

My Reminiscences

K C van der Molen

Reminiscences No 2

I have told so far is about the easy years of my life, the easy going that is. Not that colonial life was a life of leisure, servants, easy money etc. That is the description given by very many, in fact sort of the general opinion of very many people in the Motherland. The remarkable situation is that those who had lived in the Indies once back formed a separate community, differing from the home country people, and also their children or some of them would follow their parents' footsteps and go back once they finished their schooling...

But it was a good life certainly, to those who worked for it. Once I had to join the army where you meet with all sorts of people it was very clear that only a part of the white colonials were successful. One of my mates in the army was a 'voddenkoopman' He bought old clothes and shredded them to balls of a certain size to sell to the navy as 'poetskatoen' - material to clean the guns with. This by way of introduction to this second part of my story as different from the first as day differs from night,

The day that Pearl Harbour became known to me is still very clear. In the morning of that Sunday on the veranda of my one room flat which was an outbuilding of the 'main house' and the owner was a family by the name of Abendanon. He leaned out of the side window and told me about the attack. On the 12th December I was called up and reported for duty, but where, I do not remember and I became a truck driver. A military unit with the duty to transport for civilian and military whatever there was to be moved. A small unit of about 18 men, two Lieutenants, and a Captain. We had about 12 trucks.

The name of the captain commanding was Lindeman who in civilian life was somebody from the Shell oil company, a most agreeable of commander, who had very bad sleeping habits and frequently came out to the front entrance to talk and chat without stopping, and he could crack jokes, really good ones, for hours without repeating himself. The front entrance is where those on guard duty sat.

For one or other reason he liked my driving ability. Jumping in time the following really happened but much later when the Japanese had overrun Java already- no not entirely- but were on land here and there – the one lieutenant of the unit wants to quickly go to Probolinggo, a village east of Surabaya/Malang to his house to hide his motorcar from the Japanese.-in his military judgement the war would be over soon- and take the wheels off.

I had to drive them to Probolinggo in a new captain's car, a Chevrolet with steering-column gear lever which I had not seen before and had to find out quickly how that operates. Right, off we go to Probolinggo along one of the most beautiful roads, not only construction-wise but also scenic: the Zuid Smeroe road. Smeroe is the volcano to the north of the road, together with the Bromo; both active volcanoes. The two officers do whatever they had to do and then they know somebody they want to visit; and I thought the lights of this car, do they work? This may take time. So I say: Captain Lindeman I am going to try to find somebody to fix the lights and will be back. He whistles softly to me : You better be back I am not going to sit here landed with this old tart, meaning the old lady who now I understand is evidently a relative of the lieutenant and who the lieutenant wanted to say hallo to.

So I move to the centre of the village, a large grass field, like in all these villages and assume that the business area is on the other side which proves to be the case. Now to find a car repair shop and there is one run by a young Chinese man, who identifies the problem—no fuse--, but it took a little time, not long and I am on my way back which in a strange place is just as difficult as the way to. But eventually I find the square; however

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this time full, nay teeming, with Japanese. It is the end of the story. And true one Japanese gestures me to come near and out of the car and I greet him by saying 'Hi' which unbeknown to me then, means in Japanese something like " Yes Sir, Understood Sir". But then the word is spelled "Hai" and used by underlings when receiving orders from officers.

This knowledge of the Japanese language may have impressed the Japanese soldier and put him in a good mood, [I think] to listen to my story which I could not continue in Japanese but in body language which was " There are two officers who I must collect; I will do so and bring them here to surrender!"

Now that seemed a good idea and of course the Japs had won the war as far as they were concerned and had no reason to be nasty. Nevertheless I kept the conversation as short as I could help and was off in search of the street with the old lady and found it. It is remarkable how great need and danger sharpens the brain. A short explanation to my passengers had not much result and then it occurred to me that I as a soldier could not very well command my officers to make haste.

But added that the whole village was full of Japanese which made escape impossible and was waiting for their orders, it was fortunate that the 'lieutenant' knew the area very well. After saying their farewells to the poor old lady who also had no idea what all was going to happen, we set off through all sorts of little byways, short or long, paved or mud tracks all on the directions of the lieutenant at the back and eventually, you guessed it: got stuck. We were somewhere in de gamadoelas, on a very narrow road where there was no future for escapees. So I had to turn around on this narrow road barely wide the length of the car and difficult to turn particularly because the shoulders of this bit of a road were muddy.

I must have made some 10 backward-an-forwards and off we went again and there was all of a sudden the tarred road running in the right direction which was west. No Japanese in sight and I gave it [that is the car] a good prompting on the accelerator. But in those days cars were not all that powerful and fuel octane something like 86. But we went at great speed until in the distance I see the back of an Army Ambulance.

From closer by this was also the back of a long string of slowly moving ambulances at the prescribed speed [in wartime !!] of 30 KM per hour. And I still had very much in mind the Japs behind me not afraid that they would shoot me/us but that we would be taken POW there and then in the middle of the forest without any of the few personal things like razor, second set of clothing etc. which was little enough because we as transport-unit had no fixed abode. We slept just where the trucks stopped.

All these things went through my head while I was passing these 12 ambulances as I counted until, terror upon terror, 50 meters in front of me I spot a little white low wall on the right-hand side of the road and the road also narrows a bit: clearly a little bridge ahead but still many ambulances to pass. So I decide to give it stick like never before.

In that sort of situation seconds seem long to last; but I made it and *shoep* right in front of the first ambulance shoot up onto that little bridge with a slight upward bubble in the road so that we [have the feeling]fly a little but not really. There was silence from the back but soon the lieutenant recovers and says shoo 'dat scheelde maar een kuthaartje aan beide kanten" (we cleared that by a ball-hair on both sides) which made me laugh so much I nearly lost control.

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I am sure the lieutenant meant no disrespect and only used the term to graphically express how narrow our escape was. Exactly how narrow I could [at that time] not judge. A total greenhorn I had never seen one yet. Those were different times, quite different from now. Well we speed ahead until the lieutenant loudly proclaims that he has to answer a call of nature and the captain joins in this announcement. However the lieutenant wishes me to select a nice freshly painted pole. The roads in Java were lined with kilometre poles. So I stop at one but say: you must make haste because that damned hospital column is still not far behind us, so there is no time for a chat! True enough: when we depart again I see in my rear mirror the red cross of the front ambulance that we were so near to and missed. Hallelujah.

The last description is not entirely correct. De lieutenant said, "van der Molen ik moet pissen en de kaptein zei ik ook, sta op knappen". "Ja maar ik wil een mooi paaltje hebben om tegen te pissen, van der Molen". The rest of the trip was without events; we were close to our home base already, which was a deserted small building in a tiny village a little ahead.

These events must have taken place after our capitulation on the 8th March 1942. Our Captain Lindeman was an expert talker and persuader and came to an arrangement with a Japanese local commander that we would stay in the area until the Japanese could take over to which they agreed and we were to stay armed,

This made it necessary to restore to working order the great number of trucks we still had with us. This Captain Lindeman had ordered that these trucks should be made useless to the enemy. Somebody knowledgeable about this had taken all the distributors out and hid them somewhere where he could later find them.

So we stayed there for a few weeks until the 1st April, when a Japanese patrol with a weapons carrier, one of our own make, came to collect us and we officially surrendered on that date, April fool's day! Very appropriate. When we were still in Surabaya we were housed in some empty building with a sort of swimming pool [empty] and a dance hall. Possibly a restaurant cum night club, and parking for the trucks. We were all from a civilian background, no professional military in our group.

One day we were called out to assist at the harbour [called Tandjong Perak] and there we found transportation of munitions which were to be loaded on board a ship with the destination Makassar. Munitions are very heavy There were also engaged, women volunteer drivers. One had a bit of trouble manoeuvring her truck through the exit of the harbour area which made it necessary to enter a warehouse and the entry was narrow. Backwards forwards she went under the guide of some sergeant but not getting anywhere quickly.

The curve she took (and her guide managed for her) was simply not wide enough. So I see this and offer my help to the young lady driver disregarding the sergeant, and I must say successfully, the woman was out in no time. And I took a rest sitting on one of the many munitions cases standing about, waiting for my truck to be usefully employed but soon it became clear that the whole situation was a shambles, really an unbelievable shambles so I lighted a cigarette and awaited events, which soon came in the shape of a 'vaandrig' (that is a candidate officer), "Soldier, how can you be so stupid as to sit on an ammo case and smoke? Do you want to cause a huge explosion and maybe sink a ship?" Which was of course ridiculous and I thought to myself "This pipsqueak must hold back the Japanese? What a stupid twit." With nothing further to do I returned to my truck because I has guard duty that night.

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That Dutch Indonesian Army was a bit chaotic – a few days later, and this was long before the surrender because the Japanese had not yet invaded Java, my sergeant, who was an inspector of education in civilian life told me, “Private van der Molen, you have character traits totally irreconcilable with military service”, which I found disappointing since I always gave my best, and I told him so. The sergeant was a sterling chap who would never report on me adversely. And then it hit me: that pipsqueak candidate officer had reported me – what a pathetic twit that was.

This, and experience in the following years awakened in me a dormant gift to better understand people rather than to accept first, superficial impressions. It took me a few years but especially the close contact in the army and later as a POW, where you are always jammed together, helped me understand another's thinking.

If I am ever declared a good banker, it is not from my knowledge of banking, which is not difficult, but more understanding what somebody's needs are they can even articulate these themselves, and this greatly impresses clients, who say, “Wow, but this chap knows a lot”, which is not really the case. I once had a colleague who was too full of himself to observe others, and in time had to leave the bank, where nobody missed him.

You may find these noise makers. In the bank, later, much later when I had climbed somewhat it often happened that I thought: Why is it that I hear so much about, or of, ‘so and so’. Let us see what he does and found actually bugger all. Just empty or half full. In Hollands is a saying “ Holle vaten bommen het hardst” And on looking back I think that that is one of the very useful things I learned during the next years. And also I must have learned to never ever show your inner self completely. Well that is an interrupting thought. Possibly wrong. But let us not white wash: all with a strong undercurrent of impatience. and an admixture of authoritarianism!

Well where were we; Ah that April fool's day. The local commander must have notified our Captain that the game was up and a small group of Japanese arrived. It was all official with lining up and presenting of arms on both sides and then the rifles were taken in. I hated that rifle, heavy on the shoulder and I always got a pain in the upper back. However here, to surrender your rifle officially! No that was much, and dishonourable,

The Japanese came along with a huge armoured vehicle [one of our own] where you look through a slit, the driver that is, and the men are all protected by steel plating. The Japanese shouted for a driver to come forward! Ah that's my chance, I always wanted to drive one of those, and I shouted:”Here!” Once up in front I said to myself Sho now you have done it, what is all this and you look round? For starters everything looks and is different: No starter key!! That must be this huge push button and Lo and Behold that was right; then there was another button that I did not push, because of what I see through the slit; and that is Captain Lindeman looking for me.

No doubt to drive him to the final destination: Camp and I thought possibly to stay there as his valet. Now two things went through my mind: 1/ I want to drive this monster, 2/I will be a poor valet. And I kept quiet leaving the Captain to do his own driving. A bit of a betrayal there but not much, in fact nothing because he was just the captain. Earlier he had persuaded me and a few others not to try and escape southward to the coast with a few selected others out of the group and endeavour to sail to Australia with prahoe. Indeed that was a wild uncooked idea in any case. And from that moment on I said to myself my only task will be to survive, and back to Hilversum

Well back to the ‘ironclad’. I found soon enough what and how; And the most important:: a collision with another vehicle ?: most unlikely: everybody gets out of the way of this

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monster, inclusive of all the Japanese on the road; and that is where that second button came in: if I pushed it the monster issued a blast the volume of a ships foghorn. This became very pleasurable the nearer we came to Malang, full of Japanese, making it a particular pleasure to blast them out of the way. Little did I know that this would be the last Jap blasting I would ever do.

The first few months were nothing compared to what was waiting. Of course we found it terrible to be a prisoner, in our wildest dreams this had not been expected. But the treatment by the Japanese was faultless. We were taken to an empty school building and housed in a classroom. Rather packed so that at night we slept very close together on the floor.

A fellow in our room by the name of Kulkes, a huge man particularly in the size around the belt and I remember that I never saw a man with such big feet; size 12 at least. And his chest was also enormous. He slept with others on a sort of extended bench. In his civilian life he was a 'boormeester' with the BPM, that is the Bataafse Petr. Maatschappij. I slept at the entrance on the floor. The lights stayed on all night but the light bulb was no more than a 40 watt I think. He gave a sort of reddish glow which made Kulkes look like a huge piece of meat in the butcher shop.

Now one night I become aware that the classroom door is very silently opened and a Japanese guard comes in tiptoeing over everybody and heads for the huge bulk of Kulkes and covers him with a blanket. That sort of pictures [a little strongly] the mood of the Japanese - they had won the war; it was only a matter of a short time when the Americans would see reason and the Pacific would be divided up in spheres of interest. And the Dutch, ag no man they were merely talked into the affair by the Americans; they were harmless, in which latter idea they were correct!

But then times changed. Came April 5 and the Japanese tried to do the same at Colombo as they did at Pearl Harbour, but now everybody was forewarned and the battle lost. And the 8th of May was the start of the battle in the Coral Sea, the greatest naval battle ever which lasted 4 days with a result undecided but definitely a setback to the Japanese who had hoped for a breakthrough to Australia. And then the famous battle of Midway where the Japanese lost all their aircraft carriers [4] in their attacking fleet. That was a major blow. A most interesting battle to analyse. One great weakness of the Japanese was their feeling of honour to die for the Emperor; little did they understand that all the hundreds of pilots drowned could not be replaced.

This of course has no relevance to my narrative other than explain why the Japanese had no respect for us – we had surrendered and that was, in the eyes of Japanese at the time, utterly reprehensible. After these setbacks and losses of men and materiel the attitude of the Japanese hardened drastically, as our bodies would discover.

We did not stay long in that school building; about a month perhaps and were then moved to the what we called 'tangsi'- Malay for barracks- where very many people were held already. What I relate about these great naval battles penetrated our camp by way of vague rumours and it is interesting to later establish that these rumours were correct and not the 'like to believe stories' we were inclined to take them for. Also in this new camp life was not bad at all, in fact the normal POW life I should think. We were allowed to have a 'camp shop' where we could buy all sorts of food and niceties.

This was not quite Japanese benevolence. I have the idea that they were a little worried about the total sum of money available in our pockets. The only manner to get it out of

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these POW hands was to make them buy things. In the early days [before we were there] it was fairly normal for inmates to get out through or over the wire and do something which is done worldwide. To put a stop to that the Japs shot 4 of those escapers, who were buried at the far end of the camp. We had to salute these graves whenever we passed, "out of respect for our mates". And, lest you forget one got a beating on the spot if you did not.

All a culture of heroism: In Japan of those days it was an honour to die an honourable death, rather than to live and try again. And one had to honour people who had given their life - in the military - or any other service to the country. Until many years after the war Japanese soldiers hid in the jungles of the Philippines until one of the last ones was forcibly taken out and brought back to his home town in Japan, He walked every road in his village; saying and repeating himself: I did not want to come back like this.

It is easy to say: yes but that was then; now we know better; this mass psychology is not possible any more. We now have 'social democracy' or freedom of thinking or whatever. Are you sure? Communism just died and the so called social democracies of Europe? In a very subtle way one is told bluntly what may be said, done or printed, and the word bluntly is not out of place except for those who are used to hear what actually is no more than propaganda but the listeners cannot recognise it as such.

Our South African situation under Verwoerd is a good example too! There is the saying. Those who the gods wish to destroy they first make mad! Because one way or another normal thinking is not allowed, one must teach the masses first [spiritually] to march in unison. Fortunately this only works for a while, for one or two generations. Jumping in time a little it was very interesting to see this whole Japanese philosophy of militarism collapse completely in the area of Japan where we were.

When the war was over it took time before Japan was occupied, but we were free to roam around, which incidentally I did not do so easily being used to live enclosed I did not immediately walk out to 'freedom'. However I find myself climbing into a train [remarkably trains were still running] which was full, There were also American POWs in that train. And one American spotted an Army officer sitting on a seat and a very old little woman standing. This American:" Hey you" to the officer 'get up' and the officer does this thinking the American wants his seat. No the American takes the old woman by the hand and puts her on the seat. Most reluctantly did she take that seat and the aghast staring silently forward of the Japanese around told the onlooker a long story "I Never Ever Heard of This!!" was clear on all faces.

I am now writing this on the 9th December 2002, and it was about this date 60 years ago that we were in the Glodok Prison in what is now Djakarta awaiting transfer to a ship to take us to Singapore [we did not know that at the time] We arrived at the final camp in Thailand about the 8th to the 12th January. This is where dates became vague, but I remember that I thought it must be about the time of my mother's birthday which is the 9th of January when we were in 'Kimsajok' but about that later.

The journey by boat to Singapore took 4 days, a long time! A glance at the map tells you of the many islands large and small in the area. The ship was very carefully led from coast to coast of islands for fear of submarines of the enemy. In Singapore we were brought to Changi the British camp complex, but still not knowing what the destination would be. We stayed in tents, about two weeks and in one of the tents an Australian had scribbled on the inside: 'We are going north'.

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War is a mad business as also the following shows. Next to us were Australians, who had been there for a longish time and were put to work in the harbour area. There was moored a German cargo ship and the crew were not allowed to go ashore, so the German tempers were rising. For a German cargo carrier it must have been extremely unhealthy to sail about in the Indian Ocean or Pacific and their desire to feel solid ground under their feet must have been considerable; but the Japs did not allow it.

Now the Australians walked about and one of the Japs tells an Aussie to get a beer from the German crew. So up the gangplank he goes and says to a German: "your pal wants a beer" and the German says tell the Jap he can go to hell, which message he brings back, raising the Jap's blood pressure who, seeking relief, calls all his other Japs to storm the ship and demand the beer. The German sees this and calls in his pals, the entire German crew.

There was no fighting; the Japs withdrew and in this tense situation the Germans shouted their invitation to the, what were their enemy Australians, to come aboard and have a beer. I got the story direct from one of them who added that one German had said to him: we are all wrong here we should be fighting these yellow apes with you. This is a true story, later confirmed by others.

In the middle of the war in the most famous British citadel in the Far East which had fallen to the Japs practically without a fight. We were and travelled through Singapore when we were taken to and from Changi and saw no damage whatsoever. The story was that some officers were taken prisoner in the Club drinking a gin sling but that is totally unconfirmed. Not that our army performed any better. The first resistance the Japanese encountered was that they could not take Colombo.

Well then we were on our way to somewhere, but still vague about the destination. In a goods train naturally, 5 days. The train as far as I remember never stopped and I have no recollection of how and what were we fed. The great problem I do recall is the noise of the galvanised steel the wagons were made of. I do not think we were ever fed but not sure.

For lack of sleep everybody was half crazy at best. The final stop was BanPon in Thailand and then we walked. Sometimes a lift in trucks and then finally it was clear: there was the bridge, being built by the Japs and British POW and the name was Kantchanabury.

But we walked on and stopped at Tamarkan. How long I do not recollect. And then on to a place called Kimsajok, and that place was not an eye opener: it was an eyes closer; You did not want to look at it. The awfulness of the place is difficult to describe. There is the expression: "De moed zakte mij in de schoenen". It is a manner of saying meaning no more than I was a little scared. But here no here it was true in the full sense. A terrible place; beyond imagination.

A clearing, pretty sizeable in the jungle, yellow broken-down bamboo, the thin type all over, the long huts, collapsed roof with big holes in it, not just big—gaping holes, and all the bamboo of the structures tumble down and black, rotten. And all this in a little bit of a hollow, here and there. Survival? I am now not so sure anymore I thought, and also those with whom I travelled in a little group; and decided to create a place for ourselves and we did.

This was a camp, like all the others without a fence [where would you run away to?] In other words a place that inspired a strong sense of despair. Inside, there were at that time

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more than 10,000 men I think, evidently later to be spread all along the railway line that had already been set out through the whole jungle by Japanese engineers in the shape of bamboo outlines of a dyke or dig through hills. Kimsajok appeared to me at the time to be a place of hell, in a little hollow of say 5 meters. Not noticed by anybody. Dusty as can be; it was the dry season.

Now going back to the Surabaya days, as a bachelor one liked to have a few married friends; always nice to drop in on the odd Sunday for a meal. One of those was a man called Van Dijk, a year or two perhaps older than I. Very nice people. They were Gereformeerd. He was also in the camp in Malang [the 'tangsi'] and in my group in Kimsajok.

To him it must have looked no different than to anybody else. He did not join our little group outside the 'regular' barracks' and I had lost sight of him. On arrival he must have found a little place somewhere inside under a bit of shelter and laid himself down. He was one of those who had everything, pots and pans and extra clothing, all in a huge backpack and that is where he rested his head.

From what I heard he never moved away. And when I found him he had just died, some 2 weeks after we arrived, just ate what he was given. There was as yet no organisation of whatever sort and nobody worked as yet, except the guys in the kitchen. So he that is van Dyk could lie there undisturbed, nobody put us to work yet; the whole thing was waiting, for something. And when I walked nearer, there were some fellows dusting him off and I still see the clouds come off him, he was carried away and that was it. The place must have looked to him as the Armageddon where, as he thought, the bad finally had won. He gave up all hope and it is true, where there is no hope there can be no life.

That in essence is what life is all about. We in our seclusion did not stay very long and were spread over the barracks to whatever space there was. Not me however immediately. I was [looking back lucky] one of the early dysentery cases. We had with us a doctor from Malang, who had taken with him whatever medicines he could lay his hands on. I was reported to him by my mates and called. That doctor gave me three little pills; I have many more he said but there will be many more cases like you.

The name of the pill was d'Achinan, a French medicine and one of the first, as I later understood antibiotics. Take 2 now in the evening and one tomorrow morning. Maybe it helps, if not I can give you no more. I had had dysentery for about 4/5 days, real bad. and the next day: Lo and Behold it was gone. I went to the river to wash myself and had to hold on to bushes not to drift away with the current, but it felt good to be clean again;, my body? Truly I did not recognize it.

One experience: I washed myself by hand all over and thought is that me? So thin? There I was nearly a goner for sure. Railway work had started; that was heavy but a job in the kitchen appealed to me; regretfully to many others too. Eventually I succeeded as rice cook. 3 buckets of rice and 5 buckets of water in a pan [a wadjan] a very large hollow pan of iron, a wog. Fire was made with bamboo.

The kitchen was near the river for the convenience: we needed a lot of water. On one of our trips, Mam and I sailed by a motor boat on that river called Kwaai but in reality that is not its name. Mam and I also travelled on the railway with the little train that goes up and down. All the jungle is gone and now the area is a nice place with a lot of peasants. So you see what communications do to an area. These peasants now can transport their harvest to the city.

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The Thai government were the first to actually do something and 'bought the railway from those who had built it, and I was paid R3000. How they found me? I do not know but I bought then the stack of radio record player and tape recorder for it, just about that price. I was a draftee but those professional military, even as POW were still in the service but never saw a penny. "Not our responsibility: you were with the "KNIL" Koninklijke Nederlands Indiesche Leger: ask them!! Yes but that does not exist anymore!! Exactly, you are very understanding, I admire you.

All these things taught me: Never Ever be dependent on any whatever government. All this Social Democracy of today: eye wash. One of the slogans is/was "Samen onderweg" in Holland Bullshit' Individualism in those social democracies is the enemy of the community! Of course but it is deadly for personality, "killing" But Eerlijk is Eerlijk I was paid some R10 000 this year as a gesture which indeed is the name of it:" Het Gebaar" and that amount was larger than the Thai payment of 40 years ago because of the Rand rate of Exchange.

Let me immediately add I have never been waiting for money truly not I was going to earn it myself Not boasting!! No a far better reason: any payments and the like create possibly obligations and nasty as I am I do not like to be obligated. And neither I nor Mam have ever been in a position that we had to say thank you to anybody for a job, money, or career etc no more than for the ordinary say thank you things. The truly thank you goes to Mam's parents who arranged in the immediate post-war time our marriage, very romantic by horse drawn carriage and the ever easy stay I had in their house after I was back in 1946, and all the thanks *they* got was me taking their daughter to a land far away.

We're still in Kimsajok where eventually I got a permanent job in the kitchen; heavy work but free from the Japs. At night in the jungle there were no lamps of any kind; the only light from the fires under the 'PAP' drums We ate rice porridge for breakfast. Pitch dark; what about starlight one would ask? No that travels only in straight lines: we worked under some kind of roof. But the very important thing was the life-changing result of working in the kitchen: incredible really!! I was very thin and of course very visibly thin because we were all practically naked. One day working in the night shift I walked very early in the afternoon to the kitchen area ; could not sleep because the irritations of the lice You know the place was so full of rats that the monsters ran freely over you at night.

So I walk to the kitchen crossing a little sort of open space. The camp is still pretty deserted because the workers are not back yet. And from the other side of this little clearing comes a Japanese officer. The usual happens I must salute him with a bow but he is much in a hurry and tells me to get my gear. Which I do, and to follow him to a truck, a small one with a number of fellows in the truck, and the truck leaves. What next? And then it strikes me that the others are all very sick people, and that with me added the truck is full." I am being taken somewhere and away from this horror place. A horror place it was. There was a small area a little lower than outside the camp. And when the first downpour came the camp or a big part of it became a puddle. Not serious but the 'hospital' consisted of I think three tents with sick men, very sick men on the floor, the ground surface. Many of them were so weak that they drowned in 2 feet water, unable to lift their heads.

I was not there; I was trying to find some shelter in the pitch dark. The tropical down pour came at night and there was no light whatsoever. In the melee it was not possible to move because of the mud and all the debris floating around. Later the drowned men were discovered. There must have been some rebuilding as at one stage I found myself in an entirely new hut. One slept of course man to man and next to me at one side was somebody I knew; he had an immense fear of getting dysentery and before going for his

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ration he used to heat his little pan in the fire somewhere until eventually the bottom was holed.

Well he slept next to me until one morning when he was dead. The fellow on my other side got such a fright that he wanted to move immediately. He found another place far away from this one, also an own place, away from me, but it did not help. Very shortly thereafter-I think two days- he was also dead.. Of course horror is not always total; perhaps seldom so. In one place it was possible to create a bit of an own atmosphere so that it was 'my place' where one could hang up things like a little pan and arrange one's bag.

Well in any case I was moving away from it all and it soon dawned::had there been just a few minutes earlier or later and the 'bus had been missed' It dawned on me that this officer was a doctor looking-by order- for sick men, likely not out of humanitarian reasons perhaps but simply to empty the camp of the useless. Whatever the reason I was not interested: I was out!

And then the truck stopped and we were told to move in such and such a direction, without guard and truck wherewith the officer moved off, and we were on our own, a cool late afternoon in an area not unlike the Karoo, only the bushes much higher and the soil red. The past fell off like a bathrobe and the inner joy cannot be described. But where were we? Very close to Kantchanaburi.

But I did not belong to the sick in Kimsajok; I worked and was on my way to the kitchen area. Ah but this officer was in a hurry and saw there a very thin man AND wanted to go and fill that last open place in his truck! Could not find another because they were still working. With these things it is who can tell for sure.

Earlier in time still before the surrender I found myself early in the morning in Tanjong Perak, had not eaten yet! So went aboard a ship and looked for the breakfast room. Got myself a top class breakfast and the air raid alarm went off ;at least that was what the waiter came to tell me. No not leave this food standing and it took only a few minutes to get it inside. Then decided: better not to be found on a ship with an air raid going—if it comes to that there had been many- so down the gangplank.

I went across the quay area into the warehouse to come out on the other side on the road and then there is 'de Bie' a pal sitting on a drainpit. We hear a noise ever increasing as if a train is approaching. De Bie shouts 'bombs' and because he shouts so loud I get a fright and fall forward and de Bie jumps forward in full length in the sand. A bomb explodes next to him, no more than 50 cm from him and in front of me on the other side of the road. One bomb fell into the warehouse I just left. De Bie was fine: the bomb killed itself in the loose sand and he crawled out all covered with dust and sand.

The most awful thing I think I ever saw was that of a Javanese mother suckling her baby, with her back against the wall of the warehouse. She was quite near to me .sitting with her back to the wall of the Goedang as the Malay word is for a warehouse. But she was dead, killed by shrapnel of the bomb exploding inside, and penetrating the wall but leaving the baby unhurt, kept on drinking. I do not remember how my reaction was but confused I was; also because it all happens in a very short time. It is true what an old and seasoned "onderluitenant said: In war in the beginning you will not be able to shoot and kill the enemy unless made angry.

There is a thing that comes to mind which very much applies to these days in the end of 2002 where Americans play such a major role and the European West has lost some of its

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shine. Again I found myself In Tandjong Perak the harbour and again there was an air raid warning. But no planes in sight [yet] As I should we sought cover in a not very deep – perhaps 50 cm—dug out and there were also two Americans from the Philippines. One youngster was really dying for fear of a bombardment; he had the experience of course and we not. The much older fellow tried to console him and said: We may perhaps get hit but remember the United States will never go under.

We thought that very boastful typically American we said. From what I saw of Americans was only after the war and then did I change my mind. Shu they differed from us in most respects: the way they did not waste too much words, action at all times and efficiency then unknown anywhere else. Enormous organisation talent when pushed: the ease of doing things and the massive resources used properly.

The stupidity of that little Japan to wage a war was simply based not on misunderstanding but inability to understand. But that is for the end of this story. Americans simply did not have the desire to sit around tables and to discuss differences; that is to say when urgency is required. They can be like any others greatly bookish and stick each to their little rule book of their particular organisation and work in different directions or alongside without participating info and be very righteous about it, each sure of his own importance.

However we are still in Kanchanaburi, where I related how you would inexplicably feel a heavenly blessing descend upon you, after what you'd been through; windless, deliciously cool, and quiet, with no umbrella of jungle overhead. The bridge had been finished some time ago, and the camp was now a place for the infirm.

The quantity of food we received was less than upstream but that we took and accepted without a problem. I stayed there for some time and then things went bad for me. We all suffered from malnutrition, particularly the shortage of vitamins and I had for a long time scurvy to a certain degree, and that became worse. In Dutch it is called “scheurbuik”, and that is descriptive – it feels like your guts are being ripped apart.

And the distance to the latrines was great. Not being too strong on the legs anymore I fell into a latrine one day, and crawled out, but the camp was not bordering the river so that cleaning was a problem. I remember. I did that where I found a puddle. And who comes along a Dutch sergeant: “What are you doing there?”, I thought to tell him: “Smearing myself with shit”, but I said “I fell just into the latrine”. “I forbid that” says the sergeant, “Ag bugger off *klootzak* (scrotum)”, I tell him.

That did it. There was of course a Japanese commander. But the POW commander was a British colonel, with an aid for the Dutch contingent a captain who was a professional soldier and called himself The Caged Tiger of Java. The situation had slightly affected his mind and he locked me up for four days for calling his sergeant, specially appointed by him to keep order, a *klootzak*.

Now the ‘jail cells’ [4] were close to the English section who heard this and thought this captain a fool, These English POW arranged for me an absolute whale of a time. All sorts of special things they did; because a Dutchman sentenced by this captain must of necessity be a very nice person [to which I agreed with so many words].

However my problems rose and I was sent to the hospital section. That was a bad area let me tell you that. But my troubles increased. Very many men had it and I got it too: Pain in your feet particularly the toes when lying down. As soon as there is weight on the feet the pain is gone. It was called neuritis. I still have it a little. But did that do me a service later!! However not there in Kanchanaburi where there was now only one priority; to get out of

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that hospital where the environment was not, let me say encouraging to remain alive. Well one way or another I got out. And slowly things went better. Walking for a while was a bit difficult. Nothing much further happened.

Mam and I were in Bangkok on one of our tours and I said to Mam I wonder whether a possibility exists to see the railway. and there was: a daily tour even- and looking at the bridge, judging from the angle of view I could say: about here stood this or that. However the place had been filled up, brought level with the track while it was on a dyke originally.

Canterbury as the English called it was for a large part an English POW camp. The English are very good putting up short story shows, real funny, and tops in finding things to make the show look good, like a makeshift bed. Or chair while in the whole camp there were only a couple.

Then came the day that a fairly large number of us were told we were to be moved. Dr Linden [English] who looked after me in the barracks where I stayed wanted me off that list. For some or other reason that did not happen and we went to a place called 'Nonpladuc', also situated along the railway. A very large camp of newly built barracks and a new kitchen was being built; where I offered my services.

While thinking about all this, something happens to come to mind That was still in Kantchanaburi when a show was arranged and that must have been Christmas time. During that show somebody with an extremely good voice sang a Christmas carol .A large crowd listened, looking of course in the direction of the stage, built of bamboo , when during the singing high up in the sky a meteorite came down, very bright leaving just a little bit of a tail and its trail lasting 2 to 3 seconds.

This made such an impression as if this was a Christmas message from heaven that everybody, inclusive of the Japs on the front row fell totally silent. That would put the time at Christmas 1943 and Nonpladuc a little later. And the show was in the day time. Could not possibly have been otherwise as there were no lights of whatsoever kind. That means that this heavenly object was very bright.

These women stood aside obviously to let the train pass and were engaged in the removal of weeds. Must have taken the opportunity for a chat, completely unmindful of the naked backside of a man approaching leisurely high up on the side of one of the trucks of the train moving only slowly Which backside started to spray at the right [actually the wrong] moment exactly! Missing nobody!

There was no question of intent of course; but neither the owner of the backside, nor his pals who held him had any vision in this respect, in fact could not have and were very busy balancing their friend on the edge of a moving train wagon with high sides blocking all view, a precarious undertaking under any circumstance.

A complaint must have been lodged as, in the new camp, after a few days a Japanese soldier in a friendly manner, I must say, interrogated me about this incident. Now this Jap's home language and mine are totally different so it was not a matter where the Jap could say: "Tell me old chap, when you travelled here on the train was there a...?" No, it all went by sign language, which must have been comical to watch. But clearly these Japs held some sort of administration: who sat in what train...I remember playing total unfamiliarity with this event but asked questions in order to show interest. So one was: did this fellow pass a wind? (With suggestive lip-fart). "Nai nai prt prt" aped the Jap. When something funny happened you had to make the most of it.

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Well eventually I got the work in the kitchen that was being built of shaping the clay moulds for the large cooking pans, in which the rice would be cooked. These things were oven-like but on the ground level, with a large opening on the one side to make the fire. There was no outlet like a chimney. And the top side had a very large hole to fit the pan, wok, all made from clay that had to dry and then harden with a smallish fire.

.Just before I got that work which I tried and planned to make my entry to the future kitchen staff team there was something else again; I developed in the palms of my hands blisters which opened and then left round red holes in the skin. But then I did not want to give up this opportunity. What happened was remarkable. These blisters had nothing to do with the work; they would have been there in any case. But the clay healed the holes which never came back.

Now very many years later I am with Nedbank in the Head Office and it is my more or less task to find customers with foreign business and serve them, that I find a possible prospect, somewhere in South {Johannesburg} a fairly large name in cosmetics. How I found all these addresses is now a mystery. When I need something for Mam out of an out-of-the-way shop Sakia must explain in detail how to get there.

Now this fellow [in South] was sort of waiting for me to have a talking partner and it was getting later and later while he kept pouring whiskey. And then it occurred to me to tell this clay story. Oh yes he says they use this – certain types – as raw material for many facials. I smell import business but the quantities were small and the thought remaining was how I can make this to end quickly and go home, certainly before I get drunk. [Tough business this banking] and I came home late very late and Mam was not very impressed. I said “Mam it is the calcium that did it “. “Ja ja”, says Mam.

So we make these clay oven-like structures and finish other work but no job in the kitchen. Why this urge to work in a camp – Nonpladuc – where nobody works. Well I thought perhaps I can eat more of the stuff that does not feed so well but then compensate in quantity. However I landed the job of water pumper. This camp was not a river camp and depended for water from a borehole, which was, together with the pump [an American make].installed by a white man of an axis friendly nation.

However soon I was a rice cook on the large pans that we installed. Two buckets and I think five of water. The art was to draw the fire as soon as the boiling water with the rice in it came level with the rice which swelled enormously. We had no tools so that one could only draw the fire by scratching with a bamboo stick.

But now I develop a toothache which increased by the week and then by the day. Not very stoic I hear you say, not to go to the doctor. Ah but we had a special dental clinic; a proper dentist and a chair; however this was a baby highchair, and the clinic was under a tree, in itself not a bad idea as one could move the entire clinic with the sun and keep in the shade all day. However the upsetting factor was the man’s equipment: One pair of rusty pliers to pull teeth, and a hand/foot drill. Not much of a hero this one I can assure you but eventually the pain became severe and I went. And remember sitting in the baby chair and gripping the very short arm rests ready for the worst.

The dentists says open up and I did, so that he would not hear the clapping of my jaws and in goes the instrument and, once a good grip had been established, one hefty jerk and out comes the molar, out is the pain. As Americans would say:”Ah didn’t feel nothin”” Totally painless and I went to sleep catching up. As my Mother would say: “De mens lijdt het meest door het lijden dat hij vreest en dat nooit is echt geweest”. (A person fears

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most what *may* happen, rather than what *does* happen) Something in the form of a wise lecture followed which I forgot, perhaps wilfully forgot because it exhorted certain duties.

Other things come to mind that happened. This new camp was built to house the many extra people that were not required on the railway anymore because it was finished, eventually there must have been some 10 000 [I think], that meant that "facilities" were in heavy use early in the morning. Imagine that number of men having their pee at wake up time that is at sunrise.

So I and many others tried to make it in the earliest possible, still dark. Now the camp was built, on soft ground very slightly sloping and towards the higher area one walked to get to the latrine area. The sky is dark and full of stars, unlike in the 'railway' camps in the jungle where one could only see little of the sky.

And walking towards the slightly higher area was also walking straight East where there is as yet no glimmer of the new day. And then of a sudden I see in front of me building up in the dark a huge pyramid, somewhat tilted to the south, a pyramid of light slightly glimmering; real marvellously beautiful. reaching nearly Zenith high up And then remember in a book of my father, who must have had a great interest in the cosmos, having read about the Zodiacal Light, which nobody knew what it was.

It was best seen in the tropics and only at fixed times twice a year for a short while. Shu and there I see it with my own eyes. That literature dated from the very early twenties of the last century and I read it all. And what was clear is how little Man at that time knew about the environment on the large cosmic scale, compared to now.

What was once a mystery that puzzled many is simply the thin layer, a disk really, of dust left after the formation of the [our]planetary system, and this disk is at a slight angle to the plane of the Earth , and has thus two places either sides where it cuts through. If one thinks of this it is remarkable what has been discovered and figured out in less than 100 years.

On another of these, my early morning trips there occurred another phenomenon, also naturally caused but far easier to explain scientifically. It was, a little later in time, the very early orange red of the sunrise, still very low in the sky. Appearing in the distance against this band of orange red light were silhouetted a large number of human figures in the squatting mode, in a long row seeking relief on the dugout latrine facility.

These dug outs were very large affairs indeed, 100 meter long easily and deep, in order to accommodate this very large number of men. I looked at this and thought this looks like an old fashioned curtain but then upside down with the little balls up instead of hanging down from the lower end.

But then disaster struck or something extraordinary happened:: All these upside down curtain embellishments rose in concert and the human figure became clear as arms rose and even legs crooked like the legs of a frog, all this in deadly silence. The cause of this commotion became clear: almost immediately the moving figures were followed by an ugly brownish reflection against the morning glow; a wave of latrine content splashing up.

Clearly what had happened: a large slice of the side of the dugout channel had caved in and caused an enormous wave and then the silence was broken by the shrieks and shouts of the men which I heard later on account of the distance the sound had to travel.

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When I heard this shouting the 'dust was already settling again' so to speak. Seeking relief was clearly always a hazardous business this brings me to the subject in discussion: The relieving yourself in public, with all sorts of people walking about you, not to do shopping for instance, but to find an opening in the long rows of users.

This was in the early stages something to learn and get used to! Imagine yourself on Johannesburg Station having the urge and you have to decide to do it somewhere! Oh yes somewhere but where? And that is then a good question; the answer is just anywhere convenient to you. This is a little difficult to learn but very easy to unlearn, in fact then it becomes a real relief, so to speak.

Another thing comes to mind about Nonpladuc. By the time I had worked for a while in that kitchen as rice cooker I had no more clothes of any kind except a homemade sort of small swimming broekie that offered scant cover. From a well endowed other fellow as far as these worldly possessions are concerned I was offered a shirt and a pair of shorts, you knew the type you tie up on the waist with a string; for 8 tical which I could borrow from an officer in the kitchen a lieutenant by the name of van Houten who also worked for the same bank I worked for. He was quite a bit older than I and later pitched up in South Africa where he joined the Nedbank. But then I remember that I put on the shirt for the first time and found it hot and very uncomfortable. We had not worn clothes above the waist for a long time.

And that is about all of any importance that happened in that place. When all of a sudden there was something new: I was told to be ready to move. From Kantchanaburi I belonged to the first group to be taken away and now again? Where to? That nobody could tell; however there was a rumour that we were going to Japan!! Ah, I thought when at last can I go back?

And when we left the camp the Japanese lined up along the road and stood to attention. Not only the soldier ranks but the entire section inclusive of the sergeant major[s] Then I knew: it is so, we are going to Japan and all these Japanese military are paying us their respects. Which did not impress so much: Ten times more the question how will I ever get back all the way from Japan?

Back to 'Indie' no I did not think in that direction anymore; I want to go back to Hilversum to see Ina Tamsma But there was then not much time to ponder all this; walk and walk on to the railway line not far. There was a small 'stop facility' no more than a platform and one track and a large sign saying 'Nonpladuc' waiting for the train to come and that was a long wait.

Very many years later, Ina Tamsma and Kees van der Molen have been married for a long time, brought up 5 children and are on a holiday trip to Bangkok. They take a day trip to 'the Bridge' and travel with a small bus along a straight road and then all of a sudden K.C. sees a platform and on it a typical railway sign with on it the name Nonpladuc, out of the blue and I jump up "I stood there"" and frighten all the passengers because of the suddenness of the reaction. Same platform same name perhaps repainted, and also weeds among the track.

Then on to the "Burma Railway and that means Kantchanaburi. And there is it "the Bridge" - little different from as it was. Two sections are of a different shape. Those are replacements for bomb damage. Our tour leader by now knows :this fellow worked here as a POW and rushes up to me 'would you like to travel on the train there is one coming just now I will get the tickets'. And Mam and I travelled on the train to its track's end, where it has been cut in order not to enter Burma.

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Where the rail stops the jungle has taken over. All Thais on the train knew what Mam and I were all about and the conductor never asked for a ticket: we travelled for free. How about that? I asked a passenger: Kim Sajok.? Oh yes, yes we were just passing it. He was not sure about this Kim but oh sure here is Sajok as he said, All now nice farm land over a large area.

That railway has been of great benefit and the Thai Government paid us. With the proceeds I bought a Grundig sound system many years ago. We had lunch in a jungle holiday resort at the end of the railway. And then there was the typical Thai large canoe with an enormous 8 cylinder engine and we sailed the river, all still the same. We visited Thailand after India. What a difference These Indians all covered in bed sheets, dirty in general so it seems. And then the Thais, not noisy, and more dignified, a bit like in Indonesia.

That was a good thing that Mam and I did after I retired: we travelled a lot and saw very many places. We never took anything else but first class hotels. Ah, that Orchid Hotel in Bangkok, fantastic. And in Thailand they know the art of carving even the fruit you get served on the table is carved in elegant shapes. Not to shorten India the hotels there also excellent; many are converted from palaces of Rajas and Princes. We also visited Nepal The day we were at the bridge was the 23 September 1983 there are cemeteries for the men of the different nations who died there on that railway. When I stood there I could better understand how these men died and what they went through and what they looked like at their time of death than the other visitors. All died an utterly lonely death.

There is also a Buddhist sort of memorial with the specimen of the type of hut we lived in. The specimen does not get even close to reality. When in Nonpladuc, the Japanese camp commander was visited by a delegation of senior Buddhist Monks for a discussion. Ah I thought this may improve our lot. No, what they came for is to suggest that our dead be buried a little deeper as the wild dogs dug the corpses up and left the bones lying about around their temple Many of the stones on the war graves in Kantchanaburi with the names of our dead mates have nothing under them: It would not be possible otherwise. But at least the names are still there, on a stone block, far away from their homes.

There is the question that remains largely unanswered as far as I know: Why are there such differences in totals of deaths between the English, Australian and Dutch forces? The latter suffering the lowest number. Overall the total is that one in three men did not make it. Bur for us the figure is better to my knowledge.

For one thing the Australians worked much harder than we, that is for sure. They acted as if they were building their own railway; The Australians were tough, for sure. But to do your level best on a Japanese railway in war time seemed to us not right. Then there is the reason that we were 'colonials' and very few of us in their civil life did menial work or body labour and therefore inclined to do this work on the railway at a much more leisurely pace.

The English were less used to the tropical climate and [I think] decidedly less clean on their bodies - not used the bathing, while we were taking every chance there was to go to the river. The number of leg amputations because of runaway infections was the largest among the English. I know of only one Hollander who had a leg amputated because of large unmanageable tropical ulcers.

Further up, after Kimsajok was the camp Rintin, mostly Australian and the death rate was immense. An advantage was perhaps that we were forced to sleep 12 hours a day, from sun up to sun down and had more rest. That is just a thought. In any case the whole thing was now behind us and we boarded a train this time sure of the destination but not what

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we had to do. And we boarded at the platform that I saw many years later, unchanged. How will I ever get back is as I remember my thought on that moment. And Hilversum is now on the other side of the world.



EINDE Mam en Pap in Thailand