

HUGH LEONARD

Experiences as a Prisoner-of-War, 1942-1945

Interviewed by  
Charles G. Roland, M.D.

19 February 1985

Oral History Archives  
Hannah Chair for the History of Medicine  
McMaster University  
Hamilton, Ontario  
L8N 3Z5

Interview No. HCM 17-85

Hugh Leonard, Burlington, Ontario, 19 February 1985

Charles Gordon Roland, M.D.:

Mr. Leonard, I wonder if you would begin by telling me a little bit about your background -- where you were born, and a bit about your parents?

Hugh Leonard:

I was born in Ireland and had three brothers and three sisters. I came to England when I was very young. I'm pretty well self-educated because in those days it was kind of tough in Ireland, and all over the world for that matter. Eventually I joined up, in 1940, in the army, and from there I went to an Independent Mobile Unit.

C.G.R.:

You went directly into the artillery?

H.L.:

Yes, directly into it, yes; two days, I joined up and I was right in the artillery. We were an Independent Mobile Unit in England for nearly two years, [during] which we would go to Manchester, like, for 10 days, maybe Birmingham, Liverpool, all over England. And the Germans thought there were so many guns in England, but there was only one battery of guns.

C.G.R.:

That was you. You were all over.

H.L.:

Yes. We would just move around. I remember once we pulled into a camp in Carlyle, Scotland, and everybody wanted to try on our outfit because we could sleep in the daytime [laughter], you

know, and no parades or anything like that. But we were just like night owls there. We lived around, all over England. I remember once we stopped at a chicken farm and we pulled out our guns and there were no chickens left on that farm when we left [laughter]. Everybody who had chickens sent them home. Then in England, you see, you could send them home, chickens as they are with just a tag around the legs, and put them in the mail.

C.G.R.:

Really!

H.L.:

Oh yes.

C.G.R.:

I never heard of that.

H.L.:

You could do that with pheasants too.

C.G.R.:

And the mailman would deliver...?

H.L.:

The mailman delivered pheasants too, yes.

C.G.R.:

For heaven's sake! I never heard of that; that's facinating.

H.L.:

That's true, yes.

C.G.R.:

Is it during this time that that shell was fired? [Reference is to a shell seen in the photograph of Mr. Leonard attached.] What can you tell me about that?

H.L.:

Yes. Well, that was when the Germans came over very heavy bombing. It was just like a mass of cloud coming over. We were down in Waltham Abbey, and that was the powder factory down there, small arms. Small arms was at Enfield and the gunpowder was at Waltham Abbey and they were trying to hit the gunpowder factory. That's when that first shell was fired, to my knowledge, because we were the only ones with the Bofors 40mm Mark VIII at that particular time.

C.G.R.:

O.K. Tell me then about going overseas, when did it happen?

H.L.:

Yes, going overseas we left England, we left from Greenock, and we zig-zagged across the North Atlantic and eventually got to a place called Freetown, in Africa. And we arrived there around, we were there on Christmas day.

C.G.R.:

This would have been Christmas day of...?

H.L.;

1941.

C.G.R.:

'41. So the war had started.

H.L.:

Oh, hell, sure, I was in the war from 1940.

C.G.R.:

No, I'm sorry, I meant the Japanese, the war in the east, the Japanese....

H.L.:

Oh yes, yes.

C.G.R.:

O.K., fine, I just wanted to be sure of the date.

H.L.:

I think it was, because they came all down through Singapore, you know, like in March. Well, we left Freetown, which incidently, is quite some place. Like, you see those native kids swimming down there in the harbor and you see the sharks coming just outside the harbor. Then we went to a place called Capetown, beautiful Capetown. They've got the big Table Mountain there in Capetown. It's a beautiful city, beautiful.

We stayed there awhile and then we moved on and we went to a place there, we stopped at the Maldiv Islands. We never disembarked. I guess we just went in there for fresh water, or whatever. My guess is just that what it would be. And then we started, and there were a lot of ships, there were an awful lot of ships. And then the convoy broke up somewhere up in the Indian Ocean, I believe it was. I remember one battleship, that was the Ramilles battleship. I don't know if you ever heard of the Ramilles?

Next of all we pulled in to a place called Batavia, which is now called...they changed that name to...oh, I forgot now [Jakarta]. Well, anyway, it's minor. There we went from, we set up our guns and we started moving around Java. And we got up to a place called Tasikmalaya, Tasikmalaya. We moved around here and there and eventually we got to Tjilatjap, where everybody was evacuating women and the children and the soldiers,

[expecting] the Japanese would come down through Singapore like a dose of salt, which is exactly what they did. There we shot down 17 aircraft in 2 hours.

C.G.R.:

Seventeen?

H.L.:

Seventeen in two hours, with our Bofors, yes. But it was unable to stop them. There was a little island just outside the harbour which, if I had a map, I could show you. And they just come over the island. We were pretty heavy there, we were pretty busy to be quite honest with you. Then we started moving inland a bit. That was just before the Dutch capitulated. And I got malaria bad.

C.G.R.:

Is this the first time you'd had malaria?

H.L.:

This is the first time. Believe me, I know [laughter].

C.G.R.:

Tell me a bit about how it feels to have malaria.

H.L.:

Malaria, malaria; it's funny, believe it or not, but you knees and your eyes, it effects your eyes, back of your eyes. And you want to go to the toilet all the time, to pass urine. Then you start getting a little chilly and then you really get the chills. You shiver and this...I don't know if there's anything in this world can keep you warm. They plunked a ton of blankets on you but you are still cold. But you've got to break

that fever. I can tell you how you can break that, it's hot tea, weak tea with sugar and no cream. The natives told me this. And you drink that and just drink it, and drink it and drink it, and drink it as much as you can, as hot as you can, and the fever will break just like that. Unreal. Just unreal. Those people know. Yes.

I was captured in the hospital. I was thrown in a prison camp.

C.G.R.:

You were in the hospital?

H.L.:

Well, no. I was in an underground shelter. Everybody had left.

C.G.R.:

I see, I see.

H.L.:

The Japanese come into that shelter and just picked me up and threw me in there.

C.G.R.:

You were alone?

H.L.:

Oh no. Oh, I was alone in the shelter, yes. I was very lucky I wasn't killed, you know.

C.G.R.:

Yes, that's what I was wondering, yes.

H.L.:

They did make a few threats at me, you know, bayonets and the whole thing.

So they sent me to a prison camp in Bandoeng, and it was an old air force base, airport. I met some guys in there, you know, talked to them. And there was a Glen Martin bomber there which we -- they were air force, I was with the artillery, but I got pally with them; we decided that we'd fly it out. We could fix it up and get to Australia, which was only a thousand miles away. Yeah, we fixed it up [laughter], got it ready and got bombbay tanks, tanks in the bombbay rack, you know -- gasoline they give us there. And there was a sergeant, a flight sergeant -- I had better not mention any names -- just say any old name -- his name was Warner, but he never came back, you know. He told our camp commander that if he didn't stop that plane from taking off, he'd report it to the Japanese. And so he must put in his word of honor, you know. C.G.R.:

Why did he...?

H.L.:

Why he was afraid, scared of reprisals.

C.G.R.:

I see, yes.

H.L.:

Then all the work we put into it too. And we had letters to take home, you know; my kit was filled with letters. The Dutch were nice though. The Dutch were allowed then to remain free -- just the British were put in the prison camp, and Australians and Americans, there were a few Americans there. They were there up at Tasikmalaya -- at Surabaya, rather. They used to go on bombing trips to Formosa.



So when this Dutchman and I -- he came in with a car and all that -- I asked him if he'd be interested in getting off the island. He said, "Sure." So I told him that the plane: could he get a pilot? So he said, "Oh yeah. I can get you a pilot all right." He got me a pilot and I was supposed to meet him the next day at 2 o'clock -- and a truckload of Japs came along! I beat it like a Jack rabbit, and I'm not kidding you. I wouldn't trust anybody anymore.

C.G.R.:

Excuse me, but before we get away from that, how did you have access to this plane. I mean, if you were a prisoner....

H.L.:

It was still intact. The war had just ended, and that plane was there, the Glen Martin bomber was there, and there was also a light single-engine aircraft. One of the officers was thinking maybe to...I knew the officer's names and all that. I don't know but, if it would do any good....

C.G.R.:

But it was in the camp area?

H.L.:

This was not a real camp. We were in hangers, aircraft hangers. This barbed wire was around this airport, right? To keep civilians out or whatever. That's what they threw us into because they didn't have regular camps. And everything was all tipsy-turvey over there -- nobody knew what was going on and so on. I was in that camp and that was in Bandoeng. I was one of four guys. One guy's name was McDavis, and Cooper and Dunbar. McDavis is dead. He died after he got back, in a motorcycle

accident.

Then we were stuck and we decided to make a break for it, so we escaped. That was close to the end of March when we escaped, and we went down to the south coast of Java. That's where I learned about the malaria, to break the fever. You're a doctor, maybe you're saying this guy is full of baloney [laughter]! I'm not kidding you, those people know a lot -- perhaps a lot more than a lot of our high medical profession right now, you know -- those people who live out there. Because I've seen wonders done with what the witch doctors did. You know, people will laugh at you but....

C.G.R.:

I don't, no.

H.L.:

Then we broke out -- two of our buddies wanted to go north. I said, "You're crazy to go north because you have to go up towards Singapore. You go there, you're going to get caught." Well, they decided to go -- they got captured. My buddy and I, we stayed out there for close to three months, and then the Japs came after us. I think we would have been all right, but we went through a village and we were captured by the police. We got away from them -- we hid in elephant grass -- and when night falls we had to cross two rivers. Yeah, we decided to go back. At nightfall we got to the edge of the river and there was lights from everywhere came on us -- all Japanese.

Then they were going to shoot me because I was in the army, my buddy was in the air force, and they said I knew more about

bridges being blown up and all that, and I was a danger. I got out of it telling them I was a cook - I didn't know anything - and I just stuck to it that I was a cook. The Japanese who interrogated me, he says, "I was going to school in Cambridge." And he said, "I believe you now," he says, "because you will be getting too close to being shot." I was put in this camp and near a little school somewhere. I stayed there for awhile and then I went to another big camp -- for the love of me I don't know the name but I guess you've heard the name of Van der Post have you?

C.G.R.:

Yes.

H.L.:

Van der Post and I were very good buddy-buddies. Still are for that matter; I think he's South African, I believe. He was born in South Africa. Now, he told me stuff that he never told anybody about himself. And there was strictly, then, high intelligence. I know, when I came back from the war I went out to the Carribean, I've done that many times, you know, after the war. He's written several books as you know. And there was one time he asked me -- well we had been down to Batavia at this camp, and he asked me if I could take a radio tube through for him. I said, "sure." So he gave me a radio tube about that long, it was about that round. Now, what there was, there was pepper pots out there, about that long. Well, he left me -- I was the last to leave the camp -- he left me there especially to try and get this tube through. I worked on that pepper pot for days. I took that bottom off, factory sealed, I wrapped this

tube in a piece of rag and put the tube back in and sealed it back on. Just like as if it came out of the package. And I was searched. I put it right down in front of the Japanese and he said, "O.K. go." So I got it through for him.

I stayed in that camp for awhile and then they shipped me to Sumatra. Now, this Sumatra, now, that's something else. We were thrown in an old coal boat, down in the bottom of the coal boat, and we were shipped across to Sumatra. The stench! We were taken off once a day and hoses put on us, then we were put back down again. Anyone died was just thrown over the side. No prayers, nothing.

C.G.R.:

Really.

H.L.:

Yes. Then we were going into a camp.

C.G.R.:

How long would the trip have taken, about?

H.L.:

That must have taken about three weeks, about three weeks that trip. I got into another little camp -- we only stayed there for a few days and then we moved again. Incidentally, I never met one guy of my regiment all the time I was in prison camp.

C.G.R.:

Is that right?

H.L.:

Not one. No. No one from the battery, I should say.

Then we moved to a camp -- it was a deadly little camp. I remember they started to build a railroad there. I know it very well, but I can't remember the name or number of it. But one day the monsoons came and we had to run some toilets in the ground. Well, latrines overflowed, we were on bed boards, you know, about that high off the floor.

C.G.R.:

About a foot and a half?

H.L.:

Yes. The water came right up so you had sewage, you had snakes, then you had everything. We got out of that in the morning with the work on the railroad, come back at night, back to the same thing, and back on the boards. Now this is night after night. Now, why there hadn't been a very bad disease breakout in that camp, I'll never know. Never in my life will I know. So we worked on that for....

C.G.R.:

How big was the camp?

H.L.:

It wasn't very big, wasn't very big at all.

C.G.R.:

A thousand men?

H.L.:

Close to a thousand.

Incidentally, when I went to this camp, people would sell things like a groundsheet, an overcoat, or anything. But the Dutch were in command at this camp because none of our guys could speak Malaysian. So I'm European, but I could speak Malaysian,

because I'd lived out with the natives for three months. So they're maybe a little upset with me, because I used to go out through the wire and barter and sell stuff. I'd get 10%, but also I risked my life, you know. So this one sergeant-major was selling a groundsheet and wanted 12 guilders for it. I went out and I'm selling the groundsheet -- "I want 15 guilders". So he set off like that and threw the 15 guilders and took off. So I went back in the camp and everybody is standing to attention. (First of all the guards came after me and I'd been out in the jungle and I came back through them when they spread out. I got back into the camp.) I came in and everybody's standing to attention -- I sneaked in, I got in my bed space. Someone is trying to sell something; they're looking for the guy. So, without sneaking off, so the guy next to me says, "Give yourself up, Paddy." I said, "No way." I said, "You mention a word", I said, "you'll have a knife in your back." I would have too, because then things was starting to look desperate. Well, lo and behold, believe it or not, but this captain, one of our captains, followed by a Japanese officer with his big sword hanging down and all that, he's going around with a negligee -- someone was trying to sell a negligee! Well, I just smiled. I wasn't selling a negligee [laughter].

C.G.R.:

Right, you were innocent.

H.L.:

I guess the guy had got it for his wife or sweetheart. I wasn't selling negligees, no. And I got away with that.

Then we moved from that camp to another camp -- a small camp. We stayed there for three weeks, I guess. Then we moved on to another big camp. That was the big camp just outside Pakinbaru. Numbers and camps didn't mean a thing to me then -- names of camps, you know. I was too young to care less. As long as I was kept alive I couldn't care less.

There I had quite a few experiences in that camp, believe me. That's the one that -- that was the one that broke the camel's back. Because we were all getting kind of sickly then, I guess. With me, I just knew how to forage a little bit more, which I did many times. On that one I went out on a working party, and I got close to a warehouse. There was a native in charge. I just said to him, "Have you got any fish here?", I said. "Yes sir". So I said, "Can you give me a little?" "Yes sir". So I had a little kipsack, little army kipsack. So I pull up one of these live fish. So I look at the Japanese rotten vegetables and I throw all these rotten vegetables on top. And this officer saw me and he said, "You can't take that back into camp" -- a British officer. So I said, "I certainly can." He said, "I give you an order." I said, "You don't give orders. You have no right now. You're just a prisoner-of-war, the same as I am. And I'm taking it in." Well, to cut a long story short I got to the guard shack, where they searched everybody. They said to me, "What have you got?" I said, "I have Japanese food." "Oh, O.K., O.K." So I carted it in. That officer had the gall to come to me and ask me to split that fish with the party -- his working party. I took a handful for myself and gave the rest to the officer. And that's one of the things....[You

can shut that off.]

C.G.R.:

Tell me, what would 12 guilders buy? What did food cost and so on?

H.L.:

Twelve guilders. Well, you see, you couldn't buy food there unless you bought it through the fence.

C.G.R.:

Yes, I understand that, yes. I was just thinking, you said they wanted to trade for this 12 guilders. What would he do with the 12 guilders if....

H.L.:

What would I do with the 12 guilders?

C.G.R.:

No. Well, the man you were selling to.

H.L.:

No, he gets the groundsheet. I get the 12 guilders off him.

C.G.R.:

O.K. what did you do with the 12 guilders?

H.L.:

Well, then I buy food again through the fence, you see. This is what happens, I give the man these 12 guilders then he might want me to buy something, you know.

C.G.R.:

I understand.

H.L.:

Or me, if I want to buy something I can, you know, like



that.

C.G.R.:

I was just curious to know how expensive food was. I guess that's all I was getting at.

H.L.:

Oh no, food wasn't expensive.

C.G.R.:

It wasn't expensive?

H.L.:

Then there was another time I was working. They asked if anyone were a motor mechanics, they want motors fixed -- the Humber Snipe cars; I don't know if you ever heard of them.

C.G.R.:

Yes, sure.

H.L.:

I said, "Sure, I'm a mechanic." So I went in to work on them; as a mechanic I didn't even know the front brake from the gas pedal [laughter]. So they put me to work on this Humber Snipe, me and one other guy. A couple of guys came over and added on, and worked on the Humber Snipe, and we got it going. The Japanese come up to the two of us working on this car and give me a pack of cigarettes. I was no mechanic, -- I got kicked out of there fast!

I remember one day, I got one kilo of chilies I bought, and there was a truck that was supposed to take us back to camp, which was about two miles. I had those chilies wrapped in my G-string. Believe me or not, when I got back to camp that skin was right off me. Oh, I was walking like -- I was [bow-legged] just

like a wild-west cowboy, you know. I was so bad, I was really burned. That happened too, with me, with fish one time. Smoked fish and picking off those bones [laughter]!

Then one day one of guys went missing and we were on parade, and couldn't find him, couldn't find him. The guy went down and fell down in one of the toilets in the ground and drowned in there. They were going to shoot five of us if they couldn't find him. And then there was another guy that went berserk -- and he escaped. We had to all go looking for him in the jungle. When they found him, they caught him and put him in a cage in front of the guard shack and everyday they shot him with slingshots and they'd throw stones at him. Just inhuman, you know. The guy, what the heck, the guy's mind is gone, he can't help it. And there they are with slingshots -- big joke!

C.G.R.:

I assume he didn't last very long.

H.L.:

No. That's the way a lot of people died. We buried as many as three-four men a night, you know. And you had bury them before you eat.

C.G.R.:

Tell me about the burials. Where were they done and...?

H.L.:

We had a makeshift hospital there and you just wrapped a guy in a blanket or whatever, and just dug a hole and put him in the ground, and that was it. Say a prayer over him and that's it. I don't think they'll ever find that cemetery in Sumatra. Oh,

it's long jungle all over.

C.G.R.:

No padres?

H.L.:

Yes, we had a padre. Padre O'Rourke. I don't know if you ever heard of him or not? Yes, Padre O'Rourke. If you ever know this guy who lives down near Welland [Oswald Luce], he remembers Padre O'Rourke.

C.G.R.:

Is that "O'Rourke"?

H.L.:

O'Rourke, yes. Yes, he was a very nice, very nice man.

C.G.R.:

Good man.

H.L.:

Very good, very, very good.

Oh, I was sick there many times. I survived.

C.G.R.:

Tell me about this, would you. You know, this is what I'm really interested in. The kinds of diseases, and how they...

H.L.:

Diseases, yes, I had malaria, and a lot of dysentery, beriberi, and there was dengue, I don't know if you heard of dengue.

C.G.R.:

Dengue fever, yes.

H.L.:

Dengue fever. And there was another one called pellagra.

It was called pellagra. These spots come on you. One part of the body to the other, and then they'd close up; and apparently when they get up top, upstairs, you're gone. Something like that. Yes, I had the wet beriberi. I didn't have the dry beriberi. I saw a lot of cases of that. There was one case, a kid come from Australia, and we used to call him "Bundles." He had it bad, he had it very, very, bad malaria -- no, not malaria, beriberi.

C.G.R.:

Beriberi.

H.L.:

Beriberi. He just went right off. Well the Commander of our camp, he asked me if I could get some veggies [vegetables] for him, you know. I said, "Sure I'll get some lettuce and stuff." Just for the vitamin Bs, you know. I got the lettuce and the eggs, and he said, "No, I'm not a rabbit. I don't eat rabbit food." So what the hell, what can you do? That guy, he died. But, if I could save him -- I'd stuck a knife in his side to let the water out. The water went out all right, but he couldn't take it, he was too far gone by then. There was a lot of that. Many got the dry beriberi. There are two types of beriberi -- wet and the dry.

Another bad thing was those tropical ulcers, you know. You get them on your arms and legs and they eat into you. Honest to God! all you've got to get is a touch of a thorn and the next thing all this is grown big and round and bigger, and bigger, and it's just eating into the flesh, you know. I've seen guys so bad with sores that size and plugged up with cotton and stuff, you

know. Like, you didn't have the medicines and you just took what you could, you know.

C.G.R.:

Tell me about the hospital. What kind of a building was it?

H.L.:

Hospital was a building about 50 yards long, I'd say -- about 150 feet, if that; I doubt it. You were just put in there to die, on boards, that's all. What could they do for you? I'd lay in there and I was pretty sick at the time, and I looked at the guy next door -- next to me -- and he had lice crawling all over him. Well, I called one of these guys, I said, "This guy's filled with lice." So the Dutchman said, "No, it's mehring, mehring" (ants). I said (I speak a little Dutch too, you know), and I said, "they're not ants, they're lice." So I managed to get up -- I got up, you know, got back to my own bed; once I got back there the guys would take care of me. Mind you, that was close to the end of the war.

Then I got pneumonia and I was shipped to the British General Hospital in Singapore. Stayed there six weeks and then I went to India -- Bangalore. I went up to Bangalore, there, for another, it would be about another five or six weeks.

C.G.R.:

This is after the war, obviously.

H.L.:

Oh, yes.

C.G.R.:

At the hospital, were there doctors, British doctors?

H.L.:

We had British doctors, but what could they do for you? Like, it's like me going out and seeing a guy with a flat tire -- I haven't got a spare to give him. What can you do?

You wouldn't believe -- I don't think anyone would believe except people who were there. By God! You grow up working on the railroad. A Jap would be eating this thing, and we'd be dying there like dogs, and waiting for him to give you a bit, you know, just like dogs. If he was a good guy he would let us work for him and he'd give you some. He wouldn't sell it to me he would give it to me. Some of the others they'd just throw it out on the floor and stamp on it. To give you an idea of the difference in human beings. All Japs weren't bad, don't get me wrong. But we had Koreans who were our guards and they were the worst.

C.G.R.:

Yes, I've heard that.

H.L.:

Koreans were the worst. They were the devils on earth. They weren't fighting soldiers -- they wouldn't let them fight. And all they had was just the prison guards. And they were bad. They were very, very bad.

C.G.R.:

So there was a lot of brutality.

H.L.:

There was an awful lot of brutality, oh yes, there was. There was one guy, believe it or not, now, out there you are

working at a temperature of 120, you know, 110, whatever. And this guy, he wants to get a Japanese goat and kill it. They are trying to find the guy who killed the goat. Well, what the guy done, he stored the meat under his bed space. And at that temperature that didn't take too long to find out where that goat was in that heat [laughter], and the guy.

Oh, there was one experience I had there, where a little Japanese died, you know. And we were going to the party, they were going to cremate him, made a big fire, send him right back to back to his ancestors. So I'm there and I'm building the fire and he said, "Which Jap was it that died." I said, "Donald Duck." I started to laugh. Well, my God, I started laughing -- this Japanese guard hit me with rifle: he knocked the hell out of me. And he said, "Why are you laughing?" And I said, "I come from Ireland." I said, "When our people die we laugh, we joke, we drink, we dance. We put the soul happily to heaven." Oh, he puts his arm around me and gives me a package of cigarettes and started laughing. Knocked the shit out of everybody else because they wouldn't laugh [laughter]. Quick wit, you had to be, you just had to be quick, you know, you had to.

The water there wasn't the best. We made our own sort of a purifier from coconut leaves and sand and let the water go through it to try and kill the germs, purify it. You'd been drinking that water for a long time and then we found there was a body upstream in the water. We had been drinking it, you know! Then we had toilets over a creek, believe it or not. And that was your toilet, to go over a creek. And one day everybody went down, I guess the food they had, there was something wrong with

it. But they had to clean it out. So everybody's got the runs, and everybody's gone down there. Well, this is the funniest part I've heard. That toilet collapsed, it collapsed. Everybody was in the water. Well, there's a lot of people out there that they don't use paper, they use water. Little cups like, and they run down the back and they wash themselves. Those guys had been all through this looking for those cups! It was unreal, oh, just unreal. So the toilet was broke down for a few days and they fixed it up again. We used to get some turtles out of that creek. Get some big turtles, you know. They weren't good eating, but I guess the turtles were going after what we were putting into the water.

C.G.R.:

Did you lose a lot of weight during this time.

H.L.:

Yes, I lost an awful lot of weight.

C.G.R.:

Do you know, roughly, what was your normal weight?

H.L.:

My normal weight, then was 125 pounds and it dropped down to about 76.

C.G.R.:

Really.

H.L.:

Yes, I was very, very skinny. But there was times you could laugh, you know, and times you could cry, and times you could scream. We had our laughs, sure. You had to -- if you're living



in conditions like that, you've got to make life more easy than crying and grumbling, like a lot of people did. Always crying. The guys that cried and grumbled all the time, they were out there under trees.

C.G.R.:

They're what?

H.L.:

They're under trees, right now, out in Sumatra.

C.G.R.:

Yes, yes. They didn't make it.

H.L.:

No. You'll find that most of the Japanese prisoners that you speak to now that they are kind of jolly, you know. I don't think you will find anyone that is at all miserable or complaining or continuing to cry, you know.

Yeah, there's a lot to talk about, you see, but you remember, you know; you forget a lot too.

But we did have quinine tablets. Do you know quinine? We used to get the bark from the tree and always rolled it up in little balls, and you'd just swallow that stuff. You didn't want to take it like that -- augh! -- that is bitter. And Epsom salts for dysentery, which works. I think, well, I guess there's not enough left in the body by the time we used that stuff. It was supposed to.

C.G.R.:

I've heard that.

H.L.:

I beleive the malaria germ goes to the spleen, does it not?

C.G.R.:

It affects the spleen a lot, yes.

H.L.:

Well, I think when the body has it for a long time, storing it in the body it's in the spleen, I believe.

C.G.R.:

Yes. The spleen swells up.

H.L.:

That's it. And then it starts going through your blistering again -- is that right?

H.L.:

I think so, yes.

H.L.:

That's when you get the fever back.

C.G.R.:

Right, right.

H.L.:

And I've had an awful lot of malaria, an awful lot.

C.G.R.:

Have you been troubled since the war with it?

H.L.;

Oh, yes. I came to Canada, I've even had it in Canada, when I got here, about 15 years ago. I get little chills now, but I don't think it's malaria, you know, it's just chills, it's just like malaria. But it's not that.

C.G.R.:

Was the absence of sex ever a problem? Was this something

you thought about?

H.L.:

You were too hungry.

C.G.R.:

Right. That's what most people have said.

H.L.:

You want to think of food, you know. You were just too hungry. You never gave it a thought -- just starving. Well, not starving all the time, it was starving because....There again speaking about the sick out there -- if you were sick you only got half rations. So that's why a lot of guys went under too.

C.G.R.:

If you didn't work, you didn't get fed.

H.L.:

If you didn't work, you didn't get fed. And they gave us the white rice, which is the worst rice, was the white rice. If they gave you the red rice, that was good. If you'd eat them with shells on it, that's good. You know, because you're getting the vitamins with that, but there's no vitamins in white rice.

Believe it or not, it was a Dutchman found out that with his chickens. He fed them white rice and they all started wobbling all over the place and they had beri beri.

C.G.R.:

I've heard about that. Yes.

H.L.:

But I've taken eggs into camp in muddy water. The Japanese would just look at it, "that's water." For a drink, you know. I remember one day I took a big coat out, a big army coat. The guy

wanted 90 guilders for it. Well, as I said, the sun is about 120; here I am going out with a great big army overcoat on! I sold it, but they wanted to find out where the coat was, who the guy was that was wearing the coat [laughter]. They never got me. No, no, I got that army coat out, yes, out there for the guy. When I was going out the guard said, "How about it", he said, "What you got there?" I said, "I got malaria and I got very cold." "O.K." So I got away with that.

C.G.R.:

As long as it sounded plausible.

H.L.:

That's right, yes.

The Japanese gave us little phamplets about how great their air force was. It said that one of the pilots ran out of ammunition and he went after an aircraft and with this little bag of rice he threw it and hit the pilot in the face, you know, [laughter]. That was one of the little childish things. Then, at the very end, just before I got released, believe it or not, I come home from the working party and I was allowed to send a telegram home. I said, I'm not going near the Japanese; that's a lot of baloney, I'll not go there. Well, they kept after me and the Japanese come down and picked me up and said, "You'd better send a telegram home." I said, "What the hell, it will never get there anyhow." They said, "It will get there; you just say what we tell you to say." I'm being well fed, I'm being paid to work, and I'm in good condition. That was the telegram. So that was a lot of baloney.

C.G.R.:

And did it ever get sent?

H.L.:

Yes, she got it. It helped her a little bit, you know.

C.G.R.:

Sure. She wouldn't know how untrue it was.

H.L.:

That's true. We never got any Red Cross parcels. None at all. Now, I read a little bit in the Reader's Digest, there. A doctor that was a prisoner-of-war. Did you read that?

C.G.R.:

A doctor in Alberta?

H.L.:

That's right.

C.G.R.:

Yes, Ben Wheeler.

H.L.:

Ben Wheeler. Now, he states there that they got Red Cross parcels. We never saw Red Cross parcels.

C.G.R.:

From what I can tell, I don't think anybody got very many. But I guess in some areas they got a few, and I think he was mostly on Formosa, wasn't he.

H.L.:

Yes, he would be in that area.

C.G.R.:

I think so, yes. Dr. Wheeler is dead now.

H.L.:

They tell me that they got the Bible and made "Holy Smokes" for a long time out of the bible, believe it or not. And this guy, he didn't want to part with the Bible, but eventually I talked him into it -- a little bit of food and stuff like that -- you'd pretty well give anything.

C.G.R.:

Could you get tobacco or did you smoke other things?

H.L.:

You had to get the tobacco from outside the gate. You could not buy it in camp, no. But I know at the start of the war all the officers were issued cigarettes by the Japanese, but not the soldiers.

C.G.R.:

Not the men, no.

H.L.:

There was quite an experience I had there -- there was four of us, but only three of us could get in the boat. So I lost the toss to go across and get the boat back. I got the boat back and another three guys got in the boat and I stepped on a log: that was quite some log, that was an alligator I stepped on! I was across that creek before the other guys were [laughter].

C.G.R.:

Yes, I'll bet.

H.L.:

Another friend of mine, he went to go to the toilet and I heard him scream, and there were tigers in the area, and "My God! what's happening?" I went looking for him. And he said, "Paddy,

if you ever go to the toilet, don't use that tree. You pick a beautiful big leaf but all under the leaf is all thorns [laughter].

No one ever escaped successfully from that island that I know of. Because you'd have to get to the Christmas Islands and then from the Christmas Islands to Australia. The journey would be too far.

C.G.R.:

Yes. I don't think there are many successful escapes from anywhere in Asia, as far as I can tell.

H.L.:

No, no, not the Japanese. Like, if you escaped in Germany, if your caught, you're put back in camp or in solitary confinement or something like that, but not with the Japanese -- you escape and you're shot. That's it -- the gun. If they know you escaped.

C.G.R.:

Yes, you were lucky.

H.L.:

I was lucky because they didn't have anybody's names or anything, you see. They hadn't any record at all. I was just one of the lucky ones, I guess, to get out. But Sumatra is a long country. Very, very, very wild.

C.G.R.:

Are the natives helpful to you?

H.L.:

The natives weren't allowed to speak to us. They weren't allowed to talk to any of us. Even before we went to Sumatra and

we were down at Batavia, and there was a German sub in there, they wouldn't even let us speak to the Germans. They weren't allowed to speak to anybody.

Bedbugs was a damn nuisance.

C.G.R.:

Go ahead, tell me about the bedbugs.

H.L.:

You'd have to clean your bed space at least every two days because those bedbugs get underneath the cracks. At night time they were deadly. They just crawl over you like a swarm of ants. Very, very miserable. And the stink of those things! If there's one bed bug in the house I can smell it.

C.G.R.:

Is that right?

H.L.:

But the guys kept themselves pretty clean. All their heads were shaven, as you know. I saw one officer when we were first taken, after I skipped from that camp and I was back in. The kid had his hair cut and it was all off. Everywhere, shaved right off. He just sat there and cried, young guy, you know.

[End of side 1]

But it wasn't like that at all, it was quite the opposite. But you couldn't eat a big meal then because....

C.G.R.:

Your stomach had all shrunk, yes.

H.L.:

You dream a lot when you were at a place like that. You



know what you're going to do and all that.

I met some weird guys in there too. There was one guy who was an Australian, he had killed his wife and put her under the boards in the kitchen. He said, "When I go back, that's it for me. I don't want this war to end." Well, you got everybody out there telling you confession. That's one thing about everyone -- guys used to talk to you about their home life, and everything. I remember another couple of guys that robbed a bank somewhere up in Thailand. But they got away with it. They'd be O.K., if they didn't rob the bank, shot so many people up, and all that. It was just guys that didn't care. We had those too, you know.

I remember back in England, there was that rationing, you know, but we had so much food we didn't know what to do with it. The British thought, the soldiers came first. They got the best. I'll never forget it. One day we were up in a gun emplacement, piling sandbags, and we had [so many] sausages, we buried them in the sandbags. One guy said we might be glad of those one of these days. One of these days we might be thankful to have those sausages.

C.G.R.:

In Sumatra you'd have been delighted to have them.

H.L.:

Even if they were bad we would have cooked them and eaten them [laughter]. Rat and snake, they're delicious to eat too. Especially snake -- it's very good, very good. But then you eat anything, anything at all.

C.G.R.:

What would you say was the worst part about this whole

experience? If you had to single out one thing, what bothered you the most?

H.L.:

Food, food. Bothered me more than anything. Just to live to eat. Work, had to work like a horse but if you haven't got the food, it's just like a machine -- if you haven't got the oil in the machine, it breaks down -- that's it. That machine is gone. It's the same, as far as I'm concerned, it's the same with your own body. I think so, I'm not a doctor but I think it is the same exactly. The same idea.

I remember one day this big Dutchman, he used to go to the Dutch kitchen for his soup, and he'd come back saying, "The Dutch had got everything," you know. And he'd have his share of ours too. Then one day I come back and I missed him. So I said, "Where's Pete?" They said they buried him three nights ago. I didn't even notice him. That's all, you just buried people, and that was it.

You know, when I came back from the war I got in trouble with my sister. My mother-in-law died. We went down there and everybody's crying. I said, "What the hell's wrong with everybody?" "Do we bury her?" I said, "Sure, what the hell." I'll tell you, oh, well I didn't know any better. I just didn't know any better.

C.G.R.:

Sure, you were used to that.

H.L.:

Oh boy, did I ever get it! I'll never forget that.

C.G.R.:

Is there anything else you can think of that is medically related -- about other people who have had medical difficulties, or anything else of your own that you haven't mentioned?

H.L.:

Oh, I had a problem carrying 100-kilo sacks of rice on my back out there, and now my back bothers me a little bit, but it wasn't too bad. Then, as the years rolled by, it got worse and worse. And here in Burlington, in Hamilton, the doctor found out I had Paget's disease. It was my hip. I've been going to Toronto for two 10-day sessions -- stayed there for 10 days, and come back. Giving me this calcitonin to inject myself with. I've been injecting myself and then they pushed it up to two needles a day. Well, one day I was out around the pool, here, and I was down and I couldn't get up, I couldn't move. So, I called the doctor, and I said, "You might as well give me a needle now. Put me out of my misery. I can't take anymore of this." So he called in a Dr. Dolan.

C.G.R.:

Dolan?

H.L.:

Dr. Dolan, yes. I took all my x-rays down to the General Hospital. He was operating from down there. And he says to me, "Oh yes, you have to have an operation. One of your disks is just sort of gone down to tissue." He gave me a myelogram and he operated, and 10 minutes later I'm walking around fine. When I came back, too, I had spontaneous pneumothorax. And three years ago I just had a by-pass here in my legs. And that was

done by a Doctor Kafur.

C.G.R.:

I'm sorry, I didn't really mean to ask about things recently. It was during the war -- if there was anything that you hadn't thought to mention then.

H.L.:

Oh, during the war. Oh, sure. No, the only thing I can think of is like we were educated to keep our dishes clean, for dysentery. You washed them and leave them out in the sun for 20 minutes and then the sun will kill the germs off the dishes.

Oh, we had guys in camp that had been badly wounded coming down through Singapore. But they were young, they were healthy, and most of their wounds had healed pretty good. The only time the wounds would not heal was the last part of the war when you were just...the blood just wasn't strong enough to heal them, you know.

C.G.R.:

Yea, pretty worn down by then.

H.L.:

It was worn down, I guess. Like a car battery, you're just gone down. But after that, I will say one thing, you know, I never remember dreaming about anything.

C.G.R.:

Is that right?

H.L.:

No. I never remember having a dream of prison camp. Never.

C.G.R.: