

## My Reminiscences

### Chapter 3

So far so good you can truly say when you see how many of your fellows are not there anymore, and how many of your friends are missing in the ever-changing conditions of camp life, their fate unknown to you. Also, the camps were in a perpetual state of change, you were assigned here, then there, and then somewhere else again. Sometimes I thought the Japs kept us moving to stop us colluding over anything.

So the group standing on the little platform of Nonpladuc station was a new assembly, facing the prospect of another terrible journey in noisy wagons for days on end. Before the experience of the war I had many more friends – also of course because I was single, which set me apart.

There's a well-known joke about one of these boys entering a Club, where social standing and income determined hierarchy, and yells: "I earn 300 guilders a month, but where can I sit?" One of my peers in Surabaya was a certain Blankvoort, a smallish chap, skinny, with curly blond hair and a hooked nose, who walked with a bouncy gait. A cockerel of a man but quite likeable, he had an Adler, which was a very nice car.

He was transferred to Medan and, in those days, this was done by a ship of the KPM line. The little Adler had to go along on board ship so that, on landing, he could drive straight to the office in Medan. This meant that the car needed to have petrol in the tank, which the Captain refused to accept.

The rest of the plan worked and Blankvoort entered the parking area of the Medan office, which is gravelled, at some speed, creating a cloud of dust and a certain amount of noise to announce his happy arrival, and bounced straight into the office of the Agent. We didn't have a Director, we had an Agent

Unfortunately a lot of the dust and accompanying noise raised by his dramatic arrival had blown into the Agent's open window, disturbing him greatly, and there stands Blankvoort, unannounced, bouncing gently, but totally ignored.

Blankvoort makes a little "ahem" noise, to no effect – next, a little louder "AHEM", and then even louder. Eventually the Agent bestirs himself – "Is your name Blankvoort, or possibly Blankveught? If the former, you may work in my branch, if the latter, you may fuck off back to where you came from. But in either case you'll get a kick in the ass if you don't immediately get the fuck out of my office". By the standard of the time this kind of put-down was not considered excessive.

I was never a member of one of these clubs, which occurred in every town, because they cost money, money I wanted to spend on the car I could buy a year earlier if I stayed away from the clubs. Our Surabaya sub-manager Zeilinga was adept at the use of strong and colourful language, but many were similarly ripped into by their superiors.

Zeilinga later came to South Africa, to the bank in Cape Town, where he arranged an office party that Mam and I attended. When I introduced Mam to him she said how much she's heard about him, to which he replied, "Yes, disgraceful, I know, but I've reformed". Later, when we took the Zuiderkruis to Holland on long leave, Mrs. Zeilinga specially

brought a little blanket for our youngest. He was sharp, but a little dated in his thinking regarding banking, and died demented by Alzheimer's, as did absolutely all the bosses of that early and quite small bank, as well as their wives. Count your blessings!

But we are in Nonpladuc not counting blessings but railway freight cars that come slowly rolling in, in rather a great number, the same galvanised steel freight cars as of last time, not hopeful. But, OK, the train moves very slowly and in the meantime I'll answer the question no doubt being asked: How could that dust blow in from outside? Surely the window was closed due to the air-conditioning?

Air-conditioning did exist but it was a rarity. There was one single shop in the entire Surabaya that was air-conditioned, a men's outfitter named Whitelaw, a branch of the Singapore chain, and it was so cold inside that shop that I stayed away. Offices were equipped with ceiling fans.

So the train is ready, the familiar freight-wagons with an open sliding door at either side, which we crawl into and immediately notice that we are less crowded than we had been coming in the other direction a couple of years before, and look forward to a more pleasant trip.

We became a little more optimistic, with justification, it turned out, though it was still an enormous distance. This time chunks of bread were distributed more regularly than on the outbound journey, though we weren't entirely deprived then either – the memories have just faded. We didn't stop even once, not to prevent escape, but because of the incredible chaos we left behind.

Away from any town the train even stopped by a body of water where we could wash ourselves. Sleeping, normally a narrowly cramped business was easier and when we disembarked it became obvious that there were only whites on the train, although there had been many Asians in the camps.

Did Japan want to show by invasion how she had conquered the white race and thereby endear themselves to the locals? They did that in a very inept manner – Javanese and Sumatrans were transported to the railway in large numbers as coolie labourers, and the poor chaps died like flies – many more than with us, and they made it abundantly clear to the locals who was now in charge.

Other than that it went quite well, the travel time was four days, unlike the outbound journey with another day tacked on, and at Singapore we directly boarded ship, a hijacked French vessel the name of which I was unable to read.

I always enjoyed boarding a ship – it has a special ambience, and this one we had to traverse from the stern where we boarded, to, and into, the foremost cargo hold, which was entirely empty and open. I faintly remember a roll of barbed wire alongside the mouth of the hold in which we each were to find ourselves a spot. I found mine on the lowest level where, lying down, you could look up at the big square mouth without seeing any barbed wire. I appropriated an empty rice bag for bedding – there were a quantity of them laying about, but in the end not enough, and shortly thereafter we sailed.

What had seemed acceptable soon deteriorated into the most horrific nightmare. The ship sailed in the tropical sun and got hotter and hotter which, after a day or two made it unbearable – everyone began to sweat profusely, and lost all appetite for food.

The extreme humidity in the hold made that even worse, and the decks down there were soon dripping wet. Twice I can remember being brought onto deck in groups to be hosed down by Jap sailors using a fire hose, which was delicious, though it did nothing for cooling the hold.

Within days the bilge was awash with sweat that splashed with the rolling of the ship. There was one remarkable and comforting fact: when we were being hosed down up on deck we could look around and see that the convoy had shrunk.

The convoy started with six ships and two escorts, but that number decreased. The hatches were regularly suddenly closed due to the presence of submarines, and then, at the next hose-down, we'd see that there were fewer ships. Naturally it was upsetting to think that the next time the submarine might find us, and I'm not totally certain that only we got through, though I think that was the case.

This was not our greatest anxiety though - all of this humidity created a perfect breeding ground for maggots; we were covered in them, particularly down in the hold. You had to strip absolutely naked because those maggots would infest your pants and you couldn't scratch them out of your ass otherwise. Everybody had bouts of sneezing when maggots crawled into their nose. Lying on my rice bag held little pleasure because it was soaked through and squelched when I stood on it, being also an ideal breeding place for maggots. There were many of them that a man's back would be alive with a crawling mass when he stood up.

There was a Japanese sailor who told us we were in the South China Sea, between the mainland and Formosa. He also spoke of the Allied invasion of Normandy, which established the date as early June 1944, and our arrival in Japan as around the 15<sup>th</sup> of June, or possibly a few days thereafter.

At the end of June we started work in the coal mine – we landed at Moji after the first night that I'd slept well on a long time. It was a cool night during which we'd sought shelter and I slept like an ox after many sleepless nights in the unbearable heat and, in the coolness, our appetites also returned.

Moji is located on Kyushu opposite Shimonoseki on Honshu. The two cities were already joined by an undersea tunnel, if I'm not mistaken. On arrival we were transferred to barges that navigated various waterways and locks under the gaze of Japanese citizens, this being something of a publicity stunt arranged by the military government to demonstrate military success.

I had heard a rumour, which I doubted to be true, that visitors to Japan, before or after clearing Customs, I'm not sure which, were required to bathe before being admitted to the country. But indeed at Moji I saw what appeared to be large communal baths in a hangar-like structure in the port, though they were empty at the time.

What I also saw and that was far more interesting – a ship entering the Modi harbour at great speed. The harbour was part of a Bay. I very clearly remember thinking: that ship is escaping a submarine attack or more likely endeavouring to cut its time at sea to the shortest possible. It was in the daytime that we arrived and the last night aboard was much better than any of the earlier: we were in much cooler climate and I had slept as a log since many days without any sleep. In fact I was told that the anti aircraft gun on the foredeck had repeatedly fired but I had not noticed. That was a reassuring thing that so close to Japan there had been some American activity, what sort of activity we did not know, most probably aircraft; could hardly be something different,

Well again on a train but all and everything now was a different proposition than before; there were buildings, roads and this was a set up of a country and most surprising electric light, not seen for a long time. And we travelled in a train, a real train not in trucks, and arrived at a real station Fukuoka. Not that we could read that; all was of course in Japanese. We did not stop long but went on to Omuta. From Fukuoka one can also travel to the right on to Nagasaki.

The train was built for the Japanese that was obvious. Not for tall people but even third class which I think we travelled the seats were covered, not plain wood. Of course we at that time did not have the vaguest idea where we were going to, nor that we were going to work in a coalmine, That became clear on arrival in the building of the Omuta station where we were met by Japanese with miners lights on their caps. Also the camp proper was entirely different from what we were used to in Thailand. A proper building and a tiled roof, not unlike the ones we know from photos of German camps. But then some Japanese style added and the entrance door not in the middle of the front end but on the side.

The one door entrance led to a narrow passage way all along the side of the long building; The floor of that part was cement On the right side were sort of rooms, in our case double rooms on a higher level than the passage To enter the room one climbed one step; that step was intended as a seating, made of short wooden planks and then one sat there usually with shoes on. Inside the rooms the floor consisted of straw mats; I think called tatamis and inside shoes were not worn. The floor was not solid; these tatami floors gave away a little to the weight of the person. There was no furniture in the form of beds or stools. And if I am correct a Japanese house, any house is sized by the number of mats [tatamis] which have always the same measurements.

To sleep one unrolled a sort of thin mattress; and to sleep under we had a quilt. In the time the room was not used. When we were at work, it was empty: all these things were rolled up. And there was electric light. The room part was separated from the passage way by the well known Japanese sliding door, made of thin wood strips and paper.

The totally different accommodation gave us hope of no repeat of what we had seen before and experienced in Thailand. There was even at the end of each barrack a rudimentary toilet! It is remarkable how much more attention is given to roof construction in Japan—and in China for that matter—than we do. Each tile is shaped sort of as a work of art and carefully cemented on to the underlying structure. The process of laying roof tiles is a lengthy one. What I saw of Japanese houses, and that were quite a few after the war, they were all built on four corner stones carved to a certain shape, square but wider

at the bottom and there slightly rounded; and on the top the granite stone had a carved square hollowed out to fit a heavy piece of timber. The walls etc of the houses were all of very light and thin planks or strips but the outside frame was much heavier. That frame timber rested on the stone which because of its shape could roll a little. This sort of construction helped to absorb the movements of the ground in case of earth tremors. Later when we could walk freely in Japan it was clear how important the roof is to for instance a temple elaborate than anything else.

So the first impression was positive, which should be seen in the light of what we were comparing it to – Thailand. We commenced two days of instruction in Japanese terminology to be used underground, and found that we were in fact not ‘hensoppoes’ but ‘furio’, which is the Japanese term for prisoner of war. On our mine lamps that attach to the cap there was also a character that resembled our letter ‘F’. Japan as far as I understand it, has two equivalents to our alphabet, one official set of characters that resembles Chinese, and a simplified set often used for writing (I forget its name). This F was painted onto the lamp glass.

The mine buildings were all alike and built as cheaply as possible – you could never slam a door for the risk of shattering it, and I understood why theft is such a heinous crime in Japan: any house can be entered without the slightest difficulty. But escaping was a different matter: there was a tall, sturdy fence topped with high-tension wires which ensured that nobody would even think of escaping, though quite unnecessary since with your white face and mine clothing you’d be quite conspicuous. Stealing a change of clothes would be futile since they’d undoubtedly be too small – everything in Japan is designed and made for small people. The only victim of the electric fence was a drunken Japanese guard who blundered into it.

In the camp we also had an authentic Japanese bath, which is a large pool that can accommodate a hundred or more men and is steam heated. A bather must first soap himself outside the pool on a concrete floor, rinse himself with water ladled out of the pool, and when quite clean immerse himself for a long soak in water that is so hot that you emerge quite dizzy – though that might have been through being out of condition. Now I understood why Japanese officers on Java sought barrels so keenly – they wanted to fill them with water heated by a fire and sit there for hours on end. As this narrative unfolds you’ll see we didn’t often laze around in baths.

The mine itself was not very large underground nor was the equipment on top. One went down with a cable train, not an elevator and the coal was not much deeper underground than 300 meters I should say. And the mine was at a distance from the camp about one kilometre perhaps. Right at the edge of a Bay and I understand that in peace time ships obtained their coal requirements from there. A pier was next to the mine.

We were to work in three shifts, morning afternoon and night shift. Sounds reasonable but the catch was: starting time for work was at the coalface down below. That meant that for instance the morning shift got up at 3 at night. Then there were all sorts of things to be done: to eat and get one meal in a box for lunch. It was not much but perhaps sufficient in the beginning. Red rice mixed with some other grain and a few beans and seaweed separate as a vegetable.

Then parades, one after the other and endless counting of men. Then to the mine where we changed clothing and got a mine lamp. Thereafter we were spread and divided, split etc into teams, each team with a Japanese foreman. As soon as we were on mine property we were taken over by mine personnel and the mine was a Mitsui undertaking. Then we went down with the cable train, which had to go up and down a few times to take everybody. Then the walking from the lower cable station to a place called 'miharri' the tool shed where you got what was needed on the particular job. By the time you got to the place where the work was to be done it was 6 about.

The tasks were many and varied but mainly divided into two: in South African mines a large part of the coal layer is left intact to support the roof. In Japan this was not done – all the coal was mined so that everything above, in this case two to three hundred metres of it, was left unsupported and just waiting to come crashing down on you.

So in our mine there were two main activities, one was to dig out coal, and that was called 'Saitan', and the second was 'preparation', for which I never heard the Japanese word. Saitan drilled holes in the coalface which were then charged with dynamite by a Japanese 'maitomei'

The Dutch language customarily adopts words from other languages as its own, and so it was in Japan. Maito came from dynamite; a jackhammer, which was used to drill the coalface, became a 'jakkuhama', and the heavy tool to bend rails which the Americans call a Jim Crow was a 'djinkurra'.

So there was the 'maitomei' who charged the drilled holes with dynamite and fuses, lit the fuses with a stinking match (all very old-fashioned), and counted the explosions as they occurred, and then you could go back and dig the coal into a 'troffo', which is what they called a trough, since they cannot pronounce a word ending in a consonant.. The coal in the trough would be moved by a chain conveyor the same width as the trough, and the chain would loop back across a series of wooden cross-beams.

The trough emptied itself into a mine cart, a trolley large enough that I had to stretch to see into it. We had the tremendous good fortune to have a coal seam that was two metres or more high, so you could walk upright. The process of drilling, blasting, and clearing took between eight and ten hours to complete, and then the coal face had advanced by about a metre.

It varied a bit but generally a Saitan shift of six men was expected to fill 16 mine trolleys with coal, each trolley having a capacity of two and a quarter tons. Trolleys were drawn away on a rail by cables to an underground centre where they were inverted to empty them. The coal was then carried to the surface on a multi-stage conveyor belt, each section disgorging its load onto the subsequent one; no single section being up to carrying such a load alone. This conveyor system was the only half-way modern piece of equipment in the entire mine.

The other activity in the mine was called "Preparation" I do not remember or rather I am sure there was no Japanese word in circulation. When we arrived at the mine it had already been in operation for many years – many Americans, mostly Spanish speakers from Guam, worked there but there was no fraternization between nationalities, nor was there any reason to be since we worked far apart.

Preparation was an important function. In South African mines large pillars are left in place to support the roof and everything above it, but in Japan everything is mined out so support by other means must be promptly put in place to prevent collapse. These supports were called 'walls', and were extended by a succeeding shift, which also extended the trough towards the new coal face, as well as the electrically driven chain. On the other side the wall was sturdily built all the way to ceiling height to support the roof.

The wall was extended by two or three metre lengths and was at least a metre wide, built with an outer skin of heavy stone, filled with rocks and gravel. The wall was dry-packed stone, using no cement, but had to be exactly vertical or its strength would be compromised.

This doesn't sound all that difficult, but the catch came at the end, when the gap between wall and ceiling had to be closed by tamping in rubble hard against the roof, and then lifting heavy stones into place on outstretched arms to finally close the gap. These walls had been extended over the years and were now several kilometres long. Between the walls the roof was blasted away to form a rough arch, to prevent rock falls.

Not everybody knows how sharp-edged rocks that have been blasted free are. The coal seam also contained a considerable amount of embedded dark grey stone which also shattered into shards when the dynamite went off. This loosened rock was of ideal shape to build the wall with, but had to be handled with extreme care.

We did have work clothes but these were soon reduced to rags by the acid that leaked out of the lamp batteries, acid that also tormented the skin, exposed as it was by lack of clothing. Only our feet were protected from the sharp rubble by wrapping them in straw.

There were no Saturdays or Sundays; work continued without a break. That meant that soon each day was the same: sleep, get up, and get buggered around to down below, come up, eat and sleep again with no time in between. Every 10 days we changed shift. This brought some free time if you moved from the day shift to the night shift. The day shift ended in practice at about four in the afternoon and that was then also about the time that the night shifts started moving up their rigmarole ladder. So we then got the next night shift and in this way had a once in the month a bit more normal night. However that next night shift cut the sleep short to 3 in the so called free night. In such a setup one soon loses all sense of dates; particularly I did because dates are not my strong point.

The first more favourable impressions of a proper building and a leak proof tiled affair above you soon faded! In Thailand on the railway there was sometimes a possibility to temporarily disappear by goofing off a while. In the mine that was not possible. Though there was one very clever Dick in our group; he took one look at the mine and promptly declared that he could not work there because he suffered claustrophobia. That was real good: he got a job in the kitchen. Every job or most of them were real bad. One I will describe as seemingly a soft job.

As I explained the coal was moved out of the 'Saitan' section by shovelling it into a 'troffo' and an endless chain pulled it out. Now that chain was put together from many parts; if not nobody would be able to lift it. These parts were put together by strong bolts. Should one of those bolts get loose all hell broke out as the motor continued to turn and the

whole caboodle disintegrated. However the shortage of everything made it necessary, to use an ordinary nail in the little hole at the end of the bolt to prevent it from coming loose. Now one guy had to sit at the end and watch these bolts pass and check --while the chain moved-- that the nail was still in place. Try and do that: for ten hours follow a chain that passes in front of you and check by moving your eyes left to right, not in day light but in the dark. With the aid of no more than a torch light: the mine lamp on your cap. Within the course of one shift you are totally nuts.

This job also embodied another function – while you were sitting there fighting to stay awake and keeping your eyes moving to and fro the not miss the next bolt, you also had to look towards the work face where the troffo disappeared into the dark, because you were also in charge of the huge electrical isolator that controlled the motor driving the chain. It was accepted protocol that the Jap foreman would signal this necessity by ripping off his cap and waving it vigorously. You would then immediately stop the motor which was highly geared and capable of wreaking total havoc if not brought to a stop. You can imagine that happening in complete darkness.

The sole source of light was from half a dozen cap-lamps casting beams into the dense cloud of coal-dust illuminating everything that was visible. If someone saw a really nice thick rock and place this not in but across the trough right at the beginning where the chain came down from its wheel, then the chain would lift out of the trough and drag everything in its path outside, thereby putting an end to the work for the day, which was the object of the exercise.

This would only succeed if the chap at the motor switch was inattentive and failed to notice the futile waving of the foreman's cap-lamp, something he would be lambasted for but which didn't worry us in the least. Why didn't the foreman dash for the switch, climbing over heaps of coal and debris on the way?

Accidents were commonplace but there was a Japanese goddess to protect us, identity unknown, that we had to petition before going underground. When assembled and ready in the hangar with the foremen at the ready there was always a little ceremony where we'd implore a little cut-out paper doll suspended on a string in a rude little shrine against a wall under the roof, for protection.

When we stood there quite ready to go to work we had simultaneously doff our caps, observe a moment's silence, and then cover our heads again. The command from the headman for hats off was 'Tatsubo' and a cap back on was 'Chakubo'. Or maybe the other way around.

Accidents in the mine were frequent and sometimes serious. Many suffered from stones, large ones that dropped on them from the ceiling. And as described just now we did not wear anything protective. That little cap was made of cotton single ply. Inside the cap, on top was a round piece of rubber; nothing like helmets etc.

Now one day we sit in the mine and eat. One in our group is a certain Muller rather entertaining talkative fellow and he sort of mocks this little paper god business. He sits with his back to the wall; you know the endless rows of upstanding timber poles that keep ceiling poles in place. Ach he says stupid this protecting little god, a little piece of paper, these Japs do not even make a proper little sculpture/ And then this cap off and on. And

he demonstrates in an odd manner to make the whole thing look really ridiculous and believe it or not while he has his cap off for that short moment a stone falls right on top of his skull, just before he could put his cap back. It was only a small stone, half the size of a man's hand; the kind of size a god would choose to call to order one of his errant sons!

Every day was so much the same as the other that our stay there started to seem to have no end. And the work was heavy, day in day out. But very special on so called 'output' days when we had to produce the most incredible quantities of coal. These output days were as was said ordered by the Emperor who took a personal interest in all and everything; also in the Omuta coal mine; and these Japs believed this. A conditioned mind. An "output-day" was the terror of the shift. Each 10 days shift had at least one output day. And that meant two times drilling and again shovelling all that coal away; it also meant for the follow up team of preparations double the size of the walls and many times too, extra supports for the ceiling. The work day then stretched to 13 or 14 hours and then one was really dead tired in the full sense of the word at the end of it.

And then it happened to me that I thought there is no end to this. In the summer of that year and also later there was very little sign of enemy activity. The Pacific is a very large place and America needed a haven for its aircraft nearer by. The problem with being a POW is that he does not know what is going on and has no idea how long it [still] is going to last,? Just keep on digging or building walls, hope there will not be an accident. And that the food will not get even less, because it did. The beans had gone a long time ago.

And then it came what to me was most remarkable, I slept when the head touched the pillow. Now I must tell you about that pillow. Everybody had the same thing: A small wooden block with matting wound around it, the matting secured by nails. The block was say 15 cm long. And five perhaps six cm square. And then when I slept I had dreams never seen before. I was in Holland on a bicycle, shu heavy work that pedalling, the scene was a cycle path of tar and little stones, on the left reeds and water and to the right grass; and I kept on cycling with dead tired legs, sometimes made it sometimes not; whereto? To a square much like the Groest in Hilversum, but of red bricks. Everything was brick and no centre! And then always without a single exception: I put myself the question but what have you been doing all this time? You never saw her, you never bothered to see her hope have you got.

And that was then invariably the story, without variation, more than once a night it woke me up. Never understood this; why now why not on the railway. But Ina never appeared I never got that far: I woke up and true but not very credible it happened that that same dream came back when I fell asleep again. It is so, that to the POW, the situation he found himself in did not look so good at that time. Then it became winter. When we miners had the better job, underground and not cold. In the camp were other nationalities, English and Australian with other work. What exactly I do not know. Towards that winter we, at least I, reached a point of low hopes for the future.

Perhaps this is a good point in time to end this chapter. Below is the house I came from in Djakarta, this is where I was born, no wonder I can be a bit unfocussed.

END

OF

CHAPTER

THREE.

