

**JOSEPH ATEAH**

*Experiences as a Prisoner-of-War, World War 2*

Interviewed by

Charles G. Roland, MD

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Hannah Chair for the History of Medicine

McMaster University

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Charles G. Roland, MD:

Mr. Ateah, I wonder if you'd start by giving me your full name, your birthplace and birth date.

Joseph Ateah:

Joseph Ateah is my name and I was born in Rennie, Manitoba. My birth date is -- I should say I was born on September 11th, 1922.

CGR:

What kind of a name is Ateah?

JA:

Lebanese.

CGR:

Lebanese. And your father's and mother's names were...?

JA:

Well, my father's name was Abdula Albert and my mother's name was Mary Isabell.

CGR:

And what did your father do?

JA:

My father, at one time, he had two stores, so he was a merchant, but he went broke so he peddled dry goods.

CGR:

You were born in '22, so when war started you were 17? What were you doing then?

JA:

When the war started, yes, I was 17. I was working for my cousin in Victoria Beach, transfers. They were delivering ice and wood to the campers on Victoria Beach in the summer, late in

the summer.

CGR:

And when did you join up?

JA;

I joined up on June 3rd, 1941.

CGR:

'41, okay. So you were 19 then.

JA:

Yes.

CGR:

Did you go right into the Grenadiers?

JA:

No, I was in the Winnipeg Rifles first. I joined them [the Grenadiers] when they came back from Jamaica and they were looking for reinforcements.

CGR:

Oh so you went from the Rifles to the Grenadiers?

JA:

Yes.

CGR:

Were you ever sorry that you made the switch?

JA:

No, I can't say that I was sorry. I don't think there's -- being sorry don't help you any. I think it makes it worse for you if you're being sorry or anything. So no I don't.

CGR:

Sure doesn't change anything.

JA:

No. I'm not prejudiced against the Japs or the Chinese, that don't bother me. As a matter of fact, I worked with Chinese after, not long after I come back, in 1950, I guess it was. I worked with a Japanese.

CGR:

I see. Well in Hong Kong, what company were you in?

JA:

B Company.

CGR:

And tell me just a little bit about your war, your three weeks of war. What happened to you then?

JA:

Well, I was with B Company and we were in, at that time (I don't think we were all together), but I was at Wan Chai Gap and we fought there till we surrendered.

CGR:

Till the 25th, Christmas Day? Or did you surrender a bit before that?

JA:

I believe it was on the 23rd that we surrendered. I'm not quite sure about that.

CGR:

Were you wounded?

JA:

No, I wasn't wounded.

CGR:

No. So you were okay.

JA:

Yes.

CGR:

What was life in the camps like? Where did you go first, North Point?

JA:

Yes, North Point. We were in North Point. Oh, it was rough but, I don't know, I guess, other prisoners and other prisoner-of-war camps in Germany and that, I guess it wasn't well off neither.

CGR:

It's not a good life for anybody, that's for sure.

Did you have any serious sicknesses while you were in that camp?

JA:

Oh, I had dingy fever [dengue fever]. Well I guess you can't call it sick, but I had my appendix out when I weighed 93 lbs. It perforated and they opened it and took it out and I was very sick with that. I also had a touch of dysentery. But apart from really serious sickness -- like some of them had diphtheria and that -- no, I didn't have any diphtheria.

CGR:

Tell me about your appendicitis -- when did you have that?

JA:

Oh, I can't remember when I had that.

CGR:

Were you at Sham Shui Po?

JA:

Yes, then at Sham Shui Po, yes. I was up in the Bowen Road Hospital for, oh, 6, 7 months.

CGR:

You were pretty sick?

JA:

I was pretty sick. Well, they let it heal open and every couple of days they'd burn the proud flesh with blue stone. Yes, I was quite sick.

CGR:

Do you remember who operated on you?

JA:

Yes. Surgical Commander Gunn. He was a Canadian but he had went to England and joined the navy in England.

CGR:

The Royal Navy?

JA:

Yes. Before the war started, so he was the surgeon that did the operating up there while I was up there.

CGR:

Were the nurses still there then?

JA:

No, they'd gone. Oh yes, it was just orderlies. And of course the anesthetic they used was a spinal and it didn't work too well and after they had cut in a little bit deep I could feel it. So I mean, I watched them cut me open till I passed out with the pain.

CGR:

It must have been a strange feeling?

JA:

It was. The pain, you know, got worse and worse until I couldn't take it anymore; yet you could always feel something, right from the start you could even feel it a bit, but it was nothing really to -- if it was only that bad all the way through I'd have been all right.

CGR:

I was just going to say that as they got deeper it got worse.

JA:

Yes, right. I guess the worst treatment I got from the Japs when we were marching, group march from where they picked us up till they took us to North Point. They had us chained together or wired together with barbed wire, and every second or third guy would have heavy boots on and I had bare feet and they'd scuff your heels there with the toe of their boots, the ones that had on shoes. I also had a rifle butt on the side of the head. I still don't know for what reason, whether the Jap misunderstood me or not. I was knocked out by it.

CGR:

There seemed to be a lot of that.

JA:

Yes, but I guess I didn't get it as much as some did. But I don't know why because I was going to the washroom; I was, oh, outside the washrooms and the Jap told me to stop in Japanese and I stopped and he asked where I was going, and I said, "benjo," which meant washroom, and then he hit me. When I woke up he was

gone. That's all he did was just...I was quite surprised that he didn't do more, actually, when he had knocked me out already anyway.

CGR:

You didn't have diphtheria?

JA:

No, I didn't have diphtheria.

CGR:

You managed to miss that. That was pretty bad, I guess.

JA:

Yes it was.

CGR:

Tell me about dengue fever, what's that like? How do you feel when you have it?

JA:

It's almost like malaria, they tell me. You sweat and you get a temperature pretty high, but you're not quite as sick. It's a lingering thing, like I had it after I come home too. They treat you the same. They gave me quinine.

CGR:

So they treat you the same as if you had malaria. I see.

JA:

Yes, they gave me the same. And I had that here, quinine, in this hospital.

CGR:

Did you have any other medical problems while you were there?

JA:



Oh...

CGR:

Did you ever have this thing that some of them call "electric feet?"

JA:

Oh yes. I still got that.

CGR:

Do you. Tell me about that.

JA:

Well, actually it's burning and once in a while you get shooting pains and there's numbness. Like I have numbness -- not always -- but at times when the doctors examine me he'll find numbness and the next day it may be stopped again and the next day it's back again. And this polyneuritis which I have, which I got three years ago, they claimed that it was caused from beriberi and avitaminosis.

CGR:

Beriberi? And you've had these effects this long after.

JA:

Yes. When they came they said this is why I have this.

CGR:

Is it changing?

JA:

About this poly?

CGR:

Yes.

JA:

No. It hasn't changed -- really one of the changes is that my hand is more numb, even when I wave. I have to watch everything that I'm doing or else I can't feel if I grab something, you know. I don't know whether I have it or not. The girls there in arts and crafts, sometimes I marvel at the things that they do, but I guess if you want to do it I guess you can do it. And that's why I come in here to the day hospital, so that I've got something to do.

CGR:

When did you stop working?

JA:

Oh, December 20th, 1979. It's heart problem.

CGR:

How's that now?

JA:

Well I'm still getting treatments for it and I still carry the nitro. Sometimes I'll give them up and all of a sudden, it's not as much pain but my heart will go very fast and then just feel like it's going to stop, and those things. But I felt that when I was in prison camp. Of course they couldn't find it, just as here, they couldn't find it. It was just through a doctor from Czechoslovakia, Dr. Spaniel was the doctor that found something wrong with my heart. The electrocardiograph don't always show it, just once in a while, the fault. And he retired me at that time. He retired me after three bouts of intensive care in the same year.

CGR:

What were you doing then? What kind of work?

JA:

I was doing porter-orderly work in the Victoria Hospital. My wife used to always say, "Well, when you're sick why did you go to work?" I always felt, "Well, if I get sick I'm in a good spot," I worked in a hospital.

CGR:

Yes good point.

When you were in the camps, this is a large collection of reasonably healthy young men, what about sex? Did you talk about sex?

JA:

No, you didn't talk about sex. It was food they talked about.

CGR:

Everybody talked about food.

JA:

Yes. That was the thing. When you came back well then it's, then it turns to sex, as soon as your belly is full.

CGR:

But not while it's empty?

JA:

No.

CGR:

How about homosexuality? Was there any of that as far as you know?

JA:

No, not that I know of. I guess no one was in shape to even

think of it, you know.

CGR:

Yes. No kind of sex.

JA:

If you're empty and hungry, there is only one thing on your mind and that's food.

CGR:

And you were empty and hungry, I guess, most of the time, were you?

JA:

Yes, most of the time.

CGR:

How about the Red Cross parcels?

JA:

We had two and two-thirds delivered, or that they let us have, the Japs.

CGR:

In four and a half years you got...?

JA:

Well, three years and eight months. yes, that's what we had, about two and two-thirds.

CGR:

Was better than nothing, I guess.

JA:

Oh yes.

CGR:

But it's not very much, is it?

JA:

And then at times, once in a while, we got potato tops, you know, greens with lots of vitamins. But there wasn't much else. Once in a while you got some rotten eggs, but then they were that rotten that sometimes you couldn't eat it. And then there were duck eggs and duck eggs were a pretty strong odor anyway.

CGR:

Are they? I've never eaten duck eggs. I don't know.

JA:

I'd never eaten them before I went to the prison camp, but I smelled them, you know; they're very strong. And then when they are rotten it's all the more. You could smell the truck coming for miles, even before they got in the camp, and you knew they were bringing eggs.

I guess we had at least one good Jap. At least for sure we had one good Jap. Watanabe his name was. He was the interpreter at Bowen Road Hospital.

CGR:

Yes.

JA:

He used to smuggle in a little bit of medical supplies and they caught him at it once.

CGR:

Really.

JA:

And they were going to punish him, but he being a Methodist minister, well he said, "Go ahead, do what you want to with me." He said, "God will look after me but God won't have mercy on

you." And they didn't touch him. But he used to do as much as he could, you know. Of course he was from the States in the first place. Like he went back to see his people in Japan and they put him in the army.

CGR:

Ah yes I see.

JA:

But he was a very nice man. I often wondered what really happened to him, because even though he's a Jap, you know -- if they're good they're good. I mean you can't take it away from any race, eh.

CGR:

There's good people everywhere. And bad.

JA:

Yes, that's right.

CGR:

Absolutely.

JA:

Yes, I believe in that very strongly. I've worked with all kinds, different nationalities, and I've never had any problems with them. I guess it was my Dad long ago taught me against discrimination, eh. He was a Christian. Of course Christians, that's a no-no to hate anybody.

CGR:

Unfortunately not all Christians live up to that.

JA:

No. But I do, too. There is no one that I hate. Maybe sometimes I think, "Well, what for?" But then you think it over,

"Well, if you can't do anybody any good, at least don't do him any harm."

CGR:

Can you think of anything else of a sort of medical nature from the camps in the camp time?

JA:

Well yes. I forgot, in camp Dr. Ashton-Rose (you've probably heard some of the other boys talking about him).

CGR:

I have heard the name, yes, right.

JA:

He had some nicotinic acid to give us for our beriberi and avitaminosis, that would give me relief just like a pain killer.

CGR:

Really.

JA:

Yes. but the unfortunate thing was there wasn't enough of it. So they'd get to the point that they'd give me that when it was my turn, at night. Well, it worked with that. It seemed to ease the pain and also the hotness from my feet, because they would feel like they were burning hot.

CGR:

Why did they give it to you at night? So that you could sleep?

JA:

Yes.

CGR:

How did they give it to you?

JA:

Injection. They were something, those old blunt needles. I've seen them bend something when they were putting them in.

CGR:

Give it into the hip or...?

JA:

Yes. Then again, that's all they had. So you can't blame the doctors for the needles.

CGR:

Do you think you got pretty good medical there?

JA:

Well, I don't think that a lot of those people that died would have died if they had better medical treatment, like malaria and diphtheria. Some of them had pneumonia, double pneumonia.

CGR:

Yes. but that's because there weren't drugs and so on. But what I meant was, were the doctors themselves doing the best they can?

JA:

Oh yes.

CGR:

Yes, that's what I was getting at.

JA:

Yes, the doctors did very well for what they had. Dr. [John] Crawford -- I forget the names of the other doctors but he was one of them. And of course Dr. Ashton-Rose.

CGR:



Well there was a Dr. John Reid.

JA:

Yes, Dr. Reid.

CGR:

And Dr. Gordon Gray.

JA:

Gray, yes.,

CGR:

And I think there was a Dr. Martin Banfill.

JA:

I can't remember him. But I remember Reid, yes. And I think there was a Coitiere, or something like that, a dentist.

CGR:

I don't know the dentist. Oh, there was another dentist though. I just got his name this morning -- Winston Cunningham.

JA:

Yes, yes, Cunningham. I remember that name too.

CGR:

Did you have any dental work done there?

JA:

Yes. This is a marvel on its own. They drilled out my tooth and they put building cement in there. You know, it stayed in there until, oh, I don't know. It must have been three or four years after I come home.

CGR:

Really.

JA:

It stayed in there. I never had any toothache or anything

from that, and then it came out.

CGR:

So it lasted five or six years?

JA:

Yes, right. Just plain cement. But they said they put it in there just to, just for a while, just to, they figured that it might ache and then this might stop it from aching until I got used to the hole in the tooth. That was really something. Of course one thing was that we didn't have the food to chew on, to wear it out.

CGR:

No.

JA:

But still to last like that, you know, it was marvelous as it was.

CGR:

Well then after you came home, you had lots of food and it still lasted.

JA:

I think it was two years or so after, after I come home.

CGR:

Yes, that is remarkable.

JA:

You wouldn't think that it would ever -- but that sure helped. Those doctors did their very best. Of course, they worked hour after hour, even through the middle of the night, you know. As a matter of fact, one of the medical sergeants, Mawson, used to call him "Mousy" (I never really knew what his right name

was), but he turned just about -- well he turned gray in about 6 months, I guess and that might have come from worry too over the people that he was looking after. He was a medical sergeant.

CGR:

Yes, it must have been difficult to see people dying and to know you could help them if you just had the right things.

J.A.:

And you know that if you asked the Japs for more you'd probably get a smack on the side of the head or something like that. So they did very well for what they had.

CGR:

Well that's good. Is there anything else that you can think of that might fit in here?

JA:

Not really. It's always the thing that when you're, when people ask you can't think, but after you're gone maybe, tomorrow, I will.

CGR:

Yes, we're all the same.

JA:

You know what I mean.

CGR:

We all do that, yes.

JA:

But we're all the same. I'm not just saying that just because I was a prisoner, etc., but everybody...

CGR:

No, no, no, I know.

JA:

Yes, my appetite is a lot better, an appetite that's really that good; of course it's been worse since this polyneuritis.

CGR:

Well I appreciate very much your coming down.

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