

Experiences as a Prisoner-of-War, 1941-1945

JOHN ROUSSEL

Interviewed by

Charles G. Roland, M.D.

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Oral History Archives

Hannah Chair for the History of Medicine

McMaster University

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It was a good experience. We were doing guard duty at the airport in Gander. Then we went down to St. John's for three or four months, and then back to Valcartier, and then down to St. John, New Brunswick, for two weeks, back to Valcartier, and then we went overseas. Over to Hong Kong.

J.R.:

What was that like? Was that a good experience?

C.G.R.:

Right, right. Then what I decided was, all the rest were joining up so I joined up. Then on I went to Valcartier. I done my basic training in Valcartier; then we moved down to, I think it was Sussex, and then we went over to Newfoundland. We were over in Newfoundland for nine months.

J.R.:

undertaker?

Were you thinking of apprenticing with him, becoming an

C.G.R.:

for an undertaker, as a helper. Then I left school, and then, just before I joined up, I worked school in Bathurst, New Brunswick. I went up to the 8th grade. years old. Then I moved to Bathurst, New Brunswick. I went to I was born in Tracadie, New Brunswick. I left there about 3

John Rousset:

lived, and who your parents were and so on? little bit about your early years in New Brunswick -- where you Now, Mr. Rousset, could you begin by just telling me a

Charles G. Roland, MD:

C.G.R.:

Were you an infantryman, a rifleman...?

J.R.:

A rifleman.

C.G.R.:

Tell me about the trip across. I assume this was your

first trip off North America?

J.R.:

It was, yes.

C.G.R.:

Were you on the Awatea?

J.R.:

Awatea, right. It was a long trip, somewhere around 21

days.

C.G.R.:

Are you a good sailor?

J.R.:

No [laughter], not very much.

C.G.R.:

Didn't like it much?

J.R.:

No, not too much. I was seasick. Just before we got to

Hong Kong, they told us, "You'll probably have to fight your way

off the boat."

C.G.R.:

Really.

J.R.:

They were expecting the....

C.G.R.:

They thought it was wartime.

J.R.:

So after we got to Hong Kong, we were only there about three weeks, and then war was declared around December the 7th, I think. I think it was the day after Pearl Harbor, or the same day, something like that.

C.G.R.:

Before we get into the war, what was Hong Kong like? Was it a fun place to be? Did you have a good time in Hong Kong in the little time you had?

J.R.:

We did the time that we were there, yes. I mean, the times that we were loose, just before the war, yes. Yes, I liked it very much; it was a very nice, good time. So after that, when the war was declared, well, that ended all the fun.

C.G.R.:

Indeed, for a long time.

J.R.:

For a long time, yes.

C.G.R.:

Where were you when the war started? Were you with your company? Where was it -- on the island or on the mainland?

J.R.:

Yes. On the island, right. Exactly the place, I forget now. There's a lot of places I forget, but we were on the island, yes.

so on?

You know, what did they do to you and where did they take you and well, tell me what happened, as you were taken prisoner.

C.G.R.:

No, no. I don't remember exactly where I was at that time.

J.R.:

remember.

Again, it doesn't matter. I just thought you might

C.G.R.:

Exactly where...?

J.R.:

Were you at Stanley or...?

Do you remember where you were at the time of the surrender?

C.G.R.:

that we were taken prisoner.

this is something that you have to go through. Of course, after

, at that point, to each his own. It was rough by spells, but

well, there was quite a bit of action. It were more or less

J.R.:

Yes, a little less than 3 weeks.

C.G.R.:

declared, well, maybe 3 weeks, 2 or 3 weeks.

well, we weren't exactly through. They said the war

J.R.:

you were captured. Was there a lot of fighting?

Just tell me then a bit about your three weeks of war before

C.G.R.:

J.R.:

Well, when we were taken prisoner, we went into, I think the name, the camp was on the island, I think it was North Point. We were in there for a couple of years before we went to... I think it was a year or two before we went to Sham Shui Po. Then after that, well, what happened in there was... what happened to me, my eyes went bad; then I had the drop foot. I was like that for at least a couple of years. I couldn't lift my feet at all.

C.G.R.:

Your feet sort of flapped when you walked.

J.R.:

Right, just like a duck.

C.G.R.:

Do you remember when this came on? About how long after you

were a prisoner?

J.R.:

Oh, I'd say, maybe a year, a year and a half.

C.G.R.:

The eyes went first, did they?

J.R.:

Yes, my eyes went first.

C.G.R.:

What did you notice about your eyes. You know, what was it

that made you...?

J.R.:

Kind of blurred.

C.G.R.:

Everything was blurred.

As far as sickness in the camp, that was about the worst thing I had -- dry beriberi, yellow jaundice, drop foot, and of

get too tender." But it was real bad, real bad. Then the doctors told us, "Don't do this because our feet would burn, and we used to put our feet in the bucket of cold water. What we used to know at night, this rug reaches our feet, I had beriberi. Dry beriberi. Our feet were burning, course, that's about my sickness that I had in the camp. Of course, they could give us, you know. Of course, they had a barracks for a hospital. I was in there, but then they just -- they No medicine, no medicine. Of course, they had a barracks

J.R.:

Yes. Did they have any medicines or...?

C.G.R.:

For yellow jaundice?

J.R.:

Could they do anything?

Do you remember what they did for you when you had this?

C.G.R.:

No, at Sham Shui Po.

J.R.:

Po?

Was this while you were still at North Point or at Sham Shui

C.G.R.:

was sick for quite a while with that.

Yes. Then I got yellow jaundice. Real bad dose of it. I

J.R.:

course my eyes. Even today, my eyes are bad today. I can't see to read. I can't even go out alone. I don't see the lights.

C.G.R.:

I saw that you had trouble with the paper. You had a little trouble finding where to sign it, yes. And that's been that way ever since the war?

J.R.:

Ever since, yes. The worst, the worst of all. Maybe with the age, I don't know, but...

C.G.R.:

I guess we all get a little trouble with age. If you've already got something there, that would make it even worse.

J.R.:

Naturally. Then when I come back I've had operations in every toe.

C.G.R.:

Really, why?

J.R.:

I guess they called it hammer toe. All my toes went, they all went like this. Now they're all, what do you call it -- I can't bend them anymore.

C.G.R.:

Fused?

J.R.:

Fused, right, right. All the toes but the two big toes; I'm suffering with that today, I'm suffering with arthritis in the spine. I've been treated for high blood pressure, and very bad circulation; my feet are always cold, very bad circulation.

we crushed rice. A little bowl of crushed rice. Like, what well, the diet we had in camp was a soup, and in the morning

J.R.:

average day, a typical day? Can you do that?

Yes, tell me about the diet in camp. What would be an

Yes, I just meant the butter part [laughter].

C.G.R.:

one I had then.

Sure [laughter]. My diet today is a bit better than the

J.R.:

You didn't have any butter there, I don't think.

Well, that must have been something like the diet in camp.

C.G.R.:

No fats or....

J.R.:

No butter or....

C.G.R.:

I'm on a diet, yes.

J.R.:

Yes. You are on a diet are you?

C.G.R.:

or something like that?

Yes. What do you call it -- the hardening of the arteries,

J.R.:

The arteries in your heart, and so on.

C.G.R.:

And recently I've been treated for cholesterol.

would they call it here, something like a porridge, you know. At noon, well, it was more rice -- the same mixed up with potato tops or something like that -- and at supper-time was the same thing. Maybe we got a little piece of whale meat, maybe a couple of times a week.

C.G.R.:

whale meat?

J.R.:

whale meat, yes.

C.G.R.:

Really. Any Red Cross parcels?

J.R.:

Oh, we got them a couple of times we were there. I'd say we

got about two at the most, yes. Of course, the Red Cross

parcels were sent but, I mean, we didn't get them all.

C.G.R.:

Yes.

J.R.:

I mean that's not the fault, probably, of the Red Cross, why

we didn't get them all.

C.G.R.:

No, the Japanese just didn't let them through, I think.

That's what I've heard.

J.R.:

Yes, that could have been the problem, yes.

C.G.R.:

Who were the doctors that you knew there? Did you have any

particular ones that you had seen?

J.R.:

Well, we had Dr. Grey, Dr. Banfill [Dr. S. Martin Banfill,

HCM 27-83]. But the doctor I had when I was in there for yellow

jaundice was Dr. Brown, I think. An English doctor.

C.G.R.:

I don't know his name. I know Banfill. I've interviewed

Dr. Banfill.

J.R.:

Yes. Where is he now?

C.G.R.:

In Montreal.

J.R.:

Oh, he's in Montreal.

C.G.R.:

Yes, in Montreal West. Dr. Grey just died last year in

Edmonton.

J.R.:

I heard that, yes. Yes, he was the...well, Dr. Banfill

was the Royal Rifles' doctor, and Dr. Grey was the Winnipeg

Grenadiers'. I had Dr. Brown. But of course, they worked all

together anyway.

C.G.R.:

Did you have much to do with them? I guess what I'm

getting at is, do you have any feelings about whether they were

doing a good job, or...?

J.R.:

For me, for what they had to work with, they done a very

good job. Very good, yes.

C.G.R.:

Do you remember any of the orderlies who were there in the

hospitals. I think [Pat] Portier was one, wasn't he?

J.R.:

Portier could have been one. I think [Donat] Bernier was in

that. Was Bernier one? I'm not sure. Portier could have been

one, but I don't remember very much.

C.G.R.:

No. I just thought you might....

J.R.:

I remember there was a couple of English orderlies, but

their names I can't recall.

C.G.R.:

I know. It's 40 years ago. It's a long time.

I think there were three drafts that went to Japan. So

there couldn't have been many of you left, were there, in Sham

Shui Po. Canadians, I mean, Canadians. Do you remember?

J.R.:

There was quite a few still. Yes, quite a few still. I

didn't go at the time because I had the drop feet.

C.G.R.:

Yes. Did that get better during the war?

J.R.:

White I was in the camp?

C.G.R.:

White you were in the camp.

J.R.:

It got better because they gave me some massage, I think.

It got better but they never come back the way it used to be. My ankles are still weak. I have to be careful where I walk. I if

go over a bit....

C.G.R.:

Tip right...Or twist the ankle.

Do you know, did they have any vitamins? Did they ever get

any vitamins from the Red Cross or anywhere to treat this kind of

thing?

J.R.:

Not that I know of.

C.G.R.:

Nothing that you know of.

Did you go out and work at all? Were you well enough to

work? Well enough so the Japanese said you could work

[laughter].

J.R.:

Not while I had the drop feet, but I went out, I worked on

the working parties, yes.

C.G.R.:

Doing what? Did you...?

J.R.:

I used to dig tunnels. That's where they used to put their

gas and ammunition.

C.G.R.:

Oh yes? Was this near the airport, or all over?

J.R.:

No, I don't think it was close to the airport. Exactly where I don't know. I know we went out for a couple of months, I think, about 56 miles away from the camp but we stayed there for a couple of months. Yes, we dug up a, oh, a big piece of land we dug up, you know, to... I guess they were making gardens there or something.

C.G.R.:

With the hoes, or mattocks, or something like that?

J.R.:

Hoes, yes, yes.

C.G.R.:

I see. How many men would have gone out, about?

J.R.:

Oh, I'd say around maybe 50 or 60 men, at least.

C.G.R.:

You were gone for a couple of months?

J.R.:

Yes.

C.G.R.:

I hadn't heard about that before. You don't know where it was?

J.R.:

No, I don't remember the place. Of course, work don't kill

you as long as you've got enough food. Especially when you're in there for four years. It's not the work that's going to kill

you, but if you've just had rice to eat -- this is where you

don't have too much strength.

C.G.R.:

Did you have any brutality done to you? Were you beaten

up?

J.R.:

Myself, no.

C.G.R.:

I know many were, and I just wondered.

J.R.:

Yes, I know some were but I was not.

C.G.R.:

Did you lose a lot of weight?

J.R.:

Yes, I went down to about 98 pounds.

C.G.R.:

Ninety-eight? What was your normal weight?

J.R.:

My normal weight when I went in, I'd say around 150.

C.G.R.:

150, yes. So that was a real loss, that's a real weight

loss.

What about sex? Was the lack of sex a bother? Was it

something that people were worried about?

J.R.:

No, I wouldn't say that. I think what the guys would most

talk about, was food. But sex, I think the guys didn't have the

energy for it.

C.G.R.:

That's what I thought you might say, but I wasn't sure.

J.R.:

All you could hear the guys talking about was food, food.

C.G.R.:

What was the worst part of this whole thing for you? What would you say was the part that bothered you the most? Can you think of any one thing?

J.R.:

Well, when I was in there, I said to myself, "If I'm going to get out of here alive, I'm going to get out alive." But I wasn't the type to start to worry, I mean, as far as what bothered me the most was just being in there, I guess [laughter]. Bothered me the most. Especially when you're only about 21, 22 years old. Those are the best years of your life.

C.G.R.:

That's a bad time to be in. There's no good time to be in, but that's a bad time to be in, yes, I agree. Did you lose a lot of your friends over there?

J.R.:

Pardon?

C.G.R.:

Did you lose a lot of your friends in the camp? Did a lot of your friends die?

J.R.:

That died in the camp, yes. Right, yes, yes.

C.G.R.:

Why did you think you didn't? Why did you survive and they didn't? Do you have any feeling about that?

J.R.:

I don't know. I never gave it a thought through the years.

C.G.R.:

Just luck?

J.R.:

Just luck. I mean, I think at that time, it's just like

today. You see your friends have cancer, this and that, and you

say, "How come they have it, I don't have it." I mean, I think

it's the same thing when I was in the camp. I think it just

depends on the person themselves.

C.G.R.:

Yes, I get the feeling that in the camps, some just kind of

gave up.

J.R.:

That is just what I was going to say. The morale. A lot

of people gave up, is true. I was the type, I was always after

the guys, you know, "Come on, let's go." A lot of guys gave up,

that's true.

C.G.R.:

It's too bad, isn't it.

J.R.:

Well, like I told you, I said to myself, "If I get out

alive, I get out alive, and if I'm going to stay here, I'm going

to stay here."

C.G.R.:

Tell me about after the war?

J.R.:

Well, after when we come back, we just went wild there for

awhile [laughter].

C.G.R.:

In what way?

J.R.:

In what way? I say, I think it's just a matter of a way of

speaking. But I always felt, for a long time, I know I was

liberated, but I always felt that I wasn't, you know. For a

long time I felt this way.

C.G.R.:

It took you awhile to get used to it, did it?

J.R.:

Yes. Like I say, when I came back from Hong Kong, I said to

myself, I said, "Am I really loose, or what?" I wasn't sure.

It took me a little while to get back to that. So I came back. It

was down in New Brunswick. I was there. I got my discharge in

Fredericton, New Brunswick, and I was down there for about a

year, and then I come to Montreal. I've been in Montreal ever

since. I came up here in '47.

C.G.R.:

You didn't go back to undertaking?

J.R.:

No, no, no. Well, I mean, my eyes were gone, anyway. I

would have liked to, but I would have to take a course, and on

account of my eyes I couldn't.

C.G.R.:

Yes, you couldn't study the books.

J.R.:

No.

C.G.R.:

What did you do? What have you been doing?

J.R.:

Well, I worked for the Gillette company in 1947 and I was there for 32 years. I retired seven years ago, six or seven years ago.

C.G.R.:

Do you look back on this experience in the war? Was this a totally bad experience? Were there any good things about it?

J.R.:

Well, I never gave it a thought. I just said to myself, "This is one thing in the past." I don't even think about it. The only time we talk about it once in a while, is when the group meets, you know, we have a reunion, or something like that.

C.G.R.:

Yes, the Hong Kong Veterans Association, and so on.

J.R.:

Yes. Sometimes we have a group here in Montreal that want to meet. But outside of that, no, never, never mention anything to my wife or....

C.G.R.:

How do you feel about the Japanese?

J.R.:

Well, the way I look at it, they were there for the same purpose that we were. Ok., maybe we could have been treated a bit better than we were treated.

C.G.R.:

C'est la guerre.

J.R.:

All the guys, today maybe they have another opinion, but I

don't know.

C.G.R.:

Have you been back to Hong Kong?

J.R.:

No.

C.G.R.:

I know some of the group have gone back on trips and so on.

J.R.:

It would be a nice trip to take but I don't feel good enough

to.

C.G.R.:

It's not cheap, either.

J.R.:

No, it's not cheap.

C.G.R.:

It's a long way when the Government isn't taking you.

J.R.:

I know down in New Brunswick on a trip, I think it was 1979,

we were at the motel, the wife and I, and we were just sitting

there, and I started to turn and poof, I was on the floor. I

think I fell. My wife come from Levi, Quebec. We moved down

there about 4 years ago. So I went to the shopping center and I

got a bit dizzy. So I sat down, and finally I got home, and

then my eyes. I went to the hospital with 200 pressure.

C.G.R.:

I don't know exactly what time we had to go out on parade. We had to go out every morning to be counted. It was around 8 o'clock or something like that. I forget to be exact. Then we left the camp to go to work and then we came back at night. We'd come back maybe at 4 or 4:30 or something like that, and then have lunch and...Of course, while we were able to, we used to do a lot of walking. We used to do a lot of walking. I think this used to keep us in better shape. It wasn't late that we were in bed. Anyway, we had to be in bed early because...of

J.R.:

Could you try to tell me what a typical day was like? What time you got up in the morning -- just sort of sketch out what your day would have been? Just an average sort of day. A day when you were well enough to work; I don't mean a sick day.

C.G.R.:

Yes. Maybe it's caused by my bad circulation, because I feel dizzy. Some days it's worse than other days, you know.

J.R.:

Is it under good control?

C.G.R.:

Yes.

J.R.:

Is that the first time you knew that you'd had...?

C.G.R.:

Ever since then well, I've been treated for...

J.R.:

High blood pressure, yes.

course, every night we had to have one of our guys at the door of the barracks. Say, I went there for 2 hours, and then I'd wake up the other guy for 2 hours, you know. You had to have the guys there. If the Japanese guard came around, he'd come in and check. If there was an empty bed, he wanted to know where that guy was. You were responsible for the guy that was missing. You'd say he went to the bathroom or something like that.

C.G.R.:

Really? I didn't know that. So, somebody had to be there all the time.

J.R.:

Yes. They used to count on me. I'd say, OK, if I go for an hour, two hours, the other guy, you'd wake up the other guy, he'd go for an hour, two hours.

C.G.R.:

Yes, everybody would take their turn.

J.R.:

Yes.

C.G.R.:

Were there good times in the camp? Did you have fun sometimes, or was it all bad?

J.R.:

Well, all bad; I say after you're in there a couple of years, you get more or less used to it. I used to play a lot of checkers. When I was in camp, sometimes, I used to play checkers all day long until it was time to go to bed. I just enjoy it very much. Just a good pastime for me; when I went in there I never seen a checkerboard before. So when I left there I knew

how to play checkers.

C.G.R.:

I won't play checkers with you [laughter].

J.R.:

It was a good pastime for me, I can say that.

C.G.R.:

were you there when they put on shows? I think sometimes

they put on shows.

J.R.:

Sometimes they had shows, yes.

C.G.R.:

In fact I've got some pictures, I'll show you in a minute,

that I brought.

J.R.:

Sometimes they had shows. Not too often but once in a

while.

C.G.R.:

How about Christmas? Was there any celebration at

Christmas at all?

J.R.:

No, no.

C.G.R.:

Nothing, nothing at all?

J.R.:

Just like another day.

C.G.R.:

Did you work on Christmas Day. Did they make you work, do

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you remember?
 J.R.:

This I don't remember; we knew it was Christmas Day, but
 that was it.

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