

POST-GREECE

LAC Leonard W “Abbie” Abbs, 211 Sqdn, Royal Air Force

Letter from Len: 23 – 3 – 2001 (Java)

[Len's story continues with the journey to the Far East and the disastrous Dutch East Indies campaign.]

“[...] 211 were at Helwan Egypt being re-equipped. This was November 1941. They flew by hops to Palembang, Sumatra, the then Dutch East Indies. Besides the crews they took tradesmen, a skeleton staff sufficient to get them airborne on arrival. Assisted and working with Dutch Air Force, my information is they did go on one or two raids such as approaching Japanese landing craft. The aerodrome was defended by Indonesian coloured forces who put up no resistance when Jap paratroopers landed at dawn. 80 or so 211 personnel got away and made it to Java.

The remaining ground staff who had not flown in the advance party to Palembang went by troopship. We had one naval cruiser escort. It always amazed me how around the world in the different theatres of war all hell is let loose and here are we lying sun bathing in the Indian Ocean listening to Vera Lynn singing “We will meet again some summer day”.

We disembark at Oosthaven, Sumatra, 1600 hours Friday 13 February 1942. “Unlucky for some”. We board a train, here we come mates, Palembang next stop. Not so, we travel for approx 3 hours and the train stops. Ordered to dismount we line up outside a small railway station.

We are addressed by our Squadron Adjutant, Flt Lt Bright known affectionately as “Bright Eyes”. He wore spectacles. Ex-schoolmaster, loved and respected by every PoW who unfortunately were in the same camps as him [comrades in misfortune]. That's another story maybe later. To return to the railway station. Bright Eyes informs us that the Japanese forces have landed at the other end of the island. The train driver refuses to go any further. We march to a sugar plantation, where we spend a night in one of the warehouses. No grub available so we consume our emergency rations.

Next morning we commandeer every available transport and with all possible speed make for Oosthaven, hoping the Yoma troopship is still there. The train had disappointed. We made it back to the ship and the Captain said he would wait until dusk for the stragglers. Weighing anchor he set sail for Batavia. Afraid of submarine detection he sailed close to the land in shallow water. So shallow for the first time in my life I learnt the true meaning of swinging the lead. We made it mid-morning next day. Bright Eyes informed us we were to march to a Dutch Army barracks on the other side of the town where we were to be billeted.

We had left the town when one of the worst air raids had ever seen commenced. Estimated 300 bombers in waves of 27 in each formation attacked the harbour. One formation broke away, coming in low, machine gunned the road we were on. On each side of the road were 6 foot deep monsoon drains which everyone dived into. Fortunately the only casualties were those of the men who landed badly when they jumped. In the harbour was the cruiser Exeter, six destroyers, one of which was the Jupiter, and three Dutch naval vessels. As you can imagine, they were firing everything they could at the raiders. We learnt later no naval vessels hit, some merchant ships set on fire. One or two warehouses destroyed and one Gasometer [...] one of those huge gas tanks one used to see in every city. There were 300 civilian casualties

We had two weeks at the barracks and it was like a summer holiday. Looking back it is hard to believe it happened. We were actually paid by the Dutch military command and a guilder a day colonial pay extra. Guilders in those days about two shillings. It would buy 20 cigarettes and two pints of beer. We reported to Dutch air force base each day at 8 am. It was a supply base, no planes only equipment. They didn't know what to do with us. They had sufficient staff anyway so eventually they sent us packing. Swimming pool all day, cinema or cabaret at night. Invasion imminent, there we were living like tourists. I made friends with an Eurasian girl who took me to meet her parents. Should say Mum, sister and brother. Father was in the Dutch army, far as they knew in Surabaya. If we airforce had a command unit it was non-existent, we did as we wished.

Then the Japs did land. There was a huge sea battle in the sea off Java. The six British destroyers actually sailed between the landing barges picking them off. The heavy battleships of the Japanese from a distance of 15 miles picked the destroyers off one by one, ignoring the fact that they too were hitting their own troops. Apparently they estimated they could lose a third of invasion forces and still take Java. Which as history knows, they did. Day after the battle, steamship Orcades was berthed in Batavia. We boarded her bound for Australia. We thought we would get away from Java. “He who fights and runs away lives to fight another day” [...]. These words were spoken by Walter Gibson, my best mate, as we leaned over the rail watching others boarding.”



Walter Gibson 1921—1944 (LW Abbs)

Walter "Gibbie" Gibson died of dysentery in Fukuoka, Japan in January 1944 aged 23 years

"There must have been about 150 of 211 Squadron on board the Orcades. "Bright eyes", bless his cotton socks approaches our little gathering, Walter Gibson, John Stevens, Ginger Worrel, Joe Smart, Knocker Wade, yours truly, others whose names I can't recall. This is what "Bright Eyes" said. "There is a Yank auxiliary unit holding the approach bridge. The Captain asks for 100 men to leave the ship to let Dutch women and children board". Every 211 man followed "Bright Eyes" off that ship. "What now Sir?" [Bright consulted with someone, Len does not recall who] He came back with orders for us to go to Jamis in the hills where all British Forces would make a stand. Ye Gods! Brave words indeed.

We marched to the railway station. The station master was vague about time of arrival next train, not surprising really. Whilst waiting we heard noise of approaching aircraft so sought cover. They passed overhead but bombed the dock area. Whilst waiting at the station a Dutch Army convoy stopped to replenish their water supply. We ask their destination and would it be near Jamis. He said [it] would and gave us permission to travel with the convoy. "Bright Eyes" our Adjutant didn't mind as long as we made it there. Our group of mates who had been together on the Desert, Greece, Palestine and Sudan hopped aboard where there was space.

It was an infantry company we joined. They were post haste to join the main Dutch forces engaging the Japs. They had been guarding an area of the coastline where they might have landed. 2 hours on the road they stopped and we enjoyed fried rice and fish washed down with coffee. Not what we were used to but boy was it welcome, we relied on handouts. On the road again 1/2 an hour or so later we stopped and we were being fired on by machine guns. A Dutch Sergeant in our wagon said "Get under the lorry, lay behind the wheels". They were paratroops who had blocked the road. They were up in the trees. Whilst jumping for cover one Dutch lad got a bullet in his shoulder. We had rifles and ammunition. Laying behind the rear wheel I started firing into the trees. Knocker Wade was beside me, his rifle pointing out other side of wheel. He said "Stop firing you stupid sod. Only fire when you see the flash from their guns. Then you know you have a target". Knocker was a regular defence gunner. What I mean is where-ever 211 had an airfield we had sandbag machine gun posts. Also in convoys we mounted machine guns and Knocker was always there. Good advice. I did however remind him I had done an Air Gunners course. His retort: "Shut up. Stop panicking and don't waste bloody ammunition". We were all a bit tense as you would imagine. The Dutch soldiers lobbed a few grenades into the area where the enemy fire was coming from. Sprayed the area with intensive fire. God, I thought, I am glad I joined the Air Force."

"It was quiet for about an hour when the Dutch medics came around seeing to the wounded. Fortunately none killed but some bad wounded. The Dutch officer walked around speaking to everyone. To us he said "Are you glad you joined our convoy now? Anyway well done, in another 30 miles you can join your comrades. My wireless operator has been in touch with headquarters and our information is the British are assembled at Jamis." Sure enough they dropped us off, we shook hands all round and they pointed us in the right direction. We must have climbed upwards and upwards walking for a mile or so when we found the camp. There must have been hundreds of airmen assembled but not one we recognised. We had what was considered at that time a good meal. Bowl of soup, 1/2 loaf of bread and mug of tea. It was nectar. The next morning we received the news that the Dutch had capitulated. You can imagine the situation. Everyone was looking for advice. Wing Commander Gregson: "We will fight. The British will make a stand here". I remember Knocker saying "I sure will Abbie I've 40 rounds left, wonder what he has got".

We had a chin wag, that is Walter Gibson, Knocker Wade, Bob Kerswell and self. For our sins we decided to pinch a truck, make for the coast and persuade a fisherman to take us to an off-shore island. Wasn't there plenty of those off Java, no problem. This we did after doing a reconnaissance of the vehicles about, we picked a 30 cwt truck with nearly a full tank. Bob drove, Knocker in front, Gibby and I in back on a tarpaulin. As we were pulling away we were approached by a Flying Officer who signalled us to stop. Bob drove on and as we passed him he shouted "I'll have you court-martialled". Gibby said "I think he means that Abbie". We passed thousands of Dutch troops (Indonesians) carrying white flags some with Japanese flag. Eventually we made Tjilatjap. There were some airmen sitting on the side of the road. Bob stopped and asked "What's the gen, fellows?". They said "What's your unit?". We said 211. They said "There's loads of your fellows on the 'drome". Following instructions we found the 'drome and bless his cotton socks, Flt Lt Bright ("Bright Eyes"). Also Sqdn Leader Padre Rourke (Rev PT Rorke RAFVR MiD) who was to be remembered as one of the finest, bravest men who ever lived.

Padre Rourke took his uniform off and changed for an airman's, for he seemed pretty wised up, they did separate senior officers from other ranks. The Padre said his place was amongst the men and indeed he slept in our billets. I saw him, when a prisoner, take a rifle off a Japanese guard who was beating hell out of an English prisoner. The Padre took the rifle, stood to attention, bowed to the guard and handed him the rifle back. The guard stood flabbergasted. Raised his rifle to hit the Padre, stopped. Then said "Muchigo" (come with me). He took the padre to the guardhouse. This was at Yar Mari camp, Surabaya where there were at least 3000 prisoners mostly Dutch. Rumours spread round the camp like wildfire. They will shoot him, they will beat him up. About 3 hours later Padre returned to his hut with packet of Japanese fags and a bag of fruit. The interpreter said the camp commandant, a Major in the Emperor of Nippon's Imperial Forces was a true Bushido and admired the courage of the Padre. From that day some of the guards even saluted him. At Malang camp when we were made to witness the execution of four prisoners I said to Padre Rourke "Where is your God now? He let that happen". He replied "What you witnessed this day was not God's work but man's".

[At the aerodrome at Tjilatjap] We met several of our old comrades so decided to await our fate with them. Bright Eyes told me to destroy photographs that I had, about 150. Also Log book. The first few days we saw few Jap soldiers and did pretty much as we liked. For our own safety we were advised to stay on the camp at night. I made friends with a Dutch girl Pam de Bly and met her family. When we were eventually moved from the drome I left her with souvenirs that I had accumulated on my travels. Also medals and a cup I had won in boxing and swimming whilst in the Forces. She promised to send them to my parents address. I never heard no more. Who knows what fate awaited them, for eventually the white Dutch women too were interned. Lt Colonel Soni, a Japanese camp commandant once said if the women had fought for Java they would never have lost it. Soni lived in England at one time, spoke perfect English. He was one of the better ones.

If my memory serves me correctly, a company of Japs turned up one morning at the 'drome and things changed dramatically. 750 of us were put on a train and taken to Malang. We travelled all day and the Japs treated us well. When the train pulled in at a station they let us buy refreshments. Most of us had money. One Jap sergeant told us to hide it as when we got to Malang the Kempe-Tai (Gestapo) [Secret police] would take it from us. Our escort to Malang were the Jap Imperial Guards, they actually fought taking Java. They treated us with respect and some of them played cards with us on the train. Many times I thought of them and that they can't all be as bad as this bastard who is kicking me as I lay on the ground. We arrived at Malang. Things did change. For the worse."

Post script

"Whilst a PoW I was shipped to Haroku Island. 2000 Dutch and English. At one time we were burying 15 to 20 men each day. Dysentery, beri beri and malnutrition. I left the Island with first batch of sick to return to Java. At that time 400 were buried there. 950 on our ship. Time we reached Java 300 dead were thrown overboard without ceremony. When we docked I was taken to De la Rosa Hospital, Batavia. I was unconscious when I went in. I awoke thinking I had died and was in heaven for I was in a bed with clean sheets and above me a fan was spinning. I weighed 7 stone 3 lbs. I was there 3 months, left weighing 10 stone 7 lbs. It was brilliant, the only Japs we saw were medics.

I then went to Sumatra worked on building a railway. They only speak of the Thai railway. In Sumatra, they built a railway from end to end. Pakenbaroe to Palembang. Workers started from both ends and met in the middle. At one time, building a bridge over the Inderhari we were 60 feet above the water. 650 men lost their lives building that bridge. I was working with an Aussie who came from Tasmania. I only remember him as Blue. Going to work one morning he said "Abbie if that bastard sticks his bayonet in my arse today I'm jumping". He did and took the Jap with him. I last saw him when they surfaced, he still had hold of the Jap. The current was fast, both were never seen again.

All survivors of Haroku worked on that railway. Of the original 2000 that went to Haroku at the end of the war 80 survived. I had malaria 28 times on Sumatra. You worked in gangs of ten, if seven were sick [the gang] got rations for three. No work, no food. We were counted out of the gate to calculate next day's rations. Sometimes fit men helped the not so fit to work to boost the rations. I never made it to the link up [the meeting of the railway lines]. Went back to base camp with dysentery and malaria. Normally they would not have bothered but it was June 1945 and for them the writing was on the wall.

August 19 1945: a Major, two staff sergeants and 100 paratroopers dropped in on our camp. The next [day] planes dropped food supplies and medicine. [...] Suffice to say I was one of the Fortunes. I spent 26 weeks in RAF Hospital when I returned home. I was discharged on medical grounds. It broke my heart for I loved the RAF life and had intended to sign on. I have had a wonderful life thanks to my Betty and family."

Footnote:

[Squadron Leader The Reverend PT Rorke RAFVR MiD]

[Born in England in 1904, Patrick "Pat" Rorke was ordained as a Jesuit priest in 1935. He joined the RAF Chaplain's Branch in 1940 and was one of perhaps five RAF padres taken captive with so many other RAF men at the fall of Java in 1942.

Through all that Abbie and others have reported of his compassion and bravery in ministering to fellow FEPoWs, Pat Rorke survived in the face of the most brutal treatment by their captors, the Imperial Japanese Army. He was among those awarded a Mention in Despatches "for gallant and distinguished service whilst a prisoner of war in Japanese hands" (*London Gazette* 1 October 1946).

After the war, Padre Rorke returned to parish duties in the United Kingdom, to retreats, and to various writings about the spirit. His little book of collected writings, *Greatness of Heart*, saw several editions between 1979 and 1988. In it, Pat Rorke called much upon the travails he and his RAF comrades had endured, incorporating his earlier booklet *The Wisdom of Adversity* as well as other thoughts arising from that long captivity.

Father Patrick T Rorke SJ died at the age of 86 in September 1990, well-liked, much respected and never forgotten by surviving FEPoWs.]