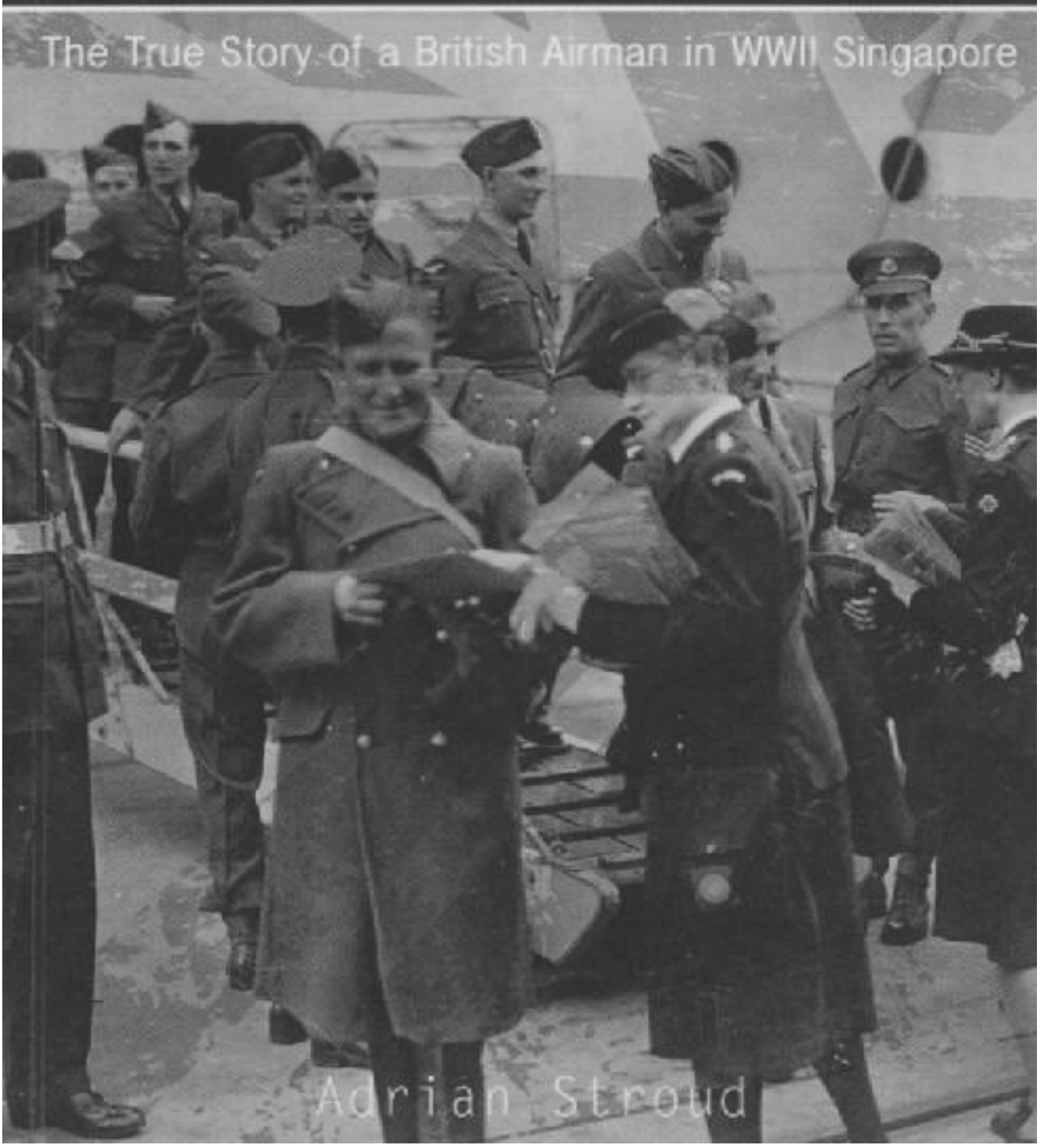
PRISONER OF WAR NUMBER 2378

The True Story of a British Airman in WWII Singapore



Adrian Stroud

PRISONER OF WAR NUMBER

The True Story of a British Airman in WWII Singapore

Adrian Stroud

TATE PUBLISHING
AND ENTERPRISES, LLC
pub. 2013
www.tatepublishing.com

The ship temporarily stopped at Durban, and my dad was transferred to a parked cruiser, which immediately got under way. It was scary because the ship had no escort. While on the cruiser one night, Dad spent his twenty-first birthday on sentry duty on deck. This while officers nearby mingled with female nurses. He then arrived in Singapore. He was then stationed at a Royal Australian Air Force base: Sembawang. He slept under mosquito nets due to terrible biting by mosquitoes. This became their base to live at. The RAF then took possession of the Cathay Building in downtown Singapore, which was a skyscraper. My dad and the other radar airmen set up their radar antennas on the roof of the building for detecting of expected Japanese air attacks. The men occupied four luxury suites that they had commandeered in the penthouse. The technical RDF equipment was set up here. The downstairs of the building was a movie theatre. It was closed, and the RAF took the A/C equipment for its own use. Dad had many adventures with the Australian soldiers in the area. Life was great in Singapore. People lived well. Australian women ran many cafes in town, like the coffee shop where Dad frequented.

One day, Dad was in downtown Singapore. He ran into a group of sailors from the HMS *Repulse*. Dad befriended the newcomers and showed them around town. He took them to the coffee shop. The next day, Dad got news at his base that the *Repulse* had been sunk that day by Japanese

Syd Catt, father of Ivor Catt.

warships. The very men dad had spent time with were all dead.

Dad became friends with an officer, Flight Lt. Sydney E. Catt. Catt was a fascinating man who was signals officer at Seletar Air Base. Syd had possession of top secret cipher books at the base. Dad once dined at Lieutenant Catt's home and played the piano for Catt and his wife. Catt's children were asleep upstairs. Syd had a beautiful home and was very kind to my father. I cannot overstate what a marvelous man Syd was. He helped many people in the Singapore area as the end neared. Many of the officers had beautiful homes in Singapore. Life in Singapore was carefree, and the war was a million miles away and would never touch my dad and his mates, or so they thought!

One day, Dad was on the roof of the Cathay building. He met the Singapore Chief of Police, Chief Superintendant Camp. Dad and he got to talking, and Dad discovered that Camp's father had been a policeman with Dad's father in Hertfordshire, and the Camp family had lived next door to my dad! Camp related to dad that the Japanese had spies in Singapore that would disappear down an understreet tunnel when Camp's men went to round them up.

Some days later, air attacks started. The planes that the British had in Singapore were left over, antiquated WWI biplanes—useless against the new Zeroes. The British planes only topped out at about 300 mph. My dad and the other airmen had no weapons and very rudimentary train-

pin attached. On the tag was dad's prisoner of war prisoner number in English and in Japanese. Dad became prisoner number *2378* for the next three and a half years.

The men slept there tightly guarded. Many incidents took place. The British pulled fast ones on the Japs as often as they could. It was a them-versus-us scenario. They were there for some days, perhaps even months. Dad even remembered marching down a road one day, and a group of German soldiers marched past them. The Germans were quite cheerful and waved. The war was over for them. They were now interned by their former Allies, the Japanese.

The men were then traveled to Surabaya. They were placed in a camp called Jaarmarkt in Dutch or yearly market in English. This was an empty place with bamboo hut accommodations. The men felt that the Japs were trying to figure out what to do with them and seemed ill-equipped for the task. The men were immediately told by the Japanese commander that his country never signed the Geneva Convention treatises, and therefore, the Japanese would not honor it. It was made apparent to them that the Japs considered the British less than human because they had allowed themselves to be taken prisoner. They should have all killed themselves instead! My father was placed in this camp with seventy civilian Dutch doctors and business leaders, all male. This was strictly forbidden by the Convention, now a mute point. The doctors had only their minds; they had no instruments and no medications to

treat the sick. The Japs took all the males out of the city of Surabaya, leaving the women and children. On one occasion, the Japs allowed the women to visit their husbands in a field, which was part of the camp. Every day, something was happening. Hundreds of people living and dying. Some officers were segregated from the enlisted men.

Amazingly, Dad met his old friend Lt. Syd Catt at this camp. Catt's journey had paralleled dads as both men tried to escape capture when the Japs first invaded Singapore. During formation one day, Catt was marched out of the camp, with a group of other officers, by Jap guards. Dad assumed he had been tortured or executed. He knew that when men were marched out by the Japs, they didn't return. The days stretched into months. Dad lived day to day until a year or two had passed.

One day, Dad was in agony with a tooth problem, and guards marched him from the Jaarmarkt to a nearby high school camp which had a dentist. While marching there, he was forced to slog through deep mud. His left big toe struck an unseen tree root, which immediately pulled the nail up. His toe would remain damaged by this for the rest of his life. The dentist, having only one crude tool, pulled his bad tooth, sans anesthetic, of course. Another doctor came in and treated the toe.

Not all the guards were cruel, but most were. The camp consisted of British, Dutch, and native peoples. Civilians, mostly businessmen, and military men were mixed. Few in

treat the sick. The Japs took all the males out of the city of Surabaya, leaving the women and children. On one occasion, the Japs allowed the women to visit their husbands in a field, which was part of the camp. Every day, something was happening. Hundreds of people living and dying. Some officers were segregated from the enlisted men.

Amazingly, Dad met his old friend Lt. Syd Catt at this camp. Catt's journey had paralleled dads as both men tried to escape capture when the Japs first invaded Singapore. During formation one day, Catt was marched out of the camp, with a group of other officers, by Jap guards. Dad assumed he had been tortured or executed. He knew that when men were marched out by the Japs, they didn't return. The days stretched into months. Dad lived day to day until a year or two had passed.

One day, Dad was in agony with a tooth problem, and guards marched him from the Jaarmarkt to a nearby high school camp which had a dentist. While marching there, he was forced to slog through deep mud. His left big toe struck an unseen tree root, which immediately pulled the nail up. His toe would remain damaged by this for the rest of his life. The dentist, having only one crude tool, pulled his bad tooth, sans anesthetic, of course. Another doctor came in and treated the toe.

Not all the guards were cruel, but most were. The camp consisted of British, Dutch, and native peoples. Civilians, mostly businessmen, and military men were mixed. Few in

ment in 1985. His work in telecommunications in Europe and Africa was the foundation of the Internet. On one trip to Beirut, Lebanon, in the 1970s, Dad was working at a satellite earth station antenna on a large hilltop. He traveled into the city one day with a fellow engineer driving the car. A civil unrest was occurring in Lebanon at the time. As they entered an intersection, they were fired upon. The engineer driving, completely traumatized, pulled over, and began to light up a cigarette. Dad yelled at him, "Let's get out of here!" He readily complied. Dad escaped death yet again.

On November 14, 1977, Dad attended a lecture at his office building in Stamford, Connecticut. The lecture was being given by a brilliant engineer from England, Ivor Catt. Intrigued by his last name, Dad approached Catt and told him that the only other Catt he ever met, Syd Catt, was during the war in Singapore. The engineer, astounded, told Dad that Syd Catt was his father! Dad told Ivor that he assumed Syd had been executed when the Japs marched him out of the camp one day. Ivor told him that not only did Syd survive, but he lived happily in Kent, England. Dad told Ivor that the night he had dinner at Syd's house in Singapore, he never met Syd's children. Ivor replied that he and his sister had been upstairs asleep that night when my dad was there visiting.

In 1978, I made a trip to England with my mom and dad. We drove down a long, winding country lane in Kent

to the home of Syd Catt and his wife, Enid. I finally got to meet the man who had been so good to my father, and I thanked him for it. Over copious cups of tea, Syd told us his fascinating story. He had been taken to Japan where he was eventually interrogated. When he was grilled about ciphers, he acted in a bizarre fashion, and the Jap brass wrote him off as crazy. He survived. He even showed me a Rolex watch he had that had been given to him by an American flyer during the war. What a fascinating man. I was humbled by him. Sydney E. Catt died in November 1986.

The dropping of the atomic bomb saved my father's life and the lives of thousands of other Allied prisoners of war. If the mainland of Japan had been invaded, the Japanese High Command circulated orders that *all* POWs were to be executed. The prisoners would have stood as evidence of the atrocities that the Japanese had committed. *Quod Erat Demonstrandum.* As it was, many thousands were indeed executed and dumped into common graves on desert islands.

My father is not bitter about the war. He holds no malice in his heart for the Japanese. Once, while walking down a hall at work, he came upon a group of engineering visitors. They were from Japan. A woman leading them was obviously an interpreter. My father, intrigued, stopped and said a few words to her in Japanese. The woman, quite impressed, asked Dad how he knew the language. Dad sim-