

## **Freemasonry among Prisoners in Singapore during the Japanese occupation.**

When the Japanese attacked The United States in December 1941, they also attacked British and Dutch colonies with the result that very quickly Hong Kong, Shanghai, Singapore as well as Siam, Malay and Burma were overrun.

Japanese culture did not appreciate surrender and prisoners were treated very badly. Despite this a surprising amount of Masonic activities did take place and records were kept. Some of these made it to the end of the war and are retained in various locations around the globe. Unfortunately many of those taking part did not fare so well.

The fall Of Singapore resulted in around 55,000 Empire military PoWs, the same number of local troops as well as 3000 internees. Initially, the internees were held in the Changi prison whilst PoWs were detained in the British camp.

There were 250 Freemasons among the internees including W.Bro. Baldwin Lowick. He was the Deputy District Grand Master at the time and he authorised Lodges to continue meeting in the prison.

He issued 42 dispensations with instructions that no regalia, lodge furniture or warrants were to be used. Lodges met with regularity and minutes were kept, some even typewritten. One lodge Secretary would take the recorded pages and tear them in half. The pieces were then stuck on a nail so they looked like toilet paper. After liberation all these sheets were repaired and pasted in his Lodge minute book. Lodge meetings were held in a room about the size of a prison cell until 10th October 1943 when a new very harsh regime was introduced. Meeting then had to stop until the camp was moved from Changi prison to a new location and a further 2000 internees were added to the numbers.

The open nature of this new location was more favourable, however privacy was an issue. One brother did manage to hold a small Lodge of Instruction every Tuesday night with a Tyler as well as a number of assistants keeping watch for Japanese 'intruders'.

As well as Craft meetings five Royal Arch Chapter and three Mark Lodges held meetings from time to time.

The military Prisoners of War were initially held in Changi Camp. Again records did survive showing that the first meeting was held on June 8th 1942 at which 42 were present. The situation that resulted in this and subsequent meetings were organised with military precision.

W Bro. H.W. Wylie, Past Assistant District Grand Master decided he wanted to ensure the Craft meeting were held correctly. He, along with two other officers of District Grand Lodge level, approached Lieutenant-General Percival who was the British Commandant to discuss the matter. Percival wasn't a Freemason, but was sympathetic and helpful as it was considered good for moral. He contacted area commanders and surprisingly, also the Japanese authorities. Assurances were given that only Masonic business among existing Freemasons would be carried out. No attempt to initiate candidates, etc. being allowed. The area commanders agreed, however the Japanese stated the matter had to be referred to a higher authority. This went all the way to Tokyo. When no answer was received from the Japanese, the General decided that brethren may hold these meeting in a discreet manner. He went so far as to say '[that this was] yet another means of preventing the deterioration of character and moral which began to show itself in some parts of the camp, at any rate, in the early stages and anything which will assist in the preservation of the discipline for which,

I believe, your Craft is universally noted, will undoubtedly prove valuable to me in the enormous difficulties I see already arising'.<sup>1</sup>

After General Percival was taken to Japan his successor, Bro. Lt-Col E. Holmes, continued his support.

Weekly meetings were held and degrees were practiced in English, Scottish and Irish workings, initially in a room in the educational building. When this was put out of bounds they moved to the Church of England Chapel.

Working tools were taken from school mathematical instruments. These were later replaced by ones made by brethren along with jewels made from wood, aluminium from damaged vehicles, or fan blades.

Things got to be more difficult when many prisoners were taken 'up country' for forced labour, but it seems, Masonry will find a way.

An example of this has been recorded and I copy it freely from papers found online.

In time the Japanese military forces began to organise PoWs into smaller work camps outside of Changi jail and Camp. One such location was a work camp situated to the west of Singapore City. Twenty five Brothers got together there and set up a 'Lodge'. They produced a Roll of Founder Members calling it 'The River Valley PoW (Masonic) Club'. It is dated 10th July 1942 and lists all 25 Brethren. Six of the Scottish Constitution, five Australian, one Irish and thirteen English. Each of the Brethren was given his own personal copy of the Roll, all 25 of which had been prepared by Brother Cecil Pickersgill. The decision to prepare such a Roll, let alone twenty five copies, is remarkable because had the Japanese discovered the document the consequences would have been catastrophic. The Brethren's names, Mother Lodge, Masonic Rank and even signatures are recorded. They met once a week when lectures were given and ceremonies practised.

Later when it became clear that most members would be going 'up country' the minute book and working tools were buried in a tin box. Unfortunately they were never recovered as a building near the burial site was developed later and a new structure built over the location. Most of the Brethren named apparently perished whilst working on the Siam, Burma railway.

Of the original twenty five copies of the Roll, three are believed to still exist. One is in the Museum of Freemasons' Hall, Edinburgh, and another was in the possession of a surviving Brother. The copy presented to the Grand lodge of Scotland was given in 1985 by Mrs Banner. Brother Banner whose name is second on the Roll, died on the railway in 1943. How the Roll came into the possession of his widow is a mystery. A third copy is thought to be in Singapore. The fact that any have survived is all the more remarkable as each were hand drawn and coloured on rice paper.

Cpt. Pickersgill was a devout Christian and he asked the Japanese commandant if he could make a Lych Gate as a sign of Christian faith at the entrance to the military cemetery. The Japanese being a religious race, agreed. The gate was built by the prisoners and erected in December 1942.

Unfortunately Bro. Pickergill died of malaria in 1943 when working on the railway. He was 37. Following the war the gate was dismantled and put into storage until 1971 when it was brought to the UK and re-erected outside of Bassinbourn Barracks. Later it was refurbished and it is now situated in the National Memorial Arboretum at the entrance to the Far East PoW plot.

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<sup>1</sup> From Lieutenant-General Percival's report after liberation.

The activities of the Brethren in Changi Camp were limited. The only time that they were allowed to themselves was on Thursday afternoons. Brethren slowly made themselves known to each other and once sufficient numbers were available they joined up on a regular basis. They convinced their Japanese guards they were holding religious services. The only 'furniture' used was the Volume of the Sacred Law. All the Degrees were worked and with the diversity of Constitutions present the Brethren were also treated to lectures by Past Masters on the Symbolism of Freemasonry, the different workings in each Constitution and in-depth discussions as to the different rituals.

The Japanese Guards, being ever present, especially when 'large' groups of prisoners congregated, were utilised by the brethren as unwitting 'Tyler' and 'Inner Guard'. They, thinking that these gatherings were religious in nature, volunteered to keep off all intruders and 'Cowans'. One stood outside the door and the other stood inside. Both had a rifle with fixed bayonet. Needless to say neither could speak nor understand English.

Going 'up country' generally meant going to work and probably dying whilst on the infamous 'Death Railway'. Because of the nature of the work and the fact that prisoners were 'leapfrogged' along the railway there are no records of Masonic activity in these camps. But the basic Masonic activity of care for others continued. Sometimes it was simply holding a Brothers hand in the final moments before he ascended to the Grand Lodge above.

Of course, Masons did not restrict their relief to just fellow Masons. Many hospital patients were without friends or were the only remaining members of their regiments. Friendship was given and gifts, often cigarettes, provided.

The military camp, under the authority of Bro. Wylie, was tightly controlled. A Lodge, 'St. George Lodge of Instruction', was approved by Bro. Wylie. Separately another Lodge was formed by mainly Australian Brethren on 18th December 1942. They elected officers with Bro. F.C. Stuart in the chair. They proposed the formation of an association and as a result 'The Prisoners of War Masonic Association' was formed with Bro. Stuart being elected chairman. A Secretary, Treasurer and an Executive committee of four Brethren from the Victoria, Queensland and English Constitutions were appointed. Further meetings were held. Although following the protocols of Lodges there was no official sanction so they didn't use the name Lodge. It was not long however before the Association learned of Bro. Wylie and on 15th February 1943 he was informed of the existence of the Association. Further correspondences resulted in the following being received.

'I have felt all along the necessity and indeed moral obligation, to avoid contravention of those excellent rules governing the Craft as much as possible and endeavour to restrict such error to the absolute minimum. This object has, I feel, been attained and with a perfectly clear conscience, am in a position to approve my brethren embracing such opportunities as your Association offers to any extent that you are prepared to allow them'.<sup>2</sup> The two Lodges then merged.

Another example of exactitude in behaviour and obedience to the constitutions was noted when following the proving of members arriving at a meeting it was found that a visitor has been 'initiated' by a Dutch 'field lodge' in the camp. It was found that the brethren of this other jurisdiction had held a meeting within the camp area at which an 'initiation' had been performed without Bro. Wylie being informed. The matter was considered by the Executive Committee and it was decided that the facts should be reported to Bro. Wylie. Bro. Wylie consulted with a Legal brother and as a result, the

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<sup>2</sup> Taken from records available online.

Committee informed the gentleman concerned that, 'pending the regularisation of his initiation, he must consider himself barred from attending any meetings of the Association'.

Towards the end of 1943 a Brother, known only as 'Major S', was brought into the camp hospital in a terrible state. He had been sentenced to imprisonment in the infamous Outram Road jail. At the time of his arrest a Masonic ritual was found in his possession. This resulted him receiving terrible beatings and torture.

Bro. Wylie stood at his bedside and heard a whispered warning advising an immediate cessation of Masonic activities as 'they' are starting an intensive investigation. Following discussion with both the British and Australian senior officers, who were both Masons, it was decided to issue an order closing the Association down.

It was not until August 14th 1945 that the Emperor of Japan ordered his forces to lay down their arms and even after the cessation of hostilities the tribulations of the PoWs were not over.

Some very small scale Masonic activity took place whilst waiting for repatriation. Sometimes even on a one to one basis. It was important at this very last moment to maintain spirits. One incident was noted at the last St Andrew's day church service, held in one camp. It is specifically remembered because, towards the end of the service, two Scottish Brethren, knowing what the occasion was, approached from a distance, singing. As they approached the 'kirk' their voices grew more powerful. The men present wept.

Over a period of 17 months, 21 meetings of the Association were held. The last being on 4th May 1944. The minutes of this meeting recorded 'There being no further business, the closing prayer was given and the Lodge closed. The brethren departing in Harmony at 6pm. – Being sorrowful at the thought that they had, perhaps, attended the last regular meeting of the Association; yet mindful of the blessing of the Grand Architect of the Universe who had allowed us to have, during this period of stress, strain and anxiety, so many happy evenings together, reviving the Spirit of the Craft and sharing mutually in the benefits and joys of its message'.

Some of the remaining PoWs were shipped off to other camps. The remainder were moved to Changi jail where over 5000 were kept in a prison built to hold 600.

Despite this Masonry continued. The following is taken from a talk given about the late Fred Wheldon.<sup>3</sup>

RWBro. Wheldon had been placed in charge of an electrical storeroom, located just inside the gates of the prison. On Sunday nights, after church services, the room took on a different use. One by one, ten shadowy figures made their way into this room and when the last entered, the door was propped closed, the light shrouded and the meetings of Masons held again. There were nine master masons and one padre - Padre Benjamin. We sat there at our meetings for a few weeks and the padre, said one night, 'Well, it's alright you chaps wasting your time talking but I think it's time you learned something - it's time you learned the ritual. Someone asked, 'Where's the ritual, padre?' He answered, 'I've got it in my head.' And so he undertook the task of teaching the ritual to nine raw master masons. He stuck to it week after week until one Sunday he said we had made some progress and the next week we would open a Lodge. He appointed his officers and the following Sunday, sitting around the table in our respective positions, all words spoken in undertone, with no movements being made, we opened an imaginary Lodge. It was full of mistakes, but as time passed

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<sup>3</sup> Australian records maintained by Lodge Liberation, Melbourne.

we rectified them. Later we graduated to degree work and then for Sunday after Sunday, until the end of the war, we opened our imaginary Lodge and initiated, passed and raised an imaginary candidate. Formation of a Lodge On the day of liberation – 28th August 1945 - Padre Benjamin held a Masonic Thanksgiving Service, which he concluded with the prayer that, 'someday, somewhere, a Lodge would be formed out of the friendships made here in Changi'.

That prayer was answered in Melbourne when, on 14th November 1949, Lodge Liberation was consecrated. Padre Benjamin was there in his official capacity as Grand Chaplain.

What all the above shows is that, when placed in conditions of hardship from war and internment the true beliefs of Freemasons will come to the fore. Brotherly love, relief and truth are the most important virtues of all good men.