

## RETRACING MY FATHER'S FOOTSTEPS IN SUMATRA

When I first read in the April 2011 edition of *Apa Khabar* that there would be a Service of Remembrance in Singapore to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Fall of Singapore, in February 2012, and a group of MVG members were planning to go, I thought it would be an ideal opportunity to do something I had had in mind for a little while. I had discovered the previous year, through the MVG, that my father had been a prisoner of war on the Pakanbaroe railway line, about which I knew very little, but after finding a website called [www.pakanbaroe.webs.com](http://www.pakanbaroe.webs.com), I felt I would like to go there and try to find some of the remains of the railway.

My father, Captain Patrick Kirkwood had been a doctor in the Indian Medical Service, which he joined in 1938, following in the footsteps of his own father who had been a surgeon in the IMS, serving in India, where my father was born. His first posting was in Secunderabad in 1939, but after 2 years was posted to the Asiatic Hospital on Blakan Mati (now Sentosa) and was there when Singapore fell in February 1942. He had been sent to Singapore on 13th February in a launch to deliver 2 wounded Volunteers to a hospital there. In the meantime, the hospital on Blakan Mati was flattened by Japanese bombs, so he was ordered to leave Singapore with several wounded servicemen and a medical team aboard the Red Cross launch, *Florence Nightingale*, on 15th February. They were to head for the escape route across Sumatra. It took several days to reach the island of Senayang, where he did what he could for the wounded survivors of shipwrecks, such as the *Kuala*, taking some of them on to the modern Dutch hospital in Dabo on the island of Singkep in the Lingga archipelago. He stayed there, with a team of nurses and RAMC staff, until the patients were well enough to leave and took the Indragiri river escape route, but when he arrived at Rengat on 23rd March, he was met by armed Japanese soldiers.

I had known he had been a prisoner in Sumatra in Medan as he had been mentioned in several books (*The Boat* by Walter Gibson, *Singapore to Freedom* by Oswald W Gilmour, *Sold for Silver* by Janet Lim, in which he was referred to as Dr. Cuttwood, and *The Escape from Singapore* by Richard Gough), but I didn't know about the railway. He didn't speak about his experiences and I had been conditioned by my mother not to ask. How I wish I had.

After spending 5 days in Singapore attending the various events, ceremonies and services organised by the MVG and the Changi Museum, I joined Liz Moggie, Yvonne Wurtzburg, Frans Duiniveld, Edda de Silva, Rufus de Silva and Azlina Yunus on the wonderful boat trip through the South China Sea, following the escape route taken by the evacuees, as described by Yvonne Wurtzburg. I was following in my father's wake 70 years later.

We ended our trip in Palembang, and spent 2 nights in a smart hotel, wonderfully luxurious after the rather primitive conditions aboard our boat.

We separated there, most of the others flying home, whereas I flew up to Padang, then travelled by road to Bukittinggi (very exciting, I love those crazy Indonesian drivers!).



After a night there (spent wondering what on earth I was doing all on my own in this strange country) I took a taxi (a very sweet driver, who bought me breakfast!) to Padang Panjang station, where I caught a train (now a tourist train which only runs on Sundays) down to Sawahlunto - the extent of the existing line. My father would have travelled this route as a POW, after being Medical Officer on the construction of a road from Blangkedjeren to Takengon in Atjeh. The prisoners had to march many miles through the jungle to Fort de Kock (Bukittinggi), whence they were taken by train to Muaro and from there by truck to Petai, Camp 14.

It was a pretty journey, with the train at first more or less passing through people's back gardens - whole families were out to watch it pass, the children with their hands over their ears to protect them from the constant loud tooting. After a while we were passing the terraced paddy fields complete with water buffaloes - very picturesque, unfortunately most of the photos I took were rather blurred.



From time to time the train slowed up and I noticed abundant fruit trees - rambutans, ducos and avocados - I longed to reach out through the window and pick them. The train passed Lake Singkarak, which was very beautiful, and arrived at Solok where it picked up many more passengers. As usual, as a Westerner, I was the centre of attention with everyone wanting to have their photos taken with me.



My plan was to visit the beginnings of the railway built by the POWs and to visit the locomotive memorial at Silokek, about 15 km along the road, which follows the Indragiri river. My original idea of stomping through the jungle along the length of the railway, finding old tracks, had been rather knocked on the head. I had been told there was hardly anything left as all the tracks had been taken up and sold off for scrap and the railbeds had been swallowed up by inhospitable jungle. Indonesians do not understand or are hardly interested in Colonial history or WWII history and mainly remain ignorant as to what happened so close to their homes. Travelling alone would be dangerous in Riau, as apparently there are bandits and, without a guide, the language barrier would present a problem. After the adventures on our boat trip, I was more than happy to limit my 'pilgrimage' to one end of the line.

I had been sent a hand drawn map and information via email by Jamie Farrell, whose daughter, Amanda, runs the Pakanbaroe website. Jamie had arranged my hotel at Sawhlunto and a driver for the morning, but I was still very nervous about trying to follow the map and direct the driver with only a few words of Indonesian (the important one being 'pelan' = 'slow'!) and the driver with no English. However, on the Sunday evening, a knock at my hotel door revealed an Indonesian man, with his wife, who knew my name and, after introducing himself as Sony, in reasonable English, and explaining he was the brother of someone who works with Jamie Farrell in Balikpapan, East Kalimantan, issued an invitation to their house for coffee. We walked up the road, very slowly so everyone could see they were with the 'European lady', and spent a pleasant evening with their family, our conversation halted on one occasion by the very loud Call to Prayer from the Mosque just below the house. At some point I thought I heard Sony say he would accompany me in the morning to the railway line. I made him repeat it to make sure and was so delighted I had heard right and would have a guide and translator for the trip.





Sony duly turned up in the morning and our driver turned out to be the hotel desk boy who indeed spoke very little English. The car looked fairly new and was very comfortable. Sony sat in the front and took charge of the map. When we arrived at Muaro township, Sony told the driver to stop and we got out and there were some of the tracks of the original railway, built by the Dutch. We came to a bridge over the river which had the old Dutch foundations alongside. We stopped there and I walked up the road and saw what looked like the old railway bed. Sony phoned a friend who turned up fairly soon after on a motorbike and led the way along the road which was very narrow and at places looked as though it had suffered in an earthquake, all broken up with large chunks pointing upwards. There were land slips and in places parts of the road had fallen into the Indragiri river, which we were following. Every now and again the road crossed a stream and consisted of railway sleepers (taken from the railway?), which were disintegrating, with great holes and gaps - each time I was sure we would get a tyre stuck, but we always made it. All very exciting. Everywhere motorbikes, dogs, chickens and monkeys - for such an out of the way place, a very busy road. This would have been the same road my father and the other POWs would have been taken along in trucks. The river was on one side of the road and the steep sides of the gorge on the other, so I couldn't see where

the railway line could possibly have been, but the whole point of my being there was to follow in my father's footsteps and get a feel for the place. After a while we stopped at a spot on the river where there were many flat boats, apparently dredging for gold.

While we were there a Chinese man came up to us who spoke pretty good English. He introduced himself and explained he was a part owner of one of the boats. He knew all about the railway line built by the POWs (so few people do) and said he had recently met a Romusha still living nearby. I wished I had had more time to talk to him and find out more but our driver and Sony were anxious to get on. Our poor desk boy was quietly having a nervous breakdown at the state of the road and his car, so motorbike boy took over the driving. Eventually we came to the locomotive and memorial plaque where we stopped and took photos. The locomotive was housed in an open-sided shed and stood on a concrete pad. It was in good condition considering it was nearly 70 years old. The memorial depicted scenes of horror - prisoners looking almost skeletal, working on the railway and being beaten and bayoneted by their guards.



People from nearby houses came to see what we were up to - they didn't seem to know much about the history of the area and didn't seem too interested to hear it now. We turned round and headed back. I then realised that this would have been the same road that the evacuees from Singapore would have travelled along after going as far as they could up the Indragiri river. From Rengat they would have been taken to Sawahlunto by Dutch lorries.

When we reached the gold-dredging boats, motorbike boy was reunited with his bike and Sony took over the driving. Back at Sawahlunto I treated everyone to lunch, but it wasn't easy to make it a grand gesture as the total bill came to £5!

After a fond farewell to Sony in Sawahlunto, desk boy and another young man from the hotel who, the previous afternoon had taken me to visit the local museums and sights of Sawahlunto on the back of his motorbike, drove me up to Bukitinggi where I could relax in my comfortable hotel and reflect upon the extraordinary two days I had just had, with such kind people.

