



"Air raid live tonight! Admission free for prisoners"

by Roger Beaumont.

On January 2nd 1943, five Australian men who had been working in the tin mines at Yala in Southern Thailand, were brought under Japanese guard into the internment camp that had been hastily constructed on the playing fields behind Thammasat University in Bangkok.

The Australians were exhausted. Three of them were still lame from wounds. They'd had a very bad time of it down south, and a number had been killed. They now joined over three hundred Commonwealth internees made up of traders, university teachers, insurance men, lawyers, and their wives and children.

They new experience of confinement soon brought out the best and the worst in people. Those civilian internees who had cruised through their office days in Bangkok in a crapulous haze of dry martinis, were now sober for the first time in years. They lost weight, began to read, and organised drama societies and lecture evenings. A few, who weren't used to picking up anything heavier than money, refused to join in any activity in the camp, and remained aloof, separated by their own arrogance, no doubt feeling that they were too special to have to do anything either for themselves or for others. They were ignored, and withdrew into a spiteful silence. Nothing changes!

Although everyone in the camp believed in the need for freedom, many understood the greater importance for order. In the tight and crowded circumstances one without the other was dangerous. As it was, there were marital affairs, personality clashes, and furious arguments over the hierarchy of command - and children saw adults under stress at close quarters; always a valuable education. With so many people to organise, committees were established to handle the sleeping arrangements, first-aid classes, sporting activities, sewer duties, the cooking, and the complaints. It had all the

makings of some insane tropical soap opera.

To those outside Thailand at the time, Bangkok was a mere backwater in the furious theatre of a global war. Yet these internees had a ringside seat when the first major Allied bombing raids began over the city on January 8th 1942. They were to continue for the next three and a half years.

From the diary of an English trader after a raid in April 1943; "As the alarm sounded some idiots in one of the camp buildings started to smoke, and after a warning, were shot at by the guards . . . next day we discovered that the raid had hit Assumption College, a clinic at the end of Silom Road, and a row of shops on Jawarat Road. There were many Chinese casualties."

Later on in the war, waves of American Super Flying Fortresses would come howling and thundering "a mere 600 feet above the river following its curve and midnight glisten to the bridges and railyards at Lopburi. Many a hole was made in our mosquito nets when the ack ack guns finally spoke . . ."

By which time, it appears, the boomers were already over another province, if not another country.

A former Archbishop of Canterbury once said that, "Cricket is merely organised loafing." He may be on to something there. At the camp, teams were patched together that consisted of men and women from countries as far apart as Uganda and New Zealand. A young Canadian who was politely asked to play at 'silly mid-off', picked up a stump and threatened the umpire - a matronly, middle-aged English woman from Devon. Bad idea. She coolly told him to, "Play where you're told, or you'll be moved to 'square-leg' - and may I remind you, I have a bottle of Scotch that's older than you." At which point he "jumped into the river and swam off in the direction of Thonburi in a frightful rage, waving the cricket stump above his head, cheered on by

two grinning solicitors from Ceylon holding plates of sandwiches." The Thai guards gulped once and blinked twice, but didn't shoot. I wonder what the Archbishop would have thought of that.

At the war's end, the last entry in the trader's diary is not his own, but from a survivor recently liberated by the Allies from the Thai-Burma railway in September 1945:

"Two hundred of us dressed in a queer assortment of garments dropped from relieving aircraft, filed noisily into a large hangar at Don Muang airport. Then an astonishing thing happened. All fell silent as we caught sight of a table in a corner with tea-urns and mugs on it. Standing there, smiling, was a pretty English girl with long fair hair sweeping in a wave over her neck, dressed in a crisp summery outfit. Two hundred toughs, clad like scarecrows, were hushed by the sight, and many were visibly affected. She signalled to us to file past to receive tea and sandwiches, and we did so quietly and even shyly. An elderly, unshaven private immediately in front of me, when asked if he would like sugar, murmured with genuine feeling, the old hackneyed reply, 'Oh Miss, if you just put your finger in it, it will be sweet enough.' He stared at her in a dog-like way, and stumbled past, blinded by her presence."



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By the way, the English do not watch cricket, they study it. To find out how people perform while loafing about.