

## Medical evacuation on the Kwai Noi River, 1943

Peter Winstanley

IN 1942–1943, more than 61000 prisoners of war (POWs) of the Japanese laboured to build the Thai–Burma railway. A large group called “F” Force, comprising 7000 men (3400 British and 3600 Australians), laboured on the northern section of the railway in Thailand. With the exception of the “coolies”, this force had the highest death rate of the groups sent to Burma and Thailand.

This is an account of three barge trips down the Kwai Noi River, Thailand, to evacuate 230 sick POWs from the vicinity of Takanun to the hospital camps of Wanyai, Chungkai and Kanchanaburi in July and August 1943.<sup>1</sup>

In the book *Through*, about the 8th Division Signals,<sup>2</sup> there is reference to the evacuations:

On the 25th July 1943 the Nips decided to send a batch of the “heavy sick” down the river to a hospital camp, and a party of eighty ORs [other ranks] and Major Parry left Tarkanoon... On 16th and 31st August further parties were dispatched down the river... In dispatching these forces, the Medical Officer, Capt Mills, always endeavoured to send the very worst cases, and would prepare a list in order of sickness. Unfortunately, the Nipponese in their usual fashion frequently came along and picked at random the sick who were to be transported. The Nips, of course, would make their selections by more obvious methods, thus, if a man had a bad sore on his leg, he could quite easily be sent, whereas a man who was dying from dysentery or cholera, or some less obvious complaint, could easily be left behind to work.

Captain (Doctor) Roy Mills also records these three evacuation parties. His diary entry of 16 August reads, “We got away another 80 unfit men by barge down the river”.<sup>1</sup>

Lieutenant Gerard H Veitch had brought a party of men from the north to Takanun a few days before the 31 August evacuation. His diary entry of 31 August reads,<sup>3</sup> “Up at 0630. Carried a stretcher down to the

barge. Saw the evacuees go. Saw Roy Mannion and Simcock, both looking perfectly fit. Don’t know why they are going down the river”. Captain Roy I Mannion was a dentist and about 39 years old at the time. The transportation of Mannion and Simcock tends to support the assertion in the extract from *Through* that the Japanese did not evacuate sick people according to medical need.

Lieutenant Frank Nankervis (VX38088 2/29 Battalion) was one of the party evacuated on 16 August from the Takanun area to Chungkai, and subsequently to Kamburi (Kanchanaburi). I prepared the following summary of the trip from the Takanun area to Chungkai and subsequently to Kamburi after discussions with Frank.

- The evacuees had to walk (shuffle) from the hospital huts to the barge (which was some distance), being aided by an orderly or a mate. Some were carried on stretchers.
- Frank’s recollection is that there were 50–60 prisoners on the barge. Most evacuees were not in any condition to identify any but close colleagues. They were grateful to be leaving that hellhole. Given their degree of sickness, many of the evacuees frequently had to hang over the side of the barge to relieve their discomfort. Some did not survive the journey.
- Known to be on the barge as patients were Lieutenant F W Nankervis, Sergeant A H (Fred) Hughes (NX26051 2/12 Field Coy), Signaller Max D Smith (NX29700), Private Rex Marshall (NX8376 2/3 Motor Ambulance Convoy) and Padre Michael Patrick Dolan. (With patience, many more could be identified from Mills’s diary.<sup>1</sup>)
- As best as he can recall, Frank estimates the size of the barge as about 40 feet by 8 feet, with only about 2 feet of freeboard.
- The barge was towed downriver. As it was the monsoon season, the river was flowing fast and the barge often floated sideways, ahead of the tug. Those patients who were in a good enough condition to be aware of the circumstances must have been concerned. Many would not have been able to appreciate the beauty of the river.
- There was one overnight stop. This was probably at Tarsao, where Sgt Hughes may have been taken off to go to Wanyai hospital camp (a short distance away). Dolan also was intended for Wanyai. Some 4 Anti Tank men (Frank says they were from Numerkah in Victoria) were at Tarsao, and one of them was dying.

*This article was prepared by Peter Winstanley following telephone discussions with Frank Nankervis and Mrs Stephanie Bladen (the daughter of Sgt Fred Hughes) and study of the book Doctor’s diary and memoirs by Roy Mills. Mrs Margaret Webster, niece of Max Smith, provided copies of the letters by Rex Marshall and assisted in preparing the article.*

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- Frank met with his former batman from 2/29 Battalion, Bill Forrester, who was dying. Forrester gave him his only possession — a comb with several broken teeth. Forrester died at Kamburi on 17 October 1943.
- All got off the barge at Chungkai. Frank was the only one to stay there. The others moved on to Kamburi by rail. At Chungkai, Frank had contact with an outstanding Canadian Medical Officer, Captain Jacob Markowitz, who had been captured in Singapore while serving with the Royal Army Medical Corps.
- Signaller Max Smith died at Kamburi on 7 October 1943.

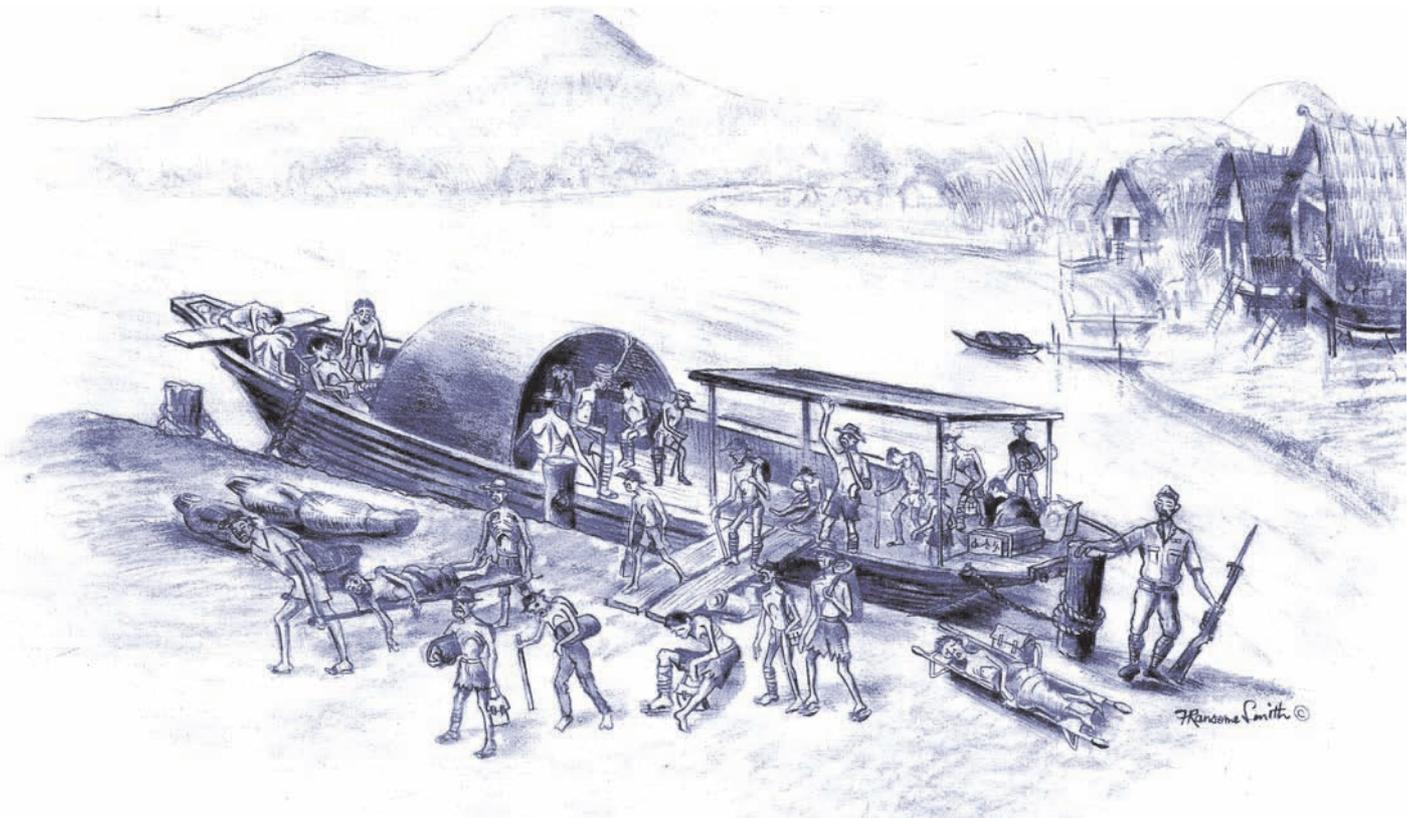
I am indebted to Mrs Margaret Webster, the niece of Max Smith, for providing copies of two letters which had been written by Rex Marshall in 1969 to her late father, Rev T G Smith, about Max Smith. The letters tells much of the conditions which these men endured and about the barge trip on 16 August. Relevant extracts are below. For clarity, some unrelated matter has been removed, some punctuation has been added, and some paragraphs have been reordered. This was kindly done by Margaret Webster.

One morning I met up with Pastor H A Brown of the Cootamundra Baptist Church. Among talk of Leeton,

my birthplace, my POW holiday came up and the name of Max Smith, ex 8th Div. Sigs. I was telling [him] of this chap that I saw slowly head home, not happy, but a day or two before he lost consciousness he affirmed to [me] that he still wanted to be a missionary and, I gathered, back to the jokers that were not throwing the home comforts about at the time (ie, the Japanese). I was telling at breakfast how Max still wanted to be a missionary, [and,] miserable as he was in the flesh, stuck to the resolve as he gradually lost ground. He and I were the only Christians alive at the time in that little party of sick.

I joined 2/3 MAC with 6 Christians, Frank Tyas (Baptist), Bruce Gostellow (Methodist), Jim Sutherland (then a Presbyterian, now Evangelical Anglican), Brian Hutchinson (then Brethren, now Anglican Minister) and the brother (?) and I, (who) went back to the world. We were from the 8th Field Ambulance. John Ridley was our Militia Chaplain.

I first met Max in Changi through other Christian contacts, forget how. We were herded up in the first F Force working party after 15 months in Changi to near Bangkok and then marched 15 nights up into the jungle near the border near Burma. There were 600 in that advance party, sleep every third night (two nights'



This sketch was drawn from memory in 2006 by Fred Ransome Smith (Lt Fred [Smudger] Smith, 5th Suffolks).

Fred Smith has two books of sketches based on his POW experiences. These can be purchased from him, 29 Seymour Grove, Brighton Beach VIC 3186 (\$18 each, including postage).

march), too hot to sleep on the ground in the heat of day, two rice only meals and a little of what we could trade for in the villages for the first few days. Two hundred and eighty of the 600 completed that march. Some dropped out and the Thais got them for their boots. Then the other parties made our number up to 600 again and we were a bridge gang with a little rice and onions only to eat. Then the wet season hit us and we starved, died and worked and walked, and cholera, dysentery, malaria and the lot hit us. Max was the only Christian I knew. I had left my mates behind in Changi through speaking out of turn against the officers robbing us of our due share of food.

[There were] about 80 going to work, 240 lying there, and one day the Japs said 80 men could go downriver if we could walk to a barge. Max and I crawled up the slopes and walked on the flats. Some of the 80 on the list could not get to their feet. There was a Presbyterian private, made Padre, also with us. He later died on food; his body could not take [the unaccustomed food].

I led Max into a camp near Kamburi, 30 odd miles from Bangkok, barefoot, trouserless, dysentery, beriberi, no control, not happy. Who could be? It was each man for himself and his mate.

Max had a pair of cotton trousers at this Chungkai camp on the big, beautiful river near Kamburi village. We sold these for him, gave him a dollar or two [for food], but his body could not take it. They were taking 1½ gallons of water out of his stomach a day before he died, so reports said, lying on some low bamboo flooring. [There was] plenty to eat, but all stews [were] rough on the bowels. Some bodies could take the food, some could not.

A day or so before he died I asked the question about still wanting to be a missionary. He was not happy in the flesh, but he still had this resolve. No pain, just

gradually dropped into unconsciousness as so many others did. His death was classed as debilitation and beriberi.

I was in one hut of 120 later on and about 90 could not take the food. [Their] bodies had weakened too far up the rail in the jungle or on the Burma railway.

I see mentioned in my old Daily Reading [notes] which I scribbled on those years ago, out of the 3074 deaths of the 7000 in F Force, about 1040 dead were Australians, the rest English. Two were Padres, two were officers (one drowned himself, one committed suicide — he was sick when we carried him up and the ORs got the hiding). The record I got at the time was 3068 odd deaths compared with six commissioned officers.

It was the circumstances of the common bond in Christ that brought us together, but Max had his 8th Div. Sig. mates. We were mates from the Christian angle or bond. If some of your friends ever go to Japan via Bangkok there is a big cemetery near Kamburi about 30 miles by bus. Max had a Christian burial there. It was no jungle death among the wild pigs, a peaceful passing into Life Eternal in Christ, but not triumphant in the flesh. [Signed] Rex.

## References

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2. Jacobs JW, Bridgland RJ. Through: the story of Signals 8 Australian Division and Signals A.I.F. Malaya. Sydney: 8 Division Signals Association, 1949.
3. Veitch GH. War diary and recollections whilst overseas with the 2nd A.I.F.: January 1941 – October 1945. Paynesville: G H Veitch, 2005. [Available from G H Veitch, Parkridge Retirement Village, 22/5 Canal Road, Paynesville, VIC 3880.]

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