JOHN FREDERICK THOMAS GEORGE

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

Interviewed by Charles G. Roland, MD 10 November 1983

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

Interview No. HCM 32-83

HCM 32-83 John F.T. George, Stoney Creek, ON, 10 November 1983 Charles G. Roland, MD:

Mr. George, I wonder if we could begin. I'd like to ask you your full name, your birth place, and your birth date, to start with.

Jack Frederick Thomas George:

It's John Frederick Thomas George. I was born in London, England -- in a place called Southampton. My birth date is the first day of the tenth month, 1918 [1 October 1918] CGR:

So you weren't much before an end-of-the-war baby. JFTG:

That's right.

CGR:

Just about. Okay. And your parents/ names? JFTG:

Leonard Samuel Reuben George.

CGR:

You went in for long names.

JFTG:

Yes, sure did [laughter]. My mother was (why I don't remember this, isn't that terrible) -- let me think. I'm trying to think of her second name. It was Doris Henrietta. CGR:

Her maiden name, do you recall?

JFTG:

It was Cheeseman.

CGR:

Okay. Now were you raised in London?

JFTG:

Oh yes.

CGR:

So you spent, until the war, you were essentially there, were you, all the time?

JFTG:

Oh yes.

CGR:

What were you doing when war began?

JFTG:

I was working, I was in an apprenticeship to the leather trade; we used to make instrument cases, mainly. We made other things but the main thing we made instrument cases for an instrument company, that was our specialty, made of leather. Also we made (I don't know whether you can remember, you very likely can't) but they used to have a very crocodile, made of crocodile and they all had brushes and all that sort of thing -- real carrying cases -- very expensive jobs, and we used to supply Manhattan Garden with them.

CGR:

Very good. Well tell me how you -- when and how you went into the service. What happened then. JFTG:

Well, I was called up at 21, eh, all the 21 conscripts; if you remember in England, when you turned 21 you were a conscript. I was called to Shrapnel Barracks, in Woolwich, in London. It was a rainy day. I'll always remember that. They were more like

stalls than Barracks there, because they had this place like a garage with a room on it. I'll always remember this particular place where I had to go. It was, oh, a dark dismal place. I guess there was about 100 in a room no bigger than twice the size of this place, very small. The old sergeant told us we were now in the army, like -- and we were billeted in (I think it was) a long narrow room with (I can't remember), about 40 beds in it. That's about all we did the first day, like. In the morning we drew rations -- not rations, we drew our kit and all that sort of thing.

CGR:

Excuse me. This was when? Do you remember the exact date, or at least roughly the date? JFTG:

Yes, I can remember roughly the date. It was in September, but I can't remember the day, the actual date. CGR:

So it was actually slightly before your 21st birthday? JFTG:

Yes.

CGR:

Fine. Go ahead please.

JFTG:

I guess we started training in there. I always remember we had no rifles, all we had was wooden sticks. Would you believe this? There were just enough, I guess a few more than enough rifles for guard duty. The only time we had a rifle, a real one, in your hand was on guard duty. I was then, after I would say

about two weeks, we were told we were going into a regiment, which was 118 Field Artillery. Then we started (I don't know whether you want to know the whole details or just...). CGR:

Well, just very briefly up till the time you went to the Far East.

JFTG:

well, we trained in there and then I went to Dover. I was made up to a Lance-Sergeant and I went on a gunnery course here. When I came back, they made me up to a sergeant -- no a bombardier, and then about a month afterwards I made up to a sergeant and they sent me to Scotland; there I joined the 155 Field Regiment, it was Scottish Yeomanry prior to this, then they changed it into an artillery. Still had the horses up there when I got there. So it was our job, actually, about 40 of us went up there, so many from each regiment -- sergeants and NCOS. We had to train the other guys up there.

CGR:

Now this would have been about when? JFTG:

This would be about -- it's hard to recollect for sure -but I would say about three months, so it would be in January. CGR:

Early '40?

JFTG:

Yes.

CGR:

Excuse me, but you had a remarkably rapid rise to sergeant,

HCM 32-83 John F.T. George, Stoney Creek, ON, 10 November 1983 didn't you? JFTG:

Yes, because -- the reason I got that was because I think it was just -- I don't know whether it was the fact that I'd been in the militia for a little while, not very long, and I was made up to what they call a temporary bombardier -- well it wasn't, it was a corporal then. I think that's what initiated the sudden raise.

CGR:

Well you must have had talent too.

JFTG:

Oh very likely [laughter]. From there we got orders. They were taking so many men from our regiment and forming gunnery crews, for the invasion -- for the evacuation of France. So they took four crews from the regiment and sent them down there and I was on the lead boats going back and forth from Dover to Boulogne. I can't remember how long for sure, but I would imagine it was around about two months from the start, before we started evacuating, like. We were sort of set up -- because they could foresee it coming. We used to go back and it was on the Princess-something boat, and I can't remember it. It was the old channel crossing boat they used to use. I can't remember, it's the <u>Princess</u>-something. I can't remember the actual name now. We used to do that. We'd go one day and then come back. CGR:

So this was about the time of Dunkirk?

JFTG:

Yes. We did it before Dunkirk, because we were just taken

off leave but then at Dunkirk we had to [return]. Then I came back off that and we went straight up back up to my regiment in Scotland. About, oh I don't know, I'd be guessing but I would imagine about six months after that we were shipped out to India, from Greenock in Scotland. I guess there was about 32 boats in our convoy that went right around the Cape. When we got to India, we started training for jungle warfare. CGR:

Where did you go in India? Where were you stationed? JFTG:

At Kirkee near Poona. From there we went to Singapore, and from Singapore we went to a place called Ipo.

CGR:

Impo?

JFTG:

Ipo. That was just a causeway -- there was a causeway until they blew it up. The causeway, just across the causeway from Singapore was Ipo and we were stationed in the rubber plantation there, and that's where we sort of waited. We did some more training and so forth. Then when the Japs come through Burma, well they moved us right up to (I can't really remember the name of that place right up top of Malaya. I just can't remember. I was trying to remember it a little while ago, but I can't).

At any rate, we were gradually pushed back and pushed back, and we ended up in Singapore. I don't know whether you are interested, but the colonel in charge of our regiment was a fellow by the name of Colonel Gold and he became a Major-General in the field, and he took over all the guns that we had on Singa-

HCM 32-83 John F.T. George, Stoney Creek, ON, 10 November 1983 pore, to defend Singapore, when they blew up the causeway. CGR:

Now you were still with 155? JFTG:

I was taken away from 155 when I went with this general, because I had been his OPP sergeant all through that campaign; so he took me with him. So I ended up with him.

At any rate, from there we surrendered, in the end. I don't know whether you want any more details about that part or anything like that?

CGR:

Well, why don't you just carry on with your tale and I may come back and ask questions about particular parts of it. JFTG:

When they blew up the bridge, I was on the -- I don't know whether you can imagine the bridge, looking across the bridge and this is just a flat piece of ground and across was a causeway. The last people to come across was the Argyle and Sutherland and Highlanders. They were the rear guard and I was on a gun right at the end of the causeway with this Major-General Gold. It was a very, very -- it'll always stick in my mind because I never felt so proud of a group of men, because they just marched with bagpipes playing and they were just falling off like flies. It was hairy.

CGR:

Marching in columns?

JFTG:

Yes. Four men right across and not one of them ran. It was

really fantastic. I guess then the Japanese took us over. They sort of collected us in a big field and they came along and (through an interpreter) told us that we were to march to Changi Jail, which is Changi Jail was the jail in Singapore. They took us there and put us in huts and we were fed three full cups of rice a day, boiled rice.

CGR:

I'm sorry, what kind of rice? JFTG:

Boiled rice, just boiled with salt.

CGR:

And that was all?

JFTG:

That was all. That was all for about, oh, I would say about a week, then we started getting a little fresh vegetables. It was enough to make a very thin soup. I think I was there (this again is very approximate, because I really can't remember the times now), but I would say we were there around about 6 to 8 months.

CGR:

The surrender was about mid-February, if I'm right. JFTG:

Right. That's right, yes. CGR:

So then October, roughly? JFTG:

Yes, in that area. I'm not quite sure. CGR:

Exactness doesn't matter. JFTG:

I might be a month or two out in all these things.

At any rate, they took us, a certain amount of us, like my regiment and a few other guys from an Australian regiment away to a place called Great World. Now this was...

Excuse me. Can I break in here before we get on to this? A couple of questions. First of all, you said you were with your regiments. You were reunited were you with your mates? JFTG:

No, we never -- we were always together, like. When we capitulated the regiment, we just marched to Changi Jail and we were in Changi Jail.

CGR:

CGR:

Oh, I see. I was going back to you saying you'd been with General Gold and I thought maybe you were apart from the regiment, but you weren't.

JFTG:

No, I was just with him.

CGR:

Then the second thing is, this 8-month period in Changi. What was the state of health like? Were people beginning to come down with disease? Were they coping pretty well? What sorts of things...?

JFTG:

Well, yes, there was -- they weren't too bad. Really and

truly it was sort of depression starting to set in, really and truly, because you was confined. That was the biggest thing, because we really hadn't, though we were pretty, I mean, lack of food was one of the big things. There was obviously sick people, but not to the degree that it got to, no great lot of sick people there. You know, the normal things, like dysentery and so forth, which developed because of the flies, I guess, and so forth. They were our biggest enemy all the way through. But not too bad then. I was lucky because I went from this Changi Jail -- I gather (I got through the grapevine) that people who were left there had a real rough time.

But they took us and they took us to this what they called the Great World. It was what used to be (if you can imagine a side-show and cabarets and skating) and it was all made of tin, just tin, and it was quite a big place. They billeted us in there. From there we used to go to what we called the bullring and that was the Japs' headquarters, and we'd parade every morning and they'd pick out parties of so many men to go to the warehouses, or godowns as they called them, in Singapore, in the harbor there. Also to places like Virginia House, that's like a big tobacco factory there where they kept the tobacco, and Nestles where all the milk and so forth was, and all these big places that were there. They got so many parties on that. CGR:

Doing laboring type work? JFTG:

Yes. Just unloading -- mostly loading onto the Japanese ships to send back to Japan. But this was a good time for us

like, because we lived like kings. Because we stole. If you had gone into the Great World where we were billeted there, you could get anything from a machine gun, bullets for a machine gun. You could get everything. You could get beer, because they used to go to the breweries. There was a brewery there, ABC Brewery, and we'd go on that. Well anything. Cigarettes, you name it. There was chocolates and of course these crates, there were all kinds of machinery, clothing. It was amazing how you could get things out. We had a hose, a half hose we used to wear, half hose like, it was made of wood and pants and what we'd do, we got our little haversack that we'd take our lunch and so forth in, and we'd put all the things in our hoses. Well the Japanese never, never thought of looking -- they looked at our haversacks before they left and that was all. That went on -- of course if you did get caught and some did get caught, and I for one got caught. We did that, I guess for about, oh, I guess around 5 months.

CGR:

What happened when you got caught? JFTG:

Well I was strung up to a tree. I was put on a tree with my arms like that, [stretched out parallel to the ground] because it was very hot, the summers were hot. The Japanese used to come by -- it was a tree that was on a mound like and they had a plaque on it that says, "This man's a thief," and they used to douse their cigarettes on me as they go by. I was there for two days and of course they had to carry me. But I survived it -- because we used to -- well, I started it because (well, me and another

sergeant) we started to bribe them at the gate. We'd bring beer in and they caught us with beer so they took it and I said, "if you let us bring some in, we'll give you a case." So we made false bottoms underneath -- the Aussies made false bottoms underneath the trucks and we'd put so many in the back that we shared with the Japanese, which was 50-50, and the rest of them was underneath in the false bottom. We brought a heck of a lot of stuff in that way. The only trouble was, the first time I went on the brewery drop I had an Australian driver, because we had the Australian service corps there, and 10 men and only the driver and me were sober. So that was when we got into trouble coming through. That's when we had to -- we couldn't do anything about it and that's when the Japanese sort of found out what we were doing. So I explained to them that if they let us do it we would bring them back all kinds of things. Being human beings like everybody else, they did. Like I say, that went on for about, I guess, around 5 or 6 months. And then we... CGR:

Did you have medical facilities there at this place? For example, when you had all these [cigarette] burns, did somebody look after you?

JFTG:

Yes. Of course we had medical officers with us, you see. They used to go out on the parties too. They never worked at that time. They did in the end, but they didn't at that time. They'd go with us and so they knew exactly what was going on. We were living good. But, yes, they looked after me fine. We had our own little hospital that we'd set up, medical and so forth.

So we had all the facilities there, better than the Japanese had.

Suddenly they decided -- well, I guess we'd shipped nearly everything out by then and that was the end of that. They started fellows who were moving, and we started to march. We marched to this place -- anyway it was about 10 miles and there they put us on a train and took us way up as far as you could go by train, through to Malaya. From Malaya we went by trap to this railway where they were starting this railway. We came up by the River Kwai.

CGR:

I was going to say, it wouldn't be the Kwai would it? JFTG:

I couldn't think of that name. We started building the embankment of the railroad. After a while they made my regiment and, I guess, there was all kinds of other regiments, Norfolk Regiment was up there, Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders, and an Australian regiment -- we started to build the embankment, and that was done by a chain effect. Like, you'd go about 50 yards away and dig a big hole, fill it up with these little small baskets and just chain them to your embankment as they filled out, the hard way. From there, after we'd one so many miles of this, they started us to laying the rails. Then they brought a lot of Indians and Pakistanis and so forth. It was a mixed breed of all kinds, and some of the British as well. They started the embankment in front of us and we started laying the rails. I laid every 20th rail, from start to finish, with a sledge hammer. So two spikes in every 10th rail, on that thing.

At any rate, medically, I would say that's when we started

to go down hill. There was a lot of dysentery and we started to get beriberi. It's like what we call when you push your finger in.

CGR:

Edema? Or dropsy? JFTG:

Dropsy, yes. A type of dropsy, I guess. Well, I could put my finger in there -- not at that time, I wasn't but there was a lot of them starting to get it.

CGR:

Swelling in the calf and in the shin and so on. JFTG:

That's right, yes. Also it was then -- well I guess not quite so much then, but we started (I didn't get it then), but any little cut you got, we got what we called tropical ulcers. I got tropical ulcers, like holes. It's just wherever you -- if you just happen to knock your leg with a bit of bamboo or something like that, scratch it, it would turn gangrene after a while. CGR:

Just didn't heal properly?

JFTG:

No. The only way we could -- it hurt -- but anyway you could do it was just dig it out and make it bleed and wrap it up, and hope that it heals right. But it was starting to get that and it got progressively worse as we went on. CGR:

I was going to ask you, what was the diet like? JFTG:

Well, the diet then was basic rice, and we had a bit of dried fish early on. About this time we were getting a little bit of fish and the same type of vegetables that we had in Changi -- few vegetables, very, very little in water, two to go to a hundred me, like. That was it basically, but mainly rice. Wherever we stopped they had, we had cooks, our own cooks in the end, and they had like a big basin, they used to cook it in, supplies by the Japanese. It was like a big frying pan with a "V" in it and you just built a fire under it, boiled the rice and took the fire out and let it steam. If you've ever seen rice done like that, it's about four times as big as it normally is when you get it. Oh yes, fantastic. All individual rice -very, very nice. Of course there were the husks around it so we did get some nourishment from them, I guess.

CGR:

It wasn't polished? JFTG:

No. I guess we started laying our rails and we got up to a place called Tampa, and that's when cholera begins. At that time, we were far away from the Indians who were building ahead of us, all in the same area. I used to hear the bugle go about as many as 50 times a day -- as our guys died. It was unreal. CGR:

How many men would there have been in the camp? JFTG:

Oh, there'd be about, I would say, around about 1,500, approximately that. They were dying about, at the peak it was

HCM 32-83 John F.T. George, Stoney Creek, ON, 10 November 1983 round about 50. It started off just two or three, and it just went like the wind. It went through the camp. CGR:

Did you have cholera? JFTG:

No. I don't know how I didn't. Well, I do. I think I know how I didn't get it. We had three medical officers with us. One I knew pretty good because he was the medical officer of our regiment, and he said to me, "Jack, if a fly settles on your rice, don't eat it." He said right away, "I know you're going to be awfully hungry," but straight away he said, "lot of them just take the bit away and threw it away and carried on eating. Because," he said, "that's where it's coming from, I'm pretty sure." The flies, from the feet of the flies. CGR:

Then you did this? JFTG:

I did that, yes. I mean, the flies were pretty bad in some of those camps, with the rotten sanitation and all that, it was pretty rough. I think that's what saved me. After, it sort of eased up. I don't know why. We moved on and it never followed us. Of course our health then was just malnutrition, plain good old malnutrition. You had no life. It was so hard to do a day's work, and you had to do a day's work, whether you liked it or not. But what we did to survive, what I did to survive, was I used to eat the bamboo shoots. We had a dietitian with us and he told us, he studied the jungle a bit and he said there were certain things that we should pick and he said it's going to

taste horrible but it will do you good. Also found at one stop, just by the rail head, was a big field, and in this field (I'd never seen peanuts growing before) but there was whole -- well more then, it was like two mucking great fields of peanuts. Now don't tell me or ask me how they got there; I'll never know. I thought first of all they were potatoes. You know how potatoes grow like?

CGR:

Yes.

JFTG:

But we pulled one up and of course there is all these shells. It was peanuts. I bagged mine. When you're in our state you've got little gangs, little cliques who look after each other; you can't help but be cliquey because you sort of, you have to survive and the way to survive is to -- there was four sergeants and seven bombardiers. We stayed together like. We sort of looked after each other. You know, if we were sick, we looked after the other guy. It was just one of those things. I mean we'd help anybody, but I mean everybody would. But you still form a little family that you have to get by with. We got these peanuts and we bagged them. We got an old rice sack and we bagged them and we rationed ourselves. Like all the rest of them they just ate and ate and ate and went through them like a dirty shirt and they were in a pretty bad way. But we just -- like this dietitian he says, "Okay, about three or four peanuts a day to you would be like about four eggs." He said, "There's a lot of vitamins and so forth." He said, "It will do you a world of good as long as you just take small doses of them. It'll last

you a long while." We did. We kept our little lot together because that's the only way you could live. Little things like that got me through.

CGR:

How did the dietitian happen to be there? JFTG:

He was an army officer but he was also a dietitian. CGR:

In civilian life.

JFTG:

When they found out he was a dietitian, he used to give us lectures.s He'd give us a lecture one day and he told us what we should eat, how we should live, and the best way of trying to survive.

CGR:

It was just a fortunate coincidence he was there? JFTG:

Yes, that's right. He was an officer in my regiment, in the 118 Regiment, by the name of Sanderson.

CGR:

Sanderson?

JFTG:

Yes.

CGR:

Speaking of names, what was the doctor's name you mentioned, the regimental medical officer? Do you remember? JFTG:

No. He was a Scotch fellow. It wasn't MacKenzie but it was

HCM 32-83 John F.T. George, Stoney Creek, ON, 10 November 1983 a name like that. CGR:

Well perhaps it will come to you later. You might mention it if it does, or any other medical officers or any medical people that you had any involvement with. As I say, if they come to you that's fine.

JFTG:

They possibly will if I think about them for long enough. It might be next week before they come to me, but I can always give you a ring and tell you, because I really can't remember. CGR:

I know names are very -- I have trouble remembering last week's names, bad enough 40 years ago.

Another thing I thought I'd like to ask you to do if you could, is could you sort of reconstruct for me an average day. What time did you get up? What did you eat for breakfast -- if you had breakfast? When did you go to work? How long did you work? Just sort of work through an average day. JFTG:

What we did normally was we got about, oh, I would say, there was no real set time, they just got us up about 6:00, 6:30 in the morning. We'd have a bowl of rice, like a mess can of rice and then we'd go to the rail head and they had diesel engines. They were originally just -- what did the English call them? -- lorries. We'd take the wheels off and they fitted on the diesel tracks. They had big flat beds and so many men on a flat bed and the rest of it were full of rails and so forth that we'd take up to the rail head to start our day. We'd have our

breakfast, get on there -- rice -- and we'd go to the rail head and we'd work. We'd work, oh, I would say about 3 hours -- there was never any definite time, just when the Japs felt like it.

But they allowed us -- it took us a while -- but they allowed us, funny enough, to have tea. Now this tea (if you would like me to tell you what it was like) it was, we had an open petrol can, the square ones, and cut the top off it and made a handle. We'd make a fire and hang it over a stick, and they gave us so much tea a day. Well the reason, as much as we wanted the tea, we also -- they allowed two men from every party of 30 to So that day all you did was go down to the River Kwai make tea. (I'll tell you a little story about my first time on the tea job) and get the water and come back. Of course it was right through jungle like to there because we were quite away in -- maybe quarter of a mile, half a mile -- because it took a long while to get down to it. You remember there was guards there but they didn't bother to guard us to the extent we could walk down to the river and come back -- where were we going? Lot of people had escaped. I escaped but I came back to another camp because I lot my way. I didn't know -- I was going round in circles. A lot of that went on but it never got you anywhere because you were too far away from -- no maps and no compass -- you just went round in circles.

Anyway, we had this tea that they used to let us have and that's give two men -- well 8 each to a party so there was quite a lot of them that didn't do any work that day, it give them a rest. So an extra rest day came in sequence and you were scheduled in and you'd get your turn. Everybody had that. We'd

have one tea-break in the morning -- about three hours work and then tea-break, and then we'd do about another three hours work and we'd have a break of about half an hour for lunch, and that was rice again. We, incidentally, brought that with us, and anything else we could scrounge. It varied from bamboo shoots to all kinds of things that you'd boil up, and some leaves. I can't think of the name of some of those things, but there were lots of different leaves that we boiled up, tasted horrible, but they were green. I guess they had quite a few vitamins in it too.

We'd have that half an hour and we'd be back to work and we'd have another tea-break in the afternoon. We worked till round about, well till it got reasonably dark, about dusk, when it got a bit dusk, then they'd put us on the flat beds. The early part of the railway they built huts, like permanent huts. They'd move us up there and built these bamboo huts. We had bamboo things to sleep on. That would be, oh, about the third or fourth camp up, and then onwards from then on you just slept out in the open, on the grass. There was a place where they cleared a bit and that's where you slept.

CGR:

No covering, no canvas, nothing at all? JFTG:

No. You just lay straight on the grass. I would say that it was here that people started having to be shipped back because they were just so bad -- they had beriberi, and ulcers, and gangrene, they couldn't walk. This is when they started -- they sent them back to what they called base camp, which was... CGR:

Kanchanaburi.

JFTG:

Chanburi. There was a little place back there they sent them back to. I don't know if they ever got there, to be quite honest.

CGR:

Were you hospitalized, were you seriously sick at all during the time?

JFTG:

I got a lot of fever but we had no quinine.

CGR:

Malaria?

JFTG:

Malaria. I suffered from malaria. I had temperatures going up to -- of course that was 109 degrees -- that wasn't the true temperature as you see it here, that's what the doctor told me at any rate. But I'd work with that. You know, I'd feel pretty groggy because you either fell down and they carried you out and that was it, so you had to keep on. It was only if you lost a leg that you couldn't work and that sort of thing, but you had to carry on.

When I got the cerebral malaria, there was a lot of them that went down with cerebral malaria. They had some quinine in base camp, I think, because I know one of my buddies he got it and he went back and he came back up again. He died there, but he did come back up and he was saying that they did have quinine there. Pretty crude, everything there. They had very little.

HCM 32-83 John F.T. George, Stoney Creek, ON, 10 November 1983 They amputated legs without any medication. CGR:

No anesthetic?

JFTG:

No anesthetic or anything like that. I didn't see that, but I heard that. I guess from then on it got progressively When we got up to as far as, oh, about 100 miles from the worse. rail head, you could reckon it was one out of three done [died] -- it was that bad up there. We, our little group, there was only six of us left in the end. They'd have all kinds of eggs and all that sort of thing. We'd go to them and trade them things. We sort of survived by doing things like that. Little kinds of peculiar things, you can't even remember every one day by day. We ate lizards. We caught lizards, we made traps to catch lizards. We ate python. My first experience of a python was when I went on my first tea job. I got the first tea job there and it was about an hour that we had to walk down to the River Kwai. We walked into the jungle and we're walking along this path and there was a python hanging down. Well, we dropped our cans and run! Of course, that was our first experience of a python. You know, we just turned tail. Went another way, went right around it. You get used to it, even the jungle, like pythons. I mean I was near as you to a python and it didn't bother me, after a while, because they weren't going to attack you, especially if they'd eaten, you could kill them as easy as that.

CGR:

They're pretty sleepy then.

JFTG:

Yes. So you learned a lot about nature, about the jungle, on this job as well.

CGR:

How do you prepare a lizard for the table? What does one do to a lizard?

JFTG:

CGR:

Well, all you do is just put over a fire, eh, like on a stick and just turn it until it's...

Eviscerate it, I suppose, and turn it on a spit? JFTG:

Just pull it apart and eat it. That's what we used to do. The funniest thing that ever happened to me, though, was we were in this place called -- not Tampa, it was Tomajo I think -- at any rate, we were sleeping out there under the sky, right out in the open, and we were right by the River Kwai, right on the banks of the River Kwai. What we did, we got home just before light and what we did, we put string, we got rope and put it across (we were there for about two weeks), and what we did, we swam across with ropes and hung rope down in the water with little hooks on it. The other guys who had been up there before had told us about it, who had been ahead of us, and we just let into the water. The next day about every other one we had a fish. They were fish. Like, I'm a fisherman, but I didn't realize, I didn't know anything till I came to Canada, I didn't know much about fishing, I didn't know anything about fishing.

HCM 32-83 John F.T. George, Stoney Creek, ON, 10 November 1983 But they were big fish. I mean, they were just this size, every other nail, I guess it just snagged them, I just realized what was happening.

The second night there it was a very hairy, night because there was a lot of monkeys up in that area, just loaded with monkeys and baboons, big baboons as well. I mean nearly as tall as a man. The trees over this part of the River Kwai were practically meeting. They were massive trees. CGR:

Arched right over?

JFTG:

Yes. We were all asleep and there was this heck of a noise just like a lot of people chattering real loud. It's sort of coming toward us. There was all these monkeys come right through our camp. Scared the living daylights out of me. But the next morning I had monkey, I ate monkey. I couldn't face monkey. That day I couldn't, I stayed with the fish. I couldn't face monkey because it reminded me of something I knew, like [laughter]. They ate monkey. A pretty good feast they had for the next couple of days, like the ones they caught.

CGR:

How long were you on the railroad? You went all the way to Moulmein?

JFTG:

Oh yes. Went from start to finish. CGR:

How long was that roughly? JFTG:

I would think that would be round about 19 months. It may be longer than that. No, no. It's got to be longer than that. It's about 2 years and 8 months.

CGR:

Right till the end of the war then? JFTG:

Yes.

CGR:

I see. So you were still at it, basically, when the war ended, were you?

JFTG:

When the war ended, we'd finished the railroad. No. They brought us back to a place called (I can't think of the name of it) -- but we started to build an airstrip. It was somewhere down that -- they brought us back down and we were building an airstrip there. What happened, we woke up one morning and these two English officers -- one was a captain and the other one was a colonel] -- they were English but they had the Australian hat on. (I forget the name of it.) They were uncouth, they hadn't shaved. They had a lot of beard and real rough-looking individuals, and they both had side arms here and daggers up here. They told us that they had been underground for 18 months, organizing the underground, eh, and they knew exactly where we were and what was going on. They were just waiting for the hostilities to finish, or they were possibly going to move in, like. CGR:

Did you lose a lot of weight?

When the war ended and they sent us to Nam Pridat, a Yes. place called Nam Pridat, that was a hospital there; when I was there I weighed 85 lbs. I put on weight so fast it was not funny. I just blew out, just like a big balloon. Of course, when I got home I found that none of my suits fit because I just put on weight so fast. But it was all water, apparently. Of course a lot of our fellows died because they didn't eat right, after; I was fortunate, like, this same (I wish I could remember that man's name), this dietitian and the doctors said you've got You've got to eat some soft food, don't try and to be sensible. start to eat double steaks and all this sort of thing. I didn't do these things so I guess I -- but of course I ate a lot of rice as well. He said you'd better keep on the diet and eat your rice because you've been on rice for a while. So he told us all these things, but of course there was other things to be eaten and some of them just ate them. You know, when you've been without these things for a long time, it's a great temptation.

CGR:

Were you married when you went into the army? JFTG:

No.

CGR:

When you went to the East?

JFTG:

No.

CGR:

What about sex? Was sex something that was on your mind all

HCM 32-83 John F.T. George, Stoney Creek, ON, 10 November 1983 these months, yours or others? JFTG:

Well, there were some, but talking for myself, no. I was too concerned with -- by the time you finished a day's work you didn't have time to think about sex, really. The only time I think you really thought about sex, really and truly, was on your day's off when you were lying around. Then just a passing thought. It was too much. I guess the (how can I put it?), I think really and truly what you were more concerned about was survival, like. It was foremost in your thoughts. My philosophy was "I'm going to live today." I didn't think about tomorrow. Ι never gave a lot of thought. The only time I really give a lot of thought to any living tomorrow was around Christmas, and that area still had the same effect on you, and that was a pretty depressing time then. You know, then you started thinking about But for most of the time I sort of wiped everything out in home. my mind and said, "That's it. Today I'm going to live and do all kinds of things and tomorrow I'll find out what's happening." That was how I went on.

I was amazed, we had these Australians with us, and they were big. I mean I was a pretty big guy because I did a lot of boxing when I was young and sports and I was, what, 210 lbs when I went in the army, so I was a big fellow.

CGR:

A heavyweight.

JFTG:

Yes. I was really big, but we had a lot of these Australians there and the biggest majority of them were really big

fellows, but they were the first ones to die. They went off just like flies because they were with us, like, most of the time out there. I don't know why this is. They said after we had come back, like, before they put us on the boat and brought us back, that they thought that the cockney, and the Londoner, when they went through statistics afterwards, survived better than anybody, with his outlook on life and his humor. I don't know if that has anything to do with it. But apparently a lot more came through from that neck of the woods than anywhere else, so they don't know if it's coincidence or just one of those things. CGR:

Do you have any feeling why you, personally, survived when so many of your friends and mates didn't? JFTG:

Well, I think, myself, I think I had a fantastic childhood where I must have developed a fantastic constitution. I never had a day's illness in my life apart from a cold now and again. I was in fantastic shape, and I think I went into the war in such good shape, I think, personally -- that's my own opinion, that's all it is an opinion -- but I was in such good shape that I think that kept me in good stead and may have got me through. Plus the fact that I took chances, like our little group took chances and went under the wire sometimes and did all kinds of things to survive. I think a lot of luck as well. But I think your mental attitude is one of the biggest things. You know, if you make up your mind, you start thinking about going home and all that sort of thing every day, I found that I'd get depressed, and so I said that's it, forget it. I put it out of my mind and said, "Okay,

I'm going to start to live today and forget about tomorrow. If it comes, that's fine." I found that was -- you made mental adjustments all through that. I made all kinds of mental adjustments as I look back on it.

I suffered from a lot of -- when I came back -- I suffered from a lot of nightmares. When I came back, my middle brother was still in the Middle East and his wife, she met me at the station when I came back and she fixed me up a room in her house, and she quite often used to come in there in my bedroom at night, because I was dreaming, eh, and she didn't know whether to wake me up or what to do. She told me about it and I didn't remember very much about it, some bits I did, but not a lot. I went to the doctors over it and he said, he give me some pills and tranquilizers and so forth to take at night. He said, "I think the only thing is that it will just subside." He said, "I'm hoping it will, if not, we'll have to do something about it." But it did. I guess about three months and gradually I forgot it. But it was a lot and I guess you didn't realize what you'd...

CGR:

A lot to work out, yes. JFTG:

You had to get rid of. CGR:

So you ever have those now? JFTG:

No.

CGR:

Not at all? Do you have any kind of after-effects?

Well the only thing I had was I had quite a bit of stomach trouble and I had to have an operation and they removed half of my stomach.

CGR:

Ulcers?

JFTG:

Ulcers, gastric, the walls in the stomach went -- I think that was partially a result of the war.

CGR:

When you were on the railroad, what did you own? What was your kit?

JFTG:

Okay. What we had was what we called a Jap-happy. Because all our clothes just shredded. They were fine down in Singapore, but as you worked on the railroad it just wore out. So what you ended up with was a loin cloth, and that's all you had. You had shoes up about until the third camp, army boots, and then you had nothing. My feet, when I got home, were so callused that I could walk on anything. I had walked on rocks and all that sort of thing. I cut myself -- but after a while they go so hard. I guess it was just like the Indians.

CGR:

So you literally lived barefoot?

Oh yes. Nothing on my head. That sun -- I was brown, black! No, that's all we ended up with. Some had more than

others. I carried a blanket; in fact, I started off with two but I ended up with one. I gave one to a buddy of ours who was in our little group, we sort of shared everything we could. But some people even had a razor right until half-way up there. How they kept that I don't know, but I didn't bother with anything like that. I thought that was immaterial to me. I didn't care what I looked like under these circumstances. As long as I was clean. The only way you got clean was to go in the river. That was your only bath you had, just washing yourself and that's what you did every night. Come home, if you were near it, you got in there and dried yourself off as best you could, like. So it was pretty primitive, really and truly.

That was farther up the railway, it wasn't like that at the offset. In the first few camps we had nearly all our kit, they didn't take any of that. We just had what we owned, what we were left with. But I would say the basics was a Jap-happy in the end -- was this loin cloth, as we called it Jap-happy. A few of us had haversacks. Like we might share one between three of us in the end, because they just got worn out and some of them were all tied together. There were a few odds and ends that we kept. I'm trying to think of what else, not very much either. Pretty dog-eared by the time I got through it.

CGR:

Any personal things, photographs, anything like that? JFTG:

No. Some of them did, but I didn't. Too much problem to carry that sort of thing, I had more uses for other things. Where are you going to put it? You had nowhere to put it unless

you were going to put them in your haversack and you had other things to do with that. As far as we were concerned we threw those non-essentials (as they were then) away, and used it for survival to keep our food in and carry food, and all that sort of thing.

CGR:

You mentioned Christmas. Did you make any effort to celebrate Christmas? JFTG:

Yes. They did find us a little bit of extra food. In fact, we got a bit of meat. Two Christmases we had that, up on the railway, and it wasn't very much like one lump between everybody, very, very small. But it was one of the steers they'd killed, because they had a few steers for themselves. They did, they killed one and give us some of it and we had stew like, beef stew topped with rice. We had a little bit of a get-together. We didn't work that day. They didn't let us work that day. That's one day they did give us off. I remember that. But that's pretty vivid in your memory, that, because when you sort of think, sunset and Christmas, you hear somebody singing carols and so forth, that's when you start really -- worse thing out I think was Christmas because it made everybody down. CGR:

It might have been better if you just had to go to work. JFTG:

It would have been far better, far better! Yes, it would have been a lot better. It's the sort of thing that you can't remember everything. You have to sort of mull it over in your in

HCM 32-83 John F.T. George, Stoney Creek, ON, 10 November 1983 your mind for a long while. I'm sure I've missed thousands of things.

CGR:

Oh sure. It's four years out of your life.

JFTG:

Yes, that's right. It's such a long while ago. There was some -- a lot of atrocities that went on. These Japs were pretty crude people.

CGR:

That's one of the things I was going to ask about next, in fact.

JFTG:

Well, I've forgot to tell you really one thing that I should have told you, which was when we finished the railway, we came back to this camp. Then we had a forced march, which was 20 miles a day (it might not sound very much to you right now, but when you go through that type of territory, normally it was a heck of a long way.) But I was one of the fittest men there so I carried this major-general on my shoulders, me and this other fellow, we took him in turns because he had beriberi so badly, and sores, that he couldn't walk. They just left you. If you can't walk, if you can't get there, you were just left by the wayside. They force-marched us for six days.

But, like I say, I can always remember the funny things about what happened there, and that was when we marched right until it was dark, and then they took us in and said lie down. I got this stone -- I thought it was a stone, I didn't know what the heck it was. I couldn't see -- so I laid on it and when I

woke up in the morning, I'd never -- it was hysterical -- because we were in a Buddhist temple, graveyard. There was Buddhas in all different, made of stone, eh, in all different shapes and sizes and positions. Well, you should see some of the fellows. They were lying with Buddhas round their necks! When I looked around with the tears running down my face, I'd never seen anything so funny. When I looked over at myself, I was laid right on an actual tomb with a big Buddha just right here at my head. It scared you first of all, then you had a look around.

There were lots of funny things. What I tended to do was to forget the bad things and remember the goodies, funny part things that happened to me during the war. There were lots, even as prisoner-of-war. You still had some because you wouldn't have got by if it hadn't of happened, that little bit of humor.

But there was a lot of dysentery all the time. The dysentery was just unreal. I don't know if that was the diet or what caused it. I never did determine what really did cause it, but there was a heck of a lot of dysentery. I had dysentery on and off, every other week you'd sort of get it. You'd eat something and bang. I guess it was the diet we were on, and when we found something that was a bit different and we tried it, I guess...

CGR:

It reacted badly.

JFTG:

I don't know. That's my impression of it.

CGR:

All this time, did it ever occur to you that you weren't
HCM 32-83 John F.T. George, Stoney Creek, ON, 10 November 1983 going to make it? JFTG:

No, it never did because I had made up my mind that I was going home, but I made up my mind also I was going to play it day by day, and I wasn't going to worry about what did happen tomorrow.

CGR:

Were there bad apples amongst the troops? JFTG:

Yes, lots of bad apples, lots of sneaks, eh. Because we had, even right up there, we had a wireless, a radio. Well, that's the one thing I forgot to tell you. We all had water bottles. I forgot to tell you that. That was one of our kits. Well the water bottles, we made false bottoms in the water bottles, you see, and put it there and then we'd carry the parts of the radio. Where ever we stayed for any length of time, we put it together. So only one man knew who had what and that was the colonel. He was in charge of it, and he'd come at a certain time and said he wanted to see us and he'd take the parts. We wouldn't know anything about it. After that, he'd give us them back and we'd get a little news. That went on but not very often, like, because we weren't stationary for too long. We weren't there for any length of time.

Yes, there were quite a few things. Like, the Japs would quite often -- they were very immature people, the Japanese, like the ordinary soldier, eh. The trouble with the Japanese, their discipline was, the colonel hits the major and the major hits the captain and the captain hits -- and so it goes right the way down

to the three-star privates. The three-star private takes it out on the prisoner-of-war. So that was their form of discipline. Like when you get to the private who we associated with, you might say -- oh, incidentally, most of our guys were Koreans. So you'd have (I don't know) 50 Koreans, maybe, because that released their own men for the front, I guess. Then you'd have a gunso, which was a sergeant, and then you'd have so many privates and so forth. Of course they had what you call a three-star, two-star, and one-star privates, like that. Three categories of privates. Well, they'd be over the Koreans so they knocked the hell out of the Koreans and the Koreans would knock the hell out of us, you see.

CGR:

And you were the bottom of the line? JFTG:

Very bottom of the line, that's right. I mean, even under those circumstances, there was always one or two good Japs. We had an old gunso there and he was an old guy who was on the forced march and he had to do it, but he was reasonable in every attitude. Like, he'd make allowances as much as he could. I was with him for quite a while. When the hostilities were over, they wanted names of different Japs who performed these [atrocities] and I put forth this man's name and said he shouldn't be harmed because he did only his job and did it well, and didn't do any harm to us at all. I guess they were brutal people because they were being treated brutal too. Their people were being brutal to them, so I guess that's what...

CGR:

How do you feel about the Japanese now? Do you have any...? JFTG:

When I came back, I couldn't get on the same bus. Betty will tell you, when we got on a bus and we had to get off because a Japanese came on. But I've got no, just an immediate, maybe for 6 months or so and I saw red -- anybody like, any race, who was foreign. But no, I've got no, never did have a color bar or anything like that before and I sure as hell haven't got it now. No, I've got no animosity against Japanese because, well it's just the circumstances of war --I put it down to after I sort of was able to think sanely and rationally after a while.

CGR:

What about <u>The Bridge on the River Kwai</u>? Did you see the movie? Have you read the book?

JFTG:

I was on the River Kwai.

CGR:

I know, but I'm saying...

JFTG:

No, but I started to build the bridge on the River Kwai. CGR:

That particular bridge?

JFTG:

That particular bridge, because it's got three spans and I'll tell you exactly how it was knocked out. (see, this is the part I've forgot to tell you.) We were on that bridge, building the bridge when it was bombed out by -- first of all they sent

over these American jobs, Flying Fortresses. They came over there, they were supposed to bomb the bridge. The bombs fell in our camp and the Japanese side of the camp -- we both lived side by side -- and killed quite a few of our guys. I think it was 25 of them, and injured quite a few of them. At any rate, we carried on building that bridge and I think it was about a week afterwards three Lancaster bombers come over and they circled and you had the feeling they were saying, "Get off the bridge before we bomb it!" The Japs run and we run and we got behind the rocks like at the far end, and the came round and circled. They had our camp there and they were being shook up. At any rate, they flew one by one and I guess every one had one span to get rid of, because the first and the third one hit the first two, and the other one missed. The other two stayed up in the sky and the other guy come around and did it again and got it. And that was the end of that bridge.

We built a bamboo bridge, first, to take the trains there, and that was a hairy situation. The River Kwai was quite wide in places. One part where it went through it was a big gorge, real deep. They were good engineers, good field engineers, the Japanese, because they built this bridge of bamboo and attap tied together. Because you've got to remember that bamboo wasn't small stuff. It was amazingly big stuff. They build it right across this gorge and when you went to walk across it, you swung. I mean, it was a real hairy sensation, I'll tell you. When you went in the train, I was like this all along [swaying] -- I wonder when we get to the other end, like it was really moving, but it's no problem. Well it was there the last time I saw it.

Then they built the other bridge right next door. So that was the end, way out to the, we got to the other end when they started on that. Then they brought us back to work on it, like. CGR:

Did you see the movie? JFTG:

Yes, I went to see the movie. It was nothing like the movie.

CGR:

Well I know the plot was all different, but was the movie realistic as far as conditions and things? JFTG:

No, that was very unrealistic. You didn't get those holes and all that. That was way out, that wasn't true at all. The conditions were bad because you were really at the end of your stick then. You know, you were sick, sick, and you were dragging yourself wherever you went, so the conditions were terrible. The food was lousy.

CGR:

Did you ever come across a Dr. Markowitz by any chance? The only name I know of a doctor who was up there, and I know there were lots of them. I just thought it was worth asking. JFTG:

I'd have to think because I'm sure I can remember some of these names but it will take me a little to sort of feed back. I'll remember one name and then a couple more will come to me, I'm quite sure, but I can't remember now. I remember the immediate buddies, I guess, they're the ones that I can remember more

HCM 32-83 John F.T. George, Stoney Creek, ON, 10 November 1983 than anything, but there are none of those left either. CGR:

That leads me to one final question that I had. All of the men who died, were they buried? Did you bury them? Did the men bury them?

JFTG:

Yes, we'd bury the men in different camps. Every camp had a few graveyards round. Like that one where the cholera was, they just carried them and put 20 or 30 in a big hole. CGR:

No time for individual graves or anything like that? JFTG:

No. You had to get them underground as soon as you could. CGR:

Well, very good. I have no further questions. Is there anything else you've thought of that you might want to mention before I turn this off?

JFTG:

Off-hand I can't think of anything. I've been through the whole thing too fast, really and truly. You really need a lot of thought. I'm quite sure I could think of a heck of a lot more but right now it's a jumble.

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