

Chapter Five— Physical health, recreation and morale in Malaya

As in all other aspects of their lives during their time in Malaya, the men of the 2/18th Battalion influenced matters relating to their own health. Good health, both physical and mental, was fundamental to their fitness, training skills and preparedness for war. It was a condition that the soldiers, who were for the most part young and physically healthy when they enlisted, would have taken for granted. However, from the time of their arrival there, Malaya challenged any complacency they might have felt. The country was a hotbed of disease for the unwary, to which even the most careful could succumb, while the enervating conditions sapped a man's energy and enthusiasm. The army instituted measures designed to protect and boost the troops' overall health but the extent of its success depended very much on the attitudes and commitment of the men themselves. Commonsense dictated that, at grassroots level, each man had actively to involve himself in his own wellbeing, for the consequences of not so doing were dire. As he acclimatised to the country, so he learned what he needed to do to protect both his health and morale.

Despite the concerted efforts of both the army and the men, Malaya exacted a high toll. The wastage of men who were deemed medically unfit, some of whom had to be repatriated, remained unacceptably high throughout 1941.¹ However, the vast majority overcame whatever individual physical health problems they might have developed and did so with their morale intact. Each man's individual vigilance with regard to his health in the conditions of Malaya was as vital as the efforts of the army in the development of the battalion's ultimate strength and readiness for war.

Malaya's heat and humidity were debilitating. Every soldier was beset to some degree by the myriad of skin complaints that erupted during 1941. He was also at some risk of succumbing to a number of local diseases, notably hookworm and dysentery. Only

¹ A.S. Walker, *Australia in the War of 1939-1945*, Medical Series, Vol.5, *Middle East and Far East*, Canberra, 1953, p.496.

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if he was celibate was he safe from venereal disease. Mosquito control had resulted in most settled areas being largely safe from malaria but during the year the 2/18th Battalion trained and worked in infested areas. The men had reason to fear other insects beside the mosquito. The bites and stings of the red ant, jungle wasp, gigantic scorpion and other creatures caused allergic reaction and infection. Tigers, crocodiles and snakes also, perhaps, represented danger but the men encountered only the latter in any significant numbers. Injuries from accidents took their toll. Certainly, Malaya afforded numerous physical discomforts, but it also exacted a psychological cost. The men felt frustration at not being in the Middle East. They also suffered from homesickness and boredom. Like one's physical health, morale in Malaya could not be simply assumed.

In August 1941, in a letter to General Percival, Bennett wrote that it was the "policy of the AIF to maintain health and morale at Government expense."² While the statement was merely an explanation of his refusal to deny Australian troops free transport for recreational purposes, a privilege not granted to the British and Indian troops, it underlined the Australian Army's commitment to its volunteers. The Australian Army sought to safeguard the men from danger and disease while initiating vigorous training programs and other activities that boosted both fitness and morale. Organised activities, recreation and leave were all vital in maintaining the troops' equilibrium. In their turn, the troops found ways to keep themselves interested and to hold boredom at bay as they readied themselves for a war that few believed would ever eventuate.

Before their departure from Australia, the doctors belonging to the various medical units attached to the 22nd Brigade had attended a short series of lectures on tropical medicine. The subject matter was general and theoretical—one doctor commented that what he had learned was equally applicable in the deserts of the Middle East and the jungles of the Far East, as both regions were tropical.³ It is doubtful whether any of the

² Wigmore, *Japanese Thrust*, p.96.

³ Dr Frank Mills of the 2/9th Field Ambulance, interview, 18 September 1995.

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doctors, prior to their arrival in Malaya, fully appreciated the physical effect that vigorous training and work in the intense heat and steaming humidity would have on the troops. Nevertheless, on board the *'Mary*, they lectured eloquently on the subjects of tropical disease, and health and hygiene in the tropics. They warned of malaria, dengue, enteritis, snake bite, dysentery, hookworm, yellow fever, berri berri, cholera, ringworm, sandfly fever, venereal disease, Singapore ear and dhobie's itch. John Fuller, a medical student, wrote to assure his parents that he would heed these warnings: "These doctors, if they speak the truth, paint a very gruesome picture for the man who neglects his health."⁴

No matter the extent to which an individual soldier heeded the warnings given to him, he could not avoid the physical impact of the East upon himself since the move to Malaya constituted a complete change in his mode of living. Both his diet and the climate in which he lived altered radically. The soldiers were used to fresh food but what they ate now was mostly either frozen or tinned. In Malaya even tropical fruit was often in short supply while fresh potatoes had to be imported. Within six months, doctors observed that many soldiers showed early signs of vitamin deficiency.⁵ In Australia, the men had lived and trained in a temperate zone but they had now to adjust to tropical conditions.⁶ The radical change in the men's physical circumstances inevitably impinged on their physical health.

When the men stepped off the train at Bagan Pinang on their first morning in Malaya, despite the early hour, the heat and humidity struck. They formed into columns to march the few miles to the Port Dickson barracks. Behind each line in the column was a long wet trail of sweat that "poured off" the men as they marched. That first march set the scene for all future marches. Three months later, Col Spence wrote: "We still sweat as much as ever, and evidently always will. Just walking up the stairs here makes me sweat,

⁴ John Fuller, letter to his parents, with the address "at sea", undated.

⁵ Burnett Clarke, *Behind the Wire: The clinical war diary of Dr Burnett Clarke*, compiled in *Changi Prisoner of War Camp 1944-1945*, Brisbane, 1989, p.5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.5-6.

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so, of course, when we go out on the road carrying our equipment, it fairly pours out of us.”⁷ Adjusting to the climatic conditions would take time.

Subjected to such conditions, the skin reacts. Consequently, from the time the troops arrived in Malaya, dermatology attained equal importance with other branches of medicine, although the worst manifestations of skin disease were to occur later, in the prison camps.⁸ Medical opinion blamed the climate, diet, chemical and mechanical causes (that is, incorrect treatments) and allergic reactions for the skin complaints that erupted during 1941.⁹

When the skin is constantly sodden with unevaporated sweat, the sweat ducts block and eventually sweat leaks into the skin which, waterlogged and unhealthy, becomes irritated.¹⁰ Most soldiers were afflicted to a greater or lesser degree with “prickly heat”, or, in army parlance, “Chronic Heat Rash”, particularly in the first months in Malaya before they could claim to have acclimatised. Treatment was limited to cool showers and sponging and the application of dusting powder and good quality calamine lotion—if of poor quality it set like concrete!¹¹ While the rash was usually not particularly serious, the intensity of the “prickling” sensation and resulting lack of sleep made sufferers irritable. To alleviate the rash, men wore as little clothing as possible by day—the rash rarely spread to areas exposed to sunlight—but as a result they suffered allergic reactions to Malaya’s flora and fauna with which their skin came in contact. After dark, however, regulations insisted they be fully covered in the effort to avoid malaria. Some cases did become chronic or recurrent and these men were sent home. Prickly heat was merely one of a number of skin complaints that would plague the troops for as long as they remained in the East and for most men it was comparatively minor. “Prickly heat was uncomfortable but did not worry us to any great extent and in this direction we were liberal with Talc

⁷ Colin Spence, letter to his parents, 13 April 1941.

⁸ Clarke, *Behind the Wire*, p.4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.6.

¹⁰ *Encyclopedia of Family Health*, Readers Digest, Sydney, 1994, p.828.

¹¹ Clarke, *Behind the Wire*, p.10.

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powder,” Mullins observed.¹²

Of much greater concern was tinea. Skin that was constantly damp was vulnerable to chafing. When lesions occurred, infections set in. Exposure to sunlight made it worse:

It was the tinea which worried the men and the RMO most, as it literally ate into the flesh. It attacked the feet, arms, high in the thighs, ears and some men were a slimy mess all over. As we were carrying out arduous training and were constantly wet from either rain or perspiration the tinea or itch did not have a chance of getting better....¹³

For convenience, most lesions were designated as tinea and treated as such. Often, and especially if the diagnosis were not accurate, the condition proved difficult or impossible to eradicate. Even those whose feet were so severely afflicted that they were unable to work could not go barefoot for fear of contracting hookworm. Tinea rampaged despite all the doctors' efforts.

Yet another complaint was dhobie's itch, an intensely irritating ringlike fungal skin infection in the groin area. It was named for the dhobie laundries that were believed to be responsible for its occurrence. Men described their scratching as the “Malayan salute”. Outbreaks had occurred previously, but by June the complaint flared in epidemic proportions. Mullins recorded that on his company's return after a week away on a company manoeuvre, the RMO ordered three-quarters of the men into quarantine for extensive treatment of the two main skin complaints, tinea and Dhobie's Itch.¹⁴

Official treatment could be ineffective and it was also often inconsistent. According to Clarke, “Every Medical Officer had his own ideas and many and varied were

¹² Mullins, *Birth of a battalion: A History of 2/18th Battalion AIF, 1940-1945*, unpaginated.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

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the remedies used, often on the same man.”¹⁵ General treatment included applications of mercurochrome which “stung like hell on raw flesh.”¹⁶ Some men, frustrated by official and unsuccessful treatment, resorted to treating themselves, sometimes successfully, by buying their own ointments when on leave. Joe Forsyth sought advice from a Chinese pharmacist in Seremban: “He told us that it was our diet that was causing all the skin problems. I bought ointment from him. It cleared it up in the end.”¹⁷ Forsyth concurs with Fuller’s opinion that in the tropics, a man could not afford to neglect his health. “You had to be careful. For instance, when you were drying yourself. You had to take responsibility.”¹⁸

Every morning long queues formed at the RMP (Regimental Medical Parade) but in their letters home the men did not dwell on the miseries that emanated from the various skin complaints. Letters are interspersed with such remarks as, “Prickly heat has had me uncomfortable for a few days”; and “My health continues to be as good as ever except that I’ve had a boil on my arm”; and “Things are going all right with me—except I’ve had ‘Singapore ear’—a kind of tinea in the ear— but have now quite recovered.”¹⁹ Everyone suffered from skin complaints in some form and at one time or another. It was the norm and of no real interest to anyone but the sufferer. They did, however, make observations about the precautions they took. “Regarding socks. The machine made ones are better. The hand knitted ones seem to induce prickly heat,” wrote Fuller, while expressing his thanks for a tin of talcum powder.²⁰ Sergeant Alan Black also wrote about talcum powder: “In this country you have to look after yourself. After showering, our room takes on the appearance of a beauty parlour, with powder flying everywhere. It keeps the skin dry and

¹⁵ Clarke, *Behind the Wire*, p.6.

¹⁶ Mullins, *Birth of a battalion: A History of 2/18th Battalion AIF 1940-1945*, unpaginated.

¹⁷ Joe Forsyth, interview, 26 July 2000.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ John Fuller, letter to his parents, 20 February 1941; Colin Spence, letters to his parents, 14 July 1941 and 19 August 1941.

²⁰ John Fuller, letter to his mother, 19 May 1941.

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prevents cracking between the toes...”²¹ Cliff Olsen remembered how, when he left for war, his father, a veteran of the trenches in Western France, gave him extra boot and shoe laces, an item of which a First War soldier could not have enough. “In the mud, your boots were sucked off. Your laces rotted and you would pull your foot out, and you would lose your boot. You couldn’t find it again in the mud.”²² For many of the men of the 2/18th Battalion in Malaya in 1941, talcum powder was as vital as extra laces had been to the men in the trenches.

One doctor observed after the war that with regard to the skin diseases that plagued the troops, “No class, officer or OR, was exempt...Any ex-Malayan campaigner who denies having had skin disease is guilty of making a terminological inexactitude.”²³ For the most part, with regard to their health, and particularly their skin, the soldiers of the 2/18th Battalion did what they could for themselves. How limited was their success is underlined by the statement in the official medical history that one lesson learned from the Malayan experience was “the need for further intensive education of all ranks in personal preventative measures”.²⁴ Despite their skin problems which, for most, remained minor, the men of the 2/18th Battalion had enlisted to fight in the war. They sought to maintain their fitness in order to do so. Thus they bought fresh fruit and vegetables when they could, they maintained as high a level of hygiene as possible, and they sought medical advice beyond the Army, sometimes successfully, if the Army was slow to cure their ailments.

In other ways, too, the men demonstrated their commitment and initiative. With very few exceptions, they avoided the brothels. At lectures, the padres and the doctors warned the troops that the girls in brothels were all diseased. “We listened in awe to lectures on every known social disease and the awful consequences... We gathered that castration would be preferable to contracting the disease. “Short arm” parades became a

²¹ Alan Black, letter to his parents, 9 April 1941.

²² Cliff Olsen, interview, 30 May 2002.

²³ Clarke, *Behind the Wire*, p.4.

²⁴ Walker, *Australia in the War of 1939-1945*, Medical Series, Vol.5, *Clinical Problems of War*, p.75.

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regular practice, and the RMO looked with increased intensity...at the proffered appendages...”.²⁵ It was an offence for a soldier not to report if he was at risk.²⁶ Certain addresses in the town of Mersing were declared out of bounds.²⁷ Moreover, the findings of a recently concluded medical investigation into standards pertaining in the brothels of Malaya and Singapore Island vindicated the standpoint of the authorities.²⁸ At least partly as a consequence of their campaign, most men probably did prefer celibacy which would accord with John Barrett’s findings.²⁹ He concluded from responses to his questionnaire that those Australian soldiers in the Second World War who preferred celibacy did so for a number of reasons which included their inexperience and shyness, their lack of opportunity, their revulsion at the conditions of some brothels, their fear of disease as well as moral scruples engendered by marriage (if they were married), religion and social attitudes of the times.³⁰ Surviving members of the 2/18th Battalion believe that fewer than thirty of their number succumbed to venereal disease, a lower figure than the official figure for the occurrence of venereal disease among the AIF in Malaya.³¹ “None of us touched the girls. Probably because we were all young and we were frightened,” one man who was eighteen at the time recalled.³² Another who was older wrote afterwards, “I was a total abstainer...the medical lectures having brainwashed me into being celibate.”³³ Yet another, at the time, reassured his father in a letter:

I have now visited a few of the towns. The places, as you told me, are full of brothels and prostitutes. I have been in them to

²⁵ Scott, *Fair Crack of the Whip*, p.91.

²⁶ 2/18th Battalion War Diary, <http://www.awm.gov.au/database/awm52/8x3x18.htm>.

²⁷ 2/18th Battalion War Diary, Routine Orders for 27 September 1941, 1 October 1941, 21 October 1941.

²⁸ *Straits Times*, 6 February 1941.

²⁹ Barrett, *We Were There*, pp.345-354 and 362-364.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Bennett, liaison letter, 19 November 1941. Bennett reported that the previous maximum incidence of 31 cases in a week among 7,700 troops rose after the arrival of the second brigade group to 58 cases among 13,600 troops in the week ending 6 September 1941. The incidence settled at 35 cases per week among 15,000 troops for the five consecutive weeks ending 19 November 1941. NAA MP729/7 42/422/53.

³² Cliff Olsen, interview, 30 May 2002.

³³ Scott, *Fair Crack of the Whip*, p.94.

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have a look but not as a client. They are full of V.D. So far very few of the boys have collected a load.³⁴

Fuller had written in February that, as a precaution, the authorities were installing very elaborate prophylactic centres in all unit centres and towns near AIF camps.³⁵ The combination of education, punishments, humiliating “short arm” parades and good prophylactic facilities, attendance at which were compulsory for those at risk, was maintained throughout the year and it tended to work. The vast majority of the men stayed away from the brothels so that, in his liaison letter to Australian Army Headquarters in November, Bennett could write:

Prophylactic measures are being enforced rigidly, and if it were not for the influence of alcohol in causing carelessness, venereal disease would probably be reduced almost to vanishing point.³⁶

When men could not be treated successfully by the RMO in the Battalion, they were sent to hospital. From Port Dickson and Seremban, sick 2/18th Battalion men went to the 2/10AGH, a new 200-bed hospital in Malacca, for treatment. VD cases went to Ward A4, malaria cases to Ward B4. Men went to hospital with hepatitis, amoebic dysentery and appendicitis and a host of other complaints. After the move to Mersing, the battalion sent its sick to the 2/13AGH which had been set up in one-half of a psychiatric hospital only sixty miles away in Johore Bahru.

It was in the hospitals that the men of the 2/18th Battalion had contact in Malaya with the Australian nurses. On board the *Mary*, Privates Ginty Pearson, Shady Chapman and Les Anthony, who had been allocated the job of carrying stores from the main kitchen to the officers' kitchen each day, had enjoyed daily morning tea with the nursing staff. However, nurses were ranked as officers and as such were generally out of bounds to the

³⁴ John Fuller, letter to his father, 3 April 1941.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, letter to his parents, 20 February 1941.

³⁶ Bennett to AHQ Melbourne, liaison letter (signed by J. Broadbent), NAA MP 729/7 42/422/53.

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private soldier. Although Fuller's photograph album recorded that on board ship "You had to be a major to do any good with the nurses", later photographs bear witness that young officers and nurses did socialise when on leave. Fuller also wrote of an occasion when he was on leave and alone at the Selangor Club (it was known as the "Spotted Dog") in Kuala Lumpur:

The Brigadier was there with a party of nurses and officers of Brigade HQ. He saw me there looking a bit lost and asked me over to join the party. The nurses gave me the shock of my life. They were not in uniform but in most attractive evening frocks... They are all very pleased that they are now allowed on special occasions to wear decent dresses... I think it is a good idea.³⁷

Other Ranks had to be sick or injured to meet the nurses and surviving members of the 2/18th Battalion remember their kindness with admiration for the work they did. "I remember one holding on to my head while I vomited," Spence recalled.³⁸ But the nurses, separated from them by distance and rank, did not figure largely in the average soldier's experience of Malaya.

In June, a number of men were repatriated, although not all of them had wished to go.³⁹ While the group included those with chronic skin problems and others who were too old—few men over 40 could cope with the physical demands made upon them in the climate—there were also those who were simply "undesirable". The doctors were always on the alert for malingerers who sought repatriation, but the troops themselves preferred their departure. Several men interviewed for this thesis spoke with good humoured contempt of one *Bluey Greig* whose efforts to go home were unremitting but in vain.⁴⁰ They spoke of his having the tinea on his feet treated by day and his rubbing it raw again

³⁷ John Fuller, letter to his mother, 23 June 1941.

³⁸ Colin Spence, telephone conversation, 10 October 2004.

³⁹ George McLaughlin, letter to his wife, 8 June 1941.

⁴⁰ *Bluey Greig* – his name has been changed.

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at night. Bruce Munro had no time for such men and, had it been his decision, would have hastened Greig's departure. Munro wrote in July: "Some of our fellows have gone back to Australia, some medically unfit, but the majority no good to themselves or anyone else and who should have been culled out before they came."⁴¹

Everyone was plagued by skin diseases to a greater or lesser extent, but the bogey that all men feared was malaria. At no stage did the Army treat malaria lightly. Preventative regulations were stringent and the men did their best not to infringe. As Private Doug Spratt said, "I used to let my sleeves down of a night, let my bell bottom trousers down and tuck them into my socks."⁴² A number of men, including even the RMO, Dr Sandy Barrett, contracted malaria when out on company field exercises during June and July. They were treated at the 2/10 AGH in Malacca. Preventative measures included a cream to rub on the skin. The men joked that it was no good—they said that the anopheles mosquitoes loved the cream!⁴³ Even before the battalion moved to Mersing, an infested area, the Army was issuing quinine tablets. Spratt remembered the quinine parades:

We used to have quinine tablets. [Lieutenant] George Warden would have to see that you had them. We used to hate the taste of them. We used to save our chocolates and put the tablets in the middle of the chocolate. You would still get that terrible taste, even though you had it in the chocolate. George Warden was standing there, making sure you took your chocolates.⁴⁴

Despite their best efforts, men succumbed. "This malaria is certainly no joke. I can't see how any one can possibly avoid getting it sooner or later. All we can do is take quinine, be careful and hope for the best," Fuller wrote from Mersing.⁴⁵ However, it was impossible

⁴¹ Bruce Munro, letter to his mother, 17 June 1941.

⁴² Doug Spratt, interview, 26 February 2002.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ John Fuller, letter to his mother, 14 August 1941.

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always to be careful and hope often proved to be misplaced. In the evenings it was feasible to cover up but by day such clothing was impractical. For work, toiling on the defences, the men wore only their PT (physical training) shorts. Out in the open in the day time the risk was minimized, but the jungle was a different proposition. “In the jungle the damned mosquitoes never knocked off,” remembered Keith Forsyth, who contracted malaria while cutting timber.⁴⁶

A man who presented himself at an RMP with a fever could not be diagnosed as malarial. Regulations decreed that doctors in the field could only diagnose his condition as NYDP or Not Yet Diagnosed Pyrexia. He was sent out of the lines to a field ambulance and from there eventually to hospital where his condition could be diagnosed.⁴⁷ Treatment depended on the diagnosis of the type of malaria and neither diagnosis nor treatment was necessarily straightforward, as is demonstrated by the experiences of some of even the small sample interviewed for this project. Mac Cottee contracted both the MT (malignant tertian) and BT (benign tertian) varieties of malaria—the two types of malaria most prevalent in Malaya⁴⁸—at the same time and consequently suffered daily attacks of fever.⁴⁹ He spent ten weeks in the hospital in Malacca. Col Spence wrote in November, “They eventually found that I did have malaria, but of course I went in for a special kind which was hard to locate and which came on every four days instead of the usual three.”⁵⁰ After a man recovered, he spent a further four weeks in rehabilitation at the Convalescent Depot near Johore Bahru, usually a pleasant but boring time. “It’s a bit of a job filling in time between pills,” Spence wrote.⁵¹ The long absences of men were a continual drain on the

⁴⁶ Keith Forsyth, interview, 25 July 2000.

⁴⁷ Dr Frank Mills of the 2/9 Field Ambulance, interview, 16 October 1995.

⁴⁸ BT or Benign Tertian Malaria (*vivax malaria*) and MT or Malignant Tertian Malaria (*falciparum malaria*) cause periodic chills and fever that recur approximately every 48 hours. Victims of MT become weaker with each attack and most die if untreated. Attacks of BT become less severe over time and eventually stop (although symptoms may reappear much later). “Tertian” is the term for a two day interval between recurring malarial paroxysms and “quartan” the term for three day intervals.

⁴⁹ Mac Cottee, interview, 19 June 2001.

⁵⁰ Colin Spence, interview, 3 May 2000.

⁵¹ Colin Spence, letter to his mother, 14 November 1941.

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battalion's strength.

The AIF used quinine to prevent, treat and suppress malaria in Malaya and sought to identify one specific treatment against all the varieties and progressions of the disease. In the months before the war began, as the men gradually became conscious of how serious was the Japanese threat, some wrote of a new worry. "The only thing I am frightened about is that I may have the damned thing when the Japs come...I am pumping quinine into myself wholesale," Fuller wrote in August.⁵² Alfred Derham, ADMS (Assistant Director Medical Services) 8th Division, had drawn upon the research of J.W.Field, the expert in malaria research in Malaya, when he chose quinine as the preventative measure for the AIF. Field had concluded that despite the availability of more powerful drugs, particularly atebtrin with which he had had remarkable success when treating plantation workers, "small daily doses of quinine cause little discomfort and are probably harmless even when continued for years. Quinine still ranks first by reason of clinical effectiveness and almost complete absence of toxicity, coupled with widespread knowledge of its use and dosage...".⁵³ Derham further reasoned that atebtrin had never been tested on troops under the extreme conditions of active service. For troops who might be subject to forced marches and other extreme physical privation, the toxicity of atebtrin might prove to have a more harmful effect than quinine.⁵⁴ However, as more men fell sick, the authorities evidently increased the prescribed dosage of quinine in their effort to combat the sick wastage, with the result that the anticipated discomfort of the first few weeks did not altogether dissipate with time. In January, Fuller complained:

This damned quinine is spoiling my sleep. My bladder is letting me down badly. We are all finding it the same. I have to get up at least four times during the night. I doubt whether I can hold as

⁵² John Fuller, letter to his mother, 14 August 1941.

⁵³ From "Notes of JW Field, Senior Malaria Research Officer, FMS", quoted in A. Derham, ADMS Malaya, Medical Appreciation of pre-action period, Malaya 1941, AWM54 553/2/1.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

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much as a fountain pen nowadays. They are certainly pumping the quinine into us. We are taking 12 grains a day now.⁵⁵

It is noteworthy that Derham had written on 13 December 1941 that “all troops outside controlled areas are on suppressive Quinine 7½ grains daily” and that, as a result, there had been a steep fall in the incidence.⁵⁶ The discrepancy between Fuller’s and Derham’s claims as to the standard dosage is significant and, as Fuller was a medical student, it is unlikely that he was mistaken as to the dose that he himself swallowed and administered to others daily.

Over time, Malaya tested men’s physical health and their morale. With regard to their physical health, men did what they could after which, for most really was, to paraphrase Fuller, a matter of taking quinine, being careful and hoping for the best.⁵⁷ Perhaps the battalion had greater success in maintaining men’s morale than their physical health. Malaya, during the long months of waiting, exacted a psychological toll but for the most part the men surmounted their doubts as to their usefulness, homesickness and boredom and, although they grumbled regularly, maintained a good natured, philosophical acceptance of their situation.

When the men of the 2/18th Battalion arrived in Malaya their interest in a foreign land could not offset their disappointment at being allocated to it and from the outset they looked forward to their departure. “I must confess I am disappointed in coming here. I had hoped to go straight to the land where the fighting is in progress,” wrote Fuller on his first evening in Malaya.⁵⁸ The soldiers viewed their posting to Malaya as an untimely delay. Their expectations were that they would move on to the Middle East and they wanted to do so sooner rather than later. Months passed but they remained in Malaya. A common theme in letters written home during 1941 is the desire to leave Malaya. For a long time, the men

⁵⁵ John Fuller, letter to his mother, 15 January 1942.

⁵⁶ Derham to General Rupert M. Downes, 16 December 1941, AWM54 553/2/1.

⁵⁷ John Fuller, letter to his mother, 14 August 1941, previously directly quoted.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, letter to his parents, 20 February 1941.

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gave little credence to the likelihood of war with Japan to which, as one of many examples, Fuller's letters testify.⁵⁹ He wrote in March, "It looks as if the Jap will go right back into his shell now. I think our hopes of a go at the Japs are becoming more and more remote." In June he wrote, "It looks as if the Japs may have to do something at last. Personally I don't think they will be game." In September, he wrote "I don't think the Japs are game now. They missed their opportunity." As far as the soldiers were concerned, the real enemy, as Merv Mullins asserted, was "bitterness and frustration at being stationed in a peacetime country."⁶⁰

That the soldiers felt that "bitterness and frustration" deeply has been well documented.⁶¹ Letters written by members of the battalion read for this research project and poems printed in their magazine reveal that many soldiers vented their "bitterness and frustration" on that "peacetime country" in writing. They derided Malaya at every opportunity—

"Give the Japs Malaya! It isn't worth a Zack"⁶²

—but it was not Malaya itself but their continuing presence in Malaya that drove their hostility. Individual letters reflect personal and on-going disappointment at the posting and a general irritation with Malaya and all its parts; or at least those parts that were affecting a particular soldier as he wrote. Thus he railed against the heat and humidity, the rain and the mud, the sweating and skin problems, the jungle and any other difficult terrain, the flora, the fauna, particularly the insects that bit and stung, the people, the food, the smells, the dirt and anything else that might have caught his attention:

I hate the food, I hate the drink;

I hate the all-pervading stink

⁵⁹ John Fuller, letters to his mother, 29 March 1941, 23 June 1941, 15 September 1941.

⁶⁰ Mullins, *Birth of a Battalion: A History of the 2/18th Battalion 1940-1945*, unpaginated.

⁶¹ Wigmore, *Japanese Thrust*, p.71.

⁶² From "Our Picnic", poem attributed to "A Nurse" (Malaya), in *Men May Smoke*, Vol.1, No.7.

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Of squalid, crowded Chinatown;
Of bodies, yellow, black and brown;
Of clamorous, murky, native shops,
Of ancient fish and sundry slops;
The blend of odours unsurpassed,
where East and West have merged at last.⁶³

Complaining was the means by which the soldier relieved his frustration and regained his equilibrium. Often, and particularly in the poems and songs, it was jocular in tone, intentionally humorous, for he was laughing at himself. His disparagement of Malaya was a form of self-mockery, a continual reminder that, although he had joined the army and was now overseas, he had somehow missed the action and was not at the centre of events:

The Sixth are getting battered, the Seventh copping Hell;
The Ninth are on no picnic, they're getting theirs as well;
Whilst in the distant jungle, many miles away,
The Eighth are on a rest cure; all they do is play.⁶⁴

The knowledge that he had somehow "missed out" permeated his thoughts and certainly might at times have temporarily threatened his morale. The media, both in Australia and in Singapore, had certainly exacerbated the soldiers' "bitterness and frustration" from the outset. The men resented the label "Overseas Militia" because while it was not, in the circumstances, entirely untruthful, it was unfair. Fuller wrote: "It's not our damn fault that we are here. The sooner we get to the other side the better we will like it. You know damn well I didn't join up for this."⁶⁵ On the other hand, since their arrival in Malaya, the local papers had lavished praise upon them, promoting them as saviours. The soldiers, just as

⁶³ *Men May Smoke*, Vol.1, No.7, October 1941, unpaginated. An editor's note attributes this poem to a "Mournful Milton". The claim by R. Holmes and A. Kemp, *The Bitter End*, pp. 202-203 that it was written by an anonymous private in the RAF is probably correct.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, "Our Picnic", unpaginated.

⁶⁵ John Fuller, letter to his mother, 23 March 1941.

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powerless to prevent this form of propaganda, resented it equally. As Ned Stanton wrote in December, “A Yank wrote up in the paper the other day that the Aussies in Malaya are ‘supermen’, a bit hot don’t you think?”⁶⁶ The series of *Australian Women’s Weekly* articles published in April and May had also provided aggravation for the soldiers as well as proof that the Australian public was misinformed both as to their role and their efforts.

Nevertheless, a reading of any selection of the letters reveals that much of their grumbling was virtually automatic—it occurred almost by rote. If a more interesting topic occurred, the soldier in his letter home would quickly set his complaints aside. Generally, work and training kept the soldiers too busy to indulge their frustrations to any great extent. Leisure time activities, particularly sport, provided further outlets for pent up feelings while actual leave away from the army was always seen to “do [one] good”.⁶⁷

The Australian Government’s decision to send the 8th Division to Malaya had been based on political and military considerations. The health and morale of the soldiers had not been a factor. However, after only a few weeks in Malaya, it was clear to the doctors that the physical and mental wellbeing of the men could not be taken for granted. Derham reported that “Men are reporting sick with minor ailments which would not worry them if they did not feel physically tired and mentally fatigued.”⁶⁸ Thereafter, the Australian army instituted or endorsed numerous initiatives that, alongside the intensive training programmes, sought to maintain both the soldiers’ interest and their enthusiasm. Bennett had explicitly undertaken responsibility for this approach on behalf of the Australian government.⁶⁹ At battalion level, ultimate responsibility fell on the Commanding Officer. Varley did not minimise the effect of the enervating climate or the general disappointment at their posting, both of which, he wrote, were “apt to fray our nerves” but neither did he pander to them. His concern was to ensure the battalion’s

⁶⁶ Ned Stanton, letter to his sister, 20 December 1941.

⁶⁷ Some examples are John Fuller, letter to his mother, 14 July 1941; Merv Mullins, *History of the 2/18th Battalion 1940-1945*, unpaginated; George McLaughlin, letter to his wife, 12 May 1941; Col Spence, interview, 3 May 2000.

⁶⁸ Derham, Medical Appreciation, 29 March 1941, AWM54 553/2/1.

⁶⁹ Wigmore, *Japanese Thrust*, p.96.

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preparedness for war. Individual certainty of that readiness was fundamental to the morale of the battalion:

Our time will come, and for that event we must be always ready.

It is my bounden duty to keep this in mind. A Battalion which is thoroughly trained can perform its tasks much more expeditiously and much cheaper in casualties, and this is of primary importance to us all.⁷⁰

The Army's commitment to the health and morale of the troops depended, at any given time, upon the dispositions of individual soldiers but a measure of its success is contained in the words of one soldier of the 2/18th Battalion: "To the credit of our Command we were kept free of ever developing a siege mentality or assuming the role of garrison soldiers."⁷¹

While training and preparation for war was critical, time and facilities were allocated for organised recreational activities, leisure and individual leave. The Army sought to keep young men interested, occupied and out of trouble and used sport, in time honoured fashion, to do so. Participation in sport not only contributed to a man's sense of wellbeing. It also provided distractions from the various irritations brought about by their presence in Malaya. Sport, the Australian national pastime for participant and spectator, engendered no less interest among the soldiers of the 2/18th Battalion in Malaya than it had done at home. Boxing, football, cricket, hockey, swimming and athletics were all represented. The 2/18th Battalion had its share of renowned sporting champions of whom the Battalion, according to the battalion magazine, was extremely proud. Perhaps, being a country battalion, its greatest pride lay in the "Rough Riders", those champion horsemen from country NSW whose skills and exploits with horses and cattle had earned national admiration but for whom Malaya offered little scope. Each volume of *Men May Smoke*

⁷⁰ Arthur Varley, 2 August 1941, in *Men May Smoke*, Vol.1, No.6, June 1941. The sixth edition of *Men May Smoke*, despite its June date, was not produced until August 1941.

⁷¹ Scott, *Fair Crack of the Whip*, p.93.

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records details of the different sporting contests, the wins and losses, personal achievements and sporting injuries.

Page after page of Fuller's photograph albums provide a pictorial record of the commitment to sport. Photographs chronicle boxing, rugby and cricket matches at each level. Sections, platoons, companies and ultimately, battalions and armies—the AIF versus the British Army—vied against each other in a series of competitions. Other photographs record swimming meets held on Singapore Island and Athletics days in Malaya. The tournaments engendered enormous interest among young Australian men which is evidenced by the crowd of spectators at each event. Sport was always a temporary panacea against boredom, homesickness and general frustration. Letters home from Malaya claim that the soldier, given the choice, would have preferred fighting to football but that, given the circumstances, the sport was worthwhile. It is noteworthy that, from a study of the interviews conducted and letters of participants included in this research, those most impatient to join the AIF in the Middle East were the very young men, those under the age of 23. They thought that they were missing their “chance” and railed against what they saw as their incarceration in Malaya. For these young firebrands, the distraction of participation in a sport was perhaps the most beneficial. Those over 25 years of age—approximately half the battalion—reveal a more philosophical acceptance of the delay in their plans. They were, after all, in the army. As Bruce Munro wrote, “The war can come to me when it will, but until then, let it be. That is the opinion of most of the sensible lads.”⁷²

When the Battalion moved to Mersing where the men spent most of their time preparing defences, sport conferred the added benefit of increasing and maintaining fitness levels. And, while sport did not eradicate the general disgruntlement at being stationed in a country at peace, even among those who did not participate, it could excite a level of interest. For those involved, “away matches” allowed time away from the battalion as well as visits to different places. Sport relieved men's boredom and helped them to pass the

⁷² Bruce Munro, letter to his sister, 18 May 1941.

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time—for the 2/18th Battalion, even leisure time in Malaya moved slowly.

While men might enjoy watching and even playing a game of football or cricket, not everyone wanted to participate in organised sports and some resented their arbitrary inclusion. Spence, who was 28 at the time, remembered: “I wished they would give us the day off and let us read a book. I didn’t mind training, the physical effort of training. But training, you could see the reason for it. I never liked athletics.”⁷³ On the whole, however, the men remained tolerant of the army’s efforts to keep them occupied. It seemed that when the battalion celebrated its First Birthday in June with a party on the beach at Port Dickson—each man received a bottle of beer and a slice of cake—everyone good-naturedly joined in both the organised sports that comprised sprint races and tug-of-war competitions, and the horseplay when the officers were thrown, fully dressed, into the water. Varley wrote afterwards that “The Battalion birthday party... will ever remain a pleasant memory to me. The enthusiasm, goodwill and lightheartedness displayed by all was a fitting climax to a year’s endeavour.”⁷⁴ A holiday such as the Battalion birthday was rare and a welcome break in the relentless training schedule.

Unexpected invitations temporarily relieved the monotony of training and work for particular groups of men and acted as a reminder that new experiences were to be had in a foreign country. George McLaughlin was one of a group of officers invited to afternoon tea at the palace of the Sultan of Negri Sembilan at Kuala Pilah. He described the visit as “an experience of a life time”.⁷⁵ On another occasion, Varley took the battalion’s Rough Riders on a visit to the British Residency at Seremban. Jack Amos wrote:

Colonel Varley took Jack Carey, Les Mac, Jack Scott, Bruce Munro and myself out to look at a few horses. They belong to the wife of the British Resident here. It was quite a change to

⁷³ Colin Spence, interview, 3 May 2000.

⁷⁴ Arthur Varley, 2 August 1941, in *Men May Smoke*, Vol. 1, No. 6.

⁷⁵ George McLaughlin, letter to his wife, 13 March 1941.

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have a look at a horse again...They looked very well considering the climate.⁷⁶

In July the Battalion band went to Malacca to play at a Chinese funeral. *Men May Smoke* remembered that members of the bereaved family had “shown many kindnesses to the AIF in Malaya [and]...the CO, Lt.-Col. Varley permitted the Band to attend and so give tangible evidence of the AIF’s sympathy.”⁷⁷ After the service and procession, during which the Band played “incidental music”, lunch was held within the Cemetery. Although given a spoon and fork to eat with, the band members received chopsticks as souvenirs of the occasion. The band also played at the official welcome of Dr Earle Page at Government House in Singapore, the former prime minister who had been appointed Australia’s representative with the British war cabinet.⁷⁸

For most men and for most of the time, such extraordinary occasions did not occur and men filled their leisure time as best they could. In their first few weeks in Malaya, men used the obligatory siesta to rest, write letters, play cards or merely talk. At Port Dickson, night time entertainment included a film, shown for a nominal charge each evening, in a makeshift theatre. McLaughlin wrote that it was “an open air show with a thatched wall around it. Officers and Sergeants get a good view of the show from the balcony of the Sergeants Mess at the rear.” The picture theatre remained a feature of the 2/18th Battalion’s leisure time life style in Malaya even after the war began. When the battalion moved to Mersing, the picture show followed. Mac Cottee remembered:

Shaw Brothers put in all the latest American gear. We could get about three changes of programmes a week. All audible. Even at Mersing, we had it. In the battle lines, almost, we had our picture theatre. It was outdoors. We sat on coconut palm benches.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Jack Amos, letter to his father, May 1941, undated.

⁷⁷ *Men May Smoke*, Vol.1, No.7, October 1941, unpaginated.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Mac Cottee, interview, 19 June 2001.

THE 2/18TH BATTALION BAND IN MALAYA



Source: 2/18th Infantry Battalion Association Archives, in possession of author.

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The picture show's value lay in the temporary escape it offered from the tedium of army routine. It remained popular despite the deteriorating weather as the monsoon season began. Jimmy Darlington's letter revealed the "pros and cons" of the 2/18th Battalion's cinema:

We have the pictures now in camp. This helps to break the monotony though the films are not the latest. I find the rain at night a great disadvantage as last week three successive nights we had to leave the show owing to a deluge.⁸⁰

The defence of the Mersing area had given the AIF a real job to do but leisure time amenities beyond the camp were virtually non-existent. Being "On Duty" occupied a specific number of hours. Leisure time began with the pronouncement, delivered by an officer or sergeant, that "Men May Smoke", the phrase which gave the battalion's magazine its name. Released from duty, men produced their cigarettes or their tobacco tins and papers, their pipes, or even, but only occasionally, the Malayan cigars that came packaged in bundles of ten. The men had watched Chinese girls at the factory in Seremban roll these on their bare thighs and most preferred not to smoke them. They could buy "good English tobacco" in tins quite cheaply at the canteen—the fine cut Log Cabin and Champion or the coarse Three Nuns tobacco for their pipes. A light in tropical Malaya was sometimes as valuable as the cigarette itself—in the humid, sodden conditions a box of locally made matches might not yield a single flame. Bruce Munro (and presumably others) wrote asking for matches from home:

Next time mother sends over a parcel, could you get her to send over some waterproof match boxes, also some wax matches. The

⁸⁰ Jim Darlington, letter to Mrs. Mosher, 20 November 1941.

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matches over here are pretty awful and always get damp in the jungle.⁸¹

Some men used cigarette lighters. Spence solved the problem of refilling his by keeping it on a silver chain. Don Rs (despatch riders) obligingly allowed him to fill it by lowering it into the petrol tanks of their motorbikes.⁸² It seemed that everyone smoked.⁸³ Smoking was a pleasant, leisure time activity, a celebration of the end of or a break in a duty, a punctuation mark that separated work and free time. Men looked forward to “a smoke” as much for what it represented as for the activity itself. If it was detrimental to their physical health, it was at the same time beneficial to their morale. It was a sociable activity that served to occupy spare time.

Any diversion from the daily monotony was welcome. When Oregon Barlow, having acquired the skill through determined practice, climbed one of the big palms fringing the camp to bring down the ripe coconuts lest they come down in the monsoon winds and kill somebody, some sixty men congregated below to watch.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, there were other options beside the picture theatre for evening entertainment. Concerts were popular. So too were Private Bert Pikett’s entertaining commentaries on the war news, which he gave in the open air picture theatre. Pikett, from the Intelligence section, garnered his information from radio news, newspaper reports and the study of maps that were accessible to him in his daily work. As many as four hundred men and officers attended his lectures, including troops from other units who came considerable distances to hear him.⁸⁵ At Mersing in the evenings, men fished from banks of the Jemaluang river, the mouth of which opened to the sea at the southern end of Palm Grove and the 2/18th Battalion’s area of responsibility. Young officers banded together on hunting expeditions

⁸¹ Bruce Munro, letter to his father, 16 May 1941.

⁸² Colin Spence, telephone conversation, 10 October 2004.

⁸³ Johnston, *At the Front Line*, p.63. The army calculated that 90 percent of Australian soldiers smoked, choosing to do so in order to be sociable, to fill in time and/or to reduce stress.

⁸⁴ Oregon Barlow, manuscript, AWM MSS1446, unpaginated.

⁸⁵ *Men May Smoke*, Vol.1, No.6, June 1941, unpaginated.

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that were hampered, until after the war began, by lack of rifles and ammunition. When all else failed even conversation offered unexpected and joyful possibilities, memories of which have endured for sixty years. In hot, steaming Malaya the soldiers of the 2/18th Battalion who were, for the most part, country men and horsemen, daydreamed of going home. A conversation evolved, in which they imagined they were speaking as horses might speak, about what they would do when that time arrived. One man, no doubt suffering from the Malayan heat, said with longing that he “would roll in the frost”. The classic lines came from Arthur Kelly. He said that he would “toss his head in the air, then drop it down, give himself a shake, snort, kick his heels up, fart, and piss off.”⁸⁶ Most of the time men found ways to entertain themselves. In fact, as Cliff Olsen observed, “You could always fill in time. And there was always the canteen.”⁸⁷

The canteen was the off-duty meeting place. Men went there to have a drink, talk, read or write letters. The gamblers, too, sought to use it. Varley determined that it was a clubhouse rather than a gaming house. He ejected the gamblers:

They were playing in the canteen. You could play two-up, you could play Crown and Anchor, In and Outs, Under and Over, whatever gambling game you liked to play. Old Varley said, “Righto, you blokes. I’ve got blokes here that drink, I’ve got blokes here that gamble, I’ve got blokes that like to drink and gamble, and I’ve got blokes that just want to go into the canteen and write letters. So all you gamblers, Out!”⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Colin Spence, telephone interview, 25 September 2004.

⁸⁷ Cliff Olsen, interview, 30 May 2002.

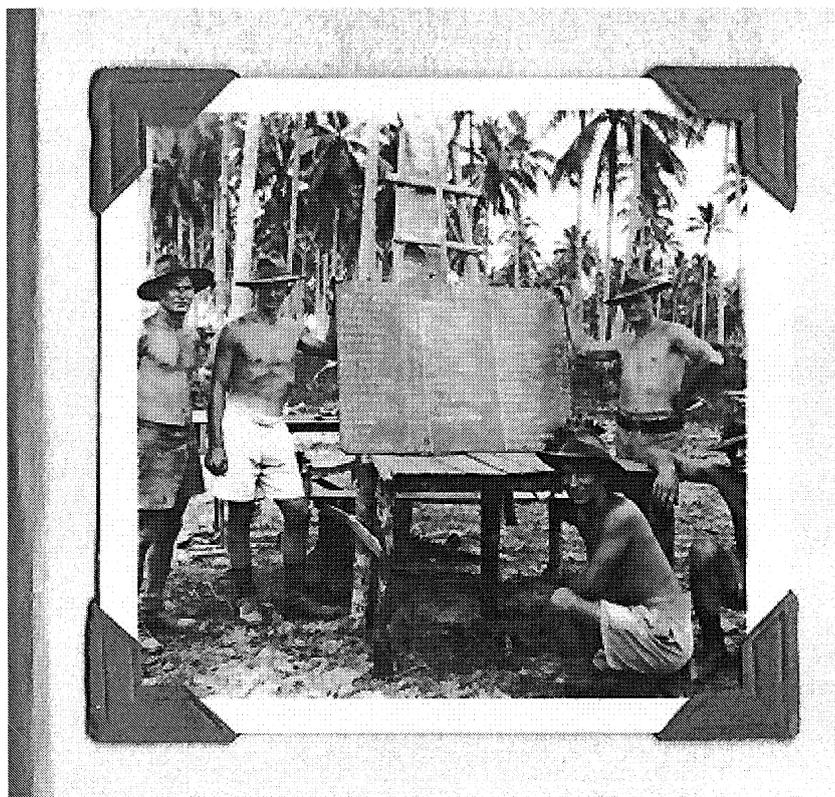
⁸⁸ Ginty Pearson, interview, 22 May 2001.

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PALM GROVE CAMP—A SNAKE CAUGHT IN THE LINES



Source: Photograph in possession of Stan O'Grady.



Source: John Fuller's diarised photograph album Volume 3, in possession of author

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At Varley's direction, a circular space was roped off outside the canteen where gambling might take place. Tilley lanterns cast enough light over the area. Tables were set up for the wheels and boards. For large numbers of men, gambling was the chief leisure time occupation. Among them, quite large sums of money changed hands regularly. Others avoided it altogether. Cliff Olsen's gambling experience was hardly encouraging:

I remember I won—the fellows, my pals, were pretty broke at the time—and I won nearly \$100. I think it was Odds and Evens. And Greenie said, "Well, give me some money, quick." I gave him \$10 and he raced up to the canteen to buy some beer and when he came back, he said, "We'll get some more now, before it closes." And I said, "You can't. I'm broke." I had had nearly \$100 and the boys got real cranky because I only gave them 10 to go up and get the beer, and when they came back, I was broke.⁸⁹

While many men had no interest in gambling, the monotony of their existence isolated in the wilds of eastern Malaya was such that any unusual event could be relied on to pique their interest. Hence the 1941 Melbourne Cup engendered immense discussion among the soldiers of the 2/18th Battalion. A book was run by some of the Rough Riders—the odds that they offered, listed on a board in the gambling area, were dependent on their knowledge of the contestants' blood lines since daily newspaper form was not available. The punters, too, applied whatever knowledge of horseracing that they had. In November, Cup Fever gripped:

The Melbourne Cup is the main topic of interest here at the moment. You can bet as much as you like and the odds are good.

⁸⁹ Cliff Olsen, interview, 30 May 2002.

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Should Son of Auris, Saul or Velocity win, I will be about 6 or £7 better off. And not very much out if they don't.⁹⁰

However, the bookmakers' superior knowledge prevailed. When Skipton won the race, they "cleaned up".

The men sought other pastimes with which to occupy themselves in the camp, not all of which, at least one man acknowledged, were admirable:

Maybe we are getting a little depraved mentally. And a bit sadistic like. Our latest fad is matching spiders and scorpions in mortal combat. In one fight which lasted for ten minutes, the spider, a huge one we caught in the jungle with fur ¼ inch long, had the scorpion beaten, having gripped it behind the head with its huge nippers. The scorpion in its death struggles managed to bring its tail over and sting the spider to death. Both the contestants died. Honours were equal.⁹¹

Perhaps it was such activities that lay behind Private Ned Stanton's comment that "Half the poor cows are jungle happy."⁹² Frayed nerves, irritability, homesickness, even bouts of depression were not unknown, but Private Cliff Olsen was adamant that any man who exhibited signs of being "troppo" was faking. "They were having it on... They were putting on big acts that they were mental to make sure that they were sent back home."⁹³

The Australian soldiers were always ready to be diverted. Their ready sense of humour gave rise to two episodes during the months at Mersing that provided entertainment and good natured amusement. The first came about in response to criticism from British Command. The salute, which had been all but abandoned by the 2/18th Battalion except in the most formal of circumstances, was reinstated. Fuller told the tale

⁹⁰ George McLaughlin, letter to his wife, 3 November 1941.

⁹¹ Alan Black, letter to his parents, 24 November 1941.

⁹² Ned Stanton, letter to his sister, 20 December 1941.

⁹³ Cliff Olsen, interview, 30 May 2002.

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of the men's reaction in a letter home:

In order to concede to the vanity of our English friends, saluting of officers has been made compulsory. Saluting had long been forgotten—it's a pity they don't drop it altogether—and now it's on, and how! The boys don't give us any respite...Everywhere we go we hear the click of heels as someone springs to the salute...Every time an officer returns a salute, the boys call it a "scalp". The sentry outside Battalion HQ at the moment has 17 "scalps". I am Orderly Officer tonight so my scalp will have been taken a dickens of a lot before the evening is over...⁹⁴

The second episode began with "*Murty's Dog*" and spread from the 2/18th Battalion to a greater or lesser extent throughout the AIF. *Murty*⁹⁵ was a member of the 2/18th, one who did not feel that he was part of the team and whose sole objective was to be returned home as an undesirable. In this endeavour he was endlessly thwarted. While he could at no stage have been considered an asset of the battalion, the officers whose prerogative it was to decide his fate had determined to keep him. This was despite the fact that, in Fuller's words, "He has tried going AWOL, causing disturbances, drunkenness, laziness and so far has failed. His latest trick is pretending to be off his head."⁹⁶ *Murty's* creativity had resulted in an imaginary dog, one that accompanied him everywhere and which needed to be fed, exercised and groomed at appropriate times. Rumour had it that, when summoned to the CO's presence, he kept that officer waiting while he tied the dog's lead to his chair. *Murty* convinced no one that he was "troppo":

The whole thing has become the joke of the camp and its inventor has had his own joke turned on him. The other night on going to bed he found a collar and chain tied to his bed and a

⁹⁴ John Fuller, letter to his mother, 17 August 1941.

⁹⁵ *Murty*. His name has been changed.

⁹⁶ John Fuller, letter to his mother, 17 August 1941.

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dish of water at the foot of it. On getting into bed he found it all wet. Everyone blamed the "dog".⁹⁷

Murty's Dog began a new craze which, according to Fuller, "did a lot to lighten life." Entering with gusto into the charade, some troops organised a greyhound meeting with bookies, officials, punters and, naturally, imaginary dogs. The craze spread through the AIF and was written up in the newspapers, one article even appearing in the Australian press.⁹⁸

Despite having begun the craze, *Murty* had no joy from it. *Bluey Greig* borrowed the dog idea for himself and succeeded, finally, in his bid to be repatriated.⁹⁹ Safely home, he sent *Murty* a card, on which were printed words now famous in the 2/18th Battalion's memory: "You invented the dog and I rode it home." Both occurrences added zest to the monotony of life and work on Malaya's east coast. Borrowing the words of *Men May Smoke's* editor, it had all been good fun and a tonic for jaded nerves. The editor settled, finally, any doubts as to battalion morale: "While the troops can make their own fun in this manner, there is not much danger of them being seriously affected by their stay in Malaya."¹⁰⁰

If their morale was firmly intact, army leave always provided an extra boost to the spirits. Freed from the restraints of army regulations and training schedules, AIF soldiers became tourists in a foreign land, experiencing the East in their different ways as they ranged across Malaya and Singapore. Richard White makes the point that tourism was, in a sense, forced on the Australian soldiers, for, unlike their British counterparts on leave from the trenches of the western front in the First World War, leave for AIF soldiers abroad generally never meant going home and being with family.¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, on leave, a soldier regained some of the sense of personal control that he had lost when he enlisted—

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Telegraph*, 25 October 1941.

⁹⁹ *Bluey Greig*. His name has been changed.

¹⁰⁰ *Men May Smoke*, Vol.1, No.7, October 1941, unpaginated.

¹⁰¹ Richard White, "The Soldier as Tourist" in *War & Society*, Vol.5, No.1, (May 1987), p.67.

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its restoration, for some men, was the true value of leave: “You have a certain amount of privacy when you get away from the army. The further you got away from it, the better.”¹⁰²

At first, at Port Dickson, leave was limited to a few hours locally or to a single day in the nearest larger town, Seremban. A fortnight after their arrival in Malaya, Corporals Roger McGee and Charles Cruikshank caught a special round trip leave train to Seremban and back. Although they enjoyed the break from training and the army generally, they had found it difficult to fill the hours until midnight.¹⁰³ As the soldiers came to know Malaya better, leave time was more easily occupied.

A man might choose to spend his leave either in a large group or with just one or two friends. The members of larger groups found it easier to stay in one place—usually a popular venue, such as the races in Kuala Lumpur or a hotel in Seremban or Singapore—and drink with each other. Drinks in Malaya and Singapore were dangerously strong and the men learned that imported spirits were the safest choice. According to Alan Black, “Whisky and gin are the two best drinks in this country. The beer...is not too good and the imported beer is terrifically full of arsenic or something. It sends the boys mad and then they start to break up everything in sight.”¹⁰⁴ As Munro wrote after having spent a number of leaves in such company, “Shepherding fellows that don’t know how to drink is too much trouble, especially here where the drinks are potent, and drinking entirely different to Australia.” He argued that such groups “never get away from where the majority go. They are not able to meet the people or see the country.”¹⁰⁵

In small groups or pairs, the dynamics changed. Those soldiers who received them valued their invitations to private houses. Acquaintanceship with local people—at Port Dickson and Seremban and when on leave elsewhere about the country—might occur by chance. Pearson remembered his meeting with Mr Darby, the superintendent of Customs at

¹⁰² Colin Spence, interview, 3 May 2000.

¹⁰³ Roger McGee, letter to his mother, 2 March 1941.

¹⁰⁴ Alan Black, letter to his parents, 19 July 1941.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

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Port Dickson. “We were going to the Seru Serin. It was like a beer garden and restaurant about four miles out of Port Dickson. This car pulled up, he, the driver, wondered who we were, he asked us would it be all right if his boy came and picked us up and took us out for the week end...”.¹⁰⁶ Fuller wrote that he enjoyed afternoon tea at a private home in Kuala Lumpur. “They were a young Chinese couple with three small children, and were very charming hosts. The afternoon tea was excellent, Mrs Tan Yu Chong was a perfect hostess, their home was very beautiful.”¹⁰⁷ Spence wrote of a visit to a rubber estate. “The part of the estate our host managed was about 3000 acres...It was quite an enjoyable day, as we had good meals and a hot bath—the first we had had in this country.”¹⁰⁸

Such visits had the added advantage that they cost nothing. Army pay, especially for those married men who had signed most of it over to their wives at home, was inadequate to cope with the expenses that would be incurred on a weekend’s leave in one of the big cities. As Black observed, “It is hard to go anywhere here without running through a terrific amount of money. Living for the white man is dear, although the native race exists on practically nothing.”¹⁰⁹ The Army helped out to ensure that all men were able to take advantage of their leave. Australian soldiers could stay in subsidised accommodation such as the Anzac Hostel in Singapore and 2/18th men who could not otherwise have afforded to go found themselves there anyway, allocated to light picket duties and plenty of free time.

For the enthusiastic soldier-tourist, Malaya and Singapore offered much. War did not appear to be imminent despite the uniforms on the ground and the aeroplanes in the air. “The fighter planes fly that fast that they have gone past before you can say boo and the bombers are much bigger than you have ever seen,” wrote Private Gordon Blair to his young brother in October.¹¹⁰ Blair had arrived with the 3rd Reinforcement Company in

¹⁰⁶ Ginty Pearson, interview, 22 May 2001.

¹⁰⁷ John Fuller, letter to his parents, 7 April 1941.

¹⁰⁸ Colin Spence, letter to his parents, 14 July 1941.

¹⁰⁹ Alan Black, letter to his father, 22 May 1941.

¹¹⁰ Gordon Blair, letter to his brother, 5 October 1941.

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PAHANG

This was Fuller's own map (a 1931 railway map) on which he traced his and Warden's journey around Pahang in November 1941.



Source: Map in possession of author.

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August and was training at the GBD in Johore Bahru under Colonel Jeater while waiting to join the battalion at Mersing. The men of the 2/18th Battalion explored the streets and visited the sites. In Singapore, Hawpar Villa, the home of “a fabulously wealthy Chinese who made all his money out of ointment of his own invention called ‘Tiger Balm’”,¹¹¹ impressed many although one man wrote it was “just the kind of place a ‘nouveau riche’ would build to impress the neighbours.”¹¹² “Change Alley”, a narrow lane of stalls, was a must. They visited the Singapore Zoo. At night the soldiers went to the famous dance halls—The New World and Great World Caberets. Raffles Hotel, the most famous and most expensive of the hotels, was, when the 2/18th first arrived, open to all. The ultimate symbol of glamour and wealth in Singapore’s British colonial society, it incorporated the most stylish accommodation, the most elegant restaurants and bars and the most select shops which sold the most expensive gewgaws. In one, Munro, on leave in May, was almost tempted to buy for his mother the ultimate present, a solid gold, collapsible swizzle stick! He compromised with a drink at a bar and was, his letter suggests, less impressed than Singapore society might have expected him to be.

Soldiers did not confine their leave to the cities. The Cameron Highlands offered respite from the heat and all the amenities. Other men, more adventurous, set out to explore the country. In November, Fuller and Warden chose to spend their week of leave travelling through the country north of Mersing, the state of Pahang. They went first to Rompin by boat and there spent a day exploring, fishing and hunting along the Rompin River. However, the next day, because of the rising monsoon winds and waves, they failed to persuade any of Rompin’s boat owners to put out to sea. There was no road so they walked the thirty-odd miles along the beach to Kuala Nenasik where they managed to persuade a boatman to take them to Kuantan. From Kuantan they travelled by local buses through the mountains via Jeremut and Raub, eventually arriving at Frazers Hill where

¹¹¹ John Fuller, letter to his mother, 3 July 1941.

¹¹² Colin Spence, letter to his parents, 9 August 1941.

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they revelled in the cool crisp conditions. From there, they were fortunate enough to be offered a lift to Malacca by way of Seremban and Port Dickson. At Malacca they hired a taxi which took them south to Muar and then on to the east-west highway through Kluang to Jemaluang and back to camp.

Leave was always valued and always too short. Nevertheless, all soldiers appreciated that it raised their spirits and their enthusiasm. Time and again the expression “It did me good” or a variation of it appears when the men refer to leave in their letters home. The pace of training and work in the 2/18th Battalion had not relented during the whole year. Surviving members of the 2/18th Battalion believed that the troops who arrived in Singapore with the 27th Brigade in August were not trained or worked as hard as they had been, a view supported by Russell Braddon’s description of his months on Singapore Island before the war.¹¹³ The men welcomed any break in their grinding routine and that break certainly raised individual morale. Battalion morale was not in question—the battalion’s *esprit de corps*, the sense of belonging to the team, the knowledge that every man was “in the same boat” and the sense of purpose that had come with the battalion’s assignment to Mersing, had all combined to promote a feeling of community esteem. By the end of November 1941, when war was imminent and all troops on leave in Singapore were recalled to camp, the men were acclimatised, fit, proud of the defences they had erected and, in Fuller’s words, “in a state of preparedness”. He continued:

The boys’ attitude is amazing. They are like a mob of kids and are as pleased as punch in the world in general. You would think it was going home day the way they are all joking and laughing and working.¹¹⁴

On 7 December 1941, the war with Japan began. The simmering excitement that

¹¹³ Braddon, *The Naked Island*, pp.39-62. However, Bradden’s experiences, as an artilleryman, must have been different from those of the infantry. And, while surviving members of the 2/18th Battalion believe this, members of the 27th Brigade would not share this view.

¹¹⁴ John Fuller, letter to his mother, 1 December 1941.

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Fuller had described a week earlier had progressed to an almost tangible confidence and expectation. He wrote:

I wouldn't be out of this place for a million pounds. Everyone is in a state of supreme calm. It is the most amazing and wonderful atmosphere I have ever experienced. It just shows what really is in our boys though they may be "rough and untidy". No one appears excited. The only thing different is that atmosphere.¹¹⁵

The battalion left their camp and went to their posts in the jungle. The men's first major wartime activity was to build new quarters. "We've been doing a lot of pick and shovel work the last few days and it's pretty hard...But we're digging for our own comfort and so it's worth it," wrote Les Stanton.¹¹⁶ Digging done, they turned to improving their dugouts or tents. The townspeople had evacuated Mersing, taking with them only what they could carry. Spence wrote:

When all the civilians were evacuated from this area, the coves got busy on the leavings. One section I visited had a netting fowl run with twenty chooks, a bag of fowl feed, a couple of alarum clocks and more pig than they could eat. I heard from them of other coves—one had a double bed and mattress, another a chiming clock, a third, being musical, had a small pedal organ in his.¹¹⁷

The largesse obtained from the abandoned township did much to alter the soldiers' lifestyle, inspiring new interests and excitements. Their diet changed. "The boys have been living on suckling pig and poultry almost entirely since we have been at our posts."¹¹⁸ They became inventive. The Mortar Platoon, having obtained domestic pigeons that they

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, letter to his father, 9 December 1941.

¹¹⁶ Les Stanton, letter to his sister, December 1941.

¹¹⁷ Colin Spence, letter to his mother, 28 December 1941.

¹¹⁸ John Fuller, letter to his mother, 31 December 1941.

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meant to eat, experimented instead, successfully, with a carrier pigeon service.¹¹⁹ The RMO “stripped down” two rickshaws and fitted the wheels to stretchers, thereby speeding up the work of his stretcher bearers.¹²⁰ Officers Hence and Crago took the engine from an old Ford car and used it to generate electric light.¹²¹ Captain Mosher invented a rat trap and delighted in its effectiveness.¹²²

That the war had finally come to Malaya acted as a tonic for the troops of the 2/18th Battalion. Not even the monsoon rains—“It is raining practically the whole time. The result is that we walk around perpetually in about 4 inches of slush”¹²³—could dampen the newly raised spirits. Although the fighting was far to the north and the 2/18th Battalion, at battle stations, was still waiting its turn to join in, a new zest for the job at hand permeated the camp. Fuller observed in a letter written on 14 December, “I never thought the Australians could take things so seriously. Everyone is on his toes and there is no longer any growling about too much work.”¹²⁴ Weeks passed. The New Year brought to the camp news of further Allied losses in the north, more rain and, in mid-January, enemy bombing raids. The Japanese moved closer. Fuller wrote to his brother, “Some pretty solid fighting is taking place in the Gemas and Muar districts. I have been to all these places and I know them well. I am glad that I went on that trip north with George Warden in November. All the ground we covered is now in enemy hands.”¹²⁵ Despite the enemy’s successes, to Fuller, at least, the men’s confidence appeared to be unaffected. He wrote, “The boys could not be in better spirits and the reverses the other British troops are having seems to do nothing more than augment their sublime Australian confidence.”¹²⁶

For the troops of the 2/18th Battalion, the long period of waiting, during which they trained and laboured with no immediate prospect of joining in the war for which they

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, letter to his mother, 16 December 1941.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 17 December 1941.

¹²² Ken Mosher, letter to his wife, 2 January 1942.

¹²³ John Fuller, letter to his mother, 17 December 1941.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, letter to his mother, 14 December 1941.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, letter to his brother, 21 January 1942.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, letter to his father, 15 January 1942.

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had enlisted, was drawing to a close. The war was now at hand and they would play their part. Until he was actually fighting, no man could tell how he personally would react to battle. He was, nevertheless, acclimatised to the tropics, personally committed, ready and confident of his own physical and technical abilities. The battalion itself had been shaped and moulded by the combined efforts of all its personnel to achieve its present state of readiness. For the most part, those who were discernibly unfit—whether physically or mentally—for the work ahead had gone. The battalion was a streamlined organisation that was ready to take its place in the front line.

Chapter Six— The Battalion and the “Orient”

For the men of the 2/18th Battalion, learning about Malaya meant learning about the people as well as the terrain. They themselves comprised one separate group in Malaya’s pluralistic society. Naturally, they came into contact with people from other groups. They encountered servicemen from other units—British, Indian and Malay, as well as civilians—Britons and other Europeans, Malays, Chinese, Indians, Eurasians, Japanese, Jews and Arabs, each group separate and distinct. In so doing they were exposed to aspects of the variety of different cultures that operated side by side in Malaya. From the outset, Lieutenant-Colonel Varley explicitly demanded from his men a standard of behaviour in their dealings with the Malayan population commensurate with an ambassadorial role—“By our deeds our country shall be judged.”¹ As ambassadors not only of Australia but also of the British Empire, their behaviour was to be exemplary—Varley would tolerate nothing less—and, more particularly, they were to do nothing that might damage the prestige of the white man among the “coloured” peoples.

The Australians generally had no quarrel with the imperial concept. Moreover, they acknowledged the distinction between “white” and “coloured” races—after all, both Australia’s major political parties endorsed the White Australia Policy. Nevertheless, how the men of the 2/18th Battalion responded to people from any particular group in Malayan society throughout 1941 depended as much upon their own social and cultural characteristics as on orders that had emanated from above. Theirs was the first experience of a Southeast Asian neighbour for a large group of Australians. Their contribution to that experience was the ease with which they interrelated with the different people in Malaya. The men applied their own brand of social intercourse and diplomacy, and the responses

¹ Varley quoted in *Men May Smoke*, Vol.1 No.3, February 1941, unpaginated.

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they evoked from the different elements in Malayan society, although they included criticism as well as admiration, were generally positive.

The Australian soldiers who travelled aboard *HMS Queen Mary* in February 1941 had much to learn, if they so wished, about their destination. Probably many of them already knew that Malaya comprised a strategically situated peninsula and adjacent islands. Britain had incorporated this land into her empire by establishing relationships with the local rulers of the communities along its rivers. Thereafter, the British had maintained their association with the Malayan aristocracy. The soldiers would learn that, over time, Britain had established different styles of administration depending upon the particular circumstances in the different areas. Each district was run by a British Resident while the British Governor presided over them all from Singapore. British Malaya included the directly ruled colonies (the Straits Settlements—Singapore, Penang and Malacca,); the Federated Malay States (Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan and Pahang); and the Unfederated Malay States (Johore, Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Trengganu). At no stage did the British or the people who lived there regard “Malaya” as a nation state—it was, to paraphrase historian Paul Kratoska, a loosely integrated collection of territories which made up a “fragment” of the empire.² As such, Malaya did not need to be self-sufficient. Its purpose was to export a small range of primary products—notably, since the turn of the century, rubber and tin—for the benefit of the empire while it imported rice and labour.³

The soldiers might learn, too, that the jungle and the unhealthy climate of this “fragment” of the British Empire had always limited its population growth. In 1850 the population of British Malaya was probably less than half a million, comprising mostly

² Paul H. Kratoska, “Country Histories and Writing in Southeast Asian History”, in *New Terrains in Southeast Asian History*, Abu Talib and Tan Liok Ee (eds), Singapore, 2003, pp.109-110.

³ *Ibid.*, p.111.

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Malays but also Chinese and Indians in the Straits Settlements.⁴ Nearly a hundred years later it had increased tenfold.⁵ The British had employed immigration on a grand scale in order to develop the land and had encountered little local opposition in doing so. They had shored up wealth, prestige and position of the traditional Malay aristocracy which, in return, acquiesced in the immigration policies and measures that limited the development of both aspirations and discontent in the vast majority of its people.⁶ The Malays continued to live in their small, picturesque villages (*kampongs*) and farm their land or fish as they had always done. The British, seeking to protect them, instituted policies designed to maintain their traditional and leisurely lifestyle. Educational policy, for example, was designed to make them better farmers and fishermen and so provided them with only a few years of rudimentary education in the Malay language.⁷ However, the unforeseen consequence of the British approach was that, as the new western style economy took shape, the Malays, forced from near self-sufficiency to a cash economy, sank into poverty.⁸

Immigration into Malaya under British auspices encompassed three main racial groups, Malays, Chinese and Indians. Malays came from Java and Sumatra and other nearby islands. They assimilated comparatively easily with the local Malays for they had common linguistic and religious ties. It was their absorption into the Malay community that allowed the Malay proportion of the population to keep pace with that of the Chinese.⁹ Most of the Chinese and Indians came to Malaya as temporary labour. Despite contrary evidence, the British persisted in regarding them all as transients who would eventually return to their homelands. This being the case, the British were able to ignore, for example,

⁴ T.H.Silcock and Ungku Abdul Aziz, "Nationalism in Malaya", Secretariat Paper No.8, Conference of the Institute of Pacific Relations at Lucknow October 1950, p.1.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Butcher, *The British in Malaya, 1880-1941: the social history of a European community in colonial South-East Asia*, Kuala Lumpur, 1979, pp.8-9.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁸ Chai Hon-Chan, *The Development of British Malaya 1896-1909*, Kuala Lumpur, , 1964, pp.273-278.

⁹ Silcock, "Nationalism in Malaya", p.2.

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the overcrowding and squalor of the towns.¹⁰ Although many immigrants were, indeed, repatriated, others prospered, settled permanently and, as women arrived from their home countries, married. Restrictions were placed upon Chinese immigrant men from 1930, but not upon Chinese immigrant women until 1938, which helped to balance the sex ratio.¹¹ With other ethnic groups and even within their own, Chinese and Indians immigrants often had few if any cultural ties—they often spoke different dialects, held different religious beliefs and practised different customs. Nevertheless, the historian V. Purcell, who described Malaysia as an “ethnographical museum”, insisted that the barriers between the different ethnic groups were religious and social rather than racial, and that it would be a mistake to believe that intermarriage did not occur.¹²

The Chinese came to Malaya as either traders or labourers. Traders often became shop owners and ran businesses. Chinese labourers cleared land for estates, built roads and buildings, mined tin and did other heavy contract work.¹³ The first Indians in Singapore were convicts brought by Britain to build the colony. Traders came and also a substantial number of educated civil servants originally from Ceylon who worked for the administration. However, the main influx of Indian immigration occurred from the last quarter of the nineteenth century when labour was required on the rubber plantations, regular work to which indentured Tamils from south India proved more amenable than the Chinese.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the impact of the Chinese predominated over that of their Indian counterparts in the development of Malaya, despite the government’s closer official ties with India and its preference for Indians on the rubber estates.¹⁵ By 1938 the population of Malaya and Singapore was estimated at a little over 5¼ million; the Chinese and Malays

¹⁰ J. Gullick, *Malaya*, London, 1963, p.67.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.64.

¹² V. Purcell, *Memoirs of a Malayan Official*, London, 1965, p.14.

¹³ Silcock, “Nationalism in Malaya”, pp. 3-4 and 6-7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.3-4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*,p.3.

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being roughly equal at 42% each, the Indians 14%, and the rest—the Europeans, Eurasians, the aboriginals, the Japanese and any others—making up the final 4%.¹⁶

The government’s failure to recognise that permanent settlement was taking place among Malaya’s Chinese and Indian immigrants was to its own advantage. It could deny Chinese and Indian immigrants the citizenship and other rights it gave to Malay immigrants and thereby avoid arousing Malay opposition.¹⁷ It was saved the responsibility and expense of integrating even those who were locally born into the wider Malayan society.¹⁸ William Roff argued that not recognising the trend to permanent settlement suited the British government because the distinctions of occupation, ethnic origin and cultural similarity or dissimilarity between the separate communities justified its own role as the society’s “arbitrators and adjudicators”.¹⁹ Its promotion of the distinction among the different groups in Malayan society lends support to the charge that the British administration actively pursued a policy of “divide and rule”; for the upshot of many of its administrative, education, land and labour policies was to reinforce the segregation and even to encourage friction.²⁰ Whether it was intentional or not, the government’s policies had the effect of promoting interracial jealousy, thwarting population integration and stultifying political development. Malaya epitomised the definition of a plural society in that its different social groups, each separated from the others along ethnic, religious, class and economic lines, and living side by side but not mingling, were nevertheless contained within a single political unit imposed by British rule.²¹

¹⁶ Morrison, *Malayan Postscript*, p.19. Morrison gives the December 1938 estimate of the population of Malaya, including Singapore, as Total-5,278,866 comprising Chinese-2,220,244; Malays-2,210,867; Indians-743,555; Europeans-28,211; Aboriginals-30,000; Eurasians-18,310; Japanese-7,951; Miscellaneous-19,728. The percentages are taken from these figures.

¹⁷ William Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, London, 1967, p. 110.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ M. Tourres, “The Politics of Multiculturalism”, *IIAS Newsletter* No. 30, March 2003, p.34, www.iias.nl/iiasn/newslet.html, [accessed 2 October 2003].

²¹ *Ibid.* Tourres quotes J.S. Furnivall’s definition of a plural society which is one in which “two or more elements or social orders which live side by side,

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For the soldiers of the 8th Division, understanding the composition of the population was for the future. Their Asian experience began as their ship steamed up the Straits to the Singapore dock. The men “gazed in wonder” at the panorama of sampans, tropical vegetation and native buildings as it unfolded along the shore.²² However, according to the 2/18th Battalion diarist, it was the Singapore Naval Base rather than this exotic vista that had the men on board the ship “agog with excitement”.²³ For more than a decade, the Base had been “news” in Australia.²⁴ It was responsible for the protection of British possessions in the region and thus for Australian defence. It symbolised the power of the Empire of which Australia was part. The troops would have preferred not to be part of the garrison that protected it, but they nevertheless recognised the importance of its being maintained, for Australia and for the Empire. Consequently, and for the most part quite unconsciously, they identified, as had the first AIF in Egypt in 1914, if not with the British themselves, then with Britain’s imperial interests and therefore with the colonial system that “divided the world into British, foreign and native”.²⁵

Before the 2/18th Battalion’s departure from Australia, an article entitled “The Mystic East” in *Men May Smoke* had announced: “The East, with its mysteries and smells, is before us.”²⁶ The article pondered the whereabouts of the battalion’s first overseas posting, including photographs of possible Asian destinations that ranged from Egypt in the “Near East” to Singapore in the “Far East”. The pictures in the magazine were stereotypical Asian scenes—the desert with pyramids, a river with sampans, camels, palm trees and temples—with which, through books, film and travel stories, Australians were familiar. 2/18th Battalion men were familiar, too, with Asian people as, for example, with

yet without mingling, in one political unit”; See also Butcher, *British in Malaya 1880-1941*, p.173. Butcher states that “The FMS was a classic example of what Furnivall called a ‘plural society’.”

²² *Men May Smoke*, Vol.1, No.5, May 1941, unpaginated.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Richard White, “Sun, Sand and Syphilis: Australian Soldiers and the Orient: Egypt 1914”, *Australian Perceptions of Asia in Australian Cultural History*, No.9, 1990, p.50.

²⁶ *Men May Smoke*, Vol.1, No.1, Dec. 1940, p.12.

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the Chinese whose businesses were a feature of New South Wales townships.²⁷ Chinese had been present in Australia from the first half of the nineteenth century.²⁸ Most had intended to return home and eventually did, but others would arrive to take their places.²⁹ At first they had come as indentured labour to work on pastoral properties; later most came to mine gold; but some entered different trades and services in order to provide food, clothing, medicine and equipment for their fellow countrymen.³⁰ These Chinese tended to settle permanently in Australia. It was in their or their descendants' cafes and general stores or as they purchased medicines from the Chinese herbalist or bought fruit and vegetables from the Chinese market gardeners that the men of the 2/18th Battalion and their families had encountered the Chinese in the townships at home. The men were aware, too, that, whatever their destination, they would experience different Asian “smells”, which, whether pleasant or repulsive, would be redolent of culture that was different from their own. The article's allusion to “mysteries” conjured for the soldiers images and even fantasies of “the Orient” with which they were also familiar—the Oriental tale, the mythology of the mysterious East, the notions of Asian inscrutability.³¹ They knew about these things because, in the words of historian Richard White, “[the Orient] is less a place in the East than part of a discourse in the West”.³² That discourse, Orientalism, had portrayed for some four hundred years, a vast “other” culture—the Orient—that was distinguished by its difference from and, especially, by its inferiority to European culture.³³ Indeed, the distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority is fundamental to the concept of Orientalism.³⁴ It was in this difference that the western idea of the East's enduring mystery lay, for Orientalism, which is, in essence, a European literary or textual

²⁷ Janis Wilton, *Golden Threads: The Chinese in Regional New South Wales 1850-1950*, Armidale NSW, 2004, pp.18, 26-27, 38, 41.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.10.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.9.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

³¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, London, 1995 (1983), p.52.

³² Richard White, “Sun Sand and Syphilis”, p.50.

³³ Said, *Orientalism*, p.42.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

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tradition, had only ever considered the Orient from the European perspective.³⁵

Consequently, in the imaginings of western minds, the Orient and its people retained their inscrutability—they could not be understood and were therefore a mystery.³⁶ It is likely that, from within the discourse of Orientalism, the image of the East might still hold for the soldiers of the 2/18th Battalion its allure of mystery.³⁷ On the other hand, the Orient’s perceived inferiority, which the West equated to weakness, justified Britain’s control and exploitation of her empire.³⁸ The tradition of European Orientalism had provided the rationale for British colonialism throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.³⁹

Therefore, in British Malaya, the administration operated on the behalf of the empire and at the same time its policies ensured the continued inferior status of the Asian population, both local and immigrant. “European” society could therefore apply to the vast majority of people living in Malaya blanket, stereotypical labels such as “native” or “Asiatic”. Having done so, with very few exceptions, it usually ignored them.⁴⁰ The consequences of this approach were ignorance and lack of understanding but not hostility between the rulers and the ruled.⁴¹ The “European” society in Singapore and Malaya remained complacently secure in its “European” superiority throughout 1941 despite growing awareness of the threat of the Japanese.⁴² Not even the Japanese invasion could shake its confidence in what has since been fittingly called “Europe’s collective day dream of the Orient”.⁴³

On board their ship, the Australians were probably unconcerned with such issues. For them, their posting to Malaya was an untimely delay but not a cancellation of their plans to join the main body of the AIF in the Middle East. They were not tourists in the true sense of the word—they had not travelled for the sake of what they might see—but

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.23 and p.12.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.42.

³⁷ White, “Sun Sand and Syphilis”, p.50.

³⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, p.44.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.39-41.

⁴⁰ Attiwill, *Singapore Story*, pp.20-21.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Leason, *Singapore: The Battle that Changed the World*, pp.116-117.

⁴³ V. G. Kiernan, quoted in Said, *Orientalism*, p.52.

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now, in the interim and destined for a country at peace, most were keen to see and experience what they could.⁴⁴ The ship berthed, Singapore’s great naval dockyard was spread out below, and, beyond its gates, the “Mystic East” beckoned.

The troops’ first experience of the East was therefore not with the Orient *per se* but with British servicemen and all the splendour of ceremony and speech making that the British colony could muster for the occasion. To the great Naval Base, in order to welcome the Australians, came British officialdom, represented by the Governor, Sir Shenton Thomas, his acolytes and numerous senior officers and men from the various services. A “medley of uniforms”, indicative of the variety of units serving in Singapore and Malaya under British Command, swarmed on the dock, and a British military band played as the great ship berthed. The scene encapsulated traditional British pomp and fanfare, and proved an irresistible invitation to Australian troops who lined the decks above. They tossed coins down to the dignitaries below, in cheerful parody of peacetime cruise ship passengers who tossed coins to dark skinned “natives” in exotic ports. Merv Mullins recorded that the troops enthusiastically cheered a senior British officer who good-naturedly picked up and pocketed a coin.⁴⁵ Their cheers for him contrasted starkly to the jeers with which they greeted the “Red Caps”, the British Military police.⁴⁶

While the Australian soldiers watched the scene below them, they too were on view, displaying some of the characteristics that had marked their predecessors in the First AIF. They had revealed their irreverence and their irrepressible humour. Now, as they filed down the gangplanks, they also demonstrated their efficiency. Disembarkation was orderly and speedily accomplished—the men marched through the gates and into the “mysterious East” where they were welcomed by cheering crowds.⁴⁷ An American reporter from *Time*

⁴⁴ White, “The Soldier as Tourist”, p.63, gives this definition of a tourist and adds that “They find in what they see a representation of ‘the other’.”

⁴⁵ Mullins, *Birth of a Battalion: A History of the 2/18th Battalion*, unpaginated.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Telegraph*, 21 February 1941.

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magazine, perhaps less impressed and certainly less effusive than his Singaporean counterparts, summed up their demeanour as “cocky”.⁴⁸

That first encounter with the British, even before the Australians had set foot on Singapore’s shore, established the relations that would ensue between the British and Australian military during the next twelve months. At the official level were the speeches glorifying the “unity of the Empire...in the common cause”; admiration of and gratitude for the new arrivals whose very presence would deter an enemy invasion; and promises of friendliness and cooperation.⁴⁹ At the grassroots level was the antagonism that flared instantly between the Australians and the British MPs, and, if it was not quite antagonism, a consciousness of difference between the Australian and British forces generally. Mullins opined that the British troops resented the prominence given to the Australians by the media. “They were pushed into the background. Some British troops had spent ten to fifteen years in the Far East and they did not receive any publicity.”⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the Australians were also bemused by their reception. As they came to understand the reasons for it, they too felt resentment. They resented being used—they called it “being glamourised”—as propaganda designed to bluff and hence deter the Japanese from invasion.⁵¹

High-ranking British officialdom had welcomed the Australians to the East. Twenty-four hours later, as part of the British garrison, they were in reserve in the Malacca-Negri Sembilan area of the Malay peninsula. The AIF’s allocation to Command Reserve reflected both the temporary nature of its assignment initially as well as its status as a separate unit with its own commander who had the power to report directly to Australia.

It was at the behest of the Australian Government that the 8th Division AIF retained its status as a separate entity, an essentially independent unit operating on the

⁴⁸ *Time*, 3 May 1941, p.26.

⁴⁹ *Malay Mail*, 20 February 1941.

⁵⁰ Mullins, *Birth of a Battalion: History of the 2/18th Battalion*, unpaginated.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

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instructions of, but not subsumed by, the British army. While all British, Indian and Malayan military units came under the direct control of Malaya Command, the AIF's position was and would remain anomalous—and, in consequence, a continual source of irritation to General Percival, GOC Malaya.⁵² From the outset, the Australian Government stipulated that, although the AIF would be under the operational control of Malaya Command, it must retain its identity as an Australian force. No part of that force could be used apart from the whole without the consent of the GOC, and if, in an emergency, Malaya Command insisted on dispersing the force, Bennett should protest, then comply but immediately report the full circumstances to Army Headquarters in Melbourne. The final decision would be made in Australia.⁵³ Bennett's directive invested in him the power of command of an independent force responsible to his own Government. It ensured that Australian policy would take precedence over instructions that ran counter to it.⁵⁴ Thus, when the Governor, Sir Shenton Thomas, wanted a force to break strikes on the rubber plantations, Bennett refused. When Malaya Command insisted, Bennett again refused and referred the matter to Melbourne as he had been instructed. Melbourne vindicated his refusal.⁵⁵ Again, when Percival instructed that troops be denied free transport to town when on leave, Bennett cited Australian Government policy and refused to comply.⁵⁶ Such responses—and there were others—did not endear the Australian commander to Percival.⁵⁷ Percival, writing after the war, complained about the system that gave officers who had been “out of harness” during the years of peace—he named Bennett—senior commands in a new war without ensuring that they were up to the task.⁵⁸ He went on to claim, in the

⁵² Lieutenant-General A.E. Percival took over as GOC Malaya in place of General Bond on 16 May 1941.

⁵³ Wigmore, *Japanese Thrust*, p.65.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.97.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.73.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.96.

⁵⁷ As an example, Bennett complained in a letter dated 13 December 1941 to the Minister for Army that “Many attempts have been made in the past by the British Military Authorities here to have the Australian scale of rations reduced to the level of the British scale. All of these endeavours have been rejected by me and will be continued to be opposed...Recently I have again been approached...”, NAA MP729/6 13/401/402.

⁵⁸ Percival, *The War in Malaya*, p.34.

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same paragraph, that Bennett’s refusal to accede to requests concerning “certain administrative matters common to the Army as a whole” amounted to a claim for special treatment for the AIF.⁵⁹ By so doing, Percival complained, Bennett had created a regrettable and, by implication, damaging difference between Australian and other troops.⁶⁰

It is probable that the men of the 2/18th Battalion would have wholeheartedly endorsed special treatment for themselves. They saw themselves as different. They were different because they were volunteers, not regulars or conscripts. It was with their permission, implicitly granted at the time they enlisted, that the army had transformed them into soldiers so that they could fight with the AIF. While content to be part of the British Empire—or, at least, not having considered otherwise—their first loyalty was, from the beginning, to Australia. In their letters home and their subsequent writings, the men drew comparisons between themselves and the British based on their experiences of them, emphasising the differences they perceived and thereby revealing much about themselves. They were sceptical of the value of training undertaken by most of the regular British units. “Our text books had applied to open country warfare and were useless in thick jungle, so, unlike the British, the AIF discarded them,” Mullins wrote. Some of his other representative and telling remarks include: “The British troops...were amazed that troops could talk to an officer [as we could]...but that was the type of officers we had”; “British officers, on an exchange basis, were amazed at the endurance tests as carried out in our training programme...I am positive they were pleased when the time came to return to their unit, so they could settle down to their more ‘relaxed’ way of life”; and, “Sergeant James was pleased to see us ‘rabble’ after a spell with the Loyal Regiment, where the privates would not do anything without a direct order—there being no initiative as was found in the AIF.”⁶¹ When the men of the 2/18th Battalion compared themselves to British

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Mullins, *Birth of a Battalion: History of the 2/18th Battalion*, unpaginated.

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troops, they revealed not only their pride in themselves, their officers, their training, their achievements and their toughness but also how they saw themselves, what they believed in and what they valued. From their predecessors in the First AIF they had inherited a self-image of the Australian soldier which they acknowledged and esteemed. As Mullins’ series of comparisons demonstrates, the men of the 2/18th Battalion were as proud of their discipline and training as they were of their independent attitude and initiative.

Contact, which was probably friendly at least as often as it was not, occurred between the men of the 2/18th Battalion and different units of the British army on manoeuvres and exercises, in sporting competitions, during exchanges and when men were on leave. John Waterford wrote: “We got on well with the British soldiers we met...”.⁶² On the other hand, some men had no personal experience of British soldiers at all.⁶³ Different personalities evoked different responses among the multitude of servicemen meeting in different circumstances, with the consequence that any one man’s experience was likely to be entirely different from that of another. The tactful ambassadorial role that Varley had envisaged for his troops was not always evident, especially in the 2/18th Battalion’s dealings with British authority. The men were more inclined to aggravate a situation and take pride in doing so. Waterford observed: “British officers...could not stand us. We did not treat the British officers as if they were superior beings...”.⁶⁴

While the men emphasised their difference from the British they did give respect when they felt it was due. Whatever the 2/18th Battalion troops thought of the performance of other British units, they had a high regard for the 2nd Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders, who were stationed near them at Port Dickson. As Col Spence recalled, “They were the best trained, much better trained than we were.”⁶⁵ Nevertheless, such respect did not preclude hostility. Again, Spence recalled: “They resented the AIF because the planters and everyone put on tea rooms for the Australians but not for them. There

⁶² Waterford, *Footprints*, p.10.

⁶³ Mervyn Blyth, conversation, 5 July 2004.

⁶⁴ Waterford, *Footprints*, p.10.

⁶⁵ Colin Spence, interview, 3 May 2000.

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were always fights between the Argylls and the Australians.”⁶⁶ British soldiers resented the publicity given to the Australians, their popularity and that so much was done for them.⁶⁷ Spence suggested that the local residents had, in fact, abandoned their earlier attempts to offer hospitality to British troops. He suggested that the average British trooper was unresponsive to an invitation if he received one because he would question the motive of anyone seeking to befriend him and therefore automatically reject the advance.⁶⁸ Regardless, the attention given to the Australians left the British Tommy feeling “a bit neglected”.⁶⁹

The Indian army, too, had cause to feel neglected. Bennett wrote that Indian troops in Malaya were “being badly provided for in the matter of amenities”.⁷⁰ However, the 2/18th Battalion had little contact with them. They saw more of the Malay Regiment when they were quartered at Port Dickson. The Malay Regiment (comprising ethnic Malay troops) had been formed in 1933 under the command of a British officer. It was the only local (or Malay) regular military unit maintained by the British government in the Federated Malay States.⁷¹ Friendly relations between the two units were promoted through sporting competition.⁷² However, the Australians were suspicious of the Malays’ immaculate uniforms and superb barrack square performances. Feted by the press,

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Bennett wrote in his liaison letter of 19 November 1941 that the perceived comparisons in treatment of the British and Australian troops were “more apparent than real”. However, it was in order to eliminate “the very bad feeling” between British and Australian troops that a system of exchanges of officers, NCOs and men between different units was instituted. NAA MP729/7 42/422/53.

⁶⁸ Colin Spence, telephone conversation, 6 June 2003.

⁶⁹ Major Kent Hughes, quoted in Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, p.72.

⁷⁰ Bennett letter to the Minister for Army, 22 September 1941, NAA MP 729/6 13/401/402.

⁷¹ Lim Choo Hoon, “The Battle of Pasir Panjang Revisited”, *Journal of the Singapore Armed Forces*, Vol.28, No.1 (January to March 2002), www.mindef.gov.sg/safti/pointer/back/journals/2002/Vol28_1/1.htm, [accessed 9 February 2003]. The Sultans had long wanted trained Malay troops for the defence of the homeland but the British authorities had been reluctant and eventually allowed only one regiment. They believed that the Malay temperament was unsuited to strict discipline, and, more importantly, they feared armed, trained Malay troops might become involved in rivalries among the Malay chiefs for power and control of the tin mining areas.

⁷² Mervyn Blyth, interview, 2 September 1999. Blyth played in a hockey competition against the Malay Regiment at Port Dickson.

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enjoying community support, confident of their national prowess as fighters, their place in the empire and their status as “white men”, the Australians troops felt no compulsion to compete with the Malays or anyone else on the parade ground. Varley might plead and hector but he did not succeed in noticeably raising his battalion’s standard.⁷³ His men had joined the army to fight and their parade ground skills would never be more than adequate. Their resistance was vindicated in a communication to Bennett in December 1941 that heralded changes to the Australian army’s basic training schedule. Emphasis was now laid on battle drill and the hardening up process. Parade ground exercises were reduced to those purposely designed to train in rapid deployment and the taking up of battle formations.⁷⁴

After Singapore fell in February 1942, British war correspondent Ian Morrison wrote about the Australians’ “obvious, rather irrelevant characteristics” which he believed had had no particular bearing on their quality as soldiers.⁷⁵ These characteristics were newsworthy, however, and pertinent in a social context.⁷⁶ For example, the Australian soldier was known for his disrespect.⁷⁷ He had a reputation for being cocky, casual and careless in both manner and attire.⁷⁸ He was known to be a larrikin, especially when he drank. He gambled too. His sense of humour was never far from the surface and “there was always a wag in the crowd.” Such attributes, whether true or not, ensured that with high ranking officialdom, the Australian private soldier would never be generally popular. In fact, as Waterford wrote, “The British ‘big brass’ did not like us.”⁷⁹ The British “big brass”, in combination with the most senior civil personnel, responded to what it saw as

⁷³ Mullins, *Birth of a Battalion: History of the 2/18th Battalion*, unpaginated; Colin Spence, interview, 3 May 2000.

⁷⁴ AHQ Melbourne to Bennett, 10 December 1941, AWM 425/11/13.

⁷⁵ Morrison, *Malayan Postscript*, p.112.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Brown, *Suez to Singapore*, p.212. Broadcaster Cecil Brown recorded that he remarked on the Australian soldier’s reputation for disrespect, slovenly saluting, and lack of discipline to General Gordon Bennett. Bennett countered that shyness, not insolence, was the cause of lack of proper saluting while too severe discipline crushed both initiative and individualism, which were essential qualities in Malaya.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Waterford, *Footprints*, p.10.

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the less than desirable traits of all Other Ranks, Australian and other, when it barred them from the exclusive European Hotels, the Seaview and Raffles. By so doing, Singapore’s “High Society”, which comprised the small but powerful group of commercial and plantation people and high ranking naval, military and air force officers, effectively banished the private soldier from its sight and consideration. Cecil Brown, the American broadcaster, exposed the absurdity of the myopic British attitude:

Raffles Hotel...is out of bounds to soldiers, and only officers are permitted. The Australians are very bitter about this because some of the Australian volunteers are wealthy in their own right. Tonight an Australian—just an ordinary soldier—was refused admittance to Raffles. The irony of it is that he happens to be a wealthy sheep owner who has enough money to buy out Raffles Hotel, lock, stock and barrel.⁸⁰

When on leave in Singapore, men from the 2/18th Battalion repeatedly tried and failed to gain entry. Cliff Olsen recalled that his only personal contact with the British was with the doormen at Raffles.⁸¹ When Bruce Munro light-heartedly wrote that he intended to improve his social situation, he summed up the status of the ordinary soldier in British colonial society:

Des and I are going to do some systematic social climbing. It will be easier said than done, but we will have plenty of scope as the inhabitants look on the ordinary soldier as a bit lower than the natives, so we will have plenty of room to climb and no distance to drop.⁸²

It is unlikely that their social status in Singapore or Malaya was of any great moment to the men of the 2/18th Battalion when they arrived in Malaya in February (or at

⁸⁰ Brown, *Suez to Singapore*, p.199.

⁸¹ Cliff Olsen, interview, 30 May 2002.

⁸² Bruce Munro, letter to his sister, 4 April 1941.

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any time afterwards, although their exclusion from Raffles did rankle when it occurred). Raffles had been open to them when they arrived but they were at Port Dickson and, in those early weeks, for most men, leave was restricted to just a few hours at a time. Moreover, until after the subsidised leave hostels for the Australians were established in Singapore, few men were financially able to go there.⁸³ Finally, work, not leave, was the order of the day. Varley worked his men hard—their job was to acclimatise and adapt to the Malayan conditions. Those who sought acquaintanceship beyond the environment of the battalion itself had to make of the local society what they could in the very limited time that was available to them.

Lectures aboard ship had left the men of the 2/18th Battalion with no illusions as to the conduct expected of them in their dealings with people in Malaya. Varley again spelled out those requirements at the first Battalion parade held on the sportsground the morning after they arrived at Port Dickson.⁸⁴ As Drum Major Douglas Fraser wrote, “It is impossible to describe the prestige that the white people have over the natives. We have to be careful not to do anything wrong in their eyes.”⁸⁵ From their own observation, the men were immediately aware of the diversity of race and culture in Malaya. On his second day at Port Dickson, Fuller wrote:

The people are a mystery. They are of all shapes, sizes and colours—Chinese, Malays, Japanese, Hindus and these are just a few...but there are a great number round these barracks so their customs and peculiarities should soon be known to us.⁸⁶

While the word “Malayan” could be used to describe all people, including Europeans, who lived in the Malay Peninsula, it did not imply a sense of shared national identity.⁸⁷ The

⁸³ The Anzac Club in Singapore did not open until July 1941.

⁸⁴ 2/18th Battalion War Diary entry, 20 February 1941, AWM52 8/3/18, <http://www.awm.gov.au/database/awm52/8x3x18.htm>.

⁸⁵ Douglas Fraser, extract from a letter to his mother, printed in *Inverell Times*, n.d. [probably March 1941], copy of clipping in possession of author.

⁸⁶ John Fuller, letter to his parents, 20 February 1941.

⁸⁷ Butcher, *The British in Malaya*, p.3.

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soldiers were instructed to use the term “native” for that part of the Malayan population which was not European.⁸⁸ “Native” denoted all those people who lived in Malaya and were non-European and, therefore, by implication, inferior. As such, the term carried the connotations of a racist slur but it was not always consciously so used. “Native” was useful as an inclusive term and used universally.⁸⁹ However, the men of the 2/18th Battalion, in their letters home, usually narrowed its meaning so that it applied only to those they saw as primitive or the very poor. The Sakai tribesmen, plantation workers, villagers, rickshaw drivers and policemen were “native”. On the other hand, the soldiers of the Malay Regiment were “Malays”, the holiday homes to the north of Port Dickson belonged to wealthy “Chinese”, and the “Japanese” owned the photographic shops.

The experience of the 2/18th Battalion in Malaya in 1941 was in some ways to parallel that of the First AIF in Egypt in 1914. For the latter, direct contact with the local population had quickly destroyed the traditional illusion of mystery and dissipated the troops’ enthusiasm and expectations. For them, Egypt “reduced to sun, sand and syphilis”.⁹⁰ In Malaya, too, the impact upon the men of their experience of Malaya and its people was the equally rapid evaporation of Eastern mystique. “We don’t see as many of the strange surroundings as you would imagine, we see the same old thing day after day, and a little of it goes a long way,” wrote a disillusioned McCosker.⁹¹ Possibly, “oriental” mystique could still be found in the cities. Munro wrote, “It is alright to have been to places you read about like KL, Malacca, Kluang and Singapore.”⁹² But he too eventually lost his enthusiasm:

The country round here is now losing its novelty, for some it lost
it ages ago. Native streets and bazaars and all the different kind

⁸⁸ John Fuller, letter to his parents, 20 February 1941.

⁸⁹ Butcher, *The British in Malaya*, p.3. The 2/18th Battalion soldiers used the word “native”. The British also used the word “Asiatic” to describe non-European people in Malaya and “native” to describe the Malays.

⁹⁰ White, “Sun Sand and Syphilis”, p.50.

⁹¹ Leo McCosker, letter to his mother, 22 April 1941.

⁹² Bruce Munro, letter to his father, 16 May 1941.

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of native, and different kind of smell, no longer interest me, and
when once I could only see romance, I can now only notice
smell.⁹³

Regardless, and although the soldiers maintained good relationships with those people who lived locally and with whom they had most contact, during 1941 their view of them was at best prosaic. The common themes in the men’s letters home, their poetry, songs and written memories, combined to reduce their image of Malaya to a place of sweat, smells and squalor.

When the battalion arrived at Port Dickson, it had seemed at first that any friendly overtures toward the Asian population were doomed. Women and girls, heeding warnings given to them about the Australians, repeatedly fled in terror from their presence.⁹⁴ A letter published months later in Sydney describes one such encounter:

We were out on a compass march a few days ago and saw a
Chinese woman tapping rubber trees. As soon as she saw us she
dropped her bucket and bolted. I never saw a woman run so fast.
She gathered others as she ran, yabbering to them, so that they
dropped their buckets and bolted too. Afraid of the wild Aussies!
Did we laugh!⁹⁵

They laughed but such responses to their presence quickly palled and became depressing.⁹⁶ Within a few weeks, however, the local population had abandoned its fears and the 2/18th Battalion had discovered a new cause for pride. Mullins declared: “*By just being ourselves, we proved these rumours false, and I say, without fear of contradiction, that when the*

⁹³ *Ibid.*, letter to his mother, 21 July 1941.

⁹⁴ Mullins, *Birth of a Battalion: A History of the 2/18th Battalion*, unpaginated.

⁹⁵ Letter in *Australian Women’s Weekly*, 6 December 1941, p.14.

⁹⁶ Mullins, *Birth of a Battalion: A History of the 2/18th Battalion*, unpaginated.

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natives got to know us, we became the most popular troops in Malaya.”⁹⁷ By “just being themselves” the 2/18th Battalion had unwittingly satisfied their commanding officer’s plea for diplomacy with the citizens of Malaya—but the phenomenon was common to all three battalions of the 22nd Brigade. The CO 2/19 Battalion was to write after the war:

It was always a source of wonder to me how quickly the Australians settled down amidst the natives, mixing freely with them and winning their confidence, yet commanding at all times, their utmost respect and affection. They maintained the white man’s prestige in a way that would have gladdened Kipling’s heart....⁹⁸

“Just being themselves” was important to the men of the 2/18th Battalion. They had always resisted any effort made to alter their ways. Integral to their self image was the informality that characterised their dealings with others, as well as their belief in their own impartiality, their humour and aura of goodwill. For the most part, the men neither actively sought the respect of the local people nor even acquaintanceship with them. When chance meetings occurred, however, their charm lay in their casual friendliness. It was this ease of manner that ensured their popularity with the Asian townspeople and particularly with their children. Within a few weeks they were generally popular with the local “European” population too. The polite word “European” was generally used in Malaya, as Spence learned on a visit to family friends who managed a tin mine: “All the Europeans at the

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* Mullins was proud of the Australians’ popularity but it should be noted that the Australians in Malaya had not come to rule, convert, employ or make fortunes. As such they were fundamentally different from nearly all other foreigners and had, as well, a different platform on which to build relationships.

⁹⁸ CGW Anderson VC MC, in the foreword of unpublished manuscript by R.F. Oakes, AWM MSS1037. Anderson succeeded Maxwell as CO 2/19 Battalion in August 1941 when Maxwell was given command of the 27th Brigade AIF.

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mine are Aussies and New Zealanders. This sentence sounds Irish but evidently we say European here instead of white man.”⁹⁹

In March 1941 Bennett enlisted local support to establish the first Australian leave club in Kuala Lumpur.¹⁰⁰ It was financed by the Australian Comforts Fund and staffed by voluntary resident Australian and New Zealand women but it was not easily available to 2/18th Battalion men at Port Dickson who usually had only a few hours’ leave at any one time. However, the local “European” population, perhaps encouraged by the press reports that “glamourised” the Australians, was keen to help them. Consequently, they established and staffed a canteen for their benefit. For a very few men, chance led to meetings and invitations. Most men, however, even had they wished otherwise, had no choice but to prefer their own society.

When the 2/18th Battalion moved to Seremban the possibilities for social interaction between the men and the local population widened. They were quartered in the town itself and, if discipline never lessened, work was mostly limited to parade ground training and the bull ring. Such circumstances offered opportunities for encounters with different groups of people.

At Seremban, as at Port Dickson, comparatively few “Europeans” lived in the district. Although European women volunteered their services in the clubs and canteens, again it was only a lucky few who received invitations to their homes. Mullins recorded that the soldiers generally ignored the women’s advice not to mix with “the natives”.¹⁰¹ They regarded the visit to a private home as “a great break”, a relief, an escape from army life.¹⁰² When on leave, they also accepted lifts in cars driven by Asians. To refuse usually meant a long walk, for cars driven by Europeans tended not to stop.¹⁰³ For the soldiers, the traditional British colonial approach to maintaining “the prestige of the white man”—

⁹⁹ Colin Spence, letter to his parents, 23 May 1941.

¹⁰⁰ Wigmore, *Japanese Thrust*, p.72.

¹⁰¹ Mullins, *Birth of a Battalion: A History of the 2/18th Battalion*, unpaginated.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

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defined by Wigmore as “the state of being aloof from ‘the natives’”¹⁰⁴—was essentially impractical. Neither did they delude themselves as to their own place in that society. As Mullins wrote:

We did not expect the white people to shower us with good times, but if they did not want us to “break down conditions” between the whites and natives, they should have helped keep them intact by helping us when possible.¹⁰⁵

Stationed at Seremban and with time to spare but little to do to fill it, the men of the 2/18th Battalion wandered about the town or, granted leave, went to Kuala Lumpur. Their instinct was to stay together. They moved about in Malaya in pairs or groups unless one had a specific errand or invitation. In their wanderings they found for themselves whatever entertainment that was offering. In this casual way, Spence and his friends attended a soccer match between two Chinese teams. The spectators treated them as honoured guests. The players impressed them with both their standard of play and good sportsmanship.¹⁰⁶ On another occasion, they visited a Chinese temple. Spence wrote: “The priests put their own people to the side so that we could see better.”¹⁰⁷ Such courtesies, which were not limited to the Chinese, engendered goodwill and interest and drew from Spence the observation that:

Our chaps get on quite well with the various kinds of native—and I think the natives appreciate their attitude, even though it would shock the “pukka sahibs”. Some of them speak excellent English and are very interesting to speak to.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Wigmore, *Japanese Thrust*, p.72.

¹⁰⁵ Mullins, *Birth of a Battalion: A History of the 2/18th Battalion*, unpaginated.

¹⁰⁶ Colin Spence, letter to his parents, 10 May 1941.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

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Conversations with local people awakened an interest in and even respect for the different nationalities and cultures that abounded in Malaya and men reported on them in their letters home.¹⁰⁹ From the district traffic officer, “a very fine looking black-bearded Sikh, a Punjabi who was born in India”, Fuller learned of Sikhism, the Sikh religion and compared the five Ks of the Sikhs—“the banya, the long hair, the comb, the beard and special the underpants”—with Roman Catholic rosary beads.¹¹⁰ He concluded his description with the comment: “I had really a most interesting talk with this chap.”¹¹¹ Munro wrote of his conversations with Indian civil servants. Their work for the British administration required that they read and write but not speak in English. Socially, they were not required to speak at all with the consequence that, as Munro observed, “They speak good English, but the accent is a bit hard to get at first.”¹¹² Nevertheless, he discovered that they were “better educated and better informed than most Australians.”¹¹³

The men’s ability to “get on quite well with the various kinds of native” ensured their welcome at and in various parades, ceremonies, celebrations and festivals. Processions occurred for any number of reasons, religious or otherwise. At Chinese funerals, if the family was wealthy enough, professional mourners were employed. Hindus would take their gods out in gilded carriages for airings or to wash in the river. Army units—including the 2/18th Battalion—marched in formation to their bands’ marching tunes. A Roman Catholic Mission in Seremban was one event in which the town’s ethnic divisions within the Christian sector, if they existed at all, were at least temporarily forgotten. The Mission concluded with a procession of the Blessed Sacrament in which 150 officers and men of the 2/18th Battalion formed a guard of honour around the canopy

¹⁰⁹ ¹⁰⁹ In letters home and diaries a range of Malay words—eg *padang*, *makan*, *tid apa* etc appeared from soon after their arrival. A number of men, including Fuller, set out to learn Malay and succeeded to varying degrees. Charles Wagner became fluent.

¹¹⁰ John Fuller, letter to his parents, 31 March 1941.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

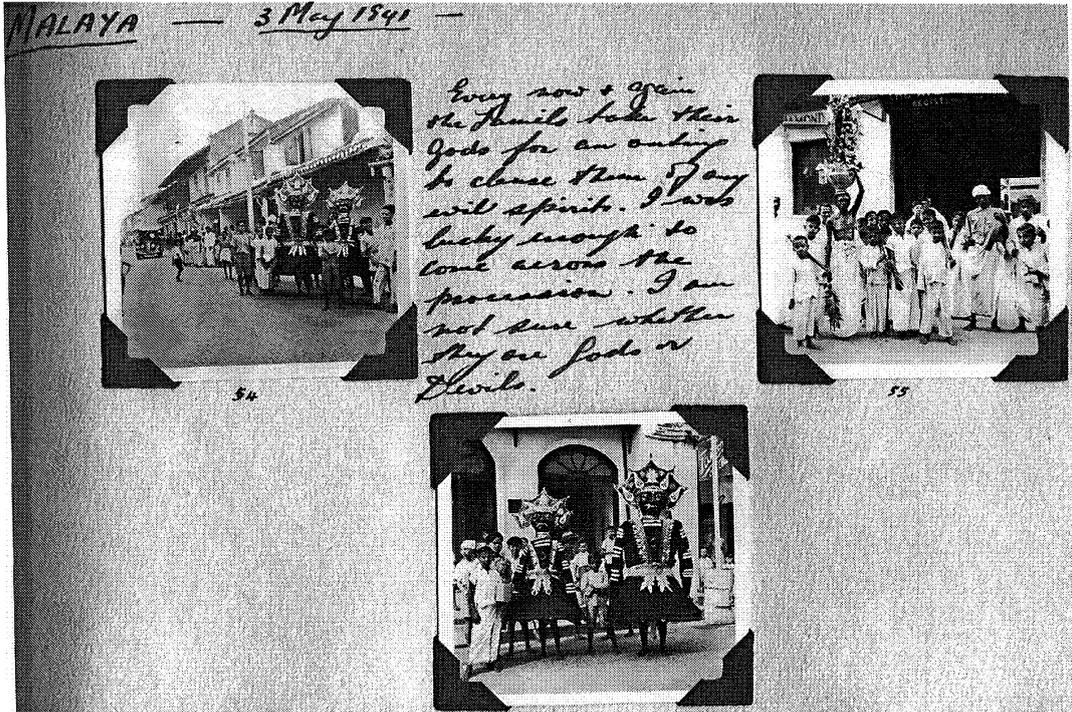
¹¹² Bruce Munro, letter to his mother, 17 June 1941.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

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PROCESSIONS IN MALAYA:

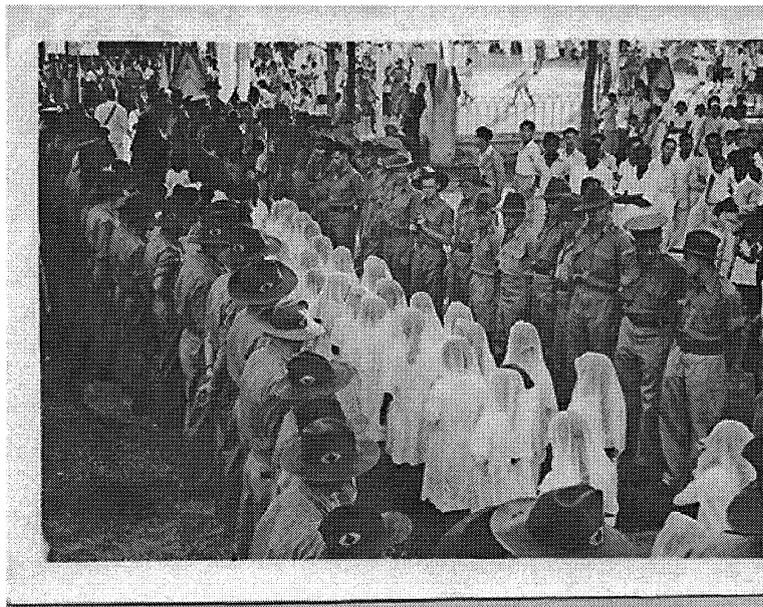
—TAMILS TAKE THEIR GODS FOR AN AIRING



Source: John Fuller's diarised photograph album Volume 2, in possession of author.

—PROCESSION OF THE BLESSED SACRAMENT
IN SEREMBAN

The 2/18th Battalion took part in the procession which concluded the Roman Catholic mission in Seremban.



Source: 2/18th Infantry Battalion Association Archives, in possession of author

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which covered the Host on its journey from the Church of the Visitation to the grounds of the Convent, where Benediction was held. Hundreds of people lined the route. *Men May Smoke* declared that, “The battalion’s participation in such a ceremony is unique in the annals of the AIF”¹¹⁴ and that “The prestige of the AIF, already high in this town, must have been greatly enhanced by the respectful bearing of the troops taking part.”¹¹⁵ McCosker described the occasion as “a very good mission”, proudly adding, “There was a big crowd of people took part in the procession, I was among them too.”¹¹⁶ Others taking part included “a long procession of altar boys (principally Chinese and Indian lads), Children of Mary of various races, schoolboys and schoolgirls and, finally, some hundreds of parishioners representing practically every race in the district...”¹¹⁷

All processions drew crowds and 2/18th Battalion men who had leave passes and were looking for ways to pass the time were among them. Their letters attest to their popularity with the local people. Munro recorded an occasion when some Hindus took their gods to dinner. When they stopped at a booth, the vendors offered food first to the gods but then to the Australians who stood nearby. The memory evoked a proudly patriotic and emotional response in Munro:

A point that sticks in my mind was three little Hindu boys, with digger hats on, sitting on the shoulders of three of the lads where they could see what was going on over the heads of the crowd. There is no doubt we are 100% with the natives. With all these queer religions and things, the Australians stroll in where angels fear to tread, and pommies seldom go...but they always get away with it, and finish up friends.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ *Men May Smoke*, Vol. 1, No 6, June 1941, unpaginated.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Leo McCosker, letter to his mother, 16 June 1941.

¹¹⁷ *Men May Smoke*, Vol.1, No.6, June 1941, unpaginated.

¹¹⁸ Bruce Munro, letter to his mother, 8 May 1941.

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On another occasion Munro and his friends attended a Eurasian wedding. Granted leave, they had gone first to the races in Kuala Lumpur after which they had moved to the Great Eastern Hotel where the wedding was in progress in the ball room. When the bridal couple’s families invited them to do so, they joined in the festivities and discovered themselves to be the only social group present that was not Eurasian. “They were all colours from black to white, but all Eurasian, and were there some glamorous looking girls!”¹¹⁹

The wedding over, the soldiers moved on to dinner and the Cabaret at the hotel where those who were prepared to pay danced with the taxi girls. A dance ticket cost 25 cents. The taxi girls were professional dancers who avoided any personal contact beyond the dance floor. Their profession was honourable, Munro wrote, and added, “They are all very virtuous, at least none of us have found out any different for love or money.”¹²⁰ Taxi girls were, by definition, “native” and integral to Malayan night life. When the 2/18th Battalion first arrived in Malaya, young officers too had delighted in practising their skills on the dance floor with them. Only a few weeks later, in April, Fuller wrote that officers were no longer allowed to dance with the taxi girls.¹²¹ Neither could they ride in cars driven by Asians or even catch a local bus. Officers, the rules implied, would maintain “white man’s prestige” even if the troops chose to do otherwise. But officers could be as practical as the men they led. Fuller wrote:

Our taxi didn’t turn up so we set out on foot for a small town a few miles away. Against the regulations, we stopped a native bus and rode in comparative comfort for the rest of the way...¹²²

Throughout 1941 the troops remained generally oblivious to whatever taboos existed among the different ethnic, religious and social groups in Malaya. They crossed social boundaries that had been established over 150 years by the British without acknowledging

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ John Fuller, letter to his mother, 30 April 1941.

¹²² *Ibid.*, letter to his mother, 4 March 1941.

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that they were there. A surviving member of the battalion recalled: “The boys would sit down and talk to old Chinamen and Malays on the footpath.”¹²³ Another remembered helping a group of Indians to push a carriage that was taking their gods to the river for a wash when a wheel had seized. Warden and Fuller, during their travels through Pahang, helped to push a bus off a car ferry when assistance was needed. The Australians were aware that some British residents looked askance at men who showed familiarity with the “natives”: the British residents would move apart from them at sports matches.¹²⁴ The Australians’ informality, their apparent indifference to a man’s race and creed and their willingness to lend a hand, contributed to their popularity. The children liked them for their friendly humour and probably even more for their generous food “hand-outs”:

Bluey Evans used to feed them with what we had left over in the dixies. They would follow us everyday because they knew they would get what we left over. No matter where we went they were always there with us.¹²⁵

Generally, the troops’ dealings with the citizens of Malaya amounted to friendly but casual acquaintanceship. Even to the local Japanese, whom they distrusted as the potential enemy, they did not show animosity. While some men would have preferred not to patronise Japanese camera shops—everyone knew that the Japanese were spies!—the superior quality of their printed photographs won their custom.¹²⁶ As the year progressed, however, the letters from both officers and men reveal both a growing awareness of Japan as “the enemy” and a growing contempt for its people. As the months passed, officers and

¹²³ Ginty Pearson, interview, 22 May 2001.

¹²⁴ Mullins, *Birth of a Battalion: A History of the 2/18th Battalion*, unpaginated.

¹²⁵ Ginty Pearson, interview, 22 May 2001.

¹²⁶ Waterford, *Footprints*, p.12.

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CHILDREN IN MALAYA—LINING UP FOR THE STEW LEFT IN THE DIXIE



Source: Men May Smoke Vol.1, No.6, October 1941.

CHILDREN GIVING THE AUSTRALIAN SOLDIERS THE "THUMBS UP" SIGN



John Fuller's diarised photograph album Volume 2, in possession of author.

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men attended lectures at which they learned how inept, inferior and comic the Japanese were. They learned also to ignore the contrary evidence available to them. They belittled the Japanese at every opportunity. Letters are littered with racist slurs such as “little yellow men.” Even Bennett wrote, after the invasion had begun, of “our new enemy, the Yellow Huns of the East”.¹²⁷ The 2/18th Battalion’s capture of two young and scared Japanese airmen near Mersing in December only confirmed the Australian soldiers’ belief in their own superiority. Hate was not yet a factor. As late as 11 January 1942, Fuller wrote:

I was only thinking last night, it will be funny if I ever run into either of those two Jap boys I used to go to school with. Their names were Shinya Inoue and Kai Nagashima. I used to like them both.¹²⁸

In March Bennett had reported that the conduct of the troops was “so good that it has drawn very favourable comments from people of all classes in the community.”¹²⁹ Nevertheless, if the general conduct of the men of the 2/18th Battalion was exemplary, individual behaviour was not always so. The 2/18th Battalion had its share of “undesirables” and others for whom the battalion’s reputation mattered little although, for the most part, the battalion’s discipline checked untoward activities. Nevertheless, despite Varley’s exhortations, some troop behaviour was less than exemplary. Larrikinism drew criticism. Ray Seymour and his friends were insensible of the deep offence they gave when they roped and then rode the sacred white bull in Seremban. For them—young, fit men seeking entertainment—their actions amounted to an amusing and harmless game, one that they often played. However, as Pearson observed, “The Indians would have cut

¹²⁷ Bennett to F.M.Forde, Minister for Army, 13 December 1941, NAA MP729/6 13/401/402.

¹²⁸ John Fuller, letter to his mother, 11 January 1941.

¹²⁹ Bennett to AHQ Melbourne, liaison letter No.1, 20 March 1941, AWM54 425/2/23.

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their throats if they could have caught them.”¹³⁰ More serious was the occasional evidence of criminal behaviour. Spence, recalling the fine of sixpence a head that the Battalion imposed in order to repay a shopkeeper at Mersing who had been robbed, observed, “Some of them must have been crooks.”¹³¹ Nevertheless, from the outset, Bennett had been able to report that fewer crimes were committed in Malaya by 8th Division soldiers than previously in Australia.¹³² From an official point of view, the Australian soldiers were generally well behaved and popular with the different people in Malaya (always excluding the British “Red Caps”). However, anecdotal evidence such as the following example indicates that individual soldiers behaved towards others in Malaya, as they did in all other circumstances, not at the behest of the authorities but entirely according to their own codes:

Three of us got a cab back to the camp. George and Jack were in the back and I sat in the front with the driver. He had a little kid, a four year old boy. He reached over and put him in the back. When we got to the camp, he wanted six dollars from the chaps in the back for the boy. Evidently he was put in the back for them to have sex with, if they wanted to. And he charged six dollars. We protested very much and chucked him back in his cab. The following night the same thing must have happened. But these chaps locked the driver in the cab and then turned the cab over on its back and left him there. There was a parade next day with him walking up and down trying to pick out the blokes that had done it. But he didn't pick anyone out.¹³³

¹³⁰ Ginty Pearson, interview, 22 May 2001.

¹³¹ Colin Spence, interview, 10 January 2002.

¹³² Bennett to AHQ Melbourne, liaison letter No.1, 20 March 1941, AWM54 425/2/23.

¹³³ Cliff Olsen, interview, 30 May 2002.

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The 2/18th Battalion had responded to the cab driver’s complaint with a parade of all those men who had had leave passes. The intention was to find the men responsible for the assault on the driver and the damage to his vehicle. That he failed to identify them because the men were not there was indicative of the men’s own creed—the soldiers of the 2/18th Battalion protected their own.

Individual soldiers were not averse to the less respectable entertainments and kept the town picket officer busy each night that the battalion was quartered in Seremban. The town picket officer was the AIF’s answer to the British “red cap”. Lieutenant George McLaughlin wrote of his revulsion at “the places of low repute” that he inspected. “Duty is all that will ever take me near the mah-jong and dope haunts and brothels again. My stomach is not what you would call weak but it was almost turned tonight.”¹³⁴

The town picket officer’s work was not always so dire. Fuller, in a letter about battalion life in the break camp at Jemaluang in August, described his turn as town picket officer on “pay day” as “the funniest night I have had since I have been in Malaya”.¹³⁵ It was also an evening during which the men of the 2/18th Battalion demonstrated how easily and with what good humour they could establish a casual friendship with the Asian population, particularly with the Chinese. In order to quell the only “disturbance” of the evening, Fuller insisted that the soldier, who was “a bit tight”, return the bicycle that he was riding up and down the street to its owners, the “extremely distracted” ice cream sellers who pursued him. The bicycle returned and the matter settled, both officer and the Chinese “enjoyed a good laugh.” After this incident, Fuller and his picket watched as “two of our most highly respected privates” set a Crown and Anchor board on a table in the light of a Chinese fruit stall:

Business was very brisk and soon there was quite a large school going. They were behaving themselves so I allowed the

¹³⁴ George McLaughlin, letter to his wife, 12 May 1941.

¹³⁵ John Fuller, letter to his mother, 4 September 1941.

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proverbial "sleeping dogs lie". I returned to the scene of the "C & A" half an hour later and on peering over the heads of the crowd I could see yellow hands, brown hands, black hands etc. all striving to put their dollars on the "lucky old hearts" or whatever it was. The Chinese are inveterate gamblers. They had the time of their lives then last night. When we moved up the street we came across the same sort of thing only this time it was "two-up". Again the Chinese joined in...

For Fuller, the highlight of the evening was an impromptu rodeo that developed when some Malays trailed a herd of water buffaloes through the town. Soldiers leapt aboard the poor animals from all sides and flayed them with their boots in order to make them buck. Presumably, only their keepers minded. The soldiers and the Chinese thought it was "a terrific joke".¹³⁶

In their letters home, the men of the 2/18th Battalion often remarked that the Chinese ran Malaya's economy. They respected the Chinese for their hard work and business acumen. However, it was humour, so evident that night in Jemaluang, and, generally, in any contact between the Chinese and the Australians in Malaya in 1941, that was the basis of the rapport that existed between the two groups. According to Bennett, "The Chinese have a sense of humour and everyone with a sense of humour captivates the Australians."¹³⁷

Whatever their relationships with the different groups in Malaya, the men of the 2/18th Battalion were primarily soldiers who were committed to Britain's war. As the threat of Japan became a reality, the battalion, stationed at Mersing from September, became less concerned with the local community and its affairs. After the war began, the battalion oversaw the evacuation of the town itself. Regret mingled with self-justification:

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ Quoted in Brown, *Suez to Singapore*, p 212.

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The natives...have now been evacuated...It was rather sad seeing all the families walk out of their homes, but a hell of a lot of them are on the Japs' side so it is just as well they have gone. They will be safer. The Japs have been dressing up as Malays, so no risks are being taken....¹³⁸

The policy was “to destroy everything that may be of use to the enemy and to take anything that is useful to us”.¹³⁹ The local people had gone and their losses were merely the fortunes of war. Spence reported seeing European refugees from the north in Johore Bahru. They too had abandoned their possessions and travelled only with what they could carry.¹⁴⁰ At Mersing the 2/18th Battalion soldiers felt no compunction about making the most of the windfall. The feelings of its original owners can only be imagined had they seen their cuckoo clock hanging from a tree—it was sheltered from the rain by an angled sheet of corrugated iron—from which vantage point it chimed the changing of the camp guard.¹⁴¹

Varley wrote of his satisfaction with and even gratitude for the restraint and friendliness that his troops practised in their dealings with other social groups, both European and Asian.¹⁴² When interacting with the different groups that constituted Malayan society, as they did in all other aspects of their life in Malaya, the troops contributed voluntarily and in their own fashion. The friendships that they forged with the peoples of Malaya were casual, and, in that they were unforced, genuine. Ultimately, however, they proved also to be merely fleeting—it could not have been otherwise. Unable to stem the Japanese tide, the Allies withdrew to the south until, finally, they crossed the causeway to Singapore Island, abandoning the Malayan Peninsula and its people to the Japanese.

¹³⁸ John Fuller, letter to his mother, 16 December 1941.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ Colin Spence, telephone conversation, 6 June 2004.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² *Men May Smoke*, Vol.1, No.4., April 1941, unpaginated.

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The 2/18th Battalion had spent almost a year in Malaya. Many of the records of that time, as well as most of the men's possessions, were permanently lost. Any significance pertaining to their experience over twelve months in Malaya was obliterated by the events that followed and any post-war relationship between the Australians and the people of Malaya would have to start again from scratch.