

SEVENTY YEARS AGO.....**A JOURNEY IN THE RIAU-LINGGA ARCHIPELAGO**

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Before reading this, do find a good map of the area – preferably one which allows you to appreciate the scale of the vast distances involved.

On Thursday, 16th February 2012 at 5.00 p.m., seven adventurers (hardly “intrepid” given the conditions of the journey our forerunners took) met at Tanah Merah Ferry Terminal, Singapore, to catch the commercial ferry to Tanjung Pinang, Bintang Island. We were 5 women and 2 men = 4 Malaysians, 2 British and 1 Dutch. Five of us were Badan Warisan members and three of us members of the Malayan Volunteers Group – all of us with shared interests.

The motivation for our journey was to retrace the sea journey undertaken by those who fled from Singapore in January and early February 1942 to escape the Japanese advance. One of our party Yvonne had as a small child escaped in this way – though she has no memory of it. Another’s father, a Doctor, had survived the bombing of his escape vessel and rendered wonderful service to other survivors both on the islands and later in the prison camps. More of this anon.

After a delicious seafood dinner, we boarded our sturdy boat, the Bintan Explorer, selected our bunks and stowed our baggage. At 4.00 a.m. (now the 17th February) the sound of the engines awoke us as we departed with the tide to cross the Riau Strait and make our way under the bridge between the islands of Rempang and Galang. The sea which had been choppy quietened and we all enjoyed a hearty breakfast – the first of a number of delicious meals prepared by Anand the cook. Then we began to get the feel of the vast distances we were going to cover not apparent from the usual maps – not a sight of land for some hours as we followed the Combol Strait up around Pulau Combol and Pulau Sugi and down the Sugi Strait to Moro on Pulau Sugi Bawah.

Moro is a poor town but friendly (indeed we found all the towns and people of the Archipelago exceptionally friendly and polite) with ordinary people industriously going about their daily business. We took a van drive round the outskirts and up to the Buddhist Viharra on a prominent hill. There was no one about but the doors were open. On entry, we were astounded by a sarcophagus-like structure rising from the floor thickly encrusted with

lashings of gold leaf – quite a sight. On our return to the town we noted the poor soils and saw the first of the prolific mango trees which sprouted directly out of dirt roads and bore abundant fruit.

Back on the boat we set off through the Durian Strait known in 1942 as “Bomb Alley” as it was in these waters that so many vessels were attacked as they tried to escape. At Pulau Durian Kechil I thought I saw the rocky outcrop which was one of the “dumps” (food and other supplies) prepared by the Escape Route¹ party to aid escapees. We passed close by several islands on our way to Tanjung Batu on Pulau Kundur where we moored for the night. Tanjung Batu is a nice clean town (definitely more prosperous than Moro) with some small, old, typically Dutch bungalows – sadly uninhabited and awaiting demolition. We had a good walk, bought sarongs and had coffee (made with an old brass coffee pot and muslin strainer) in the market. Then we made our way back to the boat, a good dinner and an evening of shared stories.

We departed Tanjung Batu at 10.00 p.m., the Captain having reassured us, we would see nothing on our journey of 8 hours. He promised to wake us up as we approached Pompong Island, but by 6.00 a.m. (now the 18th February) we were all out on deck enjoying hot coffee though it was still dark. It was well light before we saw Pompong in the distance, the darkly-clouded sky adding to its sinister reputation. It was in these waters that the 3 boats, S.S. Kuala, S.S. Tien Kwang and S.S. Kung Wo were bombed and sunk on 13 February 1942. Many people lost their lives though some managed to make their way on makeshift rafts to the rocky shores of Pompong and some were picked up by the ill-fated Tanjung Pinang. We sailed round part of the island and observed its deep waters and rocky shores and thought of those desperate frightened people all those years ago. Perhaps this is the point at which to reveal that of the 42 vessels that left Singapore between 11-15 February 1942, only 2 got through – the tragedies had taken place in the waters we were following.

A squall came up and so, in somber mood, we left Pompong and sailed down the very narrow Panjang Strait between Bengku and Temiang to anchor at Tanjung (or Tajur) Biru on Temiang. We walked into the settlement on a very substantial cement walkway noting the good condition of the houses, idyllically built over the water. The fishermen could not put to sea because of the weather and so we joined some of them for a cup of coffee. The pleasant young helper in the shop came from Medan – why had she come all that way to be a “pembantu” in a very basic coffee shop? The Chinese told us they were Teo Chew but no longer knew their ancestors’ dialect.

¹ Accounts of the SOE Escape Route may be found in:

Ian Dear, Escape and Evasion
Lynette Ramsay Silver, *Deadly Secrets*

Lynette Ramsay Silver - Deadly Secrets
Boris Hembry - Malayan Spymaster

We had long before left the Riau Archipelago and were well into that of Lingga. We continued in sheltered seas until we reached Senayang (on Sebangku Island). We knew that some of the escapees had found shelter here and again marvelled at the distances they had travelled crammed into the local craft which rescued them. Some of the wounded had lain on bare planks without food or water. Senayang possessed a large sturdy concrete wharf as it is a regional distribution centre for goods, a collection point for the fish catch and has a daily ferry service to several islands including far away Bintang. We sailed carefully through the very shallow water between Bakung and Lingga itself. Once into the open waters we were charmed by stunning views of the lovely rolling hills of the island. We failed to capture these mist-shrouded contours on film which added to their ethereal, mystical appeal. Once round through the Lima Strait we anchored for the night at Buton from where one travels to Daik, the capital. Again, we encountered a smart state-of-the art island ferry boat and were told it was but a 5 hour trip to Bintang.

After a good sleep (now the 20th February), we woke to a tasty meehoon breakfast. Anand continued to prove himself a treasure and always had plenty of fresh fruit and coffee available. We climbed aboard the ubiquitous kijangs (which we learnt to call them "mobils") for the drive to Daik. We went first to the remains of the Istana Damnah, the palace of the former rulers of Lingga and then visited the well-constructed wooden replica built alongside. We inspected the 1936 Dutch jail – no longer in use though it is well preserved. There are 4 "lock-ups" with a double bed frame in one – provision for a criminal couple perhaps? At the Dutch fort of Bukit Cenang we were impressed with the collection of old canons – some very ornate and some bearing the VOC emblem.

Our next stop was the "Museum Mini Lingga" housed in a pleasant wooden colonial building and proudly cared for by its enthusiastic curator. We were interested to hear that his father had been sent by the Japanese to "Kajang Melaka" in 1944 on some sort of police course. The collection was huge – coins, keris, brassware, Dutch and Chinese ceramics (including some superb celadon), items of clothing and textiles, photographs, intriguing brass-bound trunks and an ingenious tapioca scraper. We were told this was only a quarter of the items which had been collected from all over the island so Lingga must indeed have been a very sophisticated and wealthy Malay community. Daik itself appeared to be prosperous, some of its wealth coming in the past from bauxite mining. It had been a packed visit and by 11.30 a.m. we were back on board for departure. This was not without some drama as we grounded on the coral which rings the port and had to reverse and take a different route.

We were bound for Dabo, the capital of Singkep which had played an important role in the events of early 1942. The Dutch Commissioner of the time estimated that there were over 2,000 survivors on Singkep and the surrounding islands – thousands more had been killed or drowned. Two small vessels rescued well over 1500 escapees in several journeys and took them up the Indragiri River on Sumatra. From there they made their way across to Padang on the West Coast, some on to freedom in Ceylon (as it was) and India.

We walked along the long jetty and on up to the hospital on the hill as this was a very special visit for Imogen. Her father, the much admired Dr Kirkwood¹, had cared for survivors there. (He had treated and saved lives in other places as well but we didn't know exactly where – we were certain of Dabo Hospital). We met an exceptionally pleasant young nurse and a very friendly security man and between them they showed us the remaining pre-War buildings. The hospital was full of patients – a lot of malaria and diabetes apparently – but its open-plan surroundings were quiet and peaceful.

Across the road we had delicious coffee at a little *warong* run by a stunning 70 year old woman who looked no older than 50 – what was in the coffee we wondered! We noted that the hill was obviously the residence of the former Dutch administrators. Some interesting houses remain, including one with 2 chimneys. We ambled back stopping along the way for delicious *apam balik* and good *durian*. There was a full day's activities to chat about over "Happy Hour" on the Bintang Explorer.

At 10.00 p.m., the engines started up for another long journey of 10 hours – one pondered on the endurance of the escapees..... We were all up on deck at 6.30 a.m. (now the 21st February) to a grey morning. As our boat was normally used by fishing and diving parties, one of the crew was very knowledgeable about the position of wrecked vessels. At 7.10 a.m. as we neared Bangka Island the engines were stopped and Yvonne cast a bunch of dried heather (brought specially all the way from the U.K.) into the water in memory of those (some of whose families she knows) who were lost when the Tanjung Pinang was sunk on the 17th February on its way to Java. It will be recalled that the Tanjung Pinang had picked up survivors of earlier tragedies at Pompong. When it sank, it was carrying approximately 187 people and was only 97 feet in length. (As a point of comparison our Bintang Explorer was 90 feet). It was at this stage that the full horror of what these people went through began to be appreciated – many were killed or drowned; some survived 2 sinkings only to end up in the misery of the Camps. The Captain told us it was another 2 hours to Muntok and as we passed the Tanjung Ular Lighthouse we knew we were in the

1 A survivor of the S.S. Kuala, a nurse from Singapore, mistakenly calls him "Dr K.K. Cutwood" in her book, *Janet Lim - Sold for Silver*.
Janet Lim - Sold for Silver

vicinity of another tragedy, the S.S. Vyner Brooke, carrying over 300 people, which sank in under 15 minutes.

As we neared Muntok we began to see a considerable number of very big ships including one huge streamlined passenger ferry with the words "WE SERVE INDONESIA" (in English!) taking up nearly the length of the vessel. There were other vehicular ferries, their huge ramps visible. Soon we encountered the noise of the tin dredges working at sea and later we were told that no tin is mined on land – all is dredged from the sea bottom. We tied up at the TIMAH wharf. TIMAH is a huge worldwide Indonesian Government – linked company with its own wharf and extensive facilities. We were met by Bapak Muhammad Rizki, Senior Manager Metallurgy, in charge of the operations for Bangka Barat based at Muntok. Pak Rizki has led the efforts to preserve and conserve the built heritage and community history of Bangka Island (and Muntok in particular) and he was the key man for our visit there. Then we were carefully examined by a smartly-uniformed 22 year old Health Inspector from the Quarantine Department. He listened carefully to all our chests and examined our eyes, apparently checking for signs of Bird Flu which is carried in by people coming from Vietnam, Thailand and the U.S.A. By this time it was mid-day so we remained on board for another of Anand's lunches.

Pak Rizki was tied up at a meeting so at 2.00 p.m., we set off to walk into town after negotiating on plank walks (!) 2 vessels moored next to us. We needed the exercise and were keen to observe the surroundings. We had gone about a mile and had paused to admire a fruiting advocado (the first we had seen) when Pak Fahrizal, deputy to Pak Rizki, pulled up. We were divided into 2 kidjangs and proceeded on a Grand Tour of Muntok.

Muntok is an important centre for the tin mining industry (though the capital and airport for Bangka is Pangkal Pinang on the Eastern Coast) and is a substantial town. As we approached the town centre we saw a number of well-preserved, inhabited houses from the pre-War era. Muntok is of considerable significance in the escapees' story. The Camps there contained survivors from some 60 vessels, men, women (including British and Australian Army Nurses) and children. There are 4 sites which hold memories for the families involved. As they were rounded up the prisoners were first held in the old Cinema and a very old "Gudang" which we were told had been a stable for horses and "had some connection with the British". (Was this as far back as Napoleonic times we wondered – the building did appear to be very old). The Muntok Jail, still functioning today, was the men's prison. The Tinwinning Building (from which the Dutch administered the tin industry) was turned into a makeshift hospital. The purpose – built Women's Camp (though really only

very rudimentary *atap* shelters) was established just outside the town centre. It is the Tinwinning Building that Pak Rizki and his very enthusiastic colleagues in TIMAH together with the local authorities are presently restoring. It will house a museum of local life, history and industry.

TIMAH had ready 2 powerful speed boats which took us out to sea and round to Kalian and Radji Beaches. After the sinking of the *Vyner Brooke* on 14 February some Australian Army nurses had drifted into a river estuary. They saw a group of men being taken round a headland to Kalian Beach from where they did not return. (It later transpired they were bayoneted). The 22 nurses on Radji Beach were ordered to walk into the water where they were shot, the only survivor being Vivian Bulwinkel who told the story. It was hard to grasp the horrors those peaceful shores had known. There is a Memorial to the Australian 8th Army Personnel near the attractive (similar to Tanjung Tuan/Cape Rachado) old Lighthouse on the waterfront of the town. With lots to ponder we made our way back to the *Bintan Explorer* – the change in the level of the tide made the return even more perilous. With leaps of faith and the assistance of strong arms we all made it safely aboard.

On Tuesday, 21st February we dressed in the best clothes we had brought (for we were to meet the Bupati) and made our way to the TIMAH Resthouse for coffee. There we met up with a group who had come across from Palembang by ferry – Judy, whose grandfather died in captivity at Muntok, Anthony whose father had died in the Muntok Jail and Margie whose grandmother had died in the Women's Camp but whose mother had survived. They had brought with them Memorial Plaques to present on behalf of the Malayan Volunteers Group (MVG) – one for the Tinwinning Museum, one for the Muntok Jail and one for the site of the Women's Camp.

In smart vehicles, courtesy of TIMAH and accompanied by Bapak Rizki, Bapak Fahrizal and other TIMAH colleagues we set off for the Bupati's house. On arrival we were overwhelmed by the reception – young girls in beautiful traditional costume lined up to garland us and perform a dance of welcome. A sumptuous lunch of local delicacies was followed by a presentation of gifts to each of us. The Bupati made a speech of welcome, Anthony related the wartime family connection and I spoke on behalf of Badan Warisan Malaysia – its concern with built heritage which includes memorials.

It was a very convivial lunch as we all exchanged stories about what had brought us to Muntok. It turned out that the Bupati, Bapak Zuhri, had gained his MA at our International

Islamic University (UIA) and knew K.L. well. His charming wife told me that two of their children were born in K.L.

Then came time for the presentation of the plaques. We went first to the Muntok Jail (its structure just the same as the descriptions in books by former wartime prisoners) and were impressed that a special cement plinth had been constructed to the exact specifications to hold the plaque. Next we travelled in our long convoy of vehicles (I counted over 18) to the site of the Women's Camp at Kampung Karang Atas. Here, the whole kampung had turned out to greet us and explanatory panels had been erected in preparation. After several speeches the appropriate plaque was presented and inserted in another prepared plinth near to the remaining cement well which the women had used. It is this Camp and the events there that is the basis for the film "Paradise Road".

Another piece of background information – From Muntok the women were taken on the long sea and river journey to Palembang where they were housed in former Dutch bungalows and conditions were tolerable. Then, they were brought back to Muntok, much weakened after enduring an horrific journey, and were placed in the *atap* hut camp. Their numbers declined rapidly from then on. Finally, they were taken on an even longer journey back to Sumatra and round to a remote rubber plantation called Belalau, near Lubuklinggau up country from Lahat. There seemed to be no explanation for these journeys.

After a brief stop at a Cemetery where there is a mass grave believed to contain the (removed from another site) remains of some who died in the Muntok Camps we continued to the Memorial on the waterfront. The Bupati and his entourage had accompanied us to all the sites but now it was time to say our farewells and attempt to express our grateful thanks for the wonderful hospitality we had received. Those who had been garlanded placed their flowers on the Memorial as we stood in thoughtful homage to those who had suffered and to the many local people (Chinese as well as Malay) throughout the islands who had given assistance sometimes at the cost of their own lives.

The day was not yet over as Pak Rizki had prepared another sumptuous dinner for us at the TIMAH Resthouse. We were presented with a charming drawing of the Tinwinning Building which now hangs in the BWM Resource Centre (N.B. various pamphlets acquired on the journey are also in the Resource Centre). Afterwards, camp diagrams, lists of names, photographs, wartime diaries and various treasured papers were spread out on a long table and we all participated in an attempt to solve the puzzle of the present location of graves. We said our heartfelt goodbyes and thank yous to Pak Rizki and his colleagues, negotiated

the re-boarding of the boat, had a last chat mulling over the events of the day and fell exhausted into our bunks.

At 4.00 a.m. on 2nd February we departed Bangka Island and by 6.00 a.m. we were entering the Musi River on our way to Palembang. A vast expanse of murky brown water was lined with some sort of foliage – not mangrove. As we progressed we began to encounter huge vessels, among them barges laden with coal. Further along expanses of rice paddies began beyond the “rubbish fringe foliage” as Azlina termed it. Edda, our literary companion, reminded us of the Conrad-like atmosphere of the scenery – the endless flatness. Palembang’s longstanding importance as an oil town was brought home to us as a huge monster tanker aptly named the Global Triton powered past making for Plaju (Pladjoe in Dutch times), the centre of the oil industry. The Japanese concern to take Palembang first in order to gain access to the oil had given the window of opportunity to those escapees who made their way up the Indragiri River and across to Padang.

As the river narrowed signs of habitation increased as did factories of all sorts, doubtless discharging their waste into the Musi. The kampungs merged into one continuous mass of typical red-tiled Sumatran roofs. As we passed under the iconic Ampera Bridge, built in the 1960’s, we knew our boat journey had ended. When the correct customs point had been ascertained (we backtracked under the bridge!) the usual delay ensued as all the vessel’s papers had to be passed before we were allowed to disembark. Our wonderful crew carried our bags to the roadside, arranged 2 taxis for us and posed for photographs. Handshakes and smiles were exchanged and we knew they would have plenty of chuckles about our unusual journey to amuse them on their long voyage of 10 hours straight back to Tanjung Pinang.

Our hotel was not far away but true to form it was not found without drama as apparently 2 days before it had changed its name from Aryaduta to Arista! It was, however, a very comfortable hotel with a very obliging staff. For our party there was much laundering of clothes and luxuriating in proper showers. My notes are blank on what happened for the rest of the day – not much I suspect – though I do remember we all baulked at the idea of going out to eat and had dinner in the hotel.

On Thursday, 23rd February we arranged to hire a van (not a kidjang!) and set out to tour Palembang which we found rather intimidating after the gentle way of life in the islands. We found that the main market was full of cheap imports from China and so went to a rather up market *songket* shop with an atelier. However, we were disappointed with both the

quality and the garish colours of the modern work. The thousands of U.S. dollars wanted for the few "*halus*" older pieces reflected their scarcity. We then visited the Charitas Hospital (Our 3 Muntok colleagues had earlier presented yet another plaque there) where the Wartime staff had at great risk helped and nursed the internees. We were impressed with the present standards of care, both medical and humanitarian, (it is a not-for-profit hospital) still shown. The nearby St. Joseph's Church was a stunning piece of modern architecture. As the South Sumatera Museum was unfortunately closed for renovation we made a quick stop at the Wild Life Park (not recommended) on the way to drop Azlina, Edda and Rufus at the Airport. On the way back into town we meandered through the area of Talang Semut where some of the old Dutch bungalows (the former women's internment area) remain in evidence. This is still a very pleasant residential area bordering a lake. In the evening we were taken to the house of an antique dealer where, amongst the usual bric a brac, we were shown numerous fairly ancient-looking ceramic and glass beads that continue to be brought up from the Musi River bottom – perhaps from Srivijaya times

On Saturday, 24th February after a leisurely breakfast we set off with our pleasant van driver to drop Imogen at the Airport. At my request we made a stop at an interesting cane shop which contained a wonderful display of various "*tudung saji*" (food covers) of various shapes, patterns and colours. We were told some came from Cirebon and some were made locally from cane harvested in Danau Ranau. We drove past the Prison (which had housed the men internees) and down to the Benteng Kato Besak – the huge Dutch fort built on the river front after the conquest of Palembang in 1659. Within its mighty walls with regular gun emplacements it still houses a military base and we were refused entry. We wandered along to the Sultan Badaruddin Museum and found much of interest in the historical exhibits and cultural displays. There, at last, we saw the famed exquisite *songkets* of the region and one display noted that the word "*songket*" has its origin in a word for "chopsticks"!

Then it was my turn to be dropped at the Airport for the packed Air Asia 1½ hour flight back to K.L. – but a world away. Our epic journey had been a wonderful experience in part due to my congenial companions. But I must mention my son-in-law, Darwin, who had organized the boat and ensured that all went according to plan – the routes we followed and the stops we made. Thanks are also due to Frans, our Dutch companion, whose command of Bahasa Indonesia and easy rapport with the crew and all whom we met were invaluable.

In writing this account, I have tried to give a balanced view – one could be overwhelmed by the tragedies of the escapees, largely British but also local Malaysians.

Virtually, no names are remembered of the considerable numbers of local islanders who rescued people in their own craft, ferried them to collection points, bound up wounds and shared their food supplies and meagre belongings. Some of them continued to aid the survivors even in the Camps at great personal risk. Each of the plaques presented makes note of this humanitarian role in an attempt to rectify an outstanding omission.