JOHANNES (JOHN) JACOBUS OTTERSPOOR

Experiences as a Prisoner-of-War in the Far East, World War 2

Interviewed by

Charles G. Roland, M.D.

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Hannah Chair for the History of Medicine

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John Otterspoor, Hamilton, Ontario

Charles G. Roland, MD:

Mr. Otterspoor, would you begin by just giving me a bit of background about your early years, please?

John J. Otterspoor:

I was born September 10, 1921, and my father was stationed in Utrecht, Holland, as a railroad engineer, driving the engines from place to place. When I turned ten years old, my father was transferred to the Dutch East Indies, where he became roundhouse superintendent of the railroad in Indonesia.

C.G.R.:

Where did you live, there?

J.J.O.:

We lived, starting out, in Degaul, and later on in Semarang. Semarang is where we were, right up to the war. We had a comfortable home. We had a good life in Indonesia. We had, of course, a few servants, like it used to be there. People helping us in the house and in the garden.

I went to school, to the college for mechanical engineering. I finished the college -- in 1941 I graduated. That was a year later -- I had to be conscripted at 18, but at 19 I had to join the forces, because my study was finished.

C.G.R.:

Yes. And your country was at war.

J.J.O.:

Holland was at war at this time, but in Indonesia we were not, although we rounded up German personnel.

I was trained for nine months in the army, and was released in September 1941 (I think it was -- yes -- 1941). Then I had to join the civil service to guard strategic points in the cities and so, and that lasted until December, when Pearl Harbor was bombed and Indonesia declared war to Japan. Immediately I got my recall to go back into the forces, and served as a flight mechanic in the air force stationed in Bandung, Java.

We flew and fought for about three months, I believe, until the end of February 1942, when I was taken prisoner at the first of March 1942. We were put in camps and we did not have, directly, Japanese influence but we were just rounded up and put in camps and we were among our own people, although the food rations and everything else started to take effect right away. And you could not leave the camps.

But in a few weeks the Japanese forces were set up to guard the camps and to go for command, and I believe in about a month and a half or two months I was sent down to Tjilatjap (that's a harbor in Java) and we had to clean up the harbor. We worked there for about six months, I believe. I did at least. Other people worked longer. We had to work long hours, starting early in the morning until late at night.

Then we were transferred from Tjilatjap to Tandjong Priok (that was in Batavia -- the harbor of Batavia), where we were gathered together in big camps for transport over to Singapore, I believe in October '42.

C.G.R.:

When was that?

J.J.O.:

October '42.

C.G.R.:

October '42. About six months after you were --

J.J.O.:

In October '42 we left from Batavia on the French -- no -- it was a Japanese boat -- the Maru -- the Kumitama Maru ship.

C.G.R.:

Can you spell that first name?

J.J.O.:

It's K-u-m-i-t-a-m-a.

C.G.R.:

Ah, yes.

J.J.O.:

Kumitama Maru ship. We were transported to Singapore and we landed there in a camp, Changi. In Changi we were about, oh, probably two or three weeks until they got reorganized and transported us up to Bampong, in Siam.

In Bampong we were only maybe a couple of weeks at the most (maybe three or four days -- I can't remember), but then we traveled on to Nong Pladuk, from Nong Pladuk to Kanchanaburi, and at Chungkai, from Chungkai to Wempol to Kinsaiok, from Kinsaiok to Rin Tin Tin, where I spent really most of my time, in that camp.

C.G.R.:

About how long were you there, in Rin Tin Tin?

J.J.O.:

Oh it's difficult to say. Let me see. At least a year and

a half maybe. Yes. A year and a half. I think I went back to Singapore in June the 2nd, 1944, we went back to Singapore.

C.G.R.:

So you were there for all of '43 and a good chunk of '44.

J.J.O.:

Yes. Traveling up and down from that camp back and forwards to different directions.

C.G.R.:

Yes. Okay.

J.J.O.:

My father was in that camp and my brother. My mother was, of course, left behind in Java. But my brother and I got together on our way to Singapore. I was in the stern and he was in the other end of the ship, and we got word of mouth traveled that there was another Otterspoor there, and we got together -- we switched -- and we stayed together for a while. But in Japan we got split up again and my father was in a different camp, my brother was in a different camp, and I was in a different camp.

C.G.R.:

Yes. Tell me about the camp Rin Tin Tin. How large was it?

J.J.O.:

Rin Tin Tin, I believe, was a camp in the neighborhood between three and five hundred men. Must be a little bigger maybe. Anywhere, at different times, from three to eight hundred men. The men came in, left, and traveled through, and so on. It was quite a size camp.

What we had to do was to make the passage for the railroad, where we had to build dikes in the lowlands. In the highlands we

had to cut the rock and then the dirt, to make it level for the railroad ties to be positioned. We started early in the morning at work -- oh around six - six-thirty -- and we worked on until eight at night. Very harsh labor work, carrying dirt and clearing the jungle, and trying to build up a heap of dirt in the monsoon rains, which wasn't very nice really, because when you got your little bit of dirt that you carried in a little basket 20 or 30 feet up that slope, by the time you got it to the top it was all washed down to the bottom again.

C.G.R.:

Yes, the rain washed it down.

J.J.O.:

So it was a very difficult situation. We had to get out a cubical meter per person a day. So if there were five in the hole, you were working to remove five cubic meter of dirt a day. That was quite a chore. Picking and shoveling and getting it up.

There was an awful lot of diseases and illness and pain and very little food. In the mornings we just got a bowl of rice, really, what you call milk with a bit of rice floating in it. That was your breakfast. At lunch we had a bowl of cooked rice with salt fish, and sometimes a little bit of vegetables. At night you had to make your own; you had to cook your own water and cook a few things for yourself. The main dish, the rice, was served from the kitchens, which was very little also. So in a period of time with hard labor work, you can imagine there wasn't much flesh left on us. Of course, no nutrition at all. You really get down quite quickly.

I had a number of diseases. I had tropical ulcers, like open wound ulcers, on my legs and arms. I had dry beriberi, which was really the fortunate part, I think -- I'm not too sure if it is, but in my opinion the wet beriberi was just unbelievable.

C.G.R.:

Yes.

J.J.O.:

Just unbelievable. Awful.

C.G.R.:

With all the swelling, and....

J.J.O.:

All the swelling of the body in six hours and down the next six hours. The legs were twenty inches, thirty inches in diameter. Once that water got to the heart, of course, the guy was gone.

Then I had malaria, very severe malaria. Fortunately, I didn't get into the brain malaria, because the other people that did have it didn't live an hour, because even six of us couldn't control them. We couldn't hold them down. It was an awful fight to keep these people under control once they got the malaria into the brain.

In the monsoon, in the rainy time, it rained steady for about three or four months, and all the shelter that we had was a few bamboo sticks and some banana leaves and then we'd try to keep dry. We didn't have any clothes; the most that I had was a g-string and no shoes or nothing. Sometimes a little rag around my head That's the extent of the clothes that you had.

C.G.R.:

Fundashi?

J.J.O.:

Pardon?

C.G.R.:

The fundashi? Isn't that what they called the g-string?

J.J.O.:

Yes, something like that. Yes.

We had to survive as much as we can with the tremendous heat and then the cooling off of the rains. It was very severe on us. Fortunately, I was brought up, more or less, in the tropics, so I was used to the food and the fruits on the land, so I was very familiar with that. I pitied the Americans and the British soldiers that had no clue of the type of food, and they didn't like it and they didn't want to eat it, and so on. They were gone before we went.

C.G.R.:

Yes, yes.

J.J.O.:

Definitely. It didn't matter whether a fellow was a huge big strong fellow or a tiny little fellow. They all went as quickly as -- in a couple of days you could see them drop out.

C.G.R.:

So this camp was a mixed camp, then, was it? It wasn't just Dutch?

J.J.O.:

No.

C.G.R.:

There were Americans?

J.J.O.:

There were British. There were two battalions of British, I guess, and there was one American. There were two Australian forces there too. There were a mixture of personnel. But as far as the units were concerned, they didn't mix in the camps. We stayed under our own command; we did not mingle with the other forces as far as quarters were concerned, or food, or kitchens was concerned. Of course, you talk to them. That was the extent of mixture, really. Also, the working groups were in units of Dutch and British and Australians.

C.G.R.:

Ah yes.

J.J.O.:

Tropical ulcers, you know, when a large area of open flesh was more or less rotting away on you. We did not have any medicines. Very little if there was any. But hardly anybody got medicines at all. But one of our doctors tried it -- whether that was a procedure known or not, I don't know -- but the open lavatories that we had, the trenches....

C.G.R.:

The latrines?

J.J.O.:

Latrines, yes. With the open trenches which were four feet deep, and bamboo sticks over it, and that's the way you went. The doctors took the (I don't know what you call them)....

C.G.R.:

The maggots? The white....

J.J.O.:

Whatever the white animals were that were in there? I don't know what the name that they are.

C.G.R.:

Yes. Those are maggots.

J.J.O.:

They took them out, they cleaned them and they put them in the wounds. They were eating away all that....

C.G.R.:

All the dead tissue?

J.J.O.:

All the dead tissue, that stuff. And they healed. I don't know whether that was a procedure or not in medicine, but this doctor did it. He had great success.

C.G.R.:

Is that right?

J.J.O.:

We were quite relieved that they started to heal. Maybe that came about because of the rains that we had, that flooded those trenches, and it started to spread all over the camp. These things were apparently getting into people, and in a few days doctors were looking at it and they said "Hey, what happened? Your wounds are cleaning up." So it was more or less a blessing for us at that time.

C.G.R.:

Yes. What's it like to have a tropical ulcer? Are they

pretty painful?

J.J.O.:

Actually, no. They're not painful. But they're a nuisance really, and they're itchy. As far as I remember. Very itchy. You start scratching a bit, and then it becomes a bother, becomes maybe pain, so if you would protect it with some cloth or whatever you had, then the people were working with it. We had to go on work every day, whether we were sick or not. If you had a fever, for instance, no matter how high, the Japanese soldier would come over and you'd say, "Well, I'm sick," and he put his had on your head and he said, "Yes, you're warm; come with me," and he'd dump you in the river. Cooled you off, and then he said, "Now you can go back to work." That's the way he did it. So we had no mercy whatsoever at that time. We working almost day and night. Very little rest. Seven days a week. Ate, and five o'clock in the morning you were already up again. So it was very difficult.

C.G.R.:

Were your tropical ulcers treated with these maggots?

J.J.O.:

Yes.

C.G.R.:

Is there any feeling from that? Do you feel them there? Or feel anything going on while they were doing this?

J.J.O.:

No, no, no, no.

C.G.R.:

No. I've never talked to anyone who actually had these used

before.

Was there a hospital?

J.J.O.:

Yes, there was a tent, or hospital, set aside, but our doctors and some orderlies had been doing the work and the very sick were taken in there. But the very sick, were, more or less, the ones that are going in a couple of days, you can say that, because when you were in a hospital tent, that was it for you. They were carrying them out. I remember in Rin Tin Tin only one day that we didn't have The Last Post.

C.G.R.:

Is that right?

J.J.O.:

We had an average of 28 to 32 people die a day. In Rin Tin. Then one day, I was sitting with my brother and I said "Bert, there's something going on." He said, "Yes, I can see it too." As you know, we were on the Kwai River. Bridge at the River Kwai, the film; we were on the Kwai River. Cholera broke out in our camp, and in one night we lost close to 300 men. Now what they did, they threw all the bodies on a heap and burned them. We had to, somehow, to save the rest of the camp, to do this. Clothing, whatever, was burned. Barracks were burned, everything. Everything was burned. I said to him, "We're not going to make this." Why we didn't get it I still don't understand. The whole camp got infected and 300 drop out, and the rest of us were okay. You can't explain it really. Because the same water the same food, the same....

C.G.R.:

Everybody's worn down the same. Yes, it is amazing.

J.J.O.:

It's amazing that people somehow came out. But we did. When I had the beriberi, that was a very difficult time. I think I didn't weigh any more than 75 pounds at that time.

C.G.R.:

What was your normal weight?

J.J.O.:

About -- oh, I was, in my younger years, maybe 160-165, somewhere in there. Dry beriberi, as you know, of course, is the needle type of thing, like pins and needles all over, and it's all over your body, all over your joints, no matter where. The only relief I could get was going to the river and dangle my legs in the water. Cool them off, to stop that annoying aggravation of needles that break into you all day long. At night, ou know, you couldn't sleep. So that's the only relief, but since I couldn't walk, I had to drag myself to the river and my brother was helping me, getting me in and getting me back. I owe him a lot, I made it through, through him. Once we were released from Rin Tin, and we went back to the hospital camp, you can call it in Tamakun (I guess Tamakun was the hospital camp). There, we didn't have to work. We were relaxing. We got a little bit better food. But not because they liked us. Because they wanted us up to Japan.

C.G.R.:

Yes.

J.J.O.:

So they tried to bring us up a little bit and get a little bit more strength in us, to make that trip to Japan. But the horrifying stories, and pain, and illnesses, were in Thailand.

C.G.R.:

How long did the feet business and the dry beriberi -- do you remember how long you suffered from that?

J.J.O.:

Must have been at least three months or more.

C.G.R.:

You still worked, did you, all this time?

J.J.O.:

In the beginning, yes, but later, when I couldn't walk any more, they left me alone. Then I started to pick up again I had to work, with the beriberi also. Yes. But it was really hard work in Rin Tin Tin, to clear that jungle and making that path. There was no equipment to do anything. Everything was manpower, and the only power we had was elephants. That was really nice. Big huge animals. Worked side by side. You'd bump against his legs, or move over a bit. They were doing all the heavy work, like, we'd cut the trees, and they picked it up and carried it away.

C.G.R.:

Ah yes. Ah yes.

J.J.O.:

These animals were well-trained and well-behaved, but boy, do they know their hours! Oh, come lunch hour, there's not a minute past, they know exactly when to stop. At the end of the

day, at five o'clock, they know exactly when to stop. You won't get them to move. No way. They're going straight home. Just unbelievable. But they did help us quite a bit.

C.G.R.:

Do you remember any of the medical people at this camp? Any of the doctors or orderlies, or names of any of them?

J.J.O.:

That's very difficult. It is too long ago.

C.G.R.:

It 40-some years ago I know.

J.J.O.:

The only one that I remember very strongly is a minister -- my own minister from Semarang, who traveled with me through the camps. He's Dr. Hamel. I don't know -- the Reverend Hamel.

C.G.R.:

Ah, yes. H-a-m-e-l?

J.J.O.:

H-a-m-e-l, yes. I don't know if he'd still alive. He may not be. I think he was, oh, at least 15 years older than I was, so he may not be alive now.

C.G.R.:

He'd be close to his 80s by now.

J.J.O.:

But he was a tremendous fellow to have in the camp, really, to keep up your spirits. The only way to make it through a situation like that, I believe, in any situation -- even nowadays -- when people are down, is have hope, and the will to live. As soon as you lose that, your hope and the will to live, you can

see a guy going down in hours. There's no question about it. If you can't keep that spirit up, you're not going to make it. The tremendous power I think I had, and through this minister also, who helped me quite a bit, was to build up that spirit and keep your mind up. Some day the end of the road will be there. So this was quite strong in me and I thank him for that.

C.G.R.:

Did he conduct religious services?

J.J.O.:

Oh yes.

C.G.R.:

Regularly? Or as regularly as he could?

J.J.O.:

Every Sunday, yes.

C.G.R.:

Every Sunday. Did he have to work?

J.J.O.:

No. He was a major -- an officer.

C.G.R.:

They didn't force the officers to work in your camp? I guess they did in some.

J.J.O.:

Up to captains.

C.G.R.:

Up to captains, ah. I see.

J.J.O.:

Over that rank, no.

But, strangely enough, the mentality in people that I observed was -- you always look up to an officer and you always have respect for your officers, and they're great guys; even civilians are upstanding and great people. But when it comes down to a low situation, a low morale, a very low ebb in your life, like in those camps, then you really realize, and see, that all these great human beings from the top were not all that great.

C.G.R.:

No.

J.J.O.:

They were just as pitiful sometimes and low characters as -- you would never expect it.

C.G.R.:

Yes, yes.

J.J.O.:

Just unbelievable.

C.G.R.:

Well, not many people get put to that severe a test.

J.J.O.:

No, no.

C.G.R.:

Did you have some good officers?

J.J.O.:

Oh, yes. Yes. Even in the British and the American officers too. We respected them. Not only because of their ranks, of course, but some were really good persons, too.

C.G.R.:

Yes.

J.J.O.:

But a lot of them were not much better than just any of us.

C.G.R.:

In any of the camps were there what we would call "bad apples"?

J.J.O.:

Yes.

C.G.R.:

Can you tell me anything about that? I don't want names or anything, but just the kinds of things that you observed?

J.J.O.:

I remember at the British end, that people were stealing, and there were two or three who were doing this kind of act, and one or two got nabbed. The Japs picked them up.

C.G.R.:

Yes.

J.J.O.:

Then they would say, "Ah, too bad for these guys, but the other ones -- they're lucky. They didn't get...." So, the mentality, again, of this type of thing, was to say "Well, they got away with it. Good for them." That's the way it was.

I stole, myself, in Japan. The hunger was so great that you did anything to stay alive. There was a Japanese garden -- I took very sick, in Japan I had double pleurisy in my lungs. I had to go in a hospital camp, and in the hospital camp you did above-ground work, otherwise you were 1000 feet under in the coal

mine. So I did over-ground work. I knew that, say, a few blocks over there was a Japanese garden that had vegetables and fruit and all that. So if I could get away, and the Jap didn't see me go, I would ransack the garden and take some to eat.

C.G.R.:

Right, right.

J.J.O.:

So I did steal, which was a bad thing, but on the other hand, what are you going to do to survive?

C.G.R.:

Seems to me there's a very significant distinction between stealing from the Japanese and stealing from your fellow prisoners. I find no moral problem with stealing from the Japanese.

J.J.O.:

Well, it's still not the right thing to do.

C.G.R.:

No, I suppose.

J.J.O.:

I got caught once. Well, I was given away by another fellow. A Jewish fellow this time, unfortunately. A Jewish fellow. He got caught and he told the Japs that I was doing it to, so I got belted over by the -- still got scars on my back I think. But that happens, I guess. But with the Japs, there was one good thing: if you did something wrong, and you knew you were wrong, and they punished you severely (some bad punishment you took), and you had taken your punishment -- everything was forgotten. You were the best friends, shake hands, they even

gave you food to eat, from their own kitchens.

C.G.R.:

Really. Really.

J.J.O.:

But don't make a mess-up the next time again. They belt you over again. But once you took your punishment, that was it. They were not looking back on it. I got belted quite a few times. I lost my glasses, and some of my hearing, I guess, was due to that too. I've got two hearing aids -- not only to severe bombing on Bandung, at the airfield, but also in prison camp that I suffered quite a bit.

We were in Rin Tin Tin, in the camps; at night, when we had a little oil flame going, and the flying ants, we would just grab them, roast them and eat them. You know those white curly worms out of the garden?

C.G.R.:

Grubs?

J.J.O.:

No, they're quite thick and about that big around. I don't know what you call them. We roasted them and ate them; sometimes raw. In order to have meat. We cooked grass. We cooked whatever was possible to cook. You did it in order to get some vitamins in your body.

C.G.R.:

Yes. When you went back to -- did you go back to Changi from Rin Tin Tin?

J.J.O.:

No.

C.G.R.:

You said you went to the hospital camp.

J.J.O.:

We went to the hospital camp, and then we went back to Singapore, but I don't think we were in a camp. We were directly put on board on the French boat the Aramis.

C.G.R.:

Aramis?

J.J.O.:

The Aramis. A-r-a-m-i-s. We were shipped to Nagasaki.

C.G.R.:

Do yu have any idea how many men came back from Rin Tin Tin, of your Dutch battalion?

J.J.O.:

I know, that from all the forces, I don't know how many thousand men went in, only 18% came back after the war. Of the 18% there were only 8% with no ill-effects.

C.G.R.:

Yes.

J.J.O.:

I belonged to the 10% with hearing damage and all that.

C.G.R.:

Yes, one of the articles I've read commented that, isn't it amazing that 8% would actually have come back from that much -- those terrible experience over that long, and not have bad effects. Which, when you think about it, is interesting too.

J.J.O.:

Yes, yes.

C.G.R.:

Well, tell me if you would about your trip to Japan and a bit about your experiences there.

J.J.O.:

Well, in '44, in June '44, we were back in Singapore. In Singapore we went on the boat the Aramis to Nagasaki, where I was on board with my brother again, and we were both in the front of the boat, in the hold (nobody was allowed on deck). There were quite a few ships going out at that time, and we were all escorted to Japan, but the Americans were around too with...?

C.G.R.:

Submarines.

J.J.O.:

Submarines. Whatever boats that were around, we lost quite a few of them. I said to my brother, I said, "Well, I won't be surprised if the torpedo goes right through here, too." But no, we made it through. We landed in Nagasaki and when we got on land, we had to line up and we had to number off (you know, "one," "two," "three," whatever), and the Japs were counting so many people to go to one camp and so many to another camp. Lo and behold, between my brother and me -- split!

C.G.R.:

Really.

J.J.O.:

I tried -- we tried to move. We couldn't move. We couldn't get together. Just split between us. So I went to a different

camp than he did. When we were in that camp -- the camp wasn't really all that bad. Well, there were, of course, strong winters down there in Japan, so we had the normal barracks housing. Wooden frame houses, or cardboard houses, or whatever they call them, and they didn't have much more than mats on the floors. With four or five in a little room we were in together.

C.G.R.:

Now this was Fukuoka?

J.J.O.:

That in Fukuoka, yes. In that camp there must have been at least 1200 or 1500 men. We had work groups for the coal mines. We had drillers, cleaners, to shovel up the coal. We had maintenance people, and I, fortunately, because I'm mechanical, I was put with the maintenance people, and I had to look after the ventilation. I had to look after the water pumps in the mines, and all that, to make sure that that was clear when they were working.

We had two accidents in the mine. We lost a few people. Fortunately, I wasn't down there at that time. A lot of blasting, and so on. Clearing. You had to work hard in the coal mine. But at least at six o'clock we were out, and we worked a normal shift.

That was not too bad. The only difficulties we had were, we had to march from the mine back to the camp through the streets, of course. As prisoners, wherever we saw a paper, or wherever we could make contact with the people, we did. It was strictly out of bounds. You were not supposed to do that at all.

C.G.R.:

No.

J.J.O.:

So when one or the other got caught, for doing these things, stealing a Japanese paper to get some news, or whatever, we had to pay for it at night. I remember that sometimes, at eleven o'clock at night, everybody was called out in the middle of the winter to stand in the middle of the field, and they let us stand there for hours and hours. You know, some people got frozen legs.

C.G.R.:

Yes.

J.J.O.:

Hysterical. But overall, in Japan, other than the hard work and the harsh situation that you were in, it was a lot less severe as in Burma.

C.G.R.:

At the railway.

J.J.O.:

At the railway.

C.G.R.:

Was the food better?

J.J.O.:

Somewhat, yes.

C.G.R.:

Or more of it?

J.J.O.:

Not directly more of it, but it was a little bit better

food. Not enough, of course, and not to gain any weight or anything like that.

It was nice when the liberation came, and I still remember the B51s flying over and dropping food. That was somewhere in August -- early August I guess -- in '45. When the Americans were dropping food and with all instructions, how much we can eat, and what we have to do with it, and be careful; it still took four or six weeks before we were transported out of there. Fortunately, we were released by the Americans, because I understand, from other stories I heard, that people who were released by the British did not have the look-after like we had from the Americans. Simply, I guess, the British didn't have any money and didn't have any supplies like the Americans did.

C.G.R.:

No.

J.J.O.:

So we were overwhelmed by the Americans, and we were really treated well. But I've seen the bomb in Nagasaki. I still don't understand that the radiation has not [affected me] -- what may come I don't know. It's not taken place on me. We were in Fukuoka. I saw the mushroom. I said to -- and I was very sick -- I had the pleurisy -- I said to the fellows, I said, "What is that shape in the sky?" We had no clue.

Then, later on, we went back to Nagasaki to go on board again, and the Americans took us to Guam, and from Guam to the Philippines, and I still remember that we came in Nagasaki at the railway station. There was nothing to be seen. Only round chimneys were still standing up, and some heavy structure was

twisted down over the ground, but everything above curb-height was just gone. Completely gone. From one end of the city to the other. Not one thing left.

C.G.R.:

Must have been an awesome sight.

J.J.O.:

Oh, just unbelievable. We were there about four or five weeks, six weeks after the bomb.

C.G.R.:

Yes.

J.J.O.:

The Americans were there too. Everybody was getting ready to be going on board. Then we had to take a shower and then we were cleaned up and powdered up and get all the disinfectant, and got new uniforms, and then we were ready to wait for going on board. They had, in the hall there -- they had made some kind of a tent or a hall -- and they had all tables set up with food and ice cream and just name it all -- They had an ice cream boat there, too.

But the one thing that I never forget we were standing there, and I was eating a sandwich. The gangway from the ship down to the quay, there were two persons coming down -- two WACs -- two girls. You should have seen all these open mouths. Gaping at these women that they haven't seen for so many years. It was just unbelievable. The sight of a beautiful girl coming down there was just unbelievable.

C.G.R.:

Yes, I was going to ask about the whole question of sex and the absence of sex. Was this ever something on your minds?

J.J.O.:

Nobody had any drive for it at all.

C.G.R.:

That's what I understood.

J.J.O.:

The body wasn't functioning at that respect at all. Maybe in the early times, but certainly not later on.

C.G.R.:

No, that's what one would expect.

J.J.O.:

I really -- it may have happened -- it may have gone on -- but not to my knowledge that I was aware of, but any homosexuality or anything like that or what, I don't know of. I think we were all too sick.

C.G.R.:

Yes, yes. If you haven't the energy for heterosexual sex, you presumably don't have the energy for homosexual sex either.

J.J.O.:

It may have happened with other people that I don't know of.

C.G.R.:

I just want to go back for a minute to Dr. Hamel and religion. Did many people go to services?

J.J.O.:

No, not all that many. We may have had 30 to 50 people that come up and listen in, but he, himself...

[End of side 1.]

...was quite active in helping the dying, going around, and there were so many that he had a good word or talk to, or receive letters, or carry messages, and this type of thing. You really needed the fellow in situations like that. There was no question about it. Doctors couldn't do anything at all; there was nothing to be done. Some people were amputated and just give them a knock over the head -- knock them cold -- and then start cutting and then they would come to.

C.G.R.:

No anesthesia?

J.J.O.:

No, no. Things would happen like that, and there were a lot of difficult things that were done to help people, but in the raw situations....Maybe the medical people can fill in that part a little bit better than I can.

C.G.R.:

What kinds of things? How do you mean that?

J.J.O.:

Well, arm amputation, and leg amputation. People got wounded or something, that they had to be helped in that respect, and I don't know really all the details, but I know it has gone on.

C.G.R.:

Yes. Do you remember, with all of your various sicknesses that you had (I'm talking about the railway period again now), did you ever get <u>medicine</u> of any kind, that you can remember?

J.J.O.:

No.

C.G.R.:

Never.

J.J.O.:

No. I think twice that the Japanese had come out with a shot, and our doctors were very reluctant to take that. They would not allow the troops to take that shot unless our doctors had a good look at it and searched it, I guess, or whatever. I think we had had two shot during that time, but I don't know what it was or what it was for -- tetanus, or whatever it was. Something like that.

C.G.R.:

Some kind of immunization, I guess.

J.J.O.:

But I don't know what it was. But other medicines, other than -- iodine, I think, sometime was available and aspirin, only when you needed it pretty bad, I guess. That's the only thing you could get.

C.G.R.:

Yes. Do you remember whether the doctors amputated because of tropical ulcer?

J.J.O.:

That could be, yes.

C.G.R.:

But you don't remember particularly one way or the other?

J.J.O.:

I don't. No.

C.G.R.:

No. That's fine. That's fine.

Was there any celebration of things like Christmas or Easter?

J.J.O.:

We did our own, yes.

C.G.R.:

Tell me about that. How did you do this?

J.J.O.:

During the railroad, in Burma, it was very difficult to do anything at Christmas, of course. It was always hot, so you had no -- really, the only thing we did was, at night we got together and we sang and we said a few prayers and something like that, but no further big celebrations. But in Japan we did. We did get a Christmas tree, and we did make some decorations. And in Japan once we had (was it once or twice?) that the Red Cross had come over with some supplies and most went to the Japs and then we got some too, a little bit. I think it was once in the railroad camp too, but I haven't seen any of it. It just disappeared. It was very poorly distributed. But further celebrations were, you either make your own, or it was gone by the wayside.

C.G.R.:

It didn't happen.

J.J.O.:

But the Reverend Hamel, of course, at the holidays, he would try and encourage people to do things.

C.G.R.:

Did he go on to Japan with you, do you know?

J.J.O.:

Yes. Let me think. No. He went to Changi, but I've never seen him further in Japan. I lost him there.

C.G.R.:

Yes.

J.J.O.:

But he was in Changi, yes.

C.G.R.:

Tell me, if you would, what was a typical day like at Fukuoka. What time did you get up, and -- you did this for the railway, maybe you'd do a similar thing for the mine.

J.J.O.:

We had to get up at 5:00 or 5:30 in the morning. Very little food that we had. Just a bowl of rice. At six o'clock we marched out, and it took about half an hour to get to the coal mine, where we were just lowered down in the coal cars, down to the points where we had to work. We stopped for lunch, at twelve o'clock, and we usually carried some of our own stuff with us, but there was food supplied down below. I don't know how it ever got there. I can't remember how that went, but we did get some food down below. And drinks.

At one o'clock we started back up again until six, I guess. Or five-thirty. By six we were out of the mine. Then we got food at the camp. Which wasn't too bad. Well, it wasn't very tasteful, but at least you could have a bit more to eat than we had during the railroad time.

C.G.R.:

About how far was it from the camp to the mine?

J.J.O.:

About a half-hour walk. Forty-minute walk.

C.G.R.:

Were there just prisoners working the mine?

J.J.O.:

And a few guards.

C.G.R.:

Yes, and guards. But no Japanese mine workers.

J.J.O.:

No.

C.G.R.:

No. Just the prisoners.

J.J.O.:

Yes, just the prisoners.

C.G.R.:

Did you have quarters there too, or was it just a time shift?

J.J.O.:

A time shift.

C.G.R.:

Yes.

J.J.O.:

They were drilling with very huge machines. You could hardly lift them. They were air drills. I think the unit itself was about 24, maybe 30 inches long, and about 8 inches in diameter, and it had a 4-foot drill on it. One inch or inch and

a half bit on it.

C.G.R.:

Ah yes.

J.J.O.:

You were driving that on your shoulder right into the wall. I wasn't doing that, but the other people were. Then, when the drillers were finished, then the dynamite was put in, but we never detonated it. The Japs did that themselves. We had to get out, and then they blasted. But the studding and the roofing and everything, that had to be done by us and also by mine inspectors, that were the Japanese inspectors. I believe they tried to do the best they could under the circumstances, but it wasn't like a normal situation of course.

C.G.R.:

Yes.

J.J.O.:

There were danger points and everything else. We had a collapse, like I said. I don't know how many -- I think 14 or 20 people we lost at that collapse.

C.G.R.:

How did the national groups get along? How did the Dutch get along with the Americans and so on, as far as you observed? Was there any dissension?

J.J.O.:

As far as I observed, no. Unfortunately, I have to say that we got along better with the Americans than with the British. I think the British attitude of superior people, and strictly military organized personnel, "Yes sir!" and "No sir!" and

saluting and all that, was strictly carried on in camps too under the British. In ours it was relaxed, and in the Americans it was relaxed, and there was a far more relaxing situation than under the British. That's why, maybe, the contact with the British was not as strong as with the other people.

C.G.R.:

Was there any sabotage going on? Tell me a bit about that.

J.J.O.:

Well, at the railroad, when we were laying the tracks and then trying to get the ties up, we would try to lay them crookedly and not properly, so that it would be not too stable. Of course, we'd get caught, too, by the inspectors, and so we had to do it over again, and things like that. But definitely we were trying to slow down or trying to hamper the advances that the Japs were trying to make to Moulmein, because the Bangkok to Moulmein railroad was important to them, that they get to the other end of the water. But definitely, we were trying to slow it down as much as we could, and maybe in some places even jeopardize the safety. In the coal mines, it was not as severe, because you had to go down that shaft too.

C.G.R.:

Yes. Yes, that changes one's viewpoint doesn't it?

J.J.O.:

Yes. We had to go down that shaft too.

C.G.R.:

At the end of the war, was there any retaliation against the Japanese?

J.J.O.:

A bad thing happened in our camp. The capitulation took place, and the Japs were really perfect about that. They knew the control was lost. They had lost the war, and they were handing over their guns and everything to us. That we could guide our own camp. But the Japanese soldiers, of course, or the guards were known as bad people that had driven us and beaten us and this and that, of course, and there was one particular fellow we hated most. The Americans got a hold of him and, in the middle of the camp, there was a bad thing. They took a piece of wire -- fence wire, heavy fence wire -- twisted it around his middle and pulled him in half. It was really bad. The other ones got chased, but quite a few of them got away, of course, quick, and mingled in the cities so you can't find them anymore.

C.G.R.:

Right.

J.J.O.:

If they got a hold of the bad ones, they really let them have it. They did. But more so with the Americans, though, than with any of the others. The British didn't do it, and our troops, I know that it could have been, but the section that I was in didn't do it.

C.G.R.:

No, no.

Were there any Canadians in your camp?

J.J.O.:

No.

C.G.R.:

No.

J.J.O.:

Well, Mr. [Oswald] Luce. He was there, but he was stationed in England, with the RAF in England, and was sent over to Indonesia, so we didn't know whether he was British or Canadian. You don't realize that at that particular time.

C.G.R.:

True, true.

What would you say, if you could single out one thing, what was the worst part of this whole experience for you?

J.J.O.:

I think the loneliness, hunger, and not knowing what comes next. You're among 1000 men, but you're still lonely. Nobody really that you can talk to. Like your wife or your father or your mother, or something like that. And then fear, of course. When will it end? That was the devastating part. Then, on top of that, illnesses. You hoped you got through.

C.G.R.:

Yes. As many people have said, if you're sent to prison, at least you know when you're getting out of prison.

J.J.O.:

This, you had no clue.

C.G.R.:

You had no idea. No, no.

J.J.O.:

I was conscripted into the army. In Bandung, they asked me, would you sign up for six years and become a regular? Then

you get a pension. I said, "No way. This is going to be over in a year. Six years in the army? No way!" Was I ever sorry.

C.G.R.:

Yes.

J.J.O.:

I'm in from '42 to '48.

C.G.R.:

Six years.

J.J.O.:

Six years. Seven and a half years altogether. I should have. I would have had a pension. Now I have nothing.

C.G.R.:

You mentioned the problem with your hearing that you feel came out of this experience. Have you any other bad effects? Do you have nightmares, and things like this?

J.J.O.:

No, I'm a very calm and very relaxed person. I don't get upset quite easily. When I do get upset, I'm really mad, but that is very seldom.

The only thing I have is the loss of hearing. It was first to heavy bombing, but then in the camps I got belted around the ears, and so, and although I was not deaf, I was hard of hearing and I didn't get my hearing aids until I came to Canada. Not knowing really what it meant to use hearing aids. My wife was always talking a little louder and people were yelling at me so I could hear, so why worry?

But then, it becomes more trouble, I think, when you get older. I think your ill health will aggravate the deafness. Now

I don't know how you will say it. So my wife said, "Why don't you start looking into hearing aids. They're now available." At that time, they weren't available really. But I feel because of the loss of my hearing, and the ability to communicate, or to hear, in my further life, like in my working time now after the war, I was more or less restricted, because in meetings I had to look at people, what they were saying. Because I could not follow conversations clear enough and I would give wrong answers. They would say, "Hey, that guy's stupid," but I don't get the message clear enough.

C.G.R.:

Yes, I understand.

J.J.O.:

That has been a very big drawback, hampering me for quite a while. Even in my career too, although I did very well as a manufacturing engineer at Massey Ferguson. I became quite well known in that profession. but at the same time people were saying, "This guy can't hear anyway." When I don't pay attention, you can yell or whatever and it's lost to me. So I blame that also on the war, that I could have done maybe a lot better, maybe had a bigger job, bigger responsibility, if I had proper hearing and proper mental quickness and exactness to respond to questions and that. Unfortunately it didn't work that way.

C.G.R.:

Do you get any sort of pension for this? From the Dutch government?

J.J.O.:

The Dutch government, when I got home, in '48, I got a pair of striped pants and a jacket that was too long, and they gave the 300 guilders, which I what $125, $130. I was set aside like that. The railroad was sold in 1965 (I forget when that was) and I got $25 out of it. [laughter]

C.G.R.:

Not bad for a year and a half work!

J.J.O.:

Four and a half years of prison camp. But I think it was two years -- two or three years ago -- maybe four years ago -- Holland paid some money to POWs. I think I got at that time about $3000 dollars. That was many years later. Forced through the government in Holland. Ever since, I've been after them for pension, for support now in my retirement, but everything is a no no. Formally, Indonesia is gone. They don't recognize this. They don't recognize that, and I'm left out really cold. That's the way it is.

C.G.R.:

Well that's too bad.

Do you remember who paid you the $25? Who issued the cheque, or where did that come from? Do you recall?

J.J.O.:

I don't recall now. I think it came through the mail, sent from somewhere. From Holland, I believe. It was so many prisoners had to share in the selling of the railroad. I hear the Americans and the British got quite a bit of money out of it.

C.G.R.:

Really?

J.J.O.:

We didn't get too much.

C.G.R.:

No.

Have you been back to any of these places. I would like to. I would love to go back to Java, at least, and show my wife where I spent 20 of my years. But we can't afford it, really.

C.G.R.:

It's a lot of money.

How do you feel about the Japanese? Do you have any bad feelings about the Japanese as a people?

J.J.O.:

After the war, and even during, in Japan, I could ring their necks, I could kill them. That's how bad it was, but then after the war, when I had more food and more relaxed and had my freedom again, I started to realize that I was called up to fight for my country, and this guy was called up to fight for his country. Just happened to be on the opposite side. He was only doing what he was told to do, and I was doing what I was told to do. So how can you hate him?

So I said to my wife too, there's no way that I can carry hate for those people. I think it was in '63 or '64, a Japanese fellow and then a Korean fellow came to Canada, and they were both looking for an apartment -- a place to live. They had nothing. Wife and children. It came through, word through our church here -- Binkley church -- where I go. And I have taken

on the job to help these people. The Koreans were just as bad -- were also our captors. I helped these people, through the church organization and a lot of effort of ourselves; and the Japanese fellow, his wife and children, we are godfather of their children, and he -- the fellow -- is like a son to us. That's how it ended up.

C.G.R.:

That's very nice.

Anything else you can think that we've skipped over that we might talk about? Particularly anything having to do with your health or medical things?

J.J.O.:

The only thing that I can think of is the bad killing by the Japanese. You know, prisoners tried to escape and -- bad situations. People wandered around the woods and they got back to the camp after a week and they had to dig their own graves, and they shot them, and things like that. Hacked them to pieces.

But I don't know -- I didn't pay that much attention to what people really had, other than beriberi, dysentery, malaria, and ulcers. What other terms of illnesses there were -- there must have been many others, but you don't talk about these things. The general things were those kind of illnesses and that was it. There was no treatment for it, there was no help for it, no relief for it. You just hoped for the best, that you came through it.

C.G.R.:

What did you think of the movie <u>The Bridge on the River Kwai</u>?

J.J.O.:

I think it was an excellent movie. It had to be a movie. A lot of truth in it, but yet there was a lot of build-up in it too to make it a movie, of course. The bridge was not built all of wood. There were steel girders from Java brought over. From Semarang, really. Brought over there and put in. It wasn't blown up that way. It was bombed by the Americans. Further, the treatment and the hot box on the River Kwai movie, that was true, yes. Camp situations and all that was very well....

C.G.R.:

Realistic. As realistic as you can get in a movie.

J.J.O.:

Yes.

C.G.R.:

That's interesting.

J.J.O.:

I remember one incident with an elephant that, like I said, were big helpers to us, big friends. But one fellow got really nasty to one elephant and did something bad to the elephant, and, of course, each elephant had their own Tamil native guard, so he prevented from any accidents. But usually, on the way home from the railroad where we were building the dikes, and where we were camped (in the jungle there was a path where you had to go through), and after working time (these animals always quit right on the nose, I told you) and they would linger on the path and they would stand beside the path or with their trunk over the path and they'd let us, when you'd walk by, they'd lift their

trunk, and they'd let you go by. Until this fellow came along that had done something wrong. He lifted his trunk too, and he walked by, and then he took a big sweep right at his rear end and did he fly! He never forgot. It was just amazing.

C.G.R.:

It's true what they say about elephants.

J.J.O.:

He never forgot. No mistreatment. But they were nice elephants. Really helpful. Then, when they get their lunch, they get a pail of water and they'd drink one pail right up, finish it, and then you give them another pail and they just keep it in their snout and they start spraying around. You had to get out of the way. Clown around a bit.

Oh, you had some good times, and you had some bad times. We had some night times that we were all sitting there with the guitar and do some singing. We did laugh, and we had some jokes. We played chess in the camps, and often when I laid my head down, all I had was a little mat that you roll out, and I had to find a good soft rock for my head, and we were right in the open, looking at the sky and saw all the stars, up in the blue sky, and you start dreaming away of, when is this going to end, and what's going to happen next? But you had, like I said, good times and bad times. Even in the very severe conditions and strenuous conditions, we would march and we would sing. Keep the spirit up. There are all kinds of moments, really, in a prison camp, too.

C.G.R.:

Did your brother get back all right?

J.J.O.:

Yes. Brother and I and mother made it. Father didn't make it. He died in '43.

C.G.R.:

Well, perhaps we've got just a few minutes left in the tape --if you're willing, would you tell me a little bit about the next period? You were released, but you went back to Indonesia....

J.J.O.:

No, I went to Guam.

C.G.R.:

Yes, right.

J.J.O.:

There we stayed two days. Then I went to the Philippines, to Manila, where I stayed about three months. Then, Sukarno was acting up in Indonesia and the Dutch forces got together somehow and got some B25s and B51s; they got, I think, 14 planes at that time, and we from the air force were all of a sudden, perfect shape, ready to go, and we were sent to Australia. I was in Bundaberg for over a year -- a year and a half. From Bundaberg I flew to Broom, and from Broom we operated over the Indies, to fight Sukarno. Air strikes and this and that, and flying supplies and all this activities and then, after Biak in Hollandia, in New Guinea, where I was stationed, (from Australia I went to Biak and I stayed there for about a half a year -- maybe a year, I don't know -- half a year, I don't know) and then I went to Batavia and I was only a couple of months in

Batavia and I thought I had enough of the army. I wanted to get out and I asked for my release. I had a heck of a time getting out, but finally made it and sailed back to Holland in 1948. In June I was released.

C.G.R.:

It was a long war.

J.J.O.:

But in Manila we had some good time too. Hard times, because it was everybody on his own. I mean, everybody had guns and everybody had weapons, and you better go in a group of five or ten to protect yourself.

C.G.R.:

Really.

J.J.O.:

It was really wild west down there. There was a lot of robbing and stealing going on among the forces too, from each other stealing. When you were alone on the road, or they caught you alone, they would kill you for just a watch. Which was terrible. You make it through prison camp, and you would die down there.

I had a good time in Australia. I have family in Brisbane.

C.G.R.:

Ah yes.

J.J.O.:

Saw them of course. Aunt and uncle, cousins, and so I had a good time.

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