

WALLACE VIVIAN CAKE

Experiences as a Prisoner-of-War in Asia, 1942-1945

Interviewed by
Charles G. Roland, M.D.
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Oral History Archives
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Wallace Vivian Cake, St. John's Newfoundland, 12 February 1985

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Charles Gordon Roland, M.D.:

Mr. Cake, thank you for coming down. Would you mind beginning by just telling me a bit about your early years here on the island.

Wallace Vivian Cake:

Well, I was born in Lamaline and I gave you the dates of course. I went to school at Lamaline and I left there at the age of 16 and came to St. John's. I went to work at a department store, Stear's Limited, and I worked there until I went overseas. And that was in -- there do you want the...?

C.G.R.:

Well, just tell me a bit about your training. I don't need a great deal of detail but just a bit about where you were and so on.

W.V.C.:

Well, we landed in Liverpool and we went over on the SS Newfoundland, that was a passenger ship. We landed in Liverpool and from Liverpool we went to Port Arthur, Skagness. I guess you've heard of that. That's where we did our training, in Skagness. We were asked what we wanted to be in the navy, what type of service. And there was a petty officer there, Broome, Chief Petty Officer, he was about 60 years old. And he seemed to want all of us to go in for seamen. Why? I don't know why. However, he gave us a little talk on "that was the best type of

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We did our training there in Skagness. A couple of days after we got there, of course, the camp was raided and one of our boys was killed. His name was Penny, from Lamarchant road. Quite a few others were wounded in this particular raid. We left there and went to Davenport.

C.G.R.:

About how long were you in training there, just roughly?

W.V.C.:

Oh, we spent about six to eight weeks and then we went to Davenport. From there, of course, then we did all our main training there in Davenport. And then came the day when we were sent over after the American destroyers. So that was in August or September, I believe...

C.G.R.:

Of '41.

W.V.C.:

In 1940.

C.G.R.:

Was it? Really.

W.V.C.:

Oh yes, oh yes, yes. It was about three months after we got over there. We came to Halifax. I'm trying to think of the ship we came over on -- yeah, the Louis Pasteur, a French liner. And we joined one of the ships there. I joined the Newmarket.

We were fortunate one day to have a little collision in the dock yard so that we had to go on dock and so that made our stay a little longer. However we all applied for leave to get home,

St. John's, but they wouldn't give it to us. But this little accident occurred, something to do with the engine room, we were revving up one day to go out and do trials, and we were facing in towards the -- the dock was an L shape, and we were tied up to another destroyer. We took off and the engines wouldn't stop. So we brought the other destroyer with us and we ran the whole length of the [pier], it was quite a way in there, and we hit the dock head on. And she went right over there. Took a bite out of the dock.

So the Master-of-Arms came to me (I was Bosun's mate, actually, on this) and he came to me, and he said, "You're in luck Cake, you can tell your boys (there was about 28 of us, I believe, Newfoundlanders) he said, "We're going to St. John's and dock." So I told all the boys and they were happy. About an hour later he called me in again and he said, "I'm sorry I've made a mistake, we're going to St. John" [laughter]. So I went up and told the boys again: they were going to throw me overboard but I got off of it [laughter].

However, I took sick then and I joined...I was put ashore.

C.G.R.:

What was wrong.

W.V.C.:

I had a quinsy throat. I was put in the hospital, and the ship left without me after she was repaired. So I was sent home on leave -- sick leave. I was sick too, I spent 2 weeks, I think, in the hospital. I spent some time in the barracks there too after I got out of the hospital in (oh, my, I shouldn't forget the name), the naval hospital in Halifax.

C.G.R.:

Oh, yes, I should name the name too and I can't think of it. Anyway, I know where you mean.

W.V.C.:

Then I was sent home to St. John's on leave. So I had to report to the headquarters in the Newfoundland hotel, and the officer there (I forgot who it was right just now) he said, "Well, we're having another ship called in here, another American destroyer, you can on aboard that one." So, he said, "In the meantime you can go home and enjoy yourself and report next week at the same time." So I went home. Actually, I got married while I was home. So the next week I'm in town, I went down and reported again and he said, "Well, no, the ship hasn't arrive yet, but" he said, "report the same time next week." Anyhow, to make a long story short, this went on for about three weeks.

C.G.R.:

You weren't complaining.

W.V.C.:

I wasn't saying a word [laughter]. And after three weeks I reported and he said, "Right," he said, "your ship is in." In the meantime, that morning before I went down I said to the wife, "I won't be long, be about an hour and be back again." So when I went down "Right, this is it." So I went aboard. That was in March, I believe, March of '42 [1941, actually]. We went across all on our own, just one destroyer.

Then I went to Davenport barracks. I stayed there for another three months, I think it was. I was on the firefighters.

That was on one of these -- they had these trailer pumps, that if there was a big fire in town, you went out, you pulled this trailer, sort of a pump. Pop in the truck and drove out and then set up your gear and got cracking on the fire.

After, I think, two months at that -- we had several big fires at that particular time -- I got a draft this day, you get your draft card. And it was marked in red ink across the book, POW. So I said to one of the British chaps there, "What the heck is this, I wonder, what ship is this." The initials, the ship's initials. And he said, "This is not a ship's initials" he said, "that's Prisoner-of-War." Little did he know...[laughter].

C.G.R.:

Right.

W.V.C.:

It was the Prince of Wales. So we went aboard the Prince of Wales. We were in Scapa Flow, based in Scapa Flow. She hadn't actually finished, there were, I think there were civilians still on her, because she was just being commissioned, sort of. And we went to Scapa Flow and based there. Actually, I should of said before that she was in this battle with the Bismarck. One of the shells passed through the bridge and the bridge was practically wiped out except the captain, the IBO, Lieutenant Commander Ferguson, and a few more, and we replaced these people. I wasn't on her during the Bismarck. We replaced these chaps that were killed.

C.G.R.:

The Hood was sunk, wasn't it at the same time?

W.V.C.:

That's right, that's right. And so we replaced these people. Then, of course, the episode to do with Churchill, Prime Minister [Winston S.] Churchill -- we came over and met President [Franklin D.] Roosevelt, as you know, in Placentia Bay. The signing of the Atlantic Charter -- actually, the Atlantic Charter was never signed, it was a verbal agreement [laughter]. You already know that, I guess.

After we got back to England then we were sent out to the Mediterranean. We took a convoy through to Malta; they were short of ammunition and food on Malta. We took a convoy through to Malta and we had a pretty hot time over there with the German and Italian bombers. I think we shot down five, so they tell us. We saw a few....I was always on the bridge, every ship I was on. And we came back from there and then we were up at Scapa Flow for another -- not too long. Then we were sent back again out to the Pacific. So we went out to Singapore and we were there a few days when it started.

C.G.R.:

So that was late '41.

W.V.C.:

That was in December. We left from Cape Town, I think -- I'm almost positive now -- on my birthday, November the 18th. From Cape Town we went to Ceylon, went ashore in Ceylon, Colombo, Sri Lanka now. And we arrived in Singapore, I guess (I have the dates but I don't know right off) probably the middle of December. I think it was around the middle of December.

C.G.R.:

Had the war started?

W.V.C.:

No. No, no, no.

C.G.R.:

I think that was the 7th, wasn't it, that the war started, or the 8th?

W.V.C.:

The 7th of December. Well, it was the 7th one place and the 8th in another. 7th in Pearl Harbor, was it? Yeah, the war hadn't started. They bombed us on the night of, I guess it had to be the 8th, the morning of -the 8th. They bombed the airfield and we left the next day. There was supposed to be landings up on the border of Siam or whatever, or Thailand. We were sent up, of course, to stop the landing. There were supposed to be landings in, I think it was Khota Buru, I think that's the name. However, we went there, there was no landings there and I guess the captain figured, Captain Leach, he figured we better come back. We were spotted in the afternoon by the Japanese planes, and the next day they caught us half-ways back to Singapore. Of course, you know we were sunk.

C.G.R.:

Yes.

W.V.C.:

The Repulse was with us, she was sunk. I was brought back to Singapore, picked up by the destroyer express, brought back to Singapore, the express picked us up out of the water, the destroyer, she was one of the destroyers with us. Brought us back to Singapore.

I was put on guard in the dockyard. I was in the -- where they generated all the electricity, the powerhouse, I presume you called it. And from there the Japanese landed on the Island. I went to a hospital for awhile, I had dengue fever. After I came out of the hospital, it was about three days before they landed. They came across the Straits of Johore. I was at the Oranjie Hotel. There was two Canadian merchant seamen there, and there was one other rating, I think he was a Royal navy rating. There was only about four of us there anyhow. It had been evacuated because the Japs had already surrounded Singapore and they were lobbing in the mortars. They had sandbags up to the windows, and we were running around the floors. There was nobody else in the hotel, anyhow.

But there was a little incident there, this Canadian seaman (he'd been a seaman all his life, in the Merchant navy), and him and his buddy said, "there's nobody here, the hotel's evacuated, we've got it all to ourselves, so there must be a drop of booze around somewhere." So this old chap (he's a big tall man -- possibly he's an old man to me - 56 or something), and he said, "Yeah, I'll bet there is and I'm going to get it." So he took off and he came back and he had a big jar in his arms. I'll never forget it, there was wax over the top of it. He said, "Here's the liquor." And his friend said, "Are you sure?" He said, "I haven't been a merchant seaman 30 years not to know liquor when I see it." He got his knife out and he opens it up and takes this wax off the top of it. And he said, "Now, you have one first", he says to his buddy. He took it -- slurp!

[laughter] It was lime juice [laughter]! Oh boy!

Lieutenant Shard came in, he was Royal Navy, and he said, "Right, we want you to man one of the ships down at the docks, go on board one of the boats." And they took us down to these docks. There was a problem to get there because the Japs were in control then, they were just lobbing in these mortars and everything else. Anyhow, to make a long story short, I went up over the Viney Brooks (this was the ship) and there was a lot of nurses, 28 nurses, I believe on board there.

We took off from Singapore. We got out through the harbor, and we had to anchor that night just off the north of the harbor, we were in the midst of a mine field. So daylight the next morning Singapore was up in smoke. That must have been on the, or the day before it surrendered, I guess [14 or 15 February 1942]. And we stayed the next night, we stayed at an island. We anchored just off a small island and at daylight the next morning we took off again.

Then in the Banka Straits we were attacked by six Japanese aircrafts and they sunk us again. There was a couple of lifeboats and there was a lot of women and children aboard; we put the women in the boats, and we had some rafts. Anyhow, we drifted and swam ashore to this island. And those nurses that I said, I think they went ashore in a life boat. We put them in a life boat. And there was other ships being sunk; there was other people who had already landed there on the island that day, or just before us.

We were all congregated on this sand beach and the jungle was right there with all the palm trees or whatever. The

observation plane came out, and the next thing we knew the Japanese patrol. Well, they lined up the nurses and they bayoneted and raped and shot them -- 28 nurses.

C.G.R.:

Did they, right there?

W.V.C.:

Oh yes, yes. I was asked after the war if I was willing to go to Japan and be interviewed, you know, and give evidence and so on. I signed a paper that I would, but actually I wasn't called, I didn't have to.

C.G.R.:

Were these English nurses or...?

W.V.C.:

Yeah, Australian, mostly Australian and New Zealand, I think.

C.G.R.:

And they did this right in front of you?

W.V.C.:

Yeah. Well, I got away actually, some of us made a dash. They lined us up, actually blindfolded us, and there was guys going all ways and I got through, and another 10 of us got through. They had a machine gun set up and they also had rifles there with four or five soldiers....About 10 of us got through anyhow. We hid away for 5 days and 5 nights. But a friend of mine, his name was Lloyd, he was from South Africa, he was lined up, but he was an excellent swimmer, and he went the other way, he went out in the ocean, he swam out; he had a bullet through

his shoulder (up here) and he had another one right on top of his head there. He had a black, not a black, a white patch ever after, there on his head. But it must have been just skinned, you know. We hid away for about 5 days and 5 nights. We had no food.

C.G.R.:

Did they kill the others? I mean, aside from the women, they killed everybody else?

W.V.C.:

Oh yeah, they shot whatever they could, whatever didn't escape in the jungle, in the jungle. But after about five or six days we came out on the road -- we were starving to death, nothing to eat, nothing to drink -- and we came out and sat down on the side of the road and here comes a lorry, it has a Japanese flag on it. It pulled up, three soldiers in it, and they jumped out. We never even stood up. What are you going to do? You didn't have anything to defend yourself or...so they just threw us up in the back of the lorry and took us back to camp.

We stayed for about a month, a month and a half. And then they said, "Right, we're going to take you to a better camp." And they took us to a better camp all right! [laughter] They brought us over to Palembang.

C.G.R.:

In Sumatra?

W.V.C.:

In Sumatra, yes. They put us in a school there, Chung Wa, Chung Wa School, for about two or three months. By this time there was a lot of people with dysentery, and malaria -- you name

it, and they had it. We had a doctor, Dr. Reid, he was the English doctor, and we had an Irish doctor (I can't think of his name right off), but they had nothing to give to the sick anyhow.

So they brought us to Palembang, and then we used to work on ships. They give us quite a bit to eat on the first of it. So we were unloading ships that had rice, cargos of rice, 220 pounds in a sack. Four guys, one on each corner, they would lift it up and you run under it. Of course, the first time when they got it on my shoulder [laughter], [I collapsed and] had a sack right on top of me. You get a couple of kicks in the ribs and you get up and try it again. After awhile you do it.

C.G.R.:

You're not a very big man either.

W.V.C.:

No. Although, now, I was in pretty good shape in the navy. But, then as, you know, they cut down on the rations and after awhile, of course, you couldn't lift a kilo let alone....

C.G.R.:

How large was the camp, about?

W.V.C.:

Well, there was about, I'd say there was 2000 in it. A very small camp.

C.G.R.:

But all military.

W.V.C.:

Oh yes.

C.G.R.:

Yes, it wasn't a civilian camp?

W.V.C.:

No, no, no. There was some civilians in the other one on Montuk, but they were separated after, you know, after awhile. But this was strictly military. And we had to work every day, of course. This went on for 3 1/2 years. So that's about it.

C.G.R.:

Tell me a little bit more; can you describe an ordinary day in the camp? When did you get up and what did you get to eat for breakfast, if anything? Can you give me a typical day?

W.V.C.:

Yeah, well, a typical day would be, you'd get about 7 o'clock in the morning. And you'd have a bowl of rice, strictly rice. You'd fall in and then they'd march you to a marshalling yard. Probably two or three hundred, and there you'd have the different Japanese companies from different parts of the island: this guy here he'd want 30 men, and this guy would want 20 men and this guy would want 50 men, and they'd pick you up there and then you'd march off. Certain parties, you found out about them or you wanted to get in this...you'd jockey to get in a particular party.

I remember one day, they wanted a lot of masons, because they were going to build a brick wall around a brewery or something. They wanted 15 men. I stepped forward with another 20 or so, so they picked 15 of us. We had to build this brick wall. So we built it, and when we got it about this high [laughter] -- I never saw a brick wall like it!

C.G.R.:

A bit twisting and turning [laughter].

W.V.C.:

Yeah. This guy took a maul or something and beat it down, and then he beat the hell of us, and it was the end of the masons. But that would be your typical day. Then you'd go around and you'd work on the boats, you'd unload rice. When you had a, it could be a load of cement, you'd carry from daylight to dark. Each bag got heavier and heaveier, and heavier and heavier as the day went on. Then you'd come back to camp.

If you happened to be working in a godown, a warehouse where there is rice or you were carrying rice in there, we used to steal the -- well, we didn't steal it, we didn't call it stealing, we owned it as much as they did. We'd load up with rice and one particular time we had boots, navy boots, and we'd take them off and I used to be about 6 inches taller than I am now, loaded [with rice] right up my boots. Until one day coming back, one of the boy's boots were getting worn, and this guard in front and one at the back and one either side and every step he took there was a big white trail of rice. And this guy at the back of us said, "Hold it". So he made us all go in on the sidewalk and take off our boots. There was about a sack of rice [laughter]. Anyhow we got a good beating up that day for that. But that would be a typical day.

You'd come back then about 6 or 7 o'clock, you'd get counted off and checked in. Then you'd have a bowl of rice and sometimes you'd get some green vegetables -- I think stuff they got out of the river, named King Kong, or something, they'd give you. And

then at 9 o'clock you had to sort of pipe down and they'd keep going through the huts. You slept on a platform, with about 100 men on this side and about 100 on that side. And they 'd go through the huts periodically at night.

Then the next day it would be the same old....And there was the usual beatings, you know, you'd get [hit if] you didn't bow, or you didn't do this, or you know, they used to give the big beating for it.

C.G.R.:

Were these serious beatings up?

W.V.C.:

Oh yea, very serious.

C.G.R.:

Yes, they weren't just a bit of slapping around.

W.V.C.:

Real ones. Yeah, I'm afraid so. Yes.

C.G.R.:

What about sick call? What if you woke up sick?

W.V.C.:

Yeah, well, you report to Doctor Reid, and you report to him if you were sick. And if he thought you were, you know, he'd give you a chit and you would be taken off the party. They had a, what they called a sick-bay hut, and there was only the sick in there. If you were sick enough, of course, if you had malaria, or something like that, of course, you were put in there. But otherwise, if you had an ulcer, like you had an ulcer on your leg -- we had some, some of the boys had terrible ulcers. Big purpley, black-blue, like volcanoes, shove your fist in them.

And they had some sort of a purple ointment. It's the only thing I ever saw them use, except you'd see the doctor cutting away with a razor blade or something, at the domes around his ulcer. If you had an ulcer or if you had dysentery (I had dysentery, and I already had the dengue fever in Singapore; I didn't catch malaria). Malaria and dengue fever, is that similar?

C.G.R.:

Well, you can get both.

W.V.C.:

Oh, you can, can you? I thought I might have been immune [laughter].

C.G.R.:

No. Lots of men had both of them. You were really lucky you didn't get malaria.

W.V.C.:

I see. Yeah, yeah, I was. Well, I got dysentery. But you go to the doctor and you queue up. He's very reserved, he's a man about 45, I suppose, 50, and he had these glasses, he'd look at you over these glasses, and he'd say, "What about you." So you would say, "Well, I got so an so, and so and so." And the next thing he'd say, "Right, charcoal." And no matter what you had it was charcoal. That's all the doctor had to give you. There was nothing else there to give you. The next guy you want me to say yes, "And what about you." You'd tell him and he'd say, "Right, charcoal." And that was it. That was the treatment.

We had a chap there, he used to sing in a band back in

England, Andy, Andy somebody. I know he used to sing "Begin the Beguine," he sang it very well too. He made up a song, "What about you." And it was darn good. I forget the words now, "what about you in a place such as this" and whatever [laughter]. I think he dedicated it to Dr. Reid.

C.G.R.:

Too bad we don't have the words. It probably was good [laughter].

W.V.C.:

Yeah, yeah. It was, actually; we thought it was all right.

C.G.R. $\frac{1}{2}$

Did they have any quinine, do you know, for people with malaria?

W.V.C.:

No I don't think so. I don't remember seeing a pill. I remember an operation we saw one day.

C.G.R.:

Yea, I was going to ask about operations.

W.V.C.:

Well, I saw an operation one day on the other island, on Banka, in Montok, and -- no, it wasn't, no it wasn't, it was Chung Wa School in Palembang, before we got posted to this camp. Myself and another guy, we were out in this room and we could see in the cracks in the partition. And here was an operation going on and the Japanese doctor was there and Dr. Reid was there and this was an operation -- it was a British soldier -- and it was an operation for appendix. We were watching through the crack in the wall and I remember he was on the table, just an ordinary

table rigged up there, he was on this table, and I remember seeing our doctor go to the...the Japanese doctor was over there doing something, and I remember Dr. Reid, saw him go over and he had gloves, he had gloves on, and he pushed the Japanese doctor aside and he started hauling out things. And the next thing there was a big "crack" behind me, and they caught me. And this was the guard. So it was the last we saw of the operation. But the next day, our friend died. He had peritonitis, or something. I don't know, the next day, or the day after, shortly after that he died, he lost his patient.

C.G.R.:

Did they have an anesthetic?

W.V.C.:

I think so in this particular case.

C.G.R.:

They weren't holding him down or anything like that?

W.V.C.:

No, no, no. I think they had an anesthetic in this particular case, because there was a Japanese doctor there. And I might say, this doctor, he used to come around once in a while with our doctor. He'd look at the patients, and he seemed to be, I don't know how to describe it, he seemed to take pity on these poor chaps, you know, these ulcers, and malaria and the dysentery. He looked sympathetic, put it that way. And he wasn't the rough, gruff, Japanese type, like the officers and the soldiers, he was sort of a mild....

C.G.R.:

So he seemed like a decent type.

W.V.C.:

A decent type, absolutely, absolutely.

C.G.R.:

I'm sure there must have been some.

W.V.C.:

Oh, yes, yes, yes. Oh, guaranteed, absolutely. We even found one of our guards was a half decent, half decent chap, you know. But this doctor in particular he seemed to be a decent type.

C.G.R.:

Was there any concern at all, any interest in sex? Was the absence of sex ever a problem?

W.V.C.:

No, no, there was no interest at all. Well I'm speaking for myself, now, because, you know, you were so hungry and the interest was in food. And you never....it was sudden, you would once in a while think of it, naturally. But there was no interest in it really. Not after the first eight months. No way, you just forgot it, put it out of your mind.

C.G.R.:

Was there any sign of homosexuality that you ever saw?

W.V.C.:

No, never. Well, I wasn't too familiar -- now, I must tell you right off the bat -- I wasn't too familiar with homosexuality. In fact, I didn't know [about it] until I joined the navy. Somebody said to me, you know, he said, "What the hell you talking about?" I swear to this.

I noticed that even the guards, they wouldn't mention sex, you know, they'd talk about, you know, where you came from and all that. But they never, never bring up sex. And in searching, they wouldn't grab you. They'd make you drop your [clothing] (why, you only had, all I had was a rice sack on, cut off here). But no, no way. No sir. I noticed that about the Japs, you know. Oh, no, no. They never discussed it or you'd never see them....no way. And I never saw anything amongst the guys there. I think they were too sick, remember.

C.G.R.:

I assume there were lots of lice and bugs of all kinds.

W.V.C.:

Oh, bugs. Oh my, oh my, and lice. Well, these beds we had, I suppose they were about that wide [two feet]. And they were made out of bamboo strips, you know. Each one was separated, you had your own. You would lift it off the frame. And we used to bring them and we'd bang them on the ground, and then pick them up: there was the whole outline of your bed with bugs! You could smell them, you know oh my, oh my, they were terrible! No way you could get rid of them either. But you take a piece of paper or something and go around, light the paper, go around and burn the bamboo, and try to burn them up. Oh yeah, terrible.

C.G.R.:

No effort by the Japanese to delouse you?

W.V.C.:

None whatsoever, no. They would make sure they wouldn't sit down on your bunk [laughter], on your bed. They would keep

away from that. Yes, they were terrible.

C.G.R.:

How did people seem to cope with this, mentally?

W.V.C.:

Well, different types, of course, acted -- had different reactions. We had chaps that went berserk, of course. They were put in strait jackets. One in particular, Dick, Dick (somebody, I forget his name). I don't know whether he was....he looked very intelligent. He was about 6'2" and he was real athletic, and he had the passion of doing this. The Japs figured he was crazy. He pretended he was crazy. He would get up in front of the guard room and there would be 10 or 12 guards there and the guard commander, and he'd get talking to them, and sit down and talk to them, and he would pretend he was in an aircraft. He would do all this fighter drill and all this. And they used to call him Dickie. They used to give him all kinds of food and eventually they put him in the mental asylum. He was there for four or five months, and he came back to us again and he was strapping. He was getting tons of food, tons of everything. I wondered if he was a British spy or something, an agent [laughter]. I don't know, but he survived, I guarantee you. On the way home, on the ship coming home, he didn't seem to be in too bad a condition, physically and mentally either [laughter].

C.G.R.:

But he never said that this was something that he was doing?

W.V.C.:

No, no, no, no. No, he acted the fool and he got on it

pretty good too. Now, he was amongst the natives, the civilian population, out in this mental institution. I don't know but he might have been an undercover agent for who knows. He might have been contacting the underground there -- the Chinese and the....

C.G.R.:

It's possible, I guess, yes.

W.V.C.:

I've often wondered, because he didn't look dumb, I'll guarantee you. You know, his physical appearance.

C.G.R.:

Was there an underground?

W.V.C.:

Oh yes, I imagine, because we used to get a lot of gen, the RAF called it, a lot of news. You know, what was going on and so on. So I presume there was.

C.G.R.:

How about black market?

W.V.C.:

Oh yes, that went on. Oh, absolutely. Well, you had what we call flymen. Now, they would bribe the guards and they'd get tobacco, bananas, soya sauce, soya bean paste. And they [the Japanese] let us have a canteen, and after, oh, I don't know, the first year or two they started paying us five cents a day. Now, I think the officers got paid, I don't know, they got paid more than that. But they got, it was supposed to come out of their wages after the war or something. But they paid them. But, you

had these flymen, they had it knocked, guaranteed. One in particular, a Dutchman. Gee, he had everything he wanted, everything. He had the guards bribed, he had everything.

C.G.R.:

Is that right?

W.V.C.:

Oh, yeah. They would sell this tobacco, these square [pieces of] tobacco, you know.

C.G.R.:

Did you get any Red Cross parcels?

W.V.C.:

Twice.

C.G.R.:

Twice.

W.V.C.:

Yes, and we got one box we shared amongst four men. We got that twice.

C.G.R.:

It's not much, is it?

W.V.C.:

Sheez! Only twice did they ever give us any. And then we didn't get a box each, we divided it between four.

C.G.R.:

How about mail? Did you get mail?

W.V.C.:

No mail. No, we got the mail when the war was over. They discovered about two godowns, two warehouses packed right to the roof with our mail.

C.G.R.:

Then you didn't get any out? Did you send any mail?

W.V.C.:

We wrote letters, yes, twenty-five words.

C.G.R.:

Did they get home?

W.V.C.:

My wife did -- she got one about two years after I posted it -- a 25-word card.

C.G.R.:

But at least she did hear from you.

W.V.C.:

Yeah.

C.G.R.:

But it was such a long wait.

W.V.C.:

Oh, my goodness, yes.

C.G.R.:

How did she cope with all of this?

W.V.C.:

Oh good, yeah. Excellent. Everybody, they all said that I was dead, gone, that was it. And she said, "No way." I know my sisters, they used to put flowers on the altar in remembrance of me and all this. And she said, "No way. He told me that he would be back and he'll be back." Bad apple always turns up, I presume [laughter].

C.G.R.:

Well, that's nice to know though, isn't it.

W.V.C.:

That's a fact though, absolutely. Yeah, yes siree. Some of my friends came home discharged from the army or the navy, about a year before the war was over. And they'd say "Well, Ruth, he's dead now, you know, and that's it. Let's go out and go to a show or something." And she said, "Ah, ah, no, no." Now they told me this after I got home. Oh yeah, that's for sure. [end of side 1]

C.G.R.

What about escapes? Were there any escapes from the camp? Was there any point in trying to escape?

W.V.C.:

Well, this is going to seem funny: I escaped and broke back in. On Montuk (this first island I was on), we needed food and they weren't organized, they weren't anything, you know. They had us all jammed in this place together, and they had a barbed wire around. And there was a bit of a...no, it wasn't there, I'm getting Montuk mixed up again, it wasn't Montuk, it was Palembang. That's when they put us in this camp up in the jungle. And they cut about, I don't know, 20 or 30 feet around the camp, clear space, and then it was all barbed wire, of course. We had two or three people there that were dying of dysentery, they were dying of this and dying of hunger and fever and everything. There was one chap there, he was an army chap, and he was in an awful state. He was a sergeant major and his name was North, Sergeant Major North, N-o-r-t-h. And he was dying. So four of us teamed up and we said, "Now, we've got to

get out there and get some bananas or some papayas or something, because otherwise we're all going to die." And we drew lots, drew straws -- it was really short, this one [laughter].

C.G.R.:

You won, or lost -- whatever.

W.V.C.:

I won. I won. I won. So we posted our chaps. The guards, they were going around and around, and you'd get out as close as you could and then you'd look at one or the other, the guys that was watching the guards. He'd give you the nod, and you'd whip up the barbed wire and right across this [clear space] -- there was only 30 feet, I suppose; 8 miles, I'd say it was, but it was about 30-40 feet. And I get out this day, and I had a bucket and the bananas were tough, hard, green. I didn't touch the bananas but I got the papayas, and actually, before they are ripe they are like a potato, they are more or less a vegetable; when they are ripe, of course, they are a fruit. So they were vegetables then. I got a bucket full. And I remember thinking that if I met a patrol out here I've had it, you know. So it was just as well to have it one way as the other, anyhow. You were going to kick off. But you come back to the edge of the jungle then, and you watch these guys you had posted, and one of them would give you the signal and you'd hit back in.

We did that for quite awhile and got away with it. None of us got caught. I often thought....

C.G.R.:

It must have been pretty nerve wracking.

W.V.C.:

It was. Well, you didn't actually realize it, you know. Now, I think of it; I'd be even more frightened now thinking of it now than I was then. But this chap, then I used to share this with him. These papayas and whatever.

I remember just before it was over, we knew it was going to be over any day. You would just tell the signs, and he said, "Now, you are going to get home before I do." So he said, "My wife lives in London and I want you take this letter. You go to see her and she'll take you around shopping and if you need any money just ask her for money, she'll give you money, because I know you don't get much." And so on and so forth. And he wrote the....I got the letter at home now, actually. I got it framed. He was instructing her where to meet me and so on. I figured I'd be staying at the Union Jack Club, if I got leave in London. And he said, now, he tells me that he might be staying at the Union Jack Club opposite Waterloo Station. And he'd meet you there near Waterloo Station, but be careful, my love, because ladies of easy virtue are around there too [laughter]. However, I never met her. I didn't go through with it. I took the letter and kept the letter and brought it home. Yeah.

C.G.R.:

Did he get home?

W.V.C.:

Oh yes. Oh, I used to get Christmas cards from him after. I remember one (I've lost it now; I should have kept it), it was a Christmas card, and it was a barbed wire fence with a hand, a large hand behind the barbed wire fence up to the barbed wire.

A lot of it I intentionally put out of my mind, altogether, right from the first day I got out. I said, "right" anything that was coming out I'd say "right" and put it right at the back here. And a lot of it I've forgotten. In fact, I've only dreamt about it twice in 40 years. Maybe once, though I think it was twice, but that's it. I put it all right back there.

C.G.R.:

Well, I hope you don't dream about it tonight.

W.V.C.:

No, I don't think I will, I don't think I will.

C.G.R.:

Did you have any other sickness, or anything that was treated. I know that you had lots of ailments, but anything else that....

W.V.C.:

While I was in there?

C.G.R.:

Yes.

W.V.C.:

Well, I had this ulcer and then of course, as I said, I had the dengue. That was before I got in there. And I had dysentery and I had beriberi.

C.G.R.:

Tell me about the beriberi.

W.V.C.:

Well, of course, your legs -- on the last of it there they were dying 10, 20 a day -- and then your face was puffed up. Your

legs were like balloons. And you were looking in the mirror and you could tell, you know. The doctor he told us right out, he said, "Well, we got to keep up, now, there's only another month or so and this is going to be over." But they were dying so fast. He said, "You've got to keep up now because we can probably go a month or maybe two months more." You could see, just looking in the mirror, because you'd look at another guy that died the day before and he looked just like you did. But your legs were all puffed out.

I remember one chap, his name was Fred Archer. He used to sleep next to me, and I guess I was around, I think I was 82 pounds. I'd say he was about 70 pounds. But he had to work if he wanted any [food] -- now we were working on the gardens then. The vegetables for the Japs. You had to get out and dig up roots or something, or tear something up, and if you didn't go out you got half a ration. You were only getting half rations anyhow, so [then] you were getting a quarter of a ration. This poor begger, I remember we went out this morning, and it was in the camp or just outside the camp, and he was leaning on the shovel most of the time because he didn't have the strength to turn anything over with it. Now, he came in at 12 o'clock for our bit of rice and you'd have an hour. And just as you woofed down this bit of rice, you'd lay down and go to sleep. I remember we lay down this day to sleep and then here comes the guards and they said, "All right, come on Fred." And he wouldn't get up. I looked at him and he was dead. Now, he was out that morning, right, and on his lunch hour he died.

C.G.R.:

Just like that.

W.V.C.:

Yea, that's only one. There was a lot of that.

C.G.R.:

Yes, there was.

Let me just, if I can, let me just go back to this business when the ship was sunk, the last ship, when you came on shore and so on. I know it's a painful bit, but I just wanted to ask you a little bit more about that. Because, what I'm particularly interested in is what people saw, you know, with their own eyes. Because that's the real...that's the important....

W.V.C.:

Yeah, I see what you mean, yeah. As I say, we made a dive for the....well, this chap Lloyd (the South African, the guy that swam out), he saw it. Well, he told us, because he came ashore miles and miles down the coast and got in the jungle and got picked up again. This time they were more organized, and they brought him into the camp.

C.G.R.:

So you ended up with him again.

W.V.C.:

Although he was wounded here [shoulder] and he was wounded in the head. But they brought him in and he told us what he saw. They just raped them and then they bayoneted them, right there on the....

There was a nurse from Australia, when she was bayoneted, she fell in the water, and she drifted out, another good swimmer.

She was captured later and brought back in. Now, I read about her, her name was (funny name) Rothbotham, something like that [actually, Sister Vivien Bullwinkel]. I saw a book somewhere where this nurse returned to Australia and I believe she was sent to Japan to testify. I read it somewhere that she was the only nurse that survived that 28. And she did survive. I saw it somewhere and I read it somewhere. Something about the trials in Tokyo or something like that and her name was mentioned. She was on the Viney Brooke. I threatened to write the Australian legion, but I, you know sort of, postponed it and....

C.G.R.:

Yes, we all put off doing things.

W.V.C.:

That's right. Procrastination, or whatever.

C.G.R.:

If you had to single out one thing what would you say was the worst part of this for you? What was your worst experience, the most difficult thing to put up with?

W.V.C.:

Well, this is going to seem funny now, but when we came back, we came back on the Arnprior. We landed in...

C.G.R.:

From England to Canada?

W.V.C.:

No, no, no. From out east. We landed in Liverpool, and in Liverpool all the boys, they were up on deck -- you know we pulled in by the dock -- and they knew we were arriving there, and here was all their mothers and their wives and everything.

And I was watching, watching them go ashore, and...[an emotional memory].

C.G.R.:

Yes, I can understand that.

W.V.C.:

Yes.

C.G.R.:

That would have been, what, fairly soon after? Did they get you right back?

W.V.C.:

Oh, no. Well, we were in the camp, I suppose, a month or more after the war was over, because our troops couldn't get up there. The river was mined. Actually, Lady Mountbatten flew in and made a speech. The first white woman we'd seen in 3 and half years. She came right in the camp. She landed on the airfield, came in the camp with two Australian officers, and got up on a box and made a speech. And she said, "Don't worry." Now, the guards were still in charge, the whole Japanese army was on the island with their arms, you know, a month after the war was over. But she came in there, got up on a box and made a speech. She said, "Never mind, my husband Louis, he's not too far away. He's in Singapore, over 65 thousand troops." I thought to myself, that's not too much good to us here though. Hey, Jeez, among 35 thousand Japs. Yes siree.

C.G.R.:

Were they airlifting supplies in by then?

W.V.C.:

Oh yes they were dropping. Oh yes, right from the first they started dropping these....There was one bad day there when two aircraft came over and they were dropping these parachutes with the food and clothing and everything on it. I think it was four engines, so it must have been Liberators or B-17s; anyhow, I guess it was Australian crew, Australian crews, and this one dropped the cannisters and one of the planes had the door open and you could see him, you could see him right down low, right over the camp, and we were waving to him like that, and he was waving back and he went out over the camp and as he went out over the camp she went down. There was about, oh, I suppose, 200 feet in the air -- flames. She just crashed like that, right down. Jeez. And this buddy up top seen the black smoke going up and see his buddies circling, circling and circling, and circling. I believe there was 9 people on board that plane. She crashed. She was down to low or something or lost. Right down in the jungle.

C.G.R.:

This all seems much worse then, with the war over.

W.V.C.:

That's right, it was all over. Yeah, that was a bad day.

C.G.R.:

Well, I assume you had a good day when you finally got back to Newfoundland.

W.V.C.:

Oh, yes, yes indeed.

C.G.R.:

Your wife was proven to be right. You did come back.

W.V.C.:

Yes, oh absolutely. Well, we went to Halifax, we went to Halifax and then I came over on the Arnprior. There was a Canadian, well not a destroyer but a

C.G.R.:

Corvette was it?

W.V.C.:

Yes, yes, yes. Came from Halifax to St. John's and when I got there they were all on the jetty there. When I got up to the house all the street was decorated. Across the street and all the neighbors and all the wife's neighbors. And my boss, where I worked at Steers, 15 years before, he sent down cars.

C.G.R.

They did it up properly for you.

W.V.C.:

Oh, absolutely, absolutely, yea. Yes sir it was a happy day.

C.G.R.:

How do you feel about the Japanese now?

W.V.C.:

At times I resent them, but I suppose time, you know, time changes, changes everything. When I compare them to the Germans, how they treated the Jews, then I say they were more humane. Although they did commit atrocities in a lot of camps, you know, but not to the extent of the Germans. So I suppose you mellow, after awhile and say well.....

C.G.R.:

Well, it's been 40 years. It's been a long time.

W.V.C.:

That's right, that's right. You can't keep grudges that long.

C.G.R.:

Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about? Anything that's come to mind as we've been talking along here?

W.V.C.:

No, I don't think so, not that I can recall. As I said, you know, the first day, I put it right back there. But I'm sure there are incidents that would be worth telling, but you sort of forget them. You have your funny incidents and you have your horrible ones. I like to think of the funnier ones.