

Forward

I came across these notes written by my Aunt, June Reeve Tucker nee Ferguson, about her extraordinary return to Singapore immediately after the Japanese capitulation. She must have been the first civilian to return and see the horrors of the Sime Road Camp and the weakened state of the prisoners.

Aged four, I escaped on the 'Empress of Japan' with my mother, Joy Paxton Harding, nee Ferguson, and my grandparents, Capt. "Jack" Ferguson and his wife Meg, who were planters in the Kuala Selangor district, together with Joy's younger sister, June, aged 21.

My father Philip Paxton Harding, known as Pax, was left behind fighting in the Malayan Volunteers, as was June's fiancé, Allen Coombe, who was in the 2nd Bat. Baluch Regiment. Both men were killed in the final battle for Singapore.

The five of us disembarked at Durban, South Africa, and, with very little means, somehow found a flat and I was sent to kindergarten. My mother and her sister did a rapid shorthand/typing course and both found jobs to keep us going.

My mother and I followed June to Ceylon quite soon in 1944 and I was sent to the Hill School there. My grandparents then followed us over and my grandfather found a job as manager of a tea plantation near Kandy.

My mother followed June back to Singapore, as did my grandfather before Christmas 1945, leaving my grandmother, me and a small Cairn terrier, in the Galle Face Hotel. I remember meeting lots of the returning prisoners, as they stopped at Colombo on their way home to England. One thing they could not hold down was a big rich meal, as their stomachs had shrunk so much.

Granny and I, with Shorty the dog concealed in a bag, returned to Singapore in January 1946 on a hospital ship. In the outer anchorage of Singapore, our ship grounded on a submerged wreck, and we nearly flipped over - I actually went over the railings and was flung back on deck when the ship righted herself. My mother then had to hire a launch to take us off - Granny, me, the dog, and my dolls house! - all lowered over the side onto the launch.

We took the train to Kuala Lumpur and went back to Sungei Buloh Estate, which my grandfather was rapidly putting back in order. One of the few things our family retrieved after the war was a wonderful large bronze tiger, which a young Tamil boy, who swept the drains around the house, rescued and buried without telling anyone. All the glass and silver that my grandmother had buried was found by the Japanese and taken away. My grandparents also got their beloved Bechstein Grand piano back, which had ended up at a coal mine at Rawang.

We were only allowed a small suitcase each when we escaped, so my grandparents and parents lost everything. However, we had each other and we had survived.

Ann Evans, nee Paxton Harding

June Reeve Tucker's Account

Joy and I were working in Force 136 Colombo, Ceylon, which was a very secret organisation dealing with the formation of our internal resistance movement in then Japanese occupied Malaya. (See 'The Jungle is Neutral' by F. Spencer-Chapman.)

When I arrived in Ceylon in about February 1944, with Mrs Purdon and her three boys aged 7, 9 and 10 years, who I was governess to (in return for my passage to Ceylon) I knew nothing about Force 136, but had made my way over to Ceylon hoping to get some sort of job there, which might eventually get me back to Malaya. Also because once someone in the family was in Ceylon the rest could come over, as you were not allowed to travel there from South Africa unless you had a job to go to or a home or relatives to go to. We all knew we should be able to get jobs there, and be near to Malaya so we could return there. While I was on the tea estate with the Purdons, I made enquiries about a job saying I wanted one if possible where my knowledge of Malay and Malaya might help. One evening there was a phone call for me and it was none other than "Mac" Hunter (who I thought was with some regiment in India) and he said "I hear you are joining us old thing, jolly good show, when can you come down and meet Maria?"

Well, I simply didn't know what he was talking about, but he managed to convey in some way to me that it was a job and something to do with Malaya. (Maria was the wife of a friend of Allen's and was my eventual boss.)

When I first joined 136 I was terrified, and it didn't really sink in what it was all about till I deciphered my first message which was from Malaya!

I was alone in Colombo till Joy came over - she was transferred by the Navy to the Naval Office, Colombo. Joy, Ann and I all shared two single beds for months at a hotel near the office, as there simply was no other accommodation in Colombo. All this time neither of us knew exactly what the other's work was. It was awful not being able to tell Joy the latest news out of Malaya, and she also had her secrets! We were a very small organisation at that time, but by 1945 there were so many of us that we were falling over one another. Joy left the Naval Office and joined 136 a few months later, but we worked in different offices and still didn't know much about the other's work! But what we did discuss was what our chances were of getting to Malaya.

We were well snubbed when we suggested we should parachute in like the men (had we realised that so many women were being dropped in France, we should have gone to greater lengths). Then we began to wonder if, on the reoccupation, we should ever go there with 136 as we were really only doing the 'outside' work. We made many enquiries through very high channels for any job that would take us there early, but although people promised to do what they could, and some did, they always said the same thing "if there is anything we'll let you know".

We said we should be furious if WRENS and WAAF were sent there and we, who loved the country and knew so much about it, were left behind in Ceylon, so we decided that if we ever

got the chance we should just take it as we knew we could be of some use either looking after the welfare of the locals or the POW's and internees.

So a few days after the great news of the surrender of the Japs, 'Pop' Gillette, a wife of an old friend of the family, arrived in our room at the 'Galle Face' Hotel and asked if she could spend the night on the divan, as she had to get a plane to Madras at 4.30 a.m. She was terribly excited, but we had heard she was going on a special ship for wives of internees to U.K.

No-one in those days ever talked 'shipping' so we didn't ask many questions, but when we started talking about England she said "No Junie, I'm going the other way", flinging her arm out in an easterly direction! We nearly fell out of our chairs, and both Joy and I burst out crying, and said "But Pop, how are you getting there - what are you in - and we thought you were going home to be there when Bobbie gets out of camp." She said, "Well, I was so furious when I heard the ship that should have taken me to U.K. was cancelled that I kicked up a hell of a fuss, and as I was in Kandy, demanded an interview with 'Supremo' (Mountbatten) saying owing to this that possibly my poor husband would arrive home before me and have no-one to meet him etc." So he said "Well, what about going to Singapore? There is a ship sailing tomorrow. Will you help with the internees and POW's on board and collect your husband in Singapore?" He gave her a warrant for the plane and a form signed by him saying she was attached to RAPWI (Repatriation Allied POW India - I think?!)

We were most indignant that there should be such an organisation, which Pop told us was full of FANY's going out there to look after the POW's and internees, so while we were getting ready to go out to a party (celebrating the Jap capitulation) I told Pop that I was going to try and get on a plane too to go to Madras and try and get on that ship! She didn't think I really meant it. Joy said she would come too but then remembered Ann - and besides, her job was at that time more important than mine. At the party everyone just laughed when I said I was going, so I shut up and said no more about it. We finished up at Mount Lavinia bathing, and then another party who were in fancy dress and very merry, but Tunku Mahodeen (a Malay Prince) who was also working with us, was terribly excited and said that he would be back in Malaya in a few days, so I said "O.K. see you there." He said "Never mind, June, when I get there I'll get a job fixed for you and send for you"! So arriving back in the early hours Pop woke up and we helped her pack then I started getting my suitcase ready! Pop said "June, you're not coming? - For God's sake if you are, don't hinder my getting to Bobbie." So I said "O.K., I'll just take a tooth brush and wear the dress I left Malaya in, and if I do get there, I'll just find an old tailor and get some more clothes!" So off we went to get the RAA bus in the dark. Pop, with a tiny little suitcase, and me in my white sharkskin dress and some makeup and a toothbrush and paste in my handbag! We arrived at the aerodrome and Pop went through all the procedure of handing in her ticket and being weighed. Then we went and had some coffee as there was plenty of time and still a crowd of people being weighed in. Outside it was still dark but you could see the large shadow of the Dakotas - line after line of them on the airfield. When the rush was over I strolled along to the office and told the Fl.Lt. that I wanted a 'lift' to Madras (lots of people those days got lifts if there was a spare seat). He looked at me a bit funnily, as I wasn't in uniform, but said he would ask the pilot. I said I wanted to be in the same plane as Mrs Gillette, so expect he thought I was in whatever she

was! The pilot eventually arrived and looked me up and down and said "Why do you want to go to Madras - eloping?". I said I wasn't but wanted to try and catch a ship leaving early that day. So off we went.

The second time I'd been in a plane and the first large one. On the plane was Jack Tovey, one of our 136 lads, all dressed up to kill! Fighting order, Sten gun, jungle boots and everything. He thought he was going to Malaya but had to report to Calcutta! However, on the plane Pop found she had to get her money changed. So on arrival in Madras, Jack took us to 136 H.Q. where her money was changed to Indian rupees and I cashed a cheque!

We didn't let the cat out of the bag that I was Force 136, but told one person, the mother of a girl in Colombo whose husband was a POW, and took a letter for him from her.

Then to the Embarkation Office, or whatever it was called. Then Pop had to get her permit to embark on the ship. After she has seen the Commander in charge, Jack Tovey had to see him and put a good word in for me, and then I had to see him, and with a wink he gave me a permit to go on the wharf to 'see my friend off!' We duly arrived there and as Jack had no permit, he left us at the gate. We got through, then absolute chaos! A silly little Lt. there told Pop she couldn't get on the ship. She was furious and waved the slip signed by the 'Supremo' in his face and said that the Commander at the Embarkation Office had told her she was in a cabin with three QA's. He was quite unmerciful and wouldn't move an inch, I then confirmed what she had said and told him she was going to Singapore and hadn't seen her husband, who was in internee, for four years, etc. I asked him to phone the Embarkation Office to speak to the Commander: he wouldn't, so I found a phone and got the Commander and told him what this young Lt. was doing. He asked to speak to the Lt. and after about two seconds the young Lt. came back very crestfallen and allowed Pop to go aboard. I just followed her and that was that!

The ship was about 10,000 tons or less, and full of "Banana Colonels" (an expression used for the BMA administrative Government, where civilian personnel are given these acting army ranks). The Brigadier in charge was Alec Newbould (later Chief Sec. Malayan Union and Sir Alec Newbould - it was their house "Carcosa" where Richard and I were married in 1947). Also masses of other old Malayans like himself; they nearly fell over seeing me on board, as Alec and many others I'd said goodbye to a week or so ago when they left Colombo! A planter called Squirrel Green (then in the RAF attached to the BMA) was the first person to see us and couldn't even get over the fact of Pop being on board. The only other women on the ship were four QA's and the Red Cross girl! I said I was not going to get off if I could help it and anyway would possibly be shot by Force 136 if I went back! They were all terribly sweet and Alec Newbould threw a few hints in the right quarter and there I was! I even had a bunk in the same cabin with Pop and the Red Cross girl. We were taken down to tea and someone asked where my luggage was and I said I had none! On going to our cabin after tea I found on my bunk a collection of clothing supplied by various fellow passengers. They obviously hadn't been round to the Q.A.'s as I expect they suspected I wouldn't be too popular in that quarter - and they were right! But the clothes were fun - khaki trousers, shorts, various shirts, including 'Aertex' and a nice white long-sleeved dress and two marvellous silk vests (I think they were meant to be). They came down over my knees and

Pop at once said "They'll do for nighties." Also supplied was a lovely silk sarong. It was great fun afterward trying to guess who the various things belonged to!

We were in the harbour at Madras for five days and I never experienced worse days. Every launch that came alongside I thought was due to take me off. I really began to feel a fool. However, I decided it was no use trying to hide like a stow-away, but braved it on deck and lent over the side watching just like everyone else, but felt most conspicuous in my white sharkskin and later, when it was dirty, a khaki skirt kindly lent by the Red Cross girl, and one of the white shirts! The day before we had orders to sail some friends went ashore and collected important maps, and I gave them most of the money I had, to buy if they had time, some clothes for me. They arrived back with an embroidered cashmire woollen skirt and two blouses, and pockets full of make-up which they said if I didn't need they would send to their wives or girl friends in England! I took some as I thought it must be a hint - I expect I was looking rather awful - and felt it! We sailed, and how pleased I was to be on the high seas away from Madras, and really going to Malaya. Found a sailor tearing up lovely parachutes for gun cotton one day and asked if he could spare me some as I was a bit short of clothes, so he gave me a parachute, which for the rest of the voyage kept Pop and I and many a capt. and brig. employed unpicked.

It was funny seeing large sized men with a pin or nail file unpicking seams! Then with Pop's help we made a petticoat and night-gown (I used the rest later and still have things made of it!)

Arrived in Singapore on 4th September 1945 in the afternoon. H.M.S. Duke of York and other craft which took part in the surrender were already there. We could see masses of people like a lot of bees, all around Collyer Quay, and couldn't make out what they were doing. Afterwards heard that it was the mass of natives bartering for cigarettes - anything from Jap. 'Banana' money to gold watches! We did not go along side till next day, when the ship slowly slipped along side the wharf. We could see the odd white man on the wharf, forlornly watching the ship and then picking something up. Getting closer, we could see it was either a cigarette end or some broken tins of food - there must have been some craft tied up there before us. I saw a tall figure just in patched shorts, no shoes, standing with something like a pipe in his mouth, and for one glorious moment thought it was Pax - it wasn't. Pop and I were told we should possibly be off the ship last, but had better fend for ourselves as no-one could go ashore unless they had transport as there were no taxis! So when we saw the Navy transport (two cars with flags) we kept our eyes on them, and as a Naval officer came aboard covered in gold braid, I asked him if he would give us a lift! As it happened, we were the first people off the ship! Going up Collyer Quay we hardly passed another car. The dockyards looked deserted except for the occasional Naval craft or small ship. This road was one of the busiest pre-war.

The Naval officer allowed us the use of his car to take us wherever we wanted to go after we dropped him at his office. The Chinese driver asked us if we would mind if he went to his own house first to drop something off, and we said we didn't mind at all as long as it wasn't a long way off. His 'house' was a large European one on a hill not far from the centre of the town. The thing he dropped off and handed into the arms of his innumerable awaiting

children was nothing less than an old Kerosene tin full of obviously 'looted' tins of food! I remember that I'd noticed him picking up things off the wharf. Then we drove down Orchard Road on our way to report to RAPWI H.Q. and to our delight saw a lorry loading POW's (POW's were the Army prisoners and internees the civilians such as Govt. officials and planters etc) so stopped and talked to them. There were none we knew but they said the camp was open and that if we wanted to find anyone there we should go as soon as possible as they were all trying to get into town to see the sights and look at the ships. So we forgot about RAPWI and pressed on for Sime Road Camp. We saw two more lorries coming down the road and put our hands out to wave, only to find that this time they were Japanese! We felt like cutting our hands off. Next we saw two Europeans walking in the direction of the camp, so offered them a lift. At first sight they looked alright, if you forgot the fact that their gym shoes were tied on with string and had very little canvas on them, their shorts just a maze of patches. One had a green pork-pie hat - rather tattered but a hat! One man was rather elderly and the other at closer quarters terribly drawn, and their eyes rather like poor wild animals look in a very small cage. Their legs were just sticks. Neither of them realised we were not female internees. They just couldn't realise that we were not. I expect our not being in uniform was the cause. When Pop remarked that she was hoping to find her husband at Sime Road and asked if they know him, they said the didn't and that there had been so many deaths, especially among the older men, within the last year or two that you just never knew! Well Pop grabbed my hand and her long nails nearly went through my hand! At the gates we went to a sort of guardroom and looked at the register, and there was Bobbie's name and number of his hut. So off we rushed past sheds and huts, long 'attap' sheds, some with a little bed of flowers or a few banana trees growing close to them. Not another woman insight and yet most of the men only had on 'V strings' (a name in camp they gave their working clothes which were just a loin cloth held on by a piece of string!).

They just went placidly on with whatever they were doing. At last, hut No. 45 (I think!) and a man outside said "Why, Pop Gillette - Good God, June Ferguson - what on earth?". He rushed inside the hut yelling "Bobbie, Pop's here", Bobbie was on his bed (or what you would call a bed in an internee camp!), and just looked at the man in a daze. He told us afterwards that he really thought that he was mad. It wasn't until Truebridge said, "and June Ferguson is with her." that he came to his senses. He put his shorts on and came out into the bright sunlight and there we were. It was wonderful to see that meeting. That's the thing that made me feel it was worth having done what I had. A crowd collected around us. They were nearly all people from the Kuala Selangor districts. Quite amazing - some were exactly the same and other so changed. The man who used to have one of the largest tummies I'd seen, was just like Gandhi, his tummy just hanging and shrivelled like a burst balloon. Nearly all had beriberi, but how cheery they were. They took us inside, and all rushed in various directions to their little shelves above their 'beds' to find something to give us. One brewed 'coffee', another produced a tin with 'soup' made of weeds and tapioca, another rice with dried fish sprinkled on top. This dish was a 'treat' they were having that day. They said during the occupation when they got the dried fish, it was quite a celebration, usually they just had the 'soup' and the rice. The man who gave us coffee had had it given to him by a Chinese.

We took Bobbie and Pop's brother back to the ship to give them a meal. It was the only place we could think of to get them one. They were so funny - they counted the rolls first and as there were only three for the four of us they divided them up in bits very carefully. It was a habit they'd got into in camp, each man to have a fair share. Well we eventually ended up at RAPWI H.Q. that night and they gave us a room with one bed in it, an old-fashioned iron double one. It had a horrid dirty mosquito net and when we got into bed - oh! the smell of Japs. We had to take our underclothes and lay our heads on them rather than that smell of dirty Japanese! There must have been about twenty FANY's there. They had two mobile canteens but mostly dealt with the POW's. Food was taken into the internee camps, Sime Road, off some of the Naval ships. There wasn't much but they were thrilled by the bread off the ships, also butter was found in a cold storage in Singapore - Australian butter that had been there for three-and-a-half years!

We felt more and more wretched as each day we went to the camp - there was so little we could do to help. RAPWI's had nothing to give us to take to them - we could buy nothing. We took all our remaining cigarettes and a box of chocolates, and the most welcome thing was a pad of note paper I had - they had nothing to write letters on. No-one knew where their wives were as some had gone to Australia in the evacuation, then moved on to England. As they never, or very rarely, got letters they didn't know if they should go to Australia or direct to England, or even S. Africa.

There is masses of all this I could tell, but it'll take pages. It was just awful though to see white men and women living like coolies and walking the streets on their poor swollen feet, some with no shoes and tattered socks.

Well, Auntie Madge, there isn't any more to it. We found a dump where there were thousands of deserted cars. Japs drove them there - in fact I think they must have had the intention of blowing them up or something, and we got a car and RAPWI helped themselves and got more mobile, so I expect that was of some use. After a week Pop sailed with Bobbie, and I, as you know joined Force 136 again and helped get fourteen houses ready in Singapore for our chaps out of the jungle, and managed also to get another lift in a plane to K.L. and went to see Sungei Buloh Estate and returned to Singapore the same day. Later I went to K.L. when Force 136 was disbanded.