

JOHN N. B. CRAWFORD, MD

Experiences as a Prisoner-of-War,

Interviewed by

Charles G. Roland, MD

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Oral History Archives

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Charles G. Roland, MD:

Well Dr. Crawford, I'm delighted that you've consented to see me again after a nine-year lapse of time since our last interview. A number of the questions I have today stem from that interview in 1983. And the first one is to ask if you might expand a little on the comment you made then about your own health late in the war. You commented that you, after you moved to, I guess it was Argyle Street Camp was it?

John N. Crawford, MD:

Well I never got to Argyle myself. We were in Sham Shui Po.

CGR:

That's right, Argyle had moved to, it was "D" camp and....

JNBC:

Argyle was occupied mainly by officers of the Royal Rifles because they were caught at the end of the island. I never was in it.

CGR:

No, but you were in the officers' camp.

JNBC:

There was no such thing as an officers' camp. There was an officers' section of the general camp. But we all messed out in the same kitchen, and lived together.

CGR:

At any rate you commented, when we met before....

JNBC:

A very good thing for me that that was so because the people that ran my make-shift hospital were the Other Ranks. The volunteers, I'm sure I've stressed this before, they volunteered to

nurse diphtheria cases knowing that if they got it they died.

Wonderful people.

CGR:

Yes. And I agree, and I've interviewed quite a number of those people on that list that you gave me nine years ago.

JNBC:

Is that so?

CGR:

Oh yes, Pat Poirier and Donat Bernier, and Ray Squires and so on and so on.

JNBC:

Wonderful people.

CGR:

I've interviewed 12 or 14 of them.

JNBC:

Good, thank you.

CGR:

Nevertheless, let me return to this period just from May to August of '45.

JNBC:

Oh, that's the end of '45, the end of the operation.

CGR:

Yes, but you said then, "but suddenly I didn't have an important job and I swelled up like a poisoned pup with edema." Those were your words then, and I just wondered if you would expand a little. Was this beriberi, wet beriberi.

JNBC:

Oh yes, beriberi, avitaminoses and beriberi. As a matter of

fact a rather interesting sequel developed along with this, auricular fibrillation, which I brought home with me, and they put me on digitalis and digoxin, and I have been on digitalis and digoxin every day since that time, up until this spring. And suddenly I had a routine overhaul, I report every six months for examination, they rushed me in the hospital. Apparently I poisoned myself with the digitalis [laughter]. They withdrew that and I'm now on daezatec? instead. But this is apparently something you learn to live with.

CGR:

Another thing that you mentioned then was this problem that came up at Port Osborne Barracks in Winnipeg after you got back. You mentioned there was a riot, or something like a riot, a disturbance; can you tell, why was that, what happened?

JNBC:

Well, these boys had placed me in a very unenviable position. And they were of the opinion that nobody except me knew anything about their condition. They were getting the very best of care at Fort Osborne Barracks but they wanted me. So they, I think I still have a couple of weeks leave coming to me that I never got [laughter] in those days. They called me and made me Chief of Medicine at Fort Osborne Military Barracks, knowing how little I knew about medicine. That was it. The boys were happy I was there. But then I had troubles in other hospitals, and they moved me around, doing much the same thing.

CGR:

Well that's good, that clears that up. I wasn't sure as I read this over whether there was some serious cause for a mutiny

of some sort.

JNBC:

Oh no, it was just they wanted their doctor.

CGR:

That was understandable, and a tribute to you.

JNBC:

I suppose.

CGR:

I should tell you when I've talked to the various volunteers, the orderlies, several of them have rather denied the volunteering part; they sort of suggested that they were volunteered, although in at least a couple instances I was quite sure this was more modesty than anything else. But I just wanted to tell you that, that several of them had sort of said, "Oh well, no, not really."

JNBC:

Well, I can quite believe that somebody like Ray Squires, for example, would go back to his barrack block and say, "look I'm helping the Doc and he needs help and you're going to help me," you know. So they volunteered. But I think that the impulse came from their own level.

CGR:

Oh yes, oh yes, none of them implied they'd been ordered to go or anything of the sort.

JNBC:

No, no, no. Well I can quite imagine Ray Squires doing something just like that.

CGR:

Incidentally I found in a record here at the Archives, something indicating that there was a small epidemic of diphtheria in the Grenadiers in 1940 before you ever joined the regiment. Were you aware of that?

JNBC:

Not among the Grenadiers. If it was in late 1940 we were in Jamaica.

CGR:

Well this was very early, this was 19th January, but this is from the War Diary of the Winnipeg Grenadiers. And it says, "All ranks confined to barracks with effect from 1200 hours this date, five cases of diphtheria having been discovered." And of course it was two weeks later when you joined. You were here on 1st of February. It says you were attached. So I just thought I'd mention this. It's interesting that they'd already had some experience.

JNBC:

Thanks a lot, Doctor, as far as I'm concerned I was with the Grenadiers from the very beginning. I was their medical officer when they were still a militia regiment. And on the 1st of September we were mobilized and suddenly I'd be there in earnest, I was with them. We went to Jamaica together. Now we'd be in Jamaica at this time, in '40.

CGR:

In January of '40, that early? By August there is a note here, you were certainly in Kingston of August of '40, because there is something about giving out free issues of condoms to the

troops.

JNBC:

Well perhaps, I can't....but anyway we may have had trouble. We'd be in Fort Osborne Barracks after we went to Jamaica. And lots of places to send diphtheria to.

CGR:

Can you tell me, I'm confused about the Jubilee Building. My initial impression, and I know now that this is wrong, my initial impression was that it was only a hospital. But I gather there were lots of people living in portions of the building.

JNBC:

Oh yes, yes. I'm sure there were. It was originally a residence building for the British garrison there.

CGR:

A barracks?

JNBC:

A barracks and their families lived in there. Now I think all the civilians were moved out of it as far as I know. Well there must have been because we were behind the wire. I'm afraid I've forgotten now.

CGR:

I was leading up to....

JNBC:

Oh we didn't have the whole, it's a huge building. I didn't have that many people to put in.

CGR:

But the Canadian hospital was essentially separate from the British hospital. Is that correct?

JNBC:

Essentially so, yes. There was a good deal of exchange between this, well the professional staff. From the very beginning we just had the one camp hospital. Then the Brits began to get a lot of diphtheria, dysentery too, and I was having a lot. We worked together, but we separated out, because there were too many of us.

CGR:

But the relationship between the Canadian medical staff, the medical officers, and the British was a warm, cooperative one, yes there were no difficulties. It was just that you were looking after your men and they were looking after their men.

JNBC:

Yes, yes.

CGR:

That's fine, that's what I assumed.

Could you say something, we didn't touch this at all last time, about your trip to Japan, was it in '46 to the Japanese War Crimes Trials?

JNBC:

They sent me over pretty early, I guess it would be about '46, yes.

CGR:

Could you give me something of your impressions of what was going on there, and the trial that you were a witness at?

JNBC:

Well I had nothing to do with it really except that then

they booked me down to Ottawa shortly after we got home and they began questioning me about this. And because I had records, that you have seen in the Archives, this made me a unique witness. All they did, really, was to send me back to Hong Kong to tell them what I told them here.

CGR:

But you were sent to Hong Kong, not to Japan?

JNBC:

To Hong Kong.

CGR:

Well, that already clears up one thing. I was mistaken, I thought you were in Japan.

JNBC:

Well the Japanese trial was much later, when we were celebrating one of the anniversaries.

CGR:

Yes, yes, about '66, I think you said.

JNBC:

It was well after I left the army. I was a civilian again.

CGR:

So you were witness at which trial? Was this Dr. Saito? Or more than one trial perhaps?

JNBC:

One trial I think. There was, Tokunaga was up, and Saito was up, and so on. All I did was tell them what happened from my point of view.

I got over there somewhat under protest, because I'd gone once and had trouble getting home. So actually made a deal with

the Adjutant General, whom I greatly admired, that I wanted a diplomatic passport. All soldiers in uniforms didn't need a transport, but I wanted a diplomatic passport. And I wanted a pay book on British paymasters for any money I needed. Well, I got it.

I went to Hong Kong and sure enough it was the British who wanted me there. Once the trial was over they really didn't care very much about how I got home. They'd send me home via Australia. I thought all this is kind of silly. So they flew me on a flying boat along with three or four other people, a flying boat back through Britain. We flew in the daytime, slept down in very comfortable motels at night, first class passage with a couple of stewards waiting on us hand and foot. I got home to England, and took my pay book in to somebody because I was running short of money, and said I want some money to get home. He said, "My God how did you get this?" "Well," I said, "Canadian Army gave it to me." He said, "Do you realize you could buy the Bank of England with this pay book." [laughter] So I took the few pounds I needed to get home and was happy. But that caused him consternation?.

CGR:

I'm sure yes.

How long did the trip take, this flying by day and....

JNBC:

I think it was about four days.

CGR:

It must have been an interesting trip.

JNBC:

Oh lovely. We flew low and the staff would be pointing out what was passing beneath us, you know. It was very lovely.

CGR:

Do you remember where you stopped in any of the places?

JNBC:

We stopped in a peninsula somewhere north of Singapore one night. We stopped in Aden another night. Now I've forgotten I'm afraid. It was a very comfortable experience.

CGR:

It doesn't matter. I was just curious.

When you were in Hong Kong for the trial, did you have anything to do then with Oscar Orr, or Puddicombe, or any of the legal....?

JNBC:

Puddicombe was the guy who took me over.

CGR:

He was the prosecutor, was he not?

JNBC:

Yes, yes. Orr I had dealt with here in Ottawa. I don't think he was in Hong Kong physically.

CGR:

No, I think he was physically in Japan. That's my recollection, yes.

JNBC:

Oh, may have been, yes. Puddicombe was the man who I dealt with.

CGR:

And how, in your opinion, how did he handle the case? I mean did he do a good job?

JNBC:

Oh I think so yes.

CGR:

As good as one could have expected?

JNBC:

Yes, I think so. Mind you, I didn't sit through the whole sitting. I was there as a witness, when I was through I came home.

CGR:

But I'm sure you followed the trial with interest.

JNBC:

Oh yes, I was very glad to see that they all got some sort of punishment.

CGR:

Although it was substantially shortened, as I recall in the event, as I guess it was with most of the....

JNBC:

So easy to give a judgment based on hate. It doesn't work very well. It has to be modified.

CGR:

When I was working in Australia last year on war crimes material and I came across a very interesting file of correspondence within the Australian War Crimes Legal Branch, what ever they call it, I've forgotten now, but there were people who were pressing very hard for shortening sentences, and their sole motivation was to save Australia money. Nothing about

justice, they wanted to get these people out of there so they could stop feeding them and housing them and guarding them.

[laughter] This was about '49 or so. By then that's all they were concerned with.

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