

## **Anniversaries**

**VJ-Day 75.** *One of our parishioners, Govan Easton, was a Japanese prisoner-of-war. He was a regular at the 8am Communion service at St. Faith's until he became house bound when Michael Fluck took him communion. He moved to Dorset to be near his daughters and died in November 2019. He was a geography graduate and a secondary headmaster and lived in Southleigh Road. In 2003 he wrote three articles for "Faith Matters", the parish magazine, on "Anniversaries" and wrote articles for his daughters on VJ-Day and his subsequent return in October 1945. All are reproduced below.*

### **The Anniversary I - 15 February 1942**

Anniversaries usually involve happy, pleasant recollections of some past event; an event important and meaningful to each of us individually. The anniversary I am about to describe is different, unhappy, but memorable, as it led to one of the great character-forming periods of my life.

Sixteen hundred hours on Sunday 15th February 1942 found my colleagues and I in the depths of despair. Yes, it is sixty one years ago but I remember it as if it were yesterday. I was serving with the Royal Northumberland Fusiliers as a unit of the ill-fated 18th Division, having arrived in Singapore some ten days previously. We had just been informed on that Sunday afternoon of the surrender of the forces defending the Island, (that was us) and feared what would transpire. Is fear worse than reality? We were about to find out! The next hours we spent waiting and wondering. I tried praying, but somehow I couldn't concentrate. In spite of extreme fatigue, after some four days of non-stop fighting, I spent a restless night. At dawn orders were given to parade along Bukit Timah Road where we lined up in single file. I suppose it was around eight that Monday morning when Japanese soldiers began to approach, members of the Imperial Guard but still much smaller than most of us.

The language was strange and unintelligible to all of us, but the signs were clear and so were the messages emanating from the blows struck when one failed to respond. Standing at six feet and two inches I was able to look down on the man who approached, size was no protection however, not against an enemy holding a rifle with fixed bayonet. He grabbed my left wrist and removed one of my treasured possessions, a Rolex Oyster watch, then tapping my shirt pocket he indicated that he wished to see what was there. A cigarette case. Yes, I enjoyed smoking at that time. The cigarette case too became a trophy of war. Satisfied he moved on to the next target. We realised we had become guests of the Japanese Emperor, Hirohito.

The rest is history. Many thousands would live or die in abject slavery over the next three and a half years. I was one of the fortunate ones. I survived the work on the docks at Keppel Harbour, loading and unloading cargoes day and night. I endured with some three hundred the nightmare rail journey in trucks from Singapore to Nong Pladuck in Thailand, a journey taking 24 days. I suffered and endured the toil, the beatings, the diseases that accompanied the slavery of work on the Burma railway. My faith in human nature was tested, but endured, because of the many acts of kindness and caring I witnessed as men shared water, food, tobacco and above all ideas and thoughts of a future. I survived the voyage to Saigon when the convoy was reduced from four

ships to one. The American bombing raids on Nha Trang, an oil terminal, left me shaken but alive. Each month there is at least one day that is a significant anniversary of some momentous event in life. My sojourn took me to some twenty two different camps, in three different countries, followed eventually by release in Saigon. There are many more stories to be told. Throughout the years, since that time, the Far East Prisoner of War Association has been invaluable as an organisation to support, guide and help all FEPOW with comradeship and care, as well as financial help when required. Each monthly meeting begins with our prayer.

The FEPOW Prayer.

As we that are left grow old with the years,  
Remembering the heartache the pain and the tears,  
Hoping and praying that never again,  
Man will sink to such sorrow and shame.  
The price that was paid we will always remember,  
Every Day, every Month, not just in November.  
We can forgive, but, we cannot forget!

### **The Anniversary II - 15 March 1943**

Excitement reigned throughout the camp in Thailand. Four men from our Regiment had decided to escape and had gone from the camp. Two were fellow Sergeants and with them were two fusiliers. To cover their escape we had to ensure that the numbers at "Tenko" (roll call) added up. For three days we successfully baffled the Japanese and then the discovery. All Hell was let loose! The telephone wires were humming as messages went to the Kempai Tai (Secret Police). The following day they arrived in camp and even the Japanese and the Korean guards trembled. First they questioned the Japanese and then the Korean Guards, apparently to no avail. The camp was searched, every item within reach thrown to the ground, the huts were emptied and our meagre belongings had to be arrayed on the ground to be examined. My belongings, after a year in captivity, had been drastically reduced. I now owned a mess tin, spoon and fork, a water bottle, a mug, one blanket, a ground sheet and gas cape, a haversack, a rather ragged towel and the clothes I was wearing, namely a torn shirt, shorts, socks, boots and my topi. I had hidden my atlas in a section of bamboo out in the jungle away from the camp.

Now came our turn, the Kempai Tai came to each of us in turn and as we stood to attention they searched our possessions and asked questions. The fact that we could not understand led to beatings, threats, which we found fairly meaningless, and a display of anger. We knew nothing!

On 15th March 1943 three of the escapees were dragged back into camp, on leads like dogs. They had clearly suffered and were in a dreadful state, partly from hunger and also in part from the adverse jungle conditions, but mainly from the severe beatings they had endured. They were not defeated by the jungle but rather betrayed by natives who had been threatened by the Japanese. Next day they were taken to Banpong for trial and having been sentenced to death, they were shot, some prisoners being forced to witness this. I was relieved that it was not me. These were brave men who deserved better.

Some days later we left the jungle camp and after three days walking, along jungle tracks close to the river, we reached Chungkai. A train awaited us here and we were transported, in open trucks, to Nong Pladuk. What a revelation. Wooden huts built on stilts with wood floors and thatched roofs. Luxury after the jungle. What lay in store? A bamboo fence surrounded the camp. Near the cookhouse was a Hospital hut and a Chapel used for services by the camp Chaplain. Officers had their own accommodation many even had their camp beds whilst other ranks slept on the floor with a groundsheet and blanket as bedding.

The camp boasted an interpreter, American Japanese, and a Christian. Formerly a cab-driver in San Francisco who had travelled to Japan to see his parents and was conscripted into the forces and being bi-lingual he was made an interpreter. Even at this date in 1943 he said the Japanese could never win the war. On periodic visits to Bangkok he would undertake commissions to purchase medicinal drugs from the Chinese including sulpha drugs, which were invaluable for treating bacterial infections, and quinine to treat malaria. His actions helped to save the suffering of many.

### **The Anniversary III - 23 April 1943 (St George's Day)**

*Saint George of old the dragon slew, so runs the ancient story*

*And left to all men good and true, the guerdon of his glory.*

It was 23rd April 1943 but we were not slaying dragons even though we were enveloped in smoke and burning embers, these being the result of sitting in open trucks behind a wood-burning locomotive. We were on our way up-country into the jungle again, to a camp called Wampo on the bank of the river Kwai. We had been here many months earlier building embankments and a wooden trestle viaduct around the cliff face above the river. This camp, already disease-ridden because of earlier occupation, was to be our home. Our task was to lay the rail track, that is to lay wooden sleepers and on them rails, which had to be fixed with six inch spikes. Another series of skills to be learned, and we learned quickly when there were Japanese engineers wielding bamboo canes, ready to use them to correct any hesitation or mistake.

Traditionally the Royal Northumberland Fusiliers celebrated St George's Day with Church Services and Ceremonial Parades. We would not be celebrating this year.

Little news filtered through of the progress of the war, but hearing of the Japanese invasion of India being repulsed we realised that a radio existed in one of the camps. To keep its existence secret no news was released for at least ten days. We began to understand, however, why the Japanese had a sudden desire for "*speedo*". Great pressure was applied for all work to be speeded up, even to the extent of working on rest days. The normal work cycle was nine days work and one day of rest, Sundays being treated as a normal day, if there was such a thing. The Japanese were ever more anxious to complete this railway regardless of any suffering or deaths that may happen.

Each day we witnessed columns of English, Australian and Dutch prisoners carrying all their worldly possessions, being force marched up towards the Burmese border at the Three Pagodas Pass. Many of these would never make the return journey but would perish

somewhere in the jungle. The period of the next few months was to be a hideous example of man's inhumanity to man.

*Barbara, Govan's daughter, has taken these extracts from the memoirs her father wrote in 1997. It had taken 50 years for him to be willing to share his experiences .*

## **22 August 1945**

On 22nd August at about a quarter to ten, the Guard summoned the Gunso, The Nip in charge said simply, "*Senso awari*", the war is over. We couldn't quite grasp the significance of this and asked him to repeat, which he did. Then he said, "*Asta shigoto nei, taksin yasumi asta asta*", which means "*Tomorrow there is no work, lots of rest tomorrow and tomorrow.*" Everyone looked anxious when we returned to the barrack room and when we told them there was a long silence, we were stunned by the news. No one showed great elation we were all concerned as to how the Nips would react as the threat to eliminate all P.O.W.s had been made on many occasions.

Next day we held our own service of remembrance and thanksgiving. We sang the National Anthem for the first time in years!

## **25 August 1945**

The morning of 25th August 1945 was bright and sunny when the Nip Gunso came into our billet, this was unusual, he usually demanded we went to see him.

He bowed, a first, and then with signs and words, some of which I could understand, he explained that we were to go back to Saigon by train and that we should all collect our belongings. Later that morning escorted by Nips, now trying to be friendly, we walked to the station, pleased, but still apprehensive. It had been said that none of us would be allowed to survive and the train could be taking us anywhere. There it was at the station with steam up and ready to go, this time with some locals also aboard the trucks.

It began to travel southwards towards Saigon, and we were thankful for that. The journey took two days as there were many delays en route.

*The remainder of Govan's journey home, was from Saigon by aircraft to Bangkok, then to Rangoon, a troopship to Liverpool via the Suez Canal and finally trains home to Berwick upon Tweed, arriving on 19<sup>th</sup> October 1945.*

*His war was finally over.*

*On his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday he said to his daughters that if anyone had told him he would still be alive he wouldn't have believed it!*

*He died aged 98 in November 2019. A life well lived.*



*A photograph of Govan Easton taken in 2013 at The National Memorial Arboretum, Alrewas, Staffordshire at a celebration for VJ day*