

WILLIAM BRAGG SCHOFIELD

Experiences as a Prisoner-of-War in the Far East, World War 2

Interviewed by  
Charles G. Roland, M.D.  
Wednesday 21 May, 1986

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Hannah Chair for the History of Medicine  
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[Material in square brackets added October 1988]

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William Bragg Schofield, Thorold, Ontario, 21 May 1986

Charles G. Roland, M.D.:

We've had a little difficulty with the equipment (I have this on now) so I'm just saying that we're going to skip most of the preliminary material. You were captured in Batavia and, if my recollection is correct, around about April of 1943 you were at Jaarmarkt POW camp. Unbeknownst to you, I guess, you were going to Haruku soon. Maybe you'd pick it up from there, if you would?

William Bragg Schofield:

Yes, well we were taken by boat, and arrived at the island, and, in the evening -- it was dark. It was dark. And when we got there we found that it was raining. Everything was thick mud, and there was not even a tent. Nothing built. We just had to -- I think there was one frame building with a roof, and we got in under there. We were given a rush mat, which we spread out in the mud, and we just -- we were very tired -- and we slept as best we could that night.

C.G.R.:

How long was the trip? Do you remember?

W.B.S.:

The trip on the boat? Oh, well, as far as I can remember, -- I'm a bit hazy as to where we got to -- how we got there. But the trip on the boat actually [from Ceram] to Haruku was a short one. Would have been afternoon -- from mid-day 'til late -- 'til the evening. And then, as I say, we slept in the mud there. There was no provisions. We had to scrape. We didn't have a

meal even. And then, well, the first job we had to do, from then on -- the next morning we had to build our own camp, which we did, of course.

Then, we were given the job of levelling out the coral on the top of the island -- levelling off -- making a landing strip for planes, out of coral rock. At one point we were working with the drill and we were making holes all day long in the coral rock, and then midday when we stopped for our bowl of rice, the Japanese soldiers would come round and put these charges into these holes.

C.G.R.:

Ah, yes.

W.B.S.:

Dynamite charges, I think.

C.G.R.:

Yes.

W.B.S.:

Then it always seemed that at the last possible moment he [the guard] would shout some warning to us, and we'd already taken the bruises by then. And there were bits of coral flying about all over the place. We just took cover where we could. I know the chap next to me got one right in the midriff one day, which winded him, but luckily it didn't injure him seriously. But that was our job. I was working on there until -- of course, we were in a very weak condition and the glare from the coral rock affected my eyes. [We were told by the Japanese that the job had to be done as quickly as possible no matter how many

lives it might cost, and that, to them, we were lower than the lowest natives and if we could not work we would only get half the food ration.]

C.G.R.:

Oh yes.

W.B.S.:

One morning I just blacked out. I was taken back to camp. No, I wasn't taken back. We had to lay there. They wouldn't take you back. We had to lay there until -- there was one or two fellows like me -- and they always made us lay there until the working party had finished. Then, going back to camp with them, we marched back with them. And then I laid for some days with a damp cloth over my eyes. I think it was [Doctor] Forbes -- I think it was Forbes in Haruku.

C.G.R.:

Yes. Dr. [F. Alastair] Forbes?

W.B.S.:

Dr. Forbes, that's right. Well he managed -- how he managed it I don't know -- but he managed to get some water buffalo liver. There was about six of us with this trouble, and he managed to feed us a little bit of this every day, and in a few weeks there was an improvement. After that we got bamboo, a bit bigger than that, we used to cut it -- we'd cut the length about that long.

C.G.R.:

About an inch or so?

W.B.S.:

About an inch or so. Threaded a bit of string through a

needle -- goggles to keep the direct glare of the sun off. And luckily -- I must have been very fortunate because there was so much eye trouble. I think the majority of people I've met have had some sort of eye trouble.

C.G.R.:

Continuing eye trouble?

W.B.S.:

Yes.

C.G.R.:

Yes. Yes.

W.B.S.:

Some of them never got their eyesight fully back. Not fully. They weren't -- not blind, but this chap I was telling you who went and took photos of Haruku. Now, he can't drive. His wife drives him. He can't recognize anybody across the road, and if he's watching television, he sits, oh, nearer to there than I about here to sit to watch television.

C.G.R.:

Just two or three feet away.

W.B.S.:

Yes. And it seems there is nothing they could do about it. Some they could improve, some they couldn't. I think it depended probably upon the nerves of the eye; whether they died or whether they could be brought back to life. [I shall always be grateful to Doc Forbes for making the effort to get us a little of the liver. We were the only ones to get it.]

Marmite was the thing. I've always remembered Marmite.

They dropped loads of that to us [eventually, on our release]. Anyhow, that's about Haruku. Of course, we had dysentery and beriberi and all these things; we were in a pretty bad way. The deaths were 12 to 14 a day.

When we got back to the working party in the evening, tired out, and they said, oh well, we've got somebody, we need to bury hem tonight. They did have a party who dug the graves. I was on that for a time, diging graves. But then they had to get bearers to carry the -- well, they made rough coffins out of bamboo -- carry them down. I'm afraid we were a bit hard-hearted. Anyhow, it had to be done.

C.G.R.:

Were the graves dug in soil or did they have to be --

W.B.S.:

In soil. We cleared a part of the jungle.

C.G.R.:

So you weren't having to work with coral, at least.

W.B.S.:

No. No. We got off that. [It was considered a light job for sick men.] We were working on soil, digging these graves, and I understand now that those bodies have been removed from there to a cemetery -- in Java, I think.

C.G.R.:

Really.

W.B.S.:

Yes. They were eventually dug up and moved to a proper cemetery.

C.G.R.:

You mentioned this problem with your eyes; do you have any recollection how long you were unable to work because of the eyes? Just approximately?

W.B.S.:

Oh, about five or six weeks.

C.G.R.:

That long?

W.B.S.:

Yes. Although of course, you say "weren't able to work." Well, I wouldn't say we weren't able to work. We weren't able to go up to the airstrip, but we were put onto jobs such as digging the graves. That sort of thing.

C.G.R.:

Yes, yes. You weren't lounging around.

W.B.S.:

Oh, we weren't lounging around. They saw to that.

C.G.R.:

Yes.

W.B.S.:

And we couldn't because I mean, with the Japanese, if you didn't work, you didn't eat. Or you went on half rations, and of course that's when your group, your pals, really meant something. It was up to them to see that you got something. The Japanese mind said that if you can't work, you're no good to us, because to them we shouldn't have been alive anyhow.

C.G.R.:

No.



W.B.S.:

In their eyes. And if we couldn't work, it wasn't worth keeping us alive. Instead of giving us a little extra food to build us up again, to get back to work. I know that we had our first dog there. [laughter] I'll never forget that, because it was a man who keeps a public house in Somerset, and he scared the life out of me, because I wouldn't have had the guts to do it. The sergeant -- Japanese sergeant -- used to come round the camp every day looking for trouble.

C.G.R.:

Is this Mori?

W.B.S.:

Yes, Gunso Mori. Now, I'm not saying that it actually was Gunso Mori's dog. I don't know. It was a sergeant with a dog. I don't think it was Mori, really. Anyhow, it was his dog and it used to follow him round the camp. One day it stopped snooping outside the hut, and it came in straight down through the hut, and into another hut. Finally the dog missed him and so he came trotting down through the hut. We were sitting there on the edge of our bali, we used to call it, bamboo shelves that we slept on.

C.G.R.:

Yes, yes.

W.B.S.:

And it came trotting down. This chap, he got hold of a bit of bamboo and he went whack, walloping. We've never worked so fast in our lives after that. We had to skin it, and bury the skin and head and everything else, and boiled it in these petrol tins that we'd had petrol in. We boiled it and then we ate it

between us. The rather ironical part about was that the doctors were delighted when we gave them the soup that it had been boiled in. It was just what they wanted for their dysentery patients. [laughter] Anyhow, we got away with it. He never found out where his dog got to.

C.G.R.:

No. No.

W.B.S.:

And then there was another Javanese doctor -- Englander; England some such thing. England we called him. That was the easiest for us, to think of him as Dr. England. [Actually, Enghelin.] He was a very, very nice chap, and according to some of the people who had been out there, he was one of the best-known doctors in Java.

C.G.R.:

Is that right?

W.B.S.:

Yes. One of their top doctors. He was interned, actually. He helped me when I got beriberi in the legs and I could hardly walk. Used a couple of sticks and stumped about. He seemed to know what he was doing because he got some of the native Latin people -- the people who were native to that part -- to go picking some berries.

C.G.R.:

Oh yes.

W.B.S.:

Now I don't know, you might have heard about it, but I never

did know what they were. There was about five or six of us and we just walked up and down all night. When you were on the feet they didn't seem to ache that much but when you laid down at night they ached and ached and ached. We used to get up and walk up and down. Anyhow, he got these berries and squashed them up, and the juice from these -- we only had a little drop each every day. But he said if you could keep it up for about five weeks, he thought it might help. Well, in five weeks I could walk.

C.G.R.:

So it did seem to make a difference.

W.B.S.:

Yes it did seem to make a difference. It certainly did.

C.G.R.:

Was there much contact with the native people on Haruku?

W.B.S.:

No. No. No contact at all. The only ones were those who were interned in the prison camp -- actually in the prison camp.

C.G.R.:

I see. But there were some in your camp.

W.B.S.:

There were some.

C.G.R.:

I see.

W.B.S.:

Yes. And then it was through him that I got away from the island, because we had a parade one day, and the Japanese doctor came around, and we were all brought out on parade and we were all made like horses. Each one had to walk up and down in front

of him, you see. Then he either said, "Over there," or "Over there," you see. If he thought they were bad enough, apparently there was a boat going.

C.G.R.:

Yes. Yes.

W.B.S.:

Okay you go over there. But if you could, well it seemed to me, if you could stand even, let alone walk, you know, you were fit. He passed me as fit, and I could only hobble a little. And Dr. Enghelin -- actually he was a Freemason, as I found out after. I think that helped. But anyhow, at the end of the day, when I went into -- I was talking to the orderly. Dick Fowden his name was, and he was a friend of mine.

C.G.R.:

Fowlden?

W.B.S.:

Fowden. F-o-w-d-e-n.

C.G.R.:

Yes.

W.B.S.:

Came from Rochdale. He died of cancer, I think. [No, still living in 1988.] Anyhow, I said to him, "Oh well, I think that'll just about finish me." I didn't see how I was going to survive after that night. "I'll be stopping here, I'm not on the list." And he said, "Well, you know," he said, "don't you worry, you're on the list." He said, "You're going." So I went on that boat. And weeks and weeks we spent on that boat. The worst time

of all.

C.G.R.:

Yes. Do you remember when it was about that you would have left Haruku? Does that stick in your memory at all?

W.B.S.:

No. No it doesn't. No, I'm afraid it doesn't.

C.G.R.:

Do you remember who was in command of the party?

W.B.S.:

It must have been getting on towards the end, because I'll carry on to the end, then, now. We went by boat and we sort of hid up at night in coves and bays until we got to Bali. When we got to Bali they were transferring us from this boat to another boat that was in the harbour. I'll always remember. I was number 7. There was seven to go, to walk across the gangplank onto this ship, when they stopped us. Bali had been bombed that day and there were wounded Japanese. They brought those out from the shore and put them onto the ship. Then they said, "Right, that's all that's going on this boat." Well, that boat was torpedoed and lost.

We hung about in the bay there for about a week or two -- at least. The worst part of all was the water. You had your mug of water in the morning, and then a mug in the evening, and you were down between decks on this boat.

C.G.R.:

In the hold.

W.B.S.:

In the hold. It was very grim.

C.G.R.:

Yes.

W.B.S.:

One incident might be interesting. There were two fellows near me, and one was dying (I think it was beriberi, but he hadn't got long to go, that was obvious). His pal was trying his best to look after him -- and he had a gold ring. Oh dear. I mean, as long as he was alive, he wouldn't touch that. But when he died he knew that he could get a canteen of water from the Japanese for the ring. So he went to take the ring off his pal's finger, which was all right. He was dead. He had no other use for it. So he found that he was swollen up with this beriberi. He couldn't get it off. So what thirst does. I mean, hunger you can stand, but thirst is a terrible thing. And he gnawed his [dead friend's] finger off. To get the ring.

Anyhow, we were there. Then we were transferred -- I think we were transferred to another boat. I don't think it was the same boat. We went on from there, and from there we ended up at Singapore. The tale that we'd heard was that we were supposed to be going to Saigon, to work there on the railway, but things were getting a bit hot then. They'd lost one or two ships. They'd been torpedoed. And they dumped us on Singapore and that's as far as we went.

C.G.R.:

So that's how you ended up in Changi?

W.B.S.:

And we were put to work in a camp on the docks and we spent

our time clearing up where they'd bombed the godowns, as they called them. And we were clearing up the mess, because the natives disappeared. They wouldn't work on the docks when they were being bombed. Then from there, I was transferred up to Changi. I ended up in Changi.

C.G.R.:

Okay. Could we go back, and I ask a few questions?

W.B.S.:

Yes anything -- yes, sure.

C.G.R.:

First before I forget,. Do you by any chance remember the name of the British officer who was in charge of that ship that you left Haruku in?

W.B.S.:

No, I didn't know any officers. We were down in the hold. I don't know what happened there.

C.G.R.:

There was one group that left in charge of -- I think he was a Flying Officer Blackwood, who I know about, so I just thought I would ask.

W.B.S.:

Ah yes. No. I can't remember the bloke's name.

C.G.R.:

Tell me, how did the British POWs get on with the Dutch POWs?

W.B.S.:

Yes, well, we hadn't got much time for them, to tell you the truth, because, when a party of you got to camp -- a POW camp

(this is just an instance, and it happened time and again), you got to a camp, they would say, "Right. We've got so many British, so many Dutch, and perhaps so many American. Now we've got to supply so many hundred men each day for a working party. So that, with taking the proportions, that means so many Dutch, and so many English, so many American." Well, in about a week you'd find that 75 % of the Dutch were "sick" and couldn't work, and it ended up with us doing all the work.

And whether -- well, I think it was obvious. Their Dutch doctors must have played ball with them, because you always found that. They didn't like work and they'd get off somehow or other. You always found that we got the burden of the work to do on the working parties. And it didn't seem to take them much time at all to get on the sick list. They would lay on their beds and that's the impression. And it was the impression of everybody. They were talked about and grumbled about.

C.G.R.:

Did this happen at Haruku too, do you recall?

W.B.S.:

Yes. But the Dutch women were wonderful. Jaarmarkt you mentioned; well, the Dutch women were left outside (of course, they were living outside), and we used to go off on working parties in the morning. Working parties would leave, and as we came out of the main gates there'd be crowds. There'd be a whole bunch of Dutch women there waiting for the chance of seeing their husband. Of course, the Japanese, they had no compunction at all in swinging at them with the rifle butt and all that sort of



thing. But they didn't give -- they were there every day. And I admired them for that.

C.G.R.:

Yes. How about the officers. Did you have good officers? Do you think they did what they could? Some each way?

W.B.S.:

Some each way. Some were marvelous. Some of them tried to stand up to the Japs. They got beaten up. But they did the best they could. Others -- was it Haruku? I'm not sure where it was but on the camps -- I think it was Jaarmarkt, actually -- the officer in charge of the whole camp had to sort of deal with the Japanese. You see, we got two cents a day, I think, for work. Well, now he said, "Right. Now the officers are getting (I don't know how much it was) but they were getting a monthly substantial amount compared with that. He says now, that's not fair. All officers will put so much into the kitty to buy fruit and other things. You'd be surprised how many refused to do that.

C.G.R.:

Is that right?

W.B.S.:

So, as I say, some and some.

C.G.R.:

Can you describe a typical day for me? What time did you get up and what did you have to eat? Work through a day?

W.B.S.:

Yes, well you'd get up about -- I don't know. We had no watches -- about seven, I suppose. Then you'd go and you'd get a pint mug full of what we used to call pap. That was rice boiled

-- boiled rice, and it was very much like porridge when we got it. And you'd get a pint mug a day. And then you got, when you'd had that, most of us got an old mug or something we'd scrounged. Then you'd take a plate -- we used to get onto those hubcaps off the cars, you know. They made nice plates.

C.G.R.:

Oh, yes.

W.B.S.:

Drill a hole in them, tie them with a bit of cord around your waist, and then you were off for the day! You went off on a working party, and some were worse than others, some of the guards were worse than others, but none of them were very good, I'm afraid. You used to hope that they wouldn't be too bad. Then, when you came back in the evening, you'd go down, and you'd get your evening meal. That would be not a mugfull, about three quarters of a mug full of steamed rice.

C.G.R.:

Yes.

W.B.S.:

And then sometimes you'd get about that much [small teacup] of what we used to call "jungle stew." Seemed as if any leaves or stuff out of the jungle was put into that. And that was it. I mean, you were so tired out that you would just flop down on your bed space. Bed space, incidentally, was three foot by six foot. That was home. [laughter] I think, if you get those tapes, they'll be a great help.

C.G.R.:

Yes, I'm sure they will.

W.B.S.:

And that was it. That was it.

C.G.R.:

Can you describe the hospital for me? Can you tell me what it looked like?

W.B.S.:

What hospital?

C.G.R.:

Well, the one at Haruku, where you were when you had your eyes. You said Dr. Forbes got liver.

W.B.S.:

Oh yes. Oh, there was no hospital. They set aside one hut for the dysentery patients, and all the dysentery patients were put into that hut, so they were all together and were looked after as best we could. There was nothing we could do. The Japanese had got medical supplies, they had plenty of them, but they wouldn't issue us with any. Nothing at all.

C.G.R.:

That was really my point. So the hospital, so-called, was just a hut. I mean it was....

W.B.S.:

There was no hospital. Just huts, that's all, which were set aside. It's amazing the effect they had on the men. They were afraid of getting into the dysentery -- if you get in the dysentery ward as they called it, or the dysentery hut, a lot of them said, "Well, if I get in there I'll never come out again." And they never did, either.

C.G.R.:

Yes.

W.B.S.:

It's amazing how you could talk yourself into these things. A chap used to -- a real London Cockney -- and he looked after me. He was wonderful. When I couldn't sleep at night because my legs ached so much, he used to rub them. He used to sit and rub my legs at night. I remember it. He was a really nice fellow, and he was one of those who said, "If I get in there I'll never come out." One morning he wasn't around and I said, "Where is Bill Penny?" He used to sleep on the opposite side of the hut. They said, "Oh, they've taken him down to the dysentery ward." I said, "Oh no." Because he'd said, "Bill, I'll never come out if I go in there. I'll never come out. That evening one of the chaps who acted as an orderly in there looking after the chaps, he came up to me, says, "You know Bill Penny, don't you?" I said yes. He said, "Well, he's had it, you know." I said, "How could he have had it. Don't talk silly. He only went down this morning." I said, "He was right as rain yesterday." He said, "He's had it. He's given up. And there's nothing you can do about it." He said, "He's just rolled himself up in his blanket. He won't talk to anybody. He won't eat." He said he'll probably last two or three days. I think he lasted about three or four days. It seemed to me amazing that a man could make up his mind that that's it. And so he died.

C.G.R.:

Were you able to see him before he died?

W.B.S.:

I wasn't, no. I couldn't get down there, because I was dead on my feet I couldn't get around much.

C.G.R.:

No, no. Do you remember anything in particular about Dr. Forbes that you can tell me?

W.B.S.:

Only about the buffalo liver. How the hell he got the liver I'll never know. He was that type of guy. Marvelous.

C.G.R.:

Yes. I think you were saying before we got the tape on that he was very well thought of. Is that right?

W.B.S.:

Very well thought of. I mean at the reunion, and I said to him, I said, "Well, thank God I have the opportunity of thanking you for all you did." He was marvelous. He said, "We learned a lot off you fellows too, you know."

C.G.R.:

He seemed like a very modest individual.

W.B.S.:

Yes. Yes.

C.G.R.:

I interviewed him in August or September.

W.B.S.:

Yes, he was.

C.G.R.:

Anybody else who was in Haruku who especially stands out in your mind for any reason, that you might like to tell me about?

W.B.S.:

Only this Dr. Enghelin.

C.G.R.:

The Dutch --

W.B.S.:

The Dutch doctor. Has anybody mentioned him?

C.G.R.:

No. I haven't heard his name before. I've heard names of a couple of other Dutch doctors. There was a Dr. Springer.

W.B.S.:

Yes.

C.G.R.:

Do you remember Springer?

W.B.S.:

No.

C.G.R.:

He apparently was a surgeon, I think.

W.B.S.:

Was he?

C.G.R.:

I think so. I think if you needed operations he was the one.

W.B.S.:

Yes.

C.G.R.:

And there was a Dr. Buning. I don't know if that name....

W.B.S.:

I don't know him. I wonder if it was Dr. Springer that did the fellow on Haruku who had acute appendicitis.

C.G.R.:

Perhaps.

W.B.S.:

He operated on him with only a penknife or a table knife, and no anesthetic. He had about six fellows lying on him.

C.G.R.:

I'm sure!

W.B.S.:

And then of course nature has her own anesthetic. He passed out.

C.G.R.:

Yes.

W.B.S.:

But other than that I can't think of anybody else. I mean, usually we didn't have enough bandages. There was one fellow there, he had an ulcer there and they put a bit of bandage round it.

C.G.R.:

Down by his ankle.

W.B.S.:

Down by his ankle, yes. And then one morning I was walking around and Dick Fowden, who was working as the orderly, he said to me, "Come and have a look at this." And I went in and saw this fellow. He'd had it on for two or three days, this bit of bandage. He'd got nothing else to put on it. And then they took the bandage off -- it was just a writhing mass of white maggots,

which had eaten right through. Completely through. He died.

C.G.R.:

Yes. Yes.

[tape shut off]

Perhaps you'd just start that again. I'll put the machine on.

W.B.S.:

When we arrived back [in Java], the streets were closed to all the people so that they wouldn't see us in the state that we were in, when we got back. Coming on the train -- we were put on the train, I don't know where now, we were put on the train and we travelled overnight, to this particular place where the camp was. There were men dying on the train. They took, I don't know how many, but there were quite a few dead bodies came off the train. And I -- we were -- they were only ordinary carriages with wooden seats. We had no where to lay. I laid on the floor, and I woke up with a dead Dutchman lying on top of me. I didn't know him. I swore at him! I said, "Get off -- get off. Or I'll kick you off." He was dead.

But anyhow, they took us to this camp and considering the state we were in, they issued a certain amount of drugs to be given to the worst. What they called the worst. I know I was laying there, I was laying during the night, somebody touched me on the shoulder and I woke up. It was pitch dark and this marvellous voice said: "Don't move; don't say anything." He says, "I've got something here for you," he said and he gave me a shot in the arm. [It was my pal Dick Fowden, the medical



orderly, with a vitamin injection.]

Then we did have a rest then. We weren't made to work any more at that camp. We were given a rest and managed to build up a bit.

C.G.R.:

Very good. Thank you very much. I'll put this off now.

