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## Chapter 5. "The Tamarkan Players Present ": Tamarkan Convalescent Camp

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## Chapter 5: “The Tamarkan Players Present”

### Tamarkan Convalescent Camp

It was early December 1943 when Brigadier General Arthur Varley and the first remnants of A Force from Burma arrived at their designated convalescent camp in Tamarkan, Thailand, after a long journey by rail. As their train traversed the wooden bridges and viaducts built by their counterparts, they passed the construction camps where the POWs in Thailand anxiously awaited their own redeployment back to base camps. When they entered Tamarkan, they found a well-ordered camp with a lean-to theatre left by the previous occupants.

#### Backstory: October 1942–November 1943

Tamarkan was “the bridge camp”—the one made famous by David Lean’s film *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, based on the novel by Pierre Boulle.<sup>i</sup> There were, in fact, two bridges built at Tamarkan: first a wooden one for pedestrian and motor vehicle traffic that served as a temporary railway trace until the permanent concrete and steel railway bridge could be completed just upriver of it. These bridges crossed the River Kwai only in Boulle’s imagination. The river they actually crossed was the Mae Khlong.

Tamarkan camp was established early in October 1942 by British POWs under the command of Philip Toosey, a British lieutenant-colonel in the Territorial Army. Immediately upon arrival, Toosey was ordered to have his troops start construction of two bridges over the Mae Khlong. Knowing that to resist would be futile if not fatal for his men, he obeyed.

With the POWs’ time and energy focused on bridge construction, only a few impromptu entertainments were performed in Tamarkan during late 1942 and early 1943. In February 1943, a thousand Netherlands East Indies POWs arrived to supplement the British labor force, and the wooden bridge was completed later that month. One of their number was Frank Samethini, brother of the accordionist, Han, who was working elsewhere on the railway.

As the steel bridge neared completion under the newly imposed “Speedo” regimen, Toosey reported that “the majority of the fit men were moved further up the line for more work.”<sup>1</sup> Tamarkan was then converted into a hospital camp, where heavy sick from up country work sites could receive better medical care, be rehabilitated, and then be sent back up the line to work. The first of these seriously ill POWs to arrive in Tamarkan were not Toosey’s own troops but from Groups II and IV who were kept overnight and then passed on to their base hospital camp at Chungkai across the river. Jack Chalker was one of the heavy sick in these groups.

#### The Singapore Entertainers

Also in one of these early groups were Captain “Fizzer” Pearson and his “handful of cockney jokers”: Bobby Spong, Sam Drayton, Eric Griffiths-Jones, and other former members of “The Mumming Bees” concert party last seen in Kanyu in late February. Chaim Nussbaum, an American army chaplain in Tamarkan, noted that the entertainers’ arrival caused considerable excitement:

<sup>i</sup> For more about the relationships between the book, the film, and the reality, see Julie Summers’ *The Colonel of Tamarkan* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2005).

The Singapore camp theatre, comprised of a group of POWs who have been kept together (by the British camp office), is here and is being revived by great demand, because there are so many men with nothing to do while they wait for the inevitable call to join the slave gangs on the Japanese rail-building and bridge-building crews.<sup>2</sup>

As members of Group IV, “Fizzer” Pearson and his troupe should have been sent on to Chungkai, but with the sudden influx of desperately sick men from up country, Chungkai had become vastly overcrowded and could take no more POWs until additional huts had been built for their accommodation. The “Singapore entertainers,” therefore, had to remain at Tamarkan.

In answer to the urgent need to provide some sort of entertainment for the bored and apathetic prisoners, a lean-to theatre was built, though the “Singapore entertainers” were only allowed to perform once a fortnight.

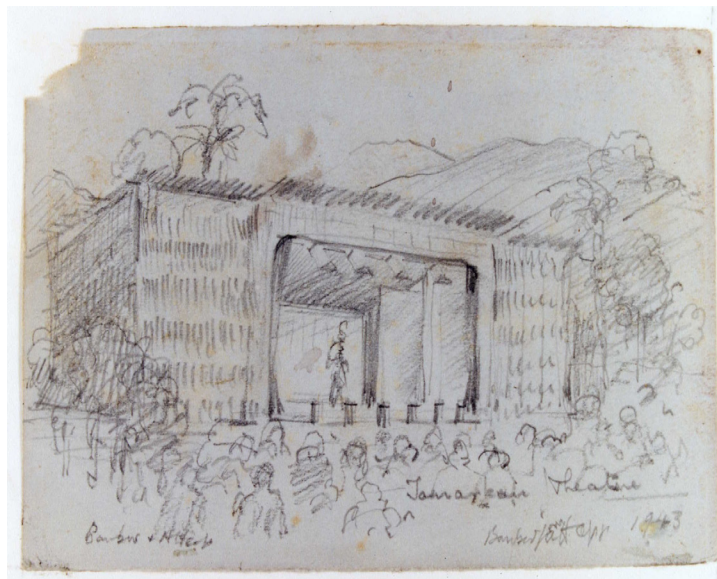


FIGURE 5.1. “TAMARKAN THEATRE 1943.” JACK CHALKER. COURTESY OF JACK CHALKER.

Jack Chalker, who revisited Tamarkan from Chungkai sometime in the late autumn of 1943, drew a sketch of the theatre. It shows a fairly large, sophisticated structure made of bamboo and atap thatching with a raised stage, a proscenium arch, and a slanted shed-like roof. The interior of the stagehouse had fixed wings, front draw curtains (shown pulled to the side), stage lighting, and off-stage spaces. A performer stands on stage, giving us a better understanding of the theatre’s size.<sup>ii</sup>

Frank Samethini described a typical show put on by the “Singapore entertainers”:

As always, tonight’s show will feature the “Incomparable Bobby.” . . . In most

<sup>ii</sup> Since Australian Major Jim Jacobs, entertainment officer for the Australians who took over the camp in 1944, stated that they were responsible for devising the lighting for this “cowshed” theatre, it is very possible that Chalker’s sketch should really be dated 1944 instead of 1943. This would be more consistent with his misdating of his Chungkai theatre sketches.

cases the script requires a young frivolous wench caught in a web of naughty innuendo or straight out dirty jokes applauded by a roaring audience.

We are seated on jute-bags in front of the stage. The curtains are closed. The show is about to start. The band is playing “Stardust”. . . . The curtain goes up.<sup>iii</sup> Bobbie [*sic*] appears swaying his hips amidst catcalls. . . . Afterwards we all silently retire, full of renewed solidarity and nostalgia.<sup>iv3</sup>

Spong also thought it his duty to perform in the hospital wards for those who could not attend the theatre. From the many references to “Bobby” in the POW diaries and memoirs, it is clear the majority of the men adored him and the “glamour” he was willing to contribute to their otherwise miserably dull lives (see more about Bobby Spong in Chapter 14: “Somebody Had to Put a Skirt On”).

Nussbaum talked to the performers after a show:

“We have performed too many eulogies since the war started,” one of the young actors told me.

Still, the troupe is full of enthusiasm and they say they are relieved to play for an audience that remembers how and when to laugh.<sup>4</sup>

This last observation reveals the terrible state of the POWs’ mental abilities and morale in the up country work camps during “the Speedo.”

## Toosey’s Troops Return

By May, the steel bridge had been completed and was taking rail traffic. Now that the I. J. A. and their POW workers at Tamarkan were “relieved from the unbearable pressure” of their “Speedo” deadlines, the attitude and behavior of the Japanese toward the POWs changed from one of harsh discipline to one of near amiability.<sup>5</sup> “Concerts took place once a week,” John Cosford observed, noting the change. “After the hopeless, dispiriting experience of disease and death, the comparative cheerfulness was a great tonic to us.”<sup>6</sup>

When the desperately ill among Toosey’s own troops—those sent up the line on work crews earlier—began arriving back at Tamarkan. He was shocked by their condition:

As a typical example I can remember one man who was so thin that he could be lifted easily in one arm. His hair was growing down his back and was full of maggots; his clothing consisted of a ragged pair of shorts soaked with dysentery excreta; he was lousy and covered with flies all the time. He was so weak that he was unable to lift his hand to brush away the flies which were clustered on his eyes, and on the sore places of his body.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>iii</sup> *Figuratively speaking; in actuality, pulled aside.*

<sup>iv</sup> *Original source has been reordered for clarity.*

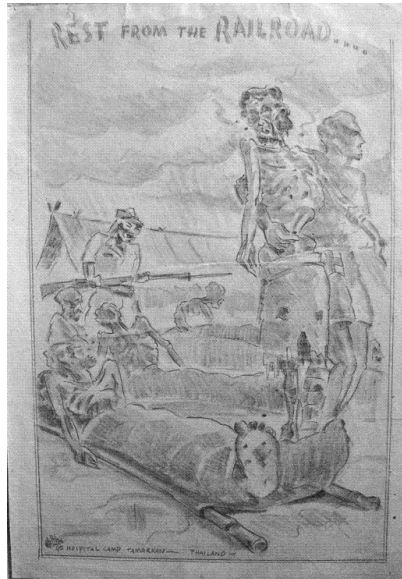


FIGURE 5.2. “REST FROM THE RAILROAD . . .” JAN VAN HOLTHE. COURTESY OF NORMAN PRITCHARD.

Jan van Holthe, the young Dutch artist seen at Rin Tin, was among those returned to Tamarkan at this time. His pencil sketch, “Rest from the Railroad . . .,” drawn at Tamarkan, confirms the horrors of the scene Toosey so vividly describes.

### *Journey’s End*

On 27 July, “Fizzer” Pearson’s company mounted a production of R. C. Sherriff’s First World War drama *Journey’s End*. Nussbaum was impressed with the relevance of its “message” for the POWs at Tamarkan:

Tonight, they performed *Journey’s End*, a saddening play about a young officer during World War I who arrives as a novice on the front in France. Enthusiastically, he pioneers a new bond of equality between officers and privates, and he dies in a mood of melancholy in the evening of that very first day in the command bunker.

The audience is grateful and deeply touched, apparently identifying with this soldier’s story.<sup>8</sup>

To produce *Journey’s End* in this setting was an extraordinary gamble. It is a serious play about soldiers obeying orders to defend the British lines against a major attack by German forces; the soldiers know full well it will bring about their deaths. With its tragic ending, it was not the usual fare for recovering POWs, who, it was thought, needed songs and laughter. Perhaps the rationale for its production was its political importance more than its entertainment value.

One of Colonel Toosey’s goals as POW commandant at Tamarkan was to foster an atmosphere

of “equality” between the officers and other ranks in his camp. To encourage this camaraderie, he refused to allow a separate officers’ mess and had all men eat together—a move not appreciated by officers in the regular army.<sup>9</sup> That Nussbaum understood the theme of *Journey’s End* as pioneering “a new bond of equality between the officers and privates” is an interpretation that fits well with Toosey’s scheme. And Nussbaum’s claim that the audience identified with the young soldier and found the play deeply moving is also telling. Only a year and a half earlier, these men had, like the soldiers in the play, been ordered into the losing battles for Malaya and Singapore and witnessed the death of many of their comrades.<sup>v</sup>

In late November, Toosey received orders to evacuate Tamarkan so it could be converted into a convalescent camp for A Force POWs arriving from Burma. Toosey’s heavy sick were sent to the hospital at Chungkai, and he, together with his light sick and fit troops, was relocated to the supply depot and maintenance facility at Nong Pladuk, where he would take over command. During these relocations, the “Singapore entertainers” returned to their base camp at Chungkai. There they would rejoin others from the original Mumming Bees troupe.<sup>10</sup>

By the end of November/early December, Tamarkan awaited its new arrivals.

### The Australians Take Charge

Responsibility for providing some sort of Christmas entertainment for the few remaining British and N.E.I. troops and the newly arrived A Force POWs now fell to the Australian entertainers. As the secret radio operators and concert party producers Les Bullock and Bob Skilton were part of Brigadier General Varley’s headquarters contingent, it is very likely these two arranged to put on the pantomime *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in their inherited lean-to theatre. Like *So Tite and the Little Twerps*—the parody of *Snow White* performed, coincidentally, across the river at Chungkai for their Christmas—the Tamarkan production was filled, no doubt, with covert allusions to their enslavement by “the dwarfs,” a frequent derisive comment made by the taller Australians on the smaller stature of their captors.

### The Burma Entertainers

On New Year’s Day 1944, there were further arrivals of POWs from Burma: members of Ramsay Force, including Norman Carter and the entertainers who had formed part of his concert parties in Burma. Their leader, Lieutenant-Colonel George Ramsay, was designated by General Varley as the officer in charge of the camp.

On 13 January, Major Jim Jacobs arrived in Tamarkan with Anderson Force. The following day, Colonel Ramsay sent for him. “He wanted me to take charge of entertainment for the troops, and to get a concert party under way,” explained Jacobs. “There were nearly three thousand British and Australian and some American troops in camp, and this provided a good field for talent, although at least 25 to 30 per cent of the men were sick in hospital.”<sup>11</sup>

Jacobs *would* find a “good field” of talent from which to produce his shows. It would include Jim Anderson, Val Ballantyne, Les Bullock, Norman Carter, Pat Fox, Sid “Happy” Marshall, Wally McQueen, “Poodles” Norley, Bob Skilton, Jack Turner, Ted Weller, set designer/scenic artist Frank Brydges, costumer Frank Purtell, and Norman Whittaker with his brass band—and Tony Gerrish with his dance band. Other

<sup>v</sup> The context in which a play is produced can change everything in terms of an audience’s reception. When *Journey’s End* was performed back in Changi POW Camp by the 18th Divisional Headquarters Players on the first anniversary of their captivity, it had received mixed reviews: their British audience had been moved by it, but their Australian audience—still smarting with deep resentment from their defeat and surrender caused, they believed, by the incompetence of the British military leaders—totally rejected its “message” of solidarity among the ranks and cheered, instead, the appearance of the captured German soldier (D. Smith, 62).



talented POW entertainers would also be found.

This is the first word we have of Tony Gerrish and his dance band, but they may have been the band mentioned by Frank Samethini performing for the “Singapore entertainers,” or, perhaps, they were the musical ensemble that played for Skilton and Bullock’s shows at Thanbyuzayat. Gerrish was an Englishman, and two members of his band were Americans, sailors in the U.S. Navy who were rescued when their ship, the U.S.S. *Houston*, was torpedoed and sunk. Navy bandmaster G. L. Galyean played the flugelhorn; Petty Officer 3rd Class Wilbur G. Smith played the bass viol, albeit a “jungle style” version made out of a wooden box with a bamboo upright and a single piece of signal wire as a “string.” It could only be plucked, not bowed.

With this collection of producers and performers together in the same camp, extraordinary things were about to take place in the entertainment world at Tamarkan.

### **Carter Tests the Waters**

Jacobs first produced a series of variety shows. When Norman Carter saw them in what he called the “lean-to shack” of a theatre, he thought they were quite poor, evidenced by the fact that they were not drawing audiences. He thought Jacobs an excellent performer but not a skilled producer. From his experience up country, Carter knew that what the POWs badly needed was a different type of entertainment—one with characters and storylines. And they also needed to be excited by the “wow” factor that sets, costumes, makeup, props, and lights could provide.

Carter knew he could offer this type of entertainment and that his recent production of *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* at Aungganaung for Christmas would be just the ticket. With the cast and production staff of that pantomime now in Tamarkan, it would be easy to remount.

Approaching another producer, who could claim “squatters’ rights” on the camp theatre, about the possibility of sharing the venue, was, as Carter well knew, a tricky business (he had resented just such an intrusion in Bicycle Camp, Java, when the American POWs Hank Bretano and “Tex” McFarland had muscled in on his theatrical turf). Trying to find a way to broach the subject without raising anyone’s artistic hackles, Carter introduced himself to Jacobs after the next variety show and mentioned the success of his productions in Bicycle Camp and Aungganaung. But Jacobs knew he wasn’t a skilled producer and surprised Carter with his delight in finding a professional in the camp who could take over that role.

*Ali Baba*—Carter’s first show in Tamarkan—appeared on the lean-to stage at the end of February. Its production was not without complications: “Our comedian, Private Wally MacQueen [*sic*] of the 2/29th Battalion,” Jacobs recalled, “went down with an attack of malaria on the eve of the show, and the versatile Norman stepped in at the last moment and took the comedy part.” As at Aungganaung, Bob Clare and Ron Wells were a great success as the donkey.<sup>12</sup>

Once he saw Carter’s production, Jacobs realized he had a talented producer-director on his hands, one who could develop marvelous shows for the camp if given the opportunity and support. He volunteered to get permission from Colonel Ramsay to “pull this cowshed down and build a proper theatre” so Carter could produce revues and musicals for the troops. Carter suggested they should open the new theatre “with a real smasher . . . *The Wizard of Oz!*”<sup>13</sup>

### **“The Tamarkan Players”**

Colonel Ramsay not only gave Jacobs permission to build a new theatre but nominated the members of a theatre committee to manage it: Jacobs would be officer in charge and general manager,

Norman Carter, producer; Lieutenant John M. Vance, secretary; and Padre Keith Mathieson of the H.M.A.S. *Perth* and Private Val Ballantyne, additional committee members.<sup>vi14</sup> Ramsay also provided support for the concert party by giving them money from the camp fund so they could purchase needed materials.<sup>15</sup> The new concert party was called “The Tamarkan Players.”<sup>16</sup>

With the array of talented actors, singers, and comedians available to him in Tamarkan—and with the support of the theatre committee and his team of designers and technicians—Carter set to work on a series of monthly spectacular and entertaining productions. In many ways, the story of entertainment in Tamarkan during 1944 is the story of Norman Carter and the extraordinary revues and musicals he produced. Besides his skills at directing actor-singers, Carter was also gifted at enlisting the artistic abilities and skills of designers and technicians to realize his production concepts.

### Carter Sets the Standards

Arthur Shakes took responsibility for pulling down “the cowshed” and constructing the new theatre. Carter told him what was needed: “it must have a gabled roof, so that you can see the whole of the back wall, not just a fraction of it. It needs height, so that you can put up a grid from which to hang scenery, and it also needs depth and width, like an old-fashioned barn, some space off-stage for the actors to dress, and a pit for the orchestra.”<sup>17</sup>

Shakes was a little stunned by the size and complexity of the theatre Carter wanted built, but as a can-do person, he immediately organized one group of men to demolish the old theatre and another to go off and cut bamboo and atap to build the new one.<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, Carter worked out a rough script for his *Wizard of Oz* on an old typewriter left behind by Toosey’s troops. He then faced the question of who would play the crucial role of Dorothy. After being turned down by several prospects, he was advised to approach Ted Weller, whose beautiful high “silver tenor” voice “with a strong falsetto range” had been heard in the “cod-operas” at Aunganaung.<sup>19</sup> But Weller was very reluctant to appear as a woman onstage (“What would my mates say?” “If he dressed up like a woman and sang like one, he’d never live it down.”<sup>20</sup>). When Carter warned him that without his participation the show would have to be cancelled, Weller went to his commanding officer for advice and was told that “without his voice” the concert party could not produce the shows the men needed to rebuild their morale. Confronted with that argument, Weller reluctantly agreed.<sup>21</sup>

But being a female impersonator in a camp with thousands of men who were getting more rest and better food was not without its hazards, as we shall see.

### The New Tamarkan Theatre

A week after Carter’s discussion with Shakes about the design of the new theatre, it was finished. It had been built opposite the men’s living quarters, facing the parade ground.

vi This original committee would eventually be supplemented by Private G. H. Trueman as stenographer, Lieutenant Arthur Shakes as stage manager, and scenic artists Spr. Frank Brydges and Private Robert Clare. Although not on the committee, Frank Purtell would be in charge of wardrobe, George Plunket, props, and Les Luff, hand props.



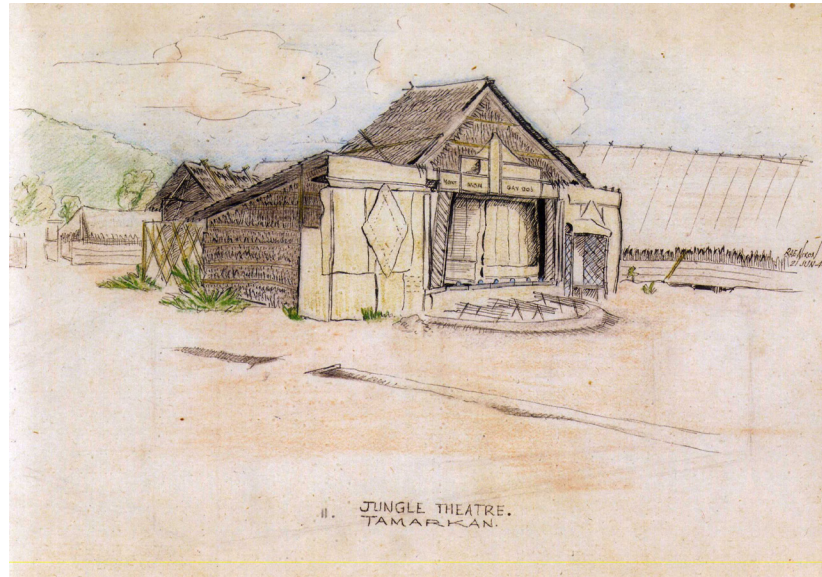


FIGURE 5.3. JUNGLE THEATRE, TAMARKAN.” RAE NIXON. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL. COURTESY OF MRS. RAE NIXON.

Rae Nixon’s sketch of the front of the new Tamarkan theatre shows the high gable-roofed proscenium theatre with wide lean-to extensions on either side of the stagehouse. Rice bags sewn together form the front draw curtains. A row of footlights saved from the previous theatre sits along the front edge of the stage. Over the proscenium opening is an oblong area that would be used as a marquee to announce the present or upcoming show. A shallow semicircular orchestra pit runs the full length of the stage. On the roof audience left is a large flap that could be propped up to allow sunlight to illuminate the upstage areas during matinee and early evening performances. A small gable-roofed shed used for various construction projects is visible behind the theatre.

Although there wasn’t height enough in the flies for the backdrops to be flown in and out from the grid over the stage, they could be rigged as rolled drops operated by pulleys from offstage.<sup>22</sup> While variety and band shows would need only a single backdrop, Carter, with his revues and musicals, would take full advantage of these staging possibilities (further details concerning the Tamarkan theatre and its appointments are found in Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!”).

When Shakes gave him a tour of his new theatre, Carter found it even better than his beloved Bicycle Camp theatre back in Java: “Arthur pointed to the six stout bamboo poles overhead which formed the grid, showed me the wardrobe annexe on the O.P.<sup>vii</sup> side and then led me down three steps at the back of the stage to the artists’ dressing room, with a table and three mirrors.”<sup>23</sup>

<sup>vii</sup> *Opposite Prompt, or stage right.*



FIGURE 5.4. BACKSTAGE IN TAMARKAN THEATRE. SKETCH.  
FLIP RELF. COURTESY OF RHYLL RIVETT.

Dutch artist “Flip” Relf’s sketch of actors getting ready for a performance in the dressing room at the back of the Tamarkan theatre illustrates Carter’s description.<sup>24</sup> In the background are the steps leading from the dressing room directly to the stage.

## Production Challenges

But producing quality theatre at Tamarkan would not be easy. Part of the difficulty was the fact that the Japanese administration would not allow rehearsals. This restriction was manageable if all that was produced were variety shows that only needed someone to devise the lineup on the playbill and a good compère to keep the show going. But for anyone trying to produce revues and musicals with scenes between characters, dances that needed choreography, and multiple set changes—all of which required careful rehearsal and coordination—it was an impossible situation. At first, Carter tried to operate within the rules. “Those involved in performance of the concerts,” Ted Weller recalled, “would learn their own lines without having a rehearsal. Carter was a strict disciplinarian and would give each performer his part and expect him to be ready for the performance on the night.”<sup>25</sup> But for a perfectionist like Carter, this restriction soon became intolerable.

Therefore, a “legitimate” version of “tossing the doctor”—the term used by the POWs for tricking a medical officer into believing you were so ill you couldn’t work—had to be developed to circumvent the restriction. It wasn’t only the actors and musicians who needed rehearsal time; it was also the design and technical staffs. “But with the co-operation of POW medical officers and administration staff,” Rae Nixon explained, “men who did the set construction, scene painting, music writing, costume making and rehearsing were officially classified ‘in hospital’ or in [camp] work parties.”<sup>26</sup> In this way, cast members and key production personnel were “kept hidden from work parties,” which allowed the concert party to

become “much larger and important for moral support which was obvious in the help and health of the men generally.”<sup>27</sup>

But, as Tom Morris admitted, there were times when even this subterfuge didn’t work:

*And you couldn’t always protect those people, you know. If suddenly the Japs wanted a working party, everybody was pulled out on parade and the Korean orderlies [guards] just went around, and, you know, whooshed! And if you happened to be one of the concert party and you couldn’t pull a string, you just went off on a work party somewhere.*<sup>28</sup>

In due time the “no rehearsal” policy eased a bit, and rehearsals were permitted—but only according to a very exact schedule.

Rehearsals were particularly awkward to manage as the Japanese stipulated that only one afternoon a week could be used for rehearsals. On that afternoon the order laid down was half an hour for dialogue, half an hour for singing, followed by the string orchestra, and finally the brass band. The order, and the time set for each section, was rigidly supervised by the Japanese. On no account were two sections allowed to rehearse at the same time. Why? No reason. Just Japanese orders.<sup>29</sup>

Since this rehearsal schedule was also ludicrous, additional rehearsals continued by subterfuge. Major Jacobs’ comment, “My mornings were usually taken up with rehearsals for the weekly concert,” suggests that at some later point the Japanese administration at Tamarkan, as in other POW camps, may have finally been persuaded to allow proper rehearsals and other work on the shows to take place during the day, justified as “light duty” within the camp.<sup>30</sup>

One rehearsal practice remained standard operating procedure at Tamarkan. If a burial party appeared on the horizon, the “[r]ehearsal would stop while the actors stood at attention until they had passed: the padre, followed by the camp trumpeter to blow the Last Post; the corpse wrapped in a threadbare blanket and carried on bamboo poles [stretcher] by two orderlies.” During their first weeks at Tamarkan, there could be four or five of these burials each morning.<sup>31</sup> Such interruptions did not seem to impede Carter’s concentration and abilities to rehearse.

### ***The Wizard of Oz***

Carter’s production of *The Wizard of Oz* opened in mid-March. He had based it on the well-known Hollywood film and included all the songs from the movie. Given the poor quality of previous entertainments, Carter believed his performers might have a hard time generating an audience, but the success of *Ali Baba* and the appearance of a new theatre had created tremendous interest. Come the opening matinee performance, there was a full house and an air of excitement.<sup>32</sup>

From the moment the curtains parted, the audience “roared their approval of everything and

everybody,” wrote Carter.<sup>33</sup> But if Carter was pleased, Major Jacobs was ecstatic:

In Teddy we had a female impersonator second to none. Bobby Clare as the Lion, Dick Moray as the Tin Man and Val Ballantyne in the role of the Straw Man gave splendid performances, but the real hit of the show was Lieut. Les Atyeo of Colac, who scored a personal triumph in a most delightful and whimsical interpretation of the Mayor of Munchkin.<sup>34</sup>

According to Carter, the scenery painted by Frank Brydges and the costumes by Frank Purtell dazzled the audience and stole the show, “especially the Yellow Brick Road—a triumph of shaving-brush artistry—and Wally McQueen’s lovable lion. Those timorous roars, that frightful skin made out of old bags, that spouting mane of shredded rice-sacks! . . . [When] Judy and the Lion made their exit arm in arm with the Lion holding his tufted tail under one paw, it looked as though they’d never stop clapping,” wrote Carter. Everyone agreed that “‘*The Wizard of Oz*’ was wizard!”<sup>35</sup>

After this initial success, persuading audiences to attend shows in Tamarkan was never a problem again. “Everybody who could walk turned up for our productions,” observed Kyle Thompson. “Even the Japanese came, and naturally, they occupied the choice front-row sitting area. There were no chairs, so everybody would sit on the ground during the performances. The Japanese seemed to thoroughly enjoy the shows, although most of them could understand little of the dialogue.”<sup>36</sup>

Nixon thought it was very interesting that the Japanese who “attended the shows said nothing about the obvious preparations, [and] enjoyed themselves.”<sup>37</sup> In his mind, it was impossible for them not to recognize that rehearsals had taken place for such elaborate and complex productions. But their silence gave consent. In their own paradoxical logic, the Japanese allowed the preparations to take place while denying they had given permission for them.

### The “Rimboe Club” Arrives

In early April, a new contingent of N.E.I. POWs arrived in Tamarkan from Kanburi hospital camp a few miles down the road. In this group was a Dutch/Indonesian cabaret troupe, known as the “Rimboe Club,” who had performed in Regue/100 Kilo, Burma, and more recently in Kanburi. Led by the Dutch adjutant van Dorst, it contained several comedians, singers, and musical groups. In contrast to a like situation at Chungkai that turned into a full-blown contretemps when a Dutch/Indonesian troupe sought permission to perform, the newcomers at Tamarkan were invited to present their shows under the Tamarkan Players banner. The soldier who had danced the Hawaiian hula as “Miss Waikiki” in Regue would become famous in Tamarkan as “Sambal Sue”—a nickname given “her” by the Australians and Americans after the spicy-hot Indonesian finger food available in the camp.

Also in the group was J. G. Julsing, who kept a list of the dates and titles of all the theatrical and musical productions he saw as a POW. This important document gives us a more thorough understanding of the range of entertainment produced by the Tamarkan Players than is available in either Jacobs’ or Carter’s accounts.

Julsing’s list makes clear that besides Norman Carter, at least four different organizations were producing shows in Tamarkan: there were Skilton and Bullock’s variety shows, Norman Whittaker’s brass band concerts, Tony Gerrish’s dance band shows, and the van Dorst cabaret troupe—all performing what



Carter termed “a mixed grill of farce, comedies, and musicals.”<sup>38</sup> Since shows were allowed to be only forty-five minutes to an hour and a half in length, major musicals like *The Wizard of Oz* had to be done in highly “potted” (condensed) versions.<sup>39</sup> In contrast to the other Tamarkan productions, Carter’s shows were privileged with a two-week run.

Following standard military practice, members of the different concert parties also performed in the hospital wards. “It cannot be stressed too much,” Ted Weller wrote, “just how much of a morale booster it was to the men.”<sup>40</sup> As a patient in one of these wards, American Benjamin Dunn remembered just such a visitation: “POW’s were usually starved for music just as they were for food and other entertainment.”<sup>41</sup>

But with an increase in the number of productions, much more was expected from the design and construction staff. As Carter explained, “To cope with increased demands on the wardrobe department, we now had a costume designer. This was Lieutenant Rae Nixon, a brilliant young cartoonist with a flair for show business.”<sup>42</sup> Frank Purtell, who had been trying to function as both designer and costumer, continued to serve in the latter role.

### Rae Nixon’s Sketchbook

One of the most remarkable artifacts to survive the ravages of the Thailand-Burma railway is Rae Nixon’s sketchbook, “Jungle Theatre Tamarkan . . . a ‘look-see’ around the wardrobe . . .” produced between April and July 1944.<sup>43</sup> Illustrated in full color are costume renderings for three of Carter’s major productions: *When Knights Were Bold*, *Memories of the Gay 90s*, and *Dingbats Abroad*. It also contains color sketches of the Tamarkan theatre, illustrations for wigs and accessories, and one sketch each of Norman Whittaker’s brass band and Tony Gerrish’s dance band.

With the strict prohibition on any artifacts that might document the POWs’ treatment, Nixon’s sketches were disguised by their use as the 8th Division Signals’ Nominal Rolls, which contained the POW death records and location of individual burial sites. These were paper records the POWs were allowed to have in their possession. Nixon explained, “deaths were recorded in the same book as the sketches to divert Japs’ attention if they found [the] book.”<sup>44</sup>

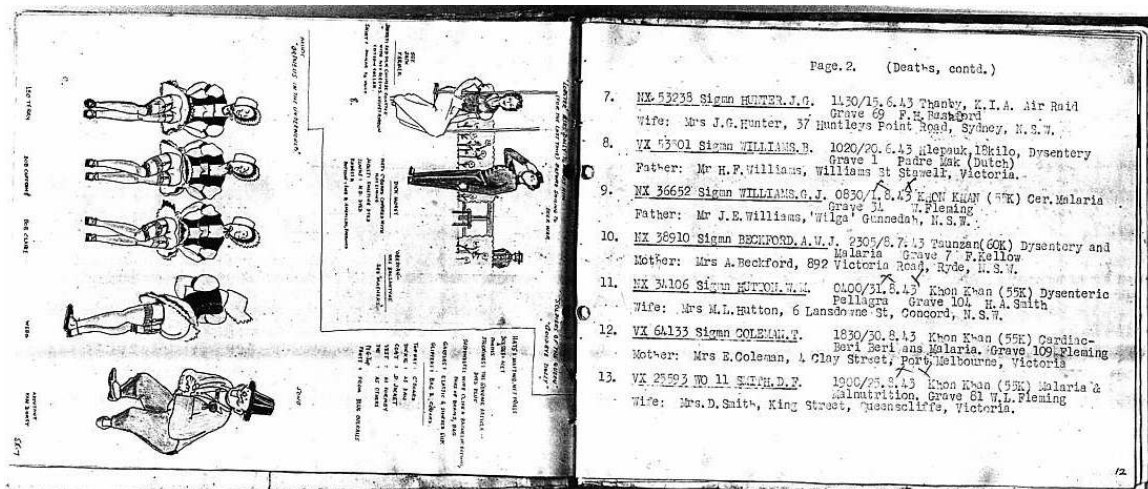


FIGURE 5.5. THE NOMINAL ROLLS AND RAE NIXON'S SKETCHBOOK. RAE NIXON. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL. COURTESY OF MRS. RAE NIXON.

Nixon’s sketchbook thus presents an astonishing juxtaposition of life and death: the costume

renderings in color in apposition to the death and burial records in black and white. While in Tamarkan, he kept his sketchbook hidden under blankets or on his body concealed in his clothing.<sup>45</sup>

But Nixon did more than draw designs for costumes in his sketchbook. He also added invaluable information about how the materials for them could be provided from borrowed clothing or scrounged or purchased items. And, in addition, he drew thumbnail sketches of some of the settings as context for the individual characters in his costume plots. With this information, we are able to reconstruct in some detail several of Carter's productions at Tamarkan, which allows us to appreciate not only Nixon's enormous talent but the ingenuity of the wardrobe staff and the set design and technical staffs as well (all of which is more fully examined in Chapter 12: "Jolly Good Show!").

This was not the only sketchbook of costume renderings Nixon produced for Norman Carter and other Tamarkan producers. Others were raffled off to fund further costuming operations and were quickly snapped up as treasured souvenirs by those who recognized Nixon's brilliance.<sup>46</sup> But Nixon did not offer to raffle off the sketchbook cited here. It was much too precious a document of the men's amazing theatrical accomplishments. This sketchbook is now preserved in the archives of the Australian War Memorial. The fate of the other sketchbooks is unknown.

### ***When Knights Were Bold***

Norman Carter's production for April was the musical comedy *When Knights Were Bold*. Having performed in a production of this popular West End musical in England, Carter wrote the whole script from memory.<sup>47</sup> Nixon jotted down a summary of the plotline in his sketchbook: "The story of a modern knight who falls asleep & finds himself living 4 centuries ago. Everything is of the century but Guy—he is still modern. His servants & friends are the same people he knows in his modern world. Confusing."<sup>48</sup>

Except for Lieutenant Atyeo, who played the knight, Sir Guy de Vere, everyone in the cast played two roles: one in the present and a contrary one in the past. For example, Ted Weller played the worldly Lady Rowena in the present, a nun in the past; Private Wells was the Hon. Charles Widdicombe in the first present, Fathead the Fool in the past; and Major Jacobs, as Sir Brian Ballymore, became a nasty chain mail—clothed knight in the second act. All Jacobs could remember about this show was being "knocked down by Les Atyeo (Sir Guy de Vere) who planted his foot on my chest and shouted 'Victory.'"

Norman seemed to take a delight in giving me parts in which I suffered some indignity. It was all in good fun of course, and I enjoyed the situations immensely. The troops enjoyed them still more, they thought it was great fun to see an officer getting the worst of it.<sup>49</sup>

Under Carter's direction, Jacobs, one of the older POW entertainers, came into his own as a performer in Tamarkan. Carter praised him as "a top-line character actor."<sup>50</sup>

With *Knights*, Carter continued to fulfill his pledge to make his shows visually exciting—challenging his scenic, props, and costume staffs to be inventive in solving his design and technical requests. Under Navy Lieutenant George Plunket's guidance, the props crew constructed a suit of medieval armor for one character and a helmet for another out of tin, while Frank Purtell and his wardrobe staff built ladies' gowns and men's tuxedos for the contemporary scene and chain mail, a nun's habit, a monk's hooded robe, and a motley outfit with bells attached for the flashback medieval scene.<sup>51</sup> With the help of "Flip" Relf, Frank



Brydges painted wonderful scenery on grass sleeping mats.<sup>52</sup> The show was so popular it was repeated later that week.<sup>53</sup>

Jack Turner, the Australian female impersonator, wrote glowingly of Carter's Tamarkan productions: "they would have been well received in any Tivoli Theatre in Australia."<sup>54</sup> Curiously enough, Turner himself was not involved in any of them: "I took no part in these shows as I had a good rest," he wrote.<sup>viii55</sup>

## Other Entertainment

Between *When Knights Were Bold* and Carter's next show, Julsing lists three entertainment offerings by other groups at Tamarkan with titles such as *Zer Gud! (Very Good)* and *Rivier Hesnet (The River Hesnet)*. He doesn't identify who produced these shows; one or more of them must have been by N.E.I. performers, but because he used the Dutch term *cabaret* to refer to what, in English, would be called a "variety show," we are at some loss to assign what show to what group. No information has been found on these shows, although it is likely there is more about them in Dutch archives.

We do know about a turn in one of the "cabarets," though, because it became very popular with audiences at Tamarkan. This was the singing group "Arry's 'Appy Amps." Jack Turner wrote a paragraph about this remarkable ensemble in his report of his POW experience:

Men were still having their legs amputated through tropical ulcers and the cheerful way men with one leg hopping around on bamboo made crutches was good to see. One concert night 12 men with only one leg sang songs as 'Waltzing Matilda,' 'Home Sweet Home' and 'Roll Out The Barrel.'"<sup>56</sup>

We will hear more about "Arry's 'Appy Amps" later on.

## Japan Parties

For months, rumors had circulated in the camp about POWs being sent to Japan. In April those rumors became a reality when fit men were selected, or volunteered, for a series of overseas drafts that would continue into June. Many of the prisoners were tired of living in a boring POW camp in Thailand. They thought conditions might be better in Japan. Two of these men were Jack Turner and his song parody writer mate, Frank Huston. Another was Brigadier General Varley, only in his case he was ordered to leave Tamarkan and join the other senior British and Australian officers who had been removed from Changi to Formosa in 1942. On his departure, Lieutenant-Colonel Anderson took over command at Tamarkan.

The Japan Party drafts were sent by rail to Saigon, French Indochina, for transport to Japan. But they were delayed from sailing because American aircraft and submarines were raiding the Japanese shipping lanes. During their wait, Turner came out of retirement to perform once again.<sup>ix</sup>

<sup>viii</sup> Although Carter never mentions Captain Bronte Edwards of the 2/3rd Machine Gun Battalion in his memoir, Jack Turner claims Carter received able assistance from Edwards with his shows at Tamarkan (Turner, *IWM*, 27).

<sup>ix</sup> After a three-month interval, they were sent to Singapore but would not embark until September—on the ill-fated *Rakuyo Maru*, which was attacked by an American submarine en route and sank. Brigadier General Varley was among those who did not survive.<sup>57</sup> Jack Turner did, and after days adrift was rescued by an American submarine and returned to Australia.

### Camp Update: “Better Termed a Rest Camp”

At the beginning of May, Major Jacobs took stock: “From the time of our arrival at Tamarkan [in January] the health of the men began to improve. For the first three months the sick from the jungle camps were dying at the rate of ten to fifteen each week. By May 1944 most of the men not in hospital were fairly fit, while the majority of the hospital patients were out of danger.”<sup>58</sup> Arthur Bancroft agreed: “Life here was far from boring and an occasional concert made conditions almost ideal. It would have been better termed a rest camp.”<sup>59</sup> Better food, medicine, light duty, sports—and a constant supply of quality entertainment—had played major roles in the transformation.

### *Pinocchio*

*Pinocchio* was Norman Carter’s musical production for May. It was based on the Disney movie, but this time Carter wrote the script in rhymed couplets, like a pantomime.<sup>60</sup> As had become standard practice with Norman Carter productions, there had to be the “wow” factor of new and exciting costumes, sets, and staging to please his audiences. And his staging requests always seemed to have some challenging problems for his designers and technicians to solve. Two of the problems in *Pinocchio* were (1) how to make the puppet of Pinocchio, and then (2) how to effect the transformation from the puppet to the live actor (the ingenious way in which these problems were solved is detailed in Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!”).<sup>61</sup>

Besides Wally McQueen as Pinocchio, the cast also included “Busty” Badger as Stomboli, the wicked circus proprietor, and Major Jacobs as Honest John Foulfellow. This time the actor who “stole the show,” in Jacobs’ estimation, was “an American sergeant, Ed Worthington from Texas . . . with his droll interpretation of Jimmy Cricket.”<sup>62</sup> Sergeant Worthington was a member of the 131st Field Artillery captured on Java. Back at Choan School POW camp on Java, he had delighted his fellow prisoners by playing an End Man<sup>x</sup> in a minstrel show.<sup>63</sup>

Like its predecessors, *Pinocchio* “went over with a bang,” exclaimed a very pleased Norman Carter. “All mens were whistling ‘Hey diddle de dee, an actor’s life for me!’ for weeks after.”<sup>64</sup>

### “Home for Christmas”

In early June, the POWs at Tamarkan heard about the D-Day invasion at Normandy from their secret radio. Carter wrote, “Life at Tamarkan . . . was pleasant and the dickie bird was singing so sweetly that everyone was betting on being home for Christmas.”<sup>65</sup>

Jack Turner heard the exciting news while in Saigon awaiting transport to Japan. He was told this information secretly so it could be shared with the other POWs during one of his performances. The problem of how to spread the news without arousing the suspicions of the Japanese was solved by Turner’s mate Frank Huston, who revised his earlier parody of the traditional army barracks song “Eleven More Months and Ten More Days” with topical references, Australian slang, and phrasing that only the POWs would understand. Its new title—“Home for Christmas”—would be enough to alert the POW audience to listen up.

*We joined the blinkin’ Army, they told us we’d have fun,*

<sup>x</sup> Minstrel shows had four comics called End Men who sat in pairs on either side of the stage making comments on the other performers in asides to the audience and launching into their own farcical routines.

*They sent us to Malaya and now look what they've done.  
We've been like this for over two years, but now it won't be long,  
And so all you no-hoppers pay attention to my song.*

*There's men who came from Java, some men from Singapore,  
Some Navy and some Air Force, in fact there's men galore.  
And Nippon here has told us men go home when railway's made  
But now the writings on the wall, we know their hopes will fade.*

*The rumours fly like cockie's chaff, each day a change of views  
The Russians must be quite worn out, to keep up with the news.  
We'd like to get the dinkum oil, we'd like to know its right,  
Now that England's jumped down off the fence, she'll soon clean up this  
fight.*

Chorus.

*We'll be home in time for Xmas, so the boys around us say,  
So pack up all your troubles 'cos we're leaving any day.<sup>66</sup>*

The song is filled with allusions and coded words. Some allusions, like “writings on the wall,” and “the Russians must be quite worn out” (Russia hoped that a second front would be opened by the Allies to relieve their siege by the German Army), and England having “jumped down off the fence” (reference to the long-awaited invasion of Europe) would be understood by all the POWs no matter what their nationality. But some of the slang would need further translation for any non-Australians in their midst: “Cockie’s chaff” is Australian farmer slang for “a farmer’s teasing banter,” and “dinkum oil” for “the truth.”<sup>67</sup> These phrases must have totally baffled the Japanese censor.

### ***Memories of the Gay 90s***

The middle of June saw Carter’s next show, *Memories of the Gay 90s*, an original revue inspired by the old-time British music hall. For Carter, one of the great values of this theatrical form was its audience participation. Therefore, in writing the script he included many well-known music hall songs so the audiences could join in on the choruses.

This time, in order to fulfill his audiences’ expectations of elaborate sets and costumes, Carter pushed his design staff and technical crews to the limits of their abilities and resources. Without recourse to libraries or archives to research visual sources, the show’s designers had to recall what Victorian and Edwardian clothing, architecture, and other artifacts looked like. (How the designers and technicians met these design, construction, and staging challenges is detailed in Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!”.) In

addition, Norman Whittaker and his band would have to remember, score, and rehearse all the music for the show.

With an international cast of twenty-nine actors playing forty-one characters, two scenic artists, one costume designer, twenty-one technical, wardrobe, and running crew members, and twenty-three musicians in Norman Whittaker's band, Norman Carter's *Memories of the Gay 90s* was an enormous undertaking. He seemed to be producing the show for London's West End or Sydney's Tivoli Theatre, not a dusty godforsaken POW camp in Thailand.

## A Closer Look

Nixon's detailed notes and thumbnail sketches allow us to examine this extraordinary POW production in more detail. Since it was an original Norman Carter script, we get an opportunity to see his genius as a writer-producer-director. The show is brilliantly imagined in terms of its overall production concept and theatricality. Carter's choice of characters and scenic locations would evoke many memories and associations in his British and Australian audiences. The synopsis that follows reveals Carter's great fondness for the older theatrical form that placed such an emphasis on "star turns" and audience participation.

The plot is constructed on the typical revue pattern of following a few central characters on a trip abroad, thus permitting a series of interesting scenic locations and chance encounters. An intriguing twist on this pattern is the framing device Carter created for the main action. In this case, the reminiscences of an old music hall couple (Grandpa and Grandma Dan Leno) celebrating their golden anniversary and music hall careers become a series of vignettes in which their memories come to life.<sup>68</sup> Dan Leno was one of the stars of the British music hall (Carter himself took the role of Grandma Leno). In order to include the renowned music hall and variety artiste Lily Langtry in his show, he arbitrarily made her Dan Leno's wife.

The show is filled with music. In the absence of widely available souvenir programs, a compère standing at stage left introduces the various music hall performers as they appear and prompts the audience to participate when appropriate.

**Synopsis.** *Memories* opened with a prologue in which Grandpa and Grandma Leno were introduced to the audience and then retired to their "latticed summer house" in front of the proscenium wall at audience right (the traditional location of the "Chairman" in the old music hall), where they remain for the rest of the show, recalling memories of their happy life together.

What followed were nine "memory" scenes beginning with the Old Bull and Bush Music Hall (Scene 1), where Dan Leno first sees Lily Langtry singing "The Old Bull & Bush" and "Lily of Lagoon." (Lily was played, of course, by Ted Weller.) They meet and fall in love, but Lily insists that Dan ask her mother for her hand in marriage. This action leads directly into the "Parlour Scene" (Scene 2). When Dan arrives, Mrs. Lantry recalls her own aborted marriage by singing the lament, "There Was I Waiting at the Church." After Dan's offer of marriage is accepted, they all leave for the seaside resort at Margate for the start of Dan and Lily's honeymoon.

While the setting was being changed, the music hall star Albert Chevalier enters downstage *in one* (Scene 3) dressed as a cockney costermonger in a traditional mother-of-pearl button outfit and sings, "Knocked 'Em in the Old Kent Road." (*In one* is the theatrical term for performing in what was known as the "first slot"—in this case, in front of the backdrop used in the "Old Bull and Bush Music Hall" scene.)

The "Margate Beach Scene" (Scene 4) is filled with local color: a bathing box proprietor, a boatman who rents wherries, and a rock candy sweet seller. While Lily is changing into her bathing costume, Dan



appears in his striped bathing suit singing “Song of the Sea.” When Lily appears, she is accosted by four apparent “Mashers,” who make eyes at her. But they turn out to be a friendly strolling barbershop quartet who serenade her with a medley of songs, including “Beside the Seaside,” “Sweet Adeline,” and “Fall In and Follow Me.”



FIGURE 5.6. COSTUME RENDERING FOR “THE MASHERS.” RAE NIXON. COURTESY OF ROBIN KALHORN.

Following this serenade, Lily and Dan go down to the beach to bathe, and there Lily has an accident—a crab bites her toe.

After the “Margate Beach Scene,” Dan and Lily sail for Paris. With the quick lowering of a rolled backdrop and the appearance of tab curtains, the setting transforms to a Paris cabaret (Scene 5), where cancan girls dance to Offenbach’s rowdy music from *Orpheus in the Underworld*.

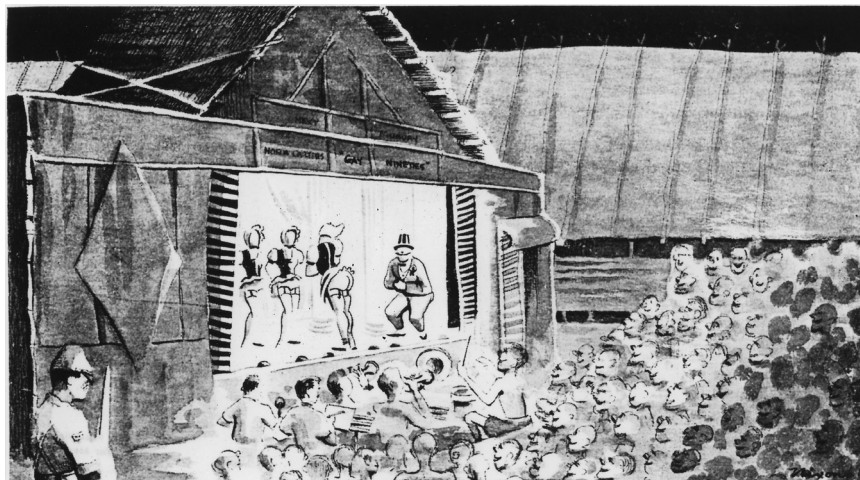


FIGURE 5.7. CANCAN SCENE FROM *MEMORIES OF THE GAY 90S*, RAE NIXON. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL. COURTESY OF MRS. RAE NIXON.

With their honeymoon over, Grandpa and Grandma reminisce about two of their favorite stage moments. Grandma's is the melodrama "Lights of London", the longest scene in the show. It had a large cast, including a Coffee Stall Keeper, a Pedestrian, the Toff, and a number of other typical London street characters. Ted Weller (in a change of costume and makeup) appeared as "Sally Turin, the Heroine of the Embankment" in this melodrama-within-a-revue. Carter's use of the traditional "Coffee Stall Sketch" allowed each character to have his or her own turn in the spotlight. For instance, the Toff sings "Fill 'Em Up," and the Pedestrian (played by the dance band leader Tony Gerrish) sings "Won't They Buy My Pretty Flowers" in a duet with Sally.

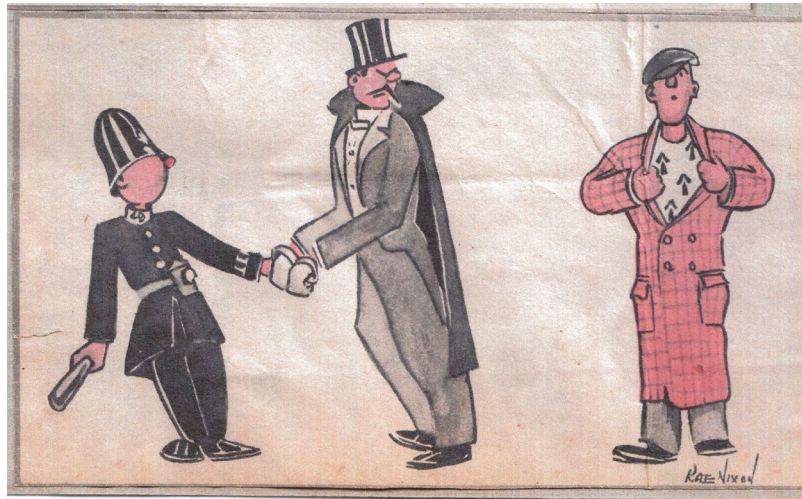


FIGURE 5.8. COSTUME RENDERINGS FOR CHARACTERS IN "LIGHTS OF LONDON" MELODRAMA IN *MEMORIES OF THE GAY 90S*. RAE NIXON. COURTESY OF ROBIN KALHORN.

The plot of the melodrama has Sally threatened by the villain, Sir Murgatroyd Winterbottom, played by Jacobs. "And I was duly hissed every time I appeared on stage," he recalled. Sally is rescued from Winterbottom's clutches by Frank Fearless and turned over to the Bobbie. "Of course in the end I was 'foiled again,'" Jacobs continued, "and taken off to the lockup by the comic policeman."<sup>69</sup> With prompts from the compère to hiss the villain and cheer the hero, the old-fashioned melodrama was the hit of the show.

It must have been during dress rehearsals that the stage manager discovered that the major changeover from "The Lights of London" to the final scene in the orchard was going to take much longer than planned. So a third scene was added to lengthen the time beyond the two already scheduled to be played in one for the changeover. The first of these (Scene 7) featured the magician Maskelene and his assistant performing sleight-of-hand tricks.<sup>xi</sup> It was followed (Scene 8) with a "star turn" by the great music hall comedian George Formby Sr., singing "Tickle Me Timothy."

The bit added at the last minute (Scene 8-A) was "Molasses and Capt'n January," incorporating nineteenth-century characters from the popular 1930s American radio show *Captain Henry's Maxwell House Show Boat*. Molasses was played in blackface by American Ed Worthington. Given the American reference, it's likely Worthington was the one who suggested this routine.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>xi</sup> John Nevil Maskelyne had been a famous London magician during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.



The final scene—the “Orchard Scene” (Scene 9)—with its magnificent flowering apple tree was Grandpa Leno’s favorite memory of a past theatrical moment. From one sturdy branch hung a swing holding Dolly Gray, who is being wooed by Lobster, a young soldier who “asks Dolly to marry him one last time before sailing to the Boer War.” (This scene could have brought the show very close to home for many audience members who may have made the same request as Lobster before sailing away to the Far East.) Two of Dolly’s other admirers hover in the background; one on a bicycle, played by Dan Leno, sings “Honeysuckle & the Bee.”<sup>71</sup> With the singing of “Soldiers of the Queen” and “Goodbye Dolly,” the revue was brought to a rousing conclusion.<sup>72</sup>

**Reviews.** “After all these preparations, plus hours of rehearsal,” Carter proudly proclaimed, “it was no wonder that *The Gay Nineties* was voted ‘the best yet.’”<sup>73</sup> And lest we think his opinion of his own show inflated, at least one member of his audience offered confirmation: Rohan Rivett thought it Carter’s finest production. The POWs whistled the tunes for months—which was, of course, exactly what Carter hoped for.<sup>74</sup> *Memories of the Gay 90s* was one of the most astonishing shows ever produced by POWs on the Thailand-Burma railway.

## Two Theatrical Casualties

Many POWs had feared their months-long starvation diet during the construction of the railway would cause permanent impotence, but with better food, extended rest, and lighter duty in Tamarkan, they were surprised to discover their sexual urges had returned. Yet the only projections for their sexual fantasies were the female impersonators. Because of rude remarks made by Rivett after *Memories of the Gay 90s*, Teddy Weller told Carter it would be his last show. Carter was unable to persuade him otherwise.

Weller wasn’t the only female impersonator who came in for salacious comments while onstage or in the camp. The impersonator most affected by jibes and innuendoes about his sexuality was the hula dancer “Sambal Sue.” After one particularly “sexy” performance, he announced “he could not continue being confined in close quarters with thousands of POWs who had not been in the company of actual females for nearly three years.”<sup>75</sup> Tamarkan had now lost its two best female impersonators. (For an in-depth examination of these incidents and issues surrounding the subject of female impersonators in the POW shows, see Chapter 14: “Somebody Had to Put a Skirt On.”)

## “At the End of the Day”

With *Memories*, Carter pushed the limits of what the Tamarkan Players could produce, and Major Jacobs decided to add new positions to the theatre committee’s permanent membership to contain the ever-increasing size and scope of Carter’s ambitions. Other Tamarkan producers needed the designers’ and technicians’ attention for their shows as well. The new committee members were bandmaster Norman Whittaker as music director, Rae Nixon as costume designer, and Frank Purtell as costumer. Several new positions and personnel were also added to the production staff, including a head of properties and a master wigmaker, N.E.I. POW Jan Jansen.

On 26 June there was a dance band show entitled *Zieken rapp* (*Sick List*), in which an original song, “At the End of the Day,” was introduced by Pat Fox. It “turned into an instant hit—a melody filled with memories, one that worked its way hauntingly into the minds of so many of us,” admitted Kyle Thompson. In fact, it so haunted Thompson that he included the lyrics and score in his memoir.

*At the end of the day,  
Some soft music I play  
And I let my heart go free.  
For the day had been hard and long,  
Only with song could I bring you to me.*

*In the evening at last  
As the hours passed,  
The jungle lay quite still.  
I sing to my love as the moon up above  
Goes slowly over the hill.*

*A faint touch of breeze  
That just rustles the trees  
As it swept and swayed the air,  
And I think of our loved ones fair,  
So very dear to everyone there.*

*In the twilight I live anew  
The things we used to do.  
One day we'll be free,  
Oh what heaven for you and me!<sup>76</sup>*

### ***Dingbats Abroad***

A cabaret on 3 July was followed two weeks later by Carter's production for July, *Dingbats Abroad*. The show, scheduled to open a week earlier, had been postponed, and in the end had only a one-week instead of the usual two-week run. Given the time of year, it might have been delayed by rain. All the Carter regulars were in the cast—except, of course, Ted Weller. The leading female role was taken by Jack Farmer, who had appeared as “Dolly” in *Memories of the Gay 90s*.

With *Dingbats*, the strain of constantly being in production mode writing and directing the next “best-yet” production was beginning to show. Unable to imagine a different storyline for his new revue, Carter adhered to the same format as *Memories of the Gay 90s*, only this time it was the “story of Dave (a country boy) who marries a sophisticated girl (‘Magenta’) and goes abroad.”<sup>77</sup> Dave’s valet, Egbert, accompanies them on their honeymoon. According to Nixon’s notes, Carter did, at least, give the plot some complications: “Dave has a little bother with Magenta, who flies to the Captain (Jacobs) & later a French Officer (Rohan Rivett).” It is Egbert, of course, “who always did the right thing at the right time,” who



## Crises

When flooding from late monsoon rains inundated the hospital camp at Chungkai, Lieutenant-Colonel Yanagida moved his Group II headquarters across the river to Tamarkan on 2 August.<sup>81</sup> Tamarkan, situated on a high bank above the river, had not been affected by the flooding.

Come August, the Tamarkan Players found themselves struggling to put on another musical theatre production. “Every show had to be scripted, either from memory or imagination,” Carter explained, “and by August the ideas department had run dry. Jakes [Jacobs] called a conference on stage, and it was unanimously agreed that, of all the shows we had done, musicals were by far the most popular and that we should do another.”<sup>82</sup> The string of Norman Carter’s successes had set high audience expectations, and the concert party was determined to continue fulfilling them. But relieving Carter from this creative burden meant that other potential producers would have to ransack their individual and collective memories for any image, story, or song from a movie or radio show that could possibly be turned into a musical.

In the weeks that followed, the Tamarkan Players found they were able to keep that hope alive. A musical called *Broadway* was produced on 7 August, followed a week later by another called *Hillbillies*. But the concert that took place on 15 August was unusual: a show Julsing listed as a *Japanese Cabaret* (unfortunately, we have no POW account of this unique show). On 21 August the musical *Wedding of the Painted Doll*, based on the popular song staged in the Hollywood film *Broadway Melody*, debuted, and three days later came a different type of musical event—a concert of light classical music.<sup>83</sup>

## Cinderella

It was really Carter himself who was at a loss in the “ideas department.” With his production slot for August coming up, Carter, in desperation, finally decided to produce *Cinderella*, the pantomime he had in final rehearsals back at Bicycle Camp on Java in 1942, which had to be aborted when the prisoners were ordered to Burma. He had avoided previous consideration of this panto, perhaps, because working on it would be too painful a reminder of friends and performers who had died so horribly on the railway in Burma.

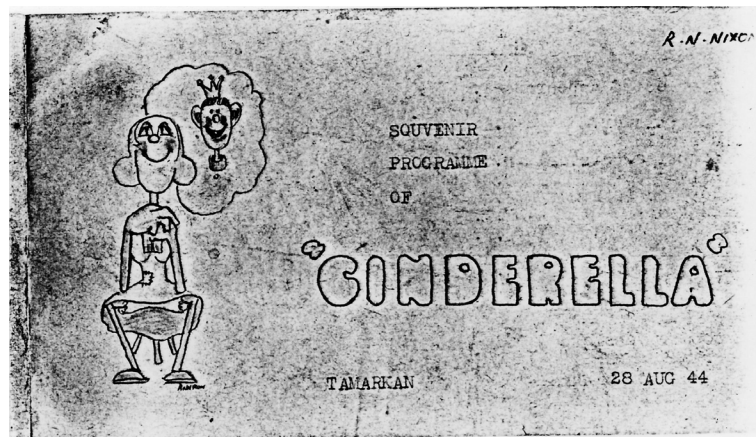


FIGURE 5.10. SOUVENIR PROGRAM FOR NORMAN CARTER’S *CINDERELLA*. RAE NIXON, AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL. COURTESY OF MRS. RAE NIXON.

*Cinderella* opened on 28 August. Carter did not attempt to revive his earlier production. For that

one he had cast the “gorgeous” Dutch female impersonator Vilhelm Vanderdeken as Cinderella.<sup>84</sup> This time, casting against type for added comic effect, he chose the tall and gangly Pat Fox as Cinderella to play opposite the short and stubby Wally McQueen as Prince Charming. Jim Anderson, usually the male lead, played the Fairy Godmother. The two stepsisters—the pantomime dame roles—were played by Doug Colman and Les Atyeo. To get a rise out of his Dutch/Indonesian audience, Carter cast the popular Dutch comedian van Dorst in a female role as Fatima Shortshanks. And Sid “Happy” Marshall also made his Thailand debut as a female impersonator in this production as Gretchen Tossle.<sup>85</sup>

Carter does not mention this production in his memoir, and there are no extant costume renderings by Nixon, so we know little about its contents. One story comes from Jacobs: “I suffered further indignities in Cinderella, in which as the Demon King, I was dragged on to the stage by my horned tail, Bobby Clare, as the dog Pluto, doing the dragging.”<sup>86</sup>

### A Burnout Case

After seven months of constant pressure to write and produce a series of large and complex musicals—always trying to top previous productions—Carter was burnt out. *Cinderella* would be his last production in Tamarkan. Though the Tamarkan Players would go on producing entertainment, none of their shows would equal the elaborate production values, professional polish, and sheer pleasure of those developed by Norman Carter.

The unenviable task of deciding what kind of show could follow such a wonderfully wacky pantomime as *Cinderella* was brilliantly answered by staging a satirical cabaret version of it on 18 September. Ten days later was the N.E.I. show *Klein Cabaret (Little Cabaret)*, and the first week of October saw a production of *Indian Love Call*, a musical based on Friml, Hammerstein, and Harbach’s musical *Rose-Marie*.<sup>87</sup> Nixon’s American Indian costumes designed for *Dingbats* were no doubt pulled from stock and reused for this production.

### A New Entertainment Challenge

With the start of October, something completely different was about to happen in the entertainment world at Tamarkan. As general manager of the Tamarkan Players, Major Jacobs was ordered by Colonel Yanagida’s office to produce a series of musical and theatrical shows for a three-day festival celebrating the formation of I. J. A. Group II in 1942.<sup>88</sup> Knowing the Tamarkan Players could not satisfy these demands by themselves, Jacobs received permission to cross over to Chungkai “so that [he] could consult the concert party committee . . . on the matter of exchanging ideas for programmes.” There he met with Bill Pycok, chair of the Chungkai theatre committee, and arranged for Norman Smith’s orchestra and “The Swingtette” musical ensemble to give performances at Tamarkan during the upcoming festival.<sup>89</sup>

On 14 October, the POW administrative headquarters at Chungkai was ordered transferred to Tamarkan so that the lines of communication between it and Yanagida’s headquarters would be immediate and direct.

The festival at Tamarkan took place on 15, 16, and 17 October. In honor of the occasion, a new theatre was built in the Japanese compound. Back in Chungkai, John Sharp heard about the event and noted it in his diary: “our Chungkai orchestra performing in the intervals—lasted 5 hours, with much enthusiasm and many encores—inaugurating new theatre.”<sup>90</sup> Later, a performance of two Japanese



“evening” plays took place.<sup>xiii91</sup>

The next night a revival of Norman Carter’s *Pinocchio* was preceded by a short concert by “The Swingtette.”<sup>92</sup> Jacobs was particularly enthusiastic about this group, especially the accordionist, Han Samethini:

This swing band was a very clever combination of drums, slap bass, trumpet and piano accordion. The accordionist was a Dutch Eurasian named Samathini [*sic*], and was far and away the best performer on the instrument I have ever heard. A sound musician and a showman to his fingertips, Samathini made a tremendous hit with the Tamarkanites.<sup>93</sup>

The revival of *Pinocchio* ran for two nights, 16–17 October. It was performed not in the new theatre but in the POW theatre where it had originally been staged. Captain C. D. L. Aylwin, part of the POW administrative staff newly arrived from Chungkai, compared the production with those he had witnessed in his former camp:

The work put in to the production scenery and dresses of “Pinocchio” must have been tremendous. But the show lacked good acting and fire. Perhaps after Chungkai, I expected too much and Tamakhan [*sic*] suffers from the disadvantage of a small stage. But Tamakhan boasts an Australian Brass Band which played well if a little too sedately, throughout.<sup>94</sup>

Given Aylwin’s reactions to the performance, it’s hard to believe that Carter had a hand in this remount. But if he did, Aylwin’s observations that “the show lacked good acting and fire” and that Whittaker’s brass band had played “sedately, throughout” may be a clue to what was really going on. Having been forced to perform for the emperor’s birthday celebration at Thanbyuzayat, Burma, back in 1943, the Tamarkan POWs decided to perform now as they had then—poorly—as an act of resistance. In this way they couldn’t be accused by their mates of having gone ‘Jap-happy.’

After the festival was over, the determined entertainers at Tamarkan continued to produce weekly shows through the rest of October and into late November, one of which—*Thanks for Everything, Harry Rosendaal!*—Nixon claimed was one of their best.<sup>95</sup> The production standards Carter had set were still being maintained.

### Camp Update: Allied Bombing Attacks

There is a gap in the entertainment record at Tamarkan between 27 November and 25 December that coincides with a series of Allied bombing raids. The first, on 29 November, attacked the anti-aircraft battery protecting the two bridges just outside the camp. As Jacobs remembered the incident, the raid took place just as the POWs were lined up for their evening *tenko* (roll call).

<sup>xiii</sup> Julsing’s intriguing citation cries out for further explanation, but none has been found. Could these have been traditional *noh* plays?



We were waiting for the Japs to come and count us, when we heard the sound of planes.

All heads turned towards the west, from whence the whirr of engines could be plainly heard. Headed in our direction, and coming out of the setting sun, we counted twenty-one large bombers flying at about five thousand feet.

Somebody said, "Its alright, they're Nips."

"Like hell they are," cried another, "the Nips haven't any four-engine bombers."<sup>96</sup>

The attack was devastating. Seventeen POWs were killed, including some who had recently transferred to Tamarkan from Chungkai.<sup>97</sup> Jacobs was part of the team recovering the bodies. The stage was used as a temporary morgue.<sup>98</sup>

### Christmas Preparations

Despite the continued threat of Allied bombing raids—or, perhaps, in defiance of them—plans were made for another pantomime for the men's third Christmas in captivity. And there was fond hope that Carter would come out of retirement to produce it. Rae Nixon and a friend presented Carter with a script they had written for a production of *Aladdin*. On reading it, Carter realized he would be in serious trouble with Colonel Ramsay as he had been earlier in Meiloe, Burma, if he produced it:

It was undeniably one of the funniest pantomime scripts I'd ever read, but it was hotter than mid-summer in Marble Bar! The traditional Laundry Scene, with the Widow Twankey washing a lady customer's undies and her remarks upon the chastity of the wearer, positively sizzled. Compared with this scorcher, *Radiosities* was an iceberg.<sup>99</sup>

Carter refused to produce the panto and warned the authors against pursuing it because of its salacious humor. But Nixon and his mate were not persuaded by Carter's argument and decided to produce it themselves.<sup>100</sup> With the mixture of anxiety and fear caused by the recent bombing, it was more important than ever to have some sort of entertainment to restore the POWs' flagging spirits. Gathering together the Tamarkan Players' singers, actors, musicians, and tech crew, Nixon began rehearsals for *Aladdin and His Wonderful Lamp*.

### Camp Update: Change of Command

On 1 December, Lieutenant-Colonel Yanagida was transferred from Tamarkan to Nakhon Pathom to take charge of the major hospital camp there, and Lieutenant-Colonel Ishii, who had been in charge at Nakhon Pathom, was moved to Tamarkan to assume Yanagida's former duties as Group II Commandant.

### Further Bombing Raids

Before *Aladdin* could be presented, two additional Allied bombing raids on 8 and 13 December

attempted to knock out the bridges. The second, a low-level run, was more destructive. Incendiary bullets set fire to many of the camp structures. Remarkably, the theatre was not one of them. The following day, Colonel Ishii ordered the entire camp evacuated across the river to Chungkai. Jacobs, along with Colonel Ramsay and his headquarters staff, was in the first party to leave; Norman Carter in the party that followed a few days later. “As we marched across the parade ground,” Carter wrote, “I turned for a final look at the theatre which had given so much pleasure to so many. Across its proscenium was written, ‘Coming soon: Aladdin and his Wonderful Lamp.’ Actors are optimists.”<sup>101</sup>

Crossing the concrete and steel bridge over the Mae Khlong, the men were able to assess the bombing’s effects. The steel bridge had received only slight damage; the wooden bridge had several spans knocked out.<sup>102</sup> Both were quickly repaired using POW labor.

### ***Aladdin and His Wonderful Lamp***

*Aladdin* opened on Christmas Day 1944 with two performances: one in the late morning, the other in the late afternoon. Because Colonel Ramsay and his staff had been among the first evacuees from the camp to Chungkai, its saucy humor brought no objections, only laughter. George Wiseman noted that the show included a Father Christmas and that “crackers, cigars, etc. [had been] chucked to audience” during the show—all pantomime traditions.<sup>103</sup> *Aladdin* proved to be an enormous success. Norman Carter had been a good teacher.

Just prior to its opening, members of several maintenance parties from work camps up the railway line had arrived in Tamarkan, where they were retained for the Christmas holidays before returning to their base camps. On their way back to Chungkai were John Sharp, variety show producer Eddie Edwins, cowboy singer Larry Croisette, accordionist Fred Coles, and theatre poster/scenic artist Geoffrey Gee.

Sharp wrote a brief review of *Aladdin* in his diary, also commenting on the other events for Christmas Day: “Performances of Aladdin given in the morning and afternoon—bright dialogue and good effects; also band concerts, a football match (British beat Dutch 3–1), boxing display, etc. Informal concerts in the evening, and lights out at 11.”<sup>104</sup>

Gee, who attended the morning performance, provided more details about the pantomime:

‘Aladdin’ was an extremely entertaining show. The decor (by Frank Bridges [sic]) was superb and personalities shone. Teddy Weller, Pat Fox, Jimmy Levers, Les Atyeo, Johnny Branchflower etc. A pity it couldn’t be seen by stage lighting at night. Good songs sung by Jim Anderson and Val Ballantyne. ‘There’s a Valley at the end of the Rainbow’ ‘Bluebird of Happiness’ being No 1 hits.<sup>105</sup>

It appears Rae Nixon had been able to coax Weller out of retirement by offering him the lead—this time a male role.



FIGURE 5.11. COSTUME RENDERING FOR THE  
LEAD ROLES IN *ALADDIN*. RAE NIXON.  
COURTESY OF ROBIN KALHORN.

The “Dutch Eurasian playing the part of the princess was excellent,” thought John Cosford, “and it was hard to realise that this ‘lovely girl’ was a man! Good God! How long had it been since we’d seen a real live white girl?”<sup>106</sup> Nixon’s persuasiveness had also brought “Sambal Sue” back for one last encore performance at Tamarkan.

Among the maintenance party workers on their way back to Nong Pladuk was G. F. Kershaw, who wrote glowingly about the brilliance of the performer playing Widow Twankey (“would have graced any London pantomime”) and was greatly taken by another N.E.I. female impersonator who appeared in the show: “A young Dutchman with a slim figure took the part of one of the court maidens, and had dressed in camp-made padded bra, figure-fitting pants, and a waist-to-ankle divided skirt made from the gauze part of a mosquito-net. He looked the part of a young and attractive female, both in dress and deportment.”<sup>107</sup>

Prior to attending the late afternoon performance, Leslie Hall had been feeling extremely depressed, but after seeing the pantomime he recalled how the closing moments had produced a euphoric and overwhelmingly cathartic effect on the whole audience.

It was truly a professional performance and it drew to a close with a beautiful tenor voice rendering “The Bluebird of Happiness.” On his right wrist the singer had a mock-up blue and gold parrot which looked like the real thing from a distance and let colour to the rendition.<sup>108</sup>

The unidentified singer with the “beautiful tenor voice” was none other than Ted Weller.

As dusk gathered around them—making it “all the more emotional,”<sup>109</sup> Weller remembered—he stood alone on the stage and sang:

*The beggar man and his mighty king are only different in name,  
 For they are treated just the same by fate.  
 Today a smile and tomorrow tears,  
 We're never sure what's in store,  
 So learn your lesson before too late, so*

*Be like I, hold your head up high  
 Till you find a blue bird of happiness.  
 You will find greater peace of mind  
 Knowing there's a bluebird of happiness.*

*And when he sings to you,  
 Though you're deep in blue,  
 You will see a ray of light creep through . . .*

As he came to the final lines of the song, Weller inserted a crucial variation in the next to last line that “brought down the ‘house.’ Even the Nips voiced their approval, though they clearly didn’t understand the words.”<sup>110</sup> With his silver tenor voice floating out into the gathering darkness, Weller sang,

*Keep alive, we'll be home in '45!  
 Somewhere there's a bluebird of happiness.<sup>xiv</sup>*

And with this “the men—even those amputees who could—rose to their feet to give this song a special ovation,” Hall recalled. “Tears flowed copiously and the only dry faces to be found were those of the uncomprehending guards.”<sup>111</sup>

### **The Last Show**

Following the Christmas celebrations, the tempo of the troop evacuation from Tamarkan to Chungkai stepped up. The Tamarkan Players would be among the last to leave. There was a repeat of *Aladdin* on New Year’s Day 1945. But after having their spirits lifted by the “Bluebird of Happiness” and their hopes for a swift end to the war raised by the Allied bombing attacks, now came the hard part. “Christmas over, the new year came and the endless waiting became increasingly difficult to bear,” bemoaned Hall.<sup>112</sup>

When it became clear that the Tamarkan Players had no follow-up to entertain the POWs waiting to be transferred to Chungkai, the indefatigable Eddie Edwins stepped forward and cobbled together an *All-Star Variety Show* that took place on 8 January. With himself as compère, Edwins drew performers

<sup>xiv</sup> Words by Edward Heyman and Harry Parr Davies; music by Sandor Harmati.

from both the Tamarkan Players (Weller, Anderson, Ballantyne, Tony Gerrish and his dance band, etc.) and his Chungkai maintenance party (Larry Croisette and Fred Coles) for his production. As unbelievable as it sounds given the circumstances, he secured permission from the I. J. A. for stage lighting to be used during the show.<sup>113</sup> It would be the last show ever performed in Tamarkan.

With the war going against them, the Japanese feared the possibility of uprisings led by POW officers, so at the beginning of February all officers in the Thai camps—and as far away as French Indochina—were separated from their men and sent to Kanburi/051 Kilo. Before leaving Tamarkan, Nixon secretly buried his precious sketchbook; he was not able to retrieve it until the war was over.<sup>114</sup> By the end of the third week of February, all the remaining other ranks had been transferred to Chungkai and only a small contingent of I. J. A. soldiers was left to inhabit the camp and man the anti-aircraft gun emplacements guarding the two bridges.

## Endnotes

- 1 Toosey, Report, 8.
- 2 Nussbaum, 160.
- 3 Frank Samethini, 74–75.
- 4 Nussbaum, 160.
- 5 Nussbaum, 160.
- 6 Cosford, 103.
- 7 Toosey, Report, 9.
- 8 Nussbaum, 160.
- 9 Summers, 146.
- 10 Chalker, Letter, 27 November 1943.
- 11 Jacobs, 106.
- 12 Jacobs, 106.
- 13 Carter, 166.
- 14 Jacobs, 106.
- 15 Jacobs, 152.
- 16 Jacobs, 106.
- 17 Carter, 167.
- 18 Carter, 167.
- 19 Weller “Basic History,” 19 April 2002.
- 20 Carter, 167.
- 21 Carter, 167; Weller, “Basic History,” 19 April 2002.
- 22 Jacobs, 106.
- 23 Carter, 168.
- 24 Rivett, illustration facing page 321.
- 25 Weller, Letter, 19 April 2002.
- 26 Nixon, PIX, 9 February 1946, 16–17.
- 27 Weller, “Basic History,” 19 April 2002.
- 28 Morris, Interview, 14.
- 29 Whitecross, 128.
- 30 Jacobs, 117.
- 31 Carter, 168.
- 32 Carter, 168–169.
- 33 Carter, 169.
- 34 Jacobs, 106.
- 35 Carter, 169.

- 36 Thompson, 99.
- 37 Nixon, PIX, 9 February 1946, 17.
- 38 Carter, 171.
- 39 Morris, Interview, 3.
- 40 Weller, Letter, 19 April 2002.
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- 49 Jacobs, 117.
- 50 Carter, 170.
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- 52 Jacobs, 106.
- 53 Jacobs, 106.
- 54 Turner, Report, 27.
- 55 Turner, Report, 27.
- 56 Turner, Report, 27.
- 57 Jacobs, 111–112.
- 58 Jacobs, 107.
- 59 Bancroft, 124–125.
- 60 Jacobs, 117.
- 61 Carter, 170.
- 62 Carter, 170.
- 63 Peadon, 20.
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- 66 Turner, Report, n.p.
- 67 Allison, E-mail, 5 February 2007.
- 68 Nixon, Sketchbook, SK-2.
- 69 Jacobs, 107.
- 70 Nixon, Sketchbook, SK-5.
- 71 Nixon, Sketchbook, SK-7.
- 72 Nixon, Sketchbook, SK-7.
- 73 Carter, 172.
- 74 Rivett, 326.
- 75 Thompson, 108–109.
- 76 Thompson, 108.
- 77 This and subsequent quotes are from Nixon, Sketchbook, SK-16.
- 78 Nixon, Sketchbook, SK-17; Jacobs, 117.
- 79 Nixon, Sketchbook, SK-17.
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- 81 J. Sharp, Diary, 2 August 1944.
- 82 Carter, 171.
- 83 Julsing, 2.
- 84 Carter, 72.
- 85 AWM PRO0412.
- 86 Jacobs, 117.
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- 88 Jacobs, 117–118.
- 89 Jacobs, 117–118.
- 90 J. Sharp, Diary, 20 August 1944.
- 91 Julsing, 2.
- 92 Alywin, 130–131.
- 93 Jacobs, 118.
- 94 Alywin, 131–132.
- 95 Nixon, PIX, 9 February 1946, 17.
- 96 Jacobs, 121.
- 97 John Sharp, Diary, 20 December 1944.
- 98 Jacobs, 123.
- 99 Carter, 174–175.
- 100 Carter, 174–175.
- 101 Carter, 175.
- 102 Jacobs, 124.
- 103 Wiseman, Diary, 25 December 1944.
- 104 Sharp, Diary, 25 December 1944.
- 105 Gee, Diary, 25 December 1944.
- 106 Cosford, 137–138.
- 107 Kershaw, 130.
- 108 Hall, 311.
- 109 Weller, Letter, 8 October 2003.
- 110 Hall, 311.
- 111 Hall, 311.
- 112 Hall, 311.
- 113 Gee, Diary, 8 January 1945.
- 114 Nixon, PIX, 9 February 1946, 17.