 January, all work on rebuilding the camp was stopped when the POWs were required to attend their first concert party—by Gus Harffey and his band—given not as a magnanimous act on Noguchi’s part but because photographs of this event would show the world how well the Japanese were caring for the officers. “A propaganda stunt,” Baume called it, and then described how the POWs tried to subvert the photographs’ value:

We had all been ordered to parade in front of the stage wearing shirts, hats, footwear and our best pair of shorts. Once there we were told to sit down on the ground in little groups and to smoke cigarettes and enjoy ourselves while the band entertained us from the stage. The Order of the Day was “Oru men happy”—so we tried to look as gloomy as possible while the orchestra<sup>xi</sup> played appropriate music such as “Rule Britannia,” “There will always be an England,” and the Nip photographer took pictures of their happy English prisoners. When the Nips had finished and were walking away, the band played “Colonel Bogey.”<sup>27</sup>

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*xi To the majority of the POWs, the terms “band” and “orchestra” were synonymous.*





FIGURE 9.6. POWs ATTENDING A CONCERT AT KANBURI. PHOTOGRAPHER JOHN MUNSLow WILLIAMS. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL.

According to the Australian War Memorial records, this photograph of a small group of POWs attending a concert at Kanburi was taken secretly by John Munslow Williams. If so, it can function as a substitute for the propaganda photograph mentioned above. A few of the men are aware of the camera, but all look as if they had gotten the word to look as sullen and dejected as possible. They are sitting on the ground or on camp-made stools on a hard-packed mound of earth in front of the stage. Other POWs stand at the back. A bamboo balustrade marking the edge of the orchestra pit can be seen in the foreground lower left. In the background is a backboard for a basketball court and a row of peaked roofs—their living quarters.

Harfey and his band joined in this act of resistance by playing normally forbidden patriotic and martial music, and when they struck up “Colonel Bogey’s March,” the POWs must have genuinely roared with laughter. As many times as it was used Up Country to mock them, the Japanese never tumbled to its “Up Yours!” sarcasm.

### Skirmishes

During the night of 4/5 February, an Allied bombing raid on the two bridges at Tamarkan, a little over three miles away, damaged the wooden bridge. In spite of the bombing, plans for the standard Monday concert went ahead, but they were suddenly cancelled when Noguchi claimed one of the POWs had failed to salute him.<sup>28</sup> Whether or not this accusation was true, we have seen that this rationale was commonly used to cancel a concert party in an attempt to undermine the POWs’ morale. At Kanburi, it only strengthened their resolve. “What annoys the Nips the most,” wrote Baume, “is that none of their punishments appear to have any effect on us (in fact they do) and instead of being cowed into submission we become even more ‘arrogant!’”<sup>29</sup> “Playing the opposite”—a well-known tactic in theatrical performance as well as politics—was one of the most powerful tools in the POWs’ resistance campaign.

5 February was also when Jim Jacobs, Norman Carter, and Charles Faulder arrived in Kanburi as

part of the first draft of officers from Chungkai hospital camp across the river. As they marched into camp, Carter surveyed their new home: “We passed the smoky bamboo cookhouse, the open cess pits mistakenly named latrines and then, as we turned a corner we saw, on the edge of the parade ground—a theatre! It was not so ornate as the Chungkai theatre but it looked adequate and, judging from the greyness of the atap on the roof, it was at least two years old.”<sup>30</sup> This was the small lean-to proscenium theatre seen in the background of the photograph of Harffey’s orchestra in 1944 (see **Figure 9.2**).

The morning after his arrival, Carter went to check out the theatre and found “the stage was cluttered with actors, scene shifters, and odd hangers-on, all milling around Leo Britt’s successor, British Captain Bill Maynall.” Maynall boasted that he had “gotten in first,” which meant that this was going to be “his” theatre. Carter proposed a production of the pantomime *Cinderella*, but Maynall dismissed it as too unsophisticated for an all-officers’ camp. He would continue the rehearsals of Sutton Vane’s dark fantasy-drama *Outward Bound* that Leo Britt had begun at Chungkai. Carter responded, “I can’t agree. *Outward Bound* is about shipboard passengers who are all dead and don’t know it, and that’s a morbid theme for a P.O.W. camp. But *Cinderella* is a tonic for everyone.”<sup>31</sup>

As a lieutenant, Carter was outranked by Maynall, so there was little he could do about the situation except hope that at some point he might be given a chance to produce his pantomime. But he knew that without his own “scenic artist, costumiere, or leading comedian” putting on the show would prove extremely difficult if not impossible.<sup>32</sup>

Carter’s account of his conversation with Maynall is odd. He had been cast by Britt as “Mrs. Midget” in the Chungkai production of *Outward Bound*, which Maynall would surely have known. Yet he does not record any overture on Maynall’s part to have him continue in that role. As we shall see, there may have been other reasons for Maynall’s behavior.

### Camp Update: Another Bombing Attack

Another bombing attack on the Tamarkan bridges took place on 13 February, this time damaging two spans of the concrete and steel bridge as well as the wooden bridge. The engineering workshop next to the officers’ camp was also attacked, and some of the bombs fell into camp, killing three POWs and wounding a dozen others. Bombs also damaged the perimeter moat and totally destroyed the new canteen.<sup>33</sup> While the officers were busy repairing the moat, crews of other ranks POWs from Chungkai and Tamuang were put to work repairing the wooden bridge so that train traffic could resume as quickly as possible.<sup>34</sup> Others were dispatched to repair the concrete and steel bridge.

### Theatre Renovation

During the officers’ first weeks in Kanburi, the focus was on enlarging and rebuilding the entire camp to make it more livable. Realizing that once that work was done, they would have very little to do,<sup>35</sup> the POWs voluntarily took on the additional task of renovating the lean-to theatre.<sup>36</sup>

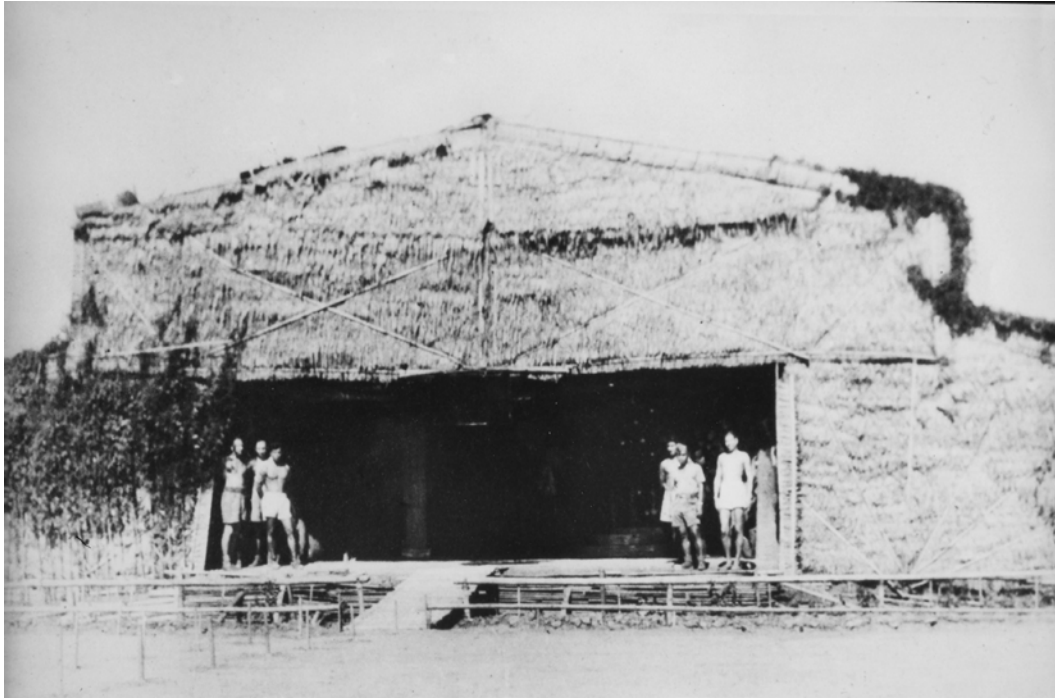


FIGURE 9.7. KANBURI CAMP THEATRE, AUGUST 1945. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL.

This photograph of the new theatre at Kanburi was taken shortly after liberation. Comparing the theatre seen here with the one visible in the background of the earlier photograph taken in 1944 (**Figure 9.2**), we note that the stagehouse has been increased to twice its former width and height. The shed-like wings on either side of the proscenium have been enlarged as well, providing generous off-stage spaces and access from the back. A ramp over the orchestra pit provided temporary access to the stage for technical work and rehearsals. The “Playhouse Presents” logo is dimly visible at the top of the header. (Further examination of this theatre and a different photograph showing the painters working onstage, is found in Chapter 11: “Out of the Blue Came Freedom” and Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!”).

### The Kanburi Concert Party

By the middle of February, all the officers from Tamarkan and Chungkai were in Kanburi. When Major Cary Owtram saw the Kanburi Theatre for the first time, he was not impressed, disparaging it as a “theatre of sorts” which, in his opinion, “had been out of use for many months.”<sup>37</sup> By the end of the month, they were joined by the officers from the hospital at Nakhon Pathom, including many too sick to be moved but forced to do so anyway, with tragic consequences.<sup>38</sup> Captain “Fizzer” Pearson and other officer-performers were part of this group, but the band conductor, Lieutenant Norman Smith, was not yet among them.

For its small size, Kanburi Officers’ Camp would end up with an extraordinary number of musicians and entertainers in its midst—the core of many of the concert parties that had formed in the POW hospital and relocation camps in Thailand. But not all the performers were officers: other ranks’ performers had also been retained, or brought into the camp, as “cooks or batmen.”<sup>39</sup> For instance, when the classical musical conductor Eric Cliffe arrived in Kanburi from Tamuang in late January with a small

group of musicians, Harffey's ensemble was able to expand into a full-fledged orchestra.<sup>xii</sup>



FIGURE 9.8. "C MINOR!" CARTOON BY FRED RANSOME SMITH. COURTESY OF FRED RANSOME SMITH.

This cartoon of Eric Cliffe tuning a fishplate—the metal piece that connected two rails—with a bolt to discover its pitch was redrawn by Lieutenant Fred Ransome “Smudger” Smith especially for this book. It is based on an original now lost.

We have little information on who out of this remarkable group of producers and performers was asked to form the Kanburi concert party. We do know a few who did not, and the reason for their exclusion is informative about camp politics and prejudices. Although Cliffe's musicians had turned his band into an orchestra, Harffey was not about to share the podium with Cliffe. And despite the fact that Majors Owtram, Pycok, and Jacobs, Captain “Fizzer” Pearson, and Lieutenants Coast, Carter, and Allum—men with extensive experience in organizing and running POW camp theatres—were all in the camp, a British Lieutenant-Colonel McOstrich was appointed as O/ic Entertainments instead. He immediately organized a committee to provide oversight of the theatre and to prevent any possible contretemps from happening between the many would-be rival producers (as in the Maynall-Carter “exchange” above). Henceforth, all producers would be required to secure approval from the committee before presenting their shows on the Kanburi stage.

Very few of these producer-directors' names were recorded. What is known is that Jacobs and Carter were not among them. In his memoir, Jacobs wrote, “Norman Carter and I took no part in these concerts, which were run almost entirely by British officers.” Jacobs went on to say that he and Carter “were

<sup>xii</sup> It would now be comprised of “seven fiddles, one oboe, five clarinets, three trumpets, E [flat] horn, euphonium, guitars, accordions, drums, and string bass.” [EN 40] One of the fiddles had been ingeniously hand made from tea chests (see details about its construction in the Musical Instrument Construction section of Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!”).

content to sit and applaud.”<sup>41</sup> But after their glory days at Tamarkan, this exclusion must have rankled. A few pages later, Jacobs admits, “it cannot be denied that many of the British ‘Pukka Sahibs’ still regarded all Australians as ‘colonials.’”<sup>42</sup> Artistic rivalry, it appears, might not have been the only reason Jacobs and Carter were excluded from the Kanburi concert party.”

As Tamarkan was being evacuated, the costumes, props, curtains, and drops accumulated from many elaborate productions had, no doubt, been transported to Kanburi and added to the stock left from the Playhouse company. Similar items may have come from the theatre at Chungkai: Aylwin noted that, “[t]he Officers who had run the décor and dresses side at Chungksai [*sic*] did the same job at Kanburi and equally well.”<sup>43</sup>

### Opening Salvos

A newly renovated theatre that would facilitate more—and more elaborate—productions, combined with the influx of officer-producers, -performers, -designers, and -technicians from other camps, all eager to continue their involvement, posed a threat to Noguchi. If he was going to break the POWs’ spirits, he would have to attack the most visible source of what kept their spirits going: their entertainment. In an attempt to limit the group’s influence, Noguchi “had its two shows a week cut down to one only (unless [he] decided to cancel it altogether).”<sup>44</sup>

On 26 February the POWs were given a half-day holiday: that evening they had a concert but, in a further turn of Noguchi’s screw, were told it would be their last.<sup>45</sup> This disheartening announcement came just as the new concert party was ready to present its first variety concerts.

Several of the singing “stars” of the concert party are known to us. One was the cowboy ballad singer Larry Croisette, an original member of The Optimists (the 18th Division Concert Party) before the war.<sup>xiii</sup> Three others were Bill Comyn, who could imitate American jazz singer Fats Waller; Austin Mooney, who specialized in burlesque songs taken from London revues<sup>46</sup> and Sergeant Bob Skilton, the only Australian.<sup>47</sup>

Besides the concert parties, Noguchi also harassed the POWs in their everyday lives. One day following a search, Noguchi ordered the POWs to turn in all their valuables. “[T]his is the final warning, Anyone found with these things in their possession in future will be ‘severely dealt with.’”<sup>48</sup> Baume decided that no matter what the risk, he was going to hold on to a few of his items, including his diary.<sup>49</sup>

### Camp Update: Interrogation and Torture

At the beginning of March, the POW officers in Kanburi underwent one of their greatest trials. With information extracted by the Kempeitai through torture in other camps, it was discovered that POW administrations had been secretly cashing checks to purchase foodstuffs and medical supplies—and newspapers—through local Thai traders allowed inside the camps. To the Japanese, this meant that the POWs were in touch with the Free Thai Underground. To find out more about that network, the Kempeitai began to take officers away for interrogation and torture. In response, Colonel Toosey ordered that the camp’s secret radio immediately be buried “well underground” and disseminated instructions on “who should give who away: thus the Kempis will always go around in circles never reaching the vital centre of our resistance. There is so much, so very much at stake.”<sup>50</sup>

<sup>xiii</sup> Croisette had continued his remarkable career as a performer throughout his three years of captivity, first in Changi, then in Chungkai, and now in Kanburi Officers’ Camp.

### Three Entertainers Identified

The 26 February concert turned out not to be the last after all—although the next performance that we know about did not take place until 14 March. Given the POWs' fear of keeping diaries and the absence of souvenir programs, only a very few of the performers, their names, turns, or titles of shows were remembered. Two performers whose names do appear in the records are “Fizzer” Pearson and Freddie Thompson.

As he had in other camps and other concert parties, the avuncular “Fizzer” Pearson quickly became “a camp favourite, with a fruity voice equally effective in dialogue or song.”<sup>51</sup> He would star “in many roles that ranged from ‘Jones of the Lancers’ to aged colonels watching cricket matches and an elderly roué in tails.”<sup>52</sup>

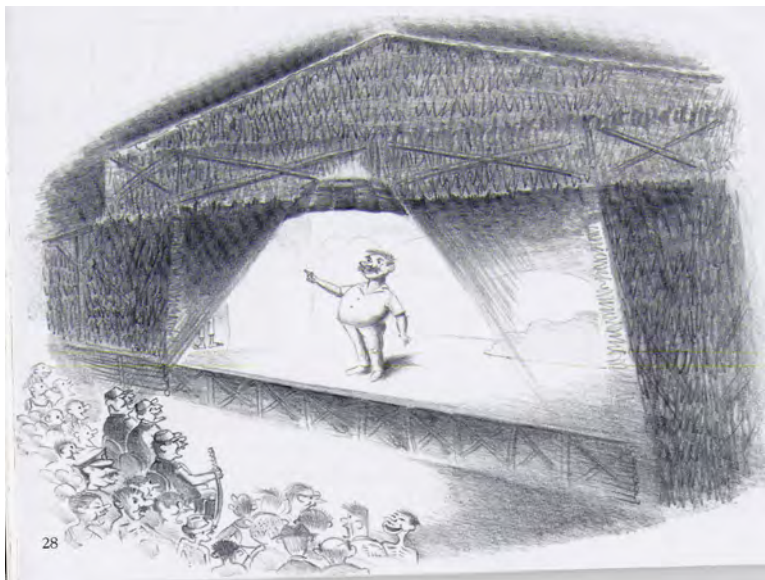


FIGURE 9.9. “FIZZER” PEARSON PERFORMING. CARTOON BY FRED RANSOME SMITH.  
COURTESY OF FRED RANSOME SMITH.

This cartoon of “Fizzer” Pearson delivering one of his risqué monologues on the Kanburi stage was drawn from memory by Fred “Smudger” Smith after the war.<sup>53</sup>

Freddie Thompson, who had starred in various productions at Chungkai, appeared on the Kanburi stage impersonating one of the great British music hall performers, Marie Lloyd, singing “Follow the Van,” a song she had made famous.<sup>54</sup>

In addition, E. R. Hall remembered an unnamed comedian who presented a “superbly acted” “Hot-Dog Seller” sketch that “drew thunderous applause as he complained that a buyer who did not want mustard on his hot-dog created unemployment for the mustard makers and put so many families in dire straits just because he did not like mustard.”<sup>55</sup>

### Noguchi’s New Tactics: “No Laughing, No Clapping

Whether in response to this incidence of “thunderous applause” or others like it, Noguchi’s next attempt to kill the POWs’ enthusiasm for entertainment was the imposition of a no-laughing, no clapping

ban that would prevent the POWs from responding spontaneously or expressing appreciation to the performers for their efforts.<sup>56</sup> It confirms that Noguchi's means for defeating the POWs in the "battle for concerts" would be tactical and psychological. His goal was to discourage POW entertainers from wanting to perform and POW audiences from wanting to attend the shows. The effect of this no-laughing, no-clapping policy on the comedians, in particular, can only be imagined. But, in reply, they devilishly tried to get their audiences to laugh out loud anyway.

## No Rehearsals

Seeing that his no-laughing, no-clapping ban did not deter further performances or attendance, Noguchi next attempted to frustrate the entertainers' abilities to produce shows at all by forbidding rehearsals from taking place. Noguchi's rationale for this ban was recorded by C. D. L. Aylwin: "They pointed out that in their army concerts were always impromptu. That probably accounts for why when I saw two performances they seemed incredibly dull. Even the Jap. audience seemed bored and restless. On the other hand although they couldn't have understood it, they seemed to enjoy our lively and colourful concerts with their cheerful dresses, décor and singing."<sup>57</sup> Since it was true that the Japanese soldiers and Korean guards also depended on the POW shows to keep their own spirits going as well, Noguchi must have been under pressure from his own troops to reverse his no-rehearsal policy.<sup>58</sup>

But the POWs' resistance could be tactical and psychological as well. "Following a week when the [unrehearsed] concert had been a bigger flop than usual," wrote Aylwin, "the Jap. Camp Commandant was informed that owing to no rehearsals being allowed, no concert would be given the following Monday." As a result of this tactic and repeated requests, Noguchi "finally permitted rehearsals for 1 hour daily between 20.30 and 21.30, which was meager allowance."<sup>59</sup>

Being forced to make this concession by what he must have considered a clever maneuver involved Noguchi in a personal loss of face that demanded repayment: "True to Nip form . . . the following week the Jap. Commander went personally to see the dress rehearsal on the Sunday evening. At the end of it he said there would be no concert on the Monday evening as it was not yet sufficiently rehearsed!"<sup>60</sup>

This final round of the current "battle" obviously went to Noguchi—and he was not averse to pressing his advantage: "About a fortnight after this, the Band were discovered still rehearsing at 21.40, ten minutes after the permitted rehearsal hours. The Jap. Camp Commander then forbade all rehearsal and concerts but some days later he relented. From this it will be gathered that the weekly concert was by no means a certainty."<sup>61</sup>

## "Speako!"

One turn in a variety show that possibly took place during this contentious period is J. H. H. Coombes' account of a ventriloquist performance—a routine that had unintended consequences for the performer:

One "concert incidental" gave all but the victima good laugh:—a Dutch officer who could ventriloquize, made a doll, and gave an excellent "turn" which impressed even the Nip. Three days later, there was one of the periodic searches, and the Nip, searching the Dutch hut found and recognized the doll. He picked it up and said: "Speako!"—but the doll never said a word. Angrily, he slapped its

face and ordered: “Speako!”—still no response, more face slapping of the doll, a crescendo of staccato abuse, and a bellowed: “Speako!”

The doll never said a word.

He threw it through the window, and sent for the owner off a working party, slapped his face, and made him stand to attention outside the guard room for twelve hours as a punishment because his doll wouldn’t speak.<sup>62</sup>

### No Speako!

Besides Bill Maynall, who was well into final rehearsals for his production of *Outward Bound*, a new dramatics group under the leadership of Lieutenant Michael Curtis had formed to put on Shakespeare’s *Richard II*.<sup>xiv</sup> Stephen Alexander was part of this group of aspiring thespians:

We made all the beginner’s mistakes of over-emphasis and textual blunders, and Mike patiently showed us how it should be done. “I’m afraid this will be a bit ham,” he would say and then, gathering his G-string round him like a regal cloak, transfix us with the deposition scene:

*Now mark me how I will undo myself.  
I give this heavy weight from off my head,  
And this unwieldy sceptre from my hand,  
The pride of kingly sway from out my heart;  
With my own tears I wash away my balm.*<sup>63</sup>

This speech from the famous “deposition scene” was banned in Shakespeare’s own day as too politically dangerous. Curtis must have thought that the play about the overthrow of an ineffectual ruler would send a message of hope to the POWs in the audience. And because it was a classic Shakespearean play—with language difficult for the Japanese to understand—he could get it past the censor.

When Noguchi got wind of the fact that two groups were going to produce plays—spoken dramas—he immediately sought to put a stop to their plans. Plays would offer occasions, he believed, for the actors to communicate covert messages to their audiences about the status of the war.

By this point some Japanese censors had become sophisticated enough to know that it wasn’t only the words of the text they had to worry about—after all, the texts had to be submitted to them for approval before the performance, and they could cross out anything that was suspect. The possible metaphorical meaning of the dramatic action concerned them as well.<sup>64</sup> If Noguchi had been informed of the titles and content of the two plays now in rehearsal, his suspicions would have been confirmed: *Outward Bound* could easily be interpreted as “homeward bound,” and *Richard II*, of course, was about a ruler’s removal from power.

Noguchi took this opportunity to put a stop not only to these two productions but to any future attempts to produce dramatic works as well. He reissued his list of entertainment restrictions, which contained the usual “no applause of any kind allowed at the concerts” and “no matter of a patriotic or

<sup>xiv</sup> Curtis had been a writer and producer of mystery-thriller plays in Nong Pladuk.



martial nature to be included in the concert programmes,” and revised his ruling on censorship to state that “all concert items [were] to be censored . . . before rehearsals commence” rather than the standard practice of censoring them before a performance was given. But the new addition to his list was the clincher: “No spoken word allowed at the concerts. Singing only allowed, plus music.”<sup>65</sup> This ruling became known as the “no-speaking” ban.

Carter learned about this latest restriction as he watched the scenic artists and technicians preparing the stage for the dress rehearsals of *Outward Bound*. A typewritten notice from I. J. A. headquarters was delivered announcing the ban, and “Bill Maynall, his artists, scene shifters, property men and the cast of *Outward Bound* left the stage and walked slowly back to their huts, leaving the theatre to the minna birds and the scorpions.”<sup>66</sup> Knowing what kind of limited entertainment this ban would produce, Carter decided to make no further comments on the entertainment in Kanburi in his memoir.

But when Michael Curtis heard the news, he got the POW administration to push back, arguing that the Japanese had already given them permission to produce a Shakespearean play. Terence Charley recorded their response: “& they said ‘Oh yes, they had heard of Shakespeare & would we come & read them a representative extract.’ ‘Yes we would.’ Ian Watt was deputed to do this but since the piece he chose was King Henry’s speech before the battle of Agincourt<sup>xv</sup> it is, perhaps, not surprising that the Japanese remained unrelenting. . . . Such sentiments were hardly calculated to allay Japanese suspicions that we were only awaiting a favourable opportunity to rise up & do them all in.”<sup>67</sup> *Richard II* was not approved for performance

### *Mum’s the Word*

This no-speaking ban was imposed on all future productions. As Aylwin understood the order, “the Japs would only permit music, singing and dancing but no talking except to announce items.”<sup>68</sup> But he also reported that it didn’t take long for the wily entertainers to figure out a way around this newest restriction:

One amusing show was put on entitled “Mum’s the Word” [in which] some very funny acts were put on in which there were no stage props and the players performed in dumb show. It was very funny. <sup>69</sup>

Given this unexpected interpretation of their no-speaking ban, the Japanese moved quickly to clarify this misunderstanding of their intent: “the [new] orders actually stated that there was ‘to be no acting or miming.’” But in a flanking manoeuvre, Aylwin noted, the entertainers “put a broad interpretation on the orders and got away with it.”<sup>70</sup>

A further casualty of the no-speaking ban were the variety shows with their dependence on comic sketches; only band concerts and revues continued to be produced. And since everything now had to be sung, “the estimable Mr. Bywaters produced an endless stream of excellent lyrics that were both amusing & suggestive.”<sup>71</sup> “Biggles” Bywaters had arrived in Kanburi along with Eric Cliffe and the other officers from Tamuang. He had already built a reputation for writing witty lyrics for Norman Smith’s songs in shows back in Changi, Singapore, as well as in Chungkai.

<sup>xv</sup> *A rousing speech spurring the troops on to victory in the upcoming battle.*

### **Camp Update: “Bridge Tournament”**

On 22 March another bombing raid took place on the nearby bridges. Kanburi was also attacked because just before the bombers struck, the Japanese quickly moved a train from where it had been stationed in an open, vulnerable spot and parked it next door to the POW camp’s cookhouses. “Most of the bombs,” Baume wrote, “fell on and around the canteen and stage, severely damaging the huts as well as the bund just behind.” Three POWs were killed in the raid and others seriously injured.<sup>72</sup> The stage itself, however, was not damaged.

In retaliation, Noguchi further tightened restrictions on the POWs’ activities, not only canceling entertainment but limiting when and where they could read or smoke, removing half of their washing-up buckets, and prohibiting them from visiting in huts other than their own.<sup>73</sup>

At the beginning of April, repairs to the wooden bridge at Tamarkan were completed and the first train tentatively made its way across. That same afternoon, Allied long-range bombers appeared and blew the bridge to smithereens. These raids gave the POWs in Kanburi enormous hope. Baume cheekily labeled his account of the raid “Bridge Tournament” and went on to say, “We feel that the end, whatever it may be, is approaching fast and that we are rushing towards the Grand Finale for which we have been waiting, praying, dreaming, for over three long years.”<sup>74</sup>

In an apparent attempt to dampen that renewed spirit, lectures, which—in addition to the entertainment—had been crucial in preserving morale as well as keeping the prisoners’ minds active, were now banned, and no more than ten POWs were allowed to gather in a group at one time.<sup>75</sup> Once again, the prisoners cleverly outwitted their captors. Lectures continued to be given as the men sat near each other in small groups that faced different directions. When a sentry intruded, the members of each group reverted to talking among themselves.<sup>76</sup>

### **“The Battle for Concerts Continues”**

So far, Noguchi’s restrictions had not prohibited entertainment altogether. He preferred to retain his ability to use the POWs’ beloved concert parties for intimidation and control. Besides, as the prisoners themselves noted, it wasn’t only their morale that would be affected if the entertainments were cancelled completely. “The Japanese—both officers and men—were so depressed by the absence of our shows,” Charles Fisher observed, “that, after a lull of some weeks, it was decided that they could be resumed, though with a proviso that there must be no speaking on the stage.”<sup>77</sup> Since there already was a no-speaking ban in effect, this should be understood as extension of that order that now banned all announcements of playbill turns by compères or title selections by orchestra conductors.

### **Round One**

Noguchi’s frequent banning of rehearsals and concerts at the slightest provocation, as well as tight restrictions on their content and reception, became a cross the Kanburi POWs had to bear. Even Gus Harffey’s leadership of the band did not survive Noguchi’s vindictive need to retaliate for any slight, real or imaginary.

Gus Harffey’s orchestra was one of the most popular acts on the Kanburi stage. “I never hear the Bobby Howes–Binnie Hale number, ‘Spread a Little Happiness,’” John Durnford wrote, “without remembering Gus Harffey, immaculate in a white cricket shirt and slacks, waving the baton negligently as the curtains opened.”<sup>78</sup> Watching the amateur bass viol player trying to reproduce techniques he had seen in professional dance bands also provided much enjoyment: “The double-bass player was a simple

soul, often carried away by the excitement of ‘Bounce Me Brother with a Solid Four’ into revolving the instrument on its own axis, giving little happy cries,” Durnford remembered. “It was a source of great amusement to the audience when, as often happened, the double-bass finished spinning wrong-side up.”<sup>79</sup>

As we’ve seen with regard to the contest over rehearsals, relations between the concert party and Noguchi were already contentious, so no matter how many points he might score with the POWs it was unwise of Harffey to make Noguchi lose face again. Baume recorded the story of Harffey’s provocation and his subsequent downfall.

The battle for concerts continues. Some time ago, when rehearsals and concert parties had been stopped, Neguchi [*sic*] was showing a rival Nip camp commandant round the Camp to impress him with the wisdom and kindness with which Kambouri [*sic*] is being run. . . . As a final treat, the rival was to be shown the band in action on the stage. Therefore Neguchi gave permission to Gus Harvey [*sic*], the leader, to rehearse after supper.

So when the important visitors arrived and took their seats on the stage, Gus did rehearse and played the same bars of music over and over again. Neguchi was furious; Gus was hauled up in front of him and finally given the sack. Norman Smith, from Chungkai, took his place.<sup>80</sup>

**Norman Smith Takes Over.** One of the last officers to arrive in Kanburi was the musical conductor Norman Smith, who had come from Chungkai via Nakhon Pathom in early April. When he first saw Harffey’s band, he speculated on how the larger musical instruments, like the drum and bass viol, had made it into the camp—“probably on bamboo bearers [disguised as heavy sick POWs] as the guards had not bothered to check the baggage or stretcher cases.”<sup>81</sup> He also noted with relief that their precious “accumulated library of music and scripts had been preserved” by Eric Cliffe at Tamuang and brought into the camp as well.<sup>82</sup>

From Aylwin’s point of view, Harffey’s removal was actually a good move: “The Camp benefited by the change because the running of the band was henceforth done jointly by 2 Officers [Norman Smith and Eric Cliffe] more experienced in music and one had a bent for dance music and the other classical. The resulting concerts were all of a higher standard and if only longer periods for rehearsal had been permitted would have vied with Chunglsai [Chungkai] standards.”<sup>83</sup> If he had known about Aylwin’s assessment, Cliffe would have heartily disagreed. He claimed that it was in Kanburi Officers’ Camp that they were able to form the largest and best orchestra of their captivity.<sup>84</sup>

## Rounds Two and Three

But Harffey’s ouster and replacement was only the first in a new series of scuffles: “Some time later, the Nips suddenly said we could have a concert (they wanted it for themselves) but Toosey declined the offer because, as we had been unable to hold any rehearsals, we could not possibly put one on.”<sup>85</sup>

This requested concert would most likely have been to celebrate the Japanese emperor’s birthday on 29 April. In other POW camps this was always the occasion for a command performance. Refusing would cause problems: “Round 3 came to-day [30 April], and this one we lost! The ban on concerts was lifted and so, taking advantage of it, Toosey asked the Frog [Lieutenant Takasaki, Noguchi’s second in

command] for permission to hold a concert. The Frog replied politely that, as we have not been rehearsing lately, we would surely be unable to put one on and therefore the request was pointless!”<sup>86</sup> Lieutenant Takasaki had been well tutored by his commanding officer.

But now that the ban was lifted, Kanburi entertainment picked up where it had left off: orchestral concerts alternated weekly with musical revues. Norman Carter described one of Norman Smith’s concerts:

The conductor, appreciating the value of time and that the Nips might at any moment ban the performance with a curt “Concerto no good kenah!” did not bother bowing to his audience; he merely lifted his baton and the show was on. The orchestra played a grand selection of pops and semi-classicals, but while the “Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairies” aroused great enthusiasm, there were those who running their eyes over the gaunt frames squatting beside them, wondered if Saint Saens’ “Dance of the Skeletons” was not a trifle tactless.<sup>87</sup>

The revue *Balalaika* opened on 7 May, one of the few Kanburi productions for which we have a title and date.<sup>88</sup> This condensed version of the 1936 West End revue starred “Fizzer” Pearson, who, as he had done in other camps, repeated “Fizzer’s Flute,” the song Smith and Bywaters had written for him back in Changi. Its final verse is given here:

*When I get back home at last on England’s happy shore . . .  
I think that I shall never visit Thailand any more . . .  
I’ll go into some posh hotel and order something nice  
And wash it down with good old ale, no matter what the price,  
And I’ll tell them what to do with it, if they serve me up with rice.*<sup>89</sup>

Finding themselves in the same camp again, Smith and “Biggles” Bywaters teamed up once more to create a series of sparkling original musical revues, which in Terence Charley’s eyes were full “of more than ordinary salaciousness.”<sup>90</sup> Biggles’ racy lyrics from “I’m a Deb” might justify Charley’s comment.

*Now I’m a Deb.  
Such a trustful rather lustful little Deb.  
They say my coming-out affair will stupefy the town:  
It won’t be what is coming out, but what is coming down.  
What a whirl  
For a highly shrewd and interviewed young girl.  
‘The Sketch’ insist I’m shy, pure as any maiden aunt,*

*'The Daily Mirror' tackles me from quite another slant,  
 Whilst the 'Sporting and Dramatic'  
 Say I'm hot stuff in the attic,  
 And this year's most attractive Debutante.<sup>91</sup>*

[The complete lyrics for these and other songs by “Biggles” Bywaters can be found in “The FEPOW Songbook.”]

### Noguchi's Magnanimity

As he had done back in Chungkai, Norman Smith turned over the orchestra to Eric Cliffe for a monthly concert of classical music. The first of these “Promenade Concerts” took place a week later. As unlikely as it sounds, it was Noguchi who had facilitated the show: “A little time ago,” Baume wrote, “we asked Noguchi [*sic*] to be kind enough to purchase some music for us in Bangkok; he was only too pleased to be able to prove his magnanimity and brought quite a few scores back.”<sup>92</sup>

Fred “Smudger” Smith designed the stage setting for this concert. “I remember modeling large heads of Mozart & Beethoven in clay,” he wrote, “& placing them in painted alcoves either side of the stage. The clay was kindly brought in by a party working on enormously enlarging the bund (moat) around the camp—very ominous.”<sup>93</sup>

Three POWs remembered the powerful effect this concert of classical music had on them. Stephen Alexander wrote glowingly about it:

As we sat in the mud, keeping the mosquitoes at bay with our “Sikh's Beard” [camp-made cigarettes] and watching the fruit bats scuttering in and out of the improvised limelight, the plangent strains of Prucell and Handel would give way to thumping chunks of Grieg, “The New World Symphony,” “Leonora” and *The Barber of Seville*. And as for ‘Finlandia,’ I could positively see the Russians being swept away and feel, with a catch in the throat and smarting eyes, the snowflakes settling on my sweaty skin.<sup>94</sup>

Durnford, not knowing how the music had been acquired, assumed this concert was another example of the musicians' abilities of total recall.<sup>95</sup> And Aylwin, noting the variety and complexity of the program (which also contained a movement from Mozart's “Violin Concerto”), concluded, “All difficulties considered, it was an excellent performance talked of for many weeks after.”<sup>96</sup>

Following the war, Cliffe wrote about the seemingly insurmountable barriers to rehearsing and presenting promenade concerts in Kanburi:

No Paper— had to make it.

No music—had to remember it.<sup>xvi</sup>

<sup>xvi</sup> As we know, this is an overstatement.

Kept 8 copyists busy under nerve-wracking conditions—not allowed writing materials—<sup>97</sup>



FIGURE 9.10. SHEET MUSIC ON PAPER MADE FROM RICE SACKS. IWM MISC 66 (1021).

With the ban on possession of writing instruments and materials, it was, ironically, Noguchi who had encouraged the POWs to start a paper-making operation.<sup>98</sup> It was a chemist in the camp who devised the process by which good paper could be manufactured from rice sacks.<sup>99</sup>

To the POWs delight, Noguchi's acquisition of orchestral music in Bangkok had an additional dividend. His "magnanimity" had blinded him to the fact that a Thai merchant in Bangkok had wrapped the musical scores he had purchased "in a recent edition of the Bangkok Chronicle," thus allowing the POWs to read the latest news about the war.<sup>100</sup>

### The "Drower Incident"

On 25 May the Kanburi POWs were elated to learn via their secret radio, recently brought out of hiding and put back in operation, that Germany had collapsed, Hitler was dead, Rangoon had been recaptured, and "heavy air raids on Japanese cities continued."<sup>101</sup>

Three days later, the "Drower Incident"—one of the most notorious on the Thailand-Burma railway—occurred. Various reports of this episode, each with slightly different versions of its cause, exist. What follows has been largely taken from Major Jacobs' account.

On 28 May, a British officer working in the pump house refused to fill a bucket of water for a Japanese private. This infraction was reported to Noguchi, who sent for the interpreter. Since the regular interpreter was ill, Captain William Drower, who had been attached as an interpreter to "A Force" in Burma, went instead. When questioned about what rights a British POW officer had, Drower stated that it was wrong to make an officer obey a request from a Japanese private. In response, "Noguchi flew into a tearing rage, and savagely attacked Bill with its sword stick, knocking him down and grappling with him

on the floor. Lieut. Takasaki (The Frog) joined in the attack, and so severe was the melee that the Jap office was wrecked."<sup>102</sup>

Drower had unwittingly given Noguchi just the provocation he needed to take out all of his hostility toward the officers, its ferocity fueled, no doubt, by news of recent Japanese losses. Drower was placed in solitary confinement in a waterlogged hole which had been dug as an air raid shelter. He was served one bowl of rice and a mug of water a day. Colonel Toosey and other officers tried repeatedly to have his sentence overturned, to no avail. Drower remained in solitary confinement for eighty-six days. During his incarceration, Noguchi tried every means possible to mentally and physically break him. According to Jacobs, Drower, in moments of despair and temporary insanity, made two attempts at suicide.<sup>103</sup>

As a result of this incident, life in Kanburi Officers' Camp became more tense and restrictive. Noguchi tried to drive a wedge between the officers and the other ranks by informing the officers that since they had objected to work, they would henceforth be forbidden to do any. The other ranks would have to handle all the camp fatigues on top of their other assignments. Unwilling to let Noguchi think he had found a weak spot—their care and concern for their men—the officers performed another grand charade of “playing the opposite.” In apparent disregard for the fate of their men, the officers spent their new free time “walking round and round the Camp in an endless procession, talking and joking and watching the looks of annoyance on the Nips faces.” The other ranks were “browned-off” by these latest developments but continued to fully support their officers. “How long,” Baume pondered, “can we continue?”<sup>104</sup>

### Charades

Seeing that his latest tactic for forcing the POW officers to bend to his will had failed, Noguchi upped the ante. That night, as the result of another minor infraction of his rules, he banned all entertainment activities and confined the officers to their huts for an indefinite period of time. They were allowed outside only for their meals, washing, and toilet needs.<sup>105</sup> Baume recorded Toosey's strategy in response to this forced detention: “We have received a warning that the Nips are gunning for us and are probably trying to provoke the long-awaited incident that will give them the excuse to open fire on us. . . . Toosey has appealed to all to obey implicitly every new Nip regulation, however trivial, so as to give them no excuse at all—it will be difficult but the alternative will be worse. Roll on the end!”<sup>106</sup>

Cary Owtram voiced the officers' defiant attitude: “The Japanese thought that this treatment would subdue us and break what they called our ‘obdurate spirit,’ but in fact it had the opposite effect and the more offensive they became, the more our spirits rose.”<sup>107</sup>

During their detention, new “chicken-shit” regulations were instituted daily: “reading has been stopped, games are not allowed, talks are forbidden, smoking is restricted, we have just to sit at the end of the bamboo bali [bed-platform] and wait, staring at the all too familiar faces of our opposite numbers.”<sup>108</sup>



FIGURE 9.11. KANBURI OFFICERS' CAMP HUT INTERIOR. PHOTOGRAPHER JOHN MUNSLOW WILLIAMS. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL.

This photograph, also taken secretly by John Munslow Williams, shows the interior of a POW accommodation hut at Kanburi. Visible on either side of a wide central aisle are the raised bamboo sleeping platforms the POWs sat on during their enforced confinement.

Once again the officers found a way to maintain their sanity and control over their lives. This time their solution was playing charades in dumb show and giving lectures *sotto voce*.<sup>109</sup> For Jacobs, “The spectacle of grown men gesticulating, and distorting their faces as they acted the chosen word in dumb show was ludicrous in the extreme, but it did help to pass away the time.”<sup>110</sup> To Norman Carter, though, it wasn’t the latest harsh restrictions that made the POWs “almost despair, it was the silencing of the orchestra and the closing of the theatre.”<sup>111</sup>

Then, on 14 June, after a fortnight of being confined to their huts and without a word of explanation, the officers were released. Shortly afterward, Noguchi informed Toosey that they were going to be transferred to Nakhon Nayok, a new airfield construction camp northeast of Bangkok. In two weeks, Toosey and an advance party of four hundred fit POW officers would leave to prepare the camp. Others would follow periodically until everyone had been moved to the new site.

### “Swinging on a Strap”

Four days after the officers’ release, concert party performances roared back to life as if the forced isolation had prompted an “outpouring of spirit” in compensation for their deprivation. *A Bench in the Park*, the latest revue from Smith and Bywaters, which had been in rehearsal before their confinement, featured at least one song, “Swinging on a Strap,” in which Bywaters proved that not all of his lyrics had to be salacious. “It was a new, easily-remembered melody,” wrote Durnford, “depicting four strap-hangers in the London tube. We were becoming sentimental about London, and our thoughts were turning towards home.”<sup>112</sup> The first verse reveals Bywaters’ verbal abilities in capturing the hustle of London life:

*Rush hour. Rush hour.  
Taxi ramming, traffic jamming,*



*Window slamming, carriage cramming  
Wary workers shuffle to the tempo of the street.  
Everywhere the rhythm of a million milling feet.*

In the chorus, it is almost possible to see the four singers hanging onto their straps in the underground carriages:

*Swinging on a strap, every morning, every evening, every day,  
Looking at a map whether coming, whether going either way.  
Typist from suburbia adjacent to a Judge,  
Looking so embarrassed at that accidental nudge.  
Tightly packed together so that neither one can budge.  
Grasping frantically, unromantically,  
Swaying on a strap as we rumble and we tumble neath the town:  
Looking for a lap if we're suddenly invited to sit down.  
Smiling at the pretty girls and frowning at the plain,  
Craning eager necks to glimpse the latest strip of Jane  
We're swinging on a strap, any morning, any evening, any day.<sup>113</sup>*

[The complete lyrics for “Swinging on a Strap” can be found in “The FEPOW Songbook.” There it is also possible to listen to a vocal and instrumental rendition of this song.]

Bywaters’ abilities to turn a phrase were widely praised. “Clever topical verses on camp events and personalities were written by an English officer,” observed Jacobs, “whose brilliant satires drew roars of appreciation from the audience.”<sup>114</sup> (Roars of appreciation were not laughing or clapping!)

Other Ranks John Durnford preserved fragments of some of these topical and satirical lyrics in his memoir because he had sung them himself. After watching numerous productions in various POW camps over the previous three years, Durnford finally succumbed to the lure of the stage, becoming one of Kanburi’s leading female impersonators.<sup>115</sup> His first solo came in a show that re-created the “Kensington Girls of Kensington Gore” number from a revue in London’s Gate Theatre with a parody of the original lyrics by Bywaters.

*My name is Belinda, I'm burnt to a cinder  
By India's blistering heat,  
I share with the colonel, my parent paternal,  
A ménage not gaudy but neat.*

*Though we're in retirement, I do what I can  
By playing at Eve to the right sort of man,  
Helping the nation without hesitation,  
Girls from Kensington Gore.<sup>116</sup>*

There were three more verses, each one sung by a different impersonator, all of whom, from Charles Fisher's perspective, "shimmered on to the stage looking like dreams and singing like nightmares."<sup>117</sup> In a later show these same impersonators, described by Durnford as a "quartet of grumbling and unwilling men," would repeat the song with a new set of lyrics. For this second production, Bywaters rewrote the lyrics as an "unmalicious satire on Malayan wives and sweethearts, mainly for the benefit of the planters and miners in the audience."<sup>xvii</sup>

Chorus:       *We're Singapore Girls from Singapore Town,  
Rather hard-up, and often run-down,  
Living our lives a la Somerset Maugham  
With a tropical man in a tropical storm.*

Solo:           *I'm Lady Medusa, a Social Who's-Whoser,  
I married the Governor last week.  
I traveled out steerage, me mind on a peerage,  
And now I'm half-way—so to speak—  
At Government House parties they say I'm a pest,  
But Coward preferred me above all the rest,  
One of the season's most promising fillies.  
[Girls from Singapore Town.]<sup>118</sup>*

These lyrics are a superb example of Bywaters' skills at multiple entendre (see more about their implications in Chapter 14: "Somebody Had to Put a Skirt On.")

Two other female impersonators—and perhaps the actual "leading ladies" of the Kanburi Concert Party—were thought by Jim Jacobs to be "very convincing": "One in particular, known as 'Sylvia Ray' [Syd Ray],<sup>xviii</sup> had not only good looks, but was a graceful dancer. Another, known as 'Popsie' [Saunders], specialized in rather risqué monologues."<sup>119</sup> But the Australian singer Bob Skilton knew there was an even better female impersonator in the camp. "Anxious to show what a fair dinkum Aussie female impersonator could do," noted Jacobs, Skilton tried to persuade Lieutenant Ted Weller "to join the concert party, but

<sup>xvii</sup> Officers in the Federated Malay Volunteer Forces and the Straits Settlement Volunteer Forces.

<sup>xviii</sup> Syd Ray had been in the earliest Kanburi concert party back in 1944.

Teddy steadfastly refused. He pledged himself not to appear on the stage again after his long run of success at Tamarkan.”<sup>120</sup>

### Camp Update: Direct Hits

On 24 June, Allied bombers in new low-level runs hit the bridges at Tamarkan. The wooden bridge was demolished once again, and direct hits on the steel bridge finally put it out of commission for the rest of the war. Four days later, Toosey departed Kanburi with the advance party for their new camp at Nakhon Nayok.<sup>121</sup> Upholding tradition, the Kanburi band was on hand to send them on their way: “They left in the middle of the night,” Baume wrote, “in pouring rain, marching out of the camp to the doleful strains of music played by a cold, wet and hungry band. When, we all wonder, shall we see them again?”<sup>122</sup> Each week more drafts would leave Kanburi for their new camp.

Five days later, an N. E. I. production called *The Holland Show* opened in honor of Prince Bernard’s birthday. (This Dutch production is the only one we know of that took place in Kanburi, although there surely must have been others.) *The Holland Show* was a revue staged by Arie Grendel that showcased traditional Dutch sailor songs and peasant dances replete with regional costumes and customs of the Netherlands.

Two full-color renderings by Peter Bernard for men’s and women’s costumes for this show survived because he hid them in a hollowed-out bamboo so they would not be confiscated.<sup>123</sup> From these sketches, it’s possible to see what elaborate costumes were constructed in the camp.



FIGURE 9.12. COSTUME RENDERING FOR MALE AND FEMALE COSTUMES BY PETER BERNARD. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

In early July, plans had been made for another of Eric Cliffe’s classical music concerts, but it never took place. Cliffe must have suddenly taken ill and been placed in hospital. In order not to disappoint the troops, what went on instead, as Alexander remembered it, was the performance of a mock symphony

concert with a brilliant comic as the conductor:

One night we had some excellent musical slapstick in a performance of ‘The Hall of the Mountain King;’ with a kind of Professor Strabismus conducting. The orchestra was always pretty odd, with an accordion acting as piano, saxophones as clarinets and tubas as French horns, but the Mad Professor added to the confusion by arranging for a succession of anomalies, such as left-handed or one-armed players; these he would stop in mid-cadenza and react to with increasing frenzy. His relief at approaching the finale was so strong that on the first long-drawn-out climatic chords he would turn to the audience with the lowest of self-congratulatory bows, the string hair from his wig flapping over his eyes, only to be brought up short by the orchestra continuing to play behind him. Spinning round, he would catch them up in time to repeat his bow after the next climax, and be caught out again in the same way—and, of course, of course, yet again by the real ending when it came, which he had treated as a pause.<sup>124</sup>

From this point on, it appears the POWs were able to produce their shows weekly without any further interference or harassment from Noguchi. The sudden change in his attitude and behavior was due, no doubt, to the fact that he had also received marching orders to leave Kanburi in order to take command of the new aerodrome camp at Nakhon Nayok.

According to Durnford, two other shows put on during this period were large-cast, large-scale productions. One was *Three O’Clock in the Morning*, “a song-pageant of English history dreamed up by an officer who had never yet had anything produced but wanted to have a go” that the theatre committee “in a weak moment . . . allowed . . . to go on.” It was a flop.<sup>125</sup>

The other show, “a South American extravaganza . . . [that] needed carefully rehearsed dance routines and harmony groups,” was, by comparison, a huge success. “The show’s centre-piece was an all-dancing, all-singing, on-stage full chorus of a new song by Norman Smith ‘The Caravanny.’”<sup>xix126</sup> Aylwin thought the “song and scene was first class.”<sup>127</sup>

### “The Happy Ending”

Since the beginning of August, anticipation of an end to years of incarceration had been building among the POWs at Kanburi:

For all of us [wrote Durnford], knowing the end was near, had begun to echo the sentiments of Austin [Mooney]’s last and most famous song, “The Happy Ending,” borrowed from a pre-war Gate revue:

*I want a Mister and a Miss,  
Some Moonlight and a Kiss,*

<sup>xix</sup> The Smith piece has not survived.

*I want to see them both united,  
But that's not all—I must have  
The Happy Ending.<sup>128</sup>*

Their happy ending was not far off, but the POWs would first have to endure one final blow to their entertainment from the vindictive Noguchi. Though he had limited the number of shows and rehearsals, prevented audiences from laughing or clapping, and, finally, forbidden any words to be spoken from the stage, the POWs had still found ways around those restrictions in order to produce entertainment that kept their morale high. Now that he was leaving, Noguchi used his authority to deliver a coup de grace to what he believed was their source of hope by cancelling concert party performances altogether—and permanently.<sup>129</sup> This was his “happy ending” to the contest of wit and will in the “battle for concerts.”

When Noguchi left for Nakhon Nayok on 10 August, the POWs, in an audacious gambit, hid the parts of their secret radio in his baggage to escape detection so that it could be safely transported to their new camp.<sup>130</sup> By this subterfuge, the POWs, in turn, scored a final triumph over their hated jailer.

After Noguchi's departure, life in Kanburi under Lieutenant Matsushita, the new Japanese commandant, became noticeably more relaxed. A number of Noguchi's repressive rules and regulations were simply forgotten, although, as ordered, there were no further concert parties.<sup>131</sup> On 15 August, Jim Jacobs and Norman Carter left Kanburi with the next draft en route to Nakhon Nayok.

Then, on 16 August, as the next party of officers was preparing to leave, the Japanese surrender was announced, and the Kanburi POWs had their happy ending. They were free at last.

## Endnotes

- 1 Toosey, Report, 19.
- 2 Baume, 163.
- 3 Coast, 213.
- 4 Chippington, 490.
- 5 Braddon, 238-239.
- 6 Braddon, 239.
- 7 Mills, 136.
- 8 IWM Misc 116 Item 1834.
- 9 Note attached to photograph in IWM collection; identities also confirmed by Wilbur Smith.
- 10 Wilbur Smith, Telephone interview, 12 May 2004.
- 11 Coast, 210.
- 12 Toosey, Report, 20.
- 13 Toosey, Report, 20.
- 14 Toosey, Report, 20.
- 15 Baume, 154.
- 16 Baume, 153.
- 17 Baume, 153.
- 18 Jacobs, 142.
- 19 Toosey, Report, 20.
- 20 Summers, 268.
- 21 Jacobs, 142.
- 22 Toosey, Report, 20.

23	Jacobs, 136.
24	Baume, 152.
25	Toosey, Report, 20.
26	Jacobs, 136; Baume, 152.
27	Baume, 152-153.
28	Baume, 154.
29	Baume, 155.
30	Carter, 184-185.
31	Carter, 185.
32	Carter, 186.
33	Owtram, 171; Coast, 215.
34	Jacobs, 143.
35	Toosey, Report, 20.
36	Owtram, 173.
37	Owtram, 173.
38	Baume, 158.
39	N. Smith, 62.
40	Cliffe, "Orchestras," 5.
41	Jacobs, 138.
42	Jacobs, 142.
43	Aylwin, 1945 Folder, 2c.
44	Coast, 213.
45	Baume, 156.
46	Durnford, 178-179.
47	Durnford, 178-179.
48	Durnford, 178-179.
49	Durnford, 178-179.
50	Baume, 158-159.
51	Alexander, 185.
52	Durnford, 177-178.
53	F. R. Smith, ". . . more memories," 28.
54	Chippington, 490.
55	Hall, 201.
56	Coombes, 117.
57	Aylwin, 1945 Folder, 1c-2c.
58	Fisher, 100.
59	Aylwin, 1945 Folder, 1c-2c.
60	Aylwin, 1945 Folder, 1c-2c.
61	Aylwin, 1945 Folder, 2c.
62	Coombes, 152.
63	Alexander, 185-186.
64	Pritchard, "the undefeated," 1-2.
65	Jacobs, 140.
66	Carter, 187.
67	Charley, 49-50.
68	Aylwin, 1945 Folder, 1c.
69	Aylwin, 1945 Folder, 2c.
70	Aylwin, 1945 Folder, 1c.
71	Charley, 50.
72	Baume, 158.
73	Baume, 159.
74	Baume, 161.
75	Baume, 162.
76	Aylwin, 1945 Folder, 1c.

- 77 Fisher, 100.  
78 Durnford, 176-177.  
79 Durnford, 177.  
80 Baume, 163.  
81 N. Smith, 62.  
82 N. Smith, 62.  
83 Aylwin, 1945 Folder, 2c.  
84 Cliffe, "Orchestras," 5.  
85 Baume, 163.  
86 Baume, 163.  
87 Baume, 163.  
88 Baume, 164.  
89 N. Smith, 135.  
90 Charley, 50.  
91 N. Smith, 138.  
92 Baume, 164.  
93 F. R. Smith, letter, n.d.  
94 Alexander, 186.  
95 Durnford, 177.  
96 Aylwin, 1945 Folder, 2c.  
97 Cliffe, "Japanese Concerto' Notes," n.p.  
98 Jacobs, 104.  
99 Cliffe, "Orchestras," 5.  
100 Baume, 164.  
101 Baume, 164.  
102 Jacobs, 146.  
103 Jacobs, 147.  
104 Baume, 165.  
105 Toosey, Report, 21.  
106 Baume, 165.  
107 Owtram, 175.  
108 Carter, 188.  
109 Baume, 166.  
110 Jacobs, 140.  
111 Carter, 188.  
112 Durnford, 177-178.  
113 N. Smith, 129.  
114 Jacobs, 138.  
115 Durnford, 176.  
116 Durnford, 178-179.  
117 Fisher, 101.  
118 Durnford, 179-180.  
119 Jacobs, 138-139.  
120 Jacobs, 138-139.  
121 Toosey, Report, 23.  
122 Baume, 168.  
123 Notes on costume renderings, trans. by Margie Bellamy.  
124 Alexander, 186-187.  
125 Durnford, 178.  
126 Durnford, 178.  
127 Aylwin, 1945 Folder, 2c.  
128 Durnford, 181.  
129 Jacobs, 149.  
130 Baume, 170.

131 Coast, 226-228.  
132 Coast, 229.