

## FIVE DEATHS IN JUNE

Between 8<sup>th</sup> June 1944 and 25<sup>th</sup> June there were 5 deaths at Muntok:

1. R. W. Morris died 8 June 1944
2. F. Fletcher died 9<sup>th</sup> June 1944
3. H. Zimmerman died 11<sup>th</sup> June 1944
4. G.O.W Roberts died 16<sup>th</sup> June 1944
5. Thomas Henry Roberts died 25<sup>th</sup> June 1944

In his book *By Eastern Windows* William McDougall has a rather creepy section called The Beriberi Song. In that section he describes the deaths of four people to each of whom he gives a pseudonym: Maurice, The Gow, Bunny, and the Flash. I have figured out three of these as follows:

Maurice = R. W. Morris

The GOW = G.O.W Roberts died 16 June 1944

The Flash = Thomas Henry Roberts died 25 June 1944

Bunny witnessed the death of Maurice and McDougall says The Gow followed Bunny. There are therefore two possible candidates for Bunny either F. Fletcher or H Zimmerman. At this stage I am inclined toward Fletcher.

MAURCIE = R. W MORRIS MORRIS R.W. [Robert Wallace] from Surrey. Assistant Planter Jementah Estate, Segamat Sub-Lt RNVR. Swam for 7 hours following Kuala sinking. Survived for 3 months on Singkao Lungka islands then Sumatra internee at Djambi then Palembang. Died in captivity 8.6.44 [42] Muntok of beriberi. His grave is D14 on the Graves page. Son of Elise Dudley Ward (formerly Morris), of 38 Feltham Avenue, East Molesey, Surrey, and of the late Harold W. Morris.

THE GOW = George Oliver Wales Roberts, brother of Joyce and son of William and 'Freda'. He was Assistant Architect, Palmer & Turner, Johore Bahru. Sgt. Straits Settlements Volunteer Force (SSVF).

THE FLASH = ROBERTS, T. H. [Thomas Henry] 'Flash' Merchant Seaman / Waiter, Empress of Asia. Palembang, Sumatra internee. Died in captivity 25.6.44 [37] Muntok of beriberi. Grave today at Jakarta.

From *By Eastern Windows* by William McDougall:

### MAURICE

Maurice was not in the beri-beri ward because in addition to that disease he was covered with septic sores. He had been the "pretty boy" of our community, spending hours in finicky cleaning and washing of his person and clothing, gazing into a tiny hand mirror and combing and recombining, combing and recombining his thinning hair. Now his dandified body, from scalp line to

toes, was a solid incrustation of scabs and pus. He lay flat on his back, his knees drawn up so that the soles of his feet rested on the bench. His hands were folded over his chest and the fingers picked at each other. His eyes were open and peered intently at the ceiling, as if trying to discern some dimly seen object above him. And he was singing. Not with words, but with a long drawn a-a-a-ah which rose and fell in a tune strangely similar to "Waltzing Matilda." I stepped up on the bench beside him and, squatting down, asked if he wanted anything. Changing a dressing frequently eased the pain of serum filled sores. He rolled his head to look at me but continued the wail. Again I asked him,

"Do you want something?"

He stopped singing, closed his mouth, opened it as though he were about to speak, but did not. While I felt his pulse he rolled his head back to his former position, peered at the ceiling and resumed the song.

The sack he used for a blanket had been pushed aside. I pulled it back over him and stepped off the bench. The attendant wondered aloud if we should call Doc West because Maurice was keeping everyone awake. We decided not. Roll call soon would sound anyway. I looked around the gloomy ward. It was always dim inside because the only windows were at the end next to the door. Here and there men were propped up on their elbows, watching. A patient requested a light for his nipa straw cigarette. The attendant brought him the small night kerosene lamp and lit it. Another man called for a bedpan. The attendant hurried to him. I walked out into the open to breathe the clean air of dawn and listen to the birds bustling in the durian trees beyond the fence.

The singing grew louder after roll call. Doc West tried to quiet him but Maurice would only pause momentarily, look at Doc as a blind man looks in the direction of a sound, working his lips as if trying to speak, then resume the wail. Around seven o'clock the song changed to loud groans and cries. We collected our breakfasts of boiled ubi and tried not to hear Maurice while we ate.

## **BUNNY**

After breakfast I worked as usual in the septic ward where Maurice lay next to a rabbit-like little man I'll call Bunny. While I was dressing Bunny's sores Maurice suddenly galvanized into action. With a raucous groan which set my teeth on edge he slowly rose from the bench to a sitting posture. It was as though a corpse on a morgue slab had sat up to look around.

He was in the grip of a violent muscular contraction which affected all parts of his body. The cords of his neck and throat were taut and distended. His fingers became talons reaching for some invisible thing. His lips drew back from his teeth in a sardonic, skull-like grin. So widely staring were his white-socketed eyes that the lids appeared torn from them. Wildly he stared at whatever it was for which he reached and tried to grasp and convey to his half open mouth. I decided he was trying to bring air to his bubbly lungs.

He rolled from side to side, throwing his arms and hands over Bunny, then twisting to the other side and trying to climb the wall, then rolling back again to half embrace Bunny. It was almost as

though he hated Bunny and was trying to take the little man with him into some realm of nightmare.

Bunny was too weak to move. He had a hole in his lower abdomen where yesterday Doc Boerma had cut into his bladder and inserted a drain tube as a desperate expedient to lessen his last agonies. Bunny could only plead:

“Keep him off me. Please.”

A morphine injection gradually quieted Maurice. His writhing decreased to restless twitching, his breathing became stertorous [noisy and labored]. An hour later he suddenly became quiet. I felt for his pulse. It was not. As I held his wrist Maurice relaxed, tension drained from his muscles, his jaw sagged as a last exhalation emptied his body of life.

The following morning I noticed that Bunny paid no attention to flies which settled on his face.

“How are you?” I asked.

“It’s no use, Mac,” he replied. “I’m finished.”

Trying to convince him otherwise would have been mockery. I thanked him for the language lessons he had given me before his illness and asked if there was anything he wanted done.

“Will you pray for me?”

I promised I would. He thought of something else.

“If I act like Maurice,” he said, “hold my hand. I don’t want to go that way.”

Bunny sang the beri-beri song two mornings later. He was spared the convulsions Maurice had experienced. He drifted from song into coma while I held his hand. When he was past knowing whether or not he was alone I returned to work. He died that afternoon.

## **THE GOW**

Next singer was a man of 29 we called The Gow. He burst into a wild, frenetic wail about seven a.m. But, unlike the two before him and the scores who followed, we were sure The Gow knew what he was doing.

“Why are you singing?” I asked him.

“I have to” he said between snatches of the dreadful melody. “I have to.”

That was the nearest we ever came to an answer. Like Maurice, The Gow went into a long series of convulsions, but unlike Maurice he remained, apparently, aware of his actions although

powerless to stop them. His lips formed the same death's head grin, his eyelids disappeared behind his eyeballs, his body tensed and writhed and twisted. He clawed for air.

Acting on a theory that the wailing and convulsions might be caused by an acute shortage of salt in the body. Doc [West] put a tube into The Gow and poured a salt solution into his stomach. He finally quieted, drifted into the inevitable coma and died in the afternoon. As we carried him from the ward other men on the bench, who looked as if they were going to go in the same way, watched uneasily.

## **THE FLASH**

The fourth song filled hospital rooms the following morning. I was talking to a 37-year-old English seaman nicknamed Flash when he broke into loud wailing. It was like watching a man go insane.

Flash had been shipwrecked and survived wearing nothing but a pair of shorts. He acquired little else during internment. All his possessions were on the bench beside him. They totaled four empty tins, two of them rusty; a battered enamel plate, a wooden spoon and a metal fork, half of a coconut shell, a bottle from which the neck had been broken and a half finished dart board. He had worked on the dart board intermittently for two years. Flash was a fighter but the odds were against him because, like Wembley-Smythe, [Kenneth Dohoo] he had not the necessary ingenuity or the luck for survival. He was a scrawny fellow when I first met him. Now his grotesquely swollen body was wracked by malaria and incrustated with ringworm, itch and septic sores. But he remained cheerful, frequently smiling and deprecating his ills, often apologizing for the "trouble" he caused hospital attendants.

Flash expressed concern for the first time over his condition when pains wracked his chest and arms the night after The Gow's death. He asked the night man how sick he was. The night man did not have the heart to tell him. When the day man came he would not tell him either. Eric [Germann] and I visited Flash before breakfast. We knew he wouldn't be around much longer and we liked him. Eric had just lit a cigarette and placed it between Flash's lips when an abrupt, hoarse, involuntary cry wrenched its way from the sick man's throat.

Flash looked at Eric, then at me. Fear was in his eyes, but he said not a word. The cigarette had fallen to the bench. Eric picked it up and replaced it between Flash's lips. Flash took a few drags then shuddered violently, dropped the cigarette again and cried a second time. The paroxysm passed as quickly as it had come.

"I'm sorry," said Flash, "I can't help it."

About half past eight I was working nearby when Flash again groaned loudly. I asked him if he wanted another cigarette.

"I'd like it if you have one," he said.

I walked down to the staff room, selected a nipa leaf, placed a few grains of tobacco on it, rolled it and returned to Flash. He smiled his thanks and said,

“Don’t go away, will you, if . . . if . .

“Okay, Flash. I’ll stick around.”

I lit the cigarette and was about to put it between his" lips when, as though a switch had been thrown in his brain. Flash passed from reason to delirium. He talked nonsense, then began to sing. The tune, as with Maurice before, was not unlike “Waltzing Matilda.” Convulsions followed. So did the shot of morphine, the coma, the stertorous breathing.

Because he had asked me not to go away I put a stool on the bench beside him, in the space left vacant by Bunny’s death, and waited. Other patients glanced apprehensively in our direction. Hospital visitors wandered in and out, staring as they passed. Attendants hurried up and down the aisle, wielding bedpans. Tommy Thomson, the hospital quartermaster, made his rounds taking orders for soya bean cake available only to sick men without stomach or intestinal troubles.

Preacher Gillbrook, who had been a lay “interdenominational” missionary in North China, came in, said he guessed Flash was a Church of England man and intoned a prayer. The morning dragged. Tiffin time approached. Flash’s breathing was more labored, his pulse weaker. I wondered,

“Will he die in time for me to eat?”

Food was served to patients. The man who lay next to Flash was an English engineer whose swollen limbs had more and deeper sores than any man in the ward. He used chopsticks to eat his rice because they stretched out his meal. Many of us used them because we could eat one grain at a time that way and make 1 30 grams last an hour. Each time he raised the sticks his elbow grazed Flash’s left shoulder. Flash died at 1:25 p.m. I pulled the sack over his face and rose stiffly from the stool. The chopsticks had not missed a beat.

I walked into the staff room just as Eric returned from the food serving line carrying his plate and mine. Flash had died in time for me to eat.

After dinner we lifted Flash’s body onto a stretcher and carried it into the bamboo and palm shed built beside the hospital for a mortuary. An empty box was waiting. We put Flash in and nailed down the lid. The coffin gang slung ropes around each end of the box, then, like Chinese coolies, looped them over carrying poles which rested on their shoulders, toted the coffin to the front gate and lowered it to the ground.

Father Bakker, with the remnants of his choir, was waiting at the gate. He raised his baton. The choir began “Abide with Me.” When the song ended, the pallbearers, three to each side, lifted the coffin onto their shoulders and were counted through the gate. Behind came six alternate pall-

bearers, including Eric and myself. We traded off every quarter of a mile. Two guards carrying bayoneted rifles led the procession, two more brought up the rear. The road wound through a green, park-like section of Muntok. Men usually liked to go on funerals because of the walk.

The cemetery, an old one laid out by the Dutch, who had colonized Bangka and developed the pepper plantations and tin deposits, had been expanded for internees and was growing rapidly. Mounds of red laterite marked the resting places of prisoners who had preceded Flash [13]. Six open graves waited for succeeding guests.

We lowered the coffin into the first of the four foot deep holes. British Leader Hammet read Church of England burial services. When he had finished he reached down, picked up a handful of red soil and tossed it onto the coffin, saying,

“Remember, man that thou art dust and unto dust thou shalt return.”

Following suit, we each stooped, picked up some earth and cast it. It struck the wood with a rattling, hollow sound. The Japanese guards saluted. We filled the hole. Hammet shoved the end of a wooden cross into the soft dirt. Painted in black letters on the cross were Flash's name and the date. Because the new [Japanese] commandant had not continued the custom of providing flowers for funerals, we broke a few leafy stems from shrubs which grew along the cemetery edge, laid them on the grave and departed.

Back in jail I lay down to rest.

### *Death by Beri Beri*

Enlargement of the heart causes paralysis of the laryngeal nerve, which controls the vocal cords, hence wheezing combined with fluid in the lung, this will produce the uncontrollable noise that MacDougall calls the Beri Beri ‘Song’.