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A Civilian Prisoner of the Japanese by derbycsv

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Contributed by derbycsv

People in story: Kenneth Dohoo, H.G.Hammet, Eric Hasselhuken

Location of story: Palembang and Muntok (Banka Island), Japan

Background to story: Civilian

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This story was submitted to the People's War Website by a volunteer from Derby CSV Action Desk on behalf of Mrs Anne Hinam and has been added with her permission. She fully understands the site's terms and conditions.

My father, Kenneth Dohoo, was born in Hornchurch in 1906. (The family is English and has been as far back as we can trace the surname.) He was educated at the City of London School, read Greats at Exeter College, Oxford, and joined the Malayan Civil Service. On his second leave he married my mother, Beryl Beck, in April 1938. My sister Jean was born in Penang a year later (my parents were living in Bukit Mertajam), I was born in Johore Bahru in October 1940 (when our father was based in Segamat). Members of the Malayan Civil Service were allowed six months' leave every four years. It was normal for the wife and children to return 'home' three months earlier and go back to Malaya three months later in order to benefit from a full year in a healthier climate. In 1941 it was not possible to return to Britain because of the war, so in August my mother, sister and I, with our Chinese amah, sailed to Australia. The ship sailed with the lifeboats slung out ready for launch, because of the danger of enemy shipping. In Perth my mother found a house to rent and my father joined us in November.

News from Malaya soon became serious as the Japanese invaded the north and my father had no doubt that he must return to Malaya to do what he could to help. The Australian Air Force agreed to fly him back, leaving Perth early on Christmas Day. That year we celebrated Christmas on December 24th.

For the next seven weeks my father wrote frequently to my mother from Singapore and further north, at first trying to reassure her that the situation was not as dangerous as wireless reports suggested, telling her of his work helping to evacuate women and children, some of them personal friends of ours. He was not permitted to give any details of his war work, but what he did say suggests he was in some danger.

What followed my mother learned after the war.

Just before Singapore fell my father enlisted in the local navy as a stoker in one of the small boats engaged in evacuation work. The boat was torpedoed off the island of Sumatra and those who survived and swam ashore were taken prisoner. My father was held in a civilian prison camp, at Palembang to start with. The Japanese guards treated civilians less brutally than servicemen, the manual labour was bearable, food was not too bad and most prisoners remained in good physical condition. My mother received one card (through the Red Cross) in March 1943 on which my father says he is in the best of health and time is passing quickly.

In September 1943 the prisoners were moved to a camp at Muntok on Banka Island. The area was infested with malarial mosquitoes and food became scarce. Weakened by starvation the prisoners succumbed easily to illness. The camp ran a hospital, there were doctors amongst the prisoners, but no medicines were provided.

I do not know when or how my mother learned that my father was a prisoner. Eventually she was allowed to write to him once a month, enclosing photographs of



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us children. Delivery was organised by the International Red Cross, though prisoners received letters rarely, several at a time.

When the war was drawing to a close my mother booked a passage to England on a cargo boat and we sailed home in May 1945, via the Red Sea. (Our amah had died some time earlier.) We docked at Liverpool and took a train to London. On the station platform our mother stopped and kissed two elderly gentlemen — they were our grandfathers. We stayed for a while with my father's parents in London, then went to Devon to my mother's parents'. I can remember that we talked about 'When Daddy comes home'.

Just before VJ Day my mother was informed by the Colonial Office that my father had died on October 25th 1944 of malaria.

When my mother died in November 1992, shortly before her 84th birthday, we found she had left a collection of letters for us to read: letters of condolence she had received, letters my father had written both before he joined us in Australia and after he returned to Malaya and also letters from men who had been in the prison camp with him, telling her of conditions there and the circumstances of my father's death. Two of these were H. G. Hammet of the MCS, who went out to Malaya as a cadet with my father in 1929, and Eric Hasselhukn, contacted by my grandfather via the Freemasons.

With the letters we found this poem in my mother's handwriting.

My love was one who came but could not stay,
My love was mine but for a little space,
Yet Lord, in the abundance of Thy grace,
We found a love that never can decay.
Tho' I may never hear his voice again,
Nor take his weary head upon my breast,
Yet I am not bereavèd nor in pain,
Possessing all that ever I possessed.
For, loving as we loved, we overcame
The earthly love of lips, and hands, and eyes,
Distilling passion to a rarer flame
And all eternity before us lies.
Eternity together — oh my dear,
There is no separation even here.

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