Introduction from our Chairman

I write this fresh from our Researching FEPOW History Seminar at the National Arboretum on 5th May 2007. It was good to see both familiar and new faces and such a wide range of expertise and interests.

Our thanks, in particular, go to Roderick Suddaby of the Department of Documents at the Imperial War Museum and our three FEPOW delegates, Victor Cole, Harry Hesp (seen on the right with his wife Merle) and Fred Seiker, who all contributed to this special event which was much appreciated by all. Topics covered included Collective Memory, IWM and National Archive holdings, FEPOW newsletters and the particular research interests of organisers and participants.

There was considerable anticipation of the May 2008 two day Conference. The main focus will be on Singapore, Hong Kong and issues of civilian internment.

This is obviously going to be a popular event and the advice must be to book your place early. A full list of speakers will be published in the autumn. I look forward to seeing you there.

Jonathan Moffatt, Chairman

The value of oral history: a FEPOW Resource

Hamzah Muzaini is a doctoral student at the University of Durham researching the memorialisation of the Malayan Campaign in Malaysia and Singapore during the Second World War. His interest in the area was sparked by his previous vocation as the curator of a WWII museum in Singapore, which exposed him to the FEPOW story and the issues associated with how it is currently remembered, recounted and disseminated today. We asked him to write about his research for this edition of the RFH Newsletter.

During the last Researching FEPOW History workshop (2007), much was said about some of the ways one could learn about those who were prisoners of the Japanese during the Second World War – e.g. through index cards, liberation questionnaires and archival information etc. One specific resource though, I felt, was not discussed enough: oral history, or personal accounts of events experienced during the war, both of combatants and non-combatants. Yet, there is much to be learnt from these seemingly anecdotal and individualized stories, and here I highlight a few of the benefits FEPOW researchers could reap from encounters with others’ war recollections. These emerged from my own research on the oral histories of civilians who lived during the war in Perak, Malaysia.

For one, oral accounts represent an invaluable resource in piecing together a more complete picture of events in the past. While official documents may arguably provide more ‘factual’ data – of prisoner camps, dates, etc. – oral sources help further to enrich and contextualize historical situations, filling gaps with poignant and moving human stories about what conditions were like then. Also, oral accounts usually touch upon histories that may be deemed irrelevant by official historians, thus providing perspectives that may not be available if one
were merely to peruse official records, statistics and social histories. Personally, I find these narratives extremely inspiring as nothing compares actually to hearing about particular points in the past from those who have gone through these events as witnesses themselves. My senses heightened when they became emotional as they related their stories of what happened to them in the past.

Even though these accounts are highly personal and usually pertain mainly to life-stories of the narrators themselves, when put together, they can also help to recreate collective histories, of a people, place or regiment, as Jonathan Moffatt and Audrey McCormack’s book, *Moon over Malaya*, exemplifies. Indeed I was fascinated by the way in which personal accounts and anecdotes were used to reconstruct the collective history of the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders and the Royal Marines during the Second World War. Thus, reading accounts of others may help FEPOW researchers to get a better idea of prevailing contexts and situations to which their loved ones may also have been subjected to then.

When someone speaks about his or her own life within an oral history project, more often than not, they also speak of other people with whom they have had contact. These are pieces of a puzzle not usually found in official records and documents that tend to gloss over mundane and anecdotal histories for a more factual and chronological account of what happened in the past. Within my research, I have encountered quite a number of war civilians who spent more time detailing the lives of other individuals they knew than of their own. Especially in the absence of official archival data, FEPOW researchers might stumble upon nuggets of information about loved ones just by reading through another person’s account of the war.

Some may dismiss oral history accounts as unreliable, full of gaps and even fictional, dependent on memories that are selective and incomplete. I have two things to say about this: first, official histories are no less selective and incomplete as some of us have found with respect to liberation questionnaires that were not completed or index cards that have gone missing. Secondly, researchers need not choose between official and oral history. Rather, they could compare the information, which might end up verifying or strengthening ones’ findings. Official and oral histories should be complementary rather than treated as two ends of a spectrum, one objective and one subjective, one factual and one partially recollected.

Therefore, in researching the lives of individual FEPOWs during the war, it would definitely be useful to go through others’ oral accounts, in particular those who might have served at the same place or within the same regiment. If lucky, one might just find the missing jigsaw piece to the puzzle being put together. If not, one might still end up learning of others’ experiences and learning more about the peripheral conditions of war in particular sites and places then.

FEPOW researchers are also, in many ways, oral history researchers insofar as they interview individuals about their experiences of war. By doing so, as opposed merely to reading books about the war, as many would agree, one may also be privy to things that have remained privately kept.
produced photographs, items and other documents that shed light on events of the war that have not been surrendered to archives, museums, yet another merit of doing oral history-type vis-à-vis secondary historical research.

On another note, I would also suggest that the fruits of FEPOW researchers’ efforts be made more accessible to others. While there are already forums such as the FEPOW community website and email threads, I think more could be done to disseminate the findings of an individual’s research. In that regard, the Researching FEPOW History Group is a step in the right direction. More than the speakers who shared their expertise about FEPOW research generally, I felt that the most significant benefit of the workshops was in providing a space where budding researchers and actual witnesses of war could meet and share ideas and stories.

I have encountered instances where bureaucratic red-tape, inter-organizational competition and government policies have hindered broad access to oral historical accounts, particularly those found within particular national archives. With regards to access, I have also encountered oral history projects that have been done only to have these transcripts kept in private libraries that are not widely available for public use. Still, I do believe that if we were to show more interest in these oral historical accounts, and demand for them to be made more accessible, such barriers to knowledge could gradually be torn down and eradicated.

Hamzah Muzaini

The Secret of Trunks in Family Attics

Martin Percival tells the fascinating story of how a trunk in the attic started him off on a journey that is still to run its course.

Digging around libraries and archives has been of interest to me for many years. When I found a large box, plus a suitcase, of material relating to my father’s time as a FEPOW in the loft of our old house, whilst moving in the spring of 2004, it sparked an interest and a chain of events that I suspect has, even now, only barely begun.

My father, Frank Percival, died in December 1982. He was a hoarder and had kept quite a lot of material relating to his time in captivity. He would talk freely about his time as a POW, if people were interested. By the age of 9 I could count to 10 in Japanese, as he had learned himself for roll call purposes. He had taken my brother and me to see the film “Bridge on the River Kwai” when it was re-released in cinemas in 1972, despite him saying “It’s a Hollywood production so factually not much of it is accurate”.

Over the following years I gained a picture of some of what had happened in my father’s life in the early 1940s. I knew that the first time he had ever left Britain had been on the troopship “Empress of Canada” and later, in captivity, when the POWs learned it had been torpedoed, they cheered despite the loss of life as they had disliked the ship so much; that he had only fired his rifle once on active service (into the top of a palm tree swaying excessively, whilst on guard duty in Singapore, in case the tree held a Japanese sniper); that the Korean camp guards were generally far worse than the Japanese as they were a subjugated nation and the POWs were the first people they had encountered who were a lower life form in the food chain than they were; that upon liberation the deaths continued because of disease and, saddest of all, containers of food and equipment being dropped through hut roofs after their parachutes failed to open and that the first time he had ever been on a plane was on the Dakota taking him to Rangoon before embarkation on the ship to take him home. In addition there were a few more stories and anecdotes that I earwigged as he and his FEPOW friend John Doherty would chat late into the evening when the families spent time with each other in John’s home in Norfolk in the late 70s and early 80s.

At that time, not knowing any other children of FEPOWs (John had no children), I assumed that other FEPOWs shared similar tales with their children. I have since learned that this is generally not the case and that in fact I have been very lucky in that I have a relatively rich store of memories and artefacts from my father relating to his time in captivity. Fortunately I had enough presence of mind at the age of 19 not to just throw all of this away when he died.

Upon rediscovering this material in the spring of 2004 I realised that my memories of my father and his stories were beginning to fade. I had not
thought about FEPOWs much in the ensuing 22 years. The occasional television documentary on the war in the Far East did get watched but that was really the limit of my interest. So I decided that I ought to try to do something with the material I had.

Alexander Camp (VRD Lines, 29 CMTD)
Singapore Island 2 Feb 1942. Pall of smoke in background caused by Japanese bombing raid on oil tanks. Negative kept through 3 ½ years of captivity. Photograph by Frank Percival.

During the Christmas break in 2004 I found time at last to take a proper look at my father's personal archive. I found all of the 30 or so letters he had received whilst a POW, the documents issued by the British military command after VJ Day instructing the former POWs not to talk to the press about their experiences for fear of upsetting the relations of those not lucky enough to return home, a great many copies from the late 1940s and 50s of the London area FEPOW association newsletter "FEPOW Forum", his long chain of correspondence with the Pension Administrators seeking an army pension, a postcard of Queen Mary's Hospital, Roehampton where he had been treated in 1955 for tropical diseases and, most exciting and unexpected of all, the front page of his local paper, the "Willesden Chronicle" dated 9 November 1945 containing an article that he had written on the troopship home telling his story, in his own words and in far more detail than I could ever hope to research in my lifetime, of his time in captivity.

This leads me back to the main focus for this article - how to assess the material that you can gather and how to build up a jigsaw puzzle picture of your FEPOW's experiences. My first action was to attempt to put together a timeline showing when he was called up, the dates and places where he was trained and stationed and how his time in the army developed from being a serving soldier to a POW and eventually his release and return home. This timeline has given me a good framework to work within and I can also see very clearly from it where there are gaps that require further investigation.

From the notes my father had written on the back of the envelopes of letters received from home, which showed the date of receipt and the camp he was in at the time the letter was issued, I was able roughly to work out his movements up and down the Burma Thailand Railway. I added to this dates taken from other documents like his army discharge papers and some of the data in his army pensions' correspondence. Over the last couple of years this timeline has proved invaluable and become my main point of reference. I have subsequently added many additional notes and observations to it. It has also sparked off ideas for other avenues of research, such as the newspaper stories at the time of repatriation and other sources that may give me the wider picture of the FEPOW story in the context of a very different world and society from that of 2007.

The National Archive at Kew is a major potential source of information and Keith Andrews covered this in detail in his article in the first issue of this newsletter last November. Suffice it to say that an attempt at finding the MI9 Liberation Questionnaire of a FEPOW plus his Japanese Index Record card is an essential step in piecing together the story of your FEPOW or FEPOWs. It is also well worth searching for the names of other FEPOWs who were friends in the same unit as you can see their camp movements and build up the picture of their overall experiences too. Keith very kindly found both documents relating to my father but they revealed little that I did not already know, the Liberation Questionnaire being very sparsely completed for a man who paid attention to detail. Something didn't seem right. I recalled my father telling me he had filled in more than one set of forms in 1945 for material that was being gathered for what became the Tokyo War Crimes trials. I had even found the receipts he'd been given for the MI9 Liberation questionnaire from October 1945 and also one for a mysterious "Form Q" as well as a blank form itself.
After meeting people with more knowledge than my own at the first "Researching FEPOW History" conference in 2006 I realised that this "Form Q" was the Tokyo War Crimes form my father had mentioned over 25 years previously and also that he had completed it 3 weeks prior to the Liberation Questionnaire. That explained the lack of detail – he would probably have taken the attitude that "I told the army all of these facts 3 weeks ago; I’m not repeating it all now". The positive angle is that the MI9 forms were released to the public in January 2005, the negative is that the "Forms Q" only turn up very rarely in Kew in files associated with other subjects, but mainly war crimes investigations. I will keep looking and one day, as more archives are opened to the public, maybe the "Form Q" my father completed will come to light revealing more details of his story.

The 60th anniversary of VJ Day in August 2005 set me off on my next avenue of research. Many people talk regularly about the "forgotten army" and that no one was interested in the FEPOWs upon their return home. I decided to visit the British Library newspaper archive at Colindale in North London to find the full edition of the newspaper from November 1945 and to see if my father’s press story was a lucky one-off article or whether there was other similar material published at the time. I was pleasantly surprised to find another article summarising the wartime experiences of another Burma Railway FEPOW, Pte William Adamthwaite of the East Surreys, of 66 Greyhound Rd, Kensal Green. This appeared in the issue of the "Willesden Chronicle" one week before my father’s story. I then went to work on the national and London dailies and found yet more facts and stories.

I discovered, for example, from both the London Evening Standard and the London Evening News that the first group of FEPOWs returned to the UK via Sunderland Flying Boats from Calcutta via Cairo. They landed at Poole in Hampshire on 19 Sept 1945. This was surprising as we know that the vast majority of FEPOWs came home via sea. 1,554 FEPOWs arrived on 7 October 1945 at Southampton on the liner Corfu and were reported in the press as being the first to return via sea.

Charles Heather of the Middlesex Regiment was reported in the London press as being the first Londoner to return home. Photographs of him with his parents in Ladbroke Grove were published on 20 September 1945. Presumably Heather was one of the FEPOWs on the flying boats, although this was not reported at the time and is an assumption on my part. From Tony Banham, an expert on Hong Kong FEPOW matters, I learned that Charles Heather was captured when Hong Kong fell on 25 December 1941. He was later shipped to Japan on the "Lisbon Maru". Fortunately he survived and ended up in Shanghai before being transported to Tokyo late in the war.

The more I looked through the newspapers the more I found. All through September 1945 were mentions of the men confirmed as being on the way home. In one London paper amongst a list of names of returning FEPOWs was that of John Doherty of Skardu Road, Cricklewood. Bingo! I remember John’s wife Mary talking often in the 1970s about the house she lived in Skardu Road with John after the war. I have still barely scraped the surface of this aspect of the FEPOW story but will return to Colindale to see what else materialises from the newspaper archives. I do recommend others to go to their local libraries and county record offices to explore the newspapers of that period as you may be pleasantly surprised with what you find.

Despite a commonly held belief that the FEPOWS were not newsworthy upon their return home, the opposite appears to be the case in the most part.

My next port of call, after seeing some of the photographs in the press of the period, was the Photographic Archive at the Imperial War
Museum (IWM). Although much of this is now online, the cataloguing of some of the material is a little hit or miss. A search for "Far East Prisoners of War" found nothing in the database. After a conversation with one of the helpful library staff, many volumes and boxes of photographs donated to the IWM by private individuals as well as newspaper photo libraries came to light. I found photographs of the Dakota airlift to Rangoon as well as pictures of the Wampo viaduct that my father had told me he had worked on.

The IWM photo library proved to be a fascinating excellent source and is another archive that I will visit again frequently.

Also at the IWM, in the Department of Documents and Printed Books, are sets of FEPOW Society Newsletters. Whilst reading through copies of the London FEPOW Forum from 1980 I found an article that seemed vaguely familiar. It told the story of the first train over the Wampo Viaduct and how it hit over-hanging rock and was then left on the creaking viaduct for over 13 hours as the rock was hacked away before allowing the train to proceed. The piece was un-attributed but in the next issue of the newsletter was a letter from a FEPOW stating that, based upon some of the anecdotes it contained, only one of two people could have written it - Clem Smith or Frank Percival. At that point I recalled my father asking me to read a draft of an article he had written, much in the same way that I asked him at that time to read through my A’ level history essays to give me feedback. I recalled that this was indeed a piece he had written.

I am still reading through various FEPOW societies’ newsletters as I come across them and I can recommend them thoroughly as a very good source of information that contain many stories that have not appeared elsewhere. They also give a good picture of life in post-war Britain for the FEPOWs and their families.

I hope I have given you, the reader, some information about sources that you may not have considered before as well as how to start the process of organising what you find into a jigsaw puzzle. Realistically you will never find all the pieces but those you do find will give much satisfaction and help give you an insight into what was a fascinating, albeit traumatic, time in the life of a relation. Martin Percival

Some useful tips and resources for researchers from Martin Percival:

"Ancestors" magazine issue 49 Sept 2006 contains a very good article "Imprisoned in Hell" on the FEPOW materials held in the National Archive at Kew. [www.ancestorsmagazine.co.uk/back_issues.php?op=preview&issue=49&storyID=291]

"Your Family Tree" magazine issue 52 June 2007 has an in depth article on using newspapers to expand your family history research.

British Library Newspapers ([www.bl.uk/collections/newspapers]

Imperial War Museum ([www.iwm.org]

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British Library Newspapers ([www.bl.uk/collections/newspapers]

Imperial War Museum ([www.iwm.org]

Ron Taylor's website [www.fepow-community.org.uk] is always worth checking for updates and articles and contains the article Martin’s father wrote in 1945 under the title ‘Your Gods are stronger than ours’.

New Research Life, Health and Social Issues encountered during and after the Far East POW experience

This is an introduction to a new oral history enquiry conducted by the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine

Professor Geoff Gill of the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine is leading an oral history project related to ex-Far Eastern prisoners of war (FEPOW). This will be conducted by Meg
Parkes, who is currently employed as a research assistant by the School. The study will investigate the long-term effects of captivity on a group of ex-FEPOW who can reflect on experiences endured over 60 years ago. The project aims to cover a broad cross-section of experience including all ranks, services, areas of the Far East theatre and location of captivity. It will complement the clinical work done by the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, both immediately post-war and from the 1970s to date. The collection of interviews (with transcripts) will be held by both the School of Tropical Medicine and at the Imperial War Museum’s sound archive in London. The enquiry is concerned to learn more about general experiences both during captivity and in the post-war years, with particular interest paid to health and social issues.

Meg would like to hear from any FEPOW who would be willing to be interviewed. It is intended that all interviews will be conducted in the interviewee’s home. Depending on the response, and in order to maintain a broad balance of experience, it may not be possible to interview at home all those who get in touch.

Please telephone her on 0151 632 2017 to register your interest, in the first instance. The mailing address is: 'Kranji', 34 Queens Road, Hoylake, Wirral CH47 2AJ; e-mail: mm.parkes@talktalk.net

Researching FEPOW History Conference 2008

We are delighted to announce the line-up for the 2nd International Conference which will once again be staged at the NMA in Alrewas, Staffordshire on Saturday & Sunday 31 May – 1 June 2008.

The focus for 2008 will be FEPOW and civilian internment in SINGAPORE, MALAYA & HONG KONG, 1942-1945. We have been very fortunate to secure as keynote speakers Mr Jeyathurai, Director of the Changi Museum, Singapore and Tony Banham, author of Not the Slighest Chance, The Defence of Hong Kong 1941, and founder of the Hong Kong War Diary website.

Guest lecturers we hope will participate include Peter Francis from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission; Dr Nigel Stanley who will be lecturing on the medical aspects relating to FEPOW and civilian internees; Roderick Suddaby from the Imperial War Museum; Roger Mansell, Director of the Center for FEPOW Research, USA and Fred Seiker, FEPOW. Once again, we hope to be joined by at least 12 FEPOW guests including representatives of two famous Highland regiments.

The delegate fee is £100 for the two days and included in this price is the cost of the bi-annual newsletter. Delegates will make their own arrangements for accommodation and there will also be a dinner on the Saturday night (approx. £20 per head, details to be sent out later).

PRIORITY BOOKING – Reserve your place NOW!

RFH members have priority booking for a limited period only and places will be allocated on a strictly first-come, first-serve basis. As before, demand will be high so don’t miss this unique opportunity to hear leading international experts in the field of FEPOW history research and network with others from across the UK and abroad. To register your interest and reserve your place, please contact Meg Parkes by e-mail mm.parkes@talktalk.net or write to: Kranji, 34 Queens Road, Hoylake, Wirral CH47 2AJ
Memories Honoured 90 Years On – New Book

On 21st May 1917 a remarkable organisation was called into being, founded on the vision of one man, Fabian Ware. The Imperial (now Commonwealth) War Graves Commission was set up to care for the graves of the million servicemen who fell during the Great War. Ware succeeded in persuading the greatest architects, horticulturalists, engineers and literary figures to support his work and give their time to Commission for free. Amongst the panoply of stars were Sir Edwin Lutyens, Rudyard Kipling, Gertrude Jekyll and Sir Reginald Blomfield. After the Second World War their work was extended even further afield to commemorate the 670,000 Commonwealth servicemen and women who died in that war. Today, 90 years on, the Commission cares for 23,000 cemeteries, burial grounds and memorials in over 150 countries.

The Commission has cemeteries and memorials all over the Far East including Singapore, Hong Kong, Thailand, Burma, Borneo, Papua New Guinea and Japan. Kranji on Singapore is the second largest Second World War CWGC memorial in the world, after the Rangoon Memorial at Taukkyan War Cemetery in present day Myanmar.

Chungkai Cemetery in Thailand (featured in the book) has been described as one of the most beautiful CWGC cemeteries in the world.

REMEMBERED is a new history of the Commission, beautifully illustrated by the award-winning photographer Brian Harris. It is available from all good bookshops, on Amazon and from the Commission itself at www.cwgc.org. RRP £29.95

ALSO - On 11 August the Java FEPOW 1942 Club are publishing their much-awaited book of articles drawn from the club’s quarterly newsletters published over 24 years. Running to 319 pages, Prisoners in Java (ISBN: 0-9547228-8-3) is lavishly illustrated with many stories published for the first time. Priced £18.95 plus £4.95 p&p (cheques payable to “The Java Club”). Contact: Lesley Clark, 5 Barrons Close, Ongar, Essex CM5 9BJ or lesleyclarkuk@yahoo.co.uk

Editor’s Comment

I am happy to receive suggestions for articles or indeed to consider articles submitted for future editions of the RFH newsletter. Contact me on the email address below or write to me at 17 Abberbury Road, Oxford OX4 4ET.

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