

UNVEILING CEREMONY OF THE SIME ROAD CAMP PLAQUE

FRIDAY – 11TH SEPTEMBER 2015

SIME ROAD CAMP

In the Sime Road Camp on Monday 13th August 1945, Canon John Hayter made a cryptic note in his diary, "little happened until last few days..... Rumours of the end rampant. Many say 11th was the day. Japanese busy on previous day."

It was not until Thursday, 16th August 1945 that he wrote, "POW over the wire said, 'Peace signed 11th. Military coming 21st.'"

However, the civilian internees were not finally released from Sime Road Camp until the 8th September 1945, thus ending three and a half years of internment for them. The thousands of military personnel who had previously passed through the Sime Road Camp during the occupation of Singapore by the Imperial Japanese Army, were also freed from their camps.

Sime Road was named after a Scotsman called John Sime, who came to Malaya in 1909 and founded Sime, Darby and Company in 1910. In 1915, he was transferred to Singapore and joined the Singapore Golf Club. He supervised the laying out of the Bukit Timah Golf Course, and the road leading to it was therefore named after him. He retired in 1937 before the outbreak of WW2.

The camp was built on an area of land measuring 470 acres beside Sime Road. Between 1941 and 1942, the Sime Road Camp, as it was called, was the headquarters of the Royal Air Force, until December 1941. However, after the Japanese invasion of northern Malaya, it became the combined Operational Headquarters of the British Army and the RAF in Singapore. During this time, General Arthur Percival, Commanding Officer for the Malayan Campaign and the Battle of Singapore ran military operations from this camp. However, on 31st January 1942, the Imperial Japanese Forces landed on the Island of Singapore, and by 11th February they were within 1 mile of the Sime Road Camp. Percival and his military staff decided to retreat to Fort Canning to continue running operations from a series of underground bunkers, now called "The Battlebox."

After the capitulation of Singapore on the 15th February 1942, Sime Road was converted into an internment camp for Allied Prisoners of War in addition to the other military barracks in the Changi area. The former British combined operational headquarters, known as the Green House, was taken over by the Japanese and used as their Headquarters and administrative centre for the camp.

Initially the prisoners of war were put to work building a Shrine next to the MacRitchie Reservoir for the Japanese war dead. As the POWs settled down to camp life, all kinds of activities took place, including the setting up of a theatre called The Barn Theatre, where productions were put on by Captain Ronald Horner and Ronald Searle, who did all the stage and costume design. Ronald Searle also drew caricatures on the walls of his hut, which later became the women's Dispensary, and was called the Flying Dutchman Hut. Into these life size murals he inscribed messages such as "Cheer up girls. Won't be long now."

But during October 1942, 3,000 prisoners were sent from Sime Road to Thailand to work on the infamous Burma-Siam Railway. Included in this workforce was Lt. Colonel Philip Toosey, who was to become the real life 'Colonel of Tamarkan,' the Commanding Officer of the camp on the River Kwai, whose men did in fact build not one but two railway bridges over the River.

Work on the railway took a terrible toll on the men, thousands died and when it was completed in October 1943, many of the sick and wounded were returned to Singapore. In November and December, the survivors of 'H' Force who had endured some of the most extreme conditions while building the Railway were sent back to the Sime Road Camp, including Ronald Searle, who became one of the most famous of the artists on the Kwai, and whose works depict a variety of images showing what life on the Railway was like.

In early May 1944, things in Sime Road Camp were to change completely. The Prisoners of War were sent to Changi Gaol in exchange for some 3,000 mostly British, European and

Australian civilian internees – men, women and children - who had been interned in the Gaol since Capitulation. Thus Sime Road finally became a civilian internment camp, and remained as such for the rest of the war. Between May and October 1944, survivors of the Double Tenth, and the bodies of 15 men who had died under interrogation, were returned to the Sime Road Civilian Camp from the Kempeitai Headquarters at the YMCA and Outram Road Gaol. In March 1945, the camp's numbers swelled by about 1500 as the Eurasian and Jewish communities from Singapore, Penang and mainland Malaya were also interned in Sime Road.

This was also a testing time for the civilians. To quote again from John Hayter's book, "Priest in Prison,"..... The wide horizons of Sime Road after the imprisoning, metaphorical as well as actual, walls of Changi, were a huge relief and a lift to morale. At the same time there were problems. The move itself was a major logistical exercise. In retrospect, it is remarkable that we were given transport and not forced to march the 7 or 8 miles from the Gaol to the Camp. We were told we were leaving Changi surprisingly soon after the visit of General Saito and his promise of things to come, which we should find 'bunyak, bunyak baik.' (Very, very good) Our first introduction to Sime Road left so much to be desired that any appreciation of our surroundings plummeted the camp consisted of a large number of long wooden huts with attap, or palm leaf, roofs, linked in the main by a system of concrete paths. The accommodation allotted to us was, we were told, only temporary. It had better be! We were crowded into a space per man of less than one and a half feet – and the roof leaked! Four days after us, on the 6th May, the Women's Camp moved from Changi. Their arrival had something of a party atmosphere about it. Some of the men had been detailed to act as baggage carriers, and this enabled us to meet the women for the first time."

Our two veterans here today, **Olga Henderson and Vilma Howe** who are to unveil the Plaque for us, were both interned as children in Sime Road. Several internees have written books about their time in the camp, including MVG member, and former child internee, **Sheila Bruhn**, ("Diary of a Girl in Changi") and **Mary Thomas**, formerly a Medical Auxiliary ("In the Shadow of the Rising Sun"). Another prominent civilian internee was **Lady Daisy Thomas**, wife of Sir Shenton Thomas the pre-war Governor of the British Colony of the Straits Settlements.

As in Changi Gaol, the men and women were separated in Sime Road. They had separate compounds within the camp – even families were split up. Life in the camp was highly organised, but food and medical supplies were in very short supply and many lives were probably saved by the regular deliveries of fresh vegetables by the Swiss International Red Cross Representative, Hans Schwietzer. As time went on, large vegetable gardens were created by the internees and the produce grown also helped to supplement their diets. Nevertheless the death toll continued to rise until the end of the war due to vitamin deficiency diseases such as beriberi, and other prevalent tropical diseases such as malaria, dysentery and typhus.

The internees were allowed other activities as well as gardening. There were workshops for carpentry, shoe repairing, tailoring and other necessities for the maintenance of the camp. There was a library and the internees were allowed to attend religious services in the two churches in the camp, built by the military POWs - St. David's Anglican Church and a Roman Catholic Church. St David's was used throughout the war years, and its walls had been decorated with murals and lists of casualties by the former POW inmates. The children had to attend school, run by the indomitable Miss Anne Griffith-Jones, and in early 1945, some of her pupils even sat their School Certificate exams organised by Harold Cheeseman, Deputy Director of Education in the Straits Settlements.

In early August 1945, as the end of the war drew near, food was in desperately short supply. The Men's Representative in the Camp, C.E. Collinge, issued a note to all inmates about "Snails," as an excellent additional supply of protein. The instructions urged all those who had expressed a willingness to eat snails, to do so after they had been properly prepared for consumption. A "Snail Farm" was set up to breed and collect them, and after preparation and cooking they were distributed to huts in rotation to be eaten as a 'side-dish' until the majority chose to consume them, and a regular supply could be made available.

For many of the Sime Road inmates, the war ended more with a whimper than a bang. They were not released from the camp instantly, but urged to stay in camp until food and medicines

could be distributed to them. And they were also advised in a leaflet, which was dropped by plane on about the 30th August telling them of the unconditional surrender of the Japanese, not to eat large quantities of solid food, fruit or vegetables at first, but to eat small amounts at a time. However, it was nearly a month later before the last inmates left the camp, and it was closed.

After the war, the RAF did consider rebuilding its Headquarters on the site of the camp which had been Air Ministry ground, but this did not happen and in 1946 the camp was closed down altogether.

The Malayan Volunteers Group became interested in the Sime Road Camp as it became clear from the numerous diaries and books which have recently emerged, that many of our relations had been interned in the camp, both as military POWs and as civilian internees. And, indeed, some of our members, including our 2 veteran ladies here today, were interned there as children. Although the National Heritage Board in Singapore designated the site of the Sime Road Camp an historic site in 2003, nevertheless it is gradually being built upon. With the re-development of the Sime Road Camp area it became apparent that a map of how it looked in wartime would be of interest to historians and relatives of those who were in the camp. Several plans of the camp area had been made by former internees, including a detailed map drawn in June 1945 by Harold MacKenzie, who had trained as an architect but worked as a rubber planter. Two other maps by an unknown person drawn in pencil were found in papers in the Changi Museum. These showed a slightly different arrangement of the huts and a different way of numbering them. Using the information from each plan, a definitive and detailed plan of the camp has been made by MVG member Jane Nielsen, in conjunction with Jon Cooper and our two former child internees here today. It is felt that the map is now as accurate as possible and shows the camp site as it was during the war.

Last year, the Malayan Volunteers Group decided that it should commemorate the 70th anniversary of the true ending of all hostilities in the Second World War in some permanent way. It was agreed that the presentation of a Plaque to the Changi Museum, in memory of all those who had been imprisoned in the Sime Road Camp would be a good way to remember them, and the 70th anniversary of V-J Day.

We are very grateful to Mr. Jeyathurai Ayadurai and the Changi Museum for giving us the opportunity to make this presentation.

Rosemary Fell
Honorary Secretary of the Malayan Volunteers Group