FIVE MONTHS ON THE RUN

Charles Herridge tells his daughter, Jenny Norvick, how he eluded capture by the Japanese during World War 2

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Five months on the run

by Jenny Norvick

Sometime towards the end of July 1942, a motor boat wound its way up the wide shallow reaches of the Batanghari River through a monotonous landscape of low-lying swampy jungle. On board were four local Malays in police uniform, all carrying guns. One of them was standing guard with his rifle over an enclosure containing 4 white men. At the other end of the boat was a small family group, captives but not enclosed, a white man, a dark-skinned woman, a younger white man, a boy and a girl.

On a wide bend in the river, about 150 kilometres upstream, the boat reached its destination, the small Sumatran town of Jambi. It drew up alongside the wharf where a Japanese army captain and group of soldiers were waiting.

The Japanese captain grinned broadly at the bedraggled group of captives. 'Where have you been?' he asked, 'how have you managed to avoid being captured for the last 5 months?'

And that was the end of my father Charles Herridge's attempt to escape to Australia after the fall of Singapore in 1942.

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Charles thought that the captain's reaction was about as reasonable as they could have expected. Fifty five years later, he remembers the scene well. Aged 83, he has started writing down the main events in his life, 'before my memory goes', he says. As his daughter, I have reached the age where I am now interested in knowing and preserving the family's past. Our father has often told his children anecdotes about his escape from Singapore but none of us has ever stopped long enough to listen to the whole story. Now I have read his notes and talked to him about what happened.

Charles and his companions were captured on the coast of Sumatra, near the mouth of the Batanghari River. The trip up the river took two days. The boat stopped overnight at a Dutch-built customs post part-way up the river to wait for the incoming tide, necessary to make the river navigable to Jambi.

Charles Herridge thought of making a last ditch effort to escape.

'Our guard was quite lax. He kept disappearing to eat, go to the toilet or just go walkabout. He always left his gun by our enclosure, within reach.'

He suggested to the other three penned in with him that they could take over the boat. They were fit and strong and should have no difficulty overpowering their slightly-built captors.

But they weren't interested. After 5 months on the run, they'd had enough. Their leaky boats were no longer seaworthy and their food had run out, which meant a constant search for new supplies. Malaya, Singapore and Indonesia were all in the hands of the Japanese who had put a price on the head of white men; they had to keep moving to avoid being betrayed. If they escaped, there was really nowhere to go.

'We didn't know then that we'd be in prison for three and a half years; otherwise the others might have thought differently about it.'

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This wasn't the sort of future envisaged by Charles Herridge when, at the age of 25, he set sail from England in pursuit of adventure and career advancement in one of Britain's colonies in the Far East. In mid-1939, he'd arrived in Kuala Lumpur, Malaya, from London to take up the position of manager of the ironmongery department in the John Little department store.

When he left his home in London, Britain had been preparing for war. Shelters were being dug in the local gardens and parks.

But he did not leave because of the war. Like the British who settled in North America and Australia or who took postings in Africa and Asia, he left in the hope of finding a better life. After 11 years in the ironmongery and hardware business in London, first as an office boy and then as a salesman, he was keen to move into management but could see no opportunities in the foreseeable future in Britain.

He'd written away to several places, including South Africa, Nigeria and Australia. So when he saw a job advertisement in the Daily Telegraph from a company in Malaya seeking 'selling and store experience, preferably with a knowledge of hardware', he jumped at the chance.

He was one of five European men employed at the John Little store in Kuala Lumpur. Ironmongery was a rather misleading name for a grab-bag range of goods including hardware, crockery, cutlery and silver plate, perfumes, guns and ammunition, bicycles, books and lawnmowers. After he had been there a few months, the head of the food department took a job in the Malayan Civil Service, in the Customs Department, so Charles had food added to his list of responsibilities.

In September 1939, not long after his arrival, war was declared in Europe. Many men felt that they should return to Europe and fight for Britain. But, apart from pilots, they were all asked to stay in their jobs. Protecting the Malayan economy, particularly the production of rubber and tin was considered vital for the war effort back home. Charles had enlisted before he left Britain and in fact his call-up papers had arrived the day his boat sailed for Malaya. In 1940, he joined the Federated Malay States Volunteer force in Selangor and became Gunner Herridge of the Light Battery.

'This meant weekend camps, training in the jungle, training on guns at HQ. I also did a short spell with despatches and learned how to zoom around on a motorcycle. Then one day a man called Isaacs whom I knew socially approached me. He was with a signals unit and told me they were looking for a company quartermaster sergeant (QMS). He was the regimental QMS. Because I ran the food section in John Little, he thought I might like to try it out.'

Just after midnight on 8 December 1941, under heavy monsoonal cloud cover and in rough seas, the Japanese landed on the white sandy beaches at Kota Bharu on the northeast coast of Malaya. The country was ill-prepared for war. The decision-makers in Whitehall had grossly underestimated the fighting capacity of the Japanese and overestimated the impenetrability of the jungle as a barrier to overland invasion. The poorly-constituted, ill-equipped and under-trained regular forces sent to defend the area quickly collapsed in the face of well-trained and equipped Japanese who confounded their enemy with tactics unfamiliar in European conventional warfare such as the use of bicycles as a means of transport for the infantry.

Fifty-five years on Charles Herridge's memory of the timing and sequence of events is rather hazy, although particular events stand out vividly. The confusion and disarray, the realisation too late of the enormity of what was happening, the very suddenness of events fogged up the days so that they all ran into each other as the British administration reacted desperately to the unconventional and unexpected.

Around the time of the attack on Kota Bharu, all Volunteers were pulled out of their day time jobs to become full-time military personnel. Charles' job as company quartermaster sergeant with Signals, was to keep the company and its signals vans well-provisioned.

'We had five vans fitted up with transmitters and receivers, staffed by Volunteers from the Posts and Telegraphs all of whom knew morse code. Our vans went up to support the army which was now in retreat from Kota Bharu.'

Just over a month after the landing at Khota Baru, Kuala Lumpur became part of the retreat. The city was evacuated of military personnel and European civilians on 10 and 11 January 1942. The Japanese entered the city unopposed late on 11 January.

Charles remembers the movement south as a seamless, almost uninterrupted journey down the peninsula to Singapore. First came the order to shift camp to the town of Seremban, sixty miles south of Kuala Lumpur. Charles packed his big, heavy supply truck with all the supplies he could cram in and headed out of Kuala Lumpur when the Japanese were just five miles to the north at the Batu Caves Hindu temple complex. In Seremban he set up his supply depot again, only to be told to repack it the next morning and keep moving. From Seremban the unit headed for the coast at Port Dickson and took the coast road down through Malacca and into Johore. Just three days after their evacuation from Kuala Lumpur, they withdrew across the causeway into Singapore. Backed relentlessly onto the island by the invading force, they had not during their retreat ever encountered the enemy face-to-face.

Charles' truck had been harried on the way south, an exercise probably designed more to destroy morale rather than to eliminate the retreating cavalcade. A formation of Japanese bombers had sighted the slow-moving procession of vehicles near Port Dickson. One bomber set its sights on Charles' truck and chased it down the road. Charles jammed the truck under a tree at the side of the road, listening, waiting, as the bombs plummetted down. Fortunately for Charles they missed their target but not so fortunately they destroyed a Malay village nearby.

The unit set up its base in Singapore at Bukit Timah High School. The Japanese blitz against Singapore intensified. Formations of 27 bombers were regular visitors, dropping their cargo of bombs on military targets and on Chinese and Malay housing.

Against the odds, it was Charles' job to keep his unit provisioned. The signals vans were still supporting the frontline over the causeway in Johore and would come to Singapore to stock up with supplies. Charles seemed always to be one step behind the Japanese bombers in finding the supply depots.

'They tried to bomb my truck again, near Changi. We dived into a drain, just in time. You can hear bombs swishing as they fall. It's a dreadful feeling. You try to burrow into the earth. They landed just 50 yards away and wiped out a whole row of

houses. So much dust. And the sound of crying. Then the survivors came to life and raced away to find shelter from the inevitable next 27.'

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The last of the Allied forces retreated from the Malayan mainland onto Singapore Island on 31 January 1942, blowing the causeway up after their retreat to hinder the Japanese advance. From 4 February, a barrage of Japanese shells, launched from Johore across the narrow strait to Singapore, added to the destruction being wreaked by the incessant bombing and machinegun strafing.

In the early hours of 10 February, the Japanese began their landing on the northwest coast of the island. The impregnable fortress of Singapore, its big guns facing silently out to sea ready for the attack that never came, had no fortifications and only a thin line of troops on the Johore side of the island. Its front gate prickled with defences to repel the unwanted intruder but the back door was left wide open.

Just after the landing, Signals command and backup moved into the city of Singapore on the southeast side of the island and were quartered at the former Japanese school in Middle Road. The shells and bombs fell constantly.

No sooner had they moved than the major in charge of the signals battalion gave Charles instructions to load all the signals vans with supplies to go north. In those final days, the generals commanding Singapore gave many orders and counter orders as they tried to shore up the Allied position, only to give ground to the invading army.

'I grinned at this. He asked why I was grinning. "Well, we've just retreated and now we're going north! We only unloaded our supplies yesterday after coming south."

"How do you think I feel?" he said. "I haven't seen or heard from the brigadier for three weeks!"'.

The next day, Charles loaded the vans as ordered. As he worked, two officers from the battalion quietly approached him. They gave him some keys to a small runabout

and told him that they had impressed a junk down on the waterfront near Raffles Hotel. 'We want you to load the runabout with everything you can find, go down to the junk and take it over. You'll probably find a Chinese on board. Get rid of him, unload the van and stay put.'

'I was a bit mystified as I hadn't thought about escaping. But orders are orders. After the other vans were loaded and ready, I loaded the runabout with cases of biscuits, tins of corned beef and fish, and the kitbags of a number of members of the unit.'

One of the officers took Charles down to the wharves along the bomb-cratered, body-strewn streets, past the looters and the gutted and burning buildings, through the desperate crowds of civilians and military searching the docks for boats.

He took him to the junk and left him there with the van and keys. On board the junk was a New Zealand lance corporal from Signals, and a Chinese. Charles waved his revolver in the direction of the Chinese who cleared the side of the boat in one jump.

'The officers were organising for a group of them to escape. They'd got hold of maritime charts. They thought that if we were backed against the sea, they'd make a break for it. None of us really knew what was going to happen, that the surrender was imminent . Although we were pretty sure we'd had it.'

Charles doesn't remember the date he boarded the junk but it was probably around 14 February. On 13 February there had been a major military evacuation using every available craft in Singapore Harbour and around that time a number of officers commandeered and provisioned boats in case there was the British surrendered.

'We waited for the officers for 2 days. At first, there was a battle royal going on at an airfield nearby [Kallang Airfield]. Then it all went very quiet. And still the officers hadn't appeared. I told the New Zealander, Jim Lyng, that I'd go back and see what was happening. I went back up onto the docks to the van and found that the tyres and dashboard had been shot out. I didn't know what to do. I didn't really know Singapore, and the school was a fair distance from the docks. I went back to the junk

and discussed it with Jim. We'd come to the conclusion that the Japs had taken over. We decided we had no alternative but to move.'

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Since late January, boats carrying evacuees, escapees and deserters, dodging the airborne strafings and weaving a route through the minefields had been leaving Singapore Harbour. Large ships and small, passenger ships, military ships, yachts, launches, sampans, junks and rowing boats, anything that floated. European women and children were the first to go, many just before the final military retreat onto the island.

The military left from about 11 February onwards - those with permission or orders to leave, the demoralised who just ran away, and those who had no further work to do. Many had no idea how to sail or where they were headed. Many boats were sunk by the Japanese, many were shipwrecked, and some just disappeared.

The junk commandeered by Charles' superior officers was a sail-powered, 40-ton *tongkang,* or sea-going barge, used to transport timber and coal along the coast to Malacca. Jim Lyng had sailed yachts in New Zealand and it seems likely that he had been chosen by the officers for this skill just as Charles may have been chosen for his access to provisions.

Jim also had a Thai wife and 2 children who, because they were not European, had not been allowed a place on one of the evacuating ships. His commanding officer had told him that if he wanted to get them out of Singapore, he would need to organise it himself. When he and Charles decided to leave, Jim went ashore and brought them to the junk.

Singapore had capitulated to the Japanese at 2030 hours on 15 February, after which the guns and mortars of both sides fell silent. Charles and Jim set sail on 16 or 17 February.

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First they had to learn to steer the junk. Attempting to leave the wharf and turn the junk around, they sailed straight into a fence below Raffles Hotel and were wedged there for several hours by the ebbing tide. Eventually they floated free and made their way out of the harbour. The Japanese were still flying low over the harbour, strafing boats carrying white escapees. Charles put on his large straw coolie hat and he and Lyng's wife, Ma, stayed on deck, Ma with her dark face turned up to the planes. Thinking that the junk was occupied by locals, the Japanese left it alone.

By late afternoon, they had reached St John's Island, just off Singapore, and dropped anchor for the night. Immediately to the south, the islands of the Dutch-controlled Riau Archipelago were visible. Using the maritime charts procured by the officers, Charles and Jim intended to plan a route to Java, with the intention of rejoining the war there. Charles felt that he had not really had a chance to do his bit for the war as all his unit had done was to retreat.

By now their complement had increased by four men, all British regular army. Three of them had swum out to a stationary tanker in Singapore harbour, where Charles and Jim had found them. One, a Scotsman named Jock, had fought with the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, the only British unit to have trained intensively in the jungle and which had therefore been a mainstay of the British defence, such as it was. He had been part of the pipe band which had brought up the rear of the retreat onto the island. The other two, Alf and Bill, had been sent to turn the big guns around to face inland. This job completed, they had become separated from their unit.

The three of them scrambled on board carrying an enormous brass compass but unfortunately none of the sacks of rice with which the tanker was filled.

The fourth to be picked up was a youth, Ron, rowing a sampan, heading for Australia. They tied his sampan at the back of the junk for emergencies.

When they picked up the first three men, Charles and Jim quickly agreed that someone would need to be in charge. Charles, although senior in rank to Jim, had already handed the captaincy of the junk to the sailor. They formalised this

arrangement as the other 3 men came on board, with Jim in charge and Charles as his deputy. The larger group quickly adopted the practice of drawing lots for any activity to be undertaken.

As with many other small boats filled with groups hastily thrown together in the disarray of the final days, there were arguments from time to time about any proposed course of action, generally when Jim with an explorer's instinct and taste for adventure wanted to do something that Charles (and possibly the others) thought was risky and not necessary. Jim generally appeared to get his own way, possibly because he was the captain, or possibly just because it is difficult to resist the temptation of adventure.

Many other groups of escapers had the bottoms ripped out of their boats on reefs, died of thirst or starvation after being shipwrecked on uninhabited islands or after running out of food and water when they lost their way at sea.

That Charles and his companions survived was partly a matter of luck. But they were well-equipped and the group was fortunate in its composition.

The boat had been generously provisioned before it left Singapore. They had maps, weapons, food, clothes to barter with, cans to hold water and wartime gas capes to catch rainwater and funnel it into the cans.

Jim Lyng, older than the others, knew how to sail; he'd been a diesel engineer at a Thai tin mine and was very handy. His wife could cook all the local starchy staples. Charles spoke 'bazaar' (*pasar* - market) Malay, was familiar with local customs and was an expert in provisioning. Jock at six foot three was strong and powerful, and with his Argyll and Sutherlanders jungle training was adept at jungle survival. Bill, a thick-set Englishman from the north, was a carpenter, and Alf, a small and nuggetty Englishman, was an odd-job man and good at fixing machines. And Ron? Well, says Charles, Ron wasn't all that bright, but he was young and fit, having been boxing champion in the army for his weight and 'was a co-operative sort of bloke.'

Our band of adventurers had a number of setbacks during their voyage but by quick thinking, bold action and ending up in the right place at the right time managed to survive and even have some moments of humour and pleasure to offset the times when they thought they were finished.

It was a real journey into the unknown. None of them had been into these waters before. Whilst they had maps, compass and a plan to head to Java, the sea through archipelago had been mined against the Japanese ships and was full of reefs and fast currents, treacherous for the unwary.

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The group had their first disagreement on the first evening anchored off St John's Island. Jim wanted to go ashore at this 'lunatic and leper'* settlement to see if there were any supplies for the taking. The others were against the idea but Jim's wishes prevailed. After drawing lots, three of them went ashore but found nothing usable.

Charles drew the short straw and remained on the junk. In the midst of the chaos of war, against the backdrop of a burning Singapore, he watched a Malay peacefully moving house, poling a sampan piled high with a precariously-balanced load of furniture.

When they weighed anchor the next morning, the rope was light and hauled in easily. The anchor had come loose and remained on the seabed.

This early setback set off a chain of events which cost valuable time and probably cost them their chance of rejoining the war in Java.

Jim had brought a petrol-driven radio on board which he managed to get to work a couple of times. Through it they later learned that the Netherlands East Indies (now Indonesia) had surrendered on 12 March and so revised their plans to make their destination Australia. They hoped to island-hop past Java, Bali and the Lesser Sundas, presumably counting on the fact that the Japanese wouldn't bother to

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* Lt H.M. Lindley-Jones, R.A., *Evacuation from Singapore across Sumatra*, British Military Report dated New Delhi, 30 November 1942, Australian War Memorial Collection, No AWM54, Canberra, p8

occupy the small fishing villages along the route on which they would need to rely for provisions.

Still so close to Singapore, they had no choice but to press on, ‘without their brakes’ as Charles put it, trying to stay on the course they had plotted, weaving through the reefs and islands scattered liberally through the seas south of Singapore.

They ended up later that day in a narrow strait between islands unsure of where they were, but in sight of a string of boats tied up to a jetty leading to a small customs post. A Malay fishing boat sported an anchor which looked just the right size . . .

‘ “What the hell”, we thought, “there’s a war on” and decided to go back at dusk and take it. Once again we drew lots and I ended up staying on the junk with a 303 in case there was any trouble. The raid was successful and we took off hastily with our new set of brakes, still to be fitted.’

Darkness falls very quickly in the tropics after the sun has set. Whilst there was still some light left, they needed to find a safe haven where they could spend the night and replace the anchor. The nearest island away from the scene of the crime was fringed with mangroves to the water’s edge. They had no choice but to ram the boat into the mangroves to wedge it to a standstill. In this they were successful but in the process broke the boom and the mast, and ripped all their sails. The sharp spike of an aerial mangrove root created a weak spot in the bottom timbers which would, later on, cause a leak.

So now not only did they have to fit the anchor but make new mast and boom, and repair the sails. They walked onto the island to find suitable trees to fell and strip. They were fortunate. The island was inhabited, the natives friendly and the mangoes large, luscious and plentiful.

Bill the carpenter made and fitted the new poles, and the sails were patched up with empty food sacks, repairs which took a week. The group was anxious to keep moving as the fires still burning in Singapore were close enough to be visible on the skyline.

But they were stuck on a lee shore, with no wind to fill the sails. They needed to get the boat out into the strait. Primitive but effective, they buried a log in the mud as far away from the shore as their rope would stretch and at high tide pulled out to it. Caught suddenly by the swift current, the boat lurched backwards out into the winds, its sack-patched sails bright with colourful advertisements for great British products such as John Bull oats.

The Malays laughed at their unpractised seamanship. 'They knew we had to be *tuans* (white masters) sailing the boat.'

They made up for lost time with a fair wind. The prevailing winds blew from the northeast and the current flowed strongly to the west and southwest. Whether the east coast of Sumatra was their intended destination or not, it was in that direction that they were carried.

But they were to be held up yet again, this time by a dreaded 'sumatra' one of those intense squalls bringing torrential rains, which sweep in unexpectedly from the Straits of Malacca.

'I really thought we'd had it', says Charles, 'It was terrifying in such a small boat. Fortunately we managed to get the anchor down so we must have been closer to land than we'd realised. But just when the storm hit, we discovered that the boat had sprung a leak. We were shipping water. Our cargo started coming adrift. Everything was afloat - cases of Arnotts biscuits, tins of corned beef, cans of fish.

'The seas were enormous. The boat was circling around the anchor, lurching all over the place, tossing up and down, and from side to side,. Jim and Bill were down below standing on their heads trying to fix the leak which was getting bigger by the moment. The rest of us formed a bucket chain bailing out as hard as we could go.'

Eventually the leak was fixed and the Sumatra petered out. A good wind followed the Sumatra and then a prolonged calm during which they probably drifted west towards

Sumatra. They filled in the hot, stuffy days catching a few small fish and swimming, a pastime that was curtailed when they saw several snakes in the sea.

They reached the large low-lying swampy islands on the central coast of east Sumatra, due west of Singapore. Much of Sumatra was already in Japanese hands, Palembang and Jambi surrendering the day after Singapore. The island of Bangka, off the coast, parallel to Palembang, had been seized on 13 February. But there were still a number of less strategic districts and towns not yet reached by the Japanese troops.

Charles and companions were now running low on staple foods. They had, by accident or design ended up in the narrow channels of sea between the close-set islands, and, without knowing it, had headed inland up the Siak River to what they learnt on arrival was the town of Siak. It had a market so they pooled their money and bought rice and other necessities. The Dutch Controlleur was in his office waiting to hand over to the Japanese. They had a beer with him. He advised them to 'buzz off, otherwise you'll get caught too'.

So buzz off they did, spending some time sailing up and down the largely uninhabited waterways between the islands trying to get out to sea to follow the coast of Sumatra southwards. Java being in Japanese hands, the destination was now Australia.

When they reached the entrance to the strait, they anchored off a small settlement there. 'A sampan containing 3-4 Chinese - I think they were - or possibly Malays, came out to visit.' remembers Charles. 'They were eyeing our boat and petrol tins [for the radio] and wanted to come on board. We refused so they went away. We sailed a bit further on and anchored next to the muddy shore for the night.

We went to sleep. I slept on deck with Jim's son, Peter. Suddenly there was a screech, 'Jepungsi!, Jepungsi!' and a foot landed on my stomach. I was annoyed and grabbed the bloke, rushed him to the edge and belted him and he went over the side into the mud. A couple of others were trying to get over the side on to the boat. I yelled to Ronny to get the gun. He came on deck and fired a few shots over their

heads. By now everyone was awake and on deck and defending the boat. The pirates ran around the junk and grabbed their sampan keeping it between them and us, quickened their pace in the water and disappeared. When they were gone, we found a spear and two axes on the deck. The spear had been used on me and I had a terrible bruise. They were probably going to bump us off and pinch the boat. I think they were the same blokes who had visited us during the day.'

Charles can laugh about it now. 'They looked so funny scuttling away.'

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After their encounter with pirates, they sailed on the next morning and came to a timber wharf run by a Chinese towkay who had the timber franchise for the area. He told them that a sampan had stopped by earlier, one of its occupants sporting a big black eye. 'So we'd managed to inflict a bit of damage', chortles Charles.

'The towkay was friendly, gave us a meal and showed us around his timber operation. We soon worked out that he wanted to take over the tongkang. He asked us if we wanted to stay there and offered to allow us to go inland and build a house. At first we thought this might be a good idea and actually started building a house. Bill was the builder and the rest of us cut down trees and assisted. We were watched from the trees by hundreds of monkeys who kept up a constant chatter.'

At this time the east coast of Sumatra was largely virgin jungle. Settlements were small and scattered and not of strategic interest to the Japanese. After what was probably at least three months on the junk, cramped together in small spaces facing the vagaries of the weather and the problems of navigating through unknown and potentially hostile territory, it was no doubt tempting to stop in this small backwater and wait out what they thought would be a short war.

But the threat of capture was never very far away.

'Our house was nearly built when we were visited by some Malays. They told us that the Japs were offering $50 a head for information about white people. We didn't panic but realised that our whereabouts could reach the Japs. We decided we'd

better move on. The Malays told us they were going up river about 30 miles to a town where they could buy sago and offered to buy us some. They said they'd be back in a couple of days. We took a chance and told them we would like a couple of sacks. They were honest and kept their word and came back as they said they would.

'We thanked the Chinese for his offer of shelter and told him we were moving on. The sago stank and we had to keep it well-covered. But it tasted good when Jim's wife served it up as porridge with carnation milk.'

They now knew where they were and fairly raced southwards down the coast of Sumatra, past the Indragiri and other big coastal rivers, whose swift currents formed wide arcs of choppy, churning brown waters where they flowed into the sea. The wind was propitious and they were making their best speed ever. Jim, ever-curious, spotted a big barge onshore through the binoculars and as usual wanted to have a poke around. The others were reluctant to interrupt their good progress but in the end Jim had his way.

The barge was full of ack-ack shells in cases lined with sheet metal. Charles speculated it had probably been abandoned for safety reasons during a Japanese air attack. About a mile away from the barge on the beach was a long, well-preserved sampan, half-buried in the sand.

Jim had by now decided to sail to Palembang and give himself and his family up. He was counting on the Japanese treating a family group kindly. Ron, young enough to pose as Jim's son, became part of the Lyng family group. They would use the junk whilst the other 4 men would waterproof the sampan with the sheet metal from the ack-ack cases and use it to continue their voyage to Australia.

So the group split into 2, with Jim and his family living on the junk and the other men living on the ammunition barge whilst they made the sampan seaworthy.

Food was a problem again. ‘Jim and his family still appeared to be doing all right so it seemed that they had taken a fair proportion of the stores’, says Charles, ‘but the rest of us were running out.

He and Jock volunteered to call on a fishing trap a mile or two up the beach to get food. They set off on their slow trip across the deep, soft sand carrying clothes and a wristwatch as barter goods. Charles lost a shoe before they moved to the firmer ground in the mangroves. The spiky roots of the mangroves tore at their feet as they walked.

They reached the fish trap and waded out to the house which sat on stilts over the sea, above a long fence which trapped the fish. After Charles explained what they wanted, the Malay fishermen asked them if they would stay and help work the fish trap. Charles and Jock willingly agreed. The Malays collected Alf and Bill from the barge and brought them back. The four men lived and worked on the trap for several days, catching and salting fish for taking to market in Palembang.

One morning the Malays woke to the sound of a motorboat. They sensed danger.

‘Tuan! Tuan! Jepung!’

The four men fled ashore and into the jungle, and shadowed the boat along the shore, watching it as it stopped at another fish trap nearby.

Eventually the boat moved on to the fish trap where they had been staying and then on down the coast in the direction of the Lyngs’ junk.

Thinking the danger past, the four men came out of the jungle and walked back along the beach intending to return to their fish trap. On the beach, they encountered the Malays from the first fish trap to be visited by the boat and were invited on board for a meal. Meal over, they asked their hosts to take them back to the fish trap where they were staying.

Their hosts refused. The motorboat was coming back after picking up the Lyngs. The Malays held the men until its return and handed them over.

‘We were shoved into an enclosure and told to sit. They fed us and gave us drinks but didn’t tell us what was going to happen to us. We went back down the coast until we came to the Batanghari River and turned inland for Jambi.’

It seems that someone on the coast had betrayed them.

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After 7 months in retreat and on the run, my father finally came face-to face with the enemy, a smiling Japanese captain at Jambi. It was the beginning of his incarceration at various Sumatran internment camps for the remainder of the war.

But that is another story

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