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## Chapter 3. "Jungle Shows" Burma

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## Chapter 3: “Jungle Shows” Burma

*The shows created for men and by men battling against killer-despair and to retain sanity.*

Jimmy Walker, *Of Rice and Men*

### A Force

“A Force,” composed of 3,000 Australians under command of Brigadier General Arthur Varley, sailed from Keppel Harbour, Singapore, for Burma on 15 May 1942. It was organized as a brigade with three battalions of four companies: Lieutenant-Colonel George Ramsay in command of “Ramsay Force,” Major Charles Green of “Green Force,” and Major D. R. Keer of “Keer Force.”<sup>i</sup> Varley would be the highest-ranking officer on the Thailand-Burma railway.

Several men active in musical and theatrical performances in Changi were part of A Force to ensure that the POWs would continue to have entertainment Up Country: Major Jim Jacobs was placed in charge of Signals Company;<sup>1</sup> Norman Whittaker and his 2/18th Infantry Battalion brass band were assigned to Ramsay Force; and the popular female impersonator Jack Turner was part of Green Force.

After five days at sea in their cargo “hell ships,” A Force arrived at Victoria Point on the southern tip of Burma, where Green Force disembarked to start construction of an airfield. Three days later the next group was offloaded at Mergui to increase the capacity of the airfield there. They were joined by members of the British Sumatra Battalion, arriving from Sumatra on another ship. Lieutenant-Colonel Albert Coates, senior surgeon with the 2/10th Australian General Hospital (A.G.H.) in Malaya, was in this group. He would become the senior medical officer (S.M.O.) on the railway.

On 24 May, Ramsay Force disembarked at Tavoy Point. Brigadier General Varley and the remainder of A Force were put ashore at Simbin later that day with orders to proceed to the city of Tavoy. Accommodations at Tavoy were squalid and food scarce. Shortly after their arrival, eight Australian POWs tried to escape, were recaptured, and were executed by firing squad.<sup>2</sup>

### Early Concert Parties

The earliest concert party activity by POWs in Burma took place at Victoria Point and Tavoy. There are no exact dates for the concert parties at Victoria Point nor details about who was responsible for organizing them, but they were held regularly between late May and early August 1942. Tom Morris remembered them as “simple items, performed by individuals” without a stage: “Some of the material was quite lewd and rude.”<sup>3</sup>

Jack Turner, who performed in these shows, described their meager resources: “We had a violin, which was later sold for food, a clarinet and a guitar plus female attire which we had brought from Singapore.”<sup>4</sup> Like the musicians who carried their instruments with them Up Country so they could perform when needed, female impersonators felt the same obligation to transport their dresses and other feminine accessories.

<sup>i</sup> Keer Force disappears from the record after this first mention.

## Enter Jim Jacobs



FIGURE 3.1. MAJOR JIM "HOLE-IN-THE-ROAD" JACOBS.  
COURTESY OF KERRIN FREY.

Prior to the war, Jacobs was a member of the Australian Imperial Forces stationed in Malaya. He had been responsible for organizing the A.I.F. Malayan Concert Party that toured Australian forward bases protecting the valuable tin mines and rubber plantations. After capitulation, he re-formed the concert party in Changi POW Camp, Singapore, as part of the 8th Division's rehabilitation program for their demoralized troops.

During the four months at Tavoy, A Force rebuilt an airfield destroyed in the battle for Burma. When the monsoon rains started falling, the work continued on, increasing the men's misery.<sup>5</sup> To maintain morale, Major Jacobs was asked to organize activities to occupy the POWs after their working day was over. "Every night there was something to do," he recalled. "I had arranged a series of debates and lectures, which were usually held in the open before dark, and after that there was always chess and bridge till lights out."<sup>6</sup> What Roy Whitecross remembered most about Jacobs' efforts were the Sunday night concerts: "everyone who could sing or play took an enthusiastic part."<sup>7</sup> During the weeks that followed, the amateur performers exhausted their limited repertoires, so Jacobs organized quiz sessions between competing teams instead.<sup>8</sup>

While at Tavoy, General Varley gave his chief of staff, Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Anderson his own command ("Anderson Force") that included Jacobs and his Signal Company.

In late September, when the monsoon started to subside, A Force was ordered to Moulmein and then on to Thanbyuzayat.

### Initial Construction: October '42-March '43

The starting point for the Burma end of the Thailand-Burma railway was Thanbyuzayat/000 Kilo, headquarters for the Japanese 5th Railway Regiment. In contrast to the Thai side of the railway, Thanbyuzayat would be the only base camp in Burma. Administration of the POWs was under the

command of Lieutenant-Colonel Yoshitada Nagatomo (Group III), who maintained his headquarters thirty-five miles away at Moulmein, although Thanbyuzayat was designated as the POW headquarters for Brigadier General Varley.<sup>ii</sup>

Actual construction on the railway began a short distance away from Thanbyuzayat at Kandaw/004 Kilo on 1 October 1942 by Green Force, which, like the other A.I.F. units, had rejoined A Force after their assignments at Victoria Point and Mergui were finished.<sup>9</sup> Anderson Force started their work on the railway near Thanbyuzayat on 4 October.

The area around Thanbyuzayat was a level coastal plain of paddy fields, and the POWs found construction work there relatively easy. By the tenth of the month, Anderson Force was transferred to Hlepauk/018 Kilo, where the flat plains began to give way to ridges covered with thick jungle.<sup>10</sup> Until tracks were laid, the POWs were either marched or, as the dirt access road became available, transported by lorries to the construction sites.

While at Hlepauk, Major Jacobs was asked, once again, to generate lectures, debates, or singsongs—anything to help pass the time in the evening.<sup>11</sup> USS *Houston* survivor Charles Pryor remembered these attempts: “I think we worked six weeks before we had our first yasumi [sic] day. I know when that first day came, well, some of the guys that had any talent put on a concert; we gathered on a bit of high ground out there and let that be the performing stage. Those that could do anything sang a song or recited a poem or something. We had a Dutchman with us who was a professional magician.<sup>iii</sup> Of course, he was a good entertainer.”<sup>12</sup> Some of the romusha in a neighboring work camp came over to watch the show, but when the magician performed a trick in which a handkerchief seemingly danced in the air, they made a hasty exit.<sup>13</sup>



FIGURE 3.2. BURMA RAILWAY MAP #1. THANBYUZAYAT/000 KILO—BETETAUNG.

### Arrivals from Java

After arriving in Burma from Java on their own hell ships on 30 October, Lieutenant-Colonel Chris Black’s “Black Force” of Australians, Dutch, and Americans<sup>iv</sup> was sent first to Thanbyuzayat and then

<sup>ii</sup> I.J.A. and POW headquarters were normally in the same camp.

<sup>iii</sup> This magician was most likely Cortini, who will appear elsewhere in this account of entertainment on the Thailand-Burma railway.

<sup>iv</sup> These were men of the Texas 131st Field Artillery Regiment or the USS *Houston*.

immediately on to Betetaung/040 Kilo. Betetaung was in the jungle, and here the POWs were expected to clear the trace back toward Hlepauk/018K as well as forward toward the next camp site. Once this was accomplished, they were to build the railway embankment. After the more relaxed atmosphere in “Bicycle Camp,” West Java, where they had previously been imprisoned, this introduction to what their future lives would be like on the railway was disheartening. “The 40 Kilo Camp was almost our undoing,” wrote American POW Tom “Slug” Wright.<sup>14</sup> With intense physical labor, sparse diet, few medical supplies—or the proper medical personnel—many POWs in Betetaung quickly succumbed to a variety of debilitating diseases and infections.

## Enter Norman Carter

Among the members of Black Force was Norman Carter who had been an actor/producer in Melbourne, Australia prior to the war. Five weeks before the fall of Singapore, he flew to Malaya to become a scriptwriter composing anti-Japanese propaganda materials for Radio Singapore.<sup>15</sup> Carter was evacuated from Singapore just before it fell: his ship was bombed off Banka Island and he was captured, imprisoned, and eventually transferred to Bicycle Camp in Batavia (Jakarta) in West Java and given a commission as a second lieutenant. There he became producer-director of the Pow-Wow Concert Party.<sup>16</sup>

As he observed the POWs at Betetaung struggling to cope with their lot, Carter realized that what the troops needed was some sort of antidote to prevent their minds from brooding on their troubles. “It would be like offering a caraway seed to a starving man,” he wrote, “but something, however trivial, had to be done.”<sup>17</sup>

A small pile of railway sleepers (railroad ties) close to the camp gates had possibilities as a stage. But the only performer from the old Pow-Wow Concert Party Carter could locate was the bass-baritone Jim Anderson. There was also a harmonica player in the camp, but Carter was warned that once this performer was on stage he was there to stay. Having no other options, Carter went ahead with these two, planning to flesh out the show with community singing.

In stark contrast to the Bicycle Camp barn he had turned into an impressive indoor proscenium theatre with curtains and lighting, Carter’s first concert party in Burma was performed on a pile of sleepers for a stage, with no lights, no posters publicizing the event, and only two performers. Even then things went awry: Anderson came down with a diphtheria-like illness that swelled his tongue and made it difficult for him to sing, and Carter, who had planned to compère the show, developed identical symptoms and was unable to speak clearly. Thus, the harmonica player was asked to take on this role as well.

From the start Carter sensed that the atmosphere in the audience was not good: “nobody seemed to be keyed up to any great pitch of excitement.” The warning about the harmonica player proved accurate. Not only were his opening remarks lacking in wit, but he played song after song while the audience became increasingly bored and restive. Finally, the camp trumpeter yelled out from the audience, “How’s about for taking it, pal?” and that did the trick. The task of enlivening the audience now fell to Anderson, who scrambled onto the sleepers, but his voice just wasn’t up to it. This was not an auspicious beginning for Carter’s debut as the camp’s entertainment officer. “The Beke Taung concert had laid an egg,” Carter concluded.<sup>18</sup>

## Enter Wim Kan

On 7 November, more N.E.I. POW laborers for the railway arrived in Rangoon from Java after a harrowing sea voyage. Their ship had been contaminated by the corpses of twelve men who had died of dysentery on the way. Among these troops was the popular Dutch cabaret entertainer Wim Kan. Kan had been on tour with his wife in the Netherlands East Indies when hostilities broke out. Called up by the N.E.I. forces, he became a radio announcer for military news broadcasts. With the N.E.I.'s unconditional surrender, Kan began his imprisonment at Tjimahi POW Camp in West Java. There he met accordionist Nico Rayer, who became his indispensable accompanist in camp cabarets.<sup>v</sup>

Upon their arrival in Burma, the N.E.I. POWs were placed in Rangoon Gaol.<sup>vii9</sup>

## Jacobs, Carter, and Kan

In contrast to the Thai side of the railway, the story of musical and theatrical activities that occurred in the POW camps in Burma is dominated by these three extraordinary producer-directors. The shows these men produced are not the whole story of entertainment on the Burma side of the railway of course; other producers, musicians, and performers will be noted. But because each of these men published an account of the entertainment he produced and the performers and production staff he gathered around him, those narratives become the major sources for documenting the jungle shows in Burma.

## Something Completely Different

By mid-November 1942, Black Force had cleared the railway trace from Betetaung/040 Kilo back to Kun Knit Kway/026 Kilo, where Ramsay Force was now located. Since Colonel Ramsay had seniority over Colonel Black, he became the POW officer in charge of the encampment.

Life in Kun Knit Kway was even more miserable than in Betetaung. Food was inadequate, and the November nights were so cold that without blankets the men couldn't sleep well. Uniforms had deteriorated so badly they were forced to devise G-strings to wear.<sup>20</sup> During the day some of the POWs were required by the Japanese engineers to act as "monkey boys," which meant they were "doomed to spend the following twelve hours up to their armpits in swirling icy water, acting as human pile-drivers for a bamboo bridge being built across a broad river two miles up the line."<sup>21</sup>

Once again, Carter decided that "something was urgently needed to make all mens<sup>vii</sup> forget their aches and pains and secret dreads." But this time it had to be something completely removed from another variety show with "the same old jokes and mouth-organ solos, with the same old tunes and maybe a spot of community singing as a chaser."<sup>22</sup> And there had to be something better to perform on than a pile of sleepers. When he approached Colonel Ramsay for permission, Carter used the same rationale he had employed back in Bicycle Camp: "If I may say so, sir, something much more spectacular is needed—something to think about—to plan for and above all to look forward to. A theatre would do that, sir."<sup>23</sup> The appeal had worked in Bicycle Camp; it proved successful at Kun Knit Kway as well.

With a group of volunteer "dirt-shovellers and bamboo-cutters and carriers," Carter set to work building a theatre.<sup>24</sup> They devised a shed-like lean-to theatre that had a raised stage with a backdrop and wings of atap matting, and an orchestra pit. Lighting would be provided by two "whopping big bonfires—

<sup>v</sup> As a civilian and a Dutch national, Kan's wife, Corrie Vonk, was placed in the Women and Children's Internment Camp at Tjihapit near Bandoeng, where she initiated cabarets to keep up the inhabitants' spirits [see "Corry Vonk" in Ernest Hillen's *The Way of a Boy*].

<sup>vi</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Wim Kan's *Burmadagboek* are by Sheri Tromp.

<sup>vii</sup> Mens is an affectation used by Carter in his memoir. It is his imitation of the Japanese mistaken use of the plural when dealing with the POWs.

one on each side of the stage, but not too close,” Carter cautioned, “lest a spark turned the theatre into a third bonfire.”<sup>25</sup>

The problem, of course, was what to put on the stage. Carter believed it should be a play—a farce—with characters and a plot to stimulate the men’s imaginations and emotions.<sup>26</sup> Before he could work out the solution, he came down with fibrositis, caused by all the backbreaking effort to get the theatre built, and missed the planning sessions as well as the performance.

Carter’s instincts about the presence of a theatre structure to generate excitement proved correct. Before the show started, there was “an enormous semi-circle of men, some in G-strings, some in tattered shorts, squatting with their knees up, gazing raptly at the stage.”<sup>27</sup> When 7:30 arrived and the harmonica player jumped into the orchestra pit, there was an almost audible groan from the audience, who remembered his last appearance. This time he surprised them:

With a flourish worthy of a Guards drum major the orchestra blew a fortissimo chord, the players ran on, and went into a breezy opening chorus. The show went over well, largely owing to the excellent clowning of producer-comedian Johnny Jevons, who appeared to have a first-rate fund of material. His first gag brought a roar of approval:

“What’s the difference between a nip from a dog and a nip from a Nip? Well, the dog gets his thrashing right away, but the Nip’s got to wait for his!”

When the cast had taken their final bows, the mouth-organist who had proved himself to be an excellent accompanist, stood up, and got a resounding ovation.<sup>28</sup>

Unlike at Betetaung, the first show at Kun Knit Kway was a success. Buoyed by that triumph, Jevons made immediate plans to produce another show the following Sunday. But Carter was dubious about this amateur’s ability to sustain his efforts—and he was right. To flesh out his new show, Jevons repeated jokes he had told in his first show and fell back on community singing, which did not go over well with the exhausted troops, “Roll Out the Barrel” being a particularly unfortunate choice.<sup>29</sup> With the failure of his second show, the dejected Johnny Jevons “retired” from the stage.

This loss of entertainment upset “the Castle” (Colonel Ramsay and the POW camp administration): “Not that the residents were particularly theatre-minded,” observed Carter, “but they recognised the urgency for some form of escapism for the men . . . and the sole amenity was the lonely little bamboo theatre, with no shows to put in it.”<sup>30</sup> As a stopgap measure, junior officers put on a *mock trial*, an old army barracks entertainment in which troops were allowed to poke fun at their leaders, regulations, and camp life. From Carter’s point of view, “Jokes about rice and the ‘runs’ had long since ceased to be funny, and, from the psychological angle, the fact that there were ‘mock prisoners’ on stage killed the show from the start.”<sup>31</sup>

While recovering from his muscle strain, Carter was encouraged to think about how the apparent lack of entertainment for the upcoming Christmas holidays could be resolved. Enlisting the “retired” Johnny Jevons’ help, he started writing a farce, *The Sultan of Sarong*, “a comedy of concubines set in the Sultan’s lecherous lounge of lust!”<sup>32</sup>

### Other Places—Other Faces

By early December, other camps were trying different types of entertainment to keep their men's attention diverted from their ills. At Tanyin/035 Kilo a talent contest was put on with some unusual participants: "Even the Nipponese faced the judging panel," wrote Lieutenant-Colonel John Williams in his diary. "They sang in both languages, their own and English. The show went on for 2½ hours."<sup>33</sup> Williams was the officer in charge of "Williams Force," a new group that had arrived in Burma from Java and was composed of the Australian 2/2 Pioneer Battalion and sailors who had survived the sinking of the HMAS *Perth*.

Down the line at Thetkaw/014 Kilo, a choral group under the direction of Sergeant Norman Halliday had developed. Tom Morris, who joined the choir, remembered that one of their contributions to a camp concert was a selection of Negro slave spirituals.<sup>34</sup>

### The Bob Skilton & Les Bullock Show

With its relative stability of personnel and work requirements, entertainment in the base camp at Thanbyuzayat had the opportunity to develop beyond impromptu sing-alongs or simple variety shows. A concert party organized by Sergeant Bob Skilton, a well-known Australian vocalist, and British Sergeant Les Bullock began to produce weekly variety shows on an outdoor platform stage built on the edge of the parade ground. (Besides his role as entertainer, Bullock also operated the outfit's "dicky bird" [secret radio], sometimes with Skilton acting as his assistant.) Rohan Rivett remembered their comic "patter" acts as both witty and wickedly salacious.<sup>35</sup> A reluctant Sid "Happy" Marshall was persuaded to appear as a female impersonator in the shows. "These performances were truly burlesque in which I sang in my natural voice (baritone) wearing a sarong," Marshall wrote. "This gave me some notoriety I did not seek."<sup>viii36</sup>

### Wim Kan's First Cabaret in Burma

Miles away in Rangoon Gaol, Wim Kan gave his first cabaret in Burma. St. Nicholas Day, 5 December, was the most important Dutch Christmas holiday, but the Japanese had refused permission for a cabaret on that date, so Kan performed it surreptitiously on 6 December instead. With the men crowded around a single oil lamp, Kan opened the show with some humorous theatre anecdotes as well as the song "Ganzenbord, 1942," his parody of the old children's board game "The Goose Game," with topical references to the swiftness with which the Japanese had taken their "spaces" in Southeast Asia.<sup>37</sup>

"Ganzenbord, 1942" reveals Kan's method of generating his cabaret material. Borrowing the tune of a well-known song, he rewrote the lyrics to critique current social or political conditions, hoping to change the listeners' attitudes and behavior. Back in Tjimahi POW Camp in West Java, he had used Kurt Weill's music for "Mack the Knife" as the basis for "Song of the Food Grabbers" in an attempt to shame the perpetrators into stopping their actions.<sup>ix</sup>

### Christmas in Captivity

The Christmas holidays, extending from 25 December through to New Year's Day, were always a special time in the military. In most camps, the Japanese acknowledged the importance of these holidays and gave the prisoners extra time off and permission for entertainment. Christmas 1942 would be their

<sup>viii</sup> We will hear more of Marshall when he is recuperating in Tamarkan Relocation Camp in Thailand.

<sup>ix</sup> See "The FEPOW Songbook" for the lyrics.



first as prisoners of war. For many of the young troops it would be their first Christmas away from home.<sup>38</sup>

### **A Brass Band Tour**

To ensure that each camp had some sort of Christmas entertainment, Sergeant Norman Whittaker and his brass band at Thetkaw/014 Kilo were given permission to tour each of the work camps on Christmas Day “to give a short programme.” They had even been allowed time to practice for the tour after their workday was over.<sup>39</sup> Traveling by lorry, they first went to the present railhead at Tanyin/035 Kilo, where they performed on Christmas Eve for Williams Force. “It was good to hear a band again,” wrote E. R. Hall. “About 50 Nipponese and 80 Burmese listened as well.”<sup>40</sup>

After spending the night, they left early on Christmas Day, doubling back down the line to Kun Knit Kway/026 Kilo. One number played there was the old marching favorite, “Colonel Bogey,” which gave the POWs a good laugh because of the alternative lyrics that mocked all military authority:

*Bollocks! Was all the band could play.*

*Bollocks! They played it night and day.*

*Bollocks! Ta-ra-ra Bollocks!*

*Ta-ra-ra bollocks! Bollocks! Bollocks!<sup>41</sup>*

In the present context, this was an act of resistance against their captors.

Later that day, at Hlepauk/018 Kilo, Jacobs listened as the band “put on a splendid programme which made us forget for a short time that we were prisoners of war. At the conclusion of the performance some wag called out, ‘Come again next year.’ This raised a good laugh, as most of us expected to be home before Christmas 1943.”<sup>42</sup>

At Thetkaw/014 (their home camp), Tom Morris remembered the concert vividly: “Norm Whittaker. Marvelous on the trumpet, absolutely. I can still hear the triple tonguing on his trumpet.”<sup>43</sup> Their final concert took place at Thanbyuzayat, where Lieutenant Naito, the camp commandant, arrived late—and drunk—and demanded a repeat of the concert, which made everyone extremely unhappy.

### **Bullock & Skilton’s *Cinderella***

As their Christmas offering at Thanbyuzayat, Skilton and Bullock collaborated on producing the old pantomime favorite *Cinderella*. The performance of a pantomime during the Christmas holidays was an old and honored tradition in the British Empire. This distinctive British theatrical form held a unique place in the hearts of Australian and British POWs, as some of their earliest and fondest childhood memories were of having been taken to Christmas “pantos” by parents and grandparents. With their clear conflict between Good and Evil, their outrageous dames, slapstick and slosh scenes, fantasy, transformations, music, dancing, and audience participation (“It’s behind you!”), the pantos performed by the POWs produced a powerful nostalgia for family and home and happier times. As an antidote, the comedians’ topical humor, double entendres, and covert jabs at their Japanese captors kept the prisoners solidly grounded in their

<sup>x</sup> During the war in Europe the soldiers there sang their own version of this marching song, which went: “Hitler only had one ball/Goering had two, but very small/Himmler had something sim’lar/but Goebbels had no balls at all.”

present world as they fell about with laughter.

*Cinderella* would become one of the most popular pantomimes performed by the POWs on the Thailand-Burma railway. Its story of a poor girl “captive” to her stepsisters’ every desire<sup>xi</sup> and her eventual release from that servitude by a fairy godmother and a prince carried tremendous metaphorical significance for the POWs. According to Rohan Rivett, Skilton and Bullock’s version of *Cinderella* was not long on metaphor but over the top in ribaldry.<sup>44</sup>

### **Carter & Jevons’ *The Sultan of Sarong***

Back up the line at Kun Knit Kway, Carter and Jevons’ *The Sultan of Sarong* opened “to a packed house.” Jim Anderson played Abdul the Bull Bull, a salacious sultan;<sup>xii</sup> Val Ballantyne, Egbert, his eunuch-in-chief; an unknown female impersonator played Connie, a cute concubine; others, ladies of the harem. The plot concerned the sultan’s troubles with Egbert, who was always telling the harem ladies racy stories, which undercut the sultan’s pleasure in doing so. But the sultan couldn’t dismiss Egbert because he was too skillful in finding new women for the harem. One night, after a particularly annoying incident, the sultan has Egbert beaten. When Egbert returns to the harem, he angrily wishes aloud that he were sultan. One of the concubines tells him that if he prays to Venus, his wish will come true. He does so, and Abdul runs onstage, “flings himself at Egbert’s feet and in a lilting soprano trills: ‘You called, Master?’”

Egbert, now gravel-voiced, snarls: “Where have you been, you perishing pansy? The ladies are waiting for you to tell ’em some juicy stories! Get cracking!”

Abdul rises, stands with one hand on his hip and simpers: “Master, no can tell naughty stories.”

“Why?” growls Egbert.

“I’m too shy!” *Curtain.*

The humor in *The Sultan of Sarong* may have been sophomoric, but it provided the release of laughter the POWs needed so badly.

After the performance, Carter and Jevons were informed of some grave concerns voiced by “the Castle” about the show’s bawdiness. Colonel Ramsay was one of those commanding officers who strictly adhered to the army’s guidelines for camp entertainments, condemning coarse speech and behavior in public events. Buoyed by their success, Carter and Jevons ignored these warnings. The following night they had a script conference and quickly wrote a “sizzling” farce, *Radiosities*—a takeoff on a day of programming at a commercial radio broadcasting station—for their next offering. But before it could be produced, Black and Green Forces were leapfrogged up the line to Meiloe/075 Kilo.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>xi</sup> *The stepmother doesn’t always appear in the traditional British pantomime version of the fairy tale.*

<sup>xii</sup> “Abdul Abulbul Amir” was a popular song during the Crimean War. Besides the original lyrics, there was a salacious version sung by British soldiers.

1943

### New Year's Celebrations

Just before Christmas, Wim Kan and his fledging cabaret troupe had been moved from Rangoon Gaol to a hospital in the N.E.I. POW headquarters compound at Moulmein. There Kan was reunited with his close friend Cor Punt, the N.E.I. adjutant, who joined his troupe as a vocalist. His preparations for a Christmas cabaret came to a sudden halt when his accompanist, Nico Rayer, became ill. The performance had to wait until New Year's Eve, after Rayer had recovered.<sup>46</sup>

#### "Letter to My Son on Christmas Eve '42"

While still in Rangoon Gaol, Kan had written, *Brief ann m'n zoon op kerstavond '42* ("Letter to My Son on Christmas Eve '42") to undercut any self-pity the POWs might be feeling about their plight. Kan knew the power of sentimentality to mask the truth. He took a very sentimental subject (an absent father's letter to his son) and then proceeded to remove the mask. Lyrics for the opening verse and closing refrain give a taste of the longer piece.<sup>xiii</sup>

*Dear son, I write to you in my mind  
This Christmas letter that you will never receive.  
Do you remember how we laughed about the snowman  
That hangs on your Christmas tree tonight?  
Do you recall that you grabbed my hand  
At the sight of the shining tree?  
How I explained to you this festival of Peace on Earth  
While you listened with open mouth?*

\*

*Now your daddy with his "peace on earth"  
And his goody-goody Christmas story from back then  
Is hopelessly stuck in Mother Earth's muck.  
What can a human being do about this world?  
I hope—my son—that when you have grown up  
And you sing for your son a Christmas song  
About peace, tolerance and reason,  
It does not sound like an "accusation."<sup>47</sup>*

The song's hard-hitting ironic tone was typical of Kan—even in a Christmas show, with all its

<sup>xiii</sup> See "The FEPOW Songbook" for the full text.

attendant heavy emotional baggage, where the main purpose must have been to cheer up the troops. In the complete lyrics, Kan even dares to suggest that their own willingness in the past to tell lies and promote illusions about their world had, perhaps, led them to this place. It was a challenging assertion and, as we shall see, not at all an unusual stance for Wim Kan to take.

With the cabaret's success, Kan sought permission for his troupe to perform weekly. Pleased with the positive effect on the POWs' morale, the Japanese commandant granted his request. As a New Year's surprise, N.E.I. headquarters gave Kan an honorary commission with the rank of second lieutenant.<sup>48</sup>

Meanwhile, up on the railway, most camps celebrated the New Year with campfire sing-alongs. "As the hours of night drifted in," wrote Leslie Hall at Tanyin/035 Kilo, "so did the voices of the camp artists in song and revelry. The whole camp, even many of the sick, joined in the lyrics with memories of home and happiness."<sup>49</sup>

### ***"It's a Jap Slap Happy Day"***

In early January, Anderson Force joined Williams Force at Tanyin. By 14 January, the Japanese engineers, trying to push the railway project forward, had increased their daily task load significantly, and now the POWs had only one day off in ten, which meant they were not only returning late to camp every day but growing more and more exhausted. In response, Jacobs redoubled his efforts to provide entertainment on their yasume days. One of his new variety show performers was "Poodles" Norley, who had been a petty officer on the *Perth*. This was Norley's first appearance as a female impersonator since Java. Afterward, in appreciation for the performance, the Japanese gave the performers presents of cigars and fruit.<sup>50</sup>

So their acceptance of the presents wouldn't be misconstrued as collaboration, their next show included a parody of the song "Hap, Hap, Happy Day" that made fun of the corporal punishment the POWs endured for the slightest infraction of camp rules.

*It's a Jap, slap, happy day*

*If you don't kiostke (Attention!),*

*You get the boot*

*If you don't salute,*

*It's a Jap slap happy day.*<sup>51</sup>

Needless to say, the lyrics did not go over well with the Japanese. This time there were no gifts of cigars and fruit. And, as a further consequence, no lectures or concerts could be given without the Japanese commandant's permission regarding their content.<sup>52</sup>

### **Wim Kan Makes His Mark**

After the first of the year, the N.E.I. POW headquarters was moved from Moulmein to Thanbyuzayat, and there, on 11 January, Kan's cabaret troupe performed the camp's first Dutch/Indonesian entertainment on the outdoor stage. Kan found it difficult to project his opening section of songs and patter loudly enough for all in the large gathering to hear. The rest of the program was, as usual, a mixture of instrumental turns, songs, and sketches. Two days later a piano for Kan and his troupe arrived as a present from the Japanese

commandant, along with a “request” for a private performance in the commandant’s quarters. Aware of the ironies of the situation, Kan wrote about this command performance in his diary:

Late yesterday night we played music for the Japanese Camp Commander, a very kind man in a white sweater. He sat smiling on the table. He himself played the violin. Two candles were on the piano. There we were, playing so peacefully in the heart of Burma as if there was no war, as if there were no runaway POWs that would be executed!<sup>53</sup>

As in all POW camps, the different nationalities at Thanbyuzayat had separate administrative, housing, messing, and hospital areas—but there was only the one stage. Relationships between the N.E.I. and the British or Australians on the railway were not always the most agreeable; in fact, they were frequently quite hostile. The language barrier was one major obstacle to better understanding. Although a number of Dutch/Indonesian troops understood English, few of the Brits or Aussies understood Dutch. For this reason, two separate entertainment units had to share the stage in Thanbyuzayat instead of combining their talents into one. Other cultural difficulties were also an issue, one of which was race. Most of the N.E.I. other ranks were *indische jorgens* (mixed race) or fully Indonesian, which disturbed many of the white British and Australian troops.

On 16 January, there was an attempt to bridge this linguistic, cultural, and racial divide. As new arrivals, Kan’s cabaret troupe was asked to perform in a talent contest as part of a Skilton and Bullock variety show entitled “The Cabaret of the Unknown” that would introduce them to the British and Australian audiences. One hundred cigars would be awarded to the contest winner. In competition were De Haan and De Leeuwentemmer, who performed a four-hand piano selection; Rayer, with a harmonica solo; and Erik Noggerath, who offered violin selections.<sup>xiv</sup> Kan did not participate—his English was not good enough. He thought the show’s title apt; it was amateurish and poorly performed.<sup>54</sup> His troupe would demonstrate professional standards when their turn came at the end of the month.

### Kan Sets the Standard

On 31 January, Kan’s cabaret troupe performed for another huge audience of N.E.I. personnel, this time in honor of Princess Beatrix’s birthday. His troupe had now grown to eight performers.<sup>xv</sup> One of these was an Australian vocalist named Pat Levy, who had originally been engaged to teach Kan conversational English so he could eventually perform for the whole camp. Kan sang four of his own compositions in the show, one of which was the new song *Bezoek aan Burma in 1950* (“Visit to Burma in 1950”).

#### “Visit to Burma in 1950”

The subject matter was, as usual, provocative: an imagined time in the future—1950—when Kan, as a former FEPOW, brings his wife on a tour to the sites in Burma where he had labored as a captive.<sup>xvi</sup> Their rail journey is marred by a series of mishaps:

<sup>xiv</sup> The contest winner(s) is not known.

<sup>xv</sup> These were Stokvis (comedian), Wacano (guitar), van Bennekom (harmonica), Erik Noggerath (violin), Nic Rayer and van Heusden (accordions), and Cor Punt and Pat Levy (vocalists).

<sup>xvi</sup> This aspect of the song proved prophetic: many POWs did return to Burma and Thailand as tourists in later years.

*“The train is going too fast!”*  
*My wife comments angrily, turning pale*  
*“Your track does not seem up to par.”*  
*I scream over the thunder of the train:*  
*“It would be a miracle if I did something good in your eyes.”*  
*She yells: “Shut your big mouth!”*  
*And before I can see precisely what is happening,*  
*The whole dining coach topples over.*  
*But when I angrily inquire*  
*Where the construction fault lies,*  
*I recognize the little bridge as my own work.*

*My wife is in a foul mood: she calls me a jerk.*  
*She says: “You always do a half-assed job.”*  
*When I chat with the chef at Retpu<sup>xvii</sup>*  
*I find out that my railway line*  
*Goes straight to China.*  
*I then ask him how was it possible to miss Bangkok?*  
*“It is a little matter of a mistake” he calmly replies.*  
*“They worked from two sides—that went very well—*  
*Only they did not meet; too bad.”*  
*My wife said: “Let’s go back to Rembrandt Square<sup>xviii</sup>*  
*You are too unimportant for work on such a line.”<sup>xix</sup>*

Though the song sounds critical of the POWs’ construction work, Kan’s actual purpose was quite different. Like the Danish writer Piet Hein and his “grooks” (short poems penned during the German occupation of Denmark), Kan had written his song in such a way that its interpretation depended on who was hearing it. The Japanese could understand it as critical of the POWs’ work; the POW audience, on the other hand, could hear it as encouraging their efforts at sabotage.

The show ended with a moment of silence in remembrance of the fallen. Then Major Hazenberg gave a short speech which concluded with everyone singing two verses of the national anthem, *“het Wilhelmus.”* Following standard practice, the cabaret was repeated in the N.E.I. hospital ward a few days later.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>xvii</sup> A work camp in the jungle, up the railway at 30 Kilo.

<sup>xviii</sup> A central square in Amsterdam.

<sup>xix</sup> See *“The FEPOW Songbook”* for the full text.

## “The All New Stage”

Among the miscellaneous items Kan entered in his diary on 18 February was a passing note that he was suffering from a small infected leg wound, that his rehearsal and performance schedule had been approved by the Japanese, and that there was a new theatre under construction. “Everybody full of energy busy with building a new stage,” he wrote. “Stealing pieces of wood etc. from the Jap (as he had his eyes diverted elsewhere), making a parquet floor to surprise me. Really nice.”<sup>57</sup>

Two days later, his cabaret opened this new theatre with a performance he claimed was “a roaring success”:

Inaugurated the all new stage. Totally built with stolen materials. Parquet flooring, 2 big flower vases with shrubs, curved front steps, white painted balustrade, 2 oil light containers, all in all exactly like a chic little stage on a terrace of some big restaurant on the Riviera! There was even a music stand.

In a provocative gesture that must have delighted his POW audience, the first item in the cabaret was a contest: “How many pieces of wood are on the stage? Answer 468! (Someone guessed 469).” If the Japanese authorities caught on to what this contest was all about, they didn’t say so at the time. What they did do, however, at evening *tenko* (roll call) was issue an order that “it was forbidden to remove even one little piece of wood [from the Japanese area]. Severe punishment!”<sup>58</sup>

The new stage now became the venue where Skilton and Bullock presented their weekly variety shows as well, and Kan believed the competition provided by his professional cabarets made their efforts much better. Thanks to Pat Levy, his conversational English improved to the point that he began to perform in all the hospital wards and not just for the N.E.I. troops.<sup>59</sup>

Following his first cabaret in March, Kan’s health began to deteriorate. The infected wound on his leg had not healed, and with limited quantities of soap and water available for washing up, he developed a rash all over his body. By 19 March he had five sores on his leg and was ordered to take three days’ bed rest. Refusing to disappoint the troops, he went ahead with a new cabaret on 20 March.<sup>60</sup>

## Horsing Around

Before Ramsay Force joined Black and Green Forces at Meiloe/075 Kilo, the POWs demanded that a new type of entertainment take place at Kun Knit Kway. This was a “race meeting” celebrating their national holiday, “Melbourne Cup Day.”<sup>xx</sup> Though the actual date for the holiday was nine months away, the prisoners tackled its re-creation with alacrity. Wooden hobby horses were constructed for the riders, and sarongs and fancy dress material originally purchased in Singapore for wives and sweethearts back home were used to create the jockey’s blouses and caps. There was a totalizator board made out of bamboo and web belts and “windows” where the POWs could place their bets. And, of course, there had to be bookie stands. Everyone donned homemade costumes for the occasion. There were men in frock coats and “ladies” in fancy dresses—even Colonel Ramsay attended as “Governor” with a “Governor’s Lady” on his arm.<sup>61</sup>

Following the race day event, Ramsay Force joined Black and Green Forces at Meiloe/075 Kilo, bringing the camp size to approximately 3,000 men. The only positive result of this severe overcrowding

<sup>xx</sup> The Melbourne Cup was traditionally held on the first Tuesday in November.

was, in Tom Morris' mind, "a much wider range of skills and talents" for concert parties.<sup>62</sup> Once again, because of his seniority in rank, Colonel Ramsay was appointed officer in charge.



FIGURE 3.3. BURMA RAILWAY MAP #2. BETETAUNG—MEILOE.

Carter looked at the site of their new camp, "built on the slope of a precipitous hill, the commencement of a range of mountains which grew progressively higher and more savagely rugged," with foreboding.<sup>63</sup> On the positive side was "an excellent little theatre" left by the British POWs who had been in the camp earlier.<sup>xxi</sup> "This was no makeshift lean-to like the modest edifice in Kun Knit Kway," Carter observed. "It had a proper roof<sup>xxii</sup> with reasonable height, plenty of room on stage and off, and there it stood just begging to be used."<sup>64</sup>

### "The Speedo" Begins

It was at Meiloe that the POWs first heard the news that the deadline for completion of the railway had been moved up to October. And they soon learned what this new "Speedo" meant in changed tactics and treatment. "The pressure was put on and blitzing became severe, sick men being forced to work," wrote Jack Turner. "We were hard at work at daylight and for several weeks worked until 2 and 3 a.m. under the light of fires. . . . Many more bashings were dealt out to us by both guards and engineers. Men came home from work in the early hours of the morning dead beat."<sup>65</sup> It was time for Carter to produce another show.

Given the increased pressure on the POWs' time and strength, Carter didn't know if he could generate the energy or the personnel necessary to put up another show. The only possibility he had on hand was *Radiosities*, which he and Jevons had written back in Kun Knit Kway following the success of *The Sultan of Sarong*. He knew this script was "a Madras curry, a trifle too hot for some palates," but rationalized that the POWs were now so sex starved they would be ready for it. The success of *The Sultan of Sarong* erased any official concerns about lewdness from his mind. When word circulated that he might produce another show, the prospect energized the camp, and many POWs volunteered to construct and paint the scenery and act as stagehands. Encouraged by this obvious hunger for entertainment, Carter put *Radiosities* into rehearsal.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>xxi</sup> Who these POWs were is not known, as no records of an earlier group at Meiloe have been found.

<sup>xxii</sup> Carter means a pitched roof, which allowed for a full proscenium arch concealing offstage spaces on either side, rather than an open lean-to shed roof.



### Three Entertainment Casualties

The POWs back at Thanbyuzayat were also affected by “the Speedo”—but indirectly. Shortly after it got under way, the base camp was turned into a general hospital for the heavy sick who began to arrive in increasing numbers from their work camps up the line. By the end of March, Kan, too, was in hospital. His infected leg had become badly swollen and covered in sores; his cabaret activity suspended.<sup>67</sup>

By early April, Williams Force and Anderson Force (including Jacobs’ Signals Company) had been combined into “Mobile Force No. 1.” This new unit would lay the sleepers and rails from Kun Knit Kway/026 Kilo to the point where they would join those advancing from the Thai side.<sup>xxiii</sup> This exhausting, backbreaking work would take seven long months to complete. For Jacobs, there would be no energy or opportunity to produce further entertainment until the railway was completed.<sup>68</sup>

Meanwhile, Carter’s band of enthusiastic volunteers had accomplished wonders in preparation for the opening of their new show at Meiloe. Over the course of three consecutive Sundays, “they built an excellent copy of a broadcasting studio complete with the announcer’s desk and microphone (split bamboo); two sets of turntables which actually revolved . . . and a pile of records (thin disks of dried mud).” Carter hoped the show would “make people forget Meiloe and imagine themselves back home listening to their favourite radio station.”<sup>69</sup>

### *Radiosities*

It had taken four weeks, but *Radiosities* was now ready for its matinee opening. When the curtains parted, the set “got a big and well-deserved hand.” The atop backdrop “had been whitewashed (lime for latrine pits) and on it was drawn (charcoal from the cookhouse) a control panel complete with knobs and gadgets. In the centre of the studio stood a pedestal mike (bamboo).”

“Sunrise Sam,” the early-morning announcer, also got a hand “when he walked in, sat at his desk, opened the mike and said brightly: ‘Good morning one and all. Six-thirty at your favourite station 2MO Meiloe,’ then put on a record which actually spun” (a POW squatting underneath the table turned it with a handle). But from there on things went from bad to worse. Sunrise Sam’s jokes about cures for marital infidelity put a distinct chill in the air. And by the time Aunt Daisy in the “Children’s Storytime” segment told the story of “Little Coldie Cock and the Three Beers,” the audience’s reaction was, according to Carter, “polar.”<sup>70</sup>

*Radiosities* proved to be a disaster. Carter had misjudged his audience. Under the watchful eye of Colonel Ramsay, the men weren’t about to laugh at the scatological obscenities. And most of the POWs had long since buried any thoughts about sex in their need to satisfy constant hunger, so jokes about marital infidelity back home—their worst fears—were totally out of place. Carter was to pay dearly for these miscalculations. Colonel Ramsay banished him from the camp and ordered him to join the heavy sick being taken by lorry down to Thanbyuzayat the next morning. “Six jolty hours later,” he wrote, “the truck drove past the guardhouse at Thanbuzayat [*sic*]. The Bad Boy of Meiloe was back at base in disgrace.”<sup>71</sup>

Though Norman Carter and Wim Kan were now in the same camp, they never met. Kan’s continued hospitalization with leg ulcers meant there were no performances by his cabaret troupe for several weeks. During their absence from the stage, an unusual event took place: a musical concert presented by a touring Japanese military band. Little is known about this group or its program of music, but its appearance was noted at various sites on both sides of the railway.

<sup>xxiii</sup> A British and American party had laid the rails from Thanbyuzayat to Kun Knit Kway.

### Skilton & Bullock Soldier On

Skilton and Bullock's variety shows continued—now seen by Norman Carter. One of their favorite targets for send-ups were medical personnel and medical practices. Recovering POWs dreaded being sent back up the line to construction camps where “the Speedo” was in full force and would do anything to avoid it. Achieving a medical officer's permission to stay in camp under false premises was known as “tossing the doctor.” In one show they presented a skit with this title which employed a parody of the Christmas song “Jingle Bells.” Carter, delighted by its audacity, copied down the entire skit:

Said Les “How you feeling, Bob?”

“Fighting fit!”

“You look it! I got the drum you nearly got sent up the line last week.”

“That's right. But I'm still here, chum.”

“Put it across the doctor, eh?”

“And how! ‘Listen, Doc,’ I said. ‘I'm sick. If you send me up the line I'm cert for the cemetery, cos . . .

*I'm feelin' awful queer,*

*With pains from there to here!*

*Me liver's up to putt.*

*I got a twisted gut.*

*Me bowels is epileptic,*

*Both kidney's [sic] have gone septic,*

*I've a goitre on me spine,*

*Ooooooh don't send me up the line . . . Cos . . .*

*Jungle bells, jungle bells —*

*They haunt me night and day.*

*Can't you hear 'em ringing*

*In the ooloo<sup>xxiv</sup> far away . . . Oooh . . .*

*Jungle bells, Jungle bells,*

*Lots of woe and strife,*

*But if you can toss the doctor,*

*You can stay at base for life!*

“Come on now, fellers, all together, let it rip”—and the delighted audience roared the chorus.<sup>72</sup>

With the duplicitous practice now publicly unmasked, the POW authorities could no longer turn a

<sup>xxiv</sup> Malayan term for “jungle.”

blind eye to its prevalence. If the Japanese discovered what the skit was really about, there would be serious repercussions for all the prisoners.

### In Honor of the Emperor's Birthday

Back at Meiloe/075 Kilo, the entertainment, now purged of the obscene and corrupting influence of Norman Carter, carried on. With the arrival of Ramsay Force, Carter's abandoned performers took advantage of Norman Whittaker and his brass band to put up a musical comedy, *The Poor Little Mill Girl*, in which Jack Turner took the female lead.<sup>xxv</sup> They could hardly have predicted the consequences of its successful performance on 25 April. Impressed with the show, their Japanese commandant decided it should be featured in a propaganda film being shot at Thanbyuzayat on 29 April in honor of the emperor's birthday. And so the sets, costumes, and company—Whittaker and his band included—were transported by truck all the way back down the line to Thanbyuzayat.<sup>73</sup>

### A Propaganda Film

At Thanbyuzayat, Lieutenant-Colonel Nagatomo believed he had engineered a public relations coup. A Japanese film crew would make a film about life in his Group III base camp at Thanbyuzayat as they celebrated the emperor's birthday. Its climax would be the hastily arranged musical comedy performance by the Meiloe POWs.

Still in hospital, Wim Kan wrote down a synopsis of every rumor he heard concerning the filming about to take place: "The Japs are going to make a propaganda film: how they treat their Prisoners of War. Arrival at the station (with stretchers, doctors, etc.), meeting, kitchen, *toko* [supply store] and music performance."<sup>xxvi</sup> He couldn't help making a sarcastic comment on the new theatre being built for the performance of *The Poor Little Mill Girl*. "Oh, we fare so well! All of a sudden a beautiful stage is built. Before you could not get anything, and now a magnificent stage in one day!"<sup>74</sup> This "magnificent stage" was a large atop proscenium stagehouse with a pitched roof and electric lighting.

The POWs at Thanbyuzayat did not want to be cast in a propaganda film, but Brigadier General Varley, fearing reprisals would be taken out on the troops up the line if they didn't comply, ordered them to fully cooperate. But their compliance, according to Jack Turner, included clever attempts to subvert the film's propaganda value: "[O]ur authorities worked things so that one man was at each place they filmed. In other words, the same man that was filmed at the canteen was also filmed in bed as a patient, in the concert party, and also being operated on, so I imagine that the propaganda film would not have such effect on the people back home."<sup>75</sup>

Filming during the day had gone well—at least up to the point where the POWs were supposed to sing the old drinking song "Bless Them All" as they marched toward the camera. As instructed, they gave it all they had—but with a twist:

*Screw 'em all, screw 'em all.*

*The long and the short and the tall.*

*Screw all the guards and each bow-legged Jap,*

<sup>xxv</sup> No prewar precursor for this musical has been located. It may have been the POWs' version of the popular 1936 film *Poor Little Rich Girl*, starring Shirley Temple. If so, the song from that film, "I Love a Military Man," must have brought down the house.

<sup>xxvi</sup> The script for this film is almost identical to another propaganda film, *Calling Australia*, made by the Japanese on Java. It, too, ends with scenes from a POW musical.

*Screw all the cooks and their flaming rice pap,  
When we're going away from it all,  
And there's no guards to screech and to bawl,  
They can stuff their pick axes,  
Right fair up their jacksies!  
So cheer up me lads, screw 'em all!*<sup>76</sup>

Carter claimed that when the song's translation was reported to the Japanese film director, he fainted. Colonel Nagatomo was furious. To prevent any further possible loss of face, he announced that the concert would go on as planned but would not be filmed. It was just as well. Jack Turner, the star of the show, had come down with another bout of malaria and barely managed to get through his performance. He was admitted to the hospital immediately afterward with a temperature of 104 degrees.<sup>77</sup>

The other performers were seemingly not in good shape either: Nagatomo's promise of rice cakes and soft drinks for their participation had led them to wildly inflate their performing capabilities.<sup>78</sup> As a member of the audience, Able-Seaman Arthur Bancroft<sup>xxvii</sup> described the continuing "larrikin" behavior on the part of his Australian mates:

At one period the compère requested everyone to be upstanding whilst the band blared out a song in honour of our honourable hosts. Everyone was upstanding including the Brigadier and other officers. Seeing the Australian officers standing to attention, all the Japanese officers present sprang to attention with all the pomp and splendour of the army to which they belong. The band struck up the tune of "Colonel Bogey" to the accompaniment of hundreds of lusty-voiced prisoners singing well-known words. The ceremony ended up with the entire cast and audience singing "Auld Lang Syne" which is a great favourite with the Japs. Again the words of the song were displaced by more fitting words.<sup>79</sup>

Though none too happy about it, Carter had been ordered by Brigadier Varley to compère the concert. From his perspective, the show had been "an abysmal flop."<sup>80</sup> But were the performers really that bad? Or had the Australians' antics been part of their plan to sabotage the performance as well? Needless to say, Nagatomo was not amused and the entertainers did not receive their promised treats.<sup>81</sup>

Elsewhere in Thanbyuzayat, Wim Kan would not recover sufficiently to perform again until the end of May. When he did, his cabaret included a new type of comic skit: blackouts, which required electrical lighting to be effective.<sup>88</sup> Once the Japanese film crew was off the scene, the POWs commandeered the "magnificent stage."

<sup>xxvii</sup> Bancroft had been on the H.M.A.S. Perth when it was sunk by the Japanese.

## Sergeant Fox Saves the Day

Elsewhere, other celebrations were hastily arranged for the emperor's birthday as well. At Anankwin/045 Kilo, Eric Burgoyne of the British Sumatra Battalion found himself ordered by the Japanese commandant to mount a show in honor of the occasion—the following evening! He panicked. He knew that Major Jacobs, who had arrived with Mobile Force No. 1 five days earlier, was too exhausted to produce a concert,<sup>82</sup> so Burgoyne sent out urgent inquiries requesting anyone in the camp with entertainment experience to come forward. Sergeant Pat Fox, who had previously organized impromptu shows for his army unit prior to captivity, turned up at Burgoyne's office to volunteer for the job. The Japanese had agreed to cooperate fully with the preparations, so while Fox went off to scout out and audition potential performers, Burgoyne had the task of building a makeshift stage.<sup>83</sup>

By the next morning all the performers, props, costuming, and staging materials had been collected. The three volunteer female impersonators—"dubbed the perverts"<sup>84</sup>—had their entire facial and body hair shaved off in readiness for their debut that night: they would wear sarongs and wigs made from flayed and dyed rope. The Japanese had done their part as promised, loaning the POWs rattan screens to be used as front curtains as well as white sheets, hurricane lamps, and a table for a shadow play.

At 7:30, the show opened with a lively sing-along parody of "She'll be Coming Round the Mountain."

*They'll be dropping thousand pounders  
When they come!  
They'll be dropping thousand pounders  
When they come!  
They'll be laying hard-boiled eggs  
Around the yellow bastards' legs.  
'Cos they'll be dropping thousand pounders  
When they come!<sup>85</sup>*

This response to being ordered to perform in honor of the emperor's birthday was risky business. But the Japanese, apparently not understanding the words, clapped to the beat.

The shadow play was an old chestnut of vaudeville theatre: "a medical inspection at which a line of men had the stethoscope applied to most unlikely parts until one was found to need surgery. He was then tapped on the head, carted behind the illuminated bed sheets, put on the operating table and opened up. All kinds of objects including the inevitable string of sausages were seemingly extracted from his stomach."<sup>86</sup>

The hit of the show, especially, it appears, for the Japanese, was the final act, "which featured a lewd portrayal of our three ladies grappling with slipped bosoms and the over-boisterous advances of their lecherous suitors." In closing, everyone sang "Auld Lang Syne," including the Japanese in their own language.<sup>87</sup> The celebration was a success. Sergeant Pat Fox had saved the day.<sup>xxviii</sup>

<sup>xxviii</sup> We will hear more about Sergeant Pat Fox when he is in the convalescent camp at Tamarkan, Thailand, at the beginning of 1944.

### “Speedo” Miseries

**Cholera Outbreak.** In May, Mobile Force No. 1 laid rail from Anankwin/045 Kilo to Taungzun/060 Kilo, a camp recently vacated by the Tamil and Burmese romusha. The camp was so filthy that for the first few weeks the POWs had to eat their meals under mosquito nets to keep the flies away.<sup>89</sup> Seeing the Tamils burying one of the romusha in a shallow grave, Medical Officer Rowley Richards suspected the man had died of cholera, so all the Japanese and POWs were immediately inoculated against this highly contagious and deadly disease. In spite of Richards’ efforts, a few cases of cholera did develop, and those POWs were quickly isolated from the rest of the troops. Several of the men died, but after a few weeks the camp was declared cholera free. Unfortunately, it was just the first local manifestation of a deadly cholera epidemic that was rapidly spreading up and down the railway line.



FIGURE 3.4. BURMA RAILWAY MAP #3. MEILOE—PAYA THANZU TAUNG.

**Forced Marches.** On 13 May, Anderson Force at Meiloe/075 Kilo began a forced march to Aunganaung/105 Kilo high in the Bilauk Taung Mountains. Though Jack Turner remained hospitalized at Thanbyuzayat, he recorded in his diary what he later learned about this journey in a section he titled “Nightmare March”: “After having worked all hours of the day and night for several weeks and working until 2 am in the morning, this march started. Men were in pitiful condition, many suffering with tropical ulcers and Malaria. Only the worst remained at the 75 Kilo camp to follow up by transport when the road was made.”<sup>90</sup>

**Monsoon Rains.** Toward the end of May the monsoon rains arrived in all their fury, and American POW Roy “Max” Offerle at Regue/100 Kilo Camp had his first experience of the weather’s alarming consequences:

Actually, creeks and rivers form, and you can almost watch vegetation grow. The rainy or monsoon season turned everything to soup or mud, and they couldn’t get supplies up there easily. Then the speedup on work came. . . . Well, the men’s health broke down. We started getting lots of malaria, beriberi, dysentery, and tropical ulcers because it seemed that the germ that causes tropical ulcers was more prevalent in the rainy season.<sup>91</sup>

The severity of the monsoon and its consequences did not prevent “the Speedo” from going forward. Instead, the Japanese engineers only intensified their drive to complete the railway on time, and the POWs, many of whom were now reduced to wearing only a G-string “Jap-Happy,” were forced to eat, work, and sleep in the pouring rain.

For Aussie Tom Morris, still at Meiloe, this was his worst time on the railway, as he was seriously ill with dysentery and malaria and the rains never stopped. But he also remembered that the concert party “stalwarts did their best to provide entertainment by way of organized concerts.”<sup>92</sup> To add to their misery, cholera broke out in the appallingly unsanitary conditions at one of the nearby romusha camps.

### **Allied Bombing Attacks**

Back at Thanbyuzayat on 8 June, Bob Skilton was transcribing the noon BBC news broadcast heard on their secret radio when he heard about Allied bombers with longer-range capabilities. When he and Les Bullock performed their latest variety show that afternoon, they included the POW version of “She’ll be Coming Round the Mountain,” emphasizing the refrain, “When they come.” It took a few minutes for the audience to catch on to the significance of the lyrics, wrote Carter, but when they did, they went wild with cheering and whistling.<sup>93</sup>

Four days later, they found out how prophetic those lyrics were. Just after breakfast, the first Allied bombing attack on the camp occurred. Kan was rehearsing with Cor Punt in a jungle clearing as the planes came in low over the camp.<sup>94</sup> Since the Japanese had not allowed the prisoners to mark the camp—not even the hospital—as a POW camp, Thanbyuzayat, sitting out in the open on the plain, was an inviting enemy target. Carter described the devastation that followed:

All mens were so stunned that they wasted valuable seconds in gaping and, just as they flung themselves to the ground, the bombs came tumbling down. The first scored a direct hit on the water tank and it disintegrated, together with the four water carriers. The centre of the parade ground, carpeted with prostrated men, their hands over their heads, suddenly erupted into two enormous craters. Screams of agony came from the [hospital] huts where helpless men, unable to move from the slats, were pierced with bomb splinters.<sup>95</sup>

Thirty-six POWs died in the attack: Kan was horrified to see body parts strewn around. Others were seriously wounded and some would eventually die. Four days later another bombing raid killed an additional thirteen POWs.<sup>96</sup>

Following these two devastating raids, the Japanese set up a temporary base camp at Kandaw/004 Kilo and evacuated the hospital to Retpu/030 Kilo. The secret radio operated by the Thanbyuzayat producer team of Bullock and Skilton was moved to Retpu as well. Everyone, sick or well, was forced to walk to their next camp carrying their own kit. “Those who could not walk, limped,” wrote Carter. “Those who could not even limp were carried by their emaciated mates, step by painful step, to a new ‘hospital’ at Retpu, thirty kilometers up the line.”<sup>97</sup> American Tom “Slug” Wright called it a death march: “From Thanbyuzayat to 8 Kilo Camp [Wagale], it was five miles. When people dropped dead, the Japs just left them there. . . . Some died right away, and some were alive laying there. I hoped that some natives with carts would bring them along. Not so.”<sup>98</sup>

Wim Kan, Norman Carter, and the other POWs staggered into Retpu/030 Kilo on 26 June. With a stopover at Hlepauk/018 Kilo, it had taken them seven days to make the eighteen-and-a-half-mile journey. The new camp was in shambles and had to be rebuilt. Shortly after their arrival, Kan was asked to give his popular theatre anecdotes talk to the Dutch troops to cheer them up after their ordeal. Two days later, his troupe performed their first cabaret at Retpu in celebration of Prince Bernhard's birthday.<sup>xxix99</sup> Skilton and Bullock's concert party activities in Retpu are unknown, but given their track record, it can be fairly certain that they set up shop there as well.

### **“An Incentive to Live”**

During these worst months of “the Speedo,” life for the POWs on the railway, especially in the forward camps, was unbearable. Receiving food and medical supplies from their base camp became impossible as the rains made the dirt access road impassible. Unlike the Thai side of the railway, where the construction followed the Kwai Noi, there was no waterway on the Burma side paralleling the work sites that could function as a conduit for supplies. Men despaired, and many lost the will to live, though medical officers, orderlies, and mates tried mightily to keep them alive. American Roy “Max” Offerle spoke about the challenge:

They tried everything in the world to save them, but some would quit eating and just give up. They would box them and slap their ears, cuss them, threaten them—everything in the world to get them to eat or to make them mad or to give them an incentive to live . . . they had been prisoners for so long, and the weather was so bad, and the conditions were so terrible that some of them just didn't have any will or reason to live. So they just gave up.<sup>100</sup>

Those who remained alive during this time forced themselves—for their own survival—to bury their emotions. “If [a man] wanted to live,” Edward Fong said, “I'd help him in every way I could. But if he gave me the impression or showed me the attitude that he didn't care, I just didn't have enough energy to expend on him.”<sup>101</sup>

### **“What a Fantastic Lot!”**

It was in this context that the few entertainers scattered among the POWs in the construction camps struggled to sustain the men's spirits. Tom Fagan's story demonstrates the importance of their efforts. Fagan, who was at Tanyin/035 Kilo, suffered from a tropical ulcer which had eaten away part of his leg: “I'm homesick, down in the dumps and have a feeling all is not going too well with this bunged-up leg of mine. . . . Can see a bit of flesh, don't know where the sinews or veins are. If I haven't got circulation, how come I'm still alive? Has me beat!”<sup>102</sup>

One night he was carried from his bed space to attend a camp show. Afterward he confided to his diary:

<sup>xxix</sup> *Consort to Juliana, the daughter of Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands, and heir to the throne.*



Last night was a great lift for all of us; the Nips allowed the boys to put on a concert. Hard to believe how sick men can change so rapidly. A bit of a sing-song, some laughter, a joke or two and one's anguish is, for a few minutes, gone. We enjoyed the show even though those who rendered items did so only with a great deal of willpower. They, too, suffered from various ailments and a few propped themselves up on crude bamboo crutches. What a fantastic lot!<sup>103</sup>

### “Rain—Rain—Rain”

June, July, and August were the height of the monsoon season. Kan's diary entry for 6 August reads, “Rain—rain—rain. It made rehearsing impossible.”<sup>104</sup> If this was true in the relative security of the hospital camp at Retpu, it was even truer for would-be entertainers in the forward construction camps. The incessant rain, along with the increased sickness and death produced by the horrendous “Speedo” work schedule, made further attempts at entertainment in these camps practically, if not totally, impossible.

Though the rain poured down, the men of Mobile Force No. 1 had been making progress in laying the tracks. In August, they were in the Apalain/o8o Kilo area, where they worked side by side with romusha. “Apparon was a dismal place,” wrote Jacobs. “We seldom saw the sun, and the gloomy atmosphere of the camp, hemmed in by jungle clad hills, and overhung by heavy thunder clouds, was made worse by the poignant notes of the ‘Last Post,’ which echoed daily from the cemetery over the hill. Every day we buried two or three men, for starvation, exhaustion and disease was taking its toll in increasing measure.”<sup>105</sup>

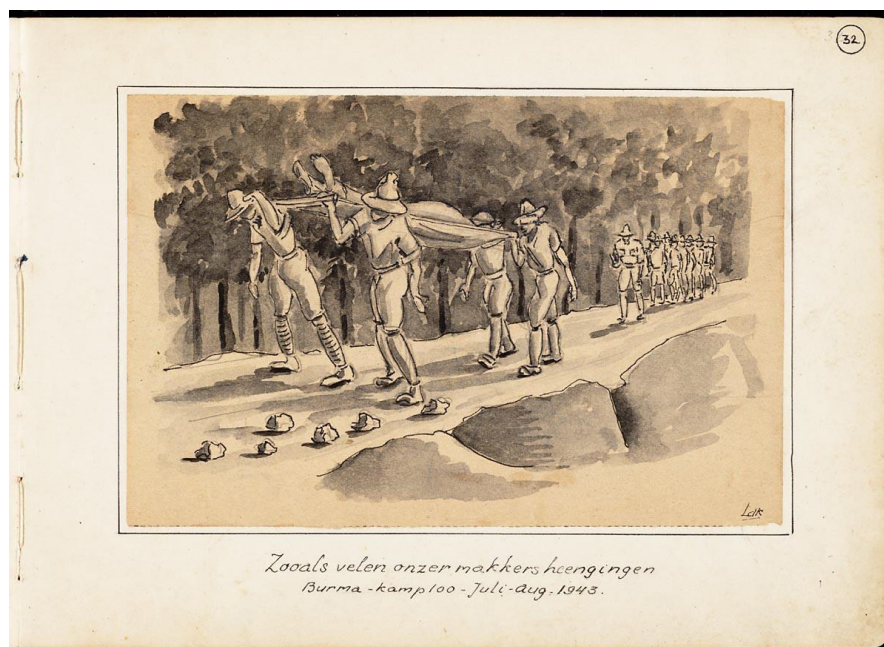


FIGURE 3-5. “ZOOALS VELEN ONZER MAKKERS HEENGINGEN” (BURIAL DETAIL). BURMA CAMP 100 JULY–AUGUST 1943. LODWIKUS D. DE KROON. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

### The Struggle to Keep Going

With heavy losses among their personnel, Black, Green, and Ramsay forces had been combined into one unit and were now high in the mountains separating Burma from Thailand at Aunganaung/105 Kilo. With the new deadline for completion of the railway fast approaching, the Japanese engineers' demand for more and more laborers meant the light sick were now forced to work on the railway as well. To acquire additional workers, all the A Force troops in hospital at Retpu, including the "fit" but banished Norman Carter, were ordered to rejoin their former units now at Aunganaung.<sup>106</sup> Wim Kan and his N.E.I. unit stayed on at Retpu until the end of August.

The forty-seven-mile trek from Retpu/030 Kilo to Aunganaung/105 Kilo was, as it had been for Turner's mates previously, "a killer."<sup>107</sup> Carter was lucky: as an officer, he was able to hitch a lorry ride. Upon arriving in Aunganaung, American Edward Fong thought it "the bottom of the pit . . . it was high in the mountains and definitely cold at night. You were already in a weakened condition. You were still in the monsoon season. Supplies were short."<sup>108</sup> Aunganaung would function as the major field hospital for POWs working further up the line. But even in the "bottom of the pit," all was not lost. The previous inhabitants of Aunganaung had built a small proscenium theatre on the edge of the parade ground—an inviting possibility for camp entertainment.

Once back in camp, Carter was anxious about his reception after the *Radiosities* debacle. His fears were well founded: Colonel Ramsay still considered him in the "dog-box."<sup>109</sup> With the rapid deterioration of his men's health and morale, Ramsay was forced to convince the Japanese commandant that something urgent needed to be done so the prisoners would find the willpower to carry on. Though he knew Carter, a professional producer, was in camp, Ramsay gave the camp barber, Wally McQueen, permission to try his hand at forming a concert party—one that did not include Carter—to put on shows.

### Wally McQueen's Concert Party

Besides Carter's old stalwarts Jim Anderson and Val Ballantyne, Lieutenant Ted Weller, who had a high "silver tenor" voice, was part of a quintet of new singers recruited by McQueen for his concert party. Weller recalled how the Japanese helped facilitate concert party attendance by allowing the POWs "to return from work parties earlier than usual" once a week—on one condition: the shows "would commence with the Japanese tune and finish with the Japanese tune but in between we would fit in our own concert."<sup>110</sup>

Compèred by Anderson, the concerts lasted approximately forty minutes. One unique type of entertainment produced was a "cod-opera"—a ballad-opera—created by stringing together the melodies of well-known popular and classical musical compositions with lyrics taken from another source. There were no sets or costumes; the singers only wore items that suggested their characters. As they stood on the bare stage, the audience was asked to imagine the unseen production elements from their actions and from indications in the sung text.<sup>111</sup>

#### "The Three Little Pigs"<sup>xxx</sup>

One of the cod-operas was built around the nursery rhyme "The Three Little Pigs." "For example," Weller explained, "Number One built his house of straw and he was portrayed as a boozier/playboy. Number Two pig built his house of sticks and he was portrayed as doing dance rehearsals all the time with no responsibilities. Number 3 pig who built his house of bricks was shown as a solid citizen. Mother Pig

<sup>xxx</sup> See "The FEPOW Songbook" for the lyrics of another cod-opera based on "The Three Little Fishies."

told most of the story with each pig singing his part.”<sup>112</sup>

The following excerpts from the cod-opera include notation of the specific tune to which each verse was to be sung:

2. THREE LITTLE PIGS. ENTERING STAGE POSITIONS.

(“Susannah’s a funny old man”)

*Presenting the Heroes in our little play*

*Snort–ay, Blurt–ay, Whistle– id-dil-de-ay*

*For we are the three little pigs*

*Snort–igs, Blurt–igs, Whistle id-dil-de-ings,*

*For we are the three little pigs.*

3. MOTHER PIG. ENTRANCE. (“Sonny Boy”)

*I am their Mother, they have no other,*

*I love my own pigies three.*

4. WOLF. ENTRANCE.

*Oh, I’m the big bad wolf,*

*Yes, I’m the big bad wolf.*

*I want to tell you folks,*

*That I’m the big bad wolf.*

“The ‘Three Little Pigs,’” admitted Weller, “was like Tolstoy’s ‘War & Peace’ and seems to go on forever.”<sup>113</sup> And so it does for twenty-eight more verses! It follows the story of the pigs’ narrow escape from the wolf using tunes such as “Little Brown Jug” and “Teddy Bear’s Picnic,” “Schubert’s Serenade” and the “Anvil Chorus,” among others. To “O My Darling, Clementine,” the Big Bad Wolf drops down the chimney into the boiling pot of turpentine waiting for him at the third little pig’s sturdy brick house, where the other two pigs have fled for protection.

27. PIGS.

*Down the chimney came the wolfie*

*Crying out you’ll soon be mine*

*It was bonza<sup>xxxi</sup> when his bronza<sup>xxxii</sup>*

<sup>xxxi</sup> Australian slang for “great,” “super,” “well-done”—a much-used word in the Aussie vernacular. [Laurie Allison, E-mail, 23 January 2005.]

<sup>xxxii</sup> Australian slang for “rear end,” “ass.”

*Touched that boiling turpentine.*

And as all good nursery rhymes must, the cod-opera, too, ended with a moral sung to the tune of the traditional Maori farewell song, “Now Is the Hour.”

32.

*Now here is the moral to help you on your way:*

*Houses “Jerry” built are flimsy*

*And never, never pay,*

*They never, never stay.<sup>114</sup>*

The emphasis on the phrase “‘Jerry’ built” was not only a covert reference to the railroad, which the POWs tried to sabotage, but a message of hope telling the audience that the Japanese Empire would eventually be defeated.<sup>xxxiii</sup> In fact, the whole cod-opera was to be understood metaphorically.

“It probably seems strange,” wrote Weller, “that men in that age group were so entertained by such child-like stories but it seems the music just took them into another world and away from their miserable day to day existence, because these ‘plays’ were very well received. The singers were class singers with very good voices. Just goes to prove what music will do to help anyone to stay alive.”<sup>115</sup> The performers, he noted, “would use the rest of the week trying to work out what the next concert may be.”<sup>116</sup>

### **“A Little Man in a Homemade Monkey Suit”**

With his professional nose out of joint, Carter refused to attend the shows—for a time. But he didn’t fail to notice that they were extremely popular. After two weeks of sulking in his hut, listening to the howls of laughter coming from the audiences, Carter relented and went along as well. He discovered that the amateur performers put on a very professional show. Their orchestra consisted of three musicians: a guitarist (the leader), an accordionist, and a bass string player who had created a “jungle” bass fiddle out of a bamboo pole stuck in an empty petrol drum and signal wire.

The show opened with two singers, and then on to the stage bounded Wally McQueen, the camp barber, a little man in a homemade monkey suit with the longest tail I’d ever seen on any simian. Completely ignoring the audience and their whistles of delighted applause, he got down to business.

He climbed one of the poles which held up the roof—and everyone roared. He climbed down again, scratched himself and remarked, “There are other ‘monkeys’ in camp beside me,” and all cheered.<sup>xxxiv</sup> He wound up his act by leaping from the stage to sit on Ron Winning’s lap while he hunted for lice in

<sup>xxxiii</sup> It may also have been a reference to the status of the war in Europe, since Jerry was a slang term for Germans.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> A reference to the Japanese, who had been depicted in racist Allied wartime propaganda as monkeys.

the adjutant's head. When he "found" some, he smacked his lips and declared, "Better than rice." Another leap took him back on stage, and holding up his tail with one hand like Felix the Cat, he made his exit to thunderous applause.<sup>117</sup>

For Arthur Bancroft, the entertainments at Aungganaung achieved a high standard of performance comparable to vaudeville shows he'd seen at the Tivoli Theatre in Sydney. And the bevy of buxom female impersonators, he noted, was very much appreciated, especially by the Japanese.<sup>118</sup>

As a professional theatre person, Carter must have been thoroughly rankled to not be involved in these shows. When his boredom became unbearable, he asked Adjutant Ron Winning to find him a job: "Well, there is a job—looking after the cemetery."<sup>119</sup>

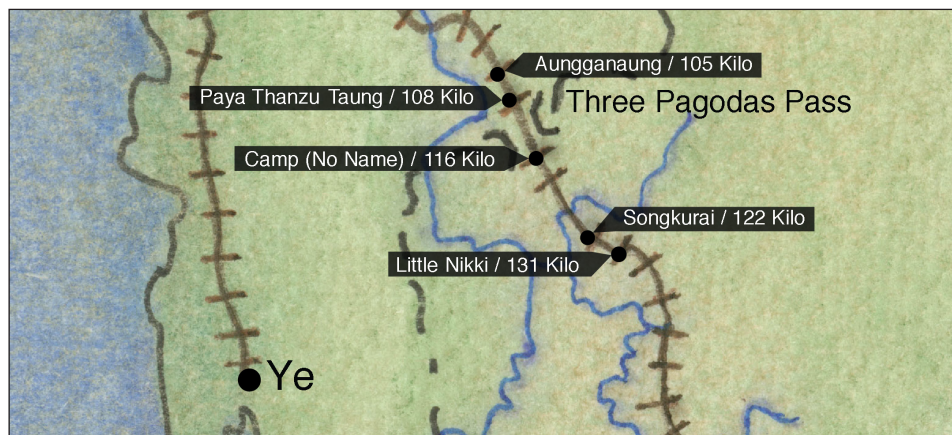


FIGURE 3.6. BURMA RAILWAY MAP #4. AUNGANAUNG—LITTLE NIKKI.

By September, Mobile Force No. 1 had laid the tracks from Kyondaw/095 Kilo to Paya Thanzu Taung/108 Kilo, high in the mountains just north of the Three Pagodas Pass, and was now across the border in Thailand at a staging camp at 116 Kilo.<sup>xxxv</sup> When Jacobs saw the conditions in his new camp, he was horrified: "There was mud everywhere. A creek was running through the cookhouse, the latrines were overflowing with excrement and maggots. . . . The congestion was terrible, for the men had less than eighteen inches of floor space each, and in this tiny area they had to eat, sleep and stow their gear."<sup>120</sup>

### "Their Last Toehold on Sanity"

Railway construction was moving forward at a furious pace to meet its October deadline, and POWs in the forward camps, working under the most appalling conditions, were dying at an alarming rate. With many of the heavy sick being sent back to the hospital at Aungganaung, the huts there became so overcrowded that the Japanese contemplated calling a halt to all concerts until more accommodations could be built. Carter, for one, thought the idea of stopping the concerts idiotic. He was very aware of their therapeutic value: "For many prisoners, the concerts represented their last toehold on sanity. Cut them and up would go the sick rate."<sup>121</sup> Nevertheless, all further concerts were canceled and, as Carter had predicted, the sick rate increased.

<sup>xxxv</sup> These kilo designations are still given from the base camp at Thanbyuzayat. This camp does not have a name.

## Fatalities

One man brought in by truck from up the line staggered into Carter's hut and sat down on his sleeping platform: "My visitor was in a shocking state," he wrote. "What had once been a head was now a bloated bladder with a few stringy hairs plastered on top. His body was almost fleshless and a grimy G-string hung precariously on protruding hips." It was Tommy Mann—the POW with the terrible singing voice whom Carter had not allowed to perform back in Bicycle Camp. Mann had seen the theatre as the lorry drove into camp and sought Carter out to ask him to fulfill the promise he had made back then: that at some future point Carter would let him perform in a concert party. That promise, he said, had kept him alive. Offering him additional hope to hang on, Carter lied again and promised Mann that he would definitely perform in the next show. Mann thanked him and started to leave, but as he inched off the bamboo bed slats, he suddenly fell over dead.

And Carter's response, like that of others faced with so much sickness and death, was to retreat into his shell: "Death was just around the corner for all of us at Anungaung [*sic*] and every man was far too intent on coming through alive to worry overmuch about those who did not. So life went on."<sup>122</sup> Ironically, it was just this sort of emotional flattening that the concert parties he championed were trying to combat.

But Tommy Mann was not the last of his old Bicycle Camp mates that Carter saw at Aungganauung. On another day when yet another truckload of sick men was brought into camp, Carter learned that among them was his close friend and performer Doc Clarke, the man who had sung "Rice Belly Nellie" in *Tit Bits* and been cast as one of the ugly sisters in his aborted panto *Cinderella* back on Java. When Carter located him, Clarke had been placed in the triage hut. He died later that day.<sup>123</sup>

### "There Will Be a New Society"

"The Speedo" had long since passed by the POWs in the hospital camp back in Retpu. Though he was running a fever and had pains all over his body, Wim Kan continued to perform in the dysentery huts as well as for the whole camp.<sup>124</sup> Because of their isolation from the ongoing construction, the POWs in Retpu had time to focus on their recovery and other matters. Some of these other matters were political. Communist sympathizers in the camp were advancing the proposition that since they were all—officers and men alike—in the same boat, they were modeling a future classless society. Kan saw the sympathizers' actual conduct that belied these assertions—conduct he felt needed to be exposed. In his 4 September cabaret, Kan performed his new cautionary song, *Dat wordt de nieuwe Maaatschappij* ("There Will Be a New Society"). (Only the first two verses and the final refrain are given here.<sup>xxxvi</sup>)<sup>125</sup>

1.

*Friend Frits of Retpu 1, who thought a lot of himself,*

*Founded the New Society from his *tampatje**<sup>xxxvii</sup>

*His neighbor on the right participated for a while, but then dropped out*

*Because he cared more about playing bridge than about a new world.*

*His neighbor on the left said: "I feel social, so I'll participate,"*

<sup>xxxvi</sup> See "The FEPOW Songbook" for the full text.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Sleeping space on the bamboo platform.

*And stole sugar from the Premier's pan on the sly.<sup>xxxviii</sup>  
 There were some ministers and everything went well:  
 For half the day the New Front lay rotting in its nest.*

2.

*Promptly at 10 o'clock one will build the Society,  
 Except yesterday, because the Premier was searching for salt.  
 (He knew a little source: it was costing him almost a riks.<sup>xxxix</sup>  
 He got half a barrel—his ministers did not get anything.)  
 He pushed two skinny guys aside near the pan with "kra"<sup>xl</sup>  
 And was caught in line getting two helpings of sambal,<sup>xli</sup>  
 And going home with his pan like a traitor.  
 He called to "a fellow idealist" that there would be a meeting after lunch.*

*Refrain:*

*There will be the New Society.  
 There the farmers wait in the queue for food.  
 But he who knows better doesn't waste his time there,  
 He goes around to the back door to get beefsteak.  
 There in the New Society,  
 The sun shines with justice, warmth and happiness.  
 The biggest loudmouth sits on the best spot.  
 We are all equal, but he is more equal than you.<sup>126</sup>*

Kan's astute observation about the politics of what was really taking place in his camp was the same one George Orwell would make about the outcome of the Russian Revolution in his 1945 allegorical novel, *Animal Farm*: "ALL ANIMALS ARE EQUAL BUT SOME ANIMALS ARE MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS."<sup>127</sup>

The cabaret closed, as it usually did, with everyone singing the national anthem, but this time it got them into trouble. They were all sent to the Japanese commandant's office for a reprimand. No one had bothered to tell them that singing national anthems was now forbidden.<sup>128</sup>

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Sugar was given by the Japanese to the POWs for services rendered, which could be interpreted to mean that the POW had gone "Jap-Happy."

<sup>xxxix</sup> Dutch slang for 2½ guilders.

<sup>xl</sup> Unknown word for some sort of food.

<sup>xli</sup> Indonesian finger food made with chili paste.

### “Their Relentless Drive”

In late September, Mobile Force No. 1 left 116 Kilo for 122 Kilo Camp in the Songkurai area of Thailand and, Jacobs happily exclaimed, “for once the sun was shining.” The monsoon was finally drawing to a close. The new camp was “divided into two portions, one of which was occupied by the men of ‘F’ and ‘H’ Forces, and the other by ourselves,” wrote Jacobs. “A bamboo fence separated us, and communication between the two groups was forbidden.”<sup>129</sup> The Japanese did not want word to get out about how these POWs had been grossly abused. Mobile Force stayed at 122 Kilo a week and was then moved to Little Nikki/131 Kilo.<sup>130</sup>

There, Jacobs was amazed once again by the “indomitable spirit” his men still exhibited despite their illnesses and long working hours: “Men were dying at the rate of six or seven a week, rations were getting worse, but the Japanese continued their relentless drive to get the railway finished before the end of October.”<sup>131</sup> Little Nikki/131 Kilo would be the POWs final rail-laying camp.

By 1 October, Colonel Nagatomo had moved his headquarters to Mezali/070 Kilo so that he could oversee the final stage of the railway construction. In order to provide more workers for the final push, six days later Wim Kan and the sick N.E.I. POWs were evacuated from Retpu and transported by rail up the line to Paya Thanzu Taung/108 Kilo. He found it unnerving traveling over the railway the POWs had built, the rails flexing up and down uncertainly (a fact he had satirized in the song “Visit to Burma in 1950”). By the second day in their new camp, his cabaret troupe had performed for more than a thousand men on an open-air stage. Afterward, in appreciation, the players received a pan filled with sugar from the Japanese. Kan’s wry response: “Very nice.”<sup>132</sup>

But Kan’s health was still not good. During a cabaret on 16 October, he became dizzy and had trouble concentrating, making many mistakes. And this time the Japanese thought the songs he had sung were about them, so they confiscated his songbook. Once they translated his lyrics, they believed his satire was aimed not at them but at the foibles of his own society, whether back home or in the camp. Like the Nazi authorities in occupied France who would approve Jean Anouilh’s version of Sophocles’ Greek tragedy *Antigone* for performance in 1944,<sup>xiii</sup> they had not been able to penetrate the ambiguities of what Kan had written to understand his subtext. They returned his songbook and told him to carry on.<sup>133</sup>

The next day, near Konkoita in Thailand, the railway tracks from Burma joined those from Thailand. There was still work to be done ballasting the track, cutting and stacking wood, and establishing water points for the steam engines before the job was actually completed, but major construction on the Thailand-Burma railway was finished—the terrible “Speedo” was over.

The POWs now faced the next stage of their captivity.

<sup>xiii</sup> Anouilh’s *Antigone* is a call for continued resistance no matter the cost. The Nazis thought the play supported King Creon’s arguments for collaboration.



## Endnotes

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- 2 Jacobs, 28–29.
- 3 Morris, “Memories of Concert and Entertainments,” 1.
- 4 Turner, IWM, 8.
- 5 Jacobs, 22–23, 31.
- 6 Jacobs, 44.
- 7 Whitecross, 39.
- 8 Whitecross, 39.
- 9 Turner, IWM, 8.
- 10 Richards, *Survival Factor*, 93.
- 11 Jacobs, 57.
- 12 La Forte and Marcello, 154.
- 13 La Forte and Marcello, 154.
- 14 Interview with Wright in LaForte and Marcello, 187.
- 15 Book jacket, *G-String Jesters*.
- 16 Carter, 3–5 passim.
- 17 Carter, 88.
- 18 Carter, 91.
- 19 Kan, Diary, 7 November 1942.
- 20 Carter, 94.
- 21 Carter, 95.
- 22 Carter, 19.
- 23 Carter, 19.
- 24 Carter, 101–102.
- 25 Carter, 101–102.
- 26 Carter, 3.
- 27 Carter, 103.
- 28 Carter, 104.
- 29 Carter, 104–105.
- 30 Carter, 105.
- 31 Carter, 106.
- 32 Carter, 108.
- 33 Hall, quoting Williams, 82–83.
- 34 Morris, “Memories,” 1.
- 35 Rivett, 209.
- 36 Marshall, Letter, 16 April 2000.
- 37 Kan, Diary, 3–8 December 1942.
- 38 Bancroft, 64.
- 39 Jacobs, 64.
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- 41 Allison, E-mail, 27, 28 September 2004.
- 42 Jacobs, 64.
- 43 Tom Morris, Interview, 5.
- 44 Rivett, 209.
- 45 Carter, 108–110 passim.
- 46 Kan, Diary, 24 December 1942.
- 47 Kan, Diary, 19 December 1942.
- 48 Kan, Diary, 1 January 1943.
- 49 Hall, 88.

- 50 Jacobs, 65.  
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52 Hall, 133.  
53 Kan, Diary, 4, 13 January 1943.  
54 Kan, Diary, 16 January 1943.  
55 Kan, Diary, 22 January 1943.  
56 Kan, Diary, 31 January 1943.  
57 Kan, Diary, 18 February 1943.  
58 Kan, Diary, 21 February 1943.  
59 Kan, Diary, 28 February 1943.  
60 Kan, Diary, 19 March 1943.  
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65 Carter, 112–113.  
66 Carter, 110–114 passim.  
67 Kan, Diary, 31 March 1943.  
68 Jacobs, 68–70 passim.  
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70 Carter, 115.  
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76 Carter, 124.  
77 Turner, IWM.  
78 Carter, 122–125.  
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83 Burgoyne, 201.  
84 Burgoyne, 202.  
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86 Burgoyne, 202–203.  
87 Burgoyne, 203.  
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98 Interview with Wright in LaForte and Marcello, 195.  
99 Kan, Diary, 30 June 1943.  
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- 101 Interview with Fong in LaForte and Marcello, 133.  
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103 From the diary of Thomas Fagan in Hall, 234.  
104 Kan, Diary, 6 August 1943.  
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110 Weller, “Basic History,” 1.  
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127 Orwell, 123.  
128 Kan, Diary, 4 September 1943.  
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131 Jacobs, 94.  
132 Kan, Diary, 7 October 1943.  
133 Kan, Diary, 17 October 1943.