

The following details of

LIFE AS A PRISONER OF WAR IN THAILAND

have been collected by Mrs. P. M. Robinson, wife of Major Robinson, 1/5th Sherwood Foresters, now in No. 4 Camp, from two men recently returned from this Camp.

Pte. — Sherwood Foresters and Gunner —, R.A. left Thailand at the end of August. They were being transferred with a number of labour units to work in Japan as the work of road-making on which they had been engaged in Thailand had been completed. On arrival in Singapore they found the island had been stripped of its food and all articles of value and comfort by the Japanese troops. Nothing seemed to have been left unspoiled.

They sailed from Singapore on September 6th and on September 12th at 4 a.m. were torpedoed by U.S. submarines. Although unable to swim Pte — was in the water until 6 p.m. September 15th. Some were picked up only on the fifth day. After torpedoing, the Japanese crew and guards took to the life-boats. The British were able to improvise a certain number of rafts by lashing together some of the hatches and most had life belts of a sort, although many of these proved ineffective. No food or water was available until they were rescued and many were unable to survive the terrible ordeal. They were landed at Saipan and taken to hospital and on Oct. 1st sailed for the States by way of the Marshall Islands and Hawaii, reaching San Francisco on October 23rd. They crossed America to New York arriving home on November 15th. Their welcome in America and the wonderful help and hospitality they received impressed them greatly.

Pte. — and Gnr. — both looked in excellent health. They appeared to be in excellent spirits and did not seem to be suffering from any mental strain or reaction. They both said they had regained a certain amount of weight on the journey home but neither had lost an undue amount while Prisoners of War. Their relations said they seemed only slightly thinner and in no other way altered. Both said that they already felt quite used to their freedom but were not yet quite used to British food and certainly not to the amazingly luxurious dishes they had been treated to in the States.

Three months after the fall of Singapore the troops were moved to Thailand. No. 4 Camp really consists of four different parts and was made up of several thousands of men. The groups were moved about frequently according to the work they were required to do. At first the Japanese put great pressure on both men and officers to make roads through the jungle. This was when most of the "savage" treatment

referred to in the press was inflicted. As the work got under way the officers ceased work much to the relief of the other ranks who did not like to see them under the discipline of the Japanese guards. Some stayed in the jungle to look after the men, including a number of R.A.M.C. Officers, others were moved to the rest camps. Conditions began to be much improved. No 4 Camp was established around the Bangkok area and men were sent there for hospital treatment and to rest and recuperate. The Camp was moved several times as work on the roads progressed. When the men left Thailand No. 4 Camp was near to Bangpong and conditions were very satisfactory, and the following details refer to life in this camp. Gardens were dug and vegetables were beginning to grow and a certain number of cattle were being kept.

Punishment was meted out to workers for three main offences, not working hard enough (often through effects of malaria) or for talking or smoking while working, and took the form of beating with stout bamboo rods. As the pressure of work decreased so did the punishment and so long as a man did his best he was left unmolested. Naturally, some men resented the discipline and by showing their independence or by insulting the guards, asked for trouble, but most had the good sense to adapt themselves to circumstance and comforted themselves by only inwardly despising their captors. Owing to the size of the Camp and the way it was divided up, it is not easy for the escaped men to give details of all the members of the Camp. In effect the men only knew intimately those who were in their individual labour group, although they know many others by sight if shown a photograph but cannot remember them by name.

SITUATION.—Nearest town was Bangpong. Camp situated on a river which was the only source of water available for drinking and washing. All drinking supplies had to be boiled and although bathing was allowed at some seasons during the cholera season, even washing water had to be boiled, and cooking utensils had to be boiled, also knives, forks, etc.

CLIMATE.—Very hot indeed. Rain at certain seasons when flooding occurred. Nights were sometimes cold, but always hot in daytime.

HEALTH.—Malaria very general, chiefly the type known as B2, which is least serious, but recurs every three or four weeks. Most men went down regularly with attacks. For a short while at the beginning, quinine was not available in sufficient quantity and the situation was serious and a number of patients died. Lately plentiful supplies were available and could be bought and the situation was improving. Dysentery was also common and some cholera, although no serious epidemics swept through the Camp. All men were strongly tanned, and except when down with malaria, looked quite fit. Nearly all had more or less accustomed themselves to the climate and did not feel undue discomfort. Hospital arrangements were admirably run by the R.A.M.C. and endless trouble was taken to ensure patients the maximum attention and comfort. The attitude of the doctors who went into the jungle with the working parties was much admired. Many of these did not hesitate to insist on sending sick men down to the rest camps despite the Japanese guards who tried to prevent them. By their determination they succeeded in their decision, thereby considerably easing the men's plight.

CAMP DISCIPLINE.—Col. Lilly of the 1/5th Sherwood Foresters was in charge of all troops in No. 4 Camp. Any complaints of treatment were made to him and he referred them to the Japanese Commandant. Pte. and Gnr. could not speak too highly of all that Col. Lilly did for the welfare of the men. At first the Japanese tried to prevent the men from singing at work. The Commandant asked Col. Lilly how it was that men who were prisoners and who were certain to be defeated could possibly wish to sing. Col. Lilly told him that no one would be able to make them believe this and nothing could stop them from singing. After this, all attempts to prevent them were given up and the men say they found singing a great help in keeping up their spirits.

CAMP ADMINISTRATION.—This was carried out entirely by the Officers. They were left to organise camp life as they thought best. As the men were working out of the Camp the Officers were mainly responsible for maintaining the Camp itself, keeping it clean, digging latrines etc. Officers of each battalion lived in their own quarters. The Foresters, for example, built themselves a very nice hut where they all slept together. Officers were responsible for making the gardens and for running the canteen which was in Major Barnett's charge. The men were only paid a miserable wage. Ten days' pay would buy ten cigarettes. The Officers, therefore, put aside almost the whole of their pay to buy supplementary food for the whole Camp and drugs for the hospital. Had it not been for this money, the men could not have survived. Parties of Officers were allowed to go down to Bangpong on shopping expeditions, for supplies of food, drugs and tobacco. No intoxicating liquors could be had, although some men tried to brew their own from rice, without any very successful results. Occasionally, supplies could be got by bribing the guards, but not as a general rule or in any quantity.

FOOD.—Staple diet was rice. Each man got one pint per meal. Although at first unpalatable, everyone soon became used to this food. Although sufficient in camp when supplemented, this amount was barely sufficient while the men were working. They, therefore, collected various edible roots and leaves from the jungle which they named "water cress," "spinach," etc. In Camp vegetables could be got and small supplies of dried salt fish. Bananas, mangoes and yams were in abundance, and other fruits. The cooks became adept at making various dishes out of the few available ingredients. For example, a form of pastry became very popular made from crushed rice and yam flour. This allowance of food could not be called really inadequate, because the general state of health was satisfactory. To say the least, it was monotonous but bearable. Tobacco could be bought, chiefly the black native variety which the men rolled in whatever bits of paper they could scrounge.

RECREATION.—All books which were salvaged from Singapore were collected by the Officers and made into a library. Books could be borrowed for a small sum. This was to prevent the destruction of the books, which could not be replaced. Lectures were given by anyone who had anything of interest to tell. A large proportion of the men were learning Japanese. A certain Major Wild, who acted as an interpreter, was in charge of this. He had lived for many years in the Far East. Concerts were often held. Cards were by far the most popular game. Bridge and whist tournaments were often held. Football was played a good deal despite the heat. They had even taught the Japanese, who soon became too adept at the game and could beat the British. The

talk of home was very general and men tended to find those who came from their own part of the country, reminisce and exchange letters and photographs. On the whole, men were too busy and the days passed too quickly for them to feel homesick.

CLOTHING.—This presented a problem as clothing was not replaced, only material suitable for pants or loin cloths. For a year or more, the men were obliged to work without any boots, but their feet soon became hardened and they suffered little discomfort. The heat was so great that little clothing was desired. The Officers were necessarily more able to look after their clothes, but nearly all wore either a pair of pants or a loin cloth. Some of the Officers had blankets, but few of the men. They were provided with sacks which they tied together and they slept on beds made from split bamboo poles, to which they very soon became accustomed.

MAIL.—A considerable amount of mail had been received in the Camp. More by Officers than men. This was due to the Japanese who could not be bothered to censor all the mail that arrived, and they make much more of a distinction between Officers and other ranks than we do. Some Officers had received forty or more letters and cards. Most men had been allowed to write five cards home, although most relatives in this country have not received more than three, if as many. Pte. — and Gnr. — thought that most of the cards had taken about a year to come to this country.

DEATHS.—These occurred from time to time when epidemics broke out. Names of casualties have been carefully checked by the War Office from accounts witnessed by the liberated prisoners. At first all deaths were followed by a military funeral, for which a Union Jack was used. Eventually this was torn up by the Japanese, and no more funerals with military honours were allowed.

MORALE.—At all times this was excellent. No man doubted that he would be freed eventually and a general feeling was prevalent that liberation would come in 1945. In any case, all men felt able to carry on until the day came. The Japanese tried every kind of propaganda concerning the defeat of the Allies, but no one believed them. While still in Singapore two radio sets were able to be hidden and news was heard, but after reaching Thailand this was impossible. However, men were able to get news from civilians whom they were able to contact while working. This was a dangerous procedure and punishable if discovered by the guards. A number of men had lived out in the Far East for years and were able to understand the dialect well enough. News of the invasion of France was received only a few days after D day. Col. Lilly arranged for a special service of thanksgiving to be held by the Padre, which greatly incensed the Camp Commandant. Services at all times were held and well attended.