

Evacuated on the Empress of Japan

Intro

Kathleen Bowers was evacuated with her three year old daughter, Gina. Here she describes the bombing of Singapore and the awful conditions on the overcrowded 'Empress of Japan.'

Her son Bill was born 4 days after the ship reached Liverpool. Her husband, Percy Tom, also known as Bill, returned from captivity but died following a road accident in 1948.

The lights were still on when the first bombs fell on Singapore. We went down to calm the servants, but Gina did not wake. After that the sirens never stopped wailing and the heavy throbbing drone of the Jap planes flying in formation, usually high, and dropping bombs just anywhere.

One morning I watched them heading for our area and realised they were almost to the danger angle. I shouted at everyone to take what cover they could - we had no shelters - pushed my guest into the corner under the stairs, and crouched over Gina with my hands over her ears. The noise was appalling, like a gigantic chain being dropped on concrete. I felt the plaster going down my neck, but luckily the old wooden staircase held. When it was quiet I made Amah sit with Gina - the poor woman was shuddering with fright - while I went to see the damage. Cookie's wife had a wound in her tummy, but her baby was untouched. Abdul Rahman was lying in a pool of blood, with a terrible wound in his head. I knew I could do nothing for him; maybe it was as well he died, he was such a kind and gentle man.

The blast had stripped every blade of grass and greenery from round us; everything was brown. The house stood, but the contents were riddled with holes, cupboards blown open and their contents strewn everywhere. Things were smashed or battered.

Soon a couple of R.A.F. lads came in to see if they could help and I asked them to try and get Cookie's wife to hospital. Then a very shaky young Chinese A.R.P. warden came, but he was too nervy to be of help, so I used his kit and bandaged up Cookie's wife and got her on a stretcher.

Then Bill arrived from H.Q. with his orderly, and the Police came to say we must move out as there was an unexploded bomb across the road. That bungalow was wrecked, but the owners were safe underneath and crawled out unhurt.

I packed everyone into the Rover and drove up to Tibbie's, dropping bits off the car on the way - luckily only minor damage to the poor vehicle.

Tibbie's bungalow was large and several families shared it. We put all the children and Amahs in the downstairs large room and the rest of us shared the bedrooms and verandahs upstairs. There were a few large drain pipes pushed into the hillside as shelters where we bundled the children during raids.

Tibbie and I did most of the shopping as we had our own cars. The siren wailed continuously and I remember a slim Chinese warden laughingly inviting me into the roadside drain, where I would have stuck as, at seven months pregnant, I was huge! One of our party, a very large man, had said that he and I needed tin hats on our fronts!

Chinese John at the market showed me his house nearby and said I was to go there if the market was closed and he would let us have what vegetables, fruit and eggs he could get. Hill and Hugh managed to bring home quite a lot of stuff, Bill being O.C. Salvage and Hugh a Doctor.

Then we were ordered to leave on the Troopships that were arriving. I had to get a passport, although I still had one in my maiden name and my marriage certificate. Getting a photograph took ages; the Japanese had been the photographers, and only a few Chinese, and these latter shut shop at every warning. I spent all day in the town, but got a passport and money.

Bill and Hugh took us to the Docks. The sirens were wailing and some of our own few planes overhead as we women and children waited to go aboard. The Indian troops were coming down one gangway as we went up another on to the "Empress of Japan", an old Canadian Pacific liner converted to a troopship.

Hugh and Bill had to leave us sitting on the lower deck floor, with our luggage in the scuppers beside us - one trunk and two suitcases which was our allowance.

The ship was filthy: some of the older women demanded disinfectant and washed down the lavatories before we dared take a child inside them. We just sat on the bare deck until some service men - Navy, I believe - brought us hard, narrow mattresses. Tibbie and I had two for ourselves and the three children. We were packed like sardines; one had to step over bodies to move anywhere. The heat was appalling with portholes screwed shut for fear of attack and we stayed down below like that until we had cleared the Straits through the Dutch East Indies. Then we were allowed to go up on an open deck for a few hours and for boat drill.

We had to file down through the kitchens to collect our food and carry it to the dining saloon which was fitted with long tables and fixed benches. The kitchens were filthy and the children all started going down with sickness and diarrhoea. Ann, my doctor friend, and a nurse and some of the older women tackled the army M.O. and insisted on the kitchens being cleaned up a bit, but it was tough work as the place was so dirty everywhere.

Fortunately, and rather surprisingly, there was not any panic or hysteria. One Eurasian near us started, but someone slapped her smartly and she was no more trouble.

The awful heat and being shut below decks was the worst and trying to get up and down stairs with small children, lugging lifejackets - very heavy ones - and emergency bag, and trying to stop people trampling on and pushing over the smaller kids, was hell. When we were allowed on deck for a while there were only a few

benches without backs to sit on, just a few chairs in one saloon and these were always taken by a bunch of White Russian women - young ones too - who had come from Shanghai. Thank heaven they left us in Africa.

Gina did not like the ship's motion and she just lay on the deck and refused to move. She was not actually seasick, but the poor mite obviously felt awful and that ship could pitch; one minute you looked at heaven and the next at the bottom of the sea, and when she took "evasive" action we had to cling to the nearest solid we could, and at meals try and stop the crockery from sliding off the table.

The first cheerful sight was a destroyer which met us outside Colombo and ran round and round us until we docked in the Roads. There was a strike on and the only way to get ashore was by sampan. Tibbie's children were still unwell so I took our money and managed to get a sampan. Luckily I did know about half-a-dozen words of Tamil, so the old boatman took Gina and I ashore. The Cingalese fell for Gina, following us along the roads, offering her flowers and trying to give her sweetmeats which I had to bar.

At the Bank I barged through the counter to where I saw a European sitting at a desk. I explained my need of English money, as I did not know where I would get to before the baby was born. He was most helpful and grabbed cash from another protesting employee. They were running very short of English currency.

We went on to Durban - still awful nights with portholes shut and consequent heat.

Our stance was near the stairway and I'll never forget the look of horror on the Officials' faces as they came aboard at Durban - they looked completely stunned. As there were some 1500 women and children on board they had some job to do. Anyway they transferred half to the "Letitia" and managed to squash those of us left into cabins. Margaret, Tam and their four children were in a stateroom; Ann, Mrs. Connelly, myself and two children in a connecting cabin, which was meant as a 2-berth but had four bunks, and we did have our own bathroom - a boon, even though water was rationed.

The Authorities told me a friend of mine was in Cape Town and offering me a home. They only wanted me to go by train to Cape Town, although we were almost certain the "Empress" was heading that way! I refused.

Tibbie and I took the children ashore to buy warm clothing. At a cafe the waitress brought them fresh milk and she just stood and stared as those babes up-ended their mugs and downed the lot. They hated the tinned stuff they had on board. The girl dashed away and brought another supply very quickly. Gina's third birthday.

The shops were some distance from the docks, but local Europeans gave us lifts, and the shop girls, many of them refugees from Egypt, all wished they could come home with us, war or no war.

At Cape Town Ann arranged for me to be X-rayed as she feared I might be carrying twins. An ambulance fetched us and I sat beside the driver, a small woman whose method of braking on the steep hill was to clutch the steering wheel and stand up on the pedals - terrifying! However, the X-ray was O.K., the baby was the wrong way up, an extended breach.

It was in a cafe in Cape Town that Tibbie and I heard Singapore had fallen, and the band played the Last Post.

We went by bus to Rondebush, Vera's house. She tried to persuade us to stay in South Africa, but we had told our husbands we would try to reach the U.K. in case they got away. Also a South African Officer, who carried the sleeping Gilly up the road for us, said we could not go to England as there was no food, etc. etc. This made us mad and more than ever determined to get home.

We took on some Naval lads and a few R.A.F. at Cape Town, and overnight the ship changed. The first shock was going into the dining saloon to find tables laid with cloths and stewards in white jackets to wait on us!

The Navy ran the boat drills properly and a Rating was told to escort me and Gina on deck from the cabin. In the case of torpedoes we would never have made it anyway, but it was a kind thought. The Army M.O. told us his boat had been torpedoed and sank in 5 minutes, but he was O.K. We felt it was so heartening to hear such a story'. somewhere in mid-Atlantic!

Gina was still terrified of noise and kept telling me she did not want the ship broken. This was when the gunners had a practice. They were nice men, but poor souls looked rather startled when told that the other very pregnant mum and I were down to go in their lifeboat in an emergency. It was a motor boat and a Naval Doctor was to come too; he said his last maternity case was a cat with six kittens.

Tibbie and I took it in turns to go on deck for a few minutes alone when the children were in bed. It was a ghostly place, no lights of course, not even a cigarette allowed, and one must never throw anything overboard to form a wake.

Ann tried to turn the baby for me, but it was no good. The Orderly in the ship's hospital was so kind, he tied his khaki handkerchief round the light to shield my eyes as it was forbidden to put it out. Those Orderlies were good at coping with pre-natal clinic as if they had always done so - and they were very young men.

Ann had got Gina's confidence by now, but she was still so frightened of noise.

At Liverpool there was talk of us going through Customs, but the Ship's Purser told the authorities that we women would never stand for it as what we had on board was all we had left of our homes.

The O.C. nearly had a fit when he saw me and sent me to the M.O. on the dock who packed us into an ambulance which drove us right up to the dining car of the London train.

A youngish male passenger gave Gina his biscuits and when we got to Euston he got me a taxi and I found he had paid the driver in advance. Two R.A.F. lads met me and escorted us to the phone to call my brother, and then to the taxi. Poor little Gina, it was dark and she was so tired, but she was by then used to being carried around by strangers and as long as she could see me was all right.

Two days after getting to Duncan's I had to go into the Nursing Home, leaving Gina. It was awful; Duncan and Kay were strangers to her, a strange country and a cold climate, poor mite. She could only come to see me occasionally as, with petrol rationing, and the distance, frequent visits were impossible.

I was six weeks in the home, very well looked after. Then a few weeks at Esher and we three went down to Cornwall.

Gina was happier there with Peppe and Sarah, but still scared of losing me. The things she thought up were incredible: I might get shot, I might fall down. I could not leave her for any length of time. She still thought noise broke things. Once we were passing a garage when something there fell down with a clang and a plane went overhead. Gina stood in the road and screamed. She was fairly happy on the beach or helping Pauline the farm girl, as she could see me from both places or run back to make sure I was there. She was asked to parties and was all excited and keen to go, but invariably at the last minute she burst into tears and did not want to go - even with me. Luckily she had friends, three sisters very close in age, and the youngest the same age as Gina. With them she went up the hill for morning lessons given by two elderly retired school mistresses. They had a large hut in their garden, a lovely place on the hillside above the Camel river. I used to take William in the pram and meet them every day.

When Bill got home Gina was better and would stay on the beach with the other children, but we never walked anywhere without our being able to see watch her and see she was O.K.

When we moved to Essex Gina and William had to go to school, which was just next door. Gina cried for a week, but again the teachers helped her wonderfully.

Bill being killed suddenly was another awful shock. Gina was just nine and William two weeks short of six.

Gina sat for her 11-plus and I fetched her from the school, straight to bed with a high temperature. This was the pattern of her school life: she took her exams and then ran a fever for two or three days. I had explained to the school staff that she was like this and they all helped her I know, but she never grew out of her worries I fear.