

PRISONER OF WAR CAMPS IN AREAS OTHER THAN THE FOUR PRINCIPAL ISLANDS OF JAPAN
LIAISON & RESEARCH BRANCH AMERICAN PRISONER OF WAR INFORMATION BUREAU

By Capt. James I. Norwood and Capt. Emily L. Shek 31 July 1946

CHANGI PRISONER OF WAR CAMPS SINGAPORE ISLAND, MALAY STATES

LOCATION: There were two British installations at Singapore, which, after capture of the city by the Japanese on 15 Feb. 1942, became large prisoner internment camps, namely, the Changi Prison. The former was a collection of military barracks and various warehouses such as commonly constitute a British Military Outpost. The Changi Prison was a large municipal gaol built for the British in 1930 by American engineers, and it was modeled after the Sing Sing prison in New York, U.S.A.

PRISONER PERSONNEL: The first prisoners to occupy the Barracks on 15 Feb. 1942 were composed of British, Australian and Indian troops who at the time were in Singapore. On 31 May 1944 the entire prisoner personnel in the barracks were transferred to Changi Prison which became the distribution center for all prisoners in southeast Asia. Approximately a total personnel of 10,000 was maintained at this location with the constantly incoming prisoners filling the gaps created by the transfer of prisoners to Sumatra, Burma, Thailand and elsewhere on various types of work projects.

Between 16 Oct. 1942 and 7 Jan. 1943 the most of the survivors of the U.S.S. HOUSTON and the majority of the 131st Field Artillery U.S.A. were transferred from Java to the Changi prison camp. These Americans were divided by services as follows: Army 255; Navy 200; Marines 26; a total of 481. This personnel, in charge of Col. Bleucher S. Tharpe, Senior Officer, was transferred in Jan. 1943 to Burma, with a very small number going to Sumatra. Upon the transfer of Col. Tharpe from the Singapore Camp, Lt. E.M. Barrett, U.S.M.C. became the senior American officer. American and Allied prisoners were constantly being sent to the Changi Camp and quite quickly transferred to work projects in the southwest Pacific Islands occupied by the Japanese. Upon the cessation of hostilities, 70 Americans were at the Changi prison camp divided by services as follows USAAF 20; U.S. Merchant Marine 30; U.S. Army 10; U.S. Navy 8, and U.S. Marines 2.

GUARD PERSONNEL: Maj. Gen. Arimura was in command from Jan. 1943 to March 1944. This officer's headquarters were originally in Java, but he later moved to Singapore with headquarters inside the POW compound at Changi Prison. Gen. Arimura was succeeded by Maj. Gen. Saito. The latter general is reported to have issued orders not to maltreat POW's. Most of the Japanese guards were susceptible to bribery for articles of food, etc. This did not in any way, however, lessen their rigid military guard discipline.

4. GENERAL CONDITIONS:

(a) Housing Facilities – Changi Prison was a large building 4 stories tall, 400 yards long by 100 yards wide. In normal times when this institution was used as a municipal prison, it housed 800 prisoners. Throughout the time it was used as a prisoner of war camp, it housed an average of approximately 4000 prisoners. At one time there were 10,000 prisoners quartered here. The walls, roof and floor of the main prison were constructed of reinforced concrete. Most of the cellblocks were 100 feet by 50 feet. There were small solitary confinement cells 10 feet by 8 feet with a concrete slab projecting from one wall toward the center on which the prisoners slept. The solitary confinement cell, constructed for the use of one man, was occupied by three. Enlisted men only lived in the main prison.

1200 officers and some 2000 enlisted men lived in wooden huts in the vicinity of the main building. These huts were 90 feet long and 14 feet wide. The roofs were of attap. There was a lattice type window in each hut. Four feet of space was allowed each man. The men slept on either side of the buildings with a passageway in the center running the length of the building. Forty-five officers were quartered in each of these huts. The huts for enlisted men were 100 meters long by 18 feet wide.

No sheets or mattresses were provided but the prisoners were able to obtain, at their expense, coconut mats on which to sleep. The weather was comparatively mild.

(b) Latrines – Although the main prison building was originally equipped for inside latrines, the overcrowded conditions necessitated the construction of outdoor latrines. These latrines were of British engineer type. A hole 2 feet in diameter and 20 feet deep was excavated with a hand-drill. A seat cover made from ammunition boxes was placed over the hole. Local Japanese newspapers were issued for toilet paper. The latrine site was changed every 2 weeks. An occasional issue of lime for sanitary purposes was made. A urinal was constructed and the urine was used as a fertilizer for the camp garden by mixing 1 part of urine to 4 parts of water and spraying the garden.

(c) Bathing – Until July 1944 no regular schedule and no facilities for bathing were provided by the Japanese authorities. However, in July 1944 regular bath parades were held. The prisoners were only 3 quarters of a mile from the ocean, and parties of 200 men were marched to the water under guard and allowed to bathe in the sea. Every man had an opportunity to perform this ablution 5 times a week. No towels were furnished but a small issue of soap was provided.

However, the soap was too strong for bathing, but it was excellent for washing clothes.

(d) Mess Hall – There were no mess halls which operated as such. There were several large galleys in the compound each of which operated for a group of 125 men. All prisoners who lived outside the main prison were organized into mess groups. There was one cookhouse for the entire personnel living in the main prison. The food was prepared and issued to each man in cafeteria style as he passed by the food vats.

(e) Food – The mess at this camp was materially reduced during Feb. & Mar. 1945. Following the first cut in Feb., a reduction of 10% was made on 1 Mar. On 7 Mar. the rice issue was reduced to 238 grams per day. There was a mess fund set up by the mess groups to purchase food from outside sources. Some of the items available for purchase were Sugar, sweet potatoes, coffee, salt, onions & tapioca root. From Mar. 1945 to the end of the war such items as fruit, oil, peanuts, goulash, etc. were not available for purchase. The fruits and vegetables grown in the camp garden were used primarily in the hospital for the patients.

(f) Medical facilities – There were no Japanese medical officers to care for the needs of the prisoners. There were British, Australian and Dutch officers who were well qualified professionally, although very little medicine and equipment were provided by the Japanese authorities.

A small amount of American Red Cross-medicines was issued in April 1945. At about this time all prisoners were vaccinated against typhoid and dysentery. A few bandages were provided by the Japanese, but the medical officers were reduced to using sheets, clothing and various other substitutes for bandages. All bandages were washed and used over and over again.

The Dutch medical officers were adept at compounding various extracts from jungle leaves and grass as an antidote against scrotal dermatitis.

(g) Supplies – (1) Red Cross, etc: There were 3 lots of American Red Cross parcels received during the time this prison was in operation. Parcels were issued on a basis of 1 parcel to 8 men. Those prisoners who were hospital patients received Red Cross food constantly. At the end of the war, large stores of Red Cross parcels were found in warehouses in Singapore. The Japanese stated that these were being held as a reserve for the prisoners in the event that war reverses prevented ships from arriving at Singapore. (2) Japanese issue: No clothing was ever issued by the Japanese. A great many men had only 1 pair of home made shorts when the war ended.

(h) Mail – (1) Incoming: Americans received mail for the first time in Dec. 1943. Incoming mail arrived in several lots of numerous letters. Since there was no schedule in censoring mail, most letters were over one year old when received. (2) Outgoing: During the entire time that prisoners were held in Changi, only 3 postal cards of 24 words each were allowed to be sent. A quota of radio messages was allowed for the entire camp. Those men who had not received word from home over a considerable length of time were allowed to utilize this radio service.

(i) Work – During the time that the prisoners were at Changi Barracks, a large rubber plantation was cleared ostensibly to plant vegetables. However, this ground later revealed itself as an airfield. The work continued after the camp was moved to Changi Prison, and the field was completed at the end of the war.

Officers supervised the work parties and also worked in the camp garden. Enlisted men did coolie labor on the airfield and some men were sent to work on the docks and railroad yards in Singapore.

The labor parties were originally turned over to contract labor but this system did not operate well. Later, all prisoners worked under guard at their various places of labor. The workday was from 0800 to 1700 hours with a 1-hour rest period at noon. There were frequent slappings and beatings, but no brutal punishment.

Much work was carried on inside the prison compound. A factory was set up which made brooms, tooth brushes, etc. from coconut husks. Soap was made from palm oil. A raw rubber extract was used to patch clothes, and a mixture of raw rubber, sand and clay was compounded into a substance used in half-soling shoes. Sandals were also made from this same material for men who had no shoes. There were Japanese machine shops for repairing vehicles inside the compound. A sawmill was installed in the compound and the prisoners were allowed to use the lumber for the construction of a theater and various other buildings in the camp. There was also a nail factory in the compound.

(j) Treatment – The treatment in general at this camp was good. The Commanding General of the prison issued orders that prisoners were not to be beaten, which order at times was violated by the guards and overseers.

(k) Pay – (1) Officers: For the first 9 months, no American prisoners were paid. The pay actually received varied from time to time. (2) Enlisted Men: Enlisted men were paid 25 cents a day in occupation currency.

(1) Recreation – In 1945 a theater was built in the compound by an Australian architect of considerable ability. Lumber from the sawmill was used to build the theater, sets, and props. The nightly audience averaged about 500. Costumes, make-up, etc. were made from coconut matting, clay, water etc. Excellent performances were given. The national anthems of the various allied countries were allowed to be played.

The theater was ordered closed by the Japanese authorities 2 months prior to the end of the war due to alleged reflections on the Japanese Army.

(m) Religious activities – Services were held each Sunday. There were Australian and British chaplains in Changi of most of the faiths. Chapels were constructed inside the compound. No sacramental wine was furnished the Catholic priests by the Japanese, although the Chinese civilians in Singapore managed to furnish it surreptitiously.

(n) Morale – Morale in this camp was very good.

5. MOVEMENTS:

The only movements connected with Changi Prison occurred upon arrival at Singapore when the prisoners were transported to Changi Barracks in trucks. When the camp was moved some 2 or 3 miles south to Changi prison, the men walked carrying their possessions personally. Upon liberation of the camp 7 Sept. 1945, the American prisoners were flown to Calcutta for onward movement to the United States.