

R.N. W/T STATION, KRANJI, SINGAPORE 1939—1942

by Herbert W. Radwell

CHAPTER I

Farewell China, Whither Westward.

The story begins at Kiukiang, north eastern China, a river port on the Yangtse River, 550 miles upstream from Shanghai.

In August 1939, HMS *Aphis*, a river gunboat of 625 tons, 2,000 IHP, two six inch guns and one three inch HA, was tied up alongside the river bank at Kiukiang. Originally designed for the Turkish Navy for service on the Euphrates, she was flat bottomed and had a draught of only four feet. I was her Petty Officer Telegraphist and Yeoman of Signals. My duties aboard were combined wireless and visual communications.

A few years earlier the Sino-Japanese war had ended in stalemate, thanks to the aid given to China by Britain and America, but Japan commanded control of all shipping up and down the Yangtse River. About five cables length away down river there was a Japanese destroyer secured alongside. She always seemed to have her sights trained on us and we did likewise to her.

Back home in Britain the political situation between Britain and Germany was very tense. It was not known whether Japan would come in immediately on the side of Germany if war should be declared between Britain and Germany, and so the Admiralty ordered all gunboats in the lower reaches of the river below Hankow to clear the river and proceed to Shanghai.

On 29th August, 1939 HMS *Aphis* pulled out from her berth at Kiukiang and proceeded downstream. The Japanese destroyer steamed about a cable's length ahead of us in the role of escort and to arrange the opening of the booms across the river. Humiliating to us, to say the least.

As we approached Wuhu "Our English Nurse" as she was known up and down the river, was once again on the rooftop of the Wuhu General Hospital with her semaphore flags. She made perfect semaphore, "Good Luck, God Speed" as was her usual practice whenever a ship flying either the White or Red Ensign sailed by.

I acknowledged her signal by semaphore as the ship proceeded on her way down to Nanking. Navigation was no easy matter on the river. With so many twists and turns on the narrow stretches it was difficult at times not to run down the slow moving junks and sampans. We overtook several "floaters" (floating dead human bodies). Some we hit, and disintegrated them, whereupon we were obliged to fix our personal spring loaded clothes pegs to our noses until we were clear of the stench.

These "floaters" were commonplace on the river. We had quite a number of Chinese ratings among the ship's company and they would never recognise

one as being Chinese. "No, no, him belong Japanese!" they would always remark.

Except for cleaning our teeth and shaving, we were compelled to do our face washing and bathing in water pumped from the river. This was already a dirty yellow colour and demanded the use of gallons of Izal disinfectant daily.

On several occasions after passing Nanking the First Lieutenant came along to the wireless office and asked me "Has the balloon gone up yet 'Pots'?" The answer each time was "Not yet, Sir!"

The ship had now passed Chinkiang and was approaching Woosung and Shanghai at the mouth of the river. It was 3rd September, 1939. I decided to have a search on my W/T receiver and picked up Reuters W/T Station, Shanghai, transmitting morse news items in English. Keeping tuned in, I then read the fateful news that England had declared war against Germany. Very soon the ship would secure to a telephone buoy in Shanghai.

Rear Admiral Yangtse, in HMS *Scorpion*, had already arrived there, and any official signals from Admiralty would be passed to us by phone from HMS *Scorpion*. I decided to wait for the AGM before reporting officially to the Captain.

When the ship had tied up to the buoy I ceased W/T watch and went forward to the quarter deck. In this class of ship the officers lived forward and the ship's company lived amidships and aft, hence the "sacred" end was forward.

The telephone rang, a voice said "Emergency State, Admiralty General Message for you". I replied "Go ahead, George, I think I know what it's about!" The text of the message consisted of three words only: "TOTAL GERMANY TOTAL". Then, reporting to the Captain, he cleared lower deck and informed the ship's company. The thought in everyone's mind was "What next?"

My office drawer was chock-a-block full of Shanghai dollar notes. It was no wonder! The Shanghai dollar was at the exchange rate of 3½d. to the dollar whilst down at Hong Kong it remained steady at 1/3d. Not having had a decent run ashore for over four months we were all set for a real rip-roaring and exciting time, hitting the high spots amongst Shanghai's bright and cosmopolitan night clubs.

First of all, along the Nanking Road, Shanghai's "Oxford Street", to the Union Jack Naval Club for a good bath in hot fresh water and to rid oneself of blocked up pores caused by river silt. Then, to meet our "up river" pals and opposite numbers, all with the same idea in mind, have a few drinks together and then a good meal before setting off to do the rounds.

Here, all together now, were PO Telegraphists George Huxford, HMS *Scorpion*; Harry Spicer, HMS *Ladybird*; George Gardner, HMS *Grasshopper*; myself HMS *Aphis*, and Bert Soffe who was on the staff of the Resident Naval Officer, Shanghai. Our

ships were normally spread out along the river at 100 mile intervals.

Bert Sofie knew Shanghai like the back of his hand. Under his guidance we visited all the best clubs. In every club we went to were notices posted up "Officers Only". With our peak caps we all "got by" without any trouble from the club managers and continued our rounds until the early hours of the morning.

After a few hours sleep it was time to return to our ships. Speaking for myself only, I felt as languid and limp as a piece of wet cotton as I staggered aboard in the morning. However, it was a change from the boredom of life up the river!

Our ship spent a few days moored to the buoy in Shanghai harbour and then proceeded to the Yangtse-Poo Dockyard for docking. There was no going back to the river. With the exception of HMS *Falcon* in the upper reaches at Chungking, the river was now cleared of British gunboats.

In dock, HMS *Ladybird* soon joined us there. She was of the same class as HMS *Aphis* and came in for the same treatment. This was to prepare us both for an ocean voyage and to proceed to where we could make a useful contribution to the war effort. Where to, nobody knew.

I found Shanghai more fascinating than any other place I have ever visited during my world wide

travels. It was there that East did really meet West, and everybody was happy with it that way.

The streets were very colourful, both by day and night. Kilted Seaforth Highlanders patrolling nonchalantly with their rifles slung over their shoulders, British and American sailors ambling in their white drill uniforms, young Chinese girls in their smart print silk cheongsams, Chinese, American and European business men in either sharkskin or Shantung silk suits, all contributing to the varied scene. Thus, it was, with the better-off social classes. On the other hand, and no less colourful, were the poorer rickshaw coolies, wearing cone shaped straw hats and sweating it out in their bare feet as they ran about the streets performing their tasks as human taxis. One could rub shoulders with Chinese, British, American, French, Russian, Polish and Hungarian nationals all over the town. Such was Shanghai!

The ship had de-ammunitioned before entering dock. After five weeks, and towards the end of the refit, the ammunition was taken onboard again and returned to the ship's magazines. About three-quarters of the ship's company, which included my two young W/T operators, then left us to board a P. and O. liner. The liner sailed away to disperse the bulk of the company among other ships in the Far East.

The last stages of the refit consisted of shoring up the bulkheads and deckheads below the upper deck with heavy timbers, to strengthen the ship for her impending ocean voyage. The ship now only had a skeleton crew of key ratings and enough watch-keepers to sail the ship by working in three watches round the clock.

On 17th October, 1939, HMS *Ladybird* and HMS *Aphis*, under sealed orders, sailed out of Shanghai to the open sea. HMS *Ladybird* carried the Senior Commanding Officer and thereby took up the van.

W/T silence being in force, my First World War vintage, type 4 spark and type 15 Poulsen Arc W/T transmitters were now out of commission. I was to keep single operator listening periods on my W/T receiver vide AFO 'S' series and spend the rest of my time on the bridge as Yeoman of Signals.

The Commanding Officer, First Lieutenant and Chief Gunner's Mate, working in three watches, conned the ship from the bridge. Communications with HMS *Ladybird* were maintained with semaphore by day and shaded flash lamp by night. Sailing orders had directed us to set a course for Hong Kong.

The ships had taken on sufficient fresh water for culinary purposes only. It was strictly forbidden to use it for washing, shaving or bathing. Both officers kept to these orders also. There was no habitation possible below decks, either in the wardroom or ratings' messes, the hatches being battened down, and so we all installed ourselves as best we could in the superstructure. Almost invariably the upper deck was awash as we rolled along through the

Formosa Strait. Lifelines were left permanently rigged fore and aft down each side of the ship.

On the second day at sea I spotted through my binoculars an unidentified three funnelled destroyer on the horizon, away on our port bow. Reporting to the Captain, he turned to the Bosun's mate and ordered "Stand by to pipe Action Stations." I quickly thumbed through "GERMANY" in the ship's copy of "Silhouettes of Foreign Warships" without avail, and before the Captain could get a clear sight of her Ensign or Jack flag, had her identified as an American class destroyer. She steamed harmlessly by.

Both ships arrived safely at Hong Kong on 20th October, 1939, where we tied up alongside in the naval dockyard. First thoughts were to get a wash and shave on the dockside. Not knowing where our eventual destination was to be, many of us decided not to shave and let our beards carry on growing.

It came as a shock when we had to exchange just over four Shanghai dollars for one Hong Kong dollar. However, the greater part of our needs were to be obtained at the China Fleet Club and prices there were reasonable.

Hong Kong was quite interesting, but not so colourful and as varied in its appeal as was Shanghai. Neither was it cosmopolitan. The greater part of the population were Chinese. These Chinese were more rugged than those in the North. The latter were more slim and cultured with smooth facial contours and of higher intellect. However, I always found the Chinese, both north and south, very happy and congenial folk.

Both ships left Hong Kong in company on 24th October, 1939. Out to sea, and then we learned that we were bound for Saigon, French-Indo China (now South Vietnam). This journey approximated that between Shanghai and Hong Kong, about 825 miles. We did not make quite as good progress. Being well out to sea it was heavy going compared to our previous coastal route. Saigon was reached on 29th October, 1939.

Only one full day was spent in the French Naval Dockyard. A few hours leave ashore were granted to give us the chance of stretching our legs, then both ships sailed again on 31st October. This time we were bound for Singapore, a journey of 625 miles. The routine was as before, no washing, no shaving.

Personal hygiene, when we were able to practise it was by stripping naked on deck and then tipping a bucket of salt water over oneself, followed by a rub down.

Providing one had a good pair of sea legs the whole journey was without incident, despite the ship rolling gunwhales under most of the way.

Approaching Singapore from the east we passed the Island of Pulau Ubin at the entrance to Johore Strait, and eventually secured alongside in Singapore Naval Base on 2nd November, 1939. Kiukiang was now 3,000 miles behind us.

We all looked pretty scruffy, but felt very well and as fit as fiddles. Except for the engine room staff we were well and truly sunburnt too. After a few days in Singapore, HMS *Ladybird's* PO telegraphist Harry Spicer, and myself, received notice that we were to be drafted to RN W/T Station, Kranji, Singapore and were being relieved by Leading Telegraphists from Kranji W/T Station.

JUST FOR THE RECORD—Both river gunboats continued their ocean voyage via Penang, Colombo, Bombay, along the Persian Gulf, down to Aden and then through the Red Sea to Alexandria, Egypt. They both made a good name for themselves during the North Africa campaign. In enemy action, HMS *Aphis* Chief Gunner's Mate Frank Arnsworth was killed, whilst his Gunner's Yeoman, Able Seaman 'Birdie' Chapman won the Conspicuous Gallantry Medal. I had spent many hours on the bridge at sea with them whilst they were Officer of the Watch and Coxswain respectively, and fine seamen they both were.

CHAPTER 2

Singapore, Sunshine and Security To be continued.

RN W/T STATION KRANJI

by Herbert W. Radwell

Chapter 2

SINGAPORE, SUNSHINE AND SECURITY

Kranji W/T Station is situated among the rubber and pineapple plantations on the North West shore of Singapore Island. Beyond the marshlands to the north are the Johore Straits. A causeway across the Straits permits rail and road traffic between the island and the mainland of Malaya.

PO Tel. H. Spicer and myself joined the W/T Station on 6th November, 1939. We were later joined by PO Tels. G. Gardner ex HMS *Grasshopper* and J. Watson ex HMS *Kent*.

Kranji was the site of the Receiving Station. The high powered W/T transmitters, operated by remote control from Suara, situated five miles away inside the Naval Base.

Both stations were then in a transitional stage of increasing services on the air from peace to a war-time basis. We four new arrivals were to take over the duties of Petty Officer of the watch vice Leading Telegraphists. The Officer-in-Charge at the time was Lieut. Cdr. Grove-White, RN.

Additional Marconi SWB transmitters were installed at Suara. American AR88 and HRO W/T receivers, obtained on a local purchase order through an agency in Singapore, were flown in from the Philippines and installed at Kranji.

Lieut. Cdr. Grove-White had unbounded energy and enthusiasm supervising the installation of this new equipment and their respective acrials. Whenever a new transmitter and aerial became operational he would request the use of an RAF aircraft and then fly around the island to plot polar diagrams of its radiation.

The Chief and PO's quarters consisted of a single-storey bungalow type building with a dining room in the centre, single berth cabins on one side, and a dormitory for up to six single beds on the other side. Annexed to this building was a billiards room and outside this, a hard tennis court. On the ceilings were fitted large two-bladed electric fans and over each bed was rigged a very fine mesh mosquito net. The shower baths and galley were at the rear of the building.

Members of the mess before our arrival were CPO Tel. 'Jock' Hutton, i/c general Station Administration, CPO Tel. Charles Peck, i/c Special Duties RN, Section Sergeant Major Fred Southwell, i/c Special Duties Royal Signals, Flight Sergeant Gilbert, i/c Special Duties RAF, PO Tels. Power and Cope, Technical Duties, and not forgetting 'Lady' the station pet bitch.

The majordomo was a Chinese 'boy' Ah Joo (pronounced R.U.). He carried out the duties of mess waiter, tea boy, bed maker, cleaner, lime juice maker, errand boy, in fact anything required of him and he always gave service with a smile.

The junior W/T ratings employed on operating duties lived in a two-storied building. They had their

own billiards and recreation room, beer bar and tennis-courts. The Special Duties ranks and ratings lived in a wooden building with an Atap (dried palm leaves) roof. This building was affectionately called 'The Ranch'.

The total European staff was approximately thirty including the Officer-in-Charge. Supporting these were Malayan Telegraphists, Teleprinter Operators, Tape perforators, Transmitter-head operators, Loggists, Telephone operators and Tamby's (messengers). Four European Singapore Police kept duty at the Station main gate. These in turn were supported by Indian Constables of the Singapore Police, who also patrolled the perimeter. On the main gate there was a Malayan scroll 'Kami Chekap Kapada Dunia' meaning 'We speak to the World'.

In the European quarters, all cooking and domestic services were carried out by male Chinese civilians under the control of a Chinese Comprador (General Catering Agent). The Comprador was paid the ration allowance of each European rank and rating on a monthly basis. He then supplied the food, arranged all menus and paid his staff.

Labourers on the station were Indian coolies under the supervision of a Mandore (Chargehand). These Indians were very caste conscious and would not perform any task below the status of their caste. The lowest caste Indians, the Tamils from southern India, were the only caste to take on such duties as cleaning drains and lavatories.

The station boasted a football field and swimming pool. These had been excavated voluntarily by ranks and ratings of previous commissions and were a great contribution to our keeping fit. By virtue of some official paper work CE-in-C had the necessary concreting to the base and sides of the pool done and it was put on the plans as a fire fighting static water tank.

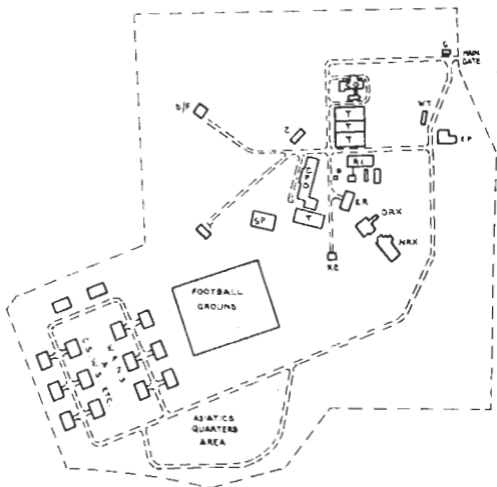
Watchkeeping duties were on a twenty-four hours on, twenty-four hours off basis; i.e. watch on, watch off for twenty-four hours and then twenty-four hours off duty completely. After making up for lost sleep on my days off, I still had time on my hands.

Singapore City was fourteen miles away down the Bukit Timah Road (pronounced—Bookit Teemer Road) and one could not afford to go there too often. The rate of exchange was now 2/4d to the Straits Dollar.

On the island are many beautiful coloured butterflies and moths to be seen, particularly the Atlas moths with transparent 'windows' on their wings and measuring up to ten inches from wing tip to wing tip. I then decided to collect and preserve butterflies and moths as a spare time hobby.

A butterfly net was easily made with mosquito netting and a couple of canes. Sheets of card, envelopes, pins, a hypodermic syringe and a bottle of Formalin completed the necessary equipment to make a start.

In Noel Coward's song it says 'mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the mid-day sun'. As a com-



R.N. W/T. STATION, KRANJI.
SINGAPORE 1942

KEY

R1 RATINGS QUARTERS	G GUARD ROOM
R2 RANKS & RATINGS S D	CO CO'S RESIDENCE
CPO. CHIEF & POS QUARTERS	W/T WARRANT TELS RESIDENCE
D,F,Y&Z SPECIAL DUTIES OFFICES	EP EUROPEAN POLICE
SP SWIMMING POOL	T TENNIS COURTS
DRX W/T RECEIVING ROOM PRE 1942	NRX 'MCLELLAND' RECEIVING ROOM 1942
ER ENGINE ROOM	(REINFORCED CONCRETE BUILDING)

promise, being myself a mad Irishman, I did just the same thing. I enjoyed the rambles through the rubber plantations and away off the beaten track in search of the varied species of butterfly. Sometimes as I passed through a native Kampong (village) the natives would have a giggle, probably thinking I was crazy.

On the station, all of the Malayan operators could read, write and speak English perfectly, so I decided to learn to speak Malay. It was not to be an extensive vocabulary, but I learnt enough to let them know in their own language that I would not stand for any nonsense or slacking whilst I was in charge and to thank them and praise them when they did a good job. They had more respect for me in return.

There is one word in the Malay language which every European on the Island knew, and used all too frequently. This word is 'Tiadapa'. It means 'Don't worry', 'Never mind' or 'Forget all about it', according to the context.

'Tiadapa' was the general attitude of mind of them all. This word should, in my opinion, go down in history. There was a war on in Europe but it was too difficult to comprehend this in far away Singapore. Everyone had been given to understand that Singapore was impregnable and secure, even if there ever was an attack made upon it, so tiadapa!

Food was plentiful. There was no rationing, whilst supplies of fresh meat, butter, wheat, fruit and

vegetables arrived regularly from Australia and New Zealand.

The fact that there was a war on struck me forcibly when I received news that my youngest brother and brother-in-law, both serving alongside each other in the Rifle Brigade, had been killed at Calais. The Regiment was there fighting a rearguard action whilst the bulk of the British Army were being evacuated from the beaches of Dunkirk.

About the middle of 1940 Lieut. Cdr. Grove-White, RN was relieved as Officer-in-Charge by Lieut. Cdr. McClelland, RN. We later learned that Lieut. Cdr. Grove-White had been killed in North Africa.

In Singapore the sun shone beautifully every day. All over the island there were the usual tennis and swimming parties, film shows of the latest releases from America, dancing at the 'Happy World' and 'New World' dance halls where there were Chinese hostesses available at ten cents a dance. As a European, one could expect to receive monthly invitations to a 'Hari Besar' (social evening and pink gin party) from the many European group organisations there. For the European, life was sweet!

Until late in the year when the northeast monsoon season sets in there is little rainfall. Then it rains to such an extent that the gutters in Singapore are constructed at various depths between two and five feet deep to cope with the flow of water into the drains and to prevent flooding.

In October 1940 I was promoted CPO Tel. and took over the duties of station administration. This entailed maintaining naval discipline amongst the naval staff, organisation of the watches, control of all station monies and keeping accounts for audit, transport officer, personnel manager to Asiatics, first-aid duties, etc., and keeping the Officer-in-Charge always in the picture of day to day events.

One thing I learned that is not in the first-aid book. This was, if ever the Indians injured themselves (they often cut their feet with their grass cutting Parangs) it was not enough only to clean and dress their wounds. They would never leave me until receiving a dose of castor oil. Something to do with ridding themselves of the devil, I believe. The victim would then place the palms of his hands together bow gracefully, and then walk backwards out of the office uttering 'Salaam Sahib'.

Having settled down in my new job I learned the names of all the station staff, including the Chinese, Malays and Indians. It was very interesting going around them all, getting to know them better, their way of life, their different characters and their general outlook on life. An extreme amount of tact had to be used with the Asiatics. They seemed to regard me as an unofficial welfare officer. Should they have an increase in family they thought it naturally followed that they would get an increase in wages. Such was not the case.

At the end of 1940 quite a lot of constructional activity began to take place on the station. A new road was constructed from the main gate eastwards,

terminating in two loop roads, one to the east and one to the southeast. On completion, new buildings were erected alongside the road. It was obvious we were to have a big increase of staff.

Whilst this work was proceeding a new reinforced concrete W/T receiving building was commenced to the northeast of the existing building. At the same time, additional special listening stations were being established in the Cocos or Keeling Islands, in North Borneo, and up country in Malaya. These latter stations were to be manned by Civilian Shore Wireless Service staff. Lieut. Cdr. McClelland had a very busy time during this reorganisation and planning and, as is usual, the paper work took up the greatest part of his time. His wife helped as his secretary.

Mid 1941 saw the large influx of staff to the station. Additional Naval, RAF, Royal Signals and CSWS personnel arrived. These included some RNZN Telegraphists. Then came thirty Wrens, headed by Second Officer Betty Archdale, one time Captain of the British Women's cricket team that toured Australia. In support of these Wrens came a Nursing Sister QARNNS. Before leaving UK the Wrens had been promoted to Chief Petty Officer. The reason? Because of the very specialist duties for which they had been highly trained!

We already had junior male ranks and ratings on the station with exactly the same qualifications and with more experience. Whatever the reason, human nature being what it is, courtships very soon got under way between junior ranks/ratings and CPO Wrens. Everyone was allowed to wear civilian clothes off the station, so what did it matter. Personally I went 'blind', my job was to see work ran smoothly, and it did.

I had to engage Chinese Amahs (maids) for the female staff, and additional Indian labourers, whilst the Comprador had to engage additional male Chinese cooks and domestics. All in all, the total station staff had now increased to approximately 300.

Betty Archdale and myself shared the Administrative Office. She was a big built, tall matronly type of woman with short bobbed hair. One could well imagine her as being capable of swiping a cricket ball to the boundary, or even for six! Initially, I advised her on the watchkeeping organisation and then suggested, six Wrens to a watch, four watches, and six Wrens as day workers and 'stand - ins' whenever any of her watchkeepers were unable to cope. It worked satisfactorily.

I was well acclimatised to the tropics but realised it takes a long time, especially for a woman, to get used to an average temperature of 85°F. with a high percentage humidity and remain fit doing day and night duties month after month.

My own duties now, with all this extra staff, engaged me up till after midnight daily to cope with it all. The Officer-in-Charge then made a request to C-in-C China for additional administrative staff to

relieve me so that I could get back to technical duties.

Out of this request came Lieut. Cdr. Sandwith, RN called off reserve in East Africa, Commissioned Master-at-Arms Lee, RNZN, called off reserve in Wellington, NZ, Surg. Lieut. Corcoran and Petty Officer (Regulating) Elbro, from ships already on the Far East station. Events were such that I was never entirely relieved from administration duties.

Also, new arrivals were Warrant Telegraphist Larkman for technical duties and Station Officer Amos i/c CSWS staff, both from UK.

In the naval base there were two RN Chaplains, one C of E and one RC for the spiritual needs of shore based naval staffs. Only one, Father Cuninghame, the RC Chaplain ever came up to Kranji to conduct services when he was free to do so. He would also come often to the Chief and PO's mess of an evening for a chat and a game of cards, followed by a sing-song. His favourite party piece was 'Phil the Fluter's Ball'. Before coming up he would ring me on the 'phone saying 'You provide the beer Chief and I'll provide the whisky'. He was good fun, a typical Irishman and very popular with one and all. I should also mention Surg. Lieut. Corcoran who hailed from Southern Ireland. He used to drop in with a bottle of 'mountain dew' also on these occasions. He too was full of life. 'Dead Surgeons are no ruddy use in war' was one of his witticisms.

My '*Ladybird*' pal Harry Spicer had blotted his copy book by getting into trouble with the station police; deprived of one good conduct badge he was sent home. Later he went down in HMS *Beverley* when sunk. George Gardner ex *Grasshopper* was next promoted CPO Tel. and joined the transmitting station at Suara. John Watson ex *Kent* was the only one of the original four still carrying out Petty Officer of the Watch duties. He was on the same turn of duty as was the Wren he was courting and was quite happy to be left with it that way.

By now I had collected five cases of butterflies. Then one day the Mandore came to me with a cobra caught on the station grounds. I took all these to a Japanese taxidermist, had the butterflies classified with their Latin names and had the cobra mounted on a plinth in a poise as though ready to strike. These were intended to be presents to my young daughter when I arrived home.

On the station, more activity! Underground air raid shelters were now being excavated. Obviously things were hotting up, or were they? Nothing like this was going on elsewhere on the island. The RAF stations still only had a small quota of Australian Brewster Buffalo fighters. There were no reinforcements of men or equipment arriving elsewhere.

In November 1941 the new W/T receiving building, named 'McClelland' after the Officer-in-Charge, was nearing completion. An air raid siren and look out post were installed on one of the tall lattice masts at Kranji.

On 2nd December, 1941 HMS *Prince of Wales*, Vice-Admiral Tom Phillips and Captain Leach, RN and HMS *Repulse*, Captain Tennant RN, arrived in Singapore.

The early morning of 8th December, 1941 put the air raid siren into operational use for the first time. The Japanese bombers, coincident with Pearl Harbour activity, came over and dropped their first bombs on Singapore. So now we knew, the war had well and truly come to us!

(To be continued)

RN W/T STATION, KRANJI, SINGAPORE 1939-42

by Herbert W. Radwell

CHAPTER 3

Disillusion and Destruction

At this time Kranji W/T Station had 16 hours daily direct W/T services with Whitehall W/T Station, direct all day and night services with Hong Kong and Colombo W/T Stations, Broadcast services to all ships on the Far East Station, a routine service with Kuching, Sarawak, and a monthly health bulletin transmission covering the whole of the Far East, to Geneva W/T Station.

We now had to set watch on 'Admirals Wave' and keep a listening watch for HM Ships should they break W/T silence to make an Enemy Report.

Later in the day, December 8, 1941, Japanese troops made initial landings on the mainland of Malaya; at Singora on the northeast coast, and further down the coast at Kota Bahru.

On December 9, 1941, the battleship HMS *Prince of Wales* and battlecruiser HMS *Repulse* set sail up the east coast of Malaya in the hope of intercepting enemy transports sailing to Malaya. They were both spotted by a Japanese reconnaissance aircraft.

The following morning our W/T operator keeping watch on 'Admirals Wave' alarmed the W/T office as he called out 'Enemy Report!' It was HMS *Repulse* transmitting that both ships were being heavily attacked by Japanese bombers and torpedo carrying aircraft. Later, during the afternoon of December 10, 1941 we received news that both ships had been sunk.

I was at the transmitter-head to supervise the transmission of the perforated tape that carried this news to Whitehall. The time in Singapore is almost seven hours ahead of GMT and this message arrived in London on the morning of December 10, 1941.

Now, after only two days of war, here we were with the strongest force of our Far East Fleet sunk.

During the ensuing weeks thousands of British troops were arriving in Singapore. They came in from Australia, India and the Middle East. At Kranji the reverse was the case. We were evacuating the W/T Station staff as and when ships were available. They were dispersed to Australia, Batavia and Ceylon until, for the second time during my commission, we were left with a skeleton staff.

All Japanese nationals on the mainland of Malaya and in Singapore were rounded up and put into Changi Jail, Singapore. Quite a large percentage of these were photographers.

As the Japanese advanced through Malaya and captured our airfields the bombing of Singapore became heavier and heavier. Their bombers came over in formations of eighty-one at a time. In Singapore city the poor Chinese (they constituted 75% of the population) and the remainder of the inhabitants just huddled together in the gutters. There were no proper air raid shelters for them to take cover in.

A few days after the sinking of HMS *Prince of Wales* and HMS *Repulse* the Royal Marine survivors from these ships were drafted temporarily to Kranji W/T Station. A few were terribly nerve shattered and sent to hospital whilst the remainder were seconded to the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders for fighting up country.

My ex-messmate, Section Sergeant Major Southwell, was now in Hong Kong. He had been promoted Second Lieutenant, Royal Signals in November, 1941. He was all cock-a-hoop when he put up his one 'pip' and we all had a celebration in the mess. He said he was to combine business with pleasure by visiting his sister-section in Hong Kong. Every day he kept in touch with us on his HF Transceiver until the Japanese also invaded Hong Kong, then on Christmas Day 1941 all went quiet on our pre-arranged frequency. We later learned he had been killed on that day.

At the end of December, 1941, the diesel generator and W/T receivers had been installed in our new reinforced concrete building and watch-keeping duties were transferred to this building. Lieutenant Commander McClelland now had to leave the W/T Station to take up duties at Combined Headquarters which had been established in Sime Road, Singapore.

As the Japanese bombers came over the island the Brewster Buffalo fighters made brave attempts to attack them but they were no match for the accompanying Japanese fighters and were shot down like nine-pins. The same fate befell the few Hurricane fighters which had recently arrived as reinforcements.

Each day brought the Japanese nearer and nearer to Singapore as they advanced through Malaya like a knife through butter.

The European civilians up country, mostly from the tin mines and rubber plantations, came southwards, across Johore causeway and down to Kappel harbour in the hope of getting away on any available ship. Their lives were more important to them than their personal cars which were left abandoned along the Bukit Timah Road.

Lieutenant Commander Sandwith then called for volunteers capable of driving a car to skirmish the Bukit Timah Road and return with as many abandoned cars as possible. Volunteers set off in the station car with jerrycans of petrol and later returned with all makes and sizes of cars including an ambulance. These were parked around the station perimeter. We were all conscious of the fact that the moment of truth was near at hand, but provided we survived and the cars survived, they were to be used for our own evacuation.

The Japanese advance brought them into Johore Bahru on February 8, 1942. During that evening, an aircraft with all lights on came flying low over the station football field. 'One of ours' I thought, and the next moment I was flat on my back from the blast of his bombs. It was a Japanese aircraft. His target was our 'next door neighbour' the Admiralty Oil Fuel Depot just across the roadway. Lieutenant Commander Sandwith came running over to me and asked 'Where was that, Chief?' 'Just over the way, Sir, he was after the oil tanks and missed, but you can bet he will be back' I replied.

For the past two months I had deserted my bed and slept on a hard bench in the W/T office with my shirt, shorts and shoes on in order to be immediately on tap for all emergencies. Later during the night of February 8/9, 1942 we were all rocked by a huge explosion. Just across the road there were flames soaring up about sixty feet or more into the air from the oil fuel tanks. Shortly afterwards Lieutenant Commander McClelland drove up from Headquarters, Sime Road and informed us that the Japanese were making landings in the marshes close to us and

to also expect paratroop landings. He then drove back to Headquarters.

We had already had a very hectic day on February 8, 1942, being shelled by the Japanese from Johore Bahru and bombed from overhead. With the exception of our Malayan operators the remainder of our Asiatic staff had deserted us. I think the last two days at RN W/T Station, Kranji can be best illustrated by the following extracts from the log book compiled at the time by our fine young RNZN telegraphists who were detailed as look-outs. Their observations were made from a wooden 'crows-nest' about 60 feet up the lattice mast:—

February 8, 1942

- 0800** Approximately 15 Japanese shells raked the station. One shell through the Warrant Tels. bungalow. One shell through the Police quarters. One shell through the junior W/T ratings' quarters. One shell through the junior W/T ratings' recreation room. Water main hit. Shrapnel on the old W/T building.
- 0845** Shelling eased a little. Fall of shot to the east near Mandai hill.
- 0917** Shelling commenced again in this direction. The Japanese have an observation balloon up over the Johore Bahru.

- 0924 Tubular W/T mast shot away together with several aerals. Shells falling close to the new W/T receiving building.
- 0929 Japanese 'plane circling overhead spotting fall of shot.
- 0930 Lull in firing. Lieutenant Commander Sandwith reconnoitres the damage.
- 0937 Bombs falling to the south alongside Bukit Timah road.
- 1003 Japanese are bombing and shelling Bukit Panjang village 1½ miles south.
- 1015 Spasmodic firing by our anti-aircraft guns.
- 1030 Japanese are after our artillery position south of the station.
- 1040 Japanese are shelling us again. Fall of shot near the Malay quarters and coolie lines. Some shells falling outside the rails.
- 1100 Shells falling outside the rails amongst the rubber trees.
- 1111 One shell through the engine room. Bombs or shells? straddle the Chief and POs' mess. Direct hit on the galley.
- 1114 Shells falling between the main gate and Warrant Tels. bungalow. One shell hit alongside the 'Ranch'.
- 1115 'Y' Building straddled.
- 1224 Stick of bombs, about 20, fall close to us.
- 1246 Shells falling between Kranji oil fuel depot and canal.
- 1317 Shells falling in vicinity of Bukit Mandai.
- The rest of February 8, 1942, continued in the same way until midnight with direct hits on the new W/T building, incinerator and an air raid shelter. Further aerals shot away.

February 9, 1942

- 0001 Activity by our artillery quiet. They are behind us to the south at Bukit Gombak.
- 0045 Bren gun crews close up around the W/T building. I am ordered to burn our confidential books in the traverse at the end of the building. The smoke almost blinds me whilst the operators are coughing and choking. It has now to be done in the open. I select a shallow pit on the uneven ground as left by the builders and continue to burn the confidential books in this. It makes me a nice target being silhouetted in the flames but the job gets completed and I cover the burnt remains with loose soil.
- 0100 Artillery and machinegun fire now in the vicinity of Johore Strait. From now until 0800 artillery fire alternated with the Japanese bombing us. It is difficult to make observations owing to the smoke and flames emanating from Kranji oil fuel depot.
- 0855 Shell hit four feet short of new W/T building. Lookout withdrawn.
- 0900 Shells passing overhead.
- 0930 Quiet.
- 0956 Stick of bombs fall just south of station.
- 1004 Heavy stick of bombs fall much closer to us.

1030 approx. We receive orders from HQ Sime Road to evacuate the W/T Station.

Our remaining staff then proceeded to smash up the Telephone Exchange and diesel generator with sledge hammers, disconnect the W/T receivers and power packs with wire cutters and smash up the remaining gear with axes. The latter included an 18 gallon cask of rum which was smashed to the accompaniment of profane language directed to the colour and parentage of the Japanese invaders.

We did not want 'Lady' left to the Japanese. She had been our pet for several years and we were unable to take her with us. I carried a Service revolver and ammunition but did not have the heart to shoot her in cold blood. Instead, one of the new arrivals, a Second Lieutenant Royal Signals, shot and killed her. There was no time left to bury her as the Japanese were now advancing down the Bukit Timah Road a mile or so behind us.

We then packed the W/T receivers, power packs, spare valves, etc., into a lorry. Hurriedly I managed to smuggle my cases of butterflies amongst the stores.

The orders were now 'Every man for himself' to get to Singapore City and hope for the best, the mode of conveyance being the cars that survived the bombing and shelling. Many of them did not and were complete wrecks.

There was only one casualty amongst our remaining station staff, a Royal Signals driver being killed by a bomb splinter penetrating his kidneys.

Lieutenant Commander Sandwith, Surgeon Lieutenant Corcoran, Commander M. A. A. Lee, Warrant Telegraphist Larkman and myself stayed to see that everybody had transport and to leave the station with just what they stood up in. The Malay operators were told to return to their Kampongs and to immediately burn their uniforms on arrival. They were not under the Naval Discipline Act.

I had held back a Leading Telegraphist nicknamed 'Dash'. He had acquired this name by reason of being the owner of a speedy MG Midget car. His car was still in good order and I was to be his passenger.

Gathering together a clean shift of shirt and shorts, towel around my neck and with soap and shaving gear in my pockets 'Dash' and I set off for Singapore City. All our kit and personal possessions had to be left behind.

Disconsolately we had a last look at the White Ensign flying above the main gate, then making a detour through the rubber plantations came out on to the Bukit Timah Road near Bukit Panjang. The officers followed behind us. No more now could Kranji W/T station 'Speak to the World'.

Kranji oil fuel depot was burning away with clouds of black smoke filling the sky behind us

whilst ahead of us Normanton oil fuel depot was suffering the same fate.

We passed our troops marching up to the front line behind us which gave us a queer feeling of being 'guilty of ratting' yet we were carrying out our orders. It must be left to the historians to figure out who were the guilty ones for this disaster, whether they be Diplomats, Politicians, Admirals or Generals.

Arriving in Singapore City a Naval patrolman directed us to the Oranje Hotel which had been taken over as an emergency shepherding station for shore based Naval personnel. Here we spent the night sleeping on horse hair hammock mattresses laid out on the floor.

On February 10, 1942, the last of Kranji and Suara W/T Station staffs were driven into Keppel harbour to board the destroyer HMS *Scout*. I went along with 'Dash' in his MG Midget car. Careering about the streets were ambulances with their alarms clanging as they made hurried journeys taking civilian casualties to hospital. Women and children were crying as they sat on the roadside by the ruins of their shops and homes.

Arriving on the quay I asked 'Dash' what he now intended to do with his car. 'Ditch it in the drink' he replied. There was a hospital ship berthed ahead of HMS *Scout* taking on wounded Servicemen. The stretcher bearers were Australian soldiers. I suggested to 'Dash' that he may as well give it to one of the Aussies. I called to one of them 'Hi, cobber, want this car?' 'Too right, Pommie!' he replied, and then taking possession he wheeled it away from the edge of the quay.

At the time, the whole situation was fantastic! The Japanese bombers were overhead pounding the island unmercifully. The anti-aircraft guns in the harbour were letting rip at them right alongside of us. The static gun emplacements, installed primarily to fire seawards were training their guns and firing inland in an arc as far as they could train. It was bedlam!

Whilst waiting on the quay for orders to go aboard, an RN van with CPO Tel Gardner in charge, drew up alongside HMS *Scout*. 'Hello George, are you coming with us?' I asked. 'No Herbert' he replied, 'I've got to see this load of Rear Admiral Spooner's wines and spirits safely aboard and then return to Sime Road'. 'Well George', I said, 'If tomorrow comes it will be my birthday and if you can spare a bottle for me I will be pleased to drink his health'.

After he had got the load of wines and spirits aboard, minus one bottle of wine, we both shook hands, wished each other the best of British luck and then went our separate ways.

CHAPTER 4

THE LUCKY ONES ESCAPE

To be continued

RN W/T STATION, KRANJI, SINGAPORE 1939-42

by Herbert W. Radwell

CHAPTER 4

The Lucky Ones Escape

On the quayside there were several Godowns or Godongs (Warehouses). These were well stocked with all kinds of merchandise and were being patrolled by armed British soldiers. Their duty was to see that there was no looting.

After getting the W/T Station stores unloaded and put onboard, we received orders to embark. No special arrangements had been made to accommodate us. Everything was being done to evacuate us on an emergency basis and we just had to take pot luck.

Down below on the mess deck the shelves were well stocked with tinned foods, chocolates and cigarettes. The cigarettes were the American brands 'Phillip Morris', 'Lucky Strike' and 'Camel' which were all popular brands in Singapore. From this, I surmised that 'Jolly Jack' had played cat and mouse with the guards and looted all this from the Godongs.

HMS *Scout* let go from the quayside in the late afternoon of February 10, 1942. Singapore looked a most pitiful sight from seawards. The whole island was enveloped in a pall of black smoke rising from the burning oil fuel tanks, accompanied by the crashing and flashing of bombs and shells. Despite what the powers that be had tried to have us believe, this outpost of Empire was fast approaching its doom. We remained stoical about our departure. Our feelings, if any, were being sorry for those left on the island to fight to the bitter end.

HMS *Scout* had been ordered to sail for Batavia, Java, where there were some British merchant ships available and ready for the homeward journey. On board there were insufficient cups, plates and cutlery to issue to the evacuees. Myself, I used a bayonet in the triple role of tinopener, knife and fork and eating and drinking direct from tins. We evacuees all slept on the hot steel upper decks, fully clothed, and using our caps as pillows. The ship had been warned of Japanese submarines operating in the Banka Strait. By steering a zig zag course, and with good fortune, she arrived safely at Batavia on February 12, 1942. The previous day, my birthday, I shared the bottle of wine with Kranji staff whilst I received 'sippers' from their tots of rum.

The RC Chaplain, Father Cunningham, had already arrived in Batavia and was at the quayside when we arrived. As I stepped off the gangway he came over and gave me a hug saying, 'Glad to see you are all safe Chief!' and then went around shaking hands with all those he had met before in Singapore. Evacuees then transferred immediately to SS *City of Canterbury*. Having boarded SS *City of Canterbury* I was allotted a four-berth cabin to be shared with three other Chief PO's. Before the ship sailed an RN Paymaster came aboard and exchanged our remaining

Straits currency for sterling. My naval PO savings bank book, together with hundreds of others, had been left behind in Singapore Naval Pay Office. I had memorised its serial number and had recorded it with indelible pencil on my left shoe when I left Kranji. I knew I would have to quote it later when making my claim to savings headquarters.

In company with a few other merchant ships we sailed the same day, down through the Sunda Strait and out into the Indian Ocean bound for Colombo and Bombay. We were escorted by one of our 'E' class destroyers and an RIN sloop. That night I had the best night's sleep I had had for over two months. Three days later, Sunday, February 15, 1942, we learned that Singapore had officially capitulated to the Japanese. The voyage to Colombo was uneventful. The majority of Kranji and Suara W/T Station staff were under the impression that they were UK bound, but after only a few hours in Colombo it transpired that only those who had served in the Far East for over two years were to continue the journey. The rest had to join Colombo W/T Station as this Station now had to combine the duties of Kranji W/T Station.

It was now almost three years since I set sail from Southampton for the Far East. My skin had tanned to the colour of mahogany and at times I began to wonder if I was a native of those parts. It gets one that way after a time, when England and home seem to become a vague memory. Only a few of us who had been away for over two years continued the journey aboard SS *City of Canterbury* up to Bombay. Here we disembarked and were accommodated in a second class hotel not far from the General Hospital and Railway Station.

Our first trip into the town was to find the nearest Post Office and send home 'safe and well' cablegrams. It did not take many nights at this hotel for us to find out that we had uninvited guests, bugs! We felt there would be no justification in complaining about this, after all, we were lucky to be alive and free whilst the thousands of Servicemen left behind in Singapore had otherwise been killed, wounded or taken prisoner. On the second day of our stay at the hotel we were visited by a CPO writer RIN. He had been officially sent to direct us to the Dockyard pay office to receive our pay to date and allowances for the loss of kit. On the way to the Dockyard our guide asked me if I would like a number two serge suit made to measure. 'I can get it made cheaply,' he said. I sensed he was after making some 'cumshaw' for himself, but told him I would like to have one made. After receiving my pay and allowances he took me along to the Dockyard sail loft where Indian tailors sat crossed legged on the floor whilst cutting out and machining suits. Speaking Hindustani, he beckoned one of the tailors over to measure me up. I had lost about a stone in weight since leaving home and asked for allowances to be made as I hoped to put on weight during the journey home. Two days later the CPO writer delivered my suit to the hotel. I asked no questions, paid up and thanked him, and he went on his way.

I had a number one cloth suit made by a naval outfitters in town and also bought a suitcase and warm under clothing in readiness for the homeward journey.

During my stay in Bombay I witnessed the most appalling living conditions I have ever seen anywhere. In this prosperous and busy seaport town there were literally thousands of homeless natives. The pavements at night were impassable in places where these hopeless souls had settled down to sleep. They were on the whole a mixture of rickshaw-coolies, labourers and beggars. In the day time beggars were to be seen in every street. Some of them were deformed and in an advanced state suffering from disease and walking about on all fours in monkey fashion. Some had self-inflicted wounds, uncleansed and swarming with flies. I was to learn it was common practice for beggars in India to sandpaper their shins to encourage infections and gain the sympathy of passers-by. In contrast there were rich Indian merchants driving around in cars with their bejewelled women folk dressed in expensive silk saris.

At the railway station I observed the trains coming and going crammed full of passengers, not only in the carriages but also on the roofs and running boards. Indian railways seemed to me, to use a contradictory phrase, organised chaos.

Many civilian evacuees from Singapore had been accumulating in Bombay awaiting passage back to UK. An enquiry bureau was set up where the names of daily arrivals were posted up in the windows. After a fortnight's stay in Bombay we learnt that passages had been booked for the naval ratings and a large number of civilian evacuees from Singapore aboard the P and O liner *Strathnaver*. On March 14, 1942, the ship sailed out of Bombay. Getting clear of the harbour speed was increased to seventeen knots and so began our zig zag course down to Capetown. Admiralty pattern lifebelts had been issued to the naval ratings as part of our kit whilst we were in Bombay. We wore these around our waist day and night. They were fitted with a rubber nozzle protruding at the front and could be inflated by the mouth if the need arose. The civilian passengers were issued with the ship's lifebelts made of canvas and cork. Little did we know when we set sail that we were to be onboard for five weeks before our journey was ended.

In time of war the Admiralty is responsible for routing Great Britain merchant ships at sea. Their general W/T callsign is GBMS. Messages for these ships are transmitted from Rugby W/T Station on both LF and HF. The merchant ships have therefore to keep a listening watch on Rugby W/T Station to intercept any message which may affect them, particularly if it concerns a change of route.

I was really looking forward to a trip ashore when the ship arrived at Capetown. I had never been down to South Africa before and was hoping that this occasion would afford me the opportunity to visit another country on my already long list. Unfortunately it was not to be. A suspected case of small-pox broke out onboard and therefore all shore leave was cancelled.

At Capetown the ship took on a cargo of copper ingots and then proceeded up the West coast of Africa to Freetown. Again there was no shore leave. There was not much for us to do onboard except walk the decks, eat, drink and sleep. Some of the 'wide boys' got out their crown and anchor boards and collected the cash from the 'mugs' who were foolish enough to gamble with them.

Leaving Freetown our route took us out westwards beyond the Azores, then up the coast of Canada and Newfoundland. We eventually altered course to the east off the coast of Labrador. This route had been dictated by Admiralty and was to keep us clear of the German U-Boats operating in the Atlantic. Maintaining a speed of seventeen knots and zig zagging across the North Atlantic we eventually arrived safely at Glasgow on April 23, 1942. It was now exactly three years and one day since I left Southampton for the Far East.

I and a few other ratings took the night train from Glasgow Central to London and Portsmouth and arrived in RN Barracks a.m. on April 24, 1942. Here we had to undergo a medical check up before receiving payment and proceeding on leave. Strangely enough,

I met 'Birdie' Chapman, ex HMS *Aphis* gunners yeoman, right then and there in the Sick Bay. 'Hello, Birdie, what are you doing here?' I asked. Smiling all over his face, he replied, 'Oh, I stopped a packet in the chest and shoulder on the *Aphis*, 'How about Frank Arnsworth?' I asked. 'He was killed during the action,' he replied. I observed 'Birdie' was wearing an uncommon medal ribbon which I did not immediately recognise. Pointing to it, I asked, 'What ribbon is that "Birdie"?', 'Oh, it's just another "Gong",' he replied. Checking up later I discovered it was the Conspicuous Gallantry Medal. The records show that there were only 179 of these medals awarded during the two world wars.

My wife and daughter had left Portsmouth and had returned to our home town of Winchester during my long absence, and so, after the medical check-up and drawing some long overdue pay I proceeded to Winchester for a spot of leave. All my relatives and friends were pleased to see me back safe and sound. Then I learned that my second youngest brother (**Kenneth Roy Radwell**, his initials were in honour of our Father's old Regiment. The **Kings Royal Rifles**) had been taken prisoner in North Africa and was now in a Prisoner of War camp in Italy. He was serving in the Hon. Artillery Company.

Had it been peace-time I would have been entitled to six weeks' leave after having been abroad for three years. As it was, all I was given was twelve days 'Survivors' leave and then packed off to Ayr, Scotland, to instruct young 'Hostilities only' ratings in the profession of becoming trained Telegraphists RN.

However, 'Tiadapa', I was one of the lucky ones!

A.R.