Introduction from our Chairman

Plans for our 2008 Conference are progressing apace. The Conference will be very much an international event with speakers from Singapore and Hong Kong - leading experts on civilian and military captivity in these former Crown Colonies that provide our main focus for 2008. Delegates from the USA, Canada and South Africa are already registered. We will be welcoming 'new' FEPOWs as well as welcoming back old friends. This is a great opportunity to improve our knowledge of certain areas of the Captivity as well as to renew friendships and share our news and recent research.

We look forward to seeing you there. Do book early to avoid disappointment as in the interests of comfort we will be limiting numbers.

November is the month when we remember the dead of the two World Wars and of past and more recent conflicts. We pay tribute to those who did not return from the Far East after the Second World War.

I hope you enjoy our latest newsletter and don’t forget to visit our website www.researchingfepowhistory.org.uk.

Jonathan Moffatt, Chairman

Remembrance – ‘For our Tomorrow they gave their Today’

In all, over 93,200 servicemen and women are buried in Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemeteries or commemorated on their memorials in the Far East. The largest memorial is in present day Myanmar (Burma) where 11,000 are buried and 26,900, who have no known grave, are commemorated. In Thailand the number of buried are 6335, in Japan 1738. In Singapore 4457 are buried in war graves with a further 858 unidentified burials and 1443 non-service burials. The Singapore memorial, the second largest in the region, has 24,675 names. In Hong Kong there are 6400 buried or commemorated and in Indonesia 3409.

These huge numbers are difficult to digest and it is all too easy to forget that for each name there was a bereaved family. The Commission continues to care reverently and with respect for the men and women who are buried in all their cemeteries and commemorated on their memorials in more than 150 countries world wide. It is an unchanging task in a changing world but it brings comfort, still, to thousands of families who lost relatives in the two world wars. At this time of year we remember our dead. The Commission cares for them all year round.

Visitors to Kanchanaburi War Cemetery, Thailand, photograph by Brian Harris © CWGC

Sai Wan Cemetery, Hong Kong, c. 1947 © CWGC
Their commitment is total and in the ninetieth year since the Commission was granted Royal Charter it is important to remember the energy and founding spirit that brought this remarkable organisation into being. The CWGC cares for 23,000 burial grounds in 150 countries and remembers 1,700,000 Commonwealth servicemen and women from both World Wars. More information at www.cwgc.org. Most cemeteries are open 365 days of the year. For exact information please check on their website. The cemeteries in Thailand are under the eagle eye of Rod Beattie in Kanchanaburi who also runs the Thailand Burma Railway Center.

Telling Tales at the Service Personnel & Veterans Agency

Veronic Heys attended the 2007 Researching FEPOW History Beginners Seminar at the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire. This article shows the value of the advice she received at the seminar and how it helped her to fill in some of the missing gaps in her research about her father’s life. We asked her to write about her research for this edition of the RFH Newsletter.

In 1999 I started to research my family history but it never occurred to me at that time, to do any research concerning my father who had been a FEPOW. After all, he was still alive so I did not consider it to be history.

My father, John Francis Harrison, who during the war was a gunner driver/mechanic with the Royal Artillery, had a very hardworking life but was fortunate that it was long and I believe, happy. I had known from being a child that during the war he had fought in France and then in the Far East where he had been a prisoner, but any conversations about the subject were confined to his time spent in France. He rarely spoke about being a prisoner so any information I had gleaned came from passing comments rather than conversations or discussions. I did know of the ill-treatment and starvation, and that he had suffered from malaria and a tropical leg ulcer. I remember as a child being initially fascinated by the scar of the ulcer which, to me, looked like a “crater” but my fascination soon waned as I began to realize that it was not something he wanted to be reminded of. This was evident when, although the weather might be scorching, he would never wear shorts and his socks were always well above the calf of his legs. It was something that was not talked about. I also knew that at some stage during the war he had received a shrapnel injury to his back.

He had married in August 1941 shortly before embarking on the journey to the Far East so upon his return he had no home and no money but he did have his life and his wife. After their marriage she had returned to her home in Essex where she worked in a munitions factory throughout the war, but upon his release she travelled to Lancashire where they made their home.

Taken on the way home from the Far East. It is stamped on the back 'Magasins Ekonomakis Suez'. John Harrison is seated left and the man on the right might be Ken Cusworth from Blackpool but this is not confirmed.

After returning from the war my father resumed his trade as a printer. Life was pretty difficult so it is surprising that in the very early 1950’s, by now with the addition of two small children to the family, he borrowed money to buy his own
small general printing business, which he retained until his retirement. It meant years of hard work and long hours – initially 10 or 11 hour days, six days a week but he had been used to this as a prisoner and I have often wondered whether he wanted his own business so that he would never again have people telling him what he must do.

I was aware that during the late 1990’s he was hoping to receive the Ex Gratia Payment being negotiated for Ex Far East Prisoners of War, something he felt strongly about after being refused a war pension. Sadly, he died in 2000 before this became a reality. Shortly after his death, when it was confirmed that payments would be made to FEPOWs or the surviving spouse, I helped my mother with her application. It was at this point that she produced my father’s Army Pay Book; a prisoner of war postcard addressed to him at P.O.W. Camp 6, Thailand but never sent; his membership card for ‘The Japanese Labour Camp Survivors Association of Great Britain’, and the winter 1997 copy of “Fulcrum” – a magazine of the Japanese Labour Camps Survivors Association. She told me that although exact camps and dates were not known, he had worked on the Thailand to Burma Railway, being held in camps along the route and two were believed to be Chungkai and Kanchanaburi.

This information still did not stir any desire in me to learn any more. It seemed too close to me and perhaps part of the reason was because it had always remained so private.

After the death of my mother in 2002, I came into possession of my father’s Army Pay Book and the other documents and also found a photograph of my mother, and one of a comrade, Bill Whiteside, with his wife. Both these photographs bear the Japanese stamp and were inside an old leather photo wallet. I also came into possession of a photograph album which I wanted for my general family history research, and on one occasion as I removed a photograph, another one fell from the album. It was of my father’s father who had been killed in the First World War in France when my father was three years old, and he had therefore never been referred to very much, my father having grown up with a stepfather. I was mystified when I saw the back of the photograph which bore the Japanese stamp. It was some time before it dawned on me that my father must have had this photograph with him when he was a prisoner. It was a surprise, but I cannot come to any other conclusion other than my father carried it with him throughout the war.

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Although I was not consciously aware of it, I must have started talking about my father and his time as a FEPOW because Christmas 2004 my husband bought me the book “One Fourteenth of an Elephant” by Ian Denys Peek which had recently been published and reviewed in a newspaper. Initially I thought I would never get through the book, not because of any failings on its part, but because of the realisation that, although I knew about the lives of prisoners, I had never understood. I had never before really thought deeply about the subject.

I think this was the point at which I decided I wanted to know more, and I wanted to know about my father. I was soon totally absorbed in the book and since then, there has never been a time when I have not been reading or re-reading a book about the subject.

Initially my goal was to chart my father’s movements, find the names and details of the camps, locate them on a map, and hopefully visit them in the future but the more I read about the illnesses and treatments, the more I wanted to know about this aspect of FEPOW life.

It was whilst at the Researching FEPOW History Beginners Seminar in May 2007, that the subject of information relating to medical histories of FEPOWs was discussed. One possible source of information suggested, were details from War Pension Applications. Harry Hesp, himself a FEPOW, told us that the Service Personnel &Veterans Agency (formerly Veterans Agency)
have a wealth of information on many FEPOWs but of course the question was, whether it would be divulged to persons other than the pension applicant. I knew that my father had made applications for a pension and because this was an issue which particularly interested me, I offered to attempt to obtain details, to ascertain how easy or difficult it would be and whether it would yield any useful information.

I wrote a letter simply outlining that I was next of kin and was researching the time my father spent as a FEPOW and asked them to provide details of his applications for a war pension or provide details of where they could be viewed. I received a reply two weeks later confirming that the agency held a number of documents on file in relation to my “late father’s Service medical & War Pension Medical history”. For records relating to the Service history I was advised to write to the Army Personnel Centre. This was something I had done twelve months previously but had failed in my endeavours. I have written again but because they are experiencing high volumes of enquiries, I still await their documents.

In relation to documents held by the Agency, the current policy within the Ministry of Defence for the disclosure of deceased individuals’ Medical Records is governed by the Access to Health Records Act 1990. I was informed that I “may have access to copies of documents post 1st November 1991 subject to a medical review”. In order for them to provide these documents I had to provide proof of kinship (copies suffice). For records prior to 1st November 1991 the common law duty of confidentiality applies and access is not normally given. Such records are only released for the purpose of litigation and would be subject to the consent of all executors, or administrator of the estate.

Knowing that my father had made a claim during the 1990’s I sent proof of kinship using both parents’ death certificates and my marriage certificate. Their acknowledgement informed me that I would receive a response within 40 days. I then waited, not quite knowing what the ‘medical review’ would involve and whether it would involve me.

Less than four weeks later the postman knocked at the door with a padded envelope marked ‘private and confidential’, sent by recorded delivery from the Agency. The envelope contained a statutory covering letter; 13 pages of Veterans Agency Abbreviations in A – Z format and 35 photocopied pages, mostly double sided, comprising the applications. The front of the top page being headed ‘CERTIFICATE REFUSED’. I say applications, because my father had been persistent in making two applications in the 1990’s, the first in November 1993 and again in July 1995 so I am lucky to have two sets of documents, but it also means that some are almost carbon copies of others.

The first claim comprises ten pages of the ‘Claim Form for a War Disablement Pension’ which was completed by my father, plus a letter and a personal document submitted by him, and 6 double-sided pages completed by the Medical Officer plus a certificate of refusal. The second application comprises a letter written by my father plus a document and the remaining pages, mostly double-sided, are of the medical review including details from his own G.P.

Although I would have liked the documents to contain more detail, such as the camps where he was treated, I have to acknowledge that they are solely a medical report and details of places are of no consequence. Because I knew of most of the issues mentioned in the claims, it has meant there have been no nasty surprises for me, something I am always conscious may be a possibility when doing any research about people. However I did gain a lot more detail about the issues, including the reason for the pension claim, which surprised me. Whilst I do not wish to go into detail, it surrounds a problem with his leg (not the ulcer) which I was unaware had been a problem for him as a prisoner. Not only did I learn about this, but also the fact that he did most of his hard labour wearing a leg splint made out of bamboo. This is possibly the reason he walked with a slight limp, a fact mentioned and acknowledged in the medical reports.

Whilst both applications were refused they do state “We accept adverse conditions whilst a FEPOW”.

With regard to the shrapnel injury, I had been doing some research of his Regiment in France and Malaya with a view to discovering where this may have occurred. I would have continued to spend a number of fruitless hours without the benefit of these documents, because on page 6 of the original application, my father gave me the answer. He was wounded by the allied bombing of the Nong Pladuk P.O.W. camp when almost 100 P.O.W’s were killed. I had never heard even the slightest reference to this throughout his life. It was not until the Beginners Conference that Keith Andrews pointed out, whilst looking at my father’s liberation questionnaire that he would have been at Nong Pladuk during the raids.
Whilst the documents have not provided all the information I was seeking, I have certainly learnt things from them and it has put the flesh on the bones of others – no pun intended!

Whilst I said there were no nasty surprises, I was not prepared for how emotionally affected I would be by the letters attached to the claims, which will always remain private. Maybe it is a sense of guilt for not taking a more active interest when he was alive, or remorse because of lost chances to discuss things with him, but I know that my research is not done out of guilt or remorse but out of respect for him and those he was with, which remains an important and central focus

When I originally wrote to the Service Personnel and Veterans Agency, I decided to also contact my local health service with a view to ascertaining the possibility of them releasing his medical record or providing me with details appertaining to illnesses and injuries suffered as a consequence of the war. I always knew that I was probably asking for the impossible and I had given it a good deal of thought, because this was taking things several stages further than seeking information contained in a pension application. I had a detailed telephone conversation with the relevant NHS department and ascertained that the records are kept for a minimum of ten years after death. They told me which documents to supply and told me to include the reason for the request. They said that although they gave my request careful consideration, they have to comply with the relevant legislation which enables them to protect the confidentiality between the patient and Health Professional, and as a Trust they have a duty of confidentiality to patients which continues after death. I was disappointed but in a sense relieved – it exonerated me from having to make the decision to look into them and how far to delve. It is also satisfying to know that our details do remain confidential.

The exercise to obtain details from the Service Personnel & Veterans Agency proved very easy and worthwhile, and I see no reason why any next of kin wanting details of claims after November 1991 should not achieve the same degree of success. All the documents, postage and packing were received free of charge.

I shall continue the various aspects of my research hoping to visit some of the places where I now know that my father spent some of his life, trying to imagine, but fortunately not having to experience, what it was actually like. However there is an added ‘problem’ Since reading the article in the June Newsletter by Hamzah Muzaini, I now realize that the Battle sites in Malaysia are marked and remembered, so in addition to visiting Singapore and Thailand I would now like to add Malaysia to the list. The good news is that I have already read travel books about the three countries and the transport system is much better than it was in the early 1940’s.

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Researching FEPOW History Conference 2008

The 2nd International Conference will once again be staged at the NMA in Alrewas, Staffordshire on Saturday & Sunday 31 May – 1 June 2008.

The focus 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 slightest Chance, The Defence of Hong Kong 1941, and founder of the Hong Kong War Diary website.
Guest lecturers include: Sears Eldredge, PhD, from the University of Minnesota who will give a lecture on camp entertainment on the Thailand-Burma Railway; Peter Francis from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission; Dr Nigel Stanley 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 Seikuer, FEPOW. Once again, we hope to be joined by at least 12 FEPOW guests including representatives of two famous Highland regiments. We are delighted that delegates are prepared to travel around the world to take part.

The delegate fee is £100 for the two days and included in this price is the cost of the bi-annual newsletter. Delegates need to 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).

To register you can download the registration form from our website: www.researchingfepowhistory.org.uk. Or write to Meg Parkes at the address below. Places will be allocated on a first-come, first-serve basis. Demand is 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.

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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Chungkai War Cemetery, Thailand

Kranji War Cemetery, Singapore