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Interview – The Japanese PoW, Gerard Hales

From the *South Wales Echo VJ Day Special* (Cardiff, UK), August 14th, 1995.

‘You’ll stay here, you’ll fight here and, if necessary, you’ll die here’

By **Matt Jones**

Former prisoner-of-war (PoW) Gerard Hales will never forget the first words he heard when he returned to his home city of Cardiff in October 1945. As the visibly starved survivor of the infamous River Kwai Japanese PoW camps climbed off a train at Cardiff station, his six-year-old daughter, Sheila, said: “You are not my father.”

For Gerard, who was reduced to just six stones after three years working on the notorious “Railway of Death”, the words were as savage as the blows he had received from Japanese guards. “It was absolutely terrible,” he recalled. “I was quite robust before I left, but when I came home I was a complete and utter wreck. I had changed that much my own daughter didn’t recognise me. She was very hostile for four or five years. My wife daren’t leave us alone in a room together because she would start throwing things at me.”

Gerard, now 83, said it was only when he second daughter, Sylvia, was born that Sheila’s attitude began to change. “Of course, today she can’t do enough for me,” he said.

Similar traumatic homecomings were repeated in thousands of homes across Britain as more than 37,000 former Japanese PoWs tried to put three years of starvation, beatings and random executions behind them, and as their families adjusted to having to nourish living skeletons back to health.

Gerard had signed up for the Territorial Army while drinking at Cardiff’s Park Hotel two weeks before the outbreak of war in September 1939. He had been an optician since 1928 and so was made an instrument mechanic in the Royal Corps of Signals when war began. “I could make or repair anything, from wireless sets to telephones,” he said.

After a voyage via Canada, Trinidad, South Africa and Bombay, Gerard, of Cowbridge Road West, Ely, arrived in Singapore just before Christmas 1941. By then, the Japanese had attacked the American naval base at Pearl Harbour. But of greater concern to the British troops arriving in Singapore was the Japanese invasion of Malaya, to the north, and the sinking of the Royal Navy ships Prince of Wales and Repulse in the waters off South-east Asia.

(more)

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Japanese PoW/Page 2/...

When the Imperial Japanese Army crossed the Straits of Johore and entered the British colony in early 1942, Gerard was involved in desperate street battles before being captured on Bukit Timah Road. He remembers with bitterness the words of the British general Wavell, who had told Gerard, “You’ll stay here, you’ll fight here and, if necessary, you’ll die here.” Said Gerard: “He was on one of the last planes out. I couldn’t believe it. The situation was absolutely chaotic and we felt abandoned.”

Along with thousands of other captured troops, Gerard was marched to Changi, on the east of Singapore Island, where he was imprisoned for four months, before being transported in a steel cattle truck to Siam, present-day Thailand, where construction of the railway was to begin.

The Japanese needed the railway to provide a supply route between Burma, where their troops were fighting the allies, and Bangkok. “I was among the first 500 PoWs to arrive on the Death Railway,” said Gerard. “We had to sleep in the open until we finished building the camp out of bamboo and attap leaves. Gradually, we moved deeper into the jungle. The conditions were terrible. We often had to sleep outside, even when it was bucketing down with rain.

“Boys were dying left, right and centre. Out of those 500, the first of more than 50,000 British troops captured by the Japanese, only 50 of us survived.”

Gerard remembers waking one morning to find seven black scorpions under his groundsheet. “We saw snakes every day,” he said. “Once, the boys caught a 22ft long python and gave me a piece of it. As hungry as I was, I couldn’t touch it. They said it was lovely, though.”

As work on the railway neared completion in late 1943 with the blasting of rock faces on the Burmese border, Gerard collapsed and was sent back down the River Kwai to recover at the Non Pladuc camp he had helped build more than a year before – and where, since then, a large railway marshalling yard had been established.

It was at Non Pladuc that Gerard’s skills as an instrument mechanic were once again utilised. He became the PoWs unofficial Mr Fixit, looked after the camp doctor’s tools and was appointed camp optician. “If anyone with glasses died, I was given the glasses,” said Gerard. “Likewise with false teeth. Anything that could be put to good use was given to me and I hid all my bits and pieces beneath a platform in the corner of the camp where we used to have concerts.”

(more)

Japanese PoW/Page 3/...

It wasn't long, however, before Gerard's box of teeth and glasses was found by the Japanese secret police. After several beatings of PoWs, he was named and hauled before the camp commander.

"He asked me what I was doing with it all," said Gerard. "I was tempted to say I was building a battleship, but I managed to restrain myself. Anyway, they knocked me around and made me stand for 48 hours with a bayonet at the back of my neck and a bayonet at the front of my neck, so I couldn't move."

Two weeks later, Gerard was working on a steam locomotive in the nearby marshalling yard when two Japanese soldiers marched him off to see the camp commander again. "I thought, 'Oh no, what now?'" he said. "As it turned out, the Japanese commander had broken his glasses and wanted me to repair them. I could have repaired them in two hours, but when he asked me how long it would take I told him two days, so I could have a rest. When I finished, he gave me a carton of cigarettes, half a dozen eggs and some bananas, which were luxuries to us. In the camp, whatever you got you shared, so I shared them around

"To understand the Japanese mind was impossible," Gerard added. "One day they would beat you and the next day they would give you gifts. I saw chaps beaten to death and heads chopped off. It was unbelievable. You never knew what was going to happen."

As well as carrying out repairs, Gerard made a sundial to help prisoners keep track of time. "We didn't know if it was October or March," he said. Then, to help them pass time, he carved chess and draughts sets. And from a set of Japanese postcards he had stolen from a guard's room, he made a pack of playing cards, marking them with rubber stamps dipped in stolen Japanese ink for spades and clubs, and red antiseptic from the camp hospital for hearts and diamonds. The Kings, Queens and Jacks were drawn by a fellow prisoner that Gerard is sure was Ronald Searle, the war artist who later became famous for his cartoons of St Trinian's schoolgirls.

"The reason I made these things was to maintain hope, to keep ourselves occupied after the building of the railway had finished," said Gerard.

Wild animals from the nearby jungle also helped to while away the hours. Monkeys became companions and Gerard had a Mynah bird, a gifted mimic, that ate rice from his dixie tin. After a month with a group of Glaswegian prisoners, however, the bird swore with a Scottish accent.

(more)

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Japanese PoW/Page 4/...

In the last months of the war, wild dogs provided warnings of allied bombing raids on the nearby marshalling yard. “They would hear the planes long before us and howl, giving us time to jump into the slit trenches we had dug for protection,” he said.

Despite the improvised shelters, however, hundreds of PoWs were killed in such raids. “Ten years later at a Christmas party in Wenvoe Golf Club [near Cardiff], a chap was recounting his exploits with the RAF during the war, when he said his best raid was at Non Pladuc. Before I could stop myself, I said, ‘Yes, and you caused 350 dead and injured.’ It sounds like mad fiction, but it’s absolutely true. And the strange thing is, I had played golf with him for years without knowing.”

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