

I STAYED BEHIND AS LONG AS I COULD IN THE HOPE THAT I WOULD HEAR FROM MY HUSBAND BUT THERE WAS NO NEWS. I HEARD LATER THAT HE HAD BEEN SHOT IN THE HAND BY A SNIPER AND WAS EVENTUALLY TAKEN PRISONER.

ON THURSDAY, 12TH FEBRUARY 1994 I LEFT THE PLACE WHERE I WAS STAYING, CARRYING A SMALL SUITCASE I HAD PACKED TO MAKE THE 11 MILE HAZARDOUS TRIP TO THE TOWN CENTRE, DIVING INTO DITCHES DURING AIR RAIDS, HITCHING A LIFT IN AN AMBULANCE, RIDING IN AN OPEN RICKSHAW AND ALSO WALKING PART OF THE WAY. I FINALLY GOT TO THE PIER, WHERE I FOUND HUNDREDS OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN, WHO HAD WAITED FOR DAYS IN THE HOPE OF A LAST MINUTE EVACUATION. IT WAS INDEED A VERY DISTRESSING SIGHT.

AT 2PM THAT AFTERNOON WE GOT WORD THAT A CONVOY OF SHIPS WOULD BE LEAVING THAT EVENING. I WAS HELPED ON TO A PACKED LORRY AND WE WERE DRIVEN TO ONE OF THE MAIN WHARFS. WE HAD NO PROTECTION FROM THE PLANES THAT COME OVER BUT WHEN IT WAS 'ALL CLEAR', I SCRAMBLED ON TO AN OPEN BOAT AND WAS THEN HAULED ABOARD A CHINESE OWNED COASTAL STEAMER WHICH HAD BEEN REQUISITIONED BY THE ROYAL NAVY AND RENAMED "HMS GIANG BEE". THIS VESSEL WAS NOT EQUIPPED TO ACCOMMODATE THE 300 MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN WHO HAD FOUND THEIR WAY ON BOARD. HAVING BEEN A CARGO SHIP, THERE WERE NO PASSENGER CABINS, LITTLE DECK SPACE, BUT PLENTY OF ROOM IN THE CARGO HOLDS.

ALTHOUGH THE ADMIRALTY GAVE OUT THE ORDER THAT NONE OF THE SHIPS SHOULD LEAVE THAT NIGHT ON ACCOUNT OF THE MINEFIELDS IN THE INNER HARBOUR, OUR CAPTAIN DISREGARDED THEIR INSTRUCTIONS AND WE SET SAIL AT 9PM. AS WE SAILED PAST THE WATERFRONT OIL INSTALLATIONS AND BUILDINGS WERE ABLAZE. AFTER A COUPLE OF HOURS WE WERE WELL OUT TO SEA.

THE NEXT DAY, FRIDAY 13TH, THE JAPANESE PLANES CAME OVER THE SHIP IN WAVES. WE WERE FORTUNATE THE FIRST TIME THEY UNLOADED THEIR BOMBS BUT WHEN THEY CAME AGAIN AFTER 1PM THEY MADE A DIRECT HIT AND CAUSED DAMAGE TO THE ENGINE ROOM. THERE WERE SEVERAL FATALITIES. I DID NOT EVEN REALISE THAT I HAD BEEN HIT IN THE BACK BY SHRAPNEL IN SIX PLACES. THESE INCIDENTALLY WERE REMOVED A FEW WEEKS LATER.

THE SHIP SAILED ON BUT AT 6PM A SHOT WAS FIRED ACROSS THE BOW, THE CAPTAIN STOPPED AND SHORTLY AFTERWARDS SIX JAPANESE NAVAL VESSELS SURROUNDED US. THEY WERE UNABLE TO DECIPHER THE SIGNALS SENT OUT BY OUR CAPTAIN THAT HE WAS CARRYING WOMEN AND CHILDREN, WHO, WERE NON-COMBATANTS. IN FACT WE WERE TOLD TO LINE UP ON THE DECK. WE MAY HAVE HAD A CHANCE AS THE JAPANESE OBVIOUSLY INTENDED TO LOWER A BOAT AND SEND AN OFFICER TO LIAISE WITH OUR SKIPPER, BUT AT THAT CRUCIAL MOMENT TWO ALLIED PLANES FLEW LOW OVER AND THE JAPS CHANGED THEIR MINDS IMMEDIATELY. WE DID NOT KNOW WHAT WOULD HAPPEN NEXT. IT WAS ALMOST AN HOUR AND DARKNESS HAD SET IN, A PITCH-BLACK NIGHT IN FACT, WHEN THE CAPTAIN GAVE THE ORDER TO ABANDON SHIP. THERE WERE ORIGINALLY 4 LIFEBOATS, EACH CAPABLE OF HOLDING 30 PERSONS, BUT WITH THE EARLIER BOMBING TWO OF THE LIFEBOATS WERE BADLY HOLED. CONSEQUENTLY THOSE WHO GOT INTO THEM LOST THEIR LIVES.

I SCRAMBLED INTO A LIFEBOAT WITH 47 OTHERS - 9 WOMEN AND TWO CHILDREN, THE REST WERE MEN OF DIFFERENT NATIONALITIES, INCLUDING 4 CHINESE CREW MEMBERS. WE HAD NO COMPETENT NAVIGATOR SO ROAMED THE SEAS FOR 5 DAYS WITH A MEAGRE RATION OF A BISCUIT PER PERSON AND A LITTLE WATER.

WE EVENTUALLY LANDED ON A MANGROVE SWAMP, NO HABITATION, NOTHING BUT BRACKISH WATER, AND A BEACH INFESTED WITH SANDFLIES. WE DID NOT DARE LIGHT A FIRE IN CASE THE SMOKE WOULD BE VISIBLE BY THE ENEMY.

ON FEBRUARY 20TH WE SAW SMOKE IN THE DISTANCE AND AFTER SOME FRANTIC WAVING IT TURNED OUT TO BE A BRITISH MINESWEEPER "HMS TAPAH". THEY HAD SNEAKED OUT OF SINGAPORE ON THE DAY OF SURRENDER TO THE JAPANESE, 15TH FEBRUARY 1942. A BOAT WAS SENT OUT TO PICK US UP AND IT WAS HOPED TO TAKE US SAFELY TO BATAVIA (NOW KNOWN AS DJAKARTA), THE CAPITAL OF JAVA. UNFORTUNATELY ABOUT MIDNIGHT SEARCHLIGHTS PLAYED ON OUR SHIP, OUR CAPTAIN WAS ASKED TO STATE HIS NATIONALITY. WHEN HE STATED 'BRITISH' THE REPLY WAS 'FOLLOW ME' AND UNTIL 2AM WE WERE UNAWARE THAT WE WERE BEING ESCORTED ~~TO~~ THE JAPANESE NAVY. NAVAL GUARDS RUSHED ABOARD AND WE LEARNT WE HAD BEEN BROUGHT TO MUNTOK, THE MAIN TOWN OF BANKA ISLAND, FORMERLY PART OF THE DUTCH EAST INDIES.

AT 6PM, A CAPTURED RAF TENDER CAME OUT ^{TO} OF THE 'TAPAH' AND WE WERE BROUGHT ASHORE. WE WERE HERDED ALONG A PIER TO A CINEMA HALL AND FOUND IT CROWDED WITH AT LEAST 1,000 MALE SURVIVORS FROM THE VARIOUS SHIPS THAT GOT AWAY TOO LATE.

WE WERE TREATED ROUGHLY DURING THE 24 HOURS WE SPENT IN THE HALL. THE NINE WOMEN AND TWO CHILDREN WERE THEN MOVED BY TRUCK TO WHAT WAS GOING TO BE OUR FIRST INTERNMENT CAMP. THERE WERE HUNDREDS OF CIVILIAN MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN OUR NEW ABODE, OF COURSE WE WERE SEGREGATED FROM THE MEN. IT WAS A BUILDING ORIGINALLY HOUSING CHINESE COOLIES WORKING THE TIN MINES ON THE ISLAND; DIVIDED INTO DORMITORIES. IN EACH DORMITORY THE ONLY FURNISHING WAS A SLOPING CEMENT SLAB ON EITHER SIDE, WHICH LEFT A NARROW PASSAGE DOWN THE MIDDLE. THE SLABS WERE SO REMINISCENT OF THE DISPLAY FACILITIES FOR COD AND HADDOCK THAT THE WOMEN CHRISTENED THE PLACE "THE MACFISHERIES".

EACH DORMITORY WAS OCCUPIED BY 40 WOMEN, 20 LYING ABREAST ON EACH SLAB, WHICH WAS FAR FROM COMFORTABLE AS WE KEPT SLIDING SLOWLY TO THE FLOOR. OUTSIDE THE DORMITORIES RAN A DEEP DRAIN, WHICH SERVED AS A LAVATORY. IT WAS EMBARRASSING HAVING TO SQUAT IN PLAIN VIEW OF ANYONE WHO CARED TO LOOK, MORE SO AS THE JAP GUARD STOOD NEARBY. WATER CAME FROM ONE TAP WHICH COULD ONLY DRIP. THERE WAS A CONSTANT QUEUE. IF THE CAPS WERE EVENTUALLY HELD, THE TWO WEEKS WHICH WERE SPENT IN THE CODLIE BARRACKS WERE PURGATORY. ABLUTIONS WERE PERFORMED IN A CONCRETE TROUGH CALLED A "TONG". THE SMALL AMOUNT OF WATER AVAILABLE WAS ALREADY DIRTY.

THERE WERE ABOUT 600 PEOPLE HERE - CIVILIAN MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN SURVIVORS REPRESENTING SOME 47 SHIPS THAT WERE SUNK IN THE BANKA STRAITS, OFF THE COAST OF SUMATRA.