James Whittaker was born on 20 June 1921 in the industrial city of Manchester, England. After leaving school at fourteen, which was not uncommon at that time, he had several odd jobs before deciding in 1938 to continue a family tradition and enlist in the British Army. When Britain went to war in 1939, Jim was serving with the Royal Corps of Signals; stationed in London, he survived the 1940-41 German air attacks on the city, and in November 1941 was posted to Singapore. When Japan attacked throughout Asia in December 1941, Jim was among thousands of Allied troops captured by Japanese forces.

Jim spent the next three-and-a-half years, until August 1945, as a POW, most of it on railroad construction projects in the jungles of Burma and Thailand. Horrendous conditions, miserable treatment, and malnutrition caused the deaths of many thousands of Allied POWs; Jim's interview provides insights to the difficult existence in Japanese labor camps. Following Japan’s surrender in August 1945, Jim was liberated from a camp in Thailand; he returned to Britain, got married, and completed his military service, being discharged in 1947.

With Britain’s peacetime economy recovering slowly, though, jobs were hard to find, so Jim took a chance and in 1948 moved his family to the United States, working on railroads and settling in Minnesota. He became a US citizen in 1953. Jim worked many years for the railroads, retiring from Burlington Northern in 1981. At the time of this interview he lived in Brooklyn Center, Minnesota.
TS: This is an interview for the POW Oral History Project. My name is Thomas Saylor. It’s 4 March 2002, and this is an interview with Mr. Jim Whittaker, at his house here in Brooklyn Center, Minnesota. First, Jim, I want to thank you very much for taking time to sit and talk with me.

JW: You're welcome.

TS: Briefly, can you state your date of birth, and where you were born?

JW: I was born in Manchester, England, on June 20, 1921.

TS: What was it like to grow up in Britain of the early 1930s?

JW: Life was much different, and very grim. Most stores closed for half a day on Wednesday, and on Sunday just about everything except the churches shut down. Nobody I knew owned an automobile, a refrigerator, for instance, or a washing machine. We walked or rode bikes, or used public transportation, trams or buses.

I lived in a five room, two story, brick row house built in 1850. The front door opened on to the street and there was no garden; a flush toilet was located behind the house in a small stone flagged yard. Each room had a coal fireplace, but we only used the one in the kitchen; this had an oven on the side and a tank behind, which heated the water. Coal was delivered in 112 pound sacks dropped into the coal cellar through a grate in the sidewalk. We had a coal gas stove and gas lighting until the middle 1930’s, when it was replaced by a single drop electric light in each room.

There were no ‘supermarkets,’ and shopping meant a daily round of small shops: the butcher, grocer, greengrocer, fishmonger, baker, chemist [drug store], tobacconist, newsagent, sweet shop [candy]. People would walk around different stores with a basket or bag of some kind to get the day’s needs. Milk and bread might be delivered, and one day a week there would be a pick-up and delivery of laundry. Small items would be washed by hand at home. Because of the poor weather, hand washed laundry would often be dried on a rack suspended from the kitchen ceiling.

There was very little in the way of amusements. For entertainment there would be local sports teams and a local cinema, walks in the park were popular, and we did have a radio, but that was about it. A family holiday might be a trip to see a relative, or a few days at the seaside, where people would stay in a boarding house,
or a private home renting rooms. But apart from that it was—most people worked six days a week, or sometimes they were given a half-day off during the week on a Wednesday. But Monday through Saturday they would be working.

TS: When did you leave school?

JW: I left school at the age of fourteen.

TS: Was that uncommon?

JW: It was not uncommon. In England they had a system then that at age eleven children took an examination, the results of which would determine if they left school at age fourteen or went on for a further two years of schooling. There was no diploma or ceremony—on Friday you were a student, on Saturday, part of the workforce. The year I left school was the same year the liner Queen Mary was launched and, as a special treat, our teacher brought a wireless [radio] to school and we listened to the ceremony. I did not realize that some fourteen years later I would sail on it to a new life in America. Most children left school at age fourteen, a few to become a seven year apprentice.

TS: Did you take an apprenticeship yourself?

JW: No.

TS: When you left school at fourteen, what did you find yourself doing?

JW: My first job was, as I moved from that to a van boy, traveling with a driver in a van delivering bakery goods to different houses. There were a couple of other small jobs, but eventually the Army beckoned.

My first job after leaving school was as an errand boy, a messenger boy, riding a bicycle with a basket in front over the front wheel, delivering groceries. I cleaned up around a grocery store, too. I worked a sixty hour week and was paid ten shillings, about two dollars. An unskilled adult at that time earned about ten dollars a week. There were several other jobs after that but eventually the army beckoned.

TS: And you joined the Army at what age?

JW: I was seventeen when I joined the Army, seventeen and two months.

TS: What lay behind your decision to join the Army?

JW: All of my family had been military, and the idea of foreign service, the adventure, the uniform, the excitement, appealed to me.
TS: And the pay I take it?

JW: The pay, yes... Pay was not the deciding factor. I think at that time we got two
shillings a day, which I think in those days was fifty cents. Part of that would be kept
for Regimental Widows and Orphans, and for expenses such as shoe repair, and for
haircuts (*laughs*).

TS: So you had to pay some of your expenses?

JW: We were paid in cash every week, there was a parade in the drill hall. The pay
was distributed in alphabetical order, so I was always one of the last recruits in the
room. The pay parade was watched over by a very formidable Regiment Sergeant
Major. Always dreading: your name would be called and you would snap to
attention, march to the pay table, to the paymaster, salute, take a pace forward and
take the pay in your right hand, transfer it to the left hand, take a pace back, salute,
make a right about turn and exit the room. Woe betide anybody who made a left
about turn.

TS: So it was very regimented, this procedure?

JW: Oh, yes.

TS: You joined the military in 1938. When you joined, was there a thought in your
mind that Britain could soon be at war?

JW: It was during the time of the Munich crisis, which came in September, I think. It
had been growing for quite a while; there was a lot of talk of war. I suppose like the
Americans over here, we didn't think it would last long. But that really didn't
influence me: I wanted to get in the Army because I thought I would like the Army.
And I did like the Army.

TS: In the first couple days of September, 1939, Britain did enter the war against
Germany. What were you doing when you heard the news that Britain had declared
war on Germany?

JW: I was in training as a radio operator at a place called Canterbury. In prewar
days it was believed bombers would always get through and towns would be
devastated, that the planes would obliterate everything. The first days of the war
there were panics, much apprehension. There was a complete blackout in the town
when the sound of aircraft came. It took some time for the Civil Defense people to
organize the problem of street lighting. On the first night there was a complete
blackout.

TS: In Canterbury?
JW: Canterbury is an old medieval town, built around a cathedral. The streets were narrow and winding, so a complete blackout really tied things up. I had been out with friends and we had trouble finding our way back from the pub to our barracks, it was that bad.

TS: And among the civilian population, was there a sense of panic about what was going on?

JW: No panic, but I remember a lot of excitement, and soldiers were suddenly very popular. When off base we were required to be in uniform and carry a swagger stick. I remember walking down a road alongside slow moving traffic when a bus load of vacationing girls came by and began to sing a song popular at the time, “There is Something about a Soldier.” It was very embarrassing and I could not walk fast enough to get away from them.

TS: In your own mind, was there a sense of excitement, or fear?

JW: Excitement more than anything—there was no fear attached to it.

TS: Excitement that something was going to happen, or something that you’d be involved in?

JW: Yes, I thought we’d go off to war, and it would be a short war, and we’d get all kinds of adventure.

TS: All the stories that we hear. When did you first experience what the war was actually about?

JW: Yes. After the war started, I was sent up to Catterick Camp in Yorkshire to finish an abbreviated radio training. From there I was sent down to London to join the London Area Signals Company, a territorial unit, the equivalent of the National Guard. The next two years I spent in and around London, manning radio stations which were set up in the event that communications were knocked out. We didn’t pass any live traffic—we just established communication.

TS: Like a backup system in case of emergency?

JW: Yes, in emergency. It was never used. We just opened up communications several times during the day and did not even monitor other radio traffic.

TS: Really, you would cheer for anything coming down?
JW: Yes, we were sure it was a German (laughs).

TS: Optimistic, you were.

JW: Well, the news at the time was always optimistic, you know: two hundred German planes shot down, and only a few British. The figures were always exaggerated.

TS: Did you experience any of the German bomb attacks on London?

JW: Oh, yes—I was on the docks the time they bombed it heavily. I was operating a station on the East India Dock on the day of the first daylight raid, and there was a lot of damage. The docks were located in London’s East End, an area of brick houses and narrow streets. Children who had been evacuated into the country when the war started had moved back and were out playing when the raid started. After the raid there were lots of casualties, with fires everywhere, and streets blocked by destroyed houses, some children were unable to find their homes of their parents.

I had actually been out helping put out some of the fires to some of the boats that were in the dock area. That time they were not unloading any of the big boats; they were bringing supplies in on small lighters. I actually helped put out some of the fires: the Germans were putting incendiary bombs down. When the night raids started we would have planes over much of the night, during one raid I helped cut loose some of the burning boats in the dock area. They were not bringing the big boats into the dock area at that time but transferring their cargoes into smaller vessels away from London.

After one raid I found an unexploded incendiary bomb, one that hadn’t gone off. It was about two feet long and about two inches in diameter. Incendiaries were dropped in containers that opened up and scattered them on the way down. It had fallen on its side and didn’t explode. I took this thing home with me; I got leave in Christmas 1940, and that happened to be the time when the Germans blitzed my home town, Manchester. A lot of damage there—there was even a bomb in my street. My mother was an air-raid warden, and when she saw this live incendiary bomb, she was horrified (laughs). Sent it over to the air-raid people.

TS: It was still live munitions?

JW: Yes, magnesium or something. I tried putting them out when they landed, and you could cover them with sand and they’d still burn down through the roof. Most public buildings had pails of sand and buckets of water with stirrup pumps, sitting around the roof and upper floors. But you couldn’t put this stuff out, this magnesium. Once it got going, it would just burn through the roof and everything.

TS: Did it have to burn itself out, is that what happened to it eventually?

JW: Yes.
TS: So sand and water didn’t—

JW: Didn’t help. A large amount of sand might help, but I mean the bits that were available—these bombs were scattered all over. On the night of a big fire raid on London, it was estimated the Germans dropped 80,000 incendiaries. Many fires were started all over the city.

TS: Were you in London that particular time?

JW: Yes.

TS: Can you describe the experience of having bombs falling around you?

JW: Well, you could hear the planes in the dark, you could see the searchlights, you could hear the antiaircraft batteries, and occasionally you’d hear the whine and whoosh of a bomb coming down, and you’d—depending on how close it was—hit the deck and cover up. But there was no sense of panic. Momentary fear as you heard the thing coming down.

TS: Is it possible to tell from the sound what kind of a bomb it is, or how close it is?

JW: The only ones that I can really remember: the Germans would drop, I believe, land mines, and they would come down by parachute. And I heard the parachute—as the thing swings from side to side, it makes a swishing sound. I’d heard those. But the other bombs: in a lot of cases, the Germans had some kind of siren on them, so that it sounded terrible, the bombs coming down. The sound of high explosive bombs coming down was very loud.

TS: As a kind of psychological impact on people?

JW: I think that’s what it was. You certainly heard it, anyway.

TS: Jim, when did you depart from London?

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JW: I think it was around July or August, September maybe of 1941 when the Germans decided they’d go for Russia. I had repeatedly requested overseas service, and in September 1941 I finally got my wish. About that time I was sent up to Yorkshire to form another unit that was destined for overseas. As I am sure is the case in every army, an order to send people to another unit would mean the least desirable ones go first, and I was a trouble maker.

TS: So you had requested overseas duty.

JW: I had requested it all the time.
TS: Had you not requested, might you have just stayed in Britain for a longer period.

JW: The ones that I left with were—some of the people coming back from Dunkirk they were refitting. The other operators eventually went to the Middle East and then to Italy. Three of us had been sent with our radio to join a Guard’s Regiment, and had I stayed with them I too would have gone to the Middle East. I met one of them after the war.

TS: But you ended up going someplace quite different. Maybe you can say a little bit about that—finding out about where you were going and when you were actually going there.

JW: We were sent to a camp in Yorkshire and told we were to be part of a new unit called “Number Six Close Support Bomber Control.” I suppose the British had learned something by the German use of aircraft as mobile artillery.

We never had a chance to train with aircraft, and as far as I could see the idea had not been properly thought out. It didn’t make sense. I can’t imagine a pilot on a bombing run listening to instructions sent in Morse code (laughs). Later they developed a system which had an Air Force chap with the front line troops giving voice instructions to the bomber and guiding them.

Without any training we were put on a ship called The Empress of Canada. It took eight weeks to Singapore, after stops at Freetown, Cape Town, and Colombo. On the voyage we practiced sending Morse messages. We stopped in Cape Town—

TS: So you went around the Horn of Africa?

JW: Around the Horn, yes. We stopped in Colombo, in Ceylon, which is now Sri Lanka. We got to Singapore the end of November 1941, just ahead of the Japanese (laughs).

TS: Just ahead of the Japanese.

JW: And when we got there, there were no bombers. There were not many planes of any kind on Singapore. Between the wars the British had anticipated it would take five hundred front line planes to defend Malaya and the Naval Base built on Singapore. When the Japanese attacked there were some two hundred mostly obsolete, Brewster Buffalo biplanes in the whole of Malaya. The Japanese had been recognized as the most probable threat, but the British were heavily engaged in Britain and the Middle East, and they had nothing to send to Singapore. There was a lot of excitement because they knew what was happening, they’d been shadowing Japanese convoys and stuff. So nobody really had anything for us to do. Twiddled our thumbs for a while.

TS: So there was a pecking order for supplies and equipment of Europe, Middle East, and then Asia was—
JW: Yes, when Russia got in the war the British sent any spare guns, tanks, planes to Russia to try and keep the Russians in the war, because they were actually fighting. The British had made some deal with the Americans that the Americans were going to protect that part of the world. They believed—the British and the Americans both—that the American fleet would deter the Japanese. [The American General Douglas] Macarthur I guess had said—estimated that it would take until February or March of ‘42, when he would have then built up an Army in the Philippines and be supplied with planes—that he could protect the whole area. The Japanese didn’t wait.

TS: And they could perhaps see that the Americans were building up as well. Were you in Singapore when the Japanese attacked?

JW: I was in Singapore—when the war broke out I was in Kuala Lumpur. I’d been up North. We heard that Singapore had been bombed and that the Japanese had landed at Singora, Patani, and Kota Bharu. Kota Bharu is in northern Malaya, Singora and Patani are both in Siam (Thailand). The British had developed plans to cut off both of these landing places in the event of war, but did not want to antagonize the Americans by bombing the Japs before the Japanese got in the war. Once the Japanese attacked it was too late; the prewar plans fell apart. The British did not have much strength in Malaya, there were two Indian Divisions but many of their senior NCO’s had been sent to India to form new divisions. There was also a weak Australian Division made up with half trained recruits and older men, some of whom had served in World War I.

TS: So these are clearly not front line first-rate troops?

JW: Not front line. There were two British brigades; before the end they brought in a British division that had been heading for the Middle East, the 18th Division. Unfortunately, their ship The Empress of Asia was sunk on the way into Singapore, and most of their equipment was lost.

TS: Sunk by a Japanese submarine?

JW: Japanese planes—the Japanese had complete control of the air and the sea. The British had sent a token force, the Prince of Wales and the Repulse, two battleships. The aircraft carrier that was supposed to go with them ran aground somewhere near Jamaica, and without air cover both ships were sitting ducks. No aircraft in Malaya to help them; the British—at that time, nobody—had had any experience of a battleship under power, fully manned, being attacked by planes. The Japanese sank both the Prince of Wales and the Repulse with heavy loss of life.

TS: They sank them rather quickly and easily, didn’t they?
JW: Yes. With the fall of France, the Japanese occupied what was then French Indo China, and by the time of the Pacific war [in December 1941] they had some of their best land and naval air forces stationed there. Though the war in Europe had changed everything, prewar plans for the defense of Malaya had been based in part on the distance the Japanese would have to travel. It was thought a fleet and reinforcements would be able to reach Singapore in sixty days. French Indo China had a land connection with Malaya.

TS: So they were steps ahead of the Allies then, British and American?

JW: Oh yes.

TS: When did the Japanese attacks impact you directly?

JW: Of course the war in Malaya only lasted about 60 days. Very, very fast. I was in a group sent with our truck mounted radios to join one of the Indian Divisions near a place called Taiping, in northern Malaya. We reported to their signal office which was very busy, and they told us to pull our trucks off the road into a nearby rubber plantation, to get some sleep, and report back in the morning. In the morning we found that the signal office had been evacuated, and the Japanese had bypassed the town. There was a nearby food dump on fire so we stopped long enough to grab some cases of tinned fruit and headed back down the peninsula. There were a couple of rather minor assignments, working switchboards—I didn’t do any radio work at all. Our radio equipment was turned over to the Australians.

The only thing I did that might even remotely be considered as useful to the war effort—when Singapore was actually under siege I was sent with a truck and several other people to pick up what we were told was “radar equipment.” We got to the naval base—I didn’t have any idea what radar equipment was, except that I’d seen these huge towers and things. Whatever we got was very small—fitted in the back of a ton-and-a-half truck. We took it out to a ship in the harbor, Singapore harbor, and we got loaves of white bread out there from the ship’s bakery. Long after the war I learned that the Americans had given the British one of their machines which was used to decrypt Japanese intercepts. I believe that it was this machine that we took to the ship, though at the time I didn’t know any more than that we’d been told it was radar equipment.

TS: How did you get from Malaya to Singapore?

JW: We drove across the causeway connecting Malaya with Singapore where our trucks and equipment were given to an Australian unit who had lost theirs during heavy fighting in Malaya. There were several moves around the island as the lines were pushed back and we finally ended up in a private house in Singapore City. By this time the city was a mess, constant bombing and shell fire had started fires everywhere, and civil authority was breaking down. In the last days attempts were being made to evacuate non-combatants and key personnel, and I was one of nine sent from the unit for evacuation. We waited there—there were no ships that we
could get on. We decided that when the end came that we would go to Sumatra on our own. We had a vague idea that Sumatra was a large island somewhere to the west, and we thought we'd go there and join the Dutch forces. When the end came we were still waiting for a boat, so one of the group found a two engine launch in the dock area and was able to start one of the engines. So we decided to head for Sumatra on our own. It wasn’t a well thought-out plan, we didn’t have any compass, we didn’t have any sailing experience, we didn’t realize that we’d be passing through minefields, but we did make it without getting sunk.

TS: To Sumatra?

JW: Yes, with no maps, no compass and only a vague, that Sumatra was a large island to the West it was not a very smart thing to do. None of us had any sailing experience and we did not even consider the seas around might be mined. After filling the tanks with gas from the many abandoned vehicles in the area, we pulled away from Singapore, somewhere along the way we found a small row boat which we took in tow. The oil supplies at the naval base had been set on fire and we could see a huge column of black smoke, by keeping it behind us we guessed we were heading in the right direction. A few days later we stopped at one of the many islands in the area to look for a drinking water container. When we returned to the boat we found the tide had gone out and the boat was tipped over on the side of the good engine. Pushing it upright we found the propeller shaft and the bracket holding it were flat against the bottom of the boat, pounding it as straight as we could we waited for the tide to re-float us and when it did, got under way. There was an ominous thumping sound from underneath the boat which began to fill with water. As the boat began to sink we all scrambled into the row boat which was badly over crowded, with only one set of oars and no idea where we were, things did not look too hopeful.

A day or two later an English Captain and a Sergeant came by in a sailing dingy they had taken from the Chongg Yatch Club, they had a spare sail with them and showed us how to fit it to our boat by lashing a small tree to the front seat, they also took one of our boys into their boat. A few days later we came across a small native boat with two Malaya Volunteers, these were men who had worked in Malaya as rubber planters or tin miners. They had Malay money, could speak the local language and could buy food, so for a while we were in good shape. Our boat was not very fast and we had trouble keeping up with the other two, one day a strong tide swept us away from the island they were heading for and we were on our own again.

At one of the islands, the native headman directed us to an island called Pulau Moro, here we found food and directions for getting help should we reach Sumatra where arrangements had been made with the Dutch to move people across the island. We probably crossed the equator on the next day, low in the water, no land in view and without any shelter in the boat, it was very uncomfortable. Sometime after dark we finally reached land only to find thick mangrove swamps in both directions and no way to get ashore. Guessing we were north of the wide Indraggri River we had been told to look for, we headed south paralleling the shore.
and having an occasional wave splash into the boat. Two days later we reached the river and made our way to a small jungle trading post called Tambihanhan. Here arrivals were being collected and moved up the river in barges towed by a wood burning boat.

TS: How much time is going by here, Jim?

JW: It took us almost a month to reach Padang, where we found some of the survivors from the sixty small boats sunk in the evacuation attempt that had also made it to Padang. Most of their vessels had been bombed and sunk in the area of Banka Straits where the Japanese were already invading with the object of securing the American oil fields at Palembang.

TS: So they had been sinking these ships of survivors and evacuees?

JW: Yes, the evacuation boats on their way from Singapore to Java had to pass through Banka Strait a narrow stretch of water between Banka Island and the Sumatra mainland. There were major Japanese forces in this area as early as February 12, the date one vessel called Vyner Brooke left Singapore with 192 passengers, including Australian nurses. The boat was bombed and sunk on February 15, and survivors including a number of the nurses made it to shore. The survivors from the boat made it to an island where they lit flares to attract others from the water. Eventually as the crowd grew, and people wounded—some of the nurses were treating the wounded, and they sent for the Japanese. The Japanese came and took all the men who could walk away, bayoneted them. Went back to the beach, drove the nurses into the sea and machine-gunned them, then bayoneted the wounded that were laying on the beach. They were massacred by the Japanese. We know of the massacre because one nurse and one sailor, left for dead, survived the war and told what had happened.

We eventually got to Padang, on the west coast of Sumatra, about midway down. It’s a deep-sea port. We got there three days after the last Royal Naval vessel had been in there to pick up survivors, but we believed that the Navy would be in any night—

TS: Because you figured they would be back?

JW: Sure—they would never let us down. Eventually we were told that the Japanese would be in the next day and anybody wishing to leave should do so. Otherwise, their names would be turned over to the Japanese.

TS: Who was in control of Padang right now?

JW: The Dutch—they’d been there for many, many years.

TS: So the Japanese had not occupied the city yet?
JW: Not at that time. The Japanese were coming down from the north and the Dutch were not too happy to have us in the city and sealed off the dock area, obviously, we were going to attract trouble.

While in Padang we met an Australian officer who told us there was an island, with a lighthouse, fifty miles off the coast there. We might be able to find a boat big enough to take us to India. Not having any idea of the distance and the difficulties involved, a friend and I decided we would go with him. Now it sounded pretty good to us, stupid as we were.

TS: Well, what other options were available?

JW: It was wait for the Japs to arrive, and be taken prisoner, or try to get away again. The officer had a supply of escape money, so we set out walking down the coast of Padang, eventually coming to some small village. Using the very few words of Malay that we knew—Malay is spoken all over that area—we thought we had persuaded these natives to take us to an island a day and a night’s sail away, were there was a lighthouse. We thought we’d get a boat there. After sailing for some time in a boat equipped with outriggers we approached an island, but clearly much too close to be the one we wanted.

TS: How many of you were there?

JW: There were five of us: a friend from my unit, two Royal Engineers, and the Australian officer. When we protested this what not the island we were looking for, they told us their boat was not big enough not go further, but they would leave us where we would be safe and come back with a bigger boat. There was a lighthouse, and after saying something to the lighthouse keeper they sailed away.

End Tape 1, Side A.

TS: So they left you on this little island?

JW: This little island, and there was a lighthouse there, and there was a lighthouse keeper. Now he clearly wasn’t pleased to see us—

TS: He was Dutch?

JW: No. He was a native. He took us to the far end of the island and showed us an open shelter, showed us how to de-husk coconuts, and how to dig for turtle’s eggs, and see when the turtles came in. A turtle lays about eighty eggs that look like soft ping pong balls, it does not matter how much we boiled them they do not firm up. We were on our own—there was drinking water on the island. The place was thick with mosquitoes; and we would light fires trying to burn the coconut husk to make smoke to keep them away, but it didn’t help. All five of us came down with malaria.

After about seven days, a vessel came in sight, and an English-speaking Dutch officer came ashore, said he’d heard we were there, and he would take us to the
island we were looking for. Now while he was telling us this, some of the Dutch naval troops surrounded us with carbines, and the Dutch officer pulled a pistol and said, “Don’t move—I’ve been told by the Japanese to shoot you if you move.” We were taken back to Padang, towed behind this Dutch vessel, and turned over to the Japanese.

TS: This was February 1942?

JW: This would be March of 1942. Singapore fell on the fifteenth, and I think this was about the fifteenth or sixteenth of March.

TS: At that point you became a prisoner of the Japanese. Can you talk about what happened from being turned over to the Japanese until you arrived at as more permanent facility?

JW: The Japanese camp that we went to—we were kept in a house that was raised on stilts above the ground. There were quite a few soldiers around there, Japanese soldiers. We were motioned to sit on the ground while they assembled on the other side of the hut. The soldiers, all with rifles, moved to the other side of the house where we could see some kind of assembly; there was a lot of yelling and shouting—we thought that it was probably a firing party. We learned later that they make some daily parade to take an oath to their emperor, and our arrival at the same time had been a coincidence.

When that was over, the soldiers dispersed and an English-speaking officer came over to where we were sitting, and his first words were: “Why did you run away? Now that the war is over, we’re all friends.” I sure didn’t see a friendly Jap after that for a long, long time, for three and a half years. He didn’t ask any questions that you would normally expect, you know, name, rank, serial number. He was more interested in practicing his English, I think, and as far as I could tell there were no notes taken.

He looked at my watch that he’d taken from me, and said, “If I send you back to your house now you won’t get any food.” And he yelled out something in Japanese and a little wooden bucket of rice was brought, nice white rice. We were pretty hungry at that time—the turtle’s eggs and coconuts don’t really make it after seven days. We were badly sunburned, and we did eat the rice, though we didn’t think much of rice as a main meal. We did not appreciate the rice as much as we would soon learn to do.

After a few more, similar questions, we were moved back to the Dutch barracks that had been taken over by the Japanese to house their prisoners. Walking in through the gate I was surprised to see everybody standing at attention. The ones with hats were saluting, and the ones without were bowing. I couldn’t figure out what it was all about until some poor unsuspecting guy walked about twenty yards ahead of the Jap, didn’t see him—the Jap guard was taking us to the officer in charge of the camp. He yelled out something and went over and started beating that poor kid about the head and face. We learned quickly that you had to
salute or bow every time you saw these guys. And they would make a game of walking around the camp, trying to catch people not bowing.

TS: When you talk about physical punishment—was physical punishment a part of the regimen of these camps?

JW: Physical punishment was common in all the camps. It was usually a slapping or beating about the head with the hands, but if you ducked the guard might get mad and then use anything handy, even a rifle butt.

TS: What were some of the things that were “wrong,” so to speak?

JW: In what way?

TS: In terms of behavior—the sort of things that would draw a behavior correction.

JW: In the early days it was just not saluting. Later on, when we got to working for them, not moving fast enough, doing something wrong, breaking something, not understanding something screamed at you in Japanese, or sometimes just because you were closest one to the guy who was ornery you could get a beating.

TS: And for no direct reason at all?

JW: Yes. Often, none—or often for no reason that was apparent to us. Just because they were ornery that day.

Early days in the camp, the first three months, the problem was getting used to things, to a completely different lifestyle than the one we had known. The big shock at first was the toilet arrangements in those Dutch barracks—you squatted over a trough of running water. The Dutch and the natives had learned to use water to clean themselves. We were conditioned to using toilet paper, and pretty soon we had this whole damn system plugged with pages torn from books and things. It was a real culture shock. I never did learn how they would wipe themselves without using their fingers. The Dutch troops would carry a bottle of water with them into the latrine. Whether they would run it down their back I don’t know—squatting down like that—I never did learn the skill, whatever it was they used. Something I never did master (laughs). When we got to the railroad, trees anywhere near the latrine would be stripped of their leaves.

TS: This first camp you were in, from March 1942, how long were you there?

JW: About three months.

TS: And with how many other prisoners?

JW: Thousand, twelve hundred British and Australian, all services, all different units—
TS: A mixed bag, then.

JW: Mixed—we were unfortunate that we had gone in without the organization of a regular regiment, without own officers and NCOs. There were men from all the services, Army, Air Force and Navy, and from many different regiments or units. Most of us were either survivors from the wrecks, or escapees. In the British army the regiment or unit is like a family, suspicious of any outsiders; now we were all outsiders and it took some time before we developed a feeling of togetherness.

We had very little in the way of gear, and we started prison life at a disadvantage. The five of us all came down with malaria in that first camp. After about three months, five hundred of us were picked, I don't know how, we were designated as the British Sumatra Battalion. And with about five or six officers—different regiments, the officers, I don't think any of them were from the same units when they were taken prisoner—we were moved by truck across Sumatra to the port of Medan, on the northeast coast of Sumatra. There we were put on a vessel called the England Maru.

After about a week on the sea on these very, very uncomfortable ships—the accommodation consisted of platforms built around the hold, with about four feet of headroom, and access to the hold was down a wooden ladder, toilet facilities on this one—seems like I’m always talking about the toilet, eh? (Laughs)

Toilet facilities on this ship consisted of wooden boxes lashed to the outer rail of the ship, to use them you had to crawl through the rail and squat over a hole under which you could see the waves, could see the sea underneath you. To reach them you first had to make your way to the deck, that was not always possible and there were accidents.

TS: So you could look down and see the ocean?

JW: Oh yeah. Oh (laughs). I guess the Malacca Straits at that time.

TS: So it also swayed back and forth?

JW: Oh yeah (laughs). There was a lot of side to side movement.

The conditions down below were very, very hot and uncomfortable. There was no drinking water or washing facilities and very little fresh air coming in. Rice and water were occasionally lowered into the hold in wooden tubs. People who could not get up on deck sometimes had accidents, and things got to be very smelly.

TS: Were there people with dysentery?

JW: Yes, there was also some sea sickness. The dysentery which started on the ship was carried ashore when we landed at a place called Mergui, in lower Burma. The Japanese had made no provisions for handling prisoners. They had never anticipated catching prisoners; they had been taught a soldier should never be taken prisoner.
TS: And they projected this kind of image onto their opponent as well?

JW: If they didn’t project that, at least they didn’t make any provisions for them, because they had never had any intention of catching any of their own. They’d come down with what they could capture in terms of supplies, and very little in support that we would have in a civilized army, with food supplies and rations and that stuff. They lived on what they could carry, capture, or find, they were living off the land. There was nothing provided for the hundreds of prisoners suddenly dumped on them.

At Mergui we joined a thousand Australians that had come up in the same convoy from Singapore. The Japanese had got no place to put us—they stuffed us, all 1500 of us, in a high school that was set up for two or three hundred students at most. The rainy season, the monsoon, had started; conditions there were very grim. All the furniture that was in the place had been thrown out, and we were sleeping on the floors, on the veranda. There was running water in a couple of faucets in the area. Toilets were little cement stalls built for kids. Mud all over the place. The stalls had some kind of container underneath that was supposed to be emptied, but with 1500 people, many with dysentery, it became very, very bad. The containers were soon overflowing.

The dysentery which had started on the ship now became a serious problem. The Japanese were asked for medication—they didn’t have anything to give us. Their first thought, we were told, was to drive the sick onto the sea and shoot them. Our people of course wouldn’t do that. But they did finally persuade the Japanese to allow Mergui hospital to be used as a hospital. It was manned by an Australian medical unit. There were no beds or furniture, no running water, no lights. The dysentery wards there: you slept on a wooden platform covered with whatever covering you had with you. The toilets again were just four-gallon cans set in the middle of the floor.

TS: And hopefully people could make it to that.

JW: Not all the time. There was usually a trail of blood and feces from the platform to the cans. The Australian medical staff did what they could, but for the most part they did not have any of the drugs needed to treat dysentery.

TS: How was the dysentery treated?

JW: Dysentery starts out as diarrhea, and pretty soon you’re passing blood and mucus. It’s just continually going—I think one night I counted about twenty-six trips to this can. The Aussies tried feeding us ground-up charcoal, hoping that it would give our stomachs something to work on. It was hard to swallow and did not seem to help. Dysentery is just a big step closer to cholera—cholera is the same thing, when you’ve got completely dehydrated. Cholera did not hit us in that particular camp, but it did later in the jungle. It was really deadly in the jungle, later on.
TS: Were people dying from dysentery as well, or not?

JW: Oh, yes, there were quite a few deaths, from dysentery and other things. The Unit friend who had been with me in the escape attempts from Singapore and Padang, he died from cerebral malaria while we were still at Mergui. Later on there were other reasons people died, including cholera, malaria, beriberi, overwork and beatings. I was just lucky that the bug that bit me did not carry that particular strain. By the time the railroad was finished in late 1943, over 140 of the British Battalion had died.

TS: At this point, Jim, how are you personally reacting to what were steadily declining conditions, and people dying around you?

JW: Well, I got very, very sick with this dysentery, on top of the malaria. When I finally recovered enough to be sent back to the camp, somebody described me as looking like a rat with face all shrunk in, and ribs sticking out. By that time, the Japanese had arranged for another camp to be built, and food was slightly better. The group had moved in from the school to this new camp. Working parties were sent out working on an airfield. I was never well enough to do that. The Japanese also allowed the camp authorities to buy some food from the natives locally—produce. But after about another three months, something like that, we moved to a place call Tavoy, again by sea, another journey—not as long as the first one, but just as uncomfortable. At Tavoy, we were there, again with working parties on airfields, or some of them were hauling wood on wooden carts for the kitchen.

At this early stage in Mergui deaths were not as common as they were to be later, and we tried to provide a burial with a military ceremony. The Australians had come from Singapore with all their gear and still had some band instruments so burial parties were accompanied to the cemetery with a band. Mergui, Tavoy, and Moulmein were established towns, the work was not too onerous, our cooks had learned how to cook rice and life in camp was developing a routine. There was some contact with the natives who seemed friendly.

I remember one incident at Tavoy that sticks in my mind. Now the idea of bathing in that part of the world was to take a bucket of water and pour it over yourself. I was out bathing when the Japanese suddenly rounded up everybody that they could find. I was barefoot and had a towel that was too small to fit around, but holding it on as I was taken downtown in Tavoy. I don't remember what the Japanese wanted us for.

I forget what we were told to do, but the natives kept calling us over and giving us food and lots of banana leaves. I can still remember the natives calling us over by motioning in a way that meant 'go away' to us, arm outstretch, palm down and moving the fingers back and forth. But they gave us food, rice, dried fish and fruit all wrapped in banana leaves, the universal wrapping paper in that part of the world. I was in a bad position holding this towel. By that time I only had a pair of shorts. It was a very humbling and frustrating experience to be standing near naked and have only one hand to accept the food, the other being used to clutch both ends.
of the towel around my waist. I don’t know what else we did, but we eventually got back to camp.

But the natives were very, very friendly—now, we always tried to believe that it was because they were pro-British, but their kindness may have been their religion.

TS: So they were not necessarily anti-Japanese?

JW: Well, I’m sure they didn’t like the Japanese, but at that time the Japanese had pushed themselves off as being liberators. I’m sure they were happy to get rid of the Brits, but though at first some may have welcomed the Japanese as liberators, as the war dragged on there were more anti-Japanese than there were pro-Japanese. The devil they knew was a lot better than the one they didn’t know.

TS: How was it for you to see fellow prisoners dying around you?

JW: You become callous to that kind of thing. You had to try and block out what was happening outside of your own small circle of friends. If it was a particular friend, it was very, very hard. I know this friend of mine that died of cerebral malaria, that bothered me because I’d been with him all the time. We’d escaped together, both times from Singapore, and again from Padang. But beyond that, it was just something that happened.

By the time we reached the railroad, in November 1942, those with the best chance of survival had made an alliance with one or two other prisoners. Having somebody to look after you when you were sick was absolutely essential. A person had to have close friends, and a strong determination to survive.

On the railroad the workers were paid twenty-five cents a day, and it was sometimes possible to supplement the totally inadequate diet with such things as duck eggs and bananas from the Japanese-run canteen. Sick people were not paid, though, and without a worker friend to buy and share, it was hard to keep going.

TS: Was becoming callous a way of keeping yourself together, or sane, of not allowing events to overwhelm you?

JW: Well, I suppose that your main concern was for yourself and surviving. But to do that you had to save whatever sympathy you had for yourself, or for your immediate friends.

TS: You went through a succession of work camps and jungles too, didn’t you Jim?

JW: Well, Mergui and Tavoy were not really work camps, though parties were sent to work on the local airfields. From Tavoy we were moved up to Moulmein. We spent a night in the Moulmein jail, and we quickly found out that the jails that the Brits had supplied for the natives were nothing like the ones we have here—the outer walls were just wooden slats, the wooden floor had a wooden block for a
pillow, and there was no bedding or anything. Though we did not know it, these accommodations were better that we would find along the railroad.

Then we left Moulmein and went by train to a place called Thanbyuzayat. Now, Thanbyuzayat was to be the Burma end of the railroad the Japanese were going to build, to connect existing lines in Burma with those in Thailand and Malaya. The Japanese were in the process of building up their army in Burma to eventually invade India. To supply that army they’d been using ships down around Singapore, up to Rangoon. This route was tying up their scarce shipping, and was vulnerable to aircraft and submarines from India. So, the obvious answer to them was to use their prisoners to build a line that would connect these two existing railroad systems, a line of 250 miles. Unfortunately it was through jungle that was very, very thick and disease-ridden.

We spent three days at the Thanbyuzayat Base Camp, and got some idea of where we stood when we were met by a Japanese colonel, Nagatoma, who stood on a box—they liked to dress up with their swords and their boots—and gave us a pep talk. We were miserable remnants of a decadent race, and should weep tears of joy that his Imperial Majesty was allowing us to work on the railroad and redeem ourselves. He advised us to work cheerfully, and finished by saying, “no work, no food.”

TS: He was talking in English to you?

JW: The speech was translated to us. This guy Nagatoma spoke a few words in English, but I think his second language was French. Anyway, he told us that we should weep tears of joy that the Imperial Emperor was allowing us to work on the railroad, and we could redeem ourselves—we had to work hard and be happy, and if we didn’t work there’s be no pay.

We soon found his “No work, no food” was not an idle threat. We knew the camps by the distance from the base at Thanbyuzayat, and the further the camp was, the more difficult it was to supply them. This was especially true during the long rainy season. Rations in the work camps were only furnished for the number of workers available, but because we were civilized, whatever came into camp was used to feed everybody, and the already inadequate ration would be further reduced.

The first camp we went to was the 18-kilo camp. We knew the camps by the distance from the base. On the Burma end we started at Thanbyuzayat, went up to somewhere around the 106-kilo and I think the Thai border was there. The camps on the other end had numbers or names from the Thailand end, Bangkok. The first camp, 18-kilo, our first job was moving dirt. The railroad was built almost entirely by hand.

We started out with a quota—the Japanese assigned a quota. Where possible the Japanese established a work quota as a means of measuring productivity. At our first camp, the 18 kilo, we were moving dirt. We worked in teams of three. Teams of three would be given a chunkel, a kind of hoe with a large blade set at right angles to the shaft, a shovel, and baskets to move the dirt, which had to be dug and carried, to or from the right of way. If it was a fill you’d dig it on the side and move it to the
right of way, if it was a cut you’d dig on the right of way and move it to the side. The quota was measured by a Japanese engineer using a heavy meter stick, which sometimes doubled as a club. Now when they found that some of the Australians in better shape than us could complete this by early afternoon, they began to increase the quota. The quota, first 1.2 meters, was changed to 2 meters a man.

About this time, I hadn’t been there too long, I went down again with malaria—it bothered me the whole time. Still weak from the dysentery at Mergui, I was evacuated back to the hospital, at the base camp at Thanbyuzayat. There I came under the care of a wonderful Australian medical staff headed by a Major Fisher, who kind of took me under his wing. I wound up with a light duty job, so I spent quite a few months down at Thanbyuzayat. Rations were furnished for the sick at the base camp, and there were no working parties required. It was at Thanbyuzayat that I met Lloyd V. Wiley, the US Marine from the USS Houston, and we became close friends and were together when the camp was bombed. Lloyd, when I met him down there, he was blind from some kind of vitamin deficiency. And together we worked on light duty around the place.

I was there in June of 1943 when the place was bombed for the first time. A plane had come over in February in the night; we heard the sound of aircraft—flares were dropped and the plane left. There was a lot of excitement and shouting, and there was no sleep for the rest of the night. The next day all we could talk about were these planes. The prison camp authorities, it was in charge of an Australian, complained to the Japanese that there was no marking on the camp, nothing to mark the camp as a hospital. The Japanese allowed us to build a red cross with the red dirt, eighteen meters long and eighteen meters across. From the air it probably looked like a road, a crossroad, and not a red cross. But anyway, then in June, we saw planes during the day. They could be plainly seen from the camp. We were told they were [B-24] Liberators [bombers], flying about six thousand feet.

TS: American planes, or couldn’t you tell?

JW: Well, Americans and British both flew Liberators when they bombed the railroad. We saw the planes, and everybody came outside of the huts and started waving towels at them. Bombs were dropped—they didn’t hit the camp, but they did get a working party of people drawing water outside of the camp for use within the camp. They killed quite a few of the guys, and wounded others. We felt, at least they know it’s a prison camp.

Now, a few days later the planes were back again and this time, they seemed to line up on this red cross, and they actually lobbed bombs in the camp, and a stick of bombs hit some of the huts. They killed quite a few of the guys, of the prisoners. By that time we’d been allowed to dig slit trenches alongside our huts, and most of the people were in the slit trenches at the sound of the planes anyway. The planes stayed around for quite a while machine-gunning; we could hear these .50 caliber slugs whistling around. Some of the Japanese guards were firing at the planes from within the camp with their rifles. The planes stayed around and machine gunned the area, probably because some guards had fired at them with rifles from inside the camp.
TS: So the planes were flying low enough to strafe the ground?

JW: Yes, you could plainly see them, if you were stupid enough to look up. We could see the markings and the open bomb bay doors when they made their run. This friend of mine, Lloyd, the American marine, he and I waited out the raid in our slit trench. We were huddled in a slit trench listening to these bullets whistle around. When the planes left, we crawled out to see what we could do; Lloyd went to help the people in the bombed huts. I was able to go and help in the operating room by holding some of the casualties down while the young Australian doctors cut away the broken pieces of bone and stitched up the holes and that stuff. I can vividly recall a Dutch man with huge hole in the side of his chest, I could see his lungs moving up and down as he gasped for breath.

After this second raid, the Australian camp authorities complained again to the Japanese that the camp was obviously a major target, a supply depot and the decision was made to evacuate the place. Moving in groups of fifty, those who could walk were marched along the [railroad] right of way into the jungle. It was long after dark when my group reached our destination, a long abandoned camp at the 8-Kilo mark. The huts were in poor shape and there was no shelter, Lloyd and I huddled under a heavy car blanket Lloyd had picked up in Java.

It was the rainy season, and we were soaking wet. They didn’t mess about—they get about fifty inches of rain a month. It just comes down in buckets. There are periods of sunshine during the rainy season, and next day we were able to dry out. For the next week or so both guards and prisoners scattered into the surrounding jungle during the times the bombers were working over Thanbyuzayat. A new hospital camp was established at the 30-Kilo mark, some making the trip on foot. The rainy season was in full swing and made the trip to the 8-Kilo a nightmare, carrying everything we owned, cold, soaking wet and very miserable.

I hate to say this, but I remember, I needed to take a leak, and I went to the side of the track and the mud and took a leak, and then I realized I should have just let that go, it would have warmed my legs at least (laughs). We were soaking wet anyway.

TS: It’s interesting you note how the guys maintained these Western habits, whether it’s wiping when you’re taking a dump, or whether you take a leak on the side of the road.

JW: (laughing) It was stupid.

TS: Jim, was it hard to make that break and really give up that attachment to getting out of there someday?

JW: Well, we were always sure that we were getting out; we were sure that we’d win at least. These funny little guys and their stupid uniforms couldn’t possibly beat us. We refused to acknowledge the fact that we’d been beaten, we were prisoners—
we tried to cling to whatever, we’d been conditioned to life here to go to the side to take a leak in a semi-private manner.

TS: Was the sanitary conditions and the fact that people were always around a hard thing to adjust to?

JW: Not really, we soon got over the sense of modesty—when nature calls you have no choice. The camps were very primitive, built in a jungle clearing and made of bamboo frames. There’d be a—we’d call it a guard hut, and two wooden posts with Japanese characters on them marked the entrance. The huts had no doors or windows and no lights or running water. There would be a bamboo sleeping platform about two feet above the dirt floor; the roof and low sides were made with atap, a kind of palm leaf. In the rainy season the floors were all mud. There was never any running water, never any electric lights, no doors, windows; the huts were open sides. To control camp hygiene, and because we were civilized, latrines were dug well away from the huts. The area around them was always covered by a mass of crawling maggots; you had to be careful where you stepped.

End Tape 1, Side B.

JW: The area around the latrines would be full of maggots—the blowflies would lay eggs and you had to be very, very careful, especially in the dark, or you’d slip and fall easily on these maggots. There were thousands of them. The Japanese were deadly afraid of disease of any kind, and they would give you a quota of a hundred flies you had to collect, in the sick camps. Now some of the Australians would capture these blowflies. They would cook them so they’d shrink up, and pass them off as flies that they’d caught. The dysentery would be carried by the flies from the food and the fruit.

TS: So the Japanese kept much different hygiene conditions for themselves.

JW: Like us the Japanese were in the jungle, but their huts, food, and clothing were better. I’m sure that they were conditioned to the kind of living that we were not. They had clothes, they had washing facilities, they had people to do the work for them. But otherwise, they were in the jungle as we were.

I’m sure they were very aware of hygiene, they shaved all their body hair and were very clean. At Tamarkan I once carried bath water to the Japanese AA camp, where it was heated for a communal bath.

TS: You mentioned that you were at the base camp for quite a while. Did you then go back to another camp?

JW: Oh yes. When the camp was bombed and evacuated, we went to 8-kilo, and from there we moved up to 30-kilo, where they established another hospital camp. Now when the railroad was finished and opened to traffic, the Japanese began to
move those they considered fit enough to work, and put them in parties to go to Japan. I was able to avoid the Japan parties and went back into the jungle.

TS: Was this into 1944 by now?

JW: The railroad was opened to traffic in October 1943.

TS: So healthy people are going to be moved by rail and then by ship to Japan?

JW: Yes. The Japanese didn’t let us have any medical facilities on our own, or in my case, we had Australian medical people. But the Japanese had—somebody we’d heard was a dental assistant or something was the Jap medic, and he would have people in the base camp walk towards him, and he would signal one side or the other, and if it was the one side you were set for the Japan priorities, or you were going back to the railway line working camps. There was no examination as such. The Australian officer was able to keep me from the working camps most of the time, but when the railroad was finished, I was able to avoid going to the working parties. I reasoned that it might be worse in Japan than it was in the jungle. Now a friend of mine thought the other way, that it couldn’t be any worse, that it had to be better.

When the time came for this parade, I was able to make out that I was in much worse shape than I was, and I was left to stay behind working on the railroad. I was sent to the 106-Kilo camp, which was very close to the Thai border, here the main work was cutting wood for the steam engines used on the line. Three men with an axe, crosscut saw, a mall and wedges, were required to fell, a tree, cut and split it, into half meter lengths, then build a stack one meter high and four meters long. Knowing nothing about trees, my group picked a large tree we thought would last a week, it took a long time to bring the tree down and to cut off several half meter sections only to find it was impossible to split them. Australians working on the same job showed us how to pick a tree with straight grain and easy to split. This was not the best wood for the engines, but the guards did not care about quality, they were interested only in quantity.

Now eventually the malaria got to me again, it came back worse than ever. I was evacuated this time into Thailand, by rail. One of my first camps was at Tamarkan, which is the location of the bridge made famous in “The Bridge on the River Kwai.” Food and conditions were much better. Now I happened to be in Tamarkan, in November 1944, down with malaria in the huts again, excused from tenko [roll call], when one evening when we heard the sound of planes again. This time we heard the sound of antiaircraft fire—the Japanese had an antiaircraft battery, they said to protect us—it was there for the bridge. Some twenty-six Liberators flew over in formation. They all dropped their bombs at once; they missed the bridges, they hit the Japanese antiaircraft camp, and at least two bombs hit our camp, causing about sixty casualties.

There were, after that, several other raids. After the second raid, I was moved to another place, called Pechburi, where I helped work on an airfield. Now actually at Tamarkan and Pechburi, the conditions were a lot better than they had
been in the jungle because there was a lot of produce around there in Thailand. At the beginning of the railway, when we started work, the Japanese began to pay the workers; at the lower end, the private got ten cents for a day's work. And it was possible to buy native produce—the Japanese allowed native traders to come in and sell bananas, eggs, native tobacco, a few other things. So people who could earn money could buy food to supplement the diet. Anybody who didn't have any money would be forced into selling whatever they had. The Japanese, who had no place to spend their money, were always around looking for watches or pencils, or lighters, anything that they could buy.

It took a total of eight raids before the steel bridge and the wooden bypass one were destroyed. After that, until June 1945, prisoners were required to make repairs on the wooden bridge. After the second raid on the bridge I was moved to a place called Pechburi, where we had to build an airfield. The food, canteen supplies, and conditions in Thailand were much better, though rice was still our main food.

TS: You mentioned food—what was the daily food situation for the prisoners?

JW: At best we got rice three times a day. And the Japanese worked on Japanese time. Japan time was a couple of hours ahead of local time, so the work day started in the predawn darkness. We would be given a mug of watery rice called "Pap," kind of porridgy stuff, there was no sugar or salt and it was not very satisfying. You would drink that, and it would go right through and clean out the kidneys almost right away.

Next we would go to an assembly area to be counted. We would count off in Japanese and have the total checked by the guards. Once they were satisfied with the count, we would draw tools and be taken to the job site, where the Japanese engineers would take over and direct whatever the work was for that day. It could be bridge-building, it could be moving dirt, it could be turning rock, it could be cutting timber, it could be clearing all kinds of stuff—

TS: And this could change from day to day for you?

JW: Yes, we would move from camp to camp depending on the work to be done. First would be clearing, then leveling, sometimes bridge building. Eventually they would start laying track, unloading the stuff at the end of the line. If the bridges were washed out they would find some way for the prisoners to carry it across wherever the trains were unloaded. At our first camp, the 18-Kilo, we worked on leveling, mostly digging and moving dirt.

TS: What you mentioned a moment ago, the pap, was that breakfast?

JW: That was breakfast; the morning meal, in the predawn night, was a watery rice—you could almost drink it—something like a watery porridge.

TS: What was the next meal?
JW: The next meal would be out on the job. Cooked rice and watery soup would be carried from the camp, and we would be given a small pint size mug of rice and a much smaller ladle of the soup. So you would eat that on the job; again, there’s be no drinking water, no tea or anything. The evening meal back in camp would be the same except the soup would include whatever meat was used to make the midday meal. Some would have army issue mess tins, others might use a hub cap, a tin plate, or even a container made from bamboo. There were never any tables or chairs, we ate squatting on the ground, back in camp we might sit on our sleeping platform. Drinking water would be boiled on the job, in the cholera season water would also be boiled to sterilize whatever was used to eat from.

We would have to boil water, again because we were aware of the conditions, of the need to boil the water. Later on in the rainy season, the cholera started in the native camps, first because these poor people—there were more of them than there were prisoners—they had been either forced or tricked into joining the railway, promise of high pay, which the Japanese printed—it didn’t mean anything. Short-term enlistments, but once they got there they kept them. It’s estimated—because no records were kept—that some 250,000 natives were forced on the railway. And again it’s estimated that over 100,000 of them dies, from cholera, disease. Often prisoners would have to go into a camp that had been occupied by the natives and have to remove bodies—they had no sense of hygiene or sanitation. Because cholera was passed through the body, through the bowels, plenty of people would be left where they died or would be thrown under the huts or into the jungle. The prisoners, because of their discipline, would make sure that the latrines were isolated, and all the cooking utensils were boiled; the people were very, very careful where they defecated. If you did get cholera in the camps, they would isolate the prisoners with cholera, in an area somewhere—cholera patients were not evacuated to the base hospital, they were isolated in the camps to avoid spreading. Even so there were a lot of cholera deaths among two particular groups of prisoners that had come up from Singapore to the Thailand end.

On occasion the prisoners moving into a camp vacated by the natives would have to clean the area and bury the bodies left where they had died. In the prisoner camps cholera patients were isolated and cared for by volunteers, they were not evacuated to base camps but left in the isolation area to recover or die. Even so there were many cholera deaths among two groups of prisoners sent from Singapore in 1943 and made to walk over one hundred miles to their jungle camps.

TS: For lunch, was the portion size sufficient for the kind of work you were doing?

JW: No, it was—I don’t know what the calorie count was, but there was never enough food. Both in volume or quality it was not enough to sustain the health of people engaged in heavy manual labor. We were always hungry. Food was always on everybody’s mind. Anything thought edible was collected and eaten to supplement the issued rations. We would try to find edible food in the jungle, snakes were a great delicacy if you could catch one. The Australians taught us that there was something they called pigweed, a leafy green plant that we could boil. Didn’t taste very good, but we figured it was good for us. Food was just always a
problem—there was never enough of it. It got much better when we got into Thailand where the supplies were better. In the jungle camps, especially in the rainy season, it was difficult for rations to reach the camps deep in the jungle and what did arrive was always picked over first by the guards.

TS: By the time you were in Thailand in 1944, you'd already survived a couple of years with the Japanese, and—

JW: I was captured in March 1942 and, after three months in Sumatra, spent the rest of the time until around October 1943 in Burma. In November 1944 I was at Tamarkan, and worked on the bypass bridge there. Some fifty prisoners standing in the water would each pull on a rope attached to a weight suspended from a frame. A Japanese engineer would sing out the Japanese equivalent of one, two, three, and on three we would loosen our grip on the rope and let the weight fall on a wooden piling, driving it into the river bed.

I think it was in November ’44 when there was the first raid on the bridge. I was at Tamarkan, and the guys were on parade being counted when these planes came and bombed it. It took eight raids for them to get the bridges, and each time the Japanese would have the prisoners rebuild the wooden bypass bridge. The bypass bridge had been the first bridge built to get supplies across the river. The bridge now known as the bridge on the River Kwai, is a steel-concrete erection. The Japanese had stolen the steel bridge in Java someplace, moved it to Tamarkan, and the prisoners rebuilt it as a bridge. This bridge and the steel one near it were soon under attack by the Allies.

TS: Was there a reason that this bridge was important?

JW: Oh, yes. The steel bridge had been dismantled in Java and moved to Tamarkan, where the prisoners rebuilt it to become part of the railway line to supply Japanese armies in Burma. This steel bridge was made of several spans and took a long time to erect. Hundreds of other bridges were built from timber cut in the jungle. The line was going to supply the troops in Burma. The original invasion of Burma had been made over jungle tracks and they couldn’t support the size army they were building, so they had hoped that they would get I don’t know how many thousand tons a day through there.

TS: And of course with any railroad, if you knock out one bridge, the whole line is interrupted.

JW: Yes. When the railway line opened for traffic it became a target for the Allies, and as the longest bridge on the line, the steel bridge got special attention. They were bombing all along the line eventually. Unfortunately the prisoner’s camps were close to the railroad and obviously in the target area. They were machine-gunning the trains, so prisoners were killed.

The worst raid was at a place called Non Pladuk, about fifty miles from Bangkok. It was a large supply complex, and the prisoner’s camp was right in the
middle. The Japanese camp commander had not allowed the men to dig slit trenches, and they were on their sleeping platform, two feet above the ground. One stick of bombs overshot the target and hit the camp, causing three hundred casualties including ninety-eight men killed. That was the worst.

I have seen a reconnaissance picture of the area around Non Pladuk. The POW camps were marked so the bombs that hit and caused the casualties among the prisoners were most likely an accident.

TS: Just when that one stick of bombs fell on the camp. Let me finish up the questions pertaining to food. Was the evening meal pretty similar to the lunch meal?

JW: The Japanese had no regard for the health of their prisoners—they had much more concern for their tools; breaking one, even by accident could bring on a savage beating. As for the evening meal, it would be the same small measure of rice, a small cup, about 2/3 the size of this—a small coffee mug size. Dry rice with a ladle of whatever had been used to make soup—it would be watery, whatever it was. And you would supplement this with whatever you could buy, or find: eggs, or snake, whatever.

TS: Sounds like the Japanese knew that men were supplementing their diet somehow, because on the diet they supplied, the men just weren’t going to make it, were they?

JW: They had no intention of anybody surviving; they were just going to use them, and if we died, that was tough—there were plenty more where they came from.

TS: That was the mentality—so it was an economic equation that you would be used until you died.

JW: Yes, by that time the economies of the area had been devastated. Rice which had once been exported was now in short supply, and feeding prisoners was not a priority. They didn’t have the facilities for moving a lot of food. They didn’t have the way to do it—they were heavily engaged by that time of the war.

TS: On to a different theme: you were only once transported by ship, but never moved on any of those ships to Japan, right?

JW: I had an earlier experience with a ship, with the England Maru. Conditions on that were terrible. But we didn’t have to worry about the American submarines, or the planes. Now, Al Kopp [another POW of the Japanese, from the crew of the sunken USS Houston] came on convoy from Java, and his convoy was bombed. There were casualties suffered on the convoy that he was on. I avoided that—I got there earlier than Al Kopp. I was able to avoid selection for the parties going to Japan. Bad as our experience on a Japanese transport was, we only had to worry
about the terrible conditions. Later in the war Japanese convoys were being attacked by the Allies, ships were sunk, and many prisoners were lost.

TS: Jim, where did you end the war?

JW: I was at a place called Pechburi in Thailand when the war ended. We built an airfield, and the Japanese had just about got the airfield finished, or we had, when the war ended. It was used to fly us to Rangoon. It was at Pechburi that I worked on my last job measured by a quota. For stone needed on the airfield, two of us using hand star drills were required to drill a hole one meter deep, one man would turn the drill while the other would strike it with a hammer. It takes a long time to drill one meter deep in granite. At Pechburi we also had to dig a ditch around the camp. It was six feet deep, twelve feet across, and all the dirt was thrown to the outside to build a wall, around which the guards could patrol. There was only one place to cross, and that was near the guard hut.

After the war ended, a British paratroop major was dropped to check the field out, and said it was okay to land planes on. American Dakotas, I think, C-54s or C-46s [transport planes] or something, were landed. They brought in food, they brought in clothing. They took out first the Americans, flew them eventually to Calcutta, I think. They flew the rest of us into Rangoon.

TS: That’s the first time you’ve talked about this. What was the purpose of such a ditch and wall?

JW: We were told it was to protect us. Actually on the outside of that there was a twenty-foot high bamboo fence. After the war, papers were discovered that the Japanese had intended to kill all the prisoners, bury them in this ditch, and hide all traces of them.

TS: Really? And what prevented that from happening?

JW: The sudden end of the war by the atom bomb, and the emperor finally telling them to lay down their arms.

TS: So had the war gone on to a slower but still foreseeable conclusion for the Japanese, you might well have ended up with a lot of other guys in these trenches.

JW: We had heard that the order for us to be (pauses three seconds) put down [killed] was 28 August. The war ended on the fifteenth—I think the second atom bomb was the ninth, and the war ended the fifteenth, and at that time, the Japanese didn’t kill anybody that we know of. I’m sure there were places that they did. By this time we knew things were going badly for the Japanese and we thought it was to keep us confined. After the war we learned the Japanese had intended to kill all their prisoners, we had actually in fact dug our own grave. I have the copy of an order instructing the prison camp commanders on how to dispose of their prisoners. The last paragraph reads, "in any case it is the aim not to allow the
escape of a single one, to annihilate them all, and not to leave any traces." There is evidence the Japanese always had a policy of not allowing any prisoners to be released by the Allies. Over one hundred Marines were massacred at a place called Palawan when the Japanese Admiral in charge of the camp thought there was to be an invasion.

The worst case I have read about occurred in Borneo. The Japanese had captured several Australian commandos who were in the area to stir up the natives and keep track of Japanese shipping. Because there were prisoners some miles away in Sandakan, the Japanese believed there would be an attempt to rescue them. There was plenty of rice in the camp but the Japanese set out to weaken them by starvation. In groups of fifty the weakened prisoners were made to walk across Borneo to far away Ranau. Stragglers were killed when they dropped behind, and of one thousand Australians and seven hundred British there were only six survivors, those who had escaped into the jungle on the way. Those who did reach Ranau were massacred.

TS: Speaking of the Japanese: how would you characterize the Japanese that you encountered in the camp—the guards or the officers?

JW: I didn't like them. They were, by our standards, brutal, and as far as I could tell completely lacking in concern or feelings for the prisoners.

TS: Were there levels of Japanese? Were there what you might call really bad Japanese and also somewhat good Japanese?

JW: Oh, yes, occasionally you’d run into [a good] one; the Japanese engineers who supervised the work, were to a man, single minded and interested only in finishing the railroad. Among the Japanese officers and men responsible for guarding us, we did sometimes run into one who tried to be reasonable, that was sympathetic. Some would be a little easier on you, or if you were on the quota work, you were working for the engineers, and they were Japanese to a man. They were just single-minded in getting whatever the job they had been assigned, done.

The Korean guards who came to the railroad were almost all vicious and sadistic. I have seen them taking pleasure in inflicting pain on prisoners and even animals. In a system that made them the bottom of the totem pole, they used every chance to take out their frustration on the prisoners. Some were just mean by nature, or they’d developed a way of being mean, these Koreans.

The welfare of the prisoners was not an issue. The Japanese had been told, “To live as a prisoner is to live without honor,” and they despised us. During the construction of one large bridge, almost a quarter mile long and eighty feet high, the pack of cards bridge fell down three times. Thirty-one men were killed in falls and twenty-nine men beaten to death.

TS: Can you remember specifically one of the guards that sticks in your mind as being one of these more sadistic, or what we might call a “bad Japanese”?
JW: Yes, we had nicknames for them all. The Australians were very colorful. There was a Korean guard that they called the Boy Bastard. A young guy, he allowed an Australian to move away from the area to relieve himself, then followed and shot him, and was never brought to task for it. There was another one the Aussies called the BBC, the Boy Bastard’s Cobber—BBC, we’d think it was the radio. But we had Lubber Lips, and names that were not nice.

Occasionally you’d run into one that would go easy on you, and say they didn’t like what they were doing. But for the most part, the Koreans were the worst ones, and some of the Koreans were particularly bad. Occasionally we would run into one who would go easy on us, but for the most part the Korean guards, and the Japanese engineers, were all bad. There was a Japanese lieutenant called Naito at the 30 kilo camp, he spoke good English but was dangerous when drunk. One night he roamed around the hospital huts waving a pistol, actually shooting one of the Australian orderlies. Most feared of all were the Kempetai, the Japanese secret police. To be turned over to them could mean torture and even death.

TS: Can you relate an incident that was perhaps symbolic of the treatment you got from these “bad Japanese”?

JW: The first time, we had come back from a working party, and the guard, probably Korean, was going around and he was searching everybody. He put his hand one of the guy’s packs, and the guy had a piece of snake in there that he’d found in the jungle somewhere. The Jap realized that it was what it was, and he got a hold of it. He jumped about three feet in the air, and everybody was laughing. These guys don’t like to lose face, and to laugh at them was not very good. There were too many of us for him to beat, so he lined us up in two lines facing one another, had one side beat the other, going along to make sure you doing it hard enough. Then he would turn around and had the other side that had been getting the beating, beat the ones that had been beating them.

The second time I got beat up was in Thailand, when I upset the guard in charge of a fifty-man light duty, men collecting firewood. The Jap made me stand to attention while the whole party walked by and belted me twice across the head. A friend of mine used the flat of his hand to make a noise by hitting me on the shoulders. The Jap, or Korean, guard saw him and realized what had happened, and hit him to demonstrate how hard I was supposed to be hit. Fifty guys then belted me across the face, twice—my head was ringing for a month.

TS: What had you done to precipitate that?

JW: This was in a rest camp, and I was late getting back from the noon day meal; I hadn’t got out there on time. The Jap was waiting for me when I got out.

On the job, if you did something wrong, the Japanese engineers would carry, we called it a beater stick, it was a club of some kind that they used to measure with. If you didn’t move fast enough, or if you didn’t understand something, they’d be likely to take after you with this damn club. It’s very hard to understand Japanese that’s screamed at you—I don’t think I ever heard Japanese spoken in a normal tone.
of voice—always screamed in short bursts. *(speaks Japanese phrase)* and this kind of stuff. You could quickly understand what they wanted when it’s supplemented with a club of some kind.

**TS:** How about the “good Japanese”? How did you get any indication that they were sympathetic or less sadistic?

**JW:** In the early days before we got into railroad “Quota Work”, the working parties were supervised by Japanese guards, and sometimes one would want to talk about home and family. I suppose some of them were conscripts, and not too happy to be in Burma.

**TS:** In English?

**JW:** [They would speak in] halting English. We would try to do all we could to stop doing whatever it was—but if you were on quota work, you didn’t have much chance, you had to do the quota. And the guards were—you could occasionally find a guard that would be easy or sympathetic, but I don’t think we ever found an engineer that was that way. They were single-minded Japanese.

We would try to distract them anyway we could. A snake in the work area was a great distraction. The first time we realized they could be eaten was when a guard motioned they were good to eat. He chopped off a piece with his bayonet and cooked it over a fire built to boil water. When we saw him eating it, there was a rush to find the rest of the snake.

**TS:** Let me ask you about people you may have encountered in camps, or in the hospitals, who made a positive impression on you, someone you can remember having looked up to. Is there someone like that?

**JW:** Well, Lloyd Willey, the American Marine who was my constant companion, we developed a friendship which has lasted until today. We looked after one another after we’d been evacuated from Thanbyuzayat. He was sent up on the line, came back on a stretcher weighing some eighty pounds or something, in very, very bad shape. I was able to look after him as he had had looked after me in Thanbyuzayat. That friendship remained.

I have a great deal of respect for the Australian medical services, doctors and orderlies suddenly confronted with diseases they may not have even heard about. There was a Major Chalmers, who had been the medical doctor at Mergui when I was down with malaria. I knew quite a few of those. At Mergui, Burma, Major Chalmers was tireless in efforts to control a dysentery outbreak. He treated me for malaria and dysentery. At Thanbyuzayat, Major Fisher had to cope with thousands of desperately sick men coming down from jungle camps. In neither case were there available many of the drugs and facilities needed. It’s not very pleasant to be looking after people that have feces all over, and smelling, with sores, and you can’t do anything for them but sympathize and try and clean them or something like that. Major Chalmers was lost when the ship taking him to Japan was sunk by an
American submarine. Australian Colonel Varley, who was the Senior POW officer in Burma, repeatedly faced down Colonel Nagatomo, the officer in charge of Burma prisoners. Colonel Varley was also lost when the convoy was attacked by American submarines. All those Australian medics were just dedicated.

I also met Al Kopp in the prison camp. Al Kopp was a corpsman on the USS *Houston*. And he then did corpsman’s work in the prison camp—he probably avoided working on the line because of it, but he didn’t have a good time.

TS: You mention these prisoners, that there were some you looked up to. How did people handle these difficult situations? Was there stealing among the prisoners, were there people who handled this better than others?

**End Tape 2, Side A.**

JW: It was a matter of survival of the fittest. If you didn’t have a friend, or a group of friends that would look after you, you were really in bad shape, because you were on your own. I believe it was absolutely essential to have a close friend, somebody to share things with and to look after you when you were sick. To be alone and have nobody to talk to about home and post war plans would mean a miserable existence.

There were people who would steal, who would take advantage of the sick if they could. We call them “skyvers” that would try and get out of work.

There were some people that gave up, that didn’t try and keep themselves clean.

TS: Kind of mentally gave up?

JW: Yes, and to do that would be fatal. If you didn’t believe strongly that you were going to get out of it, if you didn’t think positively, if you didn’t try to accept what was thrown at you and handle it the best you could—you know, what cannot be cured should be endured, or something.

TS: Isn’t that hard to do?

JW: No, not really, not when you see people dying around you. It’s very discouraging, of course, when you’ve worked all day in the rain and you come in and you’ve got watery rice for supper, and the wind is blowing the rain through the huts and you’re soaking wet, you can’t get warm, and you know you’ve got to face the same thing the next day.

TS: So how did you keep up your sense of going on to the next day? How do you keep your morale?

JW: It just came mechanically. I always tried to find something funny about everything. I suppose a sense of humor helps—if you can see something funny, a kind of slapstick comedy stuff that we’ve seen over here. There’s nothing funny
about watching somebody get beat up, but there was a kind of relief that it wasn’t you.

TS: When you saw a group of new prisoners come to the camp, did you find that you could sort of pick out who was more likely to make it or not?

JW: You could tell by a guy, if he tried to keep clean, if he tried to be a soldier, didn’t let himself go, if he tried to keep his beard cut off, generally the way they looked after themselves, you could almost tell. Making it, though, that was mostly a matter of luck—which camp you were in, what work you were doing, and whether or not you got sick. But other things being equal, it was possible to guess which ones appeared to have the best chance—they would make an effort to keep themselves clean and try to look like soldiers.

TS: So a sense of personal respect, almost?

JW: Yes. Well, if you lose respect for yourself, then you’ve had it.

TS: Were there those who couldn’t cope, and took their own life?

JW: I know of very, very few people who committed suicide. Some people gave up and died. But I’ve only heard of a couple of instances where there was a suicide. One guy jumped in a well.

TS: But for the most part, people gave up in spirit?

JW: Yes, if you got really, really sick—if you got dysentery, and the food is unappetizing, and the conditions are terrible, and you’re cold, and if you begin to feel sorry for yourself and don’t have positive thoughts, you’re gonna go. Most wanted to survive, but there were a few who just gave up. To be very sick and unable to face the miserable rice diet, that would make some people feel sorry for themselves and that lessened the chance of making it. You had to have positive thoughts. Commander Epstein, an American doctor from the USS Houston used to say, “The ticket home is on the bottom of your mess kit.”

TS: How important was religion, or faith, for you?

JW: A lot of people got religion. Everybody looked for help from somewhere, and praying for it—the many different religions all pray to somebody and believe they’re going to get help. That’s positive thinking. You pray to your god, whatever your god is, and if you survive then you believe that your god did it. Religion was important to most prisoners, with death from disease, starvation, and overwork all around them, people took comfort in prayer. When we buried the dead it was with prayers whenever possible. Harold Kurvers, one of our POW group, is very religious. I think he was religious before he was captured, but his experience may have strengthened his faith.
I was raised in a Catholic orphanage for quite a while and I’m sure I had religion and I did pray that my mother and sisters would be okay, and that I would get to see them one day, but I don’t know that it was religion any more than positive thinking, which is probably the same thing.

TS: Now in the camps, did you get news that the war in Europe had ended? On V-E Day, May 1945, you were still in one of these camps.

JW: There were radios in some of the camps—they had to be secret, to be caught with one meant trouble. One particular officer [he wrote about it in a book called The Railway Man] was mixed up with a group that had a radio or had something. He was beaten, his arms were broken—and he was lucky; other people caught with a radio would be beaten to death. So the thing was, the few people that had access to the news could not spread it. It would be—you’d get the word in rumors several days after they’d received the news, and it would be passed [unclear]. We would hear rumors, and be told it originated with a passing native. I don’t recall hearing about V-E Day in particular, but we did get the news of the German defeat, in my case it was when one of the Korean guards said “Germany all finished.”

But in the early days, the Japanese published this English-language newspaper, called “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.” They gave copies to the prisoners, I think because in that part of the world English was probably spoken by many of the natives too. This was the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere, or something like it. There were some really wild stories in there. In one edition they told of a Japanese fighter pilot who had his undercarriage shot away, and to land the plane he poked his legs through a hole and ran the plane to a standstill. In another edition there was a story about another pilot who ran out of ammunition and threw a rice cake at a 4-engine bomber. The American pilot, thinking it was a hand grenade, swerved into another bomber and both fell into the sea.

Reading between the lines we did sometimes pick up information. One issue would report the Americans trying to land on some island were beaten off with heavy losses, later we would read the Japanese were bombing the Americans on the same island. By mid-1943, though, it was dangerous to be caught with even an old copy of the paper.

TS: So I hear you saying there was difficulty getting news at all.

JW: Most of the time we would live on rumors that would go around—oh, the war will be over by Easter, and at Easter: well, it’ll be over whatever the next holiday was. This stuff would go around, and we’d be living in segments.

TS: Breaking it up into small pieces. And there was a sense that the rumors might be true, or you weren’t sure, but—

JW: Well we were happy to believe them—the Americans have landed, there’s going to be an exchange of prisoners. This would buoy you up for a while, then Easter would come, or Christmas or whatever, and: “It’s really going to happen next time!”
TS: When you left Thailand, you were evacuated out by ship or by plane?

JW: By plane from the airfield we built to Rangoon, and then by ship to England.

TS: Were you in India for a while?

JW: I didn’t go to India, just a couple of weeks in Rangoon. They put us through the hospital for a couple of days, when they saw that we were fit—and that’s a relative term—as more people came in, in worse shape, they moved us out of the hospital into canvas. Then, we were on a boat to England—we went first to Colombo, in Ceylon, or what is now known as Sri Lanka. Then through the Red Sea into the Mediterranean to Port Said [Egypt], and from there on to England.

TS: When you got to Rangoon, finally out of the prison camp system where you’d been for more than three years, how did you react emotionally at that point?

JW: Oh, we were very, very happy. We were met at the plane by Red Cross ladies with mugs of hot tea, with milk and sugar in it, and with white bread sandwiches of cheese, and we thought we were really free. Then they put us in the hospital and we were halfway afraid to sit on beds with white sheets we hadn’t seen for years. Gradually, under canvas, we began to grouse the way that most soldiers do.

TS: Was there an emotional letdown after all this where you finally could relax from the conditions you had been in?

JW: At this time I’m not sure there was really a letdown, the ‘high’ lasted a long time. Life in our last camp had been good by comparison with the jungle camps, and health was improving—the food was still rice, but there was no shortage of it. You couldn’t get fat on it. We’d kind of accustomed ourselves to living as prisoners, and this was better prison life than it had been since the early days. To be able to contact loved ones and to know we were finally free brought on a feeling of euphoria.

TS: So it was already on the upswing?

JW: Yes, Red Cross workers took our home addresses and sent cables to notify families we had been repatriated. I didn’t get any mail in the time I was a POW, and did not know how things were at home. But I did not know if my family had heard from me. We did have an opportunity to send out a couple of postcards that we’d check off “I’m well,” “I’m working for pay,” “I’m not well,” and a twenty-five-word message on there that was heavily censored.

TS: Had your family or loved ones actually received that card?

JW: No. They’d never heard anything from me at all.
TS: So you were listed as missing in action?

JW: Yes. I've got a copy of a newspaper clipping with the list: missing—believed prisoner—Malaya.

TS: And that was all it said, since the Japanese didn't report names, did they? You spent some time in Rangoon, and then the ship to Egypt, and then to England. Did it take a number of weeks to get back?

JW: Ceylon first, and then Egypt. It took about a month. I was about a month getting home. I was given a day's leave for every month I'd been overseas, which was another month, forty days or something, and I was back in the Army before Christmas.

TS: When you got back to England, who from your family met you?

JW: I was processed and given a train ticket to my home town of Manchester. The station was some way from where we lived, and without a car it meant using public transportation to get there, so I did not think anybody would be waiting at the station. I dropped off the train at a station before the city and caught a bus which took me close to home. Across our street was a sign, “Welcome Home James”. My sister who was home alone said mother had gone with an uncle to meet the train. We did not have a telephone so she ran to the house of an aunt who did have one and got a message to the station.

TS: What went through your mind? It had been four-some years since you'd seen your family, right?

JW: I kind of anticipated that it would pick up where it had left off before, but it didn’t. I’m sure I must have changed, but I was surprised at how different things seemed, after six years of shortages and rationing the place was not like the one I had left and dreamed about for so long. Things were very, very grim. I finally started driving a taxi for my uncle after I was out of the service.

TS: But you didn’t get discharged until 1947, right?

JW: I went to a camp in England and, after a refresher course as a radio operator, I asked to be sent to Japan but was told, “It is not policy to send former prisoners to Japan”. At another camp I met the ATS girl, like the American WAC, I was to marry. And when I went home, when I got there I was still in the service. The British didn’t have any GI Bill as the Americans did, but as a regular soldier I was given a month’s leave with ration money if I could find some firm that would take me on without pay and offer me a job when I finished. Now there was a paper mill close to where the wife’s folks lived, and they offered to take on this unpaid labor for a month. I was put on a machine that was making corrugated cardboard. That was a
terrible job: monotonous, busy, no time to rest at all—two big rolls of paper would go, one would be crinkled and would be fixed up, you’d start a roller going, and there’s be knives to cut them with. Every hundred feet the bell would go, and you’d have to cut the roll and start in on another one, take the old rolls off, wrap them, stack them, and by that time the bell would go again. Just labor intensive, just slave labor. I was only working an eight hour shift and was given a lunch in the factory canteen, but the regular employees worked twelve hour shifts. The end of the month I was given a pound, about four dollars, and they told me, “As soon as you get discharged, we’ll put you right to work.”

TS: Before you took that job up, you spent another year and a half in the military. And was that at bases in Britain?

JW: Yes. I had one job, I got a kick out of it. There were several different camps all in England. From the holding unit I was sent to escort German prisoners from a ship bringing them from America to a British prison camp. Having been a prisoner I felt sorry for them and, since cigarettes were rationed in England, I filled my ammunition pouches with them and thought, “Well, I’ll give these guys a treat.” When I met the Germans, they were better dressed than I was—they had barrack bags, cartons of American cigarettes, Camels, and yearbooks showing conditions in their camps which seemed to me more like holiday camps. I kept my miserable English cigarettes to myself.

From the camp where I had met my wife I was sent to take part in a big London Victory Parade. Not because I had helped win the war, but because I was the right height and had campaign ribbons. When my enlistment ran out I was in a holding unit waiting for an overseas assignment. Before meeting my future wife, I had asked to be sent overseas.

TS: How did that make you feel at that point when you realized that these German prisoners of war had been living better than you? (laughing)

JW: I swore to myself the day I would be taken prisoner again it would be by the Yanks (laughter).

TS: And it wasn’t long after that, a couple of years, that you had moved to the States?

JW: I joined ‘em (laughs). Yes, just over a year, and though I did not know it at the time I chose the right time. It was necessary for me to get a release from my British Army Reserve Service before I could leave. Just a few years after that the Korean War came along, and men with my reserve status were recalled to service. Some men I had been with as a prisoner were recalled and taken prisoner by the North Koreans.

TS: When you got out of the military Jim, what was the hardest thing for you with readjusting to being a man out of uniform?
JW: Of course, civilian life is completely different than the military with the barracks, and the parades, and the uniforms and all that kind of stuff. I guess I was able to get used to stuff because I had learned to accept and adjust to change in the prison camps. So it didn’t take too long. Pretty soon, my son came along, in 1947—he was eight months old when we came over here. So that would be September of ’47.

TS: So you would say your adjustment to being a civilian was not that difficult?

JW: I don’t recall it being that difficult.

TS: What put the idea into your head to leave Britain?

JW: Well, things were very grim in England after the war, food and clothing were still rationed, there was no housing and with so many men coming out of the service, job prospects were not good. My American Marine friend, he kept writing in glowing terms that he had a house I could live in—you couldn’t get houses in England—he had a job, he had an automobile—I only knew one person that had an automobile in England. We were I suppose as poor as you could get. It was hand-to-mouth. He kept urging me too come to the States where he said there was a job and a house waiting for me.

TS: So it sounds like it wasn’t all that difficult to listen to his invitations and say, “Why not?”

JW: Yes—at the time, it was very hard to get passage, because lots of people wanted it and transport was limited. Now, because I was driving a taxi I would stop at the shipping offices. I stopped at the Cunard Line, and I had a visa by that time. I had to go down to London to the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square; we’d been interviewed—my friend had sent affidavits that I’d saved his life and all that kind of stuff, and these along with the promise of a job resulted in fast approval. So I had the visa—we came in on a quota visa. Lloyd arranged for me to get a Quota Visa. At that time, immigrants came in on a quota. The quota for England was never filled; the quota for Italy probably was, and from some of the other places. So I had the visa, but the problem at the time was getting transportation—GI Brides and business men were all looking for passage, which was at a premium. When I stopped in at the shipping office this day they said, “Do you have a visa?” and I said, “Yes.” This was on a Monday; they said, we have a passage if you’re ready on Wednesday. They offered me passage on the Queen Mary, leaving in just two days. There was not time for them to call other people on their waiting list.

TS: Leaving in two days?

JW: Yes. So I went home and told the wife, we’re leaving in two days. We took the boat train down from Manchester to Southampton, where we boarded the Queen
Mary. My only previous experience with travel by sea had been on British troopships, a sailing vessel, and Japanese Hell Ships (laughs). My first travel on a peace time passenger liner was an experience I can never forget, wonderful accommodations and more food choices for each meal than I had ever seen. Audrey, my bride, was seasick all the time we were at sea and did not enjoy the voyage.

My friend Lloyd had arranged for train tickets from New York to Whitefish, Montana, and these were waiting for us in New York. We moved in with him for a few days, and then we took a room in a motel. I started work almost right away. Just a few days after arriving in Montana, I was driving a delivery truck and trying to remember to stay on the right side of the road. I blew all of my back pay on the passage; I got to America and I had sixty dollars left. It was three years before I was able to give Lloyd the train ticket stubs and the money he had paid for them.

TS: So you had just what you brought with you?

JW: Yes, which wasn’t much.

TS: Well, you were probably carrying it, weren’t you? But judging from the way you were talking, you didn’t have much that you left behind either.

JW: No.

TS: Jim, when you think about your war experience, what did the war mean for you personally at the time? This could be even from back as far as 1939.

JW: At the time I did not think of the war as being terrible, of being a POW; I was just a stupid kid who wanted adventure now. I’m sure I matured during the time I was in the army. There were even some positive things that came out of being a prisoner: I learned to appreciate whatever I had, whatever was available to get by, and I developed a friendship that brought me to America.

TS: When Britain entered the war in ’39 and when you were taken prisoner, you were actually an active-duty soldier for a couple of years. What did the war mean for you then? Was it a great crusade, or just a job, or something in between?

JW: I did not think of it as a great crusade. It was just a job. I had joined the army because I wanted to be a soldier, and not in response to German aggression, though I did get caught up with the patriotic spirit sweeping the country. It was exciting times—down and around London, times when I saw the King and Queen, I saw Churchill, the air raids were exciting—I didn’t think about the dangers involved, and certainly did not know how close we were to losing the war. Everybody was confident we were going to win. There was a great patriotic spirit around: “Beat the Germans!” During the Battle of Britain and the later Blitz we thought only of beating the Germans. Churchill’s speeches, his appearances in the news reels, the efforts of the RAF, all kept us focused on that. Didn’t even think of the Japs.
TS: So the immediate concern was the Germans and the Blitz?

JW: Yes.

TS: Let me ask you, how do you reflect on the war now? Does it mean something different for you now, that you were six years a soldier, four years a POW?

JW: It was probably a life the for the most part I enjoyed. I don’t know that I had any regrets. I’m glad I was a soldier and took part in the war, which I now realize is not just flag waving and parades, there was a lot of suffering even among the winners. I am not bitter about being taken prisoner. I certainly didn’t blame anybody—I volunteered to join the Army, I volunteered to go overseas. Some of the Americans that were drafted, the guys in the Philippines, complained about being left out to dry. I brought it all on myself, I couldn’t blame the government. They had problems of their own, and couldn’t be bothered to worry about me.

TS: In what ways do you think the war changed your life?

JW: Well, it changed my life completely. I came over here to America to a much better life than I ever could have expected in England. I was out of school at fourteen, and I had no marketable skills beyond a strong back. I had been a radio operator. Ten-a-penny: radio as a means of communication was already on the way out, I think.

TS: And then three years as a POW, and in 1947, when you were discharged, you were twenty-six? This was a good move for you, then to come to America?

JW: Oh yes. It seemed to be at the time, and things have turned out that way. My experience as a radio operator steered me into a job as railroad telegrapher and a thirty-one year career on the railroad. Oh, it was hard on the wife for a while, and the first three years were very, very difficult. We were living hand-to-mouth, and I had the misfortune of breaking my leg a couple of months after joining the railroad. I bought a car for $300, and I had to sell that. I was getting $25 a week from it, and we were living on eggs and potatoes. It was rough on the wife and the kid.

TS: Did you ever think at that time that you had made the wrong decision?

JW: I didn’t—I have never been sorry we made the move, although at the time I’m sure the wife did. I didn’t know of anything that I had to go back to, aside from family. At first Audrey was homesick and missed her family, but this changed as we established our own American family. I sometimes regret my children and grandchildren did not get to know their English family while they were young.

TS: So as rough as it might have been, it was probably still better than had you stayed in Britain.
JW: It was certainly no worse.

TS: Anything else you want to add to the interview that you haven’t talked about?

JW: I’ve probably talked too much as it is (laughing).

TS: I'm very pleased that you took time out to talk with me. Once again, Jim Whittaker, thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW