

## THE NSW FREEMASON OCTOBER 2000 27

### Masonic Activities in a POW Camp

*The following address which was given at a Communication of the United Grand Lodge of Queensland in December, 1945, by W Bro Dr B L W Clarke, is indicative of the spirit of Freemasonry and the will to overcome all difficulties.*

I was a member of the 2/13 Australian General Hospital Staff which was captured on 13 February 1942, two days before the fall of Singapore. It took the Japanese about ten days to put us all behind wire and then it took about two months for us to clean up and put the place in order. The whole of our new area had been heavily damaged during the war.

There were approximately 14,000 Australians and 25,000 British taken prisoner in Singapore. We were sent to Changi, which before the war had been used by the British army as barracks. Changi is approximately eighteen miles from Singapore city. Soon after our confinement behind the wire a movement was started amongst the men to see what could be done about holding lodge meetings. The prison area was divided into five sections, with the hospital area in the centre. General Percival, GOC, was sounded out and said that although he himself was not a Freemason he offered no objection provided we adhered to certain restrictions.

Upon receiving this assurance he permitted us to go ahead. These restrictions were already covered by our own rules and regulations. Many groups of brethren began to get together and, as the hospital area appeared to be the most stable, and there was less likelihood of the men being moved about suddenly in order to supply the large numbers for the Jap work parties, it was decided to establish the head-quarters in the hospital area. Besides myself there were, at the time, three other PMs, a Red Cross representative, a Padre and one of the corporals. Military rank had no bearing on our masonic activities. A little later on we were most fortunate to find the DGM of the Eastern Archipelago, and a PGSW of England, also in the 'net' with us, and also to secure the services of a most excellent secretary.

After about a week, some sixty brethren in the hospital area had proved their qualifications, and we had our first general meeting. It was explained that, as we had not any warrant or charter and had not obtained permission of any Grand Lodge, it would not be possible for us to confer degrees, etc., but there was no reason why we should not form a Masonic Association and hold practice meetings and have lectures. Eventually we called ourselves Prisoner of War Masonic Association of Changi. A number of rules were drawn up, and a small executive body was formed to arrange the necessary details. There was to be a complete change of officers for each meeting. The DC, however, was the only permanent office bearer.

There were only three rituals available and, as he knew them backwards, the greatest credit must be extended to him in the training of all office bearers, and the success of all our meetings. For every meeting there were several understudies for each post, so that in the event of illness or transfer of any officers, the show would still carry on.

It was decided to hold the meetings on the fourth Thursday of each month. There were many skilled craftsmen available, and they made all our necessary fittings and furniture out of what material was available in this camp. It has often been asked what became of these fittings etc. They were eventually souvenired by the person in whose safe keeping they were left and, in due course, have reached home. One of the most beautiful pieces of work was a perfect reproduction of the three TBs. This was done by a member of the

Royal Engineers.

For the first few months there was some difficulty securing a suitable building for our meetings. However, a church, which had been badly damaged during the war, was repaired and later used by us. Extra precautions were advisable, as the Axis views on Freemasonry were not favourable to us.

The OG would have as many as eight assistants if necessary, who were armed with wood and stones, and their duty was to throw these on the roof in the case of any alarm. We would then have to immediately change our proceedings and, if necessary, sing a well-known hymn, and it would give the suggestion of a church service. However, only once did we have any disturbance and it passed over with out incident.

The movement spread very rapidly to include British and Australians. Later on we had to have two meetings per month, one British and one Australian, and seating accommodation was limited. We could only allow 200 per meeting. The Japs would not allow more than twenty-five men to congregate without guards except for church services, in hospital wards or dormitories. So, in order to avoid any bunching together of the men, the attendance book was available in the afternoon, so that we could check over who would be in attendance that night and not excite the attention of our 'hosts'.

Dress consisted of whatever we had. Some were without boots, some without shirts and, towards the end of our detention, the clothing position became more and more serious. We did expect, however, our office bearers to be clad as respectably as possible, and even resorted to borrowing any missing clothes if necessary.

There was a small charge made to each member; part to defray certain expenses and part to provide some comforts for those in hospital. The Japs' motto was 'No work - no pay - no food'. So we did our best to make it up to the sick somehow.

About two months ahead of each meeting invitations were extended to the brethren to apply for some office so that we could train them, together with their understudies, so that the show could carry on even in the case of sickness or transfer of any of the men.

Four or five copies of all our meetings were kept, distributed and hidden. We hoped by that means to take one copy home. However, it worked out that all are now safe. We hope to have a complete copy printed in England in due course, and I hope to be able to present my copy to this Grand Lodge in due course, as I think it would be a most valuable record of Freemasonry under extraordinary circumstances. There were representatives of about twelve Grand Lodges and 600 Daughter Lodges amongst us. There were a great many nationalities in the camp, Americans, Dutch, Javanese, Chinese etc., and after the Italian surrender in 1943, Nippon presented to us some 800 Italians.

Naturally we had to exercise great care. We had been told a great deal about Continental Freemasonry, which appeared to savour of politics etc., and was widely different from British ideals. Some talks about the Orient Grand Lodges of Europe were most illuminating as regards their political ramifications, and we were aware of the Axis views on Freemasonry.

During the first year of our activities approximately twelve meetings were held and, in addition, there were many fine lectures. Personally I learnt a great deal more about Freemasonry in that short period than in all my previous experience. We were given lectures on its history, and on the explanation of many of our customs. I wonder how many know why it is necessary to sign the attendance book before gaining admittance,

and why the TB of an Emulation Lodge is placed on the floor.

In 1944 a big move of the POWs took place and we could not find a suitable building. At this time the area was very small and there were 18,000 of us in a mile square. During this time only a few lectures were held. After our meetings a festive board was held if possible. A cup of tea, without milk or sugar, perhaps a little Ersatz coffee, and a little rice saved from our meals. Of course, throughout the whole time all food had to be declared to our own Camp Authorities to prevent hoarding, etc. Throughout most of the time we were always short of food. We had to take precautions against thieving from our own food dumps.

About this time we were informed that the Japs had discovered an attendance book belonging to one of the old Singapore lodges, so further meetings were abandoned until our big thanks-giving service, held on 3 September 1945; the day when the Union Jack and the Stars and Stripes were hoisted on the pole of the Changi gaol, and the Japanese flag hauled down. Early in 1945 the Japs had located one man in the internment camp whose name was mentioned in that attendance book. They treated him badly, and subjected him to many of the Oriental methods of torture, in an endeavour to extract information from him. He maintained throughout that British Freemasonry was a charitable institution. In the end they threw him in the Outrim Road gaol and gave him a long period of solitary confinement.

After a while his health broke as a result of Jap 'hospitality'. He was returned to our camp and, I am pleased to relate, that he had recovered by the time we were to leave.

I came to the conclusion that Free-masonry is more than symbolic; it is definitely practical from the word go.

The Freemasons in the camp were always trumps when it came to trouble. We had a pretty tough spin, and members of the Craft and their friends were always on the scene when their help was wanted. It was a pathetic sight when the remnants of 'F' force came back from the Burma-Thailand railway at the end of 1943. They were just living skeletons, and 700 of them had to be carried into the hospital. They were suffering from a great variety of illnesses, mainly due to starvation and neglect.

On occasions we had to stop our men giving their own food rations to these hospital patients because if they did they would, in a very short time, be reduced to the very same state, and there would have been no one to look after the sick. Many of the brethren did wonderful jobs by bringing medical supplies to the camp. There were ways of 'acquiring' these supplies from Jap dumps while they were out on working parties. I remember one man who brought me enough medical supplies to last over two months. He banked on the assumption that the Japs would not worry about searching the sick men. Had he been discovered, he would have lost his life.

At the end of 1944 for various reasons, especially the Japs' discovery of the attendance book, we decided to close down rather than have Freemasonry dragged through the War Criminal Trials and Atrocity investigations. Our records were all very carefully kept, and I hope soon to receive mine in book form.

At Changi there was a tree some 150 feet high, which towered well above the Malayan jungle. It had been used for many years as a shipping landmark. During the war it was hit by a shell about 70 feet above the ground and badly split. The Tommies wired it up and it began to grow again, and by the time we left was flourishing.

Our motto is based on that: 'Broken but recovered'.