

Singapore Depot.
October, 1945
General Management,
M.I.M.C.Co., Ltd.,
London, W.C.2.

Dear Sirs,

Singapore, February 1942:

The following is a report of the circumstances under which the European staff (Messrs. D. Robertson and H. Thompson) left Singapore on the morning of 12th February, 1942; four days before it fell to the Japanese:

In January and early February daylight bombing of docks, wharves, and the waterfront section particularly, of the city had become practically continuous, and many businesses were dispersing away from these areas. A.R.P. authorities were also insisting on the removal of inflammable stores from these areas. As a result of this Head Office arranged to rent one of the C. & W. houses at 10, Holt Road (rent \$162/- per month; Depot rent reduced to \$50/-per month whilst 10, Holt Road occupied), and part of Depot stores was removed there under very difficult conditions.

Despite the above, and the war situation generally, Government continually reiterated that Singapore would not fall; large reinforcements were on the way, and the place would be held at all costs. Even as late as the 14th February the "Straits Times" repeated the Governor's statement that "Singapore shall not fall." I understand that by the 14th February the "Straits Times" was being turned out by Government. Government had evacuated Europeans from Penang before the Japanese reached there; this had aroused a storm of criticism from Asiatics whose relatives and friends had been left there to the tender mercies of the enemy, and it was generally felt here that the practical stoppage of European evacuation of males from Singapore was an anti-climax to the action taken at Penang. A Board was set up and no one could leave without permission of the Board.

Government had, about 1st February, indicated that a state of siege would exist at Singapore for some months, and had made available certain foodstuffs, rice, milk, etc., for purchase by the public, advising that whatever food could be obtained should be stored. By this time, however, the Japanese had reached the Johore Causeway, 16 miles from Singapore waterfront, and it was decided to send away Mrs. Robertson and Mrs. Thompson – both reached Australia safely after a very hazardous voyage. My first intimation that my wife had reached Australia safely was in December, 1943, about the same time that she first learned that I was interned in Sumatra – all I knew up to that date was she had reached Batavia safely.

Up to about 9th February male Europeans up to 55 years of age were not permitted to leave Singapore without permission from Mr. Justice Aitken's Committee, and prior to that most Europeans accepted what appeared to be the inevitable, i.e. – remain in Singapore during the siege. However, about the 10th February, and still despite Government protestations that Singapore would not fall, it was obvious that only a miracle would save the place, and only by a miracle would those still there get away safely if they attempted to do so; yet from then more or less official permission to leave was extended to anyone prepared to risk it.

In the meantime there appeared to be only one vessel in the docks (m.v. "Gorgon", A. Holt & Co.) and we completed our business with her on the 10th. All sorts and conditions of ships were, by this time, leaving with refugees, and it seemed obvious that during a time of siege no ships would be here and therefore beyond supplying E.S.D. material remaining in stores, no further useful work in servicing ships' W/T installations could be carried out.

Labour, transport and materials were extremely difficult to obtain and only at prohibitive cost – in fact it was impossible to get labour into the docks and wharves. The military were the only persons working at the wharves during the last week or so.

From Sunday, 8th February, events moved very rapidly. On the morning of this day the Japanese made a first landing on Singapore Island, and a continuous stream of re-inforcements landed during the succeeding days. By the 10th, as well as continuous bombing, shells were landing on the outskirts of the town, and infantry engagements were taking place within a very short distance of 10 Holt Road. For some time I had been acting as Supt. of Transport in the Medical Auxiliary Services at Raffles College, and was on duty from 7 pm on the 10th to 7 am on the 11th. I returned to my house in Nassim Road only to find it under shell fire. I thereupon proceeded to 10 Holt Road taking the remainder of my effects with me to add to the whole of my furniture and household effects (the same with some of Mr. Thompson's) which had been taken to Holt Road as the garage there was fairly substantial and could be locked up. By this time fighting was taking place very close to 10 Holt Road, and the military took charge of the houses in that neighbourhood. We had to get out, so grabbed mattresses, bedding, clothing, food and whatever valuables we could lay our hands on and proceeded to the office in Robinson Road. It seemed as though that was where we were to stay during the siege.

I think there is sufficient in the preceding paragraph to show that from first thing on the 11th, quick thinking and acting was very necessary. Whereas firms had a few weeks earlier moved out to so-called safe areas in the outskirts, they were now moving before the rapid Japanese advance, back again into their offices in the city and making arrangements to live there.

Early in the afternoon of the 11th, Mr. Thompson and myself having fixed, ourselves up at the office (he had come from his home – also under shell fire in the morning –

via 10 Holt Road), decided to take stock of our position. We came to the mutual conclusion that no object whatever, either in the Company's or country's interest, would be served by remaining longer in Singapore unless sufficient relieving forces arrived and this, from reliable information appeared to be impossible. We therefore decided to cable you asking for permission to proceed to Batavia to join, temporarily, Radio Holland's staff – the idea being that should, by some miracle, Singapore be relieved, we could return without much delay. We thereupon serviced you through C. & W., but immediately after doing so we realised that even as an urgent service there was little chance of getting a reply before all chances of leaving here had vanished.

After further consideration we decided to ask Mansfield & Co. if there was a vacancy on a vessel leaving for Batavia. We mutually agreed that if there was a ship we would join it; if there was no ship we would remain in Singapore. I may say it was a tremendous decision to take – we did not know whether to stay or leave, so left it to fate as above.

Mansfield & Co. had a ship called the "Redang" – an old Siam S.N. Co. vessel of just under 400 tons gross, built 40 years ago, speed 5 to 6 knots, carried cargo only. We obtained permission to leave for Batavia from Justice Aitken's Committee also from the Immigration authorities. My passport, which I managed to save (as well as my Identity card No. 160) is so endorsed. These formalities had been carried out in the early afternoon whilst awaiting word from Mansfield & Co. When we did receive word that evening less than half-an-hour in which to join the ship including launch hire which was extremely difficult to obtain. Twenty-four C. & W. men were on the same ship, and some of them who had not brought bedding, etc., to the office with them had to go aboard with the minimum of personal effects,

It should be emphasised that many people, including ourselves, were influenced by Government's re-iteration of the "Singapore shall not fall" slogan and much was made of the Governor's wife remaining here. When doubts arose towards the end it was too late to procure labour to dig holes or otherwise attempt to secrete papers and documents, etc. The streets were empty, except for fleeting glimpses of civilians hurrying from one shelter to another, and practically all labour refused to work outside. In the circumstances and in view of the urgent necessity of getting aboard the ship without delay, the depot was abandoned on the early evening of the 11th, Mr, Thompson and myself taking mattress, some food and a suitcase of clothing each. At the same time I gave the staff clerk an authority to dispose of E.S.D. lamps, batteries and other wasting assets, and told him to hide what papers he could. I learn, since my return, that beyond instructing the clerk to forward them details regarding this company, its officials, staff, stock, etc. the Japanese took no further action apart from clearing the staff from the premises. I understand the staff took what work they could find here and there during the Japanese occupation.

I would also mention that the Japanese had a very efficient, if drastic, way of ensuring that people did not work against their interests – I experienced some of it

myself. An intimation by the Japanese that anyone found with papers or other property owned by enemy subjects, after they had issued a warning that all such property should be handed over, would be punished severely was sufficient to discourage most of the local population from keeping anything belonging to Europeans. As a matter of fact possessing an authority as mentioned in the preceding paragraph was sufficient to bring upon the bearer third degree interrogation as a suspected enemy supporter.

Although we were rushed aboard on the evening of the 11th, the ship was held back for some Air Force personnel (who did not arrive) and did not sail until early on the morning of the 12th. The captain, a Danish subject named Rasmussen, aged apparently between 60 and 70, said the Naval authorities had given him a course to the entrance of the Banka Straits which took us right out to sea. Previously, so far as I know, small vessels, especially those with speeds of only a few knots, had been hugging the coast line. After we left, two launches containing deserting troops, mostly Australian, came alongside and boarded the ship after threatening the captain with rifles if he refused to allow them aboard. This brought the number aboard up to about 110, including about six women.

About 10 am the next day, Friday, 13th February, a Japanese seaplane flew over us and dropped one stick of bombs which near-missed. I guessed that the plane would communicate with other forces, either planes or ships, and interviewed the captain about provisioning lifeboats and also making up some sort of boat station list. Up to then nothing had been done except swing out a lifeboat which was lying chocked-up on the fore deck – this at the speed we were making could easily have been towed astern, When I went up to the bridge I found the captain with signal flags all over the place; I don't believe he was very conversant with international flag signals and was trying to sort them out. We got so far as a rough distribution of the people amongst the 3 lifeboats: C. & W. people with a few others in one, soldiers another, and the rest of the people and crew in the third -the 3 ship's officers to be one in each boat. To this the captain agreed and I was on my way down from the bridge when several Japanese destroyers appeared on the port bow and after, turning to starboard, they opened fire – the captain neither putting up the white flag nor stopping the ship.

I may say that I claim no particular credit for trying to prepare to abandon ship in an orderly manner, as nearly 20 years at sea, including the last war, Dardanelles landing and evacuation and two torpedoings, familiarise one with the perils of the sea. I am only sorry I did not take a more active part than I did, but I credited the captain with more efficiency than he proved himself to possess (I might also add that he was one of the first in the only boat which got away and saved his life).

After firing a few salvos and within 5 minutes of opening fire the ship was ablaze. Most of the people were forward where the third salvo landed. I was aft (the bridge ladder was on the after side) when the firing commenced and at once, with the assistance of several other people on the after deck, commenced to get the starboard quarter lifeboat (built to carry 17 passengers) into the water. I think most

of the people on deck who were left alive got into this boat (the only one to get away from the ship); the rest of the people either jumping overboard from the forward end of the ship, or being killed by shell fire.

I estimate that about 20 people were in the boat when we pulled away from the ship's side, and apart from a few burns here and there I managed to escape injury. We picked up another 13 people from the water until the boat was dangerously overloaded – amongst these was Mr. Thompson who was pulled over the stem of the lifeboat by one of the Danish members of the crew and myself. I saw him with lifebelt on paddling towards the boat and offered up a silent prayer in relief at what I thought was his safety, but as we prepared to lift him inboard, he said “be careful with my back side.” When we got him aboard we found that most of his left thigh was hanging out; there was a groove across his left forearm 1” deep and as straight and clean cut as a road cutting with the flesh all curled up, and his left leg was shattered at the ankle so that his foot would turn either toes pointing forward or backwards. I think the saltwater had stopped some of the bleeding, and he was then quite conscious. We made him as comfortable as we could and endeavoured to stop what bleeding was taking place, but it was obvious that unless we could get proper medical assistance within a short time, he would not survive his injuries.

We cleared the ship, which was blazing furiously down to the water line, about noon, and decided to make for the coast of Sumatra (which, incidentally, had the Naval authorities not sent us on a deep sea course, would have been much closer than it was). From then until we landed 26 hours later it was a constant battle with choppy seas and heavy swells; the boat was so overcrowded that continuous bailing was necessary and it was impossible to make sufficient room to hoist the sail. In fact, it was only with the greatest difficulty that we got at the fresh water barrel for a sip of water, which was all we had between leaving the ship and landing on the beach.

Mr. Thompson lost consciousness about 6 or 7 p.m.; before that he told me he had been hit whilst running aft and that a lot of people were killed on the foredeck including Mr. Rickwood of C. & W. His last words were about his wife and he thanked me – “thanks a lot” he said. It was a very unhappy moment for me – Thompson and I had worked together here for 10 years with perfect understanding. All through that night he was in his death throes: held in my arms to prevent him from dashing himself against the thwarts at each of the convulsive spasms, and not until ten o'clock the next morning did he change colour and pass away. He was gently placed overboard and four hours later we landed on the coast of Sumatra where there was, except for about a dozen coconut trees, nothing but mangrove swamps – no fresh water; no inhabitants. That night we slept on the beach but, despite the exhaustion caused by many cramped hours in the boat, everybody was up and patrolling the beach from about 4 am owing to the swarms of sandflies making further sleep impossible.

We took stock next day and found that our total food resources consisted of 10 tins of evaporated milk, half a barrel of fresh water and a small quantity of old ship's biscuits. Drastic rationing was introduced. Two parties left in an attempt to contact some settlement or estate; one proceeded up the coast for about 8 miles but found nothing but an endless succession of mangrove swamps, the other went up a small river close to where we landed and contacted a Malay fisherman who agreed to take up to Palembang for 50 guilders (actually by that time the Japanese had reached Palembang but we did not know it). We were to go up river next morning – Monday, 16th February, in two parties to transfer to the fisherman's prau, but when the first party arrived there the Malay had disappeared, and there were no signs of any other natives. Early that morning (Monday) a small ship had appeared off the coast and anchored at a spot about 2 miles south of our position. The ship did not appear to be an Allied vessel, and the majority were not in favour of either trying to board or attract its attention. However, when the party returned empty-handed from up the small river, the position was really serious: no food, no water and no signs of rescue and, to make matters worse, everyone by this time was so weak that even gathering the few remaining coconuts or cutting down the trees was an impossible task. We had had practically nothing to eat and very little to drink since breakfast on Friday and it was now Monday afternoon, so it was decided to risk the ship, which was still at anchor, being Japanese and go off to her rather than almost certainly starving to death on the beach.

We were relieved to find that the ship was the "Tarah," a Straits S.S. Co. vessel converted into a minelayer. The ship had anchored close up to the beach during the day to dodge aircraft, and from about 6 pm until daylight vain attempts were made to get the ship off the mud. The captain had gone in too close and at low tide was on the mud; apparently, there is only one tide per 24 hours in those parts, and the result was we did not get under weigh until about 5 pm on the Tuesday. This was probably a fatal delay as we might possibly have got through the notorious Banka Straits (where so many ships were bombed and captured) the previous night. As it was we hugged the coast right up to the entrance to the Straits, by which time it was dark, and then opened up to full speed (11 knots) on a course through the Straits. We had been going only one hour when a searchlight was switched on and swung round until its beam rested full on us, and shortly after a Japanese boarding party arrived.

We spent the night anchored off Muntok, essential parts of the ship's engines having been removed by the Japanese, and the next day (Wednesday, 18th February) were taken ashore and spent that night on a nice hard concrete floor in the local Cinema. I should mention that the "Redang" was abandoned as we stood up -my bag and mattress was on the fore deck and to have attempted to retrieve it would have meant almost certain death.

The next page (page 6) of this narrative – approximately 700 words – is missing.

coolie lines and the local jail, the latter had been damaged by Japanese bombers and most of roof was leaking. I was in the coolie lines, and we were between 600 and 700 services personnel, women and children and civilian men in accommodation intended for 240 coolies. We stayed here until the middle of March, living on plain rice with occasionally a little sugar or soup, and then moved to Pladjoe where we were accommodated in an attap-roofed building next to the Golf Clubhouse of the B.P.M. (Bataafsche Petroleum Maatschappij) Refineries. I should say that when leaving Muntok we were divided up; the services and women and children going to Palembang, and about 160 civilian males to Pladjoe.

At Pladjoe we were made to work unloading and stacking heavy iron pipes, boxes of cement, angle-irons, etc. for the oil refineries, Here we were given a little more food and were able to buy a few things. I was in the so-called hospital here (there were no doctors in the party) with suspected dysentery, but if it was dysentery it was only a mild attack because I recovered in about a week and, with the assistance of some extra tinned food I was able, to buy, I managed to recover some of my strength, I omitted to mention that before Mr. Thompson died he gave me the money (\$900/-) he was carrying with him to give to his wife – this money, with about \$600/- of my own, was undoubtedly a contributory factor to my coming out of this business alive – despite the fact that the exchange at times was as low as \$10/- to 2 Dutch guilders which was the only money the local people would accept (apart from what is termed “Japanese banana” paper currency). I have, since returning to Singapore, sent Mr, Thompson’s \$900/- to Mrs. Thompson at Melbourne.

After a month at Pladjoe only 20 or so of the 160 were fit for heavy work, so, in April, 1942, we were moved to Palembang jail where we joined about 200 Dutch civilian internees. This subsequently proved to be the best place (from the point of view of food) we were to strike in the whole of our internment. We did not get much meat, but received a good quantity of rice, beans and other vegetables, and lived in convict’s cells on concrete platforms with 2’ 2” of space to each man (65 centimetres was the Japanese regulation space for internees) for a matter of 8 months, when we were moved to a camp on the outskirts of Palembang. We were here joined by another 206 Dutch internees,

We remained in this Camp for 9 months, the food, all the time, deteriorating and the supplies of tinned food which we were sometimes allowed to buy became very scarce. The Camp had been hurriedly built; we slept on wood platforms over earth floors which flooded during heavy rain owing to poor drainage.

During the whole of our internment the Japanese supplied no clothing whatever; no toilet articles; no dental or optical facilities, and only permitted us to send 3 postcards in 3½ years, and I have reason to believe that two of these never got beyond the Japanese guard room of the Camp. We received a few letters -the first I received from my wife was the tenth she had written; we received no Red Cross parcels (which saved the lives of many P.o.W’s and internees in Germany), and we

received no visits from the International Red Cross.: The only thing the Japanese gave us was straw sleeping mats at long intervals.

In mid-September, 1943, we were suddenly told we were to leave almost immediately for an unknown destination. This turned out to be Muntok again, only this time it was the prison, not the coolie lines. The roofs had been repaired in a fashion and the accommodation was convicts' concrete floored cells. I was in a cell marked outside to house 35 native convicts – we had 60 in it – its size was 44 feet by 20 feet. It was here in Muntok where things commenced to be really grim – we had as many as six deaths in one day, and practically everybody had fever, beriberi or dysentery or blackwater fever. By this time our numbers had grown to about 900 by the addition of other Dutch internees; all packed into a prison built for about 250 people, with 10 conveniences or 90 internees to one convenience, so you may imagine what our living conditions were. We had several doctors who did what they could without proper medicines and instruments

We remained in Muntok for about 17 months, and early in February, 1945, were taken, under horrible conditions, a two days' journey by boat, train and lorry to the centre of a rubber estate about 10 miles north of Loebok Linggu in the centre of Southern Sumatra. I think that even the Japanese became concerned at the death roll in Muntok, and those who survived to reach Loebok Linggu were little more than walking skeletons – including myself, I could almost close my hand around my thighs. What saved me, apart from the fact that I refused to give in, was the fortunate circumstance that none of the diseases I contracted were of a serious nature.

The new camp turned out to be little, if any, better than prison until about June/July when all the more serious fever, dysentery and beriberi cases had either died or recovered – mostly the former. From then onwards, except for a favoured few, mostly Dutch, whose jobs in the Camp kitchen or other position allowed them to “handle” Camp rations before they were issued to the rank and file, it would undoubtedly have been a case of the survivors just waiting for some disease to carry them off owing to their terribly enfeebled condition. The limitation and restriction of food was definitely a deliberate policy of the Japanese to bring about the deaths of all internees in the course of time – deaths were attributed to fever, beriberi, etc., but in actual fact the major cause of every one was malnutrition. There was plenty of food in this area, as proved by the production of chickens, ducks, eggs, vegetables, beans and other foodstuffs. Immediately the armistice was announced on August 24th, 1945; the natives swarming into the Camp from miles around and trading with us for clothing, soap, mosquito nets, cigarettes, etc., which the Japanese had issued to us immediately after announcing the armistice – proving, incidentally, that all these goods were in their stores and could have been given us at any time previous to the 24th August. Amongst other things they gave us about 8 pounds of tinned butter each!

We remained at the Camp pending arrangements for repatriation and during this time had plenty of food, including some dropped by Liberators from Cocos Islands

on several days. The only drawback was that we had to cook it ourselves, and we were in no condition to do this. My turn arrived on September 18th. I left the Camp in the early morning by car to Loebok Linggu; from there by train to Lahat, and from Lahat via Palembang by air to Singapore, arriving about 5 p.m. This was done by the Royal Australian Air Force, and they carried out a splendid job in ferrying all the Britishers from our Camp, and the women and children from their Camp about two miles from ours. I must mention that although the women's camp was only two miles from ours, no visits were permitted; the briefest of notes only being allowed at very long intervals. On one occasion a wife in the women's camp with two young children asked to be allowed to see her husband in our camp just before she died, but the request was refused. I think I have taken up sufficient time and space without going into all the grim details of our lives in the various camps. We moved so often that we never had a chance to make gardens and grow vegetables on a sufficiently large scale. How those of us who survived managed to get through I don't even yet know for certain – it all seems a horrible dream in some past experience. I think in my case a lot of it was due to taking an active part in the Camp management; I was one of the leaders of the British Community in the camp, and finished up as the leader of seven sections comprising about 260 people, mostly Dutch – these I represented on the Camp Management Committee.

Singapore at present is all military. Transport, housing and food for civilians is difficult and very expensive. Since leaving hospital on October 4th, I have been sleeping at the office in view of my comparatively short stay here, but am still receiving treatment for beriberi and septic sores as an outpatient – the latter are improving, but the former will take some time to clear, so I am told.

I find my furniture all looted – not a stick is left, and my house has been seriously damaged and all the sanitary fittings stolen. I landed here with what I stood up in, and beyond a few items of army clothing I am managing on the barest minimum of personal effects until prices come down – I bought two pairs of ordinary white duck trousers \$18/- each, previous price \$2/50 each. This is typical of local prices at the present moment, and I may say that just before Singapore fell prices had also risen outrageously – although then it was a question of buying food not clothing; now it is both.

I feel I cannot conclude this without some reference to the local staff. In a sense I think we failed them – they relied on us for protection, and only a short while before the end one of them asked me if I thought we could turn back the Japanese and clear them out of Malaya. I assured him we could – I was sure that many Hurricanes were either here or close at hand, and so on – but all we did in matter of cold fact was to clear out and leave them to it, and I've since learned that Singapore was a shambles those last two or three days before it capitulated.

I should also like to express my appreciation of the consideration you have given to my wife during the years of my internment. I have not seen her since February 1st,

1942, but I am hoping the will be able to get here before long. My Mother died sometime I think in 1945 but I have had no details yet.

I trust the foregoing will serve to fill in the gap in my service record between February, 1942 and September, 1945,

Yours faithfully,
THE MARCONI INTERNATIONAL MARINE COMMUNICATION
COMPANY, LIMITED.

D. ROBERTSON,

Depot Manager.