

THE BURMA CAMPAIGN SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

March 2008

Number 12

END OF THE WAR BLUES.

The sword into its sheath
The veteran giving up
As if it was a trial by heaven

Rain is falling
As if tears of
Sorrow of soldiers

I can forget the war
As it happened in the past

But I can never forget
The faces of dear friends

This was the song that the Japanese troops sang when the end of the war was announced, and was sung again, most movingly, in the original Japanese, by Masao at the luncheon celebrating his eighty-eighth birthday and honouring Philip Malins and Phillida Purvis for all that they had done for BCS from the time of its inception. It is indeed a lament, a true Blues Song.



Philip Malins, Phillida Purvis and Masao Hirkubo at his 88th birthday party

It is also an accurate reflection of what Masao and his comrades in arms felt when the Imperial Edict ending all

resistance was relayed to them in Burma. Contrary to what might have been expected at the end of a disastrous campaign in which some 60% of all the Japanese troops who had taken part in it had lost their lives, Masao and his fellow soldiers had no wish to surrender. They wanted, instead, to fight on until the British had finally been driven out of Burma.

It is perhaps ironic that the following half century did indeed, in one way or another and for one reason or another, see the withdrawal of Great Britain from a whole succession of foreign territories, ranging from the very smallest to sub-continental scale. What is certainly amazing is to see what Masao set himself to accomplish since the day when, as a soldier, he sang that song so many years ago.

John White

THAT OTHER BRIDGE.

Editor's Note.

This Article on the blowing of the Sittang Bridge on 23rd February 1942, by one who was there, recalls one of the saddest and most tragic events of the Burma Campaign. With the Japanese almost on the Bridge itself with its access to Rangoon and to Southern Burma, the Divisional Commander Major General Smyth VC had to make an immediate and agonising decision. He was subsequently disciplined by higher command for allegedly making the wrong one, but nonetheless retained the sympathy and warm affection of most of those who served under him, and who believed that he had been unjustly treated.

It is also a reminder that in war, whether in major battles or in minor skirmishes, the tragedy of death by friendly fire, of which we hear so much today in Afghanistan and in Iraq, is a recurrent feature.

The bridge over the River Kwai.....that evocative name.....a bridge built by heroes under appalling conditions, a life for every sleeper. A bridge celebrated in books and films as a monument to human endurance.

Not that many miles away there was another Bridge and another river, the Sittang, not one of the great rivers of Burma, but a formidable obstacle nonetheless to the Japanese invaders. Half a mile wide, fast-flowing, and tidal, it was spanned by a single railway bridge, built by the engineers of the British Raj.

The 17th Indian Division, trained and equipped for the Western Desert, was rushed into Burma. Tied by its motor transport to the single track road, it was easy prey for road blocks and encirclement by an enemy moving swiftly through the jungle. Its problems were compounded by a heavy air strike, the most destructive of any in the Burma war, by our own planes. As a result, the mules carrying the wireless sets bolted into the bush. With no means of communication, and only a day's march away, they planned to withdraw to the bridgehead. The First/Fourth Gurkhas were the first to be ready, reached the bridge safely and passed across. Hard on their heels came the Japanese.

Major-General Smyth VC, had sought permission to withdraw his Division across the Sittang.....it was refused. He sent Brigadier Cowan to see General Wavell personally to emphasise their urgent need..... in vain. Furthermore the Bridge was to be denied the enemy at all cost. Preparations had been made to blow it, but it was now found that there was not enough cable to detonate the charge unless positioned on the Bridge itself, now swept by hostile machine-gun fire.

Shortly before dawn, the Bridge was blown.

The blast was clearly heard by both sides. Exhausted, as they were, this was a devastating blow to the infantry of the Division, who had now reached the East Bank, ready to cross. Equally exhausted and by no means confident, the Japanese were greatly encouraged by this unexpected development. Our men had no boats and no Engineers. The only chance was to brave the sniper fire and swim, although most of them were non-swimmers. The Regimental Officers strove to save what men they could; among them was Lt-Col, (later Brigadier) Cameron, 2/5 Gurkhas. Overnight his hair turned white; this later earned him the code-name "Snow-White".

Eight Battalions of infantry were lost to the Division. Few made it across, with no arms or equipment. It was a crushing blow.

The respite was brief. The Japanese crossed higher upstream and, moving rapidly through the jungle, established a powerful block on the only escape route north. It seemed like the end, but what must have appeared to be a miracle occurred. The morning patrol was astonished to find the road-block deserted, allowing the remnants of the only effective force in Burma to set off on its nine hundred mile trek to India. It seemed that the Japanese had received orders that Rangoon was their top priority, so they circled round under cover of darkness and allowed the Burma Army to escape.

Major-General Smyth, a sick man at the time, accepted full responsibility for the disaster at the Bridge. He was relieved of his command, reduced to Brigadier and dismissed the service.

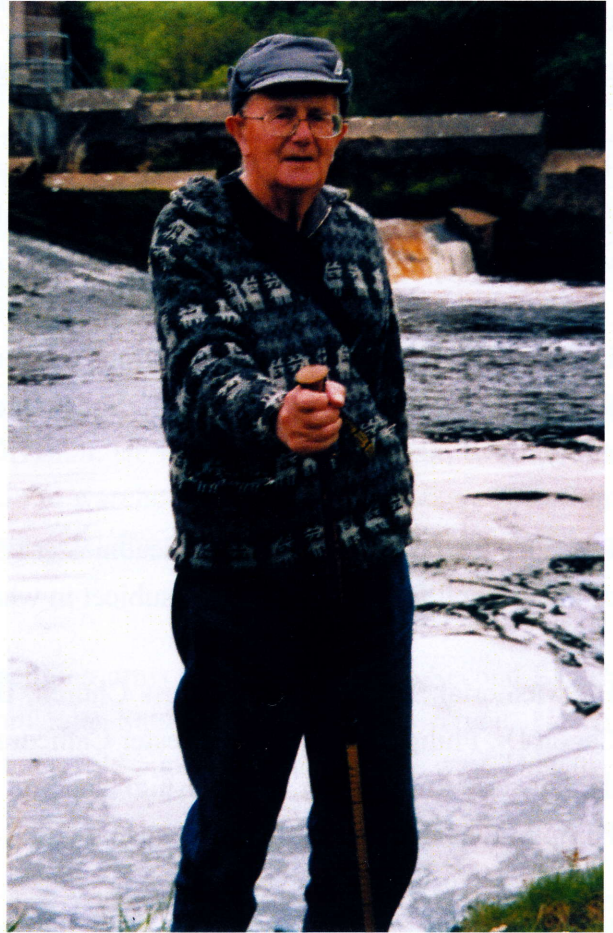
The Brigadier responsible for the bridgehead was so appalled that he ended up taking his own life.

Brigadier (later Major-General) Cowan succeeded to the command of 17 Division. He led them through four years of bitter fighting to finish up where he had started, on the banks of the Sittang. He received no recognition for his great achievements and considerable hardships and was denied the honour of leading his men into Rangoon, which he had done so much to liberate.

Lord Wavell, as his Far Eastern Command dwindled to nothing, was created Viceroy of India.

The disaster at the Bridge made the loss of Burma inevitable. The docks and airfields were lost. The vast stockpile of arms and munitions, mainly for China, were lost. The Oilfields were lost. And, worst of all, the vital overland supply route to China was cut.

Late in 1945 the ruins of the Sittang Bridge remained as a monument to the British Raj and to the ineptitude of her war leaders.



Patrick McEvoy at his sheep farm

Patrick McEvoy.
Former Jeep Driver, R.A.,
based near the East Bank of the Sittang.

OBITUARY. JOHN BYNOE.

John Bynoe, who as Honorary Secretary of the International Friendship and Reconciliation Trust was responsible for initiating and helping to arrange the annual Services of Reconciliation at Canterbury and Rochester Cathedrals, and was a former member of the Committee of the Burma Campaign Society, died suddenly, without pain, on Thursday, 8th September 2007, at the age of eighty-five.

The Services at Canterbury Cathedral were attended each year by the Japanese Ambassador and up to thirty members of the Embassy staff and their children, as well as by members of BCS, the Royal British Legion and other organisations.

In World War Two, he served in the Burma Campaign as a Captain in 82 Anti-tank Regiment, Royal Artillery, and in 21 Indian Mountain Regiment of the Indian Army.



John Bynoe

He ended his peacetime career as Headmaster of Hever School in Maidstone, and was at one time a member of the Council for Local History, a subject in which he was particularly interested.

His Memorial Service at Holy Cross Church, Bearstead, near Maidstone, was conducted by the Reverend Canon Dr. Philip Hesketh of Rochester Cathedral, a former Curate of Holy Cross Church, in the presence of the Japanese Ambassador, H.E. Yoshigi Nogami. Phillida Purvis represented the Burma Campaign Society and Philip Malins the International Friendship and Reconciliation Trust.

It is expected that the Services of Reconciliation, which John initiated, will be continued at Canterbury Cathedral on the Sunday on, or immediately following, August 15th, the Anniversary of the end of the Second World War.

Philip Malins.

THE JAPANESE SOLDIER.

At a Discussion Meeting at the Nippon Club on 29th November 2007, Masao Hirakubo described his life before, during, and after the Second World War.

His father was an international trader who believed that Japan could achieve all its objectives through trade, not war. Masao went with a school party to Manchuria and was impressed by Japanese industrialisation.. He was alarmed by the attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941 during his last year at university, after which liberals were arrested by the secret police.

There was military conscription with no choice of service, but with exemption for those at university. He began his military career as a one star soldier and passed an examination to become an infantry officer, and was then one out of fifteen to pass the Accounting Officer's examination. The latter were responsible for paying the troops, purchasing food, and for clothing, cooking and feeding arrangements. The Combatants Code,

issued as a Directive in 1941, required all soldiers to fight to the death and never surrender. Masao did not believe that the Emperor was divine, but all Japanese were related to him and owed absolute loyalty.

Masao was posted to Burma via Singapore, where he stayed briefly at Raffles Hotel, landing on the Tenasserim Peninsular, near the Malaysian border, travelling by train to Rangoon and then to 15 Army HQ in Maymyo. From there he joined 31 Division near Homain, on 26th February 1944, to be posted to 58 Regiment.

The Major-General commanding the Division explained the forthcoming attack on Kohima and said that no rations would be supplied from the rear. Accounting Officers would be responsible for feeding their troops from what they could carry with them and from locally purchased and captured supplies. Masao was responsible for a thousand soldiers and the supply system looked hopeless. He gave each man twenty days' supply of rice and salt to carry. A thousand cattle, one for each man, were driven with them, but only 10% arrived at Kohima.

They reached Kohima on the planned date, using steep jungle tracks, and captured twenty British warehouses, holding a three years' supply of rice and other items for a Division. He had managed to obtain two months' rations for his troops before the Royal Air Force destroyed the warehouses and their contents. They then attacked Garrison Hill, and the troops in the front line were supplied during the night with rice balls and salt, and a bottle of boiled water.

After some two months of bitter fighting against the overwhelming arms and artillery of the Second British Division, the Japanese were defeated, and Divisional Commander Sato gave the order to retreat. Nearly everyone was riddled with disease and reliant on what food they could purchase or find on the way. They had reached the Shan States when the ceasefire came.

When they returned to Japan, they were not treated like heroes. Wounded and disabled soldiers, dressed in white coats, were simply ignored and sang and begged for money on the streets and in trains. Masao's family home had been destroyed by bombing and he was reinstated by his Company and worked in the Tokyo Branch.

He was thankful that the Allies treated Japan well. Despite what they had expected, General MacArthur, the Supreme Commander, did not treat them harshly. Returning soldiers were given a monthly pension for life, subject to them having a minimum of thirteen years' service. A year's service in Japan counted as one year, in China two years, and in Burma three, confirming that, to the Japanese, Burma was the worst theatre of war. Those soldiers who did not qualify were given a lump sum gratuity of twenty-five thousand yen. Masao was glad that Japan changed from a militaristic to an anti-war nation, and that after centuries of isolation her people are now travelling widely and working abroad. But some ancient Japanese characteristics remain which make them different in outlook from Western people. These include the concept of shame, which came from the Bushido of the Samurai warriors, so that being captured was indeed shameful.

Before the Second World War there was considerable admiration in Japan for Britain and its national life, and for its training of the Japanese Navy. Despite racial differences, Masao believed that our two island peoples, the British and the Japanese, with their great histories and traditions, had much in common. He had made his home and brought up his children in Britain, and was glad to live here.

CELEBRATION OF THE FOURTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE DEDICATION OF THE MEMORIAL PLAQUE IN ST. ETHELBURGA'S CHURCH.

As her first major initiative since becoming Honorary Secretary of BCS, Akiko Macdonald again organised a Tea Party, celebrating Japanese-British Reconciliation, which was no less successful than the first such event in 2006.

An Opening Ceremony greeting the assembled guests and introducing the Burma Campaign Society and its aims, was again followed by a somewhat crepuscular screening of Yuki Sunada's remarkable Documentary with its highly evocative archival material. Messages from Masao Hirakubo, as Chairman of BCS, and Mr. Kenji Hiramatsu, the Japanese Consul General, to whom the Society's warm thanks is due for his regular participation in events promoting Anglo-Japanese Reconciliation, were followed by the Memorial Ceremony itself.



John White Maj. Gen. Ian Lyall Grant Mr. Kenji Hiramatsu Masao Hirakubo

After a pause for refreshment, the Musical Entertainment which followed began with twelve year old Asaki Nakata at the piano, playing works by Chopin and Prokofiev, not only with great skill and sensitivity, but, where the music called for it, with quite remarkable power for for one so slight. Her thirteen year old sister followed, with no less assurance, on the violin, playing Keisler's *Liebesleid* and Bazzini's *Round of the Goblins* with its incredibly rapid fingering and staccato bowing. Afterwards the two young soloists were accorded a standing ovation. Not unexpectedly, their mother Satsuki, told me that they were quite a handful.

Miss Eriko Davis at the piano then played pieces by Ravel and Debussy with great delicacy and feeling, to be followed by the Green Chorus, consisting of eight delightful married ladies, Chifuyu Ohtani, Yeung-Hee Kim, Tokuko Ohtani, Miyuki Takahashi, Saiko Taniguchi, Eri Matsui, Harumi Murata and Minori Matsubara, singing a medley of Japanese and Western songs with equal facility, conducted by Mikiko Ridd and accompanied on the piano by Noriko Sekiya.

John White

HODOGAYA REMEMBRANCE DAY CEREMONY.

Editor's Note.

This Report by Mrs. Yoshiko Tamura, who each year lays a wreath on behalf of BCS, brings the day vividly to life for all of us, who were not able to be there, in a most touching way.

On 11th November, 2007, the Remembrance Service was held and passed off very smoothly and solemnly as usual. Following the prayers offered by different priests of many denominations, the wreaths were laid on the altar one after another. Included was one from our Burma Campaign Society, which the MC loudly introduced by name.



The Commonwealth War Memorial



Mrs. Tamura

Although the weather had been terrible since the previous day, when it was almost time for the ceremony the rain ceased and the sun came out. "It is always strange" we often say to regular participants, "but it never rains on this occasion in Yokohama." Indeed, this time turned out to be just so. Every year we get together and mention this coincidence. Is this because all the souls in the Commonwealth War Cemetery in Yokohama, feel happy for this special ceremony, in respect for those who are interred, in the presence of their own Ambassadors and Representatives who now gather for them to commemorate their sacrifice?

Yoshiko Tamura MBE

EDUCATION IN NAGALAND.

The Kohima Educational Trust, now some four years old, was born in the Officers' Dinner Club of the 2nd Division, which played such a key role in the reversal of the tide of war in Burma. Its Secretary, Gordon Graham, then in the Gordon Highlanders, himself fought in the Battle of Kohima.

The Trust has now been joined, in equal partnership by the Kohima Educational Society, and this will undoubtedly give fresh impetus to the wide range of important educational and education related activities which, despite inevitably limited funds, are being devoted to the task of honouring, and of brightening the future, of the Naga people in whose land, through no fault of their own, such brutal fighting took place during the Second World War.

The efforts of these two educational Charities, which have now been merged, is complemented by the activities of the All Burma Veterans Society in Tokyo in making it possible for young people from Kohima to go to Asia College with the aim of becoming future agricultural leaders.

It is indeed heartening to see that so long after the cessation of hostilities and the departure of the opposing armies, the people of Nagaland have not been forgotten.

John White

COMING EVENTS.

Thursday, 20th March: 6.00 - 8.00 pm:- A Discussion Meeting at the Nippon Club. Dr. Keiichiro Komatsu will speak on The Future of Japan in the 21st Century.

Wednesday, 16th May: 11.00 am:- Sixth Annual General Meeting of BCS, followed by Reception and Lunch.

Editor's Note.

For comments, criticisms, and questions concerning the Newsletter, please contact John White, 25 Cadogan Place, London, SW1X 9SA, Tel/Fax 020 7235 4034. Material for inclusion in the September 2008 Issue should reach me at the above address by 31st August at the latest.

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Editor's Apologies — Firstly, to David Manners because, unfortunately, in the last Newsletter (Issue No. 11 of September 2007) the acknowledgement of his Copyright in the Caption for the splendid photograph of Lord Weatherill in Canterbury Cathedral was omitted. Secondly, to all the recipients of the same Newsletter for the ridiculous typo which, at a late stage, infiltrated the Society's E-mail address.

John White