

FRANK ARNOLD HARDING

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

Interviewed by

Charles G. Roland, MD

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Oral History Archives

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Charles G. Roland, MD:

What is your full name, please?

Frank Arnold Harding:

Frank Arnold Harding. I was born in Winnipeg, 1923

CGR:

What date?

FAH:

November 5th.

CGR:

And your parents' names?

FAH:

Gladys Arnold and Frank Harding.

CGR:

What did your father do?

FAH:

He worked for the railroad.

CGR:

CPR or CN?

FAH:

CP.

CGR:

And were you raised in Winnipeg?

FAH:

Yes, I was raised in Winnipeg. I left school at 14 and started working. I worked for two years and went in the army at 16.

CGR:

How did you manage that? It's a touch young.

FAH:

Well, I haven't grown a damn bit since then. Mind you I've put on weight, but I was 5'10" and they never questioned. Of course at that time, if you had a pulse, you had a heartbeat, you were in. That was it.

CGR:

So that was, what, in '40 did you say?

FAH:

It was in '40.

CGR:

And you joined the Grenadiers?

FAH:

No, I joined the PPCLI [Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry] and I took practically two years training with them before the Grenadiers come back from Jamaica. In the meantime the Pat's had gone overseas and they were full up by reinforcements; there was nothing moving and I wanted to get it moving, you know. I was young, I wanted to go. Actually I didn't much care where. The Grenadiers come along and: "Who'll volunteer for the Grenadiers?" "Sure, here, great," and I'm away. I spent my 18th birthday on the boat going to Hong Kong. It would have been a hell of nice place, I think, if war hadn't broke out.

CGR:

Yes, right.

FAH:

It would have been a beautiful spot for garrison duty whatever. But before we knew it, we were in it. They didn't catch

us like they caught the Americans. We were already up in the hills and in position.

CGR:

What company were you with?

FAH:

C Company.

CGR:

Yes, I've talked to somebody else today who was with C Company, but I am losing track. Scotty Adams, or Jack Hardy?

FAH:

Jack Hardy, I think.

CGR:

Do you remember where you were, exactly, when the war started?

FAH:

Yes.

CGR:

Okay, maybe you'd just tell me briefly about your war, your three-week war, before we get into the POW experience? Just tell me some of the things you've just mentioned.

FAH:

You know, actually I was never, what you'd say, afraid. It was like a big game of cowboys and Indians. Yes, I guess I hadn't grown up, eh. I never realized I was in the war until I got shot and that was Christmas eve. I was behind a machine gun. I guess they fired right back along the muzzle-flash and landed right in the shoulder.

CGR:

Just on the right side of the neck?

FAH:

Yes. Right here, and the bullet split the machine gun butt and it cut the side of my neck, went in here, down, hit the shoulder blade, and across and hit the spine and stopped there. It didn't break the -- it just ended up like that in the...

CGR:

Just sort of nudging up against the spine.

FAH:

Just nudging, yes. Mind you, I was paralyzed on the one side.

CGR:

Your leg?

FAH:

Yes. My leg, I couldn't walk. This arm come up, like that, and it just stayed there. But they got me out of there and a big Russian doctor was the one that figured out where in hell the bullet went, because there was no x-rays, no nothing, they just had to surmise and guess, but he found it.

CGR:

Where did they take you?

FAH:

Queen Mary Hospital. From what I understand, I was missing, presumed dead, because I wasn't on the casualty list, or I wasn't on the POW list. When the Japs took the list, they just took the ones in the prisoner-of-war camp and the ones in the military

hospital. There were about 20 of us, I guess, in the Queen Mary Hospital that they missed altogether, didn't even know we were there. So I was "missing in action" for, oh, about two years, I guess. They cut off my -- I had a \$20 assignment paid to my mother and they cut that off, they wouldn't send her any money. The next thing she heard was a postcard directly from me, from the prison camp. Then she heard from Ottawa.

CGR:

When did this Russian doctor see you? Was this right away?

FAH:

This was right away. This was Christmas Day. It must have been Christmas Day. You know, there's a loss of time there.

CGR:

But it was immediate. And did he operate?

FAH:

Oh yes.

CGR:

So they took the bullet out.

FAH:

Took the bullet out, yes. I asked them to save me the bullet and he brought it down and said, "Here it is," and dropped it in my hand, brought it down to me.

CGR:

How long were you at that hospital?

FAH:

Oh, about three or four months. I missed the first bunch -- they put all the Canadians, pretty well all the Canadians in North Point Camp, and I missed that entirely. They moved over to

Sham Shui Po and I come down out of the hospital -- by the time I was ready to come down out of the hospital, I went to Sham Shui Po Camp. I didn't hit North Point at all.

CGR:

Who was staffing the hospital?

FAH:

Civilians, and volunteers.

CGR:

No military?

FAH:

There was no military there at all.

CGR:

Well, that's why they missed you -- I understand now. Did they have decent supplies? Did they take good care of you?

FAH:

Oh yes. Excellent care. You know the food was getting a little short, especially after I was up there for four months. This big Russian doctor gave me a tennis ball and that's the way I started and brought my hand back, a tennis ball, playing with it and then started bouncing with it.

CGR:

How about the leg?

FAH:

The leg come back. I exercised that -- sit on the side of the bed; they put an elastic band on the side of the bed and I'd sit on the side of the bed and put my foot (like a stirrup, eh), and push down against the elastic band and push it up and push it down again. It was all makeshift stuff. They didn't have no

physiotherapy stuff like we have today. But it done the job.

CGR:

So were you in pretty good shape by the time you did go to Sham Shui Po?

FAH:

Yes I was. I was in better shape than the fellows that had been sown in the prison camp all the time, because I more or less stayed on a semblance of a European diet. So I was in pretty good shape. Don't ask me dates, there are only two dates that I remember -- December 25th when the fighting quit, ended, and August 15th when the war was over and we got out. That's it. In between I can't tell you what date we went to Japan. I was on the first draft of Canadians to go to Japan [on the Tatuta Maru.]

CGR:

Yes. As far as I can figure out that must have been early '43, a little over a year after...

FAH:

Yes, about a year, yes. You know, everything just seems to blend. Actually, this late in the game you forget the rough times; all you do is think of the fun times. And there was fun times.

CGR:

Well, tell me about some of those.

FAH:

You were always matching wits. You know, if you could out-fox them, that made your day. In fact, it made your week or your month. If you just get ahead of them, just out-think them. And I guess this is what kept you going.

CGR:

Can you give me a for-instance?

FAH:

Well, we worked in a shipyard and the Americans came over and they blew hell out of the shipyard.

CGR:

This was while you were in Japan?

FAH:

Yes. So they moved us to a railway siding and we were handling food, military supplies, and there was food coming through -- powdered eggs, dried fish, powdered milk -- all this food. Canned salmon. We would pinch this stuff. We had a Jap guard, a civilian guard, someone like we had, the Home Guard here. He would watch for us, or we'd steal his -- he'd give us his box, his bag, and we'd take it into the boxcar and we'd fill it up for him and give it to him, and he'd take it away and hide it. Then when he came back, he'd watch for us while we loaded up. We'd steal all this stuff and we'd smuggle it into camp. Whatever you got past the guards, this really made your day. Sometimes you got caught. The places you hid it, sometimes -- you don't even mention where you hid it -- any place that was imaginable you hid it. We all had the biggest feet you've ever seen. We'd fill our shoes. If you took a size 9 you were wearing a size 12, and the shoes were loaded with whatever, eh.

CGR:

What happened if you got caught?

FAH:

Well, they'd slap the hell out of you and make you stand there 24 hours; but, you know, next time you'd get away with it. They allowed you to boil water. They didn't give you hot water in camp, but they allowed you to boil water out on the job. So you'd scrounge and find a big kettle in the fires. If there was no work around the railway siding, you sent out cleaning up the burnt-out area of Tokyo, and you'd find porcelain kettle or something, and you'd bring it into camp, show the guards the kettle. Okay, they'd let you keep it. So you take that out on the job with you and you'd put a can of salmon or something on the bottom of it, fill it with hot water, throw some green tea on top of it, which the Japs gave you every now and then, and when you'd come in, you'd take the lid off and show it to the guards and it was green tea for supper. Put the lid back on it. There was a can of salmon in the bottom: stuff like that, anything. This made your day. But if you got caught, hell...

There was a fellow, a little Jap, in the camp, he worked in the kitchen, we called him "Harry Gribble." He'd come out and he'd tell us when we were going to have a search. Knives were taboo, maps were taboo, and food that wasn't issued was taboo; so he'd tip us off -- they're going to hunt for knives. So, you know, you'd hide your knives, but you'd leave your map out there on the shelf, you could leave a can of salmon and that. They weren't looking for that. They'd go up on your shelf and they'd move your can of salmon, push your maps out of the way and look all through it, but no knives. How about that! A week later they would be looking for contraband food. So you'd leave the knife laying there and the map laying there. But if they found

what they were looking for, well you got it -- not only you, but the whole section got it.

CGR:

What was life like -- let's go back to Sham Shui Po -- what was it like there? You were there for 6 months or so.

FAH:

That was grim. There was no black market that you could get into. Work parties weren't organized. Maybe you'd hit a work party a week. The rest of the time was just boredom, just sit; that was heavy. You know, at least the work broke the monotony and you could throw yourself into something and do something. But when there was no work, just sitting around -- Christ! guys would pay cigarettes to get on a work party just to get out and do something. We looked forward to burial parties, going out and bury our own dead even though they'd been dead for about four or five or six days, just to get out of camp.

CGR:

Food was not very good.

FAH:

Just rice and pig weed.

CGR:

Did you lose a lot of weight?

FAH:

Oh yes. I remember in Japan, when I first went to the railway siding, I weighed about 97 lbs. and I was carrying 210-lb. bags, soybeans, great bloody big sacks. It took three men to lift them. Put on our shoulders and you'd carry them. The bags weighed more than you did.

CGR:

A lot more.

FAH:

Twice as much.

CGR:

Well, how was your health when you were in the camps? Did you have any serious sicknesses?

FAH:

I took diphtheria. I had both types of dysentery -- bacillary and amoeba.

CGR:

Tell me about the diphtheria. When did you come down with that?

FAH:

I was one of the first to come down with it. We were in North Point Camp. Captain [John] Reid was our medical officer there. I imagine his name has come up before. I went up and I had a sore throat, and I went up on a special sick report at night, in the evening like. He took one look down my throat and he called a medical orderly over by the name of Sonny Veale [died 1980] (I don't know if his name is ever mentioned) and he says, "There's a positive." He said, "That's what you look for." So they hustled me right out of the camp in the Japanese camp commandant's car, private car -- right up to Bowen Road Hospital. Right that night, I was gone. They were scared of it. I don't think they let the serum in until it started hitting their own men, then they let the International Red Cross bring the serum

in. But about of the 30 men that was in that ward, at the time I was there, I was the only one that walked away.

CGR:

Is that right?

FAH:

I could never figure out why, because we had been inoculated -- I imagine we had been inoculated for diphtheria -- until years later (she's dead now, my aunt from down east), she told me that I had been exposed to diphtheria when I was 18 months old. It could have been that.

CGR:

You must have had just enough immunity to bring you through.

FAH:

Yes, because I was the only one that walked away from there.

CGR:

How did they treat you? What did they do for you?

FAH:

Actually they couldn't do nothing. They just made you comfortable in bed. The dip hit me in my mouth. It split my tongue wide open. In fact, I think the two marks are still there. [They were.] My tongue split wide open and they had to feed me with a straw and all I could do was suck it up. It hit different guys different ways, like some down there [testicles]. I know Lieutenant Harper, it hit him in the testicles and oh my God! like footballs, and he died. Boy he was in agony. But I was never what you would say really sick with it. My mouth was uncomfortable and I had to breathe through my nose. It was just all tongue. I remember this Major Harrison, he was with the

Royal [Army] Medical Corps, every morning he'd come and see me -- oh, and they washed it with glycerin. That's the only thing they had. They kept washing my tongue with glycerin and this kept it moist and helped. He'd come up every day and he'd draw a picture of my tongue. That was it. I would have to sit there with my mouth open and he drew this picture and he was talking to himself all the time while he was drawing my mouth. "My word, I've never seen anything like it, never seen anything like it," you know. He'd be drawing these pictures of my tongue.

CGR:

How long were you sick with that, do you remember, roughly?

FAH:

God I can't tell you. You know, I really can't tell you. A couple of months anyway. I was up there when the Flying Tigers come over and bombed Hong Kong and I was up in Bowen Road Hospital. We all went out on the balcony and we started laughing and cheering away like hell, and the camp commandant of the hospital come down and slapped the hell out of us for laughing at the Imperial Japanese Air Force for going up and trying to get these P-38's that the Flying Tigers were flying. We got the hell slapped out of us for that, for laughing.

CGR:

Tell me something about -- you said you had both kinds of dysentery.

FAH:

I had dysentery several times -- two or three times in Hong Kong and then when we got to Japan I had it a couple of times. Then things started acting funny. I would have a couple of days

really bad: cramps, the whole bit. Then I would tighten up. That would go for two or three days and then, bang! again. I went to Captain Reid. Every time I went to Captain Reid I would tighten up. He'd put me in the hospital and he said, "Give us a stool." I couldn't give a stool.

He said, "You're a malingerer." So I said, "Okay, if you think I'm a malingerer send me back with the work party." I said, "You'll never see me again. I'll never come back." So he turned me loose and I went back to work. And my bowels kept -- I was messing myself, I couldn't control them, and I finally passed out. So they took me back to camp and the Japs took me to see him and he said send him to (I'm trying to think of the name of that hospital camp in Japan) Shumidigawa, I think, it was called Shumidigawa. He said, "Send him to Shumidigawa." And he said, "I don't know what's the matter with him." [Shinagawa?]

So they sent me there and they took a stool test and they knew right away. It was a Japanese doctor working on me. They just put me in isolation and he said, "You've got both types, and you're a carrier besides." There was my problem. I stayed there for, I think, I was there a good four or five months. The only medication they gave you was Epsom salts for three days and then bismuth. Then you would have to give them three stool samples and the whole three of them had to be negative. I would give them two negatives and then the third one would be positive. Back again for another course of Epsom salts and bismuth, see, and they they'd start again. I was there for four or five months before I got out of there. That was it. But I imagine if I hadn't passed out and got sent to Shumidigawa I would have liter-

ally shit myself to death.

CGR:

What was the trip to Japan like?

FAH:

Well it was bloody awful. You know, they had Red Cross marked on the boat. We were just put in holes and then the lids put on us. They'd hand you a bucket once a day and everybody went in the bucket, and designate one man to go out and dump it, once a day. There was no daylight, no nothing. Your food would come down and what there was was just like a gruel made out of rice and greens all mixed together. And that was it, you divided it up as best you could. We were just like cattle in there.

CGR:

Was it a long trip?

FAH:

It seemed long, it seemed like forever [actually, 6 days]. Of course you had no way at all to tell night from day. There was just always a naked light bulb, that's all.

CGR:

Where did you go when you went to Japan, when you got to Japan?

FAH:

Landed in Nagasaki.

CGR:

Nagasaki, was it?

FAH:

Then they took us right to Yokohama and we worked in a shipyard -- Nippon Kokan.

CGR:

Doing what kind of work?

FAH:

Building ships! Riveting and painting and electrical work, whatever, right on a military objective.

CGR:

Really!

FAH:

Strictly against the Articles of War. We were right in a regular shipyard, building ships.

CGR:

Did they treat you any better there? Did they feed you any better?

FAH:

No, no. They did it the same way. We got fed according to the work party. If you could field a 400-man work party, you got rations for 400 men. If you only put out, say, 375, that's what rations you got. So the way everything was done -- the rations for 375 was still divided amongst 400 men.

CGR:

And how long did you work at that? Is that when you came down with the dysentery?

FAH:

Apparently I must have had the dysentery all the way from Hong Kong, because I had it two or three times in North Point and Sham Shui Po, dysentery like.

CGR:

I'm confused.

FAH:

But where I come down, where I reported the...

CGR:

You were in Japan when you were treated?

FAH:

Yes, I was in Japan when I got the treatment, when I went to the hospital camp and the Japanese found out what was the matter.

CGR:

Any other medical things that happened to you?

FAH:

No.

CGR:

That's enough -- but I wanted to be sure I'd asked about everything.

FAH:

What with being shot and getting diphtheria and carrying around dysentery for three or four years...

CGR:

And starving.

FAH:

Yes. Who needs more?

CGR:

One of the questions I've asked everybody (and I get much the same answer) is, what about sex? Was sex something you talked about?

FAH:

Never thought about it. Never, never entered my head, all

that was about was food.

CGR:

Of course, you were pretty young too. Did you have any sexual experience?

FAH:

No, none. I didn't know what it was all about.

CGR:

You didn't know what you were missing, so to speak.

FAH:

Married men they said, "Wonder what the wife's doing?" So who's worried? I didn't even have a girlfriend. That's one problem I didn't have. I didn't even have a girlfriend to come back to.

CGR:

How about homosexuality? Did you ever see any evidence of that?

FAH:

Never, never seen it at all. And you'd think with me being so young that I might have been approached, but no. I never seen anything, and I was never bothered or anything.

CGR:

It's interesting to hear so much about homosexuality now, and yet what you've said is what I hear from everybody, that the odd person knows an isolated instance maybe where it happened, but it certainly doesn't seem to have been a problem of any kind.

FAH:

No, it was never a problem. There was a lot of married men who were worried about their wives, things like that, but wasn't

anything else, like homosexuality, never ever. I heard of one guy they said, "You watch that old son-of-a-bitch (he's dead now), he's a dirty old man, he likes little boys, you know." He never bothered me. He was right in our company, he just never bothered me.

CGR:

How do you look back on this? Is this something that bothers you? Do you have bad dreams?

FAH:

I don't get any bad dreams. Now and then I feel cheated a bit. Like I mean, from 17 to 21, it's the best years of your life, eh? I do feel a little cheated now and then, but not all the time. I would never want to go through anything like that again, but I don't think I'd trade the experience. It's just something -- well, millions of people go through this life and never leave their mark on anything, but I feel as if I've left my mark there. If people want to dig far enough, one hundred, two or three hundred years from now, they can find my name. As I say, there's millions of people go through life and never leave anything, no place.

CGR:

Yes, that's sure true.

FAH:

It's my claim to fame. It's my individual little moment.

CGR:

Do you feel the experience benefited you in any way?

FAH:

I think so.

CGR:

How?

FAH:

I think it prepared you -- anything they throw at you back here, it's a piece of cake. Several years ago I was threatened with being thrown in jail in Kenora, and I laughed at the judge. He couldn't see the joke, but me, I just stood there and I laughed. He fined me \$150 or 30 days and I said, "It's going to be 30 days because I'm retired." I said, "If you think I'm taking \$50 from my wife and \$50 from my daughter and \$50 of my own, you're crazy." I said, "I'll go to jail." So I figure after the Japanese prison camp, I'll do that standing on my head.

CGR:

And did you go to jail?

FAH:

No. There was a lawyer in Kenora by the name of T.A. O'Flaherty, he got me aside and he says, "Let me handle your case." I says, "I'm not spending a nickel." He said, "I'm not asking you for a nickel." He said, "Just let me handle your case." So he took it and appealed it and the case was thrown out. But I was prepared to go to jail. There was no way I was going to give them no \$150.

CGR:

How did people adapt to life in the camp? Did people have trouble adapting?

FAH:

No, I don't think so. Because like the Grenadiers had been

in camps in Jamaica, and then we had camp conditions here at Fort Osborne Barracks. No, I don't think there was really that big a problem adapting. I didn't find it hard to adapt. You know, I didn't miss going out or anything like that. Of course, I didn't do too much of it anyway. Once the work parties started up and they were regular, this was good. This got rid of time.

CGR:

It was an activity.

FAH:

Yes, right.

CGR:

How about in your personal experience. Were there any people you'd call bad apples?

FAH:

Well, there was always troublemakers in every outfit. There was troublemakers with the guards and there was troublemakers amongst our own boys. You just got to know them and stay the hell away from them.

CGR:

What kind of trouble? I'm curious to know how people react. (I don't want to know people's names. I'm not interested in muckraking.)

FAH:

Well, there was one that I know was on dope. I didn't know it at the time. I found out years later what the problem was with him. He was always wheeling and dealing and getting himself in the goddamnedest jackpots, and at times he'd get the whole camp in trouble, the whole bloody camp would be -- something would be

stolen and they'd report it to the Japs and the whole camp would be stood out by the barracks and the huts would be searched and just torn to hell looking for this article. And things like that.

Then you'd get a bad guard. It don't matter what, he was just out for trouble and he was going to find it. And guys dealing in the black market. You had to be careful what you dealt with. One stupid bugger went -- the Japs brought us in shoes, and you signed for those shoes, and he traded off his shoes. You know, they knew goddamn well the shoes were gone, right away quick. The whole goddamn camp was punished for that. This guy was a sergeant, you'd think he'd have better sense.

CGR:

The fellow you mentioned that was on dope. How did he ever get dope?

FAH:

I don't know. But apparently he stayed on dope all the time he was there, and when he come back to Canada he was still on dope. He's dead now. But, as I say, I didn't know it at the time. He was on dope all the time there. He started in Jamaica, an old Grenadier, he started in Jamaica.

CGR:

Yes, that's the place to start, I imagine.

FAH:

He stayed and he made the connections in the camp with the Jap guards and he had the Jap guards bringing him in dope. He'd be trading, wheeling and dealing in watches. If you had a watch, if he couldn't make a deal with you he'd steal the goddamn thing.

CGR:

Any other experiences you can think of?

FAH:

Not really. Nothing that really stands out except the bombings, when they took Guam and the B-29s got close enough to bomb hell out of us, eh. That was fun. I was working in the railway siding, this was after we got to the shipyard. They burnt everything around us -- to the north, to the south, the east, the west. The only thing left standing was our goddamn camp. Nobody, but nobody can tell me that the Americans didn't know we were there. There was 250 Americans, there was 50 Dutchmen, there was 50 Canadians in this one camp working on the railway siding. They burned everything down except that camp.

CGR:

Sounds too lucky to be just luck.

FAH:

Right, especially when you know the way they bombed. I mean, they'd send one plane over about 4:30, 5:00 o'clock, 5:30, 6:00. He'd come in and he'd drop these bread-baskets, they'd spin. At a certain RPM the sides come off, and out come hundreds, literally hundreds of incendiary bombs and they just fly all over hell. Tokyo is a city made to burn -- bamboo and paper -- and they'd start fires. Well, then in would come the planes at night and they just bombed. There's no way they could see our camp down there. But it was just a queer damn thing that our camp was not hit. It just burnt everything.

We'd get out, we had these long-handled mops with rice straw at the end of them, it'd be like mops, and we were supposed to

beat the fires out. Just dunk them in the water and beat the fire out. We'd be standing out there and cheering and shouting and laughing and the Japs would come along and they'd say (we got pretty good in talking broken Japanese) and say, "Anatawa tamadache ema, shinda anatawa." "Your friends are going to kill you." We'd laugh like hell and say, "Watashi sinda anatawa shinda onaje." "If I die, you die too." They used to call us, they say Baka or Bakaro. That was about the worst thing they could call you was a fool or crazy. But this is it, they'd be bombing the hell out of you and you'd be out there and you'd be laughing like hell. This was great.

CGR:

Well, I don't have any other questions.

FAH:

They brought in a B-29 pilot, they'd shot him down. A great big Texan I bet you he was 6'4" and they brought him into camp because they couldn't get him to the interrogating camp. And we were asking him questions about everything else. Jesus Christ! here's a guy that had breakfast at home, you know, wow, news! One of the first things I asked him, "What's the most popular song?" He says, "Anybody got a guitar?" Somebody gave him a guitar and, "I'm going to buy a paper doll I can call my own." I'll never forget that. Every time I hear that song and you do hear it now and then, I'll think of that day. Whether he ever made it through that interrogation camp, I think of that Texan. But this is the things you remember, the high points, the fun times, especially this late in the game. Probably if you had done this thing 35 years ago, just shortly after we got back, you

might have found a lot of bitterness and hate.

CGR:

And a lot more detail.

FAH:

Right, now it's so foggy and you can't recall it all.

CGR:

Forty years is a long time.

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