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Chapter 1. "In the Bag": Changi POW Camp, Singapore

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Chapter 1: “In the Bag”

Changi POW Camp, Singapore

The musical and theatrical entertainment that took place along the Thailand-Burma railway was performed by British, Australian, Dutch/Indonesian, and American POWs who had been captured in early 1942 when Imperial Japanese Forces conquered most of Southeast Asia. This chapter focuses on the performers sent to Burma or Thailand from Singapore between late spring and fall of that year. It acts, therefore, as a “curtain-raiser” to all that follows. The story of entertainment created by POWs sent directly to Burma from the Netherlands East Indies is told in Chapter 3: “Jungle Shows”: Burma.

Prisoners of War

On 15 February 1942, Lieutenant-General Arthur Percival of Malaya Command surrendered the British Commonwealth forces defending Singapore to Lieutenant-General Tomoyuki Yamashita of the Imperial Japanese Army. Two days later, all the “fit” Commonwealth troops were imprisoned in what had supposedly been the “impregnable fortress” at Changi on the eastern end of Singapore Island. They were now “in the bag”—prisoners of war.

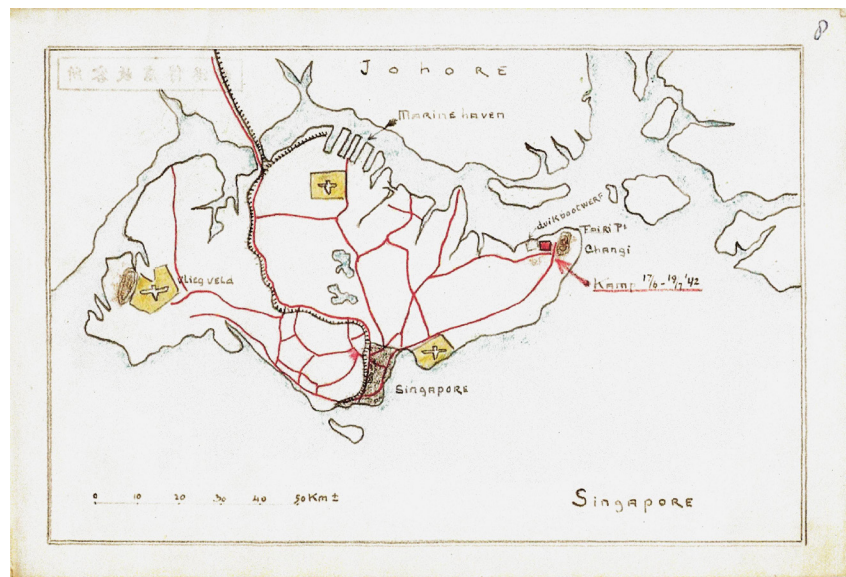


FIGURE 1.1. MAP OF SINGAPORE SHOWING CHANGI POW CAMP. H. J. D. DE FREMERY. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

Priorities

Once in Changi, first priority was given to bringing order out of chaos. This meant tackling several issues simultaneously, such as finding accommodation, food, water, and fuel for the more than 52,000 demoralized troops herded together within the confines of the former garrison. Concurrent with those priorities was the need to reestablish military discipline.

Military discipline. The POWs' disgust at the incompetence of those who had been in command in the battles for Malaya and Singapore created potential for chaos of another kind: anarchy—a situation that had to be resolved as quickly as possible. Whatever the POWs' thoughts and feelings about their situation and who was responsible for it, their only hope for survival lay in maintaining their military structure and discipline. Therefore, discipline was re-imposed—in some cases brutally.¹

Accommodation. By the end of the first week, the sprawling POW camp at Changi had been subdivided into separate areas corresponding to the five divisions that had formed Malaya Command's battle order.¹ Sitting approximately midway on the peninsula, and adjacent to each area, were the Roberts Barracks, now designated as the general hospital for the entire POW camp.² Once the fit soldiers were in Changi, the sick and wounded troops were evacuated there from hospitals in Singapore.³

Food. For the first two weeks the POWs lived on any provisions they had brought into Changi or discovered in camp stores. By the third week, the Japanese started to provide some rations, but other than a few scraps of meat, it was mainly rice. Rice was served in some form at every meal, but, since the grain had never been a staple of the European diet, the military cooks did not know how to prepare it properly, and the result was widespread constipation.

Water. Many POWs were already suffering from dysentery after drinking contaminated water. Changi's water mains had been destroyed during the battle for Singapore; therefore, the only water available was at a few underground well "water points." Twelve days after the start of the POWs' incarceration, 800 cases of dysentery from drinking contaminated water were reported in Roberts Hospital.⁴ Until the mains could be repaired, water had to be rationed to one full bottle a day per soldier (and "every drop had to be boiled or chlorinated").⁵ The only water available for washing up, outside of a daily communal bowl, was the sea, so small groups made trips to the garrison's bathing beach at Fairy Point. On these outings, other useful items might be found. In order to survive, the POWs became expert scavengers.



FIGURE 1.2. CHANGI POWs BATHING AND SCAVENGING. WATERCOLOR BY ROBERT BRAZIL.
COURTESY OF ROBERT BRAZIL.

ⁱ These were the Selarang Barracks Area (Australian Imperial Forces 8th Division); Birdwood Camp and the Garden & Woods Area (British 11th Indian Division); the India Lines Area (British 18th Infantry Division); the Southern Area [Singapore Fortress Command, which included Fortress Signals, Straits Settlements Volunteer Forces Brigade (S.S.V.F.), Federated Malay States Volunteer Forces (F.M.S.V.F.), the Royal Army Service Corps (R.A.S.C.), the Royal Army Medical Corps (R.A.M.C.), other smaller formations, as well as the abandoned indigenous settlement, Changi Village]; and the Command Area (Malaya Command, 3rd Indian Army Corp, headquarters for the 9th and 11th Indian Divisions, and the I. J. A. POW Administration).

Fuel. As Rob Brazil's watercolor of the early days in Changi illustrates, wood for cooking fires was more easily obtained.ⁱⁱ There was also wood available from bomb-damaged buildings, and when that ran out, there were plenty of trees in the heavily wooded garrison that could be cut down for fuel.

Morale

When the POWs entered Changi, it was clear to Staff Captain Gibby Inglefield that everyone was suffering from “utter depression, of failure, or wasted energy and useless loss of life.”⁶ Changi was now filled with thousands of men with nothing to do but argue endlessly about the conduct of the war and the humiliation of the surrender or complain about their confinement and meager rations—especially the rice, lack of water, inadequate housing, and re-imposition of military discipline. Solving this morale problem was also top priority.

“To Keep the Community Occupied”

The standard military response to morale problems was articulated by Inglefield: “to keep the community occupied and to make use of whatever leisure hours it had to the best advantage. Inactivity is almost worse than discomfort to a P.O.W., and more damaging to morale.”⁷ One immediate way to keep the troops busy was to put them to work on essential camp duties.⁸

But of the 52,200 POWs in Changi, only so many could work on fatigue duties at any one time. The rest had to be employed in “make-work” duties, such as picking up leaves on the *padangs*ⁱⁱⁱ or endless close-order drill practice—activities that would not endear the leaders to their troops. George McNeilly, the YMCA representative serving with the Australians, was among those who realized that camp fatigues would not do enough to address the issue:

A man who is working hard has little time while actively engaged to brood over the harshness of the fate that causes him to be so employed. . . . But all this was merely physical labour; and though it could fill some part of the day for everybody [it] could not fill the whole of the day for all: nor did it provide the mental stimulus which was necessary to provide food for thought in the non working hours or serve as an anodyne, or distraction to divert the mind from brooding over the present situation.⁹

The military had developed other more creative ways of maintaining troop morale. A pamphlet entitled “The Soldier’s Welfare,” issued by the War Office in London in 1941 and disseminated to all unit welfare officers, laid out suggestions for sports and games, entertainment, and education.¹⁰

Books found in abandoned barracks and base housing were collected in central locations and divisional libraries started.¹¹ Prisoners with academic degrees or expertise in some field were encouraged to deliver lectures and form classes that could take place during the day for those not assigned fatigue duties. Out of these endeavors, a “Changi University” sprang up in each area.¹² Because of Gibby Inglefield’s

ⁱⁱ Robert Brazil is one of the numerous artists who documented the POWs’ lives with drawings and watercolors. Prior to enlistment he had studied art at Goldsmiths College in London. Before leaving England, Brazil glued his watercolors into a tobacco tin so that he could take them with him. The lid would function as the palette. When he was interviewed fifty-nine years later, Brazil still had his tobacco tin and paints.

ⁱⁱⁱ Open areas used for drill practice and playing fields.

background and musical abilities—he had already formed a choir that sang at Sunday chapel—he was “appointed ‘Professor’ to the Faculty of Music” in the 18th Division’s “university.”¹³ Arts and crafts classes were also instituted and periodic exhibitions scheduled.

But the most troubling time of day—when boredom set in and morale was at its lowest ebb—was the POWs’ leisure time between the evening meal and “lights out.” To help fill these hours, pick-up games of soccer and other sports were initiated, although they had not been authorized by the Japanese. Even so, sports, lectures, classes, and arts and crafts proved insufficient to dispel the general malaise. For Charles Frisby, a trombone player in one of the military bands, the solution was obvious: “there was nothing more calculated to sustain the morale of the men than to set before them a form of activity which, under normal circumstances, they would expect to experience.”¹⁴ He referred to entertainment provided by concert parties.

In fact, it hadn’t taken long for someone to start community singing to fill those evening hours—as had happened during basic training and on transport ships during the long voyage to the Far East. Anyone with a musical instrument, as William Wilder quickly discovered, was considered a valuable asset: “When I got back to my bed an officer wanted to start a sing-song to the accompaniment of my tin whistle. Played for an hour and quite a cheerful time was had by all.”¹⁵

Group singing (“sing-songs” or “sing-alongs”) after the evening meal became something the POWs looked forward to each day, “For then we could bear to be reminded of home,” wrote one other ranks soldier.¹⁶ This assessment wasn’t true for everyone: “far from making us happy,” Thomas Pounder wrote, “these sing-songs only served to make us more miserable as memories of home, happy days and freedom flashed though our minds.”¹⁷

To keep the men’s spirits going through the long months of incarceration ahead, Malaya Command knew the POWs needed more than impromptu sing-alongs. Organized entertainment produced on a regular basis could go a long way to fill the men’s leisure hours. And given that performances created a common bond among audience members, they could help the men adjust collectively, as well as individually, to the reality of their newfound status as prisoners of war.

When permission for organized leisure activities was sought from the Japanese, the initial response was not positive. The conquerors felt it inappropriate for men who had suffered the shame of defeat to be engaged in such activities as sports and entertainment. They were convinced otherwise, according to Aussie George Sprod, “when our commandant, intrepid ‘Black Jack’ Galleghan, put it to them that a few such diversions would deter the prisoners from indulging in evil thoughts, such as escaping.”^{iv18}

The Reorganization of Divisional Concert Parties

Once permission was granted, each division was encouraged to establish an entertainment committee and a concert party. The officer in charge of the concert party would have “full authority to draw on the best talent available” from the various units within the division.¹⁹ Performances were to take place six days a week after the evening meal and before lights out, but not on Sundays. Each entertainment committee could determine how its concert party could best serve the men in its area with regard to the location and how often programs should change. In order to have time to produce the shows, “members of the concert party were excused all other duties.”^{v20}

This latter provision elicited more than one grouching comment from POWs about what they saw

*iv Galleghan represented the A.I.F., but he wasn’t the only officer present at this meeting.
v Release time from camp duties was also extended to the lecturers in Changi’s fledgling universities.*

as preferential treatment, but those voices were quickly silenced by others who understood its necessity. Producing “rattling good shows”²¹ every week, or every other week, or even once a month would be an enormous challenge requiring huge amounts of talent, skill, stamina, perseverance—and luck. Happily, what transpired in response was, in Jack Chalker’s words, a “releasing and discovering [of] great creative talent.”²²

To find material for their shows, entertainers scoured divisional libraries, recycled every old song and comedy bit they knew, and dredged their collective memories to recall every stage show seen, every radio show heard, and every film viewed during their civilian lives.

Divisional Concert Parties

Of the five divisional concert parties formed in the spring of 1942, only the four that supplied entertainers to the Thailand-Burma railway become our focus here.^{vi} Three had been in operation before the war, and depending upon who had survived the battles for Malaya and Singapore, and in what condition, these concert parties would get a head start in reactivating their troupes and presenting shows.

“**The A.I.F. Malayan Concert Party.**” “On 11 March 1942, Major [Jim] Jacobs was asked to come forward and he, with the assistance of Lieut. Val Mack and Sergeant John Wood as the Entertainment Committee, reformed the AIF Concert Party,” recalled Corporal Leonard Stewart in his official report on the concert party, written in 1944.²³

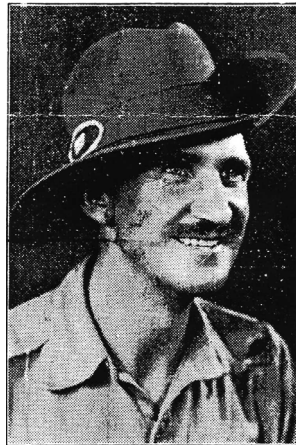


FIGURE 1.3. MAJOR JAMES WILLIAM (JIM) JACOBS. VX 40983.



FIGURE 1.4. CAPTAIN VAL MACK. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF KERRIN FREY.

Jim “Hole-in-the-road” Jacobs (the nickname acquired from a comic sketch he performed) noted that all but three of the former “Digger” troupe were “still available. These men formed the nucleus of the new party, and to them we added many new performers whom we discovered in the camp.”²⁴

“**The Optimists.**” By contrast, only five members of the original 18th Division’s Optimists concert party had been located. Their popular magician, Fergus Anckorn, was in Roberts Hospital recovering from war wounds.

^{vi} As far as is known, no performers with the fifth group, “The Malayan Command Players,” were sent Up Country.



FIGURE 1.5. FERGUS ANCKORN. COURTESY OF FERGUS ANCKORN.

Anckorn had survived the battle for Singapore, but just barely. During one Japanese bombing attack, he had been driving a lorry:

And I got blown up. . . . The shrapnel came in—I got hit in the face; hit in the back . . . and the lorry was on fire, and I couldn't get out of it. So I went to open the door, and I saw my hand was hanging off—my right hand—this one. (That's why I wear this splint.) And so I couldn't open it [the door]. In the end I kicked the door open and I jumped. And when I was in midair, I was shot. . . . I got a bullet went through the back of my leg into my kneecap. And down I went.^{vii25}

The injury to his hand might have ended Anckorn's career as a magician, but an alert orderly managed to save it. (To hear how Anckorn's hand was saved and about his narrow escape during the Japanese massacre of patients in Alexandra Hospital, listen to **Audio Link 1.1**).

Audio



1.1

It was May before Anckorn was discharged from hospital and able to rejoin the Optimists. While recuperating, he learned to compensate for his shattered left knee by using a homemade pulley contraption. Later he taught himself to do card tricks with his left hand.²⁶

^{vii} Anckorn would later believe that he had been shot by friendly fire.

Of the several new recruits for the company, Aubrey King (tenor) and George Wall (bass-baritone) were professionally trained singers and Reginald Renison a classically trained pianist—additions that pleased music director Denis East, who had been a violinist in the London Philharmonic Orchestra.^{viii} Norman Pritchard, an architect in training pre-enlistment, became the company’s stage manager.



FIGURE 1.6. NORMAN PRITCHARD. COURTESY OF NORMAN PRITCHARD.

“The P.O.W. WOWS.”^{ix} It is unclear who was responsible for the formation of “The P.O.W. WOWS Concert Party” in the 11th Indian Division’s Garden & Woods Area. Musical conductor “Ace” Connolly and his “Kings of Swing” orchestra (including songwriter Bob Gale), who had participated in a shipboard concert organized by Major Cary Owtram on their way out to Malaya, had been captured early in the war and incarcerated in Pudu Gaol in Kuala Lumpur.^{x27}

“The Southern Area Central Concert Party.” This concert party supplied a significant number of entertainers for the Thailand side of the railway—entertainers who remained together through most of the ensuing three and a half years—and thus will be examined more closely in terms of its personnel and productions.

The Southern Area Central Concert Party

The Artistic Team

The three key figures on the Southern Area’s entertainment committee were “General Manager and Stage Director” Major Leofric Thorpe of Singapore Fortress Signals, “Musical Director” Second Lieutenant Norman Smith, and “Producer” Corporal Leo Britt.^{xi28}

^{viii} Renison and East were both recruited by John Coast to teach music in the 18th Division’s university [Coast, 18].

^{ix} Another group of POW entertainers in Bicycle Camp on Java will call their group “The Pow-Wow Concert Party.”

^x This information comes from a recent interview with “Bunny” Austin who met Connolly and Gale while incarcerated in Pudu Gaol. He would later become a member of “Ace” Connolly’s band in Nong Pladuk [Callum Austin, “Interview with ‘Bunny’ Austin,” 29 August 2011].

^{xi} Others on the entertainment committee were Second Lieutenant R. Green as box office manager, Lieutenant P. Finch as stage manager—personnel, and Corporal H. Jones as stage manager—sets & properties.



FIGURE 1.7. LEOFRIC THORPE. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF DAVID AND CHRISTINE STYLES.

Leofric Thorpe had been posted from India to Singapore in September 1939. Soon after his arrival, he became involved with a local community theatre called The Island Committee, comprised of rubber brokers, tin miners, solicitors, and other British colonials as well as military personnel from the units stationed in and around Singapore. Besides functioning as the theatre's honorary secretary and treasurer, Thorpe also stage-managed several productions, including the *Fun Fare* concert parties that toured to Alexandra Military Hospital and Royal Artillery installations in June and August of 1941.

In late November 1941, he was the director, stage manager, and business manager for the "Stand Easy Concert Party" that toured Northern Malaya "to entertain the troops in the rubber."^{xii29} They were performing in Ipoh on 2 December when orders were received that all troops should return to barracks immediately. In his official report on the tour, submitted three days after the Japanese attack on 8 December,^{xiii} Thorpe wrote, "With the war being fought, there will be an even greater need now [for entertainment]. When the situation stabilizes, and the number of troops perhaps increase, no better way of maintaining the morale of the men could be tried. . . . Another show should start as soon as circumstances permit."³⁰ But the situation didn't stabilize and the circumstances didn't permit until after the British surrender.

^{xii} *Protecting the strategically valuable rubber plantations.*

^{xiii} *7 December in the United States.*



FIGURE 1.8. NORMAN SMITH. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF CHRISTOPHER N. SMITH.

Norman Smith had been a dance band leader before the war. Because of his unusually large stature, he was described by John Durnford as an “enormous, cheerful figure” and John Coast would call him “the vast Norman Broad.”^{xiv31} Later, in Chungkai hospital camp in Thailand, Richard Sharp would write that his “brusque good nature and common sense smoothed many a situation.”³²

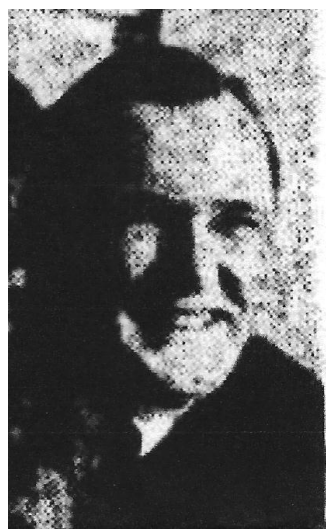


FIGURE 1.9. LEO BRITT.
PHOTOGRAPH DETAIL. *THE ARGUS*
(MELBOURNE), 7 JULY 1948.

^{xiv} John Coast's memoir, *Railroad of Death* (1946), was one of the first works published about the Thailand-Burma railway. Unfortunately, Coast used pseudonyms for all the surnames of the British, Australian, and Dutch soldiers, fearing that what he had written might, in some cases, be considered libelous. His device has been a bane to all serious researchers. Yet most of his pseudonyms were cleverly devised to rhyme with the person's actual name (“Benson” for “Renison”) or to describe a unique physical characteristic (“Norman Broad” for “Norman Smith”), so that those who had been there would know whom he was talking about. In this text, these pseudonyms have been restored to the individuals' real surnames whenever possible.

Leo Britt had been a professional actor in London's West End theatre before enlistment. He met Leofric Thorpe in September 1941 when performing in the Island Committee's production of *The Amazing Dr. Clitterhouse* that Thorpe had stage-managed. Given Britt's years of professional stage experience, Thorpe designated him the concert party's producer.

The Company

To get his new company off the ground, Thorpe first enlisted personnel from the two prewar theatrical organizations he'd been involved with. Those from the "Stand Easy" concert party were Arthur Butler and Frankie Quinton.

Old Faces. Lance Bombardier Arthur Butler had been well known in Singapore before the war as a female impersonator named "Gloria d'Earie." With his "delightful tenor voice," he sang on Singapore Radio every Sunday and at society birthday parties, and he even gave a command performance for the sultan of Johor.³³ "Butler was slim and gracious, with small features and ardent brown eyes," wrote Tom Wade. "He was always known as Gloria and the jokes about him were almost as numerous as they once use[d] to be about Mae West. It was said that when he gave an order to the gunmen in his artillery battery, they would always reply, "Yes, darling."^{xv34}



FIGURE 1.10. ARTHUR BUTLER AS "GLORIA D'EARIE" IN FRONT OF HIS BILLET. IWM PHOTOGRAPH ARCHIVE DOC 843. COURTESY OF R. T. KNIGHT & PAMELA KNIGHT.

Another soldier remembered that Butler "undertook, on one occasion, to spend, dressed as a woman, an afternoon and evening in the city visiting Raffles Hotel^{xvi} and meeting people without being recognized as a man. And he got away with it."³⁵

^{xv} Given his stage name it must have really been, "Yes, dearie."
^{xvi} The most prestigious high-class hotel in Singapore.



FIGURE 1.11. FRANKIE QUINTON AND FRIENDS IN MALAYA PRIOR TO HOSTILITIES (FRANKIE QUINTON IS ON THE LEFT). COURTESY OF TOM BOARDMAN AND MRS. QUINTON.

The accordionist Frankie Quinton carried his instrument with him everywhere he went. “Frankie was a short, cheery laddie,” recalled Laurie Allison, “who only needed an audience to bring out his accordion and for hours would play any tune requested. If he didn’t know the tune, which was rarely, he would get the requester to hum it and then would pick up the melody. . . . However, being the cheery chappie he was, his theme song was ‘When You’re Smiling’ and smile songs featured predominantly in his playing.”³⁶ Frankie’s “instrument often wanted ‘patchin’ up,” wrote Tom Boardman, who became a close friend, “and somehow he did it, and carried on with the show.”³⁷

Those enlisted in the concert party from the Island Committee were Lieutenant Jack McNaughton, Captain Wilfred Pearson, Captain Eric Griffith-Jones, and Lieutenant Terry Morris.

Jack McNaughton had been a professional actor in London revues before the war. With “much comedy experience and a mobile and highly expressive face,” he became the concert party’s leading comedian.³⁸



FIGURE 1.12. CAPTAIN WILFRED "FIZZER" PEARSON. COURTESY OF CHRISTOPHER N. SMITH.



FIGURE 1.13. CAPTAIN ERIC GRIFFITH-JONES. COURTESY OF CHRISTOPHER N. SMITH.



FIGURE 1.14. LIEUTENANT TERRY MORRIS. COURTESY OF TERRY MORRIS.

"Fizzer" Pearson was described by John Coast as "an amateur actor and comedian of great ability, and seemed equally at home acting a straight part in a play, a genial ass in a Musical Comedy, or on occasion he would get down to what he and his lyric-writer called 'the real, red-nose stuff.'"^{xvii39} According to Jack Chalker, he acquired the nickname "Fizzer" because of his "bubbling humour."⁴⁰

Eric Griffith-Jones had appeared with Britt in *The Amazing Dr. Clitterhouse*. He and Pearson became close friends and would stick together until liberation.

Between 10 May and 21 August 1941, Terry Morris had appeared in three Island Committee productions, including Thorpe's *Fun Fare* tours. He was typecast by Thorpe to play "young 'boyish' parts."⁴¹

New Faces. Once the "old faces" were on board, Thorpe auditioned other possible participants from the varied constituencies in the Southern Area. One of the new faces was Bobby Spong, a female impersonator who had already made a name for himself as a performer in his unit's shows.

^{xvii} Farce.



FIGURE 1.15. BOBBY SPONG. *WONDER BAR*
PHOTOGRAPH DETAIL. COURTESY OF MARTIN
PERCIVAL.

Thorpe recalled Spong’s repertoire: “His favorite two numbers were ‘I’m an old Norman Castle with a ruined Tudor wing. Ten architects have had a hand in me,’ and ‘A tisket, a tasket, my little yellow basket.’ I have heard him sing them a hundred times.”^{xviii42}

Butler and Spong would be the company’s top female impersonators. When the troops saw these two “glamorous” figures on stage, Tom Wade noted that their reactions were both ecstatic and erotic:

These two young men, slinkily dressed and well made-up, caused immeasurable happiness to thousands of prisoners. They were frankly adored. In POW camp we had no heroes: no war heroes, political heroes, sport heroes. The only people about whom there was any glamour were the actors and most idolised of these were the female impersonators. Crowds escorted them from stage door to their barracks each evening. I often heard troops say, “If Gloria were a woman I could really go for her,” and others, “I had a wonderful dream about Bobby Spong last night.”⁴³

Musicians. While Thorpe was recruiting comics and singers, Norman Smith was scouting out musicians and instruments for his “Melody Makers” orchestra. Among the troops who entered Changi as POWs were members of several different regimental bands and orchestral units. During combat they had served as stretcher bearers. In addition, there were soldiers like Tom Boardman who carried musical

^{xviii} Thorpe went on to write, “The first of these songs, with its double entendre, was made popular by the famous British female impersonator, Douglas Byng in the 1930s. The second was a children’s song which had been given an early 1940s American swing treatment [by Ella Fitzgerald] and could easily—and at times did—have additional, or altered, lyrics that made sarcastic references to their captors” [Thorpe, *Fax*, 23 June 2000]. Norman Smith recalled that Spong also “impersonated Beatrice Lillie. ‘She’ had a complete repertoire of solo numbers such as ‘Love for Sale’ and ‘Falling in love again’ and ‘See what the boys in the back room will have,’ the latter two, of course as Marlene Dietrich” [Norman Smith, 18–19].

instruments for their own enjoyment and that of their barrack mates.



FIGURE 1.16. TOM BOARDMAN IN MALAYA BEFORE THE WAR. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF TOM BOARDMAN.

Whatever musical instruments the Changi musicians didn't have they would try to make. Tom Boardman lost his "bongulele"^{xix} during the battle for Singapore, so he constructed a small ukulele out of scrap wood with signal wire for strings and "gears" from a "badly broken mandolin" found in a village hut on work detail.⁴⁴ The Optimists' Denis East lost his violin as well, and after much trial and error a new one was constructed.⁴⁵

Before Smith was done recruiting, he had acquired fifteen musicians along with a collection of instruments.^{xx46} Two pianos were commandeered from military clubs or married quarters. Preparing musical scores for his orchestra was an arduous task: "All the band parts had to be handwritten and the scores done from memory," wrote Smith. "I had lots of assistance from army musicians used to copying music and the music teacher-pianist, Lieutenant Eric Cliffe^{xxi} contributed several pieces all of which had to be suitably arranged for the rather unbalanced orchestra I had collected together."⁴⁷

"It must have taken about a month," Thorpe remembered, "to get the cast and orchestra and others together and rehearse the first show."⁴⁸

First Divisional Productions

On 18 March 1942^{xxii}—one month after surrender—the A.I.F. Malayan Concert Party was once again on tour, "but this time around the [Selarang] Barrack square, and adjacent areas," wrote Corporal Stewart. "Each camp or unit had built its own platform staging, and the party did the rounds of these 'theatres' once a week with a change of programme."⁴⁹ The variety shows were brief, lasting no more than thirty to forty minutes so they could visit as many units as possible "after the evening meal and before the

^{xix} A combination bongo and ukulele.

^{xx} These were four violins, two flutes, two clarinets, a saxophone, an oboe, two trumpets, two piano accordions, two Spanish guitars, two pianofortes, and percussion.

^{xxi} Cliffe had been on the piano faculty at the London Academy of Music.

^{xxii} The date is from Val Mack's production logbooks and confirmed by Major Jacobs' statement in his autobiography that their first show took place a week after the formation of the company. In his report, Stewart gives the first performance date as 19 March.

sun set.”⁵⁰

The P.O.W. WOWS and Optimists presented their first productions three days later. The *1st Edition* of the P.O.W. WOWS’ variety show was performed for the troops in the Garden & Woods section at the base of a natural amphitheatre dubbed “the Rice Bowl Theatre.” The show was also toured to troops across the way in Birdwood Camp. New “editions” of the show were produced every two weeks.

In contrast, the first of the Optimists’ monthly shows, *Rice and Shine: A Topical Revue*, was performed indoors in an atap hut that had previously been a dining hall.⁵¹ Since everyone was sick to death of their rice diet, the pun in the title was cheeky. As the subtitle indicates, the show was filled with topical humor, in monologues (“Rumours,” “Ode to Rice”) and sketches (“Food Fracas,” “The Soldier’s Return”).

“The Soldier’s Return” was the Optimists’ version of a comic sketch that had originated in First World War concert parties. It satirized the misunderstanding that occurs when a soldier comes home from the front after a long absence and uses military terminology and jargon not understood by his wife or family. The climax involves the soldier’s discovery that he is the father of a newborn baby boy—clearly not his. In the long tradition of barracks humor that “busted” what the audience held most dear, the POWs at this point could laugh about this soldier’s unfortunate fate. Two years later, a repeat of this sketch in Chungkai hospital camp in Thailand would get the producer in a great deal of trouble.

The Southern Area Troops Central Concert Party opened the first of its monthly productions, *Red, Bright and Blue: A New Laughing Revusical*,^{xxiii} on 14 April in what had been an open-air Chinese Opera playhouse-cum-cinema in Changi Village.⁵² As Leofric Thorpe had been stationed in Changi before the war, he knew the camp well, and once assigned to the Southern Area, he commandeered the abandoned theatre and set about renovating it: “I, of course, managed to get a hold of school desks and benches and tiered benches came from a cricket field just before it went out of bounds, so we seated about 2000. . . . I was able to get my own curtains from Singapore^{xxiv} via one of the working or ration parties.”⁵³

In recognition of a well-known variety theatre in London, it was called “the Pavilion Theatre.” When D. S. Cave attended the theatre, he was amazed by its professional look: “Around the façade of the Pavilion were hoardings showing the cast, strung on painted palms in true theatre style.”⁵⁴

^{xxiii} As the name suggests, a revusical was a hybrid form, but in actuality the term was more of a publicity gimmick to pull into the theatre audiences expecting to see something new.

^{xxiv} From the Island Committee.



FIGURE 1.17. PROGRAM COVER FOR *RED, BRIGHT AND BLUE*.
IWM 65/144/1.

Red, Bright and Blue was written and produced by Leo Britt but staged by Leofric Thorpe. Among the thirteen sketches and musical numbers on the playbill were “Latest News: Official Rumourtism” (a satire of the insidious rumor mill); Gloria d’Earie’s strip-tease act, “Nina Pulloffski: The Beautiful Spy”; and “Black Fantasie,” a “Concerto Negro Spirituals” by “The Savoyard Singers.” Following tradition, the show closed with everyone standing and singing the national anthem.

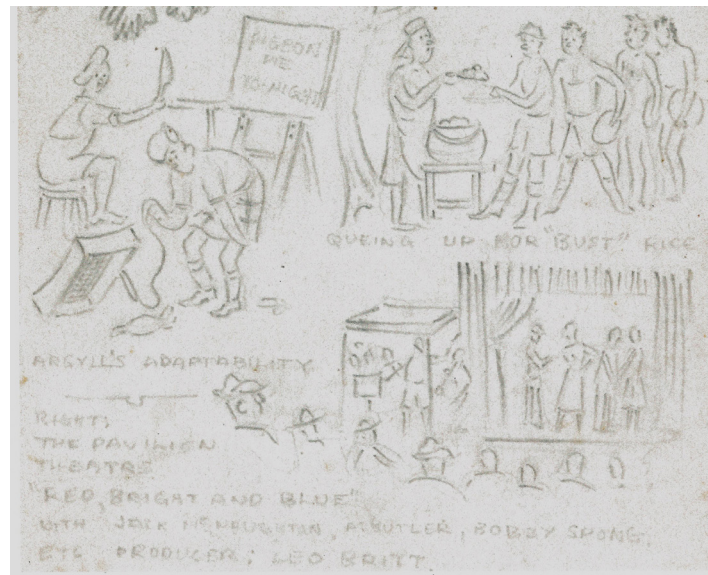


FIGURE 1.18. “CHANGI SCENES” DETAIL. CHARLES A. SIMPSON. IWM ART 15592 [8].

A detail from Charles Simpson's cartoon "Changi Scenes" shows the Pavilion Theatre with performers on stage and Norman Smith's orchestra under the marquee at audience left (see **Figure 1.19** for the complete cartoon in the Image Gallery).

Item ten on the playbill was a very pointed topical sketch, "The Men who Stayed Behind: Penalties for Desertion."^{xxv} According to R. J. Godber, it showed "the absolute imbecility of the High Command." One actor was made up "to look just like General Keith Simmonds," the Singapore Fortress Command G.O.C.,^{xxvi} who attended one performance along with General Percival of Malaya Command and other senior officers and staff⁵⁵—a performance Thorpe remembered:

I well remember a satirical sketch with Jack McNaughton as a Colonel staff officer "Colonel Mango," Fizzer as the Adjutant "Capt. White-teeth," Terry Morris, and another (I forget who). The Colonel was told that Ululand had invaded Blunderland, and the Col asked which side they were on—Blunderland of course. After a lot of very witty dialogue, which made no secret of the ballsup which had taken place, they ended with a song and dance. . . . General Percival came of course to see the show, and I watched his reaction with great interest through the curtains; he took the ribbing very well.⁵⁶

Another member of the delegation from Malaya Command was Other Ranks John Sharp of Command Signals Headquarters. This performance was the first he had seen in captivity, and the brief comment he made on it in his diary was the first of many during the next three and a half years: "Went to concert in Changi Village—several good sketches and a female impersonator, with an amusing news bulletin."^{xxvii57}

Censorship

As the Optimists' and Southern Area's shows illustrate, the false rumors that tormented the men, the unpalatable rice, and the debacle of losing Malaya and Singapore provided fertile ground for the comedians' caustic wit—and would continue to do so. This line of humor would be endured as long as it wasn't perceived to cross the line and undermine morale.

The Japanese did not attend the POWs' musical and theatrical productions during that first year in Changi, and the only instance of their censorship was an order issued two months after concert parties were up and running that forbade the singing of the British national anthem because it might inspire patriotic thoughts in defeated men. To satisfy the need for some sort of rousing patriotic-like number, concert party producers substituted "Land of Hope and Glory" instead, which seemed satisfactory to the I. J. A.⁵⁸

With no requirement to submit scripts to Japanese censors for approval, the shows were replete with attempts by the POW comedians to get back at their captors by mocking what they saw as peculiar

^{xxv} "Very pointed" because just before capitulation, General Archibald Wavell, Commander-in-Chief of the combined American-British-Dutch-Australian Command, fled Singapore by flying boat to escape capture. His last orders to the officers and men left behind were a reiteration of Churchill's that Singapore must be defended to the last man. Many POWs interpreted Wavell's escape as desertion.

^{xxvi} General Officer Commanding—the title for the general at the top of the division's command structure.

^{xxvii} Before mobilization, John Sharp had been in training as a librarian and carried these interests and skills into captivity with him, establishing lending libraries in several of the Thailand camps. His voluminous diary is one of the most extraordinary documents to come out of the Second World War in the Far East. It is a blend of factual and gossip information that gives the reader a feel for the day-to-day existence of an other ranks POW. Immediately after the war, Sharp transcribed the miniscule handwriting in his original diary onto the lined pages of twelve school exercise books totaling 1,293 pages. A separate exercise book contains an index of subjects and names with the pertinent pages in the main diary. These now reside in the Imperial War Museum.

customs and/or racial and physical characteristics. When one of these turns was performed, there were always lookouts posted to avoid surprise by an unannounced Japanese patrol. When the Japanese later started to attend POW shows Up Country, censorship rules were quickly imposed—challenging the entertainers to find clever ways to subvert them.

“Entertainment Everywhere”

As troops in each area were only allowed to attend their division’s shows on a rotation basis, there could be long gaps in time before they got to see another one. This situation proved intolerable, and to fill these gaps more entertainment was encouraged at the regiment and battalion level—in fact, anywhere a large number of POWs were stationed for any length of time. Keith Wilson noted an important difference in the status of these new unit or work site performers: “Unlike the chaps who performed in the main concert party, who were excused other duties, our performers worked during the day and had little time to rehearse or put acts together.”⁵⁹ Before long there were so many concert parties operating in Changi that John Lane observed, “There was entertainment everywhere.”⁶⁰

Unit Concert Parties

One of the new unit concert parties was in the Selarang Area, where Jack Turner, a member of the 2/2nd Transport Company, took on the role of female impersonator. One song he sang during his act was “The Singapore Retreat,” a parody written by Frank L. Huston of Tommy Tucker’s popular song “The Man That Comes Around.” The first verse gives an example of the song’s satirical sting:

*There’s the man that said that Singapore shall not, must not fall,^{xxviii}
He pushed us in the scrum and he left us with the ball.
We’ll resist them on the land, repel them everywhere,
But little did we realise, his words were all hot air.⁶¹*

Huston also wrote a number of other parodies for Turner based on old music hall songs (see the lyrics for all these songs in “The FEPOW Songbook”).

Work Site Concert Parties

Toward the end of March, the Japanese ordered thousands of POWs from Changi to work sites in Singapore and environs. Their job was to clean up debris from the bombing campaign and restore essential services. Some of the men were assigned to day jobs where they moved from place to place as needed and returned to Changi each night. Others were sent to locations such as River Valley Road or the docks at Keppel Harbour, where they would stay for several months. It was at these long-term work sites that concert parties were initiated.^{xxix}

River Valley Road. River Valley Road Camp functioned as the field hospital for the working

^{xxviii} Prime Minister Winston Churchill had ordered that Singapore be held at all cost.

^{xxix} Besides River Valley Road and Keppel Harbour, concert parties were created in the work camps at Adam Park, Caldecott Hill Estate, The Great World, Havelock Road, Serangoon Road, Sime Road, and Towner Road.

parties in and around Singapore. It was located on the edge of Singapore Town just across a stream from Havelock Road Camp, situated in the heart of Chinatown.



FIGURE 1.20. LEN GIBSON AND FRIENDS IN LIVERPOOL BEFORE EMBARKATION. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF LEN GIBSON.

Len Gibson and three mates from the Highland Regiments, Michael Conlin, Charley Carney, and Johnny Glancy, organized concert parties in the camp.⁶² Jack Chalker, who had been transferred to River Valley from Havelock Road after contracting malaria, drew a pencil sketch of the “Gaiety Theatre” they built at one end of a hut.^{xxx}

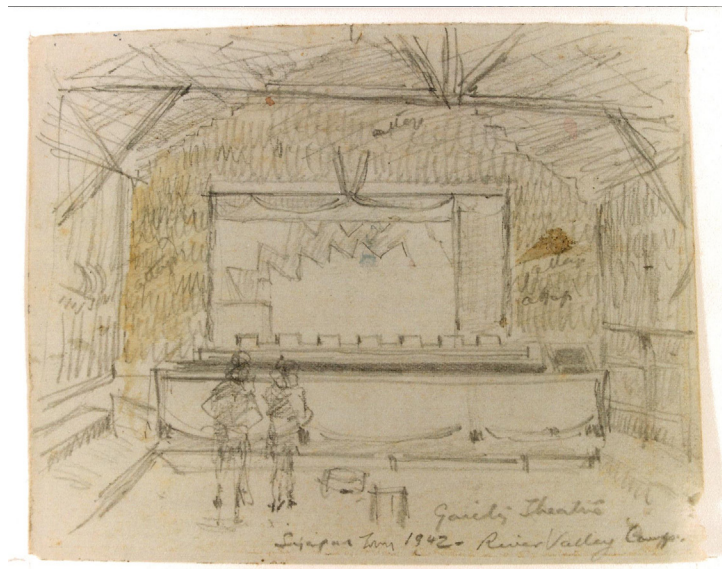


FIGURE 1.21. THE GAIETY THEATRE. JACK CHALKER. COURTESY OF JACK CHALKER.

^{xxx} Jack Chalker had been an art student preparing to take up his post-graduate scholarship at the Royal College of Art when his induction notice came. With his powerful drawings documenting the tropical diseases suffered by the POWs in Thailand, the ingenious medical practices used to combat them, and daily life on the Thailand-Burma railway, Chalker became one of the best-known railway war artists. He would also become significantly involved in the entertainment Up Country.

Keppel Harbour. The POWs posted to the docks at Keppel Harbour—Singapore’s port of entry—worked as stevedores loading and unloading cargo from ships and turning the Singapore Police Station into an I. J. A. headquarters. Jimmy Walker, who had produced a show aboard the transport ship on the way out to Malaya, was asked by welfare officer Lieutenant John D. V. Allum to organize weekly shows. Sergeant Major “Tug” Wilson volunteered to perform and write songs as well. With a nod to their locale (and to the popular song), they called themselves “The Harbour Lights Concert Party.”

Walker recalled how they converted one of their godowns, or warehouses, into a theatre:

Under cover of darkness, we sawed off lamps and fittings from under the eaves of Godown 21 within the camp’s perimeter. We “laid on” electricity and the lamps, gaily painted, became our footlights. Bales of cotton stolen from Godown 21 were transformed into curtains and scenery cleverly painted by Lieutenant Greig. Every item, every costume and prop was stolen at the risk of someone’s life. The mechanism to dim the lights was once the innards of an electric fan in Jap. H.Q., formerly Singapore Police Station.⁶³

“Every Wednesday,” Walker wrote, “the men would dash for a place in the ‘theatre’ for their one spasm of entertainment. . . . The ‘hit’ song of each episode became the song echoing through the camp for the following week. We heard no others.”⁶⁴

To be a complete success, the troupe had to find somebody willing “to put a skirt on”—i.e., become a female impersonator—“so when a look-alike Carmen Miranda danced gracefully on stage,” Walker wrote, “hope danced as well. Her swirling coloured skirt was once a mosquito-net, her bra, two twisted towels and her head-dress out-Mirandered Miranda! Her dancing was the performance that two Jap guards dashed back-stage and caused ‘Carmen’ to undress completely and reveal a laughing signalman, Johnny Mutton!”⁶⁵

This kind of mistaken identity by Japanese guards would plague the female impersonators wherever they performed, either in Changi or Up Country. Each episode would usually end with the indignant performer lifting up his skirt to reveal the fact that he was, unequivocally, male.

Jimmy Walker, Hank Phillips, and Bert Compton became the Harbour Lights’ comedians. Their most popular sketch was “Smiles on the Nile.”⁶⁶

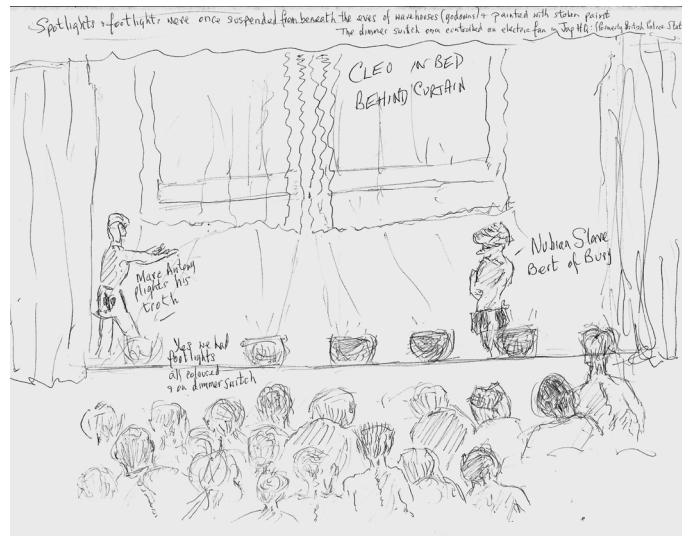


FIGURE 1.22. "SMILES ON THE NILE" ON STAGE IN THE KEPPEL HARBOUR THEATRE. JIMMY WALKER. COURTESY OF JIMMY WALKER.

(To hear Walker narrate this sketch and other variety acts and how costumes were produced from scrounged materials, listen to **Audio 1.2.**)

Audio



1.2

More problematic for the entertainers, whether at work sites or in Changi, would be acquiring costumes and makeup, but as Thorpe's and Walker's accounts reveal, the POWs proved very resourceful. "It was admirable the way tailors and carpenters provided such colourful and attractive costumes and props," wrote Tom Wade. "We all contributed what we could in the way of brightly coloured clothing or civilian hats, but most of these things and other like dresses were brought in from working parties in Singapore, always on the look-out for such valuables."⁶⁷ For female impersonators like Jack Turner, makeup items like "rouge, face powder, lipstick and creams were obtained from former Australian nurses' trunks which were left on the Island when they evacuated Singapore."⁶⁸ When that supply ran out, chemists in the prisoners' midst would concoct substitutes.

Camp Bulletin 05/42: Re Up Country Construction Project

In early May, I. J. A. headquarters notified Malaya Command that 8,000 POWs would be sent from Changi to Up Country locations to work on a huge construction project, rumored to be a railway. The first of these drafts, known as "A Force" and composed of 3,000 Australians under the command of Brigadier General A. L. Varley, embarked by ship to Burma on 14 May.

Among them were Major Jim Jacobs, formerly officer in charge of the A.I.F. Malayan Concert Party, Bandmaster Norman Whittaker with his 2/18th Infantry Battalion's Brass Band (including all their instruments), and female impersonator Jack Turner. Many Australian POWs volunteered to go on these

drafts in order to stay with their mates as well as to get out of Changi's stultifying atmosphere.^{xxxii} The Japanese had led them to believe that food and living conditions would be better Up Country. They would soon learn otherwise.

“The Mummie Bees”

The British POWs in the other areas of Changi were unaffected by this evacuation of Australian troops. Once their concert party was established, Thorpe and Britt imposed a rigorous repertory-style rehearsal and performance schedule on the company in the Southern Area: “We played a musical show 6 nights a week, rehearsing the one which would follow during the daytime, and writing, orchestrating, and planning the one to follow that during the evening until late at night.”⁶⁹

Their new show, *Hellsabuzzin'!*, was Britt's rewrite of Lupino and Eyton's popular West End musical comedy *Runaway Love*, with topical references (Britt had been in a tour of the show back in Britain, so he knew it thoroughly).^{xxxiii70} Musical comedies of the 1930s differed from revues more in degree than in kind. They had tighter plots, more developed characters, and music more integral to the action. To identify the musical theatre troupe and its shows from other Southern Area productions, such as orchestral concerts, the group was christened “The Mummie Bees.”

Among the new performers added to the company was John “Nellie” Wallace, who had studied ballet prior to the war. As he was willing to “put a skirt on,” Wallace gave the company a much-needed third female impersonator. His campy acting style got him typecast by Thorpe as “a low comedienne.”⁷¹ With the success of this second show, Leo Britt's reputation as a quality producer began to grow—and so did his ego.

Something New / Something Different

When concert parties started in March, “Every joke, every grotesque gesture, every sly dig at the Japanese, many of whom would be standing on the fringe of the crowd, sullen and frowning, provoked frantic cheering and laughter,” explained Hew Crawford.⁷² But after more than two months of variety and revue-type shows, some performers were dissatisfied with this format and its content. There was also need for a wider variety of entertainment to appeal to other segments and tastes in the vast POW community.

In the Optimists, classically trained singers George Wall and Aubrey King and musicians Denis East and Reginald Renison felt their talents were being wasted. They wanted to give themselves, and their audiences, an alternative to the popular songs, show tunes, and farcical sketches. So when the run of their current show ended, the company disbanded, and they, along with accordionist Fred Coles, formed the “Quo Fata Vocant”^{xxxiiii} ensemble to perform concerts of light classical music. Other Optimists performers like Fergus Anckorn became “free agents,” available to any producer in the area. After a successful debut on 29 May, the ensemble began to tour different venues in the 18th Division.

Another response to demands for variety in programming was the 18th Division's formation of “The New Windmill Players”—a dramatics group that presented plays on a renovated stage in the ballroom of a recreational center renamed the New Windmill Theatre.^{xxxiv73} Its sets were designed by other ranks cartoonist Ronald Searle.

^{xxxii} But their commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel “Black Jack” Galleghan, steadfastly refused to allow any other members of the concert party to volunteer for these drafts. They were to stay in Changi to keep up the morale of his troops there. For this reason, there is little in this chapter about the marvelous Australian performers or the series of shows they produced under the guidance of Captain Val Mack, who was given a field promotion to run the company when Major Jacobs was sent away.

^{xxxiii} The new title was “borrowed” from Olsen and Johnson's wacky and surreal 1941 movie, *Hellzapoppin*.

^{xxxiv} “Whither the fates call”: motto of the Royal Northumberland Fusiliers.

^{xxxv} The windmill was a reference not only to the unit “flash” [emblem] worn on their uniforms but to the famous London theatre that was kept open during “the Blitz.”

In the Southern Area, the need was met by the development of two smaller production companies. Leofric Thorpe's *The Weekenders* performed on Sundays,^{xxxv} when the Mummie Bees had their one day off. "It had no real rehearsal," wrote Thorpe, "but was not at all bad and [had] chaps like Sam Drayton who sang in one of the big London bands. He was very wooden in appearance so I put a microphone in front of him consisting of a boot polish tin with a wire to it which the Japs inspected very carefully."⁷⁴ *The Weekenders* proved to be enormously popular. Whereas audiences for the main shows were booked on a rotation basis, the "Sunday shows were first come, first in—you can imagine the rush weekly."^{xxxvi75}

Leo Britt's *Café Colette*, on the other hand, was a tour show devised so it could be performed anywhere in the Southern Area during the week. "Leo put on shows during the day with no help at all. They were done at any convenient place, always a different one. . . . It consisted of three or four rhythm sections conducted by Leo, one or two singers, and an occasional man dragged up from the audience."⁷⁶ Britt's band leader character was called "Maestro," and since this title seemed to fit his personality and style, everyone started to address him this way.

Camp Bulletin 18-26/6/42: Re More Up Country Evacuations

The call for additional drafts to complete the I. J. A.'s request for 8,000 POWs for Up Country duty was finally received. Between 18 and 26 June, 3,000 POWs from various divisions in Changi were transported in railway boxcars to Thailand. Designated "Mainland No. 1 Work Party," this advance group would construct the supply depot and maintenance base camp at Nong Pladuk and the staging camp at Ban Pong. It would also lay the track from Ban Pong to the provincial city of Kanchanaburi in preparation for the start of major construction.



FIGURE 1.23. TRANSPORT TO THAILAND. ROBERT BRAZIL. COURTESY OF ROBERT BRAZIL.

Major Cary Owtram and others from Birdwood Camp were part of this draft, as was Norman Pritchard from the 18th Division and John Sharp from Malaya Command Signals Headquarters.

^{xxxv} In the interest of keeping morale up, the ban on Sunday performances had been lifted.

^{xxxvi} But Thorpe's agreement to let the padre use the theatre for Sunday services created a problem: "He asked me if he might have a service before the show and I said it would bring in a good congregation. It started with about 50 worshipers and then people realised it was the way to get good seats at the show, and hundreds turned up. The Padre had rigged up a small bamboo altar and found someone sitting on it. He remonstrated but was told, 'Bugger the fucking altar; I've come to the show!' So it ceased to be a church" [Thorpe, Letter, 24 May 2000].

“Fizzer’s Flute”

Once again, the evacuation of these additional 3,000 troops had little impact on the vast number of POWs who remained in Changi, although rumors circulating about more overseas drafts added to their uncertainty about the future. With Leo Britt occupied touring *Café Colette*, comedian Jack McNaughton produced the Mummings Bees’ new “non-stop revue,” *New Pins and Needles*, which ran during June in the Southern Area.^{xxxvii}

One item on the bill was “Fizzer” Pearson’s solo turn, “Balalaika,” that contained his first performance of a song especially written for him by Leslie “Biggles” Bywaters to music by Norman Smith. The first verse gives a good idea of Bywaters’ gifts as a lyricist, especially for double entendre:

*Behold in me a member of the Oswaldtwistle band,
When you hear my music you will think it simply grand.
I told my wife that playing second fiddle was the cause
Of much of our unhappiness, she answered without pause,
You’re lucky to be in the band at all with an instrument like yours.
(Flute).⁷⁷*

“Fizzer’s Flute” would become Pearson’s signature song, repeated many times Up Country.^{xxxviii}

On the back page of the show’s souvenir program was an announcement of Britt’s imminent return to the Pavilion stage with a new production: André Charlot’s musical *Wonder Bar* (Britt had been in the cast of the original West End production). As a musical comedy with scenes taking place indoors and out at a ski resort in St. Moritz, Switzerland, it would need extensive rewriting before being presented to Changi audiences.

More Entertaining Solutions

By the sixth month in captivity, participation in sports had fallen off due to the inadequate diet. As a consequence, dependence on entertainment intensified, which meant additional viewing opportunities had to be found. One solution was to grant touring concert parties like the P.O.W. Wows permission to travel outside the boundaries of their area. With the addition of Padre John Foster-Haigh as officer in charge, the Quo Fata Vocant ensemble began to tour other areas as the “Changi Celebrity Artists.”^{xxxix}

Another solution was to allow officers to take their men to see shows in other areas. To accommodate them, concert parties performing in theatres, like the Mummings Bees, would need to extend their run. With this expectation in mind, Leo Britt put aside his prep on *Wonder Bar* and produced instead *Pass The Nuts: A New Screamlined and Nutty Revue*, which ran during July and August.

As the Mummings Bees’ company now numbered approximately fifty-two people, including administrative personnel, performers, stage technicians, and an orchestra of fifteen, *Pass the Nuts* was Britt’s biggest show yet.⁷⁸ The finale was a spectacular “Blood and Sand” sketch that had more than twenty

^{xxxvii} The “old” *Pins and Needles* had been a very popular London revue that had opened in 1921 and gone through numerous yearly “editions.”
^{xxxviii} Other verses from this risqué song will be found in later chapters.

^{xxxix} Padre John Foster-Haigh had been a professional singer in civilian life, “known throughout England as John Foster, the B.B.C. Tenor” [McNeilly, “Changi Celebrity Artists,” 1]. Foster-Haigh had already founded a Male Voice Choir, which Gibby Inglefield joined.

costumed characters on stage performing their drama of passion and death to music from Bizet's *Carmen*.

One of the new faces in the cast was Nigel Wright, a member of the F.M.S.V.F. (Federated Malay States Volunteer Forces) who had worked as a chemist for the rubber planters in Malaya and had years of experience leading an amateur theatre there. But two star performers—comedian Jack McNaughton and female impersonator Arthur Butler—were absent from the cast. When *New Pins and Needles* closed, they had put together a show to tour other areas in Changi.

Camp Bulletin 20/6-16/8/42: Re Decapitation

On 20 July, rumors were confirmed about another overseas deployment—but not for a working party. With thousands of POWs in Changi and Singapore and relatively few I. J. A. or Indian National Army^{x1} troops to guard them, the Japanese feared the POWs might attempt a breakout. To prevent such a possibility, all the senior officers above the rank of lieutenant-colonel were ordered removed from Changi and sent overseas—presumably to Japan. Jack McNaughton and Arthur Butler were scheduled to leave with them as members of their support staff.

The actual evacuation of these senior officers did not take place until 16 August. Before departure, General Percival placed Lieutenant-Colonel E. B. Holmes in charge of the British troops and Lieutenant-Colonel “Black Jack” Galleghan in charge of the Australians.⁷⁹ A month after their arrival in Taiwan, McNaughton and Butler were transferred to Chosen [Korea], where, by Christmas, they appeared in a series of shows in Keijo [Seoul] POW camp.

With Butler's departure, Bobby Spong became the Mummie Bees' leading female impersonator. Lieutenant James Richardson, who had seen both Butler and Spong on stage, much preferred Spong's abilities to create the illusion of a glamorous female: “Bobby Spong as a girl—very good (luscious, seductive bitch who always looks like a forthright whore!).”⁸⁰

And the Shows Go On

If the I. J. A. believed removal of the senior officers would make a significant difference in the ongoing life in Changi, they were mistaken. The POWs were more concerned about the possibility of a diphtheria epidemic, as the illness had already caused two deaths and put nearly two hundred men in the hospital.⁸¹ When that fear proved unfounded, each area tried to encourage attendance at its shows by showcasing new performers, putting on different types of programming, and playing new venues.

In the 18th Division, the New Windmill Theatre's *Windmill Variety No. 1* featured two new groups, John Foster-Haigh's Male Voice Choir and the 18th Division Signals String Band, as well as Fergus Anckorn performing several of his conjuring tricks. In the Southern Area, Eric Cliffe organized a concert of classical music performed in the officers' mess. After the concert, Richardson, who loved this type of music, wistfully mused, “What a wonderful place the world would be.”⁸²

^{x1} These were Sikh soldiers who had been members of the 3rd Indian Corps. When they were first captured, the Japanese removed them to a separate area to recruit them for the I. N. A., whose goal was the liberation of India from colonial rule. Many of these Indian soldiers willingly—or under duress—renounced their allegiance to the British Crown and became members of the new army. Those that refused were eventually sent to Thailand and held in a secret section of the hospital camp at Nakhon Pathom (see Chapter 8: “Breakout”).



FIGURE 1.24. SOUVENIR PROGRAM FOR *FUN FARE: A NEW EDITION*. IWM 65/144/1.

While *Pass the Nuts* continued its run in the Pavilion Theatre during August, Britt went back to work on his revision of *Wonder Bar*. To serve the needs of Southern Area troops who had already seen *Pass the Nuts*, “Fizzer” Pearson produced “a new quick-fire revue,” *Fun Fare: A New Edition*, with a group of performers from *Nuts* that toured area units during the day.^{xli}

Camp Bulletin 2-5/9/42: Re the “Selarang Incident”

With the senior echelon of POW officers off the scene, I. J. A. headquarters issued a demand that every POW sign a form swearing that he would not under any circumstances attempt to escape.⁸³ This command was in direct contradiction to the treatment of POWs laid down in the Hague and Geneva conventions. After much debate, the POW administration refused to sign, and in retaliation, all the POWs in Changi, except those in Roberts Hospital, were ordered to assemble in Selarang Barracks square by 2 September or be shot.⁸⁴ So 15,000-plus POWs^{xliii} trundled to the parade ground of the Selarang Barracks with everything they could carry or load onto hand-drawn trailers, including their food. In Selarang Square they found no latrine facilities and only one water point. To further intimidate the POWs, machine gun emplacements were set up at the corners of the square and Japanese and Sikh guards with fixed bayonets patrolled the perimeter. That night thousands of POWs slept out in the open.

The standoff was finally resolved two days later when the POW negotiating team proposed that the prisoners would sign the form if it was acknowledged they had done so “under duress.” The I. J. A. agreed to this provision, and the deadlock was broken.^{xliiii} By 6:30 p.m., all the POWs had signed the “no-escape” forms. Denis Russell-Roberts, for one, thought, “What a lot of ballyhoo it all was.”

^{xli} Another program gives credit for producing the show to Leofric Thorpe.

^{xliii} Not everyone agrees on the exact numbers.

^{xliiii} See Ronald Havers’ *Reassessing Changi for a blow-by-blow description of these negotiations*.

Nevertheless it gave us an excuse to celebrate, and that night[,] the eve of release, we put on a grand camp concert. A stage was somehow made out of two or three trailers parked together; lights, curtains and props were organised, and when the curtain went up, there must have been nearly fifteen thousand pairs of eyes riveted on that stage. All the stars of the Southern Area Concert Party were in their best form, ably supported by Bill Middleton and his orchestra.^{xliv} And when Bobby Spong came on magnificently dressed as a woman, the roar that went up from that square must have been heard all over the island.⁸⁵

The transgressive nature of Spong’s appearance in all “her” finery was instantly recognized by the POWs as a defiant “Up Yours!” to the Japanese—and as an affirmation of their ability to prevail. If they had lost the battles for Malaya and Singapore through the incompetence of their leadership, they had at least won this round. Further acts of transgression ensued.

When the concert had ended we stood to attention and sang *God Save the King*. The few lights on the square had gone out and we stood in the darkness facing the Japanese on the Guard Room balcony. We sang as we had never sung before, with the orchestra seeming to encourage us to even louder and greater efforts. This was a truly wonderful act of defiance, directed upwards at those figures on the balcony from the throats of fifteen thousand men.⁸⁶

Keenly aware of their spectators’ gaze, the performers and audience members saw the activity they were engaged in from a totally new perspective: concert parties were not simply entertainment but acts of resistance—an important lesson for those headed Up Country, where the enemy would attend the shows and sit in the front row, always in sight of the POWs behind them.

The next day the POWs returned to their separate areas of Changi and continued on as before, buoyed by their newfound solidarity.⁸⁷

Something Old, Something New

Once the men were back in their respective areas, entertainment seemingly picked up where it had left off. On Saturday, 10 September, Australian medical officer Charles Huxtable, as he had many times before, accompanied two patients from Roberts Hospital to see the variety show in the New Windmill Theatre (the same show that had been running prior to “the Selarang Incident”). There Huxtable took special note of Fergus Anckorn and his performance: “A tall, fair young man dressed in full evening dress with white tie and tails (where did he get his clothes?) was very clever with a pack of cards and he entertained and mystified the audience with various tricks.”⁸⁸

^{xliv} A show hastily produced by Leo Britt with the A.I.F. concert party’s orchestra.



FIGURE 1.25. FERGUS ANCKORN AS "WIZARDUS." COURTESY OF FERGUS ANCKORN.

Emboldened by his earlier success, Eric Cliffe convinced Norman Smith that the Southern Area should offer a series of classical concerts during the rest of the month, modeled on the popular "Proms" at the Royal Albert Hall in London. All members of the British Empire knew about these iconic promenade concerts because the annual festival of music was broadcast each year on the BBC. The concerts would also give Leo Britton time to rehearse his production of *Wonder Bar*.

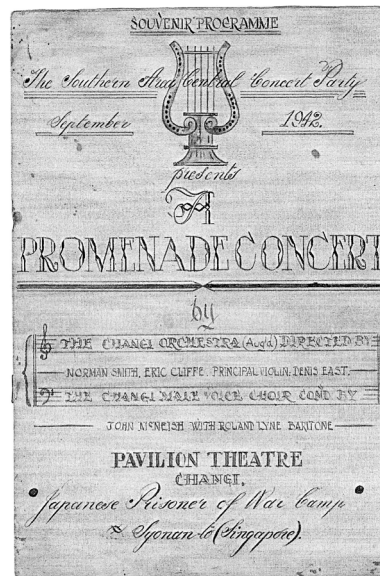


FIGURE 1.26. PROGRAM OF MUSIC FOR PROMENADE CONCERT. IWM 65/144/1.

For these concerts, the Southern Area's orchestra was augmented ("Aug'd") by musicians such as Denis East from other areas.

Camp Bulletin 18/9/42: Re New Arrivals

On 18 September, life in Changi was disrupted by the arrival of the first substantial party of POWs from camps in the Netherlands East Indies. These "Ex-Java Parties" (as they came to be known) contained Australian, British, Netherlands East Indies (hereafter N.E.I.), and American soldiers, as well as airmen and sailors.^{xlv} The new arrivals were dispersed and billeted in different divisions. At the same time, working parties stationed in and around Singapore began to be transferred back into their units in Changi, causing an acute housing shortage. The situation was exacerbated further at the end of the month when POWs who had been held in Malaya, including musicians "Ace" Connolly and Bob Gale, began to arrive. Changi was being transformed into an enormous transit camp in readiness for massive troop evacuations.

As several of the N.E.I. men were performers who had been entertaining their campmates on Java, their arrival proved a boon to Changi concert parties and their audiences by offering new faces and new acts. On 10 October, an A.I.F. concert party variety show concluded—much to the delight of the audience—with a trio of N.E.I. troops from Java performing a medley of Hawaiian songs enhanced by the presence of a hula dancer.



FIGURE 1.27. HULA DANCER. CHARLES BURKI. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

This trio and hula dancer would become extremely popular in POW camps Up Country.

“The Great Migration”

In early October the long-anticipated massive troop evacuations got under way. Between 9 and

^{xlv} The American soldiers were from the 2nd Battalion of the 131st Field Artillery Brigade (Texas National Guard); the sailors had been rescued from the U.S.S. Houston and the H.M.A.S. Perth, both of which had been sunk in the Sunda Straits off Java early on in the Japanese advance south.

16 October, the Australians at River Valley Road, along with the Dutch/Indonesian and American ex-Java POWs in Selarang, were ordered to Burma as “Williams Force” to join “A Force” already there. British POWs, including Len Gibson and his mates and Jack Chalker, were sent to Thailand instead. Four parties of British soldiers from Sime Road Camp led by Lieutenant-Colonel Philip Toosey followed soon after. As they departed, ten additional parties arrived from Java. David Nelson labeled these troops movements “the Great Migration.”⁸⁹ Major construction on the Thailand-Burma railway was about to begin.

At first the impact of these work site and ex-Java evacuations on the POWs remaining in Changi was minimal. Their attention was focused instead on another diphtheria outbreak that had temporarily closed the New Windmill Theatre. But in the third week of October, when word came from Malaya Command that 8,650 more POWs would be needed in Thailand—and supplied only from troops in the British divisions in Changi—morale among those remaining began to plummet.

Troops in the Southern Area were among the first targeted for transport Up Country. The initial draft of 200 left by rail on 24 October, followed daily by drafts of 650, eventually including members of the Mummie Bees. Providing “farewell concerts” for these departing troops became top priority. “It was decided,” Norman Smith wrote, “to keep concerts going as long as there were people to entertain and those of us running the theatre were on the last group to leave. This turned out to be advantageous in that the group tended to remain together. Later on this made it easier to repeat the setting up of theatres in the destination camps.”⁹⁰

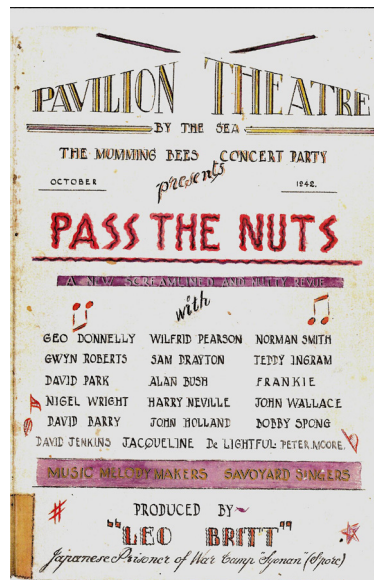


FIGURE 1.28. SOUVENIR PROGRAM FOR *PASS THE NUTS*. IWM 65/144/1.

Given these exigencies, Leo Britt’s production of *Wonder Bar* was abandoned, and a remount of *Pass the Nuts* was produced instead. One new performer in the cast was Ted Ingram (see **Figures 1.29–31** in the Image Gallery for the playbill listing other cast members). Since electricity had just been restored to the Southern Area, the remount would at least have the added attraction of stage lighting.

In the audience on 23 October was Lieutenant G. Stanley Gimson, whose diary entry captures both the nervous, unsettled atmosphere among the troops about to leave Changi as well as the magic of that

evening's spectacular "Blood and Sand" finale:

Tonight with all the mental upset of impending move . . . , to a concert. There was all the usual stuff—funny, sentimental & naughty—most of it excellent. For the first time we had lighting, and so as the sun set, the concert moved on toward the final scene. The setting was Spain; outside a bullring. The back cloth white with leafy branches across it. The stage was crowded—costumes in black, white and & scarlet, as colourful as one might wish. The soft lighting only half-lights the stage and overcame its smallness with deep shadows. A dancer—surely a girl—with tambourine, weaved in and out. The toreador sat drinking. The Dona Isabella sat sipping her wine, the aged priest beside her. The music from Carmen. It was wistfully, unbelievably beautiful.—When it was all over, and a few sad speeches made, the National Anthem—fervently sung. . . . Outside the moon was brilliant, shining over the valley between the palm trees.⁹¹

Although many troops from the 11th and 18th Divisions were also included in these drafts, members of the P.O.W. WOWS, the Changi Celebrity Artists, and the New Windmill Players were spared. Padre Foster-Haigh's choir was not so lucky. By 26 October he had lost half of the forty members who had started rehearsing excerpts from Handel's "The Messiah" for their first Christmas in captivity.⁹² With so many men leaving, classes in the Changi Universities dwindled and eventually came to an end.

Farewell shows in other areas of Changi were taking place as well. On 1 November in the 18th Division, there was a farewell concert for ex-Java POWs leaving from the Divisional Signals' sector: "It was a show one won't easily forget," wrote Captain Charles Wilkinson, "as the turns were all provided by British, Australian, American and Dutch troops and by U.S. Navy, all of whom are P.O.Ws here and have been brought in from various islands such as Java, Batavia, and some of them even out of the sea!"⁹³

When the New Windmill Theatre reopened on 2 November, performances of the revue *Gentlemen Only* were given twice nightly for departing troops.⁹⁴ The hit of the show was a Dutch/Indonesian illusionist who went by the stage name "the Great Cortini." Viewers were thrilled, Fergus Anckorn recalled, when he "visibly turned into a perfect skeleton in front of the audiences' eyes. And then back to normal. NO MIRRORS!"⁹⁵

The next day British division commanders received an urgent message from Malaya Command requesting an additional party of nearly 2,000 men, with the last group scheduled to leave on 9 November. This time, members of the P.O.W. WOWS, as well as newly arrived "Ace" Connolly and his musicians, and actors Michael Curtis and W. S. Milsum of the New Windmill Players, were included in the drafts.

Fearing he might be called up as well, the classical pianist Reginald Renison was in despair. Fergus Anckorn "came across him sitting on the ground looking very despondent, and on my enquiring, he said he could not go on without his music which was his life. I told him to put up with things and we would soon be back home."⁹⁶ Renison lucked out: he was not included in the current drafts. Anckorn was not so lucky: he was.

By now, almost all the troops scheduled from the Southern Area had left. On 6 November, Leofric Thorpe, Norman Smith, Leo Britt, Bobby Spong, and other members of the Mummie Bees followed in the last draft.

Roll Call

These are the men who, with their music and theatre, would become instrumental in helping the POWs on the Thailand-Burma railway endure the unimaginable hardships of that construction project and the years of imprisonment that followed its completion. The entertainment they produced would be for many the difference between living with hope and sinking into despair. They would be joined by other entertainers sent directly to Burma from Java and Sumatra, and by new faces who step forward from among the ranks. Their experience producing concert parties on improvised stages with scrounged materials in Changi or on Java would serve them well for the more difficult circumstances encountered Up Country.

But this is not the end of the story. In January 1943 another large contingent of POWs arrived in Changi from Java—called, this time, the “Java rabble.” Among them were Australian medical officer Lieutenant-Colonel Weary Dunlop and the Dutch/Indonesian cabaret entertainers Joop Postma, Philip Brugman, Ferry van Delden, and accordionist Han Samethini.



FIGURE 1.32. HAN SAMETHINI. PREWAR PHOTOGRAPH.
COURTESY OF ROBIN KALHORN.

The “Java rabble” were quickly sent on to Thailand.

In the spring, when starvation, illness, and death decimated the Up Country workforce, raising serious doubt as to whether the railway could be completed on time, urgent calls for more POWs from Changi would follow.

Endnotes

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- 4 Nelson, 14.
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- 6 Inglefield, 16.
- 7 Inglefield, 24.
- 8 Nelson, 18.
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- 18 Sprod, *Bamboo*, 62.
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- 34 Wade, 46.
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- 37 Tom Boardman, “Questionnaire,” 4.
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77 Norman Smith, 135.
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