

'THE SURVEYOR SURVEYED'

ERIC STEWART WILLBOURN

OBE ED MA (Cantab) FGS

Major : FMSVF

Born 21 October 1889

Died 25 November 1977

**A brief talk delivered to
The Malayan Volunteers Group**

RAF Club, London -- 21st October 2017

Researched and delivered by **Roger S. Willbourn** (*grandson*)

with great assistance from

Amanda E. Royde-Smith (*granddaughter*)

and

Caroline V. Willbourn (*granddaughter-in-law*)

My grandfather, **Eric Willbourn**, was born in Bridlington, Yorkshire, on 21st October 1889, exactly 128 years ago today, and so this is a most appropriate date on which to deliver this brief talk.



From school, Eric gained a scholarship to Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, to read Natural Sciences. On graduating in 1911, he was awarded a First Class degree and the Natural Sciences Tripos Prize and he later taught for a couple of years at Dean Close School in Cheltenham, which had recently opened new science laboratories. He then applied for the position of Assistant Geologist in the Geological Department of the Federated Malay States, where he commenced work in June 1914.



The FMS Geological Department, under its first Director, J. B. Scrivenor, had established its headquarters at **Batu Gajah** in Perak.

Tin-mining was vital to the wealth of Malaya and in 1884 **Batu Gajah**, close to Ipoh, became the administrative centre of the richest district in the entire Malay States owing to tin mining and the associated fees and taxes. The Land Office there became the most important in the country, still apparent from the impressive colonial buildings and the large Hospital which stand in Batu Gajah to this day.

Eric joined the territorial force, the Malay States Volunteer Rifles, the precursor of the FMS Volunteer Force. When World War One broke out, there was no serious threat to regional British interests, as Japan was then on "our" side. However, one major purpose of the Territorial Forces was to deal with any local disturbances and ensure that the colonial subjects did not take advantage of what was, for the most part, a European war by fomenting rebellion against His Imperial Majesty. And so regular and vigorous training was conducted !





In June 1917 Eric returned home to serve in the regular Forces for the duration of the Great War, with his Geologist's post being held open for his return. He was commissioned into the Signals in April 1918 and subsequently served in France. His demobilisation was greatly delayed, not occurring until May 1919.

He knew he would be going back to Malaya but first he had to make sure he could marry his teenage sweetheart, my grandmother Jessie Cooper, for whom he had been holding a candle throughout all those years of his first tour in Malaya.

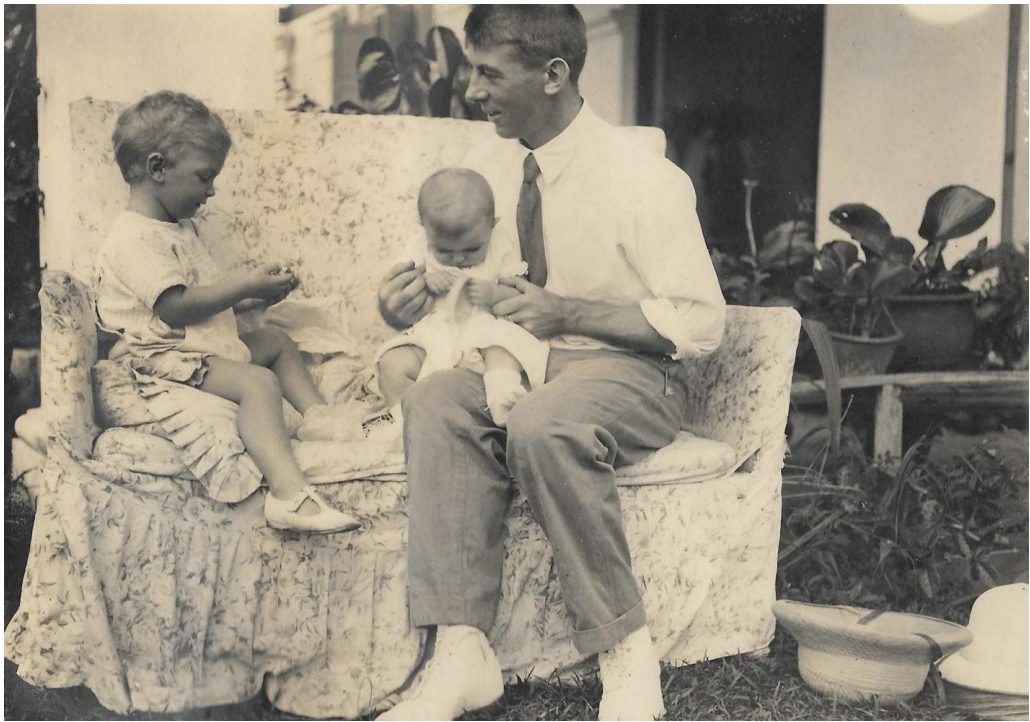


Jessie Teresa Cooper was an adventurous woman whose life and exploits would justify a separate talk all on their own. She had escaped her domineering father by working as a governess in Cuba and Austria. She was an excellent horsewoman and also worked for the Master of a Northamptonshire hunt. By Christmas 1918 Eric & Jessie were engaged; Jessie would have been thrilled at the thought of an adventurous life in the somewhat exotic colonies of Malaya -- and they were duly married on 25th June 1919.



They travelled back to Malaya via Canada, crossing the Pacific on the liner S.S. Suwa Maru, arriving in Japan on New Year's Eve. Ironically, they really liked Japan, Jessie declaring Tokyo to be a most beautiful city. Then it was on to Shanghai and Manila where Eric had to be hospitalised, being seriously ill with typhoid. Eventually, in March 1920 they arrived in **Batu Gajah**, where Eric resumed work at the Geological Survey. On 19 May 1920, their first child was born, my father, Anthony (always known as Tony). A daughter, Elizabeth (always called Betty as a child), arrived two years later on 19th September 1922. Whilst a large number of servants taking care of domestic affairs and the children was commonplace, Jessie was not one to sit around idly gossiping. At Eric's insistence, she acquired a grand piano to sustain her love of music and also her own beautiful horse, to continue her passion for riding.







Whilst still the Assistant Geologist, Eric spent significant periods out on expeditions, often for weeks at a time and on occasion accompanied by Jessie, throughout the country's uncharted jungles and mountains. We have photos of him with parties of coolies erecting large wooden trig survey points on mountain tops to assist with this work. He often headed up into the central highland spine of Malaya and then descended on the eastern side, through virgin jungle, building rafts when the rivers became broad enough and emerging onto the Malayan east coast.





He surveyed throughout every corner and State of Malaya, as well as in the more mineralogically rewarding states of Perak and Selangor. Archived records of these journeys are still held in the Geological Survey library, now located in one of those 1957 Ipoh buildings designed by Ruth Rollitt's father --- shown in Ruth's slides during her splendid talk to us last year. Eric also visited the Dutch East Indies islands of Bangka and Sumatra - names no doubt redolent to many MVG members here; and he represented the Geological Survey at the Pacific Science Congress in Japan in 1926, accompanied by Jessie; they attended a tea-ceremony !





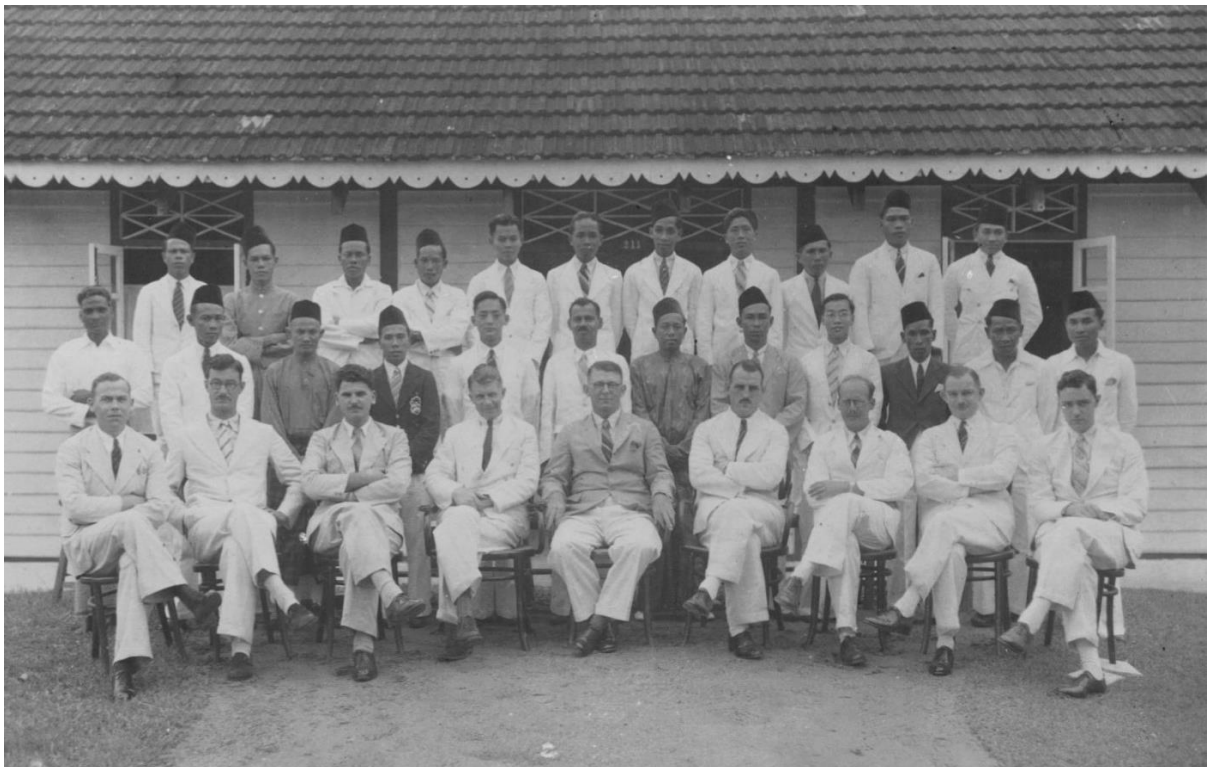
The fluctuating price of tin and the Great Depression definitely impinged upon the lives of civil servants and tin-miners in Malaya but of course geological surveying continued. Life as a colonial civil servant probably didn't change particularly rapidly between the wars and in general was undoubtedly very pleasant, with parties, balls, sports and many visits to Maxwell Hill, Fraser's Hill and Cameron Highlands.



In 1931 Scrivenor retired and Eric was promoted to be the second Director of the Geological Survey.

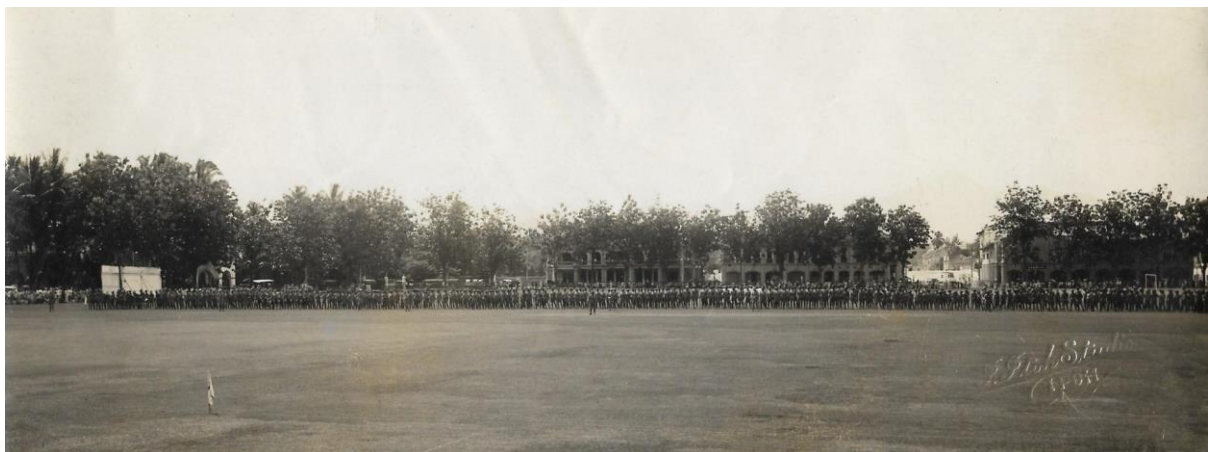


From 1935 onwards, Eric was able to expand the Geological Survey and so by 1939 there were no fewer than nine expatriate geologists and chemists employed. Amongst those he recruited was the remarkable James Richardson. Between the wars, Eric published some 25 works on the geology of Malaya, a number of which have copies here in the British Library.



The war clouds gathered in the late 1930s and their last home leave was in '38. By 1941 it had become generally recognised that a war with Japan was more likely than not.

Eric had been a dedicated member of the Volunteer Rifles and then the FMS Volunteers for over twenty years. By the early 1930s, he was the Commanding Officer of 'C' Company in the 1st (Perak) Battalion of the Volunteers and second-in-command of the whole battalion. Jonathan Moffatt's meticulous records show that Eric was later transferred to the Training Battalion -- he was already **50** years old by 1939. In October 1940 a Local Defence Corps was formed and Eric was made second-in-command of the Perak LDC -- and Jessie had signed up with the Medical Auxiliary Service at Batu Gajah hospital, training to drive 'Ambulances' (actually, converted lorries !) and perform first aid. Eric was clearly aware of the threat from Japan and in 1940 he approached the Military Directorate in Singapore, offering the entire senior staff of the Geological Survey for intelligence duties. Given their detailed knowledge of Malaya right up to, and even across, the Siamese border, this would have been a highly valuable resource for the British Army. His offer was curtly refused as being "quite unnecessary".





All Territorial forces were mobilised shortly before the Japanese invasion of 8th December 1941 and a week later all expatriate women were ordered to evacuate from Perak. Jessie then drove down to Seremban to stay with John and Jo Cowgill -- John was the British Resident for Negri Sembilan. Jessie had just one small suitcase, evacuating the house in a rush and leaving it in the care of the servants.





Eric and his fellow officers divided the Perak LDC into three groups : those under 41 were sent to the Volunteers, the unfit were discharged and those who were older but fit (such as Eric) assisted the military with driving transport, manning fire engines and maintaining order amongst the civilian population.

They were deployed down at Tanjong Malim, suffering frequent attacks by enemy aircraft, diving into slit trenches but still taking some casualties. Their main duty was to keep Motor Transport running in support of the Army. Eric records they had a visit there from the Governor and his wife, Sir Shenton & Lady Thomas, and to his "great satisfaction, they told me they had just seen Jessie with the Cowgills in Seremban".

The Japanese then landed further down the coast, outflanking the British forces who were also defeated at Slim River, leading to a further southward retreat. Eric was instructed to assist the army withdrawal with transport, apart from a few small parties to whom he gave special duties: one group of his men was detailed to take eight million dollars from the KL State Treasury back to Singapore!

From The Residency in Seremban, Jessie wrote on Christmas Day to Tony and Betty that she was "working at the local hospital, driving a little ambulance about between the wards and the operating theatres". On 10th January, she and Jo Cowgill were forced to evacuate to Singapore, where Lady Shenton immediately invited them to stay at Government House.

THE RESIDENCY, 22.12.41.

NEGRI SEMBILAN,

FEDERATED MALAY STATES.

Dear Tony & Betty Dad & I had planned to come here for Christmas, but called it all off some time ago when it became obvious that neither of us would be able to get away - & now here I am, one of four "evacuated" women being put up by Mrs. & Mr. Coe for the time being. Those of us from Ipoh & Batu Pahat feel we have been got out in rather good time & of course we hope things will so turn out that we can in the meantime be of use to the cause.

By coincidence, Eric also arrived in Singapore on the very same day with his LDC convoy. He located Jessie at Government House -- at which point Lady Shenton insisted that he, too, move in there with Jessie.

A letter home on 12th January expressed "an unpleasant surprise at the weakness of our defences but we know that we are going to sock the Japs good and heavy some time -- later if not sooner" --- which last remark rather betrays a lack of confidence in the near term outcome ! That evening they were joined for dinner by Sir Duff and Lady Diana Cooper, Eric wrote that Jessie enjoyed a half-hour's tête-à-tête with Lady Diana, whom he describes as being "still a beautiful creature - very tall and of good figure - but she owes a lot of her present good looks to beauty doctors".

Resigning from the Perak LDC, as they no longer had an effective role, Eric volunteered as a Liaison Officer with the AIF, since "The Aussies don't know the language & don't know the natives & they need people like us who know the ropes."

Jessie continued in the Medical Auxiliary service, refusing to leave Singapore. Jessie's last letter home from Government House, expressed her pleasure at being together with Eric for this short spell and being so glad that Tony and Betty were 'safe' in England. She writes "Now we are as far south as we can come & I hope we can stick it here & see the tide turn & the Nips pushed back" although some realism creeps in when she reports of the air-raids that "they haven't bombed Government House (yet) - probably they are hoping to live in it themselves!"



GOVERNMENT HOUSE,
SINGAPORE.

Jan 14. 42.

Dear Tony & Betty

Now we are as far
south as we can come & I hope we
can stick it here & see the tide turn, & the
'Nips' pushed back. Jo Cowgill. I left
Seremban on Saturday morning ^{10. JAN} in her
car, going by the coast road to Malacca,
as Mr Cowgill thought it would be safer
& quieter. Actually, just as we were
ready to start lunch, the alert went

Jessie refused to leave whilst nurses were still needed; Eric later wrote that although he tried to get her to leave, he was proud of her refusal to do so.

On 12th Feb, Eric was very busy but managed to drive to the house near the hospital, where Jo Cowgill & Jessie by then were living. There he learnt that both women had been taken to the docks after John Cowgill received a phone call from the Colonial Secretary, insisting that their wives left immediately. Feeling mightily relieved that Jessie was now heading for potential safety, Eric returned to the Australian Brigade HQ.

After the surrender, Eric smuggled a letter to John Cowgill, now amongst the civilian internees in Changi Jail; John told Eric that he had taken their wives to the docks and seen them into a launch. That was the last John saw or heard of them. From the news that filtered back to Changi over the following months via survivors of the ships that had been lost, Eric realised that it was likely that Jessie had been killed or drowned -- but he didn't give up all hope.

In the Changi PoW camp, Eric's life was the same as that of the other military officers, which has been well documented. Richardson records meeting Eric at the Selarang Barracks on 4th

March, still with the AIF, but by the time they met again on 8th June, Eric had rejoined the Volunteer contingent. Richardson also mentions conversations with Eric on geomorphology and a geology lecture that Eric gave on 6th August entitled 'The Creation of Malaya'. The infamous Selarang incident in early September seems to have somewhat interrupted such scientific discussions!



On 28th October, Eric was part of U-Force (his Japanese PoW card confirms this) transported up to Ban Pong in Siam; the majority of this Party consisted of Volunteer forces. The unpleasantness of that rail journey and the rigours of the forced march from Kanchanaburi are described in Eric's post-war diaries, published in the October 2015 edition of *Apa Khabar*, so I won't repeat them here. Richardson's diary also gives a graphic description of conditions; suffice it to say that Eric and his companions marched through the mud and rain for the fifty or so miles from Kanburi to Tarso.

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| 收容所 Camp | 馬 泰 昭 和 年 月 日 | 番 號 No. | 馬 本 1712 |
| 姓 名 Name | WILLBOURN, Eric Stewart | 生 年 月 日 Date of Birth | 21 st October 1889 |
| 國 籍 Nationality | BRITISH | 所 屬 部 隊 Unit | No. F. M. S. V. F. |
| 階 級 身 分 Rank | MAJOR 少 佐 | 捕 獲 年 月 日 Date of Capture | 昭 和 15 ^年 2 ^月 15 ^日 |
| 捕 獲 場 所 Place of Capture | SINGAPORE 昭 南 | 母 之 名 Mother's Name | Jane |
| 父 之 名 Father's Name | ← | 職 業 Occupation | GEOLOGIST 地 理 學 者 |
| 本 籍 地 Place of Origin | Carlton Terrace, Bridlington, Yorkshire, England | 通 報 先 Destination of Report | Anthony Horace Willbourn (Son) 22 St. Johns Avenue, Bridlington, Yorkshire, England. |
| 特 記 事 項 Remarks | | | |

補 修 欄 Other Informations

昭 和 十 七 年 拾 月 廿 八 日

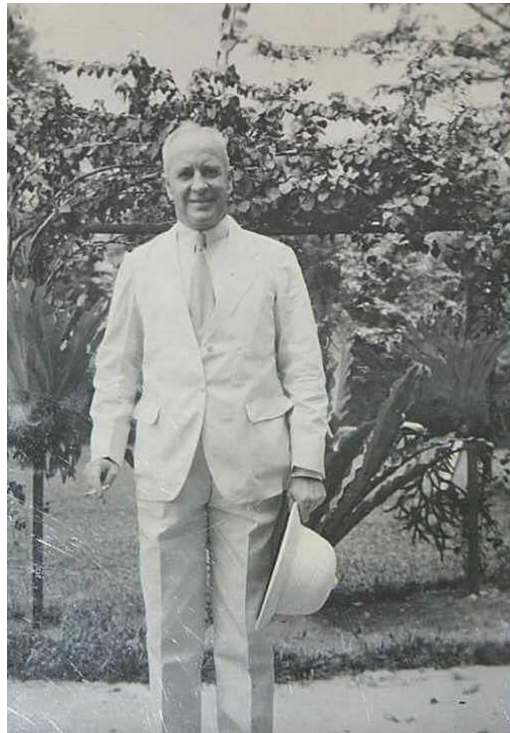
昭 和 18 年 月 日 泰 俘 虜 收 容 所 第 IV 分 所 へ 移 管 ス

昭 和 20 年 8 月 30 日 バ ン コ ヲ ク ニ 於 テ 將 谷 國 手 ニ 引 渡 ス

Once further up at Kinsaiyok, one of the selfless Malayan Volunteer doctors (about whom Jane Flower gave us so much interesting detail two years ago) was able to provide some relief by lancing his blistered and septic heels - the bone now showing through. He had also contracted amoebic dysentery, with his weight down at 8½ stone.

Eric was fortunate that Kinsaiyok was as far north as he went, since the death rate further up the line was far higher, reaching 50% or more by late '43. In December '42, he was moved to Kanyu River Camp. Here, with his close friend Os Watson, also a Malay Volunteer, Eric

worked as a gravedigger. Eric and Os shared everything and stuck together for most, if not all, of their time in captivity.



In April 1943, they were in a party of sick and elderly sent to Chungkai, which probably saved their lives, it being a so-called hospital camp. This was when the 'speedo' period started, the worst of the cholera outbreaks happened and death rates began to soar. When Eric arrived at Chungkai, the camp held about 70 graves; when he left just over a year later, there were more than 1,500. In June 1944, Eric was moved to Nakhon Pathom, another so-called 'hospital' camp.



According to the post-war account given to his daughter, Betty, Eric worked here as a medical orderly, particularly with those who had become mentally deranged by their sufferings. In January 1945, Eric was moved back up to Kanchanaburi; at least this meant he had been spared the agony of the hell-ships to Japan and the associated dangers of being sunk by allied submarines.

Of course, Eric's life and those of so many other Far East PoWs were saved by the suddenness of Japan's unconditional surrender after the A-bombs were dropped over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. After VJ day on 15 August 1945, it took some time for the word to filter all along the railway but, as luck would have it, Eric was in a party of 400 which left Kanburi on 15th August in open-top rail-wagons bound for Nakon Nayok via Bangkok.

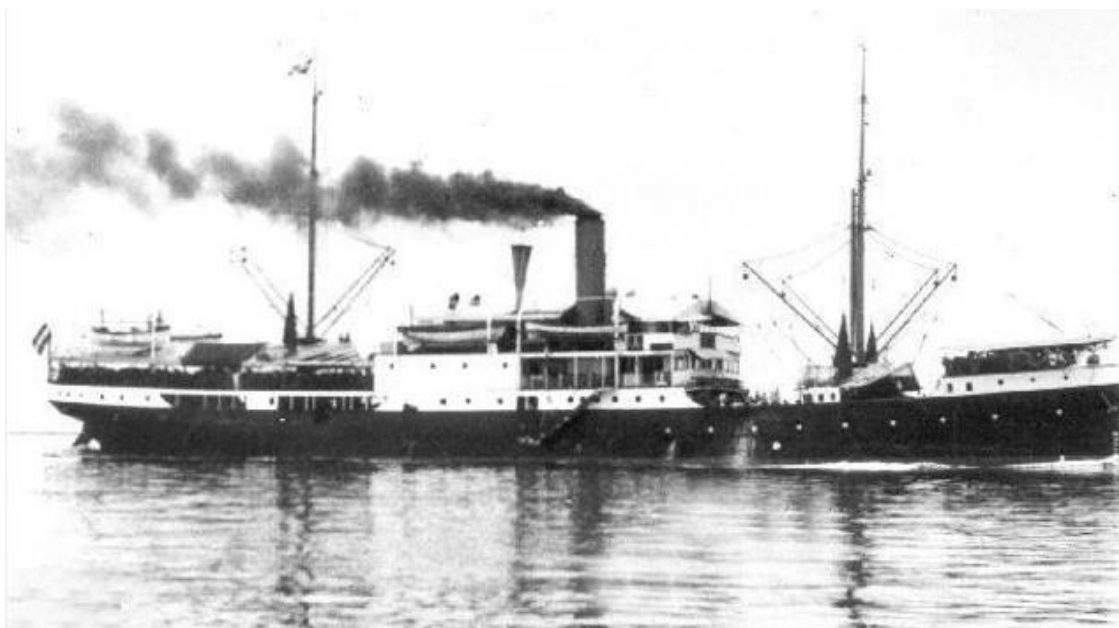
On 17th August they arrived into Bangkok to discover that the Japs had surrendered and, as Eric acknowledged, he was "very lucky to be able to reach the one civilised part of Thailand exactly at the critical date."

After ten days in a warehouse at the port, and having been given "many of the Red Cross supplies that the Nips have withheld from us", Eric and about 100 others were moved to no less an address than the Oriental Hotel! Four of them shared a room; there was no power but "we are a set of scroungers, and have got some coconut oil to burn in lamps made from old tins".

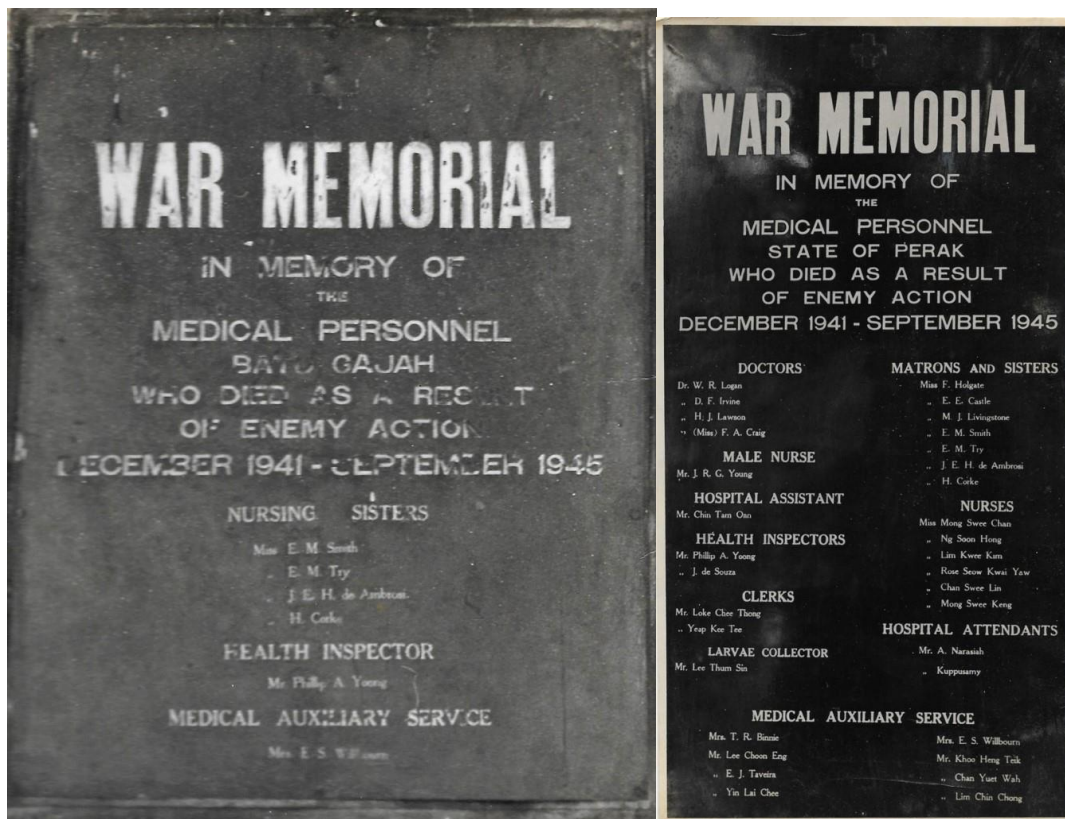
On 3rd September he wrote home from the Oriental Hotel, saying he had cabled John Cowgill in Singapore, seeking news of Jessie; he had not yet given up all hope of finding her alive. The PoWs were to be flown out to Rangoon but Eric refused to leave without more definite news of Jessie. He was then moved to Bangkok's Red Cross Hospital to receive treatment for the amoebic dysentery from which he had been suffering for three years. On 17th September, he writes that he had been "quite ill" for about a week but was now getting better, each day taking **50** pills along with an anti-protozoal injection for his dysentery! The hospital is "like heaven and the Thai nurses are kindness personified".



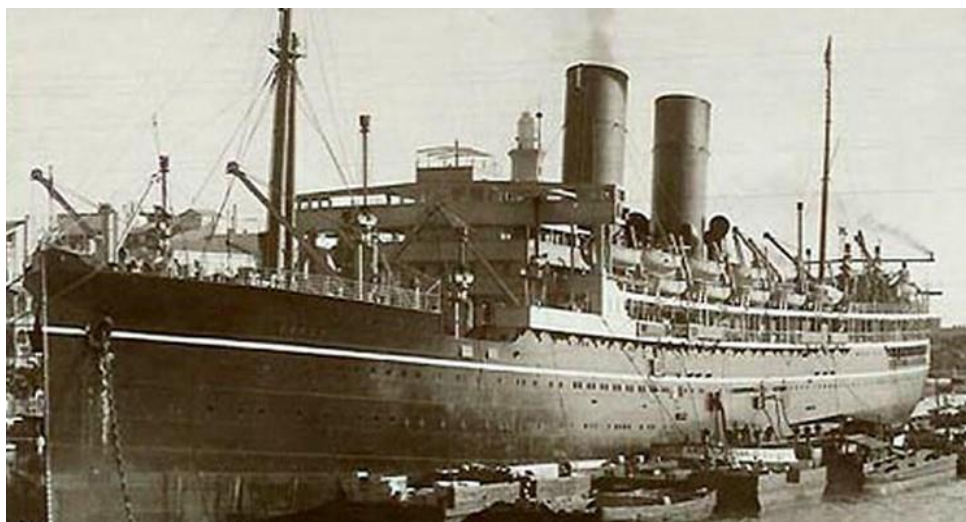
He is very clear that as soon as he has definite news about Jessie, he will come home: "I've had enough of the Tropics". Finally he is flown down to Singapore and, writing from the British General Hospital in mid-October, Eric reports that he has gathered information from former passengers on the **Giang Bee** who survived and were imprisoned in Palembang, Muntok and elsewhere and who had been evacuated to Singapore for hospitalisation. It was confirmed that both Jessie and Jo Cowgill were indeed on the vessel and neither had survived the sinking. From the accounts of those present, it would appear that they were in the damaged port-side lifeboat which had foundered after being launched, owing to bomb shrapnel and splinter damage.



Despite keeping his hopes alive for all the years of captivity, with this effectively 100% definite news Eric then knew that Jessie had died back in February 1942 and he writes "I shall not re-visit BG but will come straight home. I don't want to see BG again!"



Eric left Singapore on the S.S. Ranchi, arriving into Southampton on 20th November, from where he took the train to Waterloo. There he was met by Betty, who did not recognise him at first, so small and shrunken had he become and wearing a huge overcoat far too big for him, but with a luminous and beatific smile. Eric was able to return home just in time to see his mother once again; she died a fortnight later, aged 85.

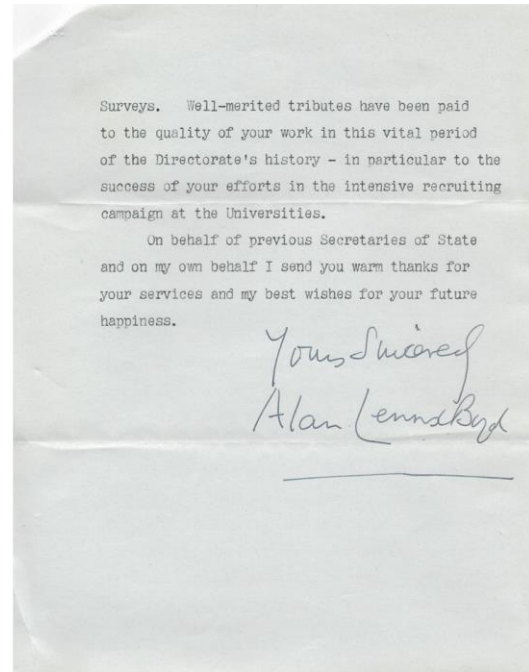
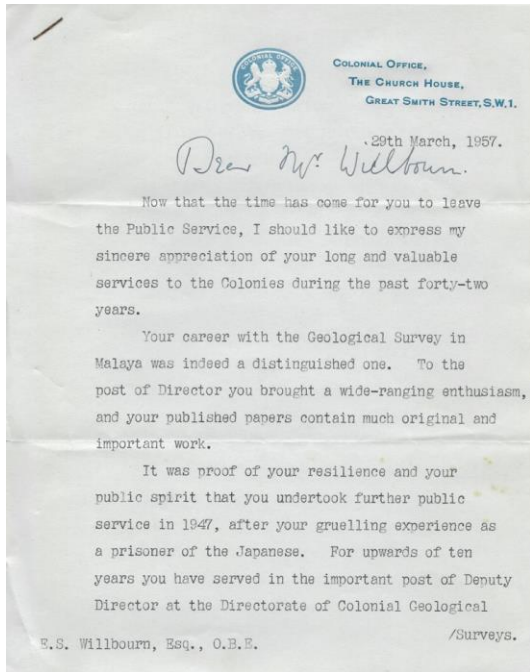


His recuperation took some time but he eventually returned to work. He was appointed to be Deputy Director at the Directorate of Colonial Geological Services in London, located within the Imperial Institute in South Kensington, which controlled Geological Surveying work

throughout the Empire. From 1954 to '57, he also served on the Council of the Geological Society, of which he had been a Fellow for over 30 years.

Eric was awarded the OBE in the New Year's Honours List of January 1955 and finally retired two years later at the age of 67. Our family archives contain the letter of appreciation from Alan Lennox Boyd, Secretary of State for the Colonies who, coincidentally, was also the Secretary of State in office when Malaya was granted its independence.





Eric then returned to the family home in Bridlington, where he enjoyed a relatively long retirement, being a loving and much loved grandfather for his eight grandchildren. My cousins, Amanda and Chloe are both here with me today. Eric died on 25th November 1977, at the age of 88, and is buried in the family grave in the Priory Churchyard in Bridlington, where the two headstones commemorate his beloved Jessie, along with his parents and seven siblings.





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R.I.P.
Eric and Jessie Willbourn