

EVACUEE REPORTS:

GIBSON, JAMES

MAT TELESCO.
G-3. GHR.



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28 Jan 45

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Capt. James GIBSON, 122 Fd Regt, Royal Artillery
Captured at SINGAPORE on 15 Dec 42.

Was imprisoned at CHANGI prison camp on SINGAPORE Island, where rations consisted of 16 ounces of rice per man per day, one-sixteenth of an ounce of salt, one can of M & V to forty-eight (48) men and about twice a week from 1 1/2 - 2 ounces of meat. No vegetables of any description were provided and we used leaves and various shrubs as vegetables.

After one month in CHANGI various working parties were sent out into the town area in SINGAPORE to do general cleaning-up work, removal of dead bodies buried under debris and similar types of work. During this time the treatment of prisoners by the Japanese guards was reasonable and the men were not unduly molested, although there were occasional cases of beating and maltreatment.

In June 42 the transfer of prisoners to BANPONG in THAILAND was started. The first group consisted of 1,200, followed a few days later by another group of 1,800. For about two months these prisoners were employed in building camps and various marshalling yards in BANPONG area.

In Nov 42 the bulk of prisoners from SINGAPORE started to arrive in THAILAND and work on the railway proper was commenced. Sections of the railway for which the prisoners of war were responsible was from BANPONG to the Three Pagodas Base on the THAI-BURMA border. Once work on the railway was started conditions of feeding and general treatment of prisoners steadily deteriorated. As the railway progressed the Japanese became continuously harsher in their treatment and even were forcing sick men to go out to work. There were about 12,000 British and 3,000 Australian PWs on this section of the railway at this time.

In Mar 43 about 10,000 British and Dutch prisoners of war arrived to work on the railway. A working battalion of officers, including field officers, was formed by the Japanese despite continued protests by the senior British officer, Lt. Col. WILLIAMSON. This battalion was forced to work building bridges, which was considered by everyone as the heaviest work on the railway. For a large portion of the time these officers were working up to their waists in water driving piles in the rivers and swamps.

In June 43 we had a forced ten days march through the jungle up to the far northern section of the railway, and by this time most of our men were without proper clothing and very few had footwear of any description. The condition of their health was becoming steadily worse and the death rate was increasing rapidly. We struck a cholera epidemic at TAKANUN and the death rate then became alarming. Medical facilities were negligible, though no praise can be too high for the British and Australian doctors who accompanied us throughout the construction of the railway. With minimum medical equipment these doctors worked day and night attempting to alleviate the sufferings of the men and save lives. During this time in most of the camps men were sleeping without cover and it was raining almost continuously; food was bad, consisting for long stretches of rice and salt and not much of that. There was an alarming increase in dysentery and men were dying like flies.

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Indicating the large numbers of men who could not be driven out to work, a base hospital was formed at CHIANG RAI commanded by Lt. Col. OWTRAM, with British and Australian medical staffs. I was personally able to see for myself the condition of the sick men coming in from the country, as I had been evacuated with chronic malaria in June. These men were usually sent down river by barge and usually made the trip with no food or, at the outside, one meal during the three days' journey to the base camp, and practically every barge arrived with anything from one to three dead men. The bottom of the barges was invariably several inches deep in excreta, as the men were too weak to get over the side of the barge.

In CHIANG RAI Camp when I left there were close on 200 men who had one leg amputated because of tropical ulcers, and there were two Australian soldiers who had both legs amputated. Many others had died as a result of amputations and lack of medical facilities for treating them post-operationally.

The railway was completed in Nov 43 and the Japanese started evacuating the camps on the high ridges of the railway from Dec onwards CHIANG RAI was the main base camp and there were also two smaller bases at TAMARKAN, under Lt. Col. TOOSEY, of 135 Fd Regt RA, and at NONPADUK, under Lt. Col. Louis BAKER, of the Norfolk Regt. The senior medical officer at CHIANG RAI was Lt. Col. DUNLOP, of the Australian Medical Corps, and at TAMARKAN was Major A.E. MOON, of the Australian Medical Corps. Conditions now started to improve and the treatment was much better and the food became quite reasonable, with a good supply of vegetables and occasionally meat. We were also able to make local purchases of foodstuffs, mainly eggs and meat. For the maintenance of the hospital, which by now formed the major part of the camp, as very few men were anything but sick, the officers had to subscribe 15 dollars per month from their pay and various other forms of raising money were adopted. Even this was quite inadequate.

In Mar 44 the Japanese started picking out the fit men who had recovered from the effects of the up-country experience and formed them into parties for transport to JAPAN; ratio one officer to 150 men. No officer above the rank of Captain was selected for these parties. I was placed in command of one party of 2,000 men for transport to JAPAN. We finally left CHIANG RAI on 7 June 44 and proceeded by rail to SINGAPORE, where we boarded two transports, 1,250 men on one transport, on which I was travelling, and 700 men on the other, under command of Capt. H.R. HALL, of 148 Fd Regt RA. This transport left several days before we did and I have no knowledge as to what happened to it after that. We left SINGAPORE on 29 June and sailed to MIRI, SARAWAK. We then went on to MANILA, P.I., where we arrived on 23 Jul and lay in the bay for two months before continuing our journey to JAPAN. During this period food and medical supplies were extremely bad and over 100 men died of starvation, including one doctor, Capt. BRAHAM, RAMC.

On 20 Sep we sailed from MANILA and next day we were caught by the first American air attack on shipping at LUZON. By this time 80% of the men were unable to walk and, when the ship was struck by two aerial torpedoes and four bombs, two of which landed in the holds containing the men, killing a large number, many of them were unable to help themselves and the majority of them were drowned. I was able to swim ashore and escape from the Japanese and later picked up 11 other men, consisting of 8 British and 3 Dutch, who had also been able to get away from the Japanese. I then spent five months with the guerilla forces in ZAMBALES and PAMPANGA and finally was able to contact an American Navy PTB on the night of 24 Jan 45. These people took me aboard and delivered me to Seventh Fleet HQ at LINGAYEN GULF on the morning of 25 Jan, where I was interrogated for one day and sent by plane to LEYTE.

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