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# PRISONER of the JAPS

By Sgt. Bill Reed

YANK Staff Correspondent

**An Aussi private, rescued with his fellow prisoners of war by a U.S. sub, tells how life was in the hell of Jap jungle prison camps where Allied GIs had to help build a railroad for the Emperor**



**A** BASE IN THE MARIANAS—"I often sit and wonder what I'm doing here," reflected Pvt. James L. Boulton of Melbourne, Australia. "By the law of averages I should have been dead two years ago, and yet here I am—smoking Yank cigarettes, eating Yank food with Yank nurses taking care of me. When I was a PW in the jungles of Burma I never thought I'd survive the beatings and fevers and ulcers. But a free man with his back to the wall can stand a lot."

The man's pale blue eyes moistened a bit as he pushed his hat farther back on a comically bald head. His face suggested little of the hardships he had experienced. It was lined a bit too much for a 34-year-old face, perhaps, but it did not have the gaunt, haggard look so many novelists attribute to "one who has suffered." And you'd never know by looking at Pvt. Boulton's slight, wiry body that he had lived through two-and-a-half-years of punishment in Nipponese jungle prison camps.

Jim Boulton was born in South Australia and lived on his father's "Sunny Creek" farm until he was nearly 15 years old. Then he struck out for himself and got a job driving a dray horse for which he received the "same wages as a man." Later he apprenticed himself to a carpenter and then became co-owner of a florist shop in Victoria Market in Melbourne. Following this was a series of jobs as road builder, gold miner, gardener, and foreman of a water-line gang.

On July 2, 1940, he finished his last water-line job in the town of Leongatta, paid off his men and went to nearby Melbourne to join the Army.

Boulton went through rookie training and joined the 8th Infantry. When his battalion was

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broken up to form the 29th Infantry, he joined the 2/2 Motor Transport Company. And when it was divided—one half to go to the Middle East, one half to go to Malaya—Boulton went with the latter group to the defense of Singapore in 1942.

Just before the fall of Singapore, Boulton suffered a concussion when seven or eight bombs were dropped in the middle of the company's motor pool. He was taken to a field hospital and later removed to the Cathay Theater, one of the largest buildings in the city. When the Japs took Singapore, Boulton and other prisoners able to walk were marched 16 miles to the former British Chengi Barracks where they were quartered for the first three months of their captivity.

Here the prisoners were left pretty much to themselves. The Japs allowed the Aussie officers and non-coms to organize and direct the work of their men, which consisted of building roads and policing up the city. The prisoners were organized into large working forces of 3,000 men and, at the end of three months, were removed from Singapore and sent to other parts of the Japanese Empire. Some went to Borneo and Thailand to build railroads; others to Saigon in French Indo-China; some were sent to Java, and still others to Japan.

Boulton's organization (the A Force) was divided into three groups of 1,000 each and sent to Victoria Point, Mergui and Tavoy, cities on the southwestern coast of Burma. Boulton was among those who sailed for Victoria Point.

Life aboard the prison ship was miserable. The daily prison ration of three pannikins (messkits) of rice was reduced to one. Drinking and washing water was scarce and the holds were so crowded that the men had to sleep on top of each other. The ship anchored about 15 miles from Victoria Point (the southernmost tip of Burma) and 1,000 of the men were taken ashore in small barges. They were given a meal at midday and were not fed again for nearly three days. On the morning of the last day they were marched to an airdrome about eight miles from town, and at midnight they were given some rice, which they boiled in petrol drums and gaged down despite its taste of gasoline.

In the houses they pulled down to get material for their barracks, the prisoners found evidence of prewar, anti-British activities. There was a letter written by a man in Rangoon, who alluded to the discontent among the educated natives in Burma and asserted, "It's easy to see there's an inside power working here." Another letter written at Victoria Point mentioned similar discontent in that city, but finished with, "Why should I care after the raw deal the authorities here have given me?"

It was at Victoria Point that the prisoners became aware of the extent of Jap cruelty for the first time. Some of the men from the airdrome were taken to build radio stations. Here they learned that a native, a former employee of a local British radio station, was being tortured by the Japs for military information which he claimed he didn't have. The prisoners brought stories back of how the Japs had hung the native up by his toes, used the water treatment and other tortures which eventually killed him.

While the work at Victoria Point was light, the rice was so full of

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large, inch-long maggots that the prisoners ate in the dark, so they wouldn't have to look at their food. Complaints to the Jap officers were greeted with grunts and dismissal, but by stealing and bartering with the natives and sharing their loot with each other, the prisoners managed to get enough to eat. While their guards, three-star Japanese soldiers who had been relieved from front-line fighting for guard duty, did not treat the PWs well, they treated them decently.

It was the last decent treatment the prisoners had for a long while.

They left Victoria Point for Tavoy on August 7, 1942. Here they joined other prisoners who had been working at an airdrome, and for two months the prisoners labored over a new Jap airbase. The guards carried heavy bamboo sticks, flogging those who were slow to understand or unable to carry out orders, and forced the prisoners to stay at their tasks through the rains and freezing winds that swept across the fields.

By the middle of October, the PWs had completed their job at Tavoy and they were taken to Moulmein at the mouth of the Salween River. Contrary to the attitude of many of the natives in Burma, who were suspected of Fifth Column and anti-British activities, the natives of Moulmein were friendly toward the prisoners.

"We were taken inland about 40 miles," Boulton explained, "to a place called Tambazoi. This was to be the PW headquarters for jungle work gangs. Col. Nagatama, who was supposed to be in charge of building a railroad between Burma and Thailand, told us that we were the ones who would do it. He said that he planned to put the railroad through the heart of the jungle. We would work on the Burma side and another group of PWs would begin in Thailand and work toward us. He told us we were the remnants of a beaten nation and should weep with gratitude that the Imperial Japanese Army had spared our lives. 'But,' he finished, 'your lives are worth nothing if they can't serve us. I intend to build that railroad—if it is over your dead bodies.'"

Boulton's group was marched to the 4 Kilometer Camp and was detailed to do three and one-half kilometers of work on each side of it. The nearest camp forward was the 8 Kilo, which would meet them. Each man was supposed to move a square meter of dirt daily.

"We went from the 4 Kilometer Camp to the 14 Kilo and from there to the 75," Boulton recalled. "The food, the treatment we received from the guards and the work was getting worse all the time. When we got to the 105 Kilo, we thought we'd never leave the place alive."

It was at the 14 Kilo that the first signs of malnutrition appeared. The prisoners' eyes blurred and became bloodshot, their stomachs soured and large sores appeared on their skins. They buried one man at the 14 Kilo—the first of hundreds who were to die later.

But of all the hardships the prisoners suffered, the worst were those imposed by the Korean guards. "The Koreans hated the Japs, but they hated us worse," Boulton explained. "When a Jap officer was around the Koreans never lost an opportunity to humiliate us. They'd beat us with bamboo sticks and rifle butts. They'd talk in their own lingo, and when we misunderstood, they'd belt us over the head with a gun. Sometimes just for the hell of it, they'd line us up on the parade ground and make us count off in Japanese for

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hours. A Korean guard thinks he's king. I've seen some of these little dictators go through our quarters and pull men out to hit the line, when they were so sick with fever they couldn't stand. The Japs were so anxious to get the work done they gave the Koreans a free hand."

The work was done. It was done poorly, tardily, unwillingly; but the first roadbeds were built and the first ties laid. And soon the first shiny rails reached from Tambazoi to the 4 Kilo, and then, stretching harder, touched the 8. Col. Nagatama's railroad was crawling slowly through the jungles of Burma and Thailand.

Col. Nagatama's railroad crawled slowly—at times it seemed as if it had stopped. At the 75 Kilo the quota of dirt per man was doubled, but when the Japanese engineers pegged out each man's share at night, the prisoners would move in the pegs the following morning and reduce the quota. When the Japs increased the working day to 18 hours, the prisoners sabotaged. Pick handles were broken and loads of dirt were upset; men disappeared from their jobs when the guards' backs were turned and came back later with mumbled excuses. The railroad crawled slowly and all the floggings in the world wouldn't make it move faster. And then—at the 105 Kilo—it looked for awhile as if it would go no further.

The 105 was in the heart of the jungle where it was necessary to spend hours clearing the land before dirt could be moved for the roadbed. The wet season, which had set in at the 75, was at its worst here, and each day dozens of men died from cholera, malaria and tropical ulcers.

"The graveyard for our own outfit started with one or two," Boulton observed. "When I left there were 130 graves in the cemetery and there were more to put in it later. It was a common thing for the grave diggers to go to the doctors in the morning and ask how many they expected to die that day and night."

"We could fight against the cholera by keeping the place clean," Boulton continued, "but it was hard to do anything about tropical ulcers. They'd start when some chips from rocks we were cracking flew into our bare feet and legs. The flesh would start to rot, and if you couldn't stop it you'd lose your leg. Our own Aussie and English doctors did everything they could to help us, but they had nothing to work with—neither medicines nor equipment. About the only thing they could

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do with tropical ulcers was to scoop out the dead flesh with a spoon. Many men afflicted with ulcers have watched their legs being slowly scooped away. For awhile we thought there was nothing anyone could do to stop it."

But finally an Aussie doctor and a Dutch chemist found a way to combat the disease and invented the tools and medicine they needed to do it. The 55 Kilo Camp was converted into a PW hospital base, and Col. Coat, an Aussie surgeon, with the aid of a Dutch chemist, was placed in charge. Coat devised an amputating saw and other equipment from some barrel hoops and the chemist, who had lived all his life in the tropics, invented a serum from jungle herbs which partially deadened the nerves. Hundreds of men were saved from death by these amputations.



Imperceptibly, the work at the 105 advanced. Life became a miserable routine. There were the daily quota of dirt and the daily quota of deaths and the daily quota of beatings by the Korean guards. Each day larger gaps appeared in the line, and finally English, Dutch and American PWs were brought to take the place of those who filled the graveyards. But the addition of more men served only to increase the number of deaths, the number of sick, the number of madmen.

In Thailand, the PWs who were working toward the 105 fared no better. The force there, which had been brought directly from Singapore, was totally unprepared for Thailand's tropical climate and jungle diseases. The prisoners began work during the treacherous wet season, and their own officers assert that cholera and other illnesses claimed 90 percent of the men.

But life for the railroad gangs was not entirely without hope. In the beginning their only knowledge of the outside world came from the Japs themselves, who boasted that the Nipponese flag flew over the capitols of Australia and the United States. However, better news came on a home-made radio set. On this they heard of the defeat of the Germans in Africa and of the landings in Italy. The men destroyed the set later, so it wouldn't be discovered by the Japs who were conducting thorough and systematic searches of the prisoners' huts and belongings. In Thailand, three British officers were beaten to death when their radio was discovered hidden in a peanut can.

The 105 was an unhappy camp—but the prisoners tried hard to make it better. Boulton recalls this story of a Yank from Texas: "I was passing through the American PW camp one day, when I recognized this tall Yank, who had been taken from the cruiser *Houston*. He was sitting up to his knees in slush and mud, sick with fever and was the most dejected-looking creature I ever saw. I walked over, slapped him on the shoulder and said, 'Cheer up, Yank. Uncle

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Sam is coming.' He looked sadly up to me and said, 'Christ! Don't tell me they've got him too?'"

On those rare nights when their work was done early, the prisoners gathered on the parade ground for plays and concerts. Some of the members of the 29th Infantry Band had salvaged their instruments. They made up dramas with humorous lines that gently teased the various nationalities of the PWs or laughed bitterly at their captors. The Yanks told the Aussies that they'd never have to worry about the birth rate now that the Americans were in Australia; and the Aussies retaliated by telling how Noah spent a whole night shoveling the dung from his Ark and on the following day discovered America.

Eventually, even such diversions as these were no longer possible. Cholera took its toll of musicians and joke-makers, too, and the men no longer had the heart to laugh. The rice they cooked at night over the bamboo fires was poorer than ever, and they no longer could supplement their diet with food from the natives. The plague had left many brown, fly-covered bodies about the camp, and, finally even the Burmese, who had lived since birth in the jungle, left it to the Japs and Koreans and their unhappy prisoners.

Col. Nagatama's railroad crawled along—and then one day it was finished. The force from Thailand met the one from the 105, the last spike was driven without ceremony and the job was done. Aussie officers claim they can prove that 13,000 men died in the jungles during the construction, and they believe that there are at least 2,000 more dead of whom they have no record.

Almost immediately word came through that the sickest of those in the jungle would be removed to Thailand and then to Japan. The others would stay to cut fuel for the new railroad.

Boulton went to Tamakan in Thailand with the first group of prisoners. After two months there a Jap doctor examined them and selected 3,000 of the fittest to be among the first to start the trip to Japan. Those chosen were issued new clothes and boots and sent to Saigon in French Indo-China.

Saigon was a new experience for the prisoners. Here they saw their first white people in more than a year. For the first time since they had been captured in Singapore they came into contact with others who believed that eventually the Allies would come. The people of French Indo-China had been thrown into an uncomfortable position when their country surrendered to Germany. With their own borders overrun by troops of Germany's ally, Japan, there was little the inhabitants of French Indo-China could do but declare themselves legitimate subjects of the Vichy government.

It was apparent, however, to the PWs that the sympathies of the French in Saigon were with the Allies. When the prisoners were driven through the streets, the civilians never lost an opportunity to make "V for Victory" signs. Sometimes it was done by old men as they stroked their beards; sometimes by young girls who seemed to be adjusting their hats or waving to acquaintances. Even the children made a game of flipping V signs when they saw the prison trucks pass their houses.

While the Japs had been under the threat of Allied air raids, none had struck Saigon before the PWs arrived. Allied reconnaissance planes had approached the city and one Lockheed Lightning had been as far as the 105 Kilo Camp before the prisoners had left. Bangkok, an important city not far away in Thailand, had already suf-

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ferred severe bombings, and they were expected in Saigon nightly.

**T**HEY came three days after the prisoners. The latter had been camped in the middle of a large petrol dump on the wharf, as if the Japs had planned the destruction of the PWs by bombs from their own people. The Nips panicked when the planes came. They cursed and screamed and shouted and shot at everything. But not a plane was hit on the first raid, and, for weeks after, the Japs were busy dispersing their supplies to the rice fields around Saigon.

Prison food wasn't good at Saigon, but the PWs found many ways to augment their meager meals of rice, meat bits and leaf stew. Details of PWs were sent to work in the warehouses on the wharves where dozens of crates of beef and milk were "accidentally" smashed with their contents disappearing a few minutes later. Most of the time the Japs never discovered the "scroungers" but, infrequently, they were caught and beaten.

Saigon was a painless purgatory after the hell of Burma's jungles. There were still the contemptible Koreans and their bamboo beatings. There were still long hours of tedious work and there were still times when the prisoners went hungry. But there was no cholera or malaria, no tropical ulcers. The monotony of their work was broken when the prisoners were taken to jobs outside the city and could catch glimpses of the French in the streets. Now, here was a girl who carried herself like Ruby, and there was a man who chewed his wad like Clancy, the gold-miner from Owens Valley.

The scroungers were more than normally successful, and, occasionally, modest feasts were held in the PW quarters. They had one the night Red Cross parcels were distributed to the Yank soldiers, who, against strict orders from the Nips, shared their bonanzas with the other prisoners. When things got too dull, they short-circuited the lights. Then the Japs had to call a French electrician who spent hours finding the trouble, all the while telling the PWs the latest news of the world.

The French sent musical instruments—violins, mandolins, guitars and a piano. Nightly concerts and plays were held, and one evening the highest Jap officials in the city attended. When song-fests were scheduled on the parade ground, the whole camp turned out to sing "Swanee River," "They'll Be Dropping Thousand Pounders" (to the tune of "Comin' 'Round the Mountain") and "Roll Out the Barrel."

Saigon was a strangely unreal interlude, which ended entirely too soon.

**A**BRUPTLY the purgatory of Saigon was concluded and the prisoners were taken in barges up the Mekong River to Nomping, and from there by rail to Bangkok in Thailand. At Bangkok they began the 12-day rail journey through Thailand and Malaya to Singapore. Times had changed since their last trip through the peninsula. The busy little cities of Ipoh, Kuling and Kuala Lumpur had become ghost towns. The natives, who had formerly worked in the shops and factories and who had been suspected of belonging to a Fifth Column during the early part of the war, came in ragged droves to beg for rice and make clandestine V signs to the prisoners.

While at Singapore awaiting shipment to Japan, the prisoners worked on the wharves. Here they saw two German submarines and a cargo boat which had evidently been damaged and were in for repairs. "We came into contact with a German officer one day," said Boulton, "and he surprised us by saying, 'It's a pleasure to see a white

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man again after being with these yellow bastards so long.' He couldn't believe it when we showed him the food the Japs gave us, and one afternoon he sent down some tinned cheese, meat and sugar. A Korean guard found the stuff that night when we were ready to go home and began beating our men for stealing. The German officer explained the situation to a Jap who paid off the guard with a good bash on the ear. The food that German gave us was the only good tucker we had all the time we were in Singapore."

After the men had been on the island for about a month they were suddenly rushed aboard a ship, which left the following day. About 1,000 Aussies and 300 Englishmen were put on Boulton's ship and 700 English were loaded aboard another, which some of the prisoners, who had worked around her, believed to be the American *President Harding*.

Besides the prison ships, there were tankers, cargo boats, destroyers, corvettes and a cruiser.

"We sailed one night," said Boulton. "The Japs seemed scared from the very first. They had many alerts and blackouts. They seemed to be afraid of Allied planes. They finally said that if we got through the next two days we'd be safe.

"We got through the next two days all right, but about 0200 one morning we heard a terrific explosion. I was in the hold at the time, but some of the boys on deck said that a cruiser—the biggest escort in the convoy—was burning like hell. I felt around for my skivvy and lifebelt. I didn't think I'd get much sleep that night, anyway."

At 0500 the men heard another blast and this one shook the whole ship. An instant later, the craft turned up and seemed to be sinking, tail first, with its nose in the air. Gallons of water poured in on the men jammed in the hold. It seemed that in seconds they would be drowned.

But a moment later the ship righted itself. The men in the hold grabbed their lifebelts and started to scramble out, pushing and stepping on each other in the dark. Another torpedo shook the vessel. It gulped more water and steadied again, while the men in its belly fought harder against the suffocation that gripped their throats.

From the deck came a commanding cry from Scotty Hayward, an Aussie sergeant-major. "Easy does it, laddies. The ship is steadied. We'll all be able to make it!"

"He probably saved most of us from going down with the ship," Boulton remarked. "After this we took our time and helped each other out of the hold, while the men topside began systematically to lower the life rafts."

In other parts of the vessel, the Japs panicked, struggling against each other to get overboard. They had screamed loudly from the moment they saw the wake of the first torpedo. Now their curses lent a frenzied overtone to the mad activity on deck, which contrasted strangely with the quiet behavior of the ship itself as it gently inched a first fathom on its way to the bottom.

Once in the water, the men tied as many rafts together as they could and tried to paddle away from two oil tankers, which burned brightly in the background. Most of the Japs got away in the small boats, but a few were bobbing about in lifebelts. These were rescued by the PWs, who were busy the greater part of the morning picking up survivors. In the afternoon, two Jap destroyers returned and sent small boats out to rescue the remaining Nipponese. But when they came to a raft with both prisoners and Nips, the prisoners were held at the point of machine guns and pistols to prevent them from coming aboard



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as the Japs rescued their own people.

"After they'd taken the Jap survivors away, we fully expected them to machine gun us in the water," Boulton remarked. "I think the only thing that kept them from it was that they were afraid the subs would return. I can honestly say that not a man among us begged for mercy. When they started back for the ship and left us there, we sang 'There'll Always Be an England' at the tops of our voices."

"As nearly as we could figure it, we were in the China Sea some hundreds of miles from Formosa," Boulton went on. "So when evening came, we started paddling toward the sun, hoping we could make the China Coast. We worked at it during most of the first night, but after that we didn't have the strength. We found out later we could never have made it in a thousand years because of the strong tide against us."

Men began to die the second day. The heat and thirst ate quickly at their thin bodies. The rafts were overloaded; there was room for only the weakest to sit on them; others hung on ropes at the sides. Those on the rafts held the heads of the others to keep them out of the water.

A man could stand the burning sun just so long and then he dropped quietly off the raft, hoping the others would not notice his surrender. Or he'd take a quick gulp or two of salt water before the others could stop him, and be gone within the hour. At first the stronger swimmers rescued those who drifted away, but soon there was no strength left for such errands. Then a man's life depended on how long his aching fingers clutched a rope or how long his tired back could resist the coolness of the sea.

On the second night, the little group drifted into floating oil, which covered their bodies and left many totally blind. The third day was a repetition of the second, and on the third night a storm claimed all but those who were tied to the rafts.

**N**ONE of the men can give an accurate account of events on the fourth day. All were in a semi-stupor from which they were only occasionally aroused by a particularly rough wave. Then they would open their eyes and see the white-hot color of the sun through their blindness. For a minute or two they'd try again to wipe this blindness away with the soft kapok which lined their lifebelts. Failing in this, they relaxed on the ropes that bound them precariously to the floats and returned to their stupor. In a half-conscious way they knew the night would finish them. There was no use fighting it.

Late that afternoon the commander of an American submarine, returning from a successful chase after the last two destroyers in the Singapore-to-Tokyo convoy, noticed the men on the rafts. He mused to himself that it was strange that the Japs had not stopped to pick up their own men, and studied the survivors a bit more carefully through his periscope. Something unusual about one of them, he said to himself—a Jap with blond, curly hair. Could be a German, he thought, but still—it might be worth investigating. He shouted orders to surface the craft and prepared to go on deck himself. If there were Japs around with blond, curly hair, he wanted to be the first to tell about it!

A week later 150 men, the only living survivors of the 2,000 PWs in the convoy, were in a hospital in the Marianas—smoking Yank cigarettes, eating Yank food with Yank nurses taking care of them. They can't believe it themselves. By the law of averages they should have been dead two years ago. But then—a free man with his back to the wall can stand a lot.