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“We Girls”: Female Impersonators in Prisoner-of-War Entertainments on the Thailand-Burma Railway

*This article investigates the female impersonators who performed in POW camp entertainment on the Thailand-Burma Railway during World War 2. Research sources, including unpublished diaries, memoirs, interviews, and correspondence, reveal how they were selected, trained, and performed—and how the “glamour” of their presence onstage and off disrupted the spectators’ “heterosexual norm.” The ambiguities of gender inherent in their representations are examined, raising questions about the impersonators’ sexual orientation. The corresponding complexity of the spectators’ “desiring and approving gaze” is also explored. The article concludes with a profile of Bobby Spong, the most famous and beloved impersonator on the railway. Sears A. Eldredge is Emeritus Professor of Theatre and Dance at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota. His book *Captive Audiences / Captive Performers: Music and Theatre as Strategies for Survival on the Thailand-Burma Railway 1942-1945*, is to be published electronically by the Library at Macalester College in 2014.*

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Introduction

Between June 1942 and the late spring of 1943, the Imperial Japanese Army transported more than 60,000 captured British, Australian,

American, and Dutch/Indonesian POWs from camps in Southeast Asia to Burma and Thailand to construct a secret railway.¹ When operational, the railway, running from Bangkok, Thailand, to Moulmein, Burma, would resupply the I. J. A. troops in Burma preparing for an incursion into India to free it from British colonial rule. The drive to complete the railway on schedule pushed the Japanese to treat the POWs as slaves—and expendable. The starvation, brutality, and tropical diseases suffered by the POWs led to innumerable deaths. These atrocities are well known—the subject of many memoirs, monographs, and documentary films.² What is less well known is that in the midst of this misery, the few entertainers among the POWs attempted to counter their despair with sing-alongs around campfires and variety shows on makeshift stages.³ After the railway was completed in October 1943, the POWs who survived were moved to hospital and relocation camps in Thailand for convalescence. In these camps music and theatre flourished as an essential part of rehabilitation schemes to encourage physical and psychological healing. Entertainment committees were formed, theatres were built out of bamboo and *atap* (palm fronds), and various concert party troupes produced a whole range of musical and theatrical entertainment. The producers and performers became camp celebrities; the weekly concert parties were eagerly awaited. Though all the entertainers gained special recognition and status in the camps as “precious personalities,”⁴ none were more precious to the POWs than the female impersonators.

Military concert parties “for the troops by the troops” featuring female impersonators were a British military tradition that went as far back as the eighteenth century, if not earlier.⁵ Having females represented in concert parties ensured a range of content not feasible without them. They had been a huge success in shows behind the lines during World War 1, which J. G. Fuller in his study of troop morale attributed to the belief that “their trappings of elegance and luxury were the negation of war and squalor and, as such, a potent fetish of peace.”⁶ This tradition continued into World War 2 and thus into the Allied POW camps in Southeast Asia. When Jimmy Walker organized “The Harbour Lights” concert party in his work camp in Keppel Harbour, Singapore, in 1942, he insisted that “somebody had to put a skirt on.”⁷ He did not lack a volunteer; nor did the concert parties in the main camp at Changi.

The impersonators’ value to the morale of the POWs was inestimable. Laurie Allison believed the impersonators “were a tonic to all” and noted that they “received loud applause even before they commenced their act.”⁸ Writing about the female impersonators in Changi, Tom Wade explained why this was so: “In POW Camps we had no heroes: no war heroes, political heroes, sport heroes. The only people about whom there was any glamour were the actors and most idolized of these were the female impersonators.”⁹

Traditional Categories

Of the three traditional categories for female impersonators in military entertainment units—comic drag acts and chorus lines, skilled dancers or singers, and glamorous “illusionists”—it was the first that quickly disappeared from the entertainment produced in the camps in Thailand. The only occurrence of a farcical “Beauty Ballet” (men with hairy legs and chests in tutus leaping about) was in the Wampo Concert Party during railway construction—but even that quickly developed into a chorus line of “serious” dancers. In the hospital and relocation camps with their innumerable variety shows, revues, musical comedies, and plays, the POWs needed female impersonators to appear as “real women,” playing their roles “straight,” not “for laughs.”

For these types of shows, the impersonators’ dancing, singing, and acting abilities took precedence, and those with the most versatility became highly prized. Variety shows featured imitations of popular female film, radio, or stage celebrities, while revues, musicals, and plays displayed middle- and upper-class women of the 1920s and 1930s—and sometimes, “ladies of the night.” For these latter types, the female impersonators were further typecast into four sub-categories: the “glamorous woman,” who could enchant men with her sexual allure; “the young woman” (wife, sweetheart, or prostitute); “the ingénue” (an innocent and pert young girl or a sassy soubrette); or the “older woman” (mothers, aunts, grandmothers), usually played by other POWs brought in for a one-off performance. These representations, in the main, confirmed cultural stereotypes.

The Performers

Though detailed descriptions of the female impersonators and their performances in POW diaries and memoirs are limited, by combining what is found there with information gleaned from interviews, correspondence, show posters, and playbills, enough information has been gathered on several of the officer and other ranks impersonators to tell us something about them as personalities, what their performances were like, and how audiences responded to them. One general comment about the impersonators’ physical attributes was made by Charles Fisher: “It was astonishing to see how so many of the least impressive-looking prisoners managed to transform themselves into remarkably glamorous creatures with the aid of locally improvised theatrical make-up and elegant dresses.”¹⁰

The Australian Ted Weller had been a singer in the variety shows in Aunganaung, Burma, in 1943, but not as a female impersonator. Tom Morris remembered him as “a slim, slight-built, little fellow [who] had a boyish voice at his command . . . a most glorious boy soprano voice.”¹¹ Because of his “silver tenor with a strong falsetto range,” producer Norman Carter cast Weller as the ingénue or

young woman “leading lady” in a series of musical comedies and revues at Tamarkan convalescent camp in Thailand in 1944.¹²



Figure 1. Photograph of Lieutenant Ted Weller. Courtesy of Bet Weller.

A photographic portrait of Ted Weller taken in 1939, when he received his commission as a second lieutenant, shows a handsome, fresh-faced young officer with gentle features who, with a wig and some makeup, could easily be transformed into a beautiful young woman. On two separate occasions, entertainments officer Major Jim Jacobs called Weller, “a fair dinkum Aussie impersonator” and “a female impersonator second to none.”¹³

Also in Tamarkan was the Dutch/Indonesian performer known as “Sambal Sue.” Kyle Thompson, a stagehand in the Tamarkan theatre, included a lengthy description of “her” in his memoir:

a Dutch army Eurasian, who had delicate features and developed into a sensational female impersonator. This fellow had dark brown eyes with long, curling eyelashes, and a smooth olive complexion. He was five feet, five inches tall and weighed about 150 pounds—the perfect size for a female impersonator—and when he was made up with a wig and what served as cosmetics, he was a dead ringer for the real thing.¹⁴

His sensational performance of the Hawaiian hula earned him the nickname “Sambal Sue,” after the spicy Indonesian finger food made by POWs in the Netherlands East Indies Army and available in the canteen.

In Nong Pladuk relocation camp was another Dutch female impersonator—also a dancer—known as “Skippy,” who Fergus Anckorn claimed looked “EXACTLY like Marlene Dietrich!—and dare I say it—to us at the time, she looked gorgeous. She (he) had the most wonderful gowns,—God know where the material came from. We scarcely had material enough for a handkerchief.”¹⁵ “I mean, you’d swear he was a girl. And people would cheer like mad when she came on. I say ‘she’ because that’s all you could think of: blond hair, blue-eyed, and with a face like a doll.”¹⁶ (In describing the impersonators, pronoun confusion and quotation mark usage is common.¹⁷)

In the British entertainment at Nakhon Pathom hospital camp, Ken Adams was cast in the glamour roles and Jack Chalker played the ingénue/soubrette roles. Describing Adams, Chalker wrote, “In looks he was taller and more heavily built than Bobby Spong—one of the major British impersonators—and with less immediate female face, but made up well and assumed female movement and voice pitch well.”¹⁸ When Adams appeared onstage in P. G. Wodehouse’s comedy *Good Morning Bill* dressed in the women’s silk cami-knickers that had been donated for the show from an anonymous source, he received what Chalker termed “a stunning reception from the audience.”¹⁹

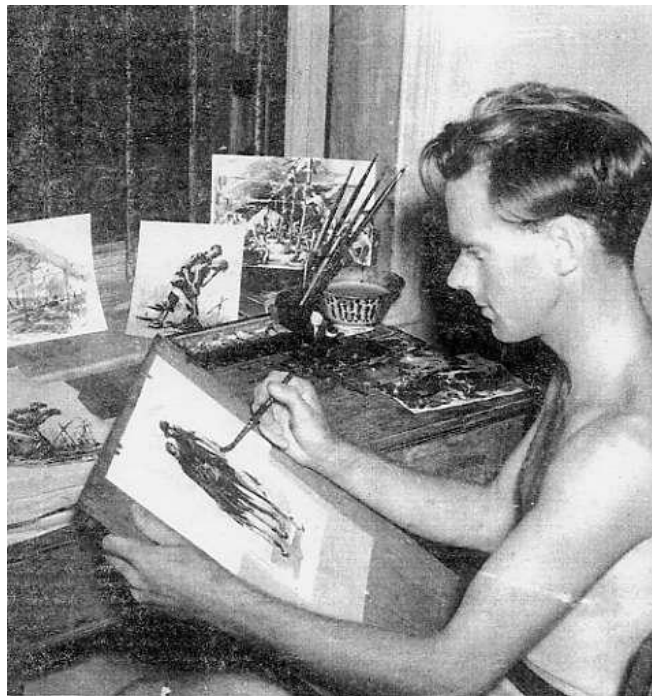
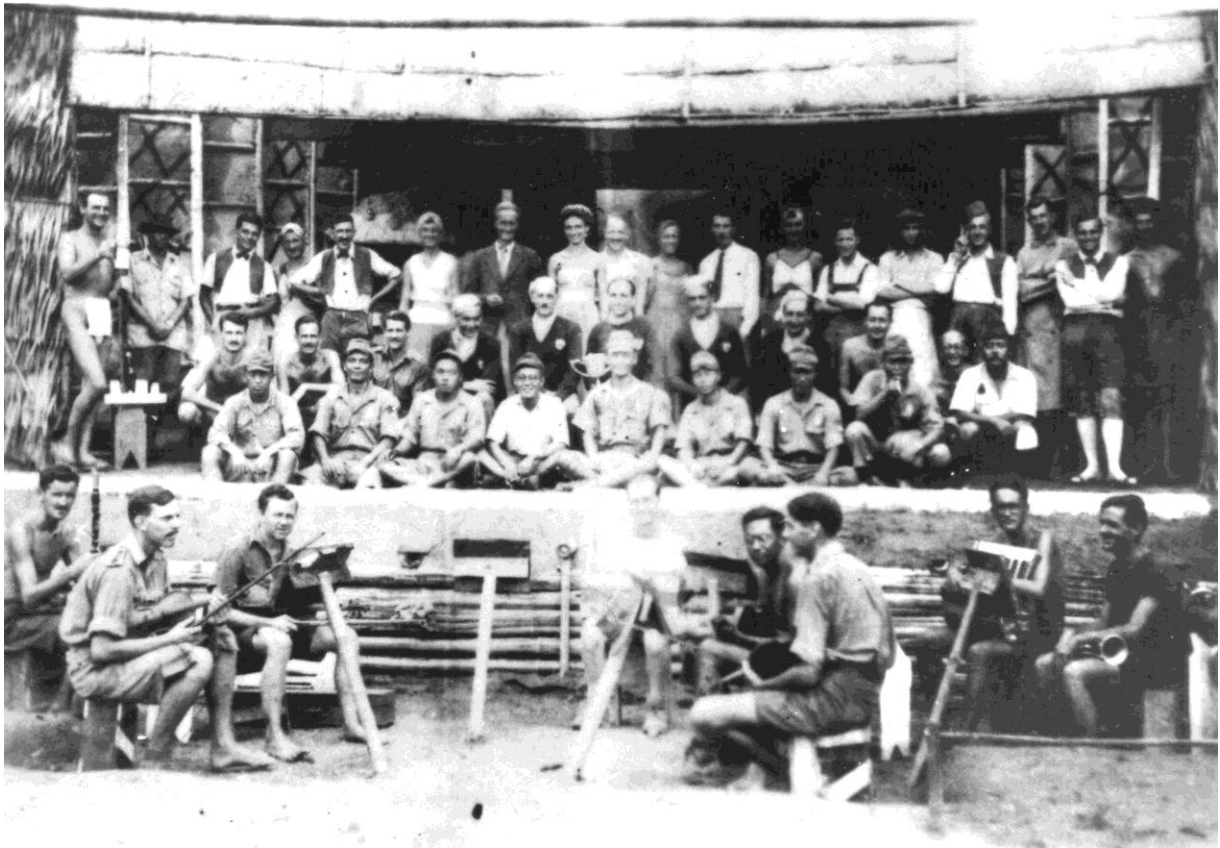


Figure 2. Jack Chalker in Bangkok following liberation.

Photograph courtesy of Jack Chalker.

By contrast, Chalker was of medium height and had a slight build—ideal for the young female roles he played. Fred Ransome Smith remembered Chalker as “a handsome chap with an aquiline nose & slim with quite a head of hair!” Trying to recall Chalker’s appearance on stage, he wrote, “I can only say the audiences responded rapturously.”²⁰

At Chungkai hospital camp, the three major British female impersonators—Bobby Spong, Douglas Morris, and John “Nellie” Wallace—appeared together onstage in the musical *Wonder Bar* in May 1944. Two photographs of the production taken by a Japanese cameraman for propaganda purposes survive. They are the only photographs we have of a POW show on the Thailand-Burma railway.



*Figure 3. Cast photograph of the Wonder Bar company—and guests.
Courtesy of Martin Percival.²¹*

Bobby Spong stands in the middle, just left of centre (all directions given from the point of view of the viewer). Since Spong appears extensively in the POW literature, he will become the subject of a more extensive profile later in this article.

Douglas Morris (two figures to the right of Spong) was, perhaps, Chungkai's finest "actress." His performance of the title role in G. B. Shaw's *Major Barbara* was widely praised.²² John "Nellie" Wallace stands two figures to Spong's left. Custance Baker described him as "long, thin and extraordinarily supple [; he] could turn out some sort of a dance at a moment's notice."²³ Trained in ballet before being called up, Wallace had also performed in West End musicals—a background that proved invaluable for the Chungkai concert parties. His female impersonations were in a campy acting style described by Tom Morris as "slightly outrageously overacted."²⁴

Besides these three were two other British "female" stars—Dick Lucas and Custance Baker—who came to the fore in the latter part of 1944. Patrick Stephenson thought them the "prettiest girls" on the Chungkai stage.²⁵



Figure 4. Barry Custance Baker. Photograph courtesy of Hilary Custance Baker.

Baker described himself as "a small slim handsome young man and a good dancer." He first got involved with the theatre as a "stage carpenter and odd job man." "My true potential as a chorus girl and romantic actress was not recognized until later," he quipped.²⁶ Of Dick Lucas' appearance as Cinders in the Christmas pantomime *Cinderella*, Basil Peacock wrote, "I shall never forget the sight of Cinderella (one of our younger and prettier subalterns) going to the ball in a golden coach and waving to us like royalty."²⁷ Under director Leo Britt's careful guidance, the men playing female roles in his productions at Chungkai learned how to transform into "women." "He was strict with us girls," Custance Baker noted. "Report to the theatre after first rice and from then on wear skirts and high heels to become used to moving like a

woman.”²⁸ The training regimen worked. As he was leaving the theatre after a performance of *Café Colette*, Baker overheard this comment about his and Dick Lucas’ portrayals as prostitutes: “Those fucking tarts were more like fucking tarts than real fucking tarts.”²⁹

There were many British, Australian, and Dutch/Indonesian female impersonators on the railway, but these are the ones we know most about. In Fergus Anckorn’s estimation, “all of the impersonators were brilliant. . . . They were all extremely good and they could carry it off.”³⁰

“First Feeling of Lust for Two Years!”

In their memoirs, the POWs never missed an opportunity to point out that the Japanese and Korean guards appeared to be sexually attracted to the female impersonators.³¹ Of “Sambal Sue,” Tom Morris said that “all the Japs in the camp had the hots for him.”³² Chalker recalled that in both Chungkai and Nakhon Pathom, “some of the Korean and Jap guards frequently came sniffing round the dressing rooms back-stage where female-cast members were dressing and making-up, and had to be diplomatically steered away.”³³ But it wasn’t only the Japanese who were sexually attracted to the female impersonators.

By the spring of 1944, with minimal work requirements and a better diet that included eggs and meat, a number of POWs in the hospital and relocation camps experienced sexual urges for the first time since the beginning of their captivity. (They had worried that the starvation diet endured during the railway construction would make them impotent.) And in a world without women, the only focus for their fantasies was the female impersonators. “Clearly some of our leading ladies seemed to be as intensely sought after by their respective fans as were the real-life counterparts in London’s theatre-land,” Charles Fisher observed, “and more than a few wells of loneliness apparently changed overnight into fountains of desire.”³⁴



Figure 5. Female impersonators in Joop Postma's *1001 Nights*. Peter van Velthuisen. Image copyright Museum, The Hague, Netherlands.³⁵

After observing the Dutch/Indonesian female impersonators in Joop Postma's cabaret *1001 Nights* at Chungkai, James Richardson recorded a fellow POW's remark in his diary: "First feeling of lust for two years!"³⁶ (In the annotated version of his diary, Richardson elaborated on this statement: "So considering the debilitating [*sic*] and virtually desexing effects of a prolonged rice diet, this was an eloquent acknowledgement of excellence of the 'girls' performance."³⁷) At Tamarkan, Roy Whitecross admitted that "the sight of the leading 'ladies' awoke memories that had better been left asleep."³⁸ From his exhaustive research of POW life in the Pacific during World War 2, Richard Daws concluded, "In prison camps, to be able to feast the eyes on something that looked like a woman was a powerful thing. And Complicated."³⁹ "Complicated" because in the all-male environment of the POW camps, the "women" the prisoners were responding to were men dressed and acting like women. And the POWs knew that—intellectually. But over and over in their memoirs, interviews, and correspondence, those who worked on the Thailand-Burma railway insist that the "illusionists"—the female impersonators who worked hard to convince their male audiences they were women—were *experienced* as "women," not as men in drag. Custance Baker explained that this was their goal:

We girls in Leo [Britt's] company, maintained the illusion that we were really actresses, not men dressed up. Many female impersonators nowadays tend to

end their act by shedding their wigs and bras to gasps of astonishment from the audience. We never did. We were girls right to the final curtain.⁴⁰

Fergus Anckorn testified to their effectiveness:

And when you saw a play with men and women in it, you would never think for a moment that they were all men. In the beginning there was a lot of whistling and hooting going on . . . [but as time went by it was] accepted completely. But it was appreciated, I know, because these fellows could forget that there were no women anywhere and they really believed what they were seeing, so it must have been very good for morale.⁴¹

As a consequence, Daws explained, “there were wistful longings heterosexual, homosexual, or just confused by captivity. Everyone liked looking at the stage ladies.”⁴²

This phenomenon was not new: the same thing had happened in response to female impersonators in military concert parties during World War 1. Fuller’s research into the subject led him to the conclusion that the “considerable sexual excitement” generated in the soldiers by the female impersonators “shows the intensity of the desire to believe.” Analyzing that startling conclusion a bit further, he added, “it seems likely that the appeal of the concert party ‘girls’ owed as much to their emphasis upon glamour as to the sheer fewness of the females.”⁴³ But as Daws intimates, the spectator’s gaze is more complicated than this explanation would have us believe. From his investigation into the phenomenon in World War 1 military concert parties, David Boxwell drew a more nuanced conclusion:

While the spectacle of a soldier in drag functioned according to the “safety valve” model of cathartic ritual, the form and content of the drag performer’s “act,” strongly dependent as it was on multiple entendre, close physical contact with other men (both in and out of drag), and the illusion of eroticized, idealized, and objectified femininity, disrupted the boundaries that contained the act as a necessary release in an all-male environment. A spectator’s desiring and approving gaze on a soldier in drag was not simply a matter of pleasure in a “surrogate” woman; rather, his gaze was directed at an effeminate-acting man in drag, a fellow soldier in his own military organization.⁴⁴

“Challenging the Heterosexual Norm”

According to Terence Charley, the production of plays like Somerset Maugham’s *The Circle* always “aroused curiosity as to how they would tackle the love scenes.”

Two males indulging in a passionate embrace in public, even if dramatically desirable is not, among the English at any rate, a thing to be lightly undertaken, even if one of them is masquerading as a woman, indeed that probably makes it much worse. Even if the man is as “queer” as a coot he will often prefer not to have his little bit of fun in public & if he isn’t, well you never know, people may think he is. The rumor, therefore, was sedulously put about that our leading lady, Bobby Spong, suffered from halitosis so that even the chaste embraces that our actors permitted themselves would be generally recognized to be distasteful to them.⁴⁵

Though actors may have been required by the script to engage in quick kisses, at other times they might have used the old technique of turning their heads upstage as they embraced. Supposedly, the illusion of passionate embraces could only be carried so far before disrupting normal heterosexual boundaries. Or so it was thought.

But Custance Baker’s recall of his “kiss and cuddle” scene in *Hay Fever* appears to undercut this theory.

In my best scene twisting around on a very hard bamboo sofa with the host I was often worried that our kisses might cause giggles or rude comment from our brutal and licentious audience, but we got away with it and the host, Leo [Britt] himself, once whispered to me, “They’re taking it OK, do it just once more.” So we did, and the Japs who came every night and sat in the front row just loved it.⁴⁶

However Baker understood what “illusion” he and his kissing partner were creating, they were, as Alan Bérubé explained in his study of female impersonators in American “soldier shows,” certainly “challenging the heterosexual norm”:

The most daring and skillful GI drag performers were like magicians. They played tricks with gender, becoming master of the art of illusion with a sense of humor. They created beautiful attractive women out of men, affirming the heterosexuality of their audiences, then played with the implications, covertly challenging the heterosexual norm by becoming men dressed as women hugging, kissing, and singing love songs to other men.⁴⁷

As Baker admitted, it wasn’t only in the spectator’s approving gaze where desiring occurred. In *Outward Bound*, he and Dick Lucas were cast as “a young couple very much in love”:

They have little part in the play except to sit in corners kissing and embracing and murmuring love to one another: “Darling, sweetheart, I love you so much.” After a few dull rehearsals we decided to learn both parts and

to play boy and girl on alternating nights. . . . After many sessions of kissing and cuddling a pretty young man dressed as a girl, or when I was a girl being treated similarly by this same girl now dressed as a man I began to feel some considerable attachment to Dickie. Nothing physical you understand! Pat Stephenson agreed with me that it was really a lesbian tendency, so perhaps I am really a lesbian after all. My four children and eleven grandchildren seem to make this unlikely.⁴⁸

Joking aside, Baker's emotional attachment might be better described as "de-sexualized homosexuality," a phenomenon discussed by Iris Rachamimov in her investigation into shifting gender boundaries in World War 1 internment camps.⁴⁹ What the evidence suggests is that during the long incarceration of the POWs on the Thailand-Burma railway, the boundaries of "the heterosexual norm" became less fixed and more permeable.

Sexual Orientation

The sexual orientation of the female impersonators was always grist for the camp rumour mills. Fergus Anckorn thought that "a lot of them were effeminate. So they could do it [perform as a female impersonator] and they loved it."⁵⁰ In the first half of the twentieth century, especially in the military, being labeled *effeminate* was equated with being called *queer*. The dancer "Skippy" at Nong Pladuk was, in Anckorn's eyes, as "queer as a clockwork orange."⁵¹ David Wince was convinced that the female impersonators he saw at Chungkai were homosexuals. "As I can remember," he wrote, "most, or even all of the female impersonators lived together at the end of one of the huts. I can still remember seeing their 'smalls' hanging up to dry after being washed."⁵² But I never witnessed any homosexual acts. I can only go by their personal idiosyncrasies, and by the way they spoke and moved. I don't think I was mistaken!"⁵³

Being thought queer by the other troops was one of the fears that men had to deal with when asked to become a female impersonator. For this reason, Norman Carter encountered difficulties finding a POW to play Dorothy for his production of *The Wizard of Oz* in Tamarkan:

The trouble was finding a leading lady. Nobody was interested. Finally, I asked Arthur Shakes, who suggested having a word with Teddy Weller, a handsome young officer. I approached Teddy and got a firm "No!" What would his mates say? What would his Kumi say? ⁵⁴ If he dressed up like a woman and sang like one, he'd never live it down. Besides he was far too busy with his softball team. It was not until I told him bluntly that if he did not play Judy I'd have to cancel the show that he reluctantly consented.⁵⁵

Weller's own memory of how he was convinced to become a female impersonator differs from Carter's: "This caused me some embarrassment and on discussion with my commanding officer regarding losing respect from the men, was told they wouldn't be able to do many of the plays without my voice. It turned out the men gave me more respect than ever."⁵⁶

Many female impersonators, like Weller, tried to minimize speculation about their sexual orientation: "I always changed out of costume immediately [after a show]. There was no doubt I was there as a soldier and a lieutenant."⁵⁷ In Custance Baker's case, "Some of us became anxious that we might possibly be becoming too girlish, and to prevent this we kept a stock of barbells and weight bar (bamboo and logs) behind the stage, which we could lift from time to time as an assurance that our manly muscles were still all there."⁵⁸ But their efforts did not necessarily prevent projections from taking place. Kyle Thompson tells what happened when the playful banter about "Sambal Sue's" sexuality—which all the female impersonators had to endure—turned into innuendo and behaviour that became just too obvious to ignore:

[Pat] Fox and the female impersonator became good friends and often played opposite each other in male-female roles. Inevitably, rumors began circulating that they might be more than just fellow actors. The female impersonator quickly became a celebrity, but not of the sort he sought. Some of the guys around camp began issuing flirtatious whistles and catcalls as he walked about. Shortly, this all became too humiliating and he quit the stage. . . . He told us one night after an unusually good performance that it was his last, as he could not continue being confined in close quarters with thousands of POWs who had not been in the company of actual females for nearly three years.⁵⁹

The majority of the female impersonators on the Thailand-Burma railway, it appears, had no other motive than the fulfillment of duty, which was to keep up the troops' morale. Speaking from his own observation, Terry Morris (brother of female impersonator Douglas Morris) reiterated Jimmy Walker's statement about the necessity of finding men to play female roles if the concert parties were to develop more substantial entertainment: "Somebody had to wear the skirt' really . . . sums up the situation."⁶⁰

The Others

There were others who specialised in the "glamour" roles and liked to wear female attire and didn't mind if their actions provoked sexual innuendo or advances. These were the impersonators who, in "Pop" Vardy's words, "took their 'art' too seriously, having shaved their eyebrows off and allowed their hair to pass even the worst soldier's standard" and might be seen walking around the camp with their

hair up in curlers.⁶¹ Such a person was “Skippy” at Nong Pladuk, who in Fergus Anckorn’s estimation, “very much considered herself female day and night. Everything she did was in the female [way]—all that. She didn’t wear these dresses and things [offstage]; she was [an] ordinary soldier.”⁶² Or Vilhelm Vanderdeken in the hospital camp at Nakhon Pathom, who “always played the part of an exotic woman—and a good looking one,” Benjamin Dunn observed. “A lot of guys whistled at him and he seemed not to mind. He even had a big Dutch boyfriend who was with him constantly.”⁶³ Earlier, he had appeared in shows at Tamarkan where G. F. Kershaw had been taken with his charms:

He looked the part of a young and attractive female, both in dress and deportment, and when he brought cigarettes to the hospital after the show it was a study in psychology to see the number of men who pressed him to sit beside them, and all those who made any excuse to touch him, although all knew him to be a man.⁶⁴

These female impersonators teased the men’s imaginations with their ability to create the illusion of the glamorous female while, at the same time, they flirted with the revelation of their own sexual orientation by employing multiple double-entendres in their skits and songs.

*I’m Lady Medusa, a Social Who’s-Whoser,
I married the Governor last week.
I traveled out steerage, me mind on a peerage,
And now I’m half-way — so to speak —
At Government House parties they say I’m a pest,
But Coward preferred me above all the rest*⁶⁵

This excerpt from “Biggles” Bywaters’ lyrics for a show in Kanburi Officers’ Camp offers a good example. The initial implication about an extramarital affair between the female singer and Noel Coward, who toured the Far East before the war, was “doubled” into a second and more audacious implication with a male actor in drag singing about an affair with Coward, who was known to be gay.

A Dangerous Game

A certain level of joking and teasing about homosexuality could be tolerated in the POW camps, just as it probably had been earlier in the soldiers’ lives. During his investigation of how American army inductees in basic training dealt with their first encounter of an all-male society, Bérubé concluded that the homosexual banter and horseplay he noted in the barracks “defused secret fears through laughter, and it reassured the men that their uncomfortable feelings were common rather than queer.”⁶⁶ But teasing was one thing; actual participation in homosexual activity was another. In the military, punishment for this behaviour meant jail time and a

dishonourable discharge. Still, according to Fergus Anckorn, such serious consequences didn't necessarily prove a deterrent:

An awful lot of homosexuality going in all these camps—all over the place. Oh, plenty of it went on. But, in a way, it was a lot of the married people. And it was just a matter of, well, we've got no wife, let's get someone else. And they weren't ravishing homosexuals in any way; it was that we'll have to make do with this. And there again, that was quite accepted, or not looked at. And nothing much was made of it.⁶⁷

Anckorn may be overstating the case here. Most POWs who served on the Thailand-Burma railway would categorically deny that any such activity went on in the camps. But Terence Charley's observations about Kanburi Officers' Camp in 1945 are more in agreement with Anckorn's above:

It was in Kanburi that one noticed that sex was beginning to rear its ugly head and from this I deduced that there is probably no such thing as a completely heterosexual person. One noticed little liaisons blossoming even amongst those who, as soon as they were let out, rushed to the comfort of the married bed.⁶⁸

Though no official report would ever admit it, after years of isolated incarceration there seems to have been some level of turning a blind eye to what is known in penal studies as situational homosexual behaviour. Some female impersonators may have been instrumental in prompting such behaviour, but no camp gossip has surfaced that suggests they ever engaged in it. Yet, comments about "protectors" or being accompanied by "big boyfriends" might suggest that some impersonators were not simply concerned about what their actions onstage might provoke offstage.

"The Uncomparable Bobbie"

Of all the glamorous "illusionists" in the Thailand POW camps, it was British Private Bobby Spong who became the best-known and best-loved female impersonator on the railway. Since there is more mention of Spong in the diaries and memoirs than any of the other female impersonators, it is possible to assemble a more complete profile of him both as a person and as a performer.

According to Jack Chalker, "Spong had a slender build, was more sophisticated, naturally elegant and made-up easily and exceptionally well."⁶⁹ John Durnford called his figure "thin but eloquent."⁷⁰ And John Cosford, who had been Spong's hut-mate in Tamarkan, remarked,

He was an extraordinary fellow and so completely feminine in his habits that I often found him most embarrassing. . . . He would spend a great deal of time over his teeth and hair, talked like a girl—"Oh dear, mother's tired," being his favourite phrase—and was a dab hand at mending clothes. He kept a folder of "cuttings" which told of his appearance on stage and for every show made out a programme with his own name on top of the bill.⁷¹

The only visual images we have of Bobby Spong are found in the two photographs of the *Wonder Bar* show in Chungkai in May 1944 and in an illustration for a camp soccer match.



Figure 6. Photograph of Wonder Bar, Act Three. Courtesy of Martin Percival.



Figures 7 and 8. Details of Bobby Spong from Wonder Bar photographs. Courtesy of Martin Percival.

Though indistinct, these details from the *Wonder Bar* photographs show a young lissome figure in a strapless evening gown. His head with its oval face sits atop a slender neck set off by abundant brunette hair that has been pulled into an upsweep (Spong had been allowed to let his hair grow long). To complete the illusion of his femininity, he also shaved parts of his body that would be revealed by the outfits he wore. “When [Spong] shaved his hairy chest and legs, and dressed as a woman,” Cosford declared, “it was difficult to believe he wasn’t the genuine article.”⁷² His strapless evening gown displays his slim upper torso—he is wearing “falsies”—and his willowy arms, and, as the gown is gathered between his legs in one photograph, shapely calves.

Bobby Spong Onstage

Unlike other female impersonators, Spong did not resort to exaggerated vocalisations, movements, or gestures to convince audiences he was a woman. The qualifier used repeatedly in diaries, memoirs, and interviews to describe Spong’s physical demeanour on stage is *natural*. For example, Durnford called his “variety of feminine gestures . . . both natural and amusing.”⁷³ It was this “naturalness” that medical officer (and fellow actor) Hugh de Wardener most admired about him:

I remember Bobby Spong because he was so attractive. He really was. He was utterly feminine, utterly. And utterly relaxed in it. It suited him. But Bobby was a good actor, too. I mean, he was utterly at ease in the part. . . . He didn’t overdo it [at] all. He did it perfectly . . . it was his relaxed, utterly natural stance which I remember so well.⁷⁴

Frank Samethini recalled that the “uncomparable Bobbie’s [*sic*]” first appearance on stage in a show always got a rise out of the audience: “The curtain goes up. Bobbie appears swaying his hips amidst catcalls.”⁷⁵ In Chalker’s memory, it wasn’t catcalls but cheers that were raised every time Bobby appeared.⁷⁶ Tom Wade noted that during his performances, Spong “could roll his big eyes wickedly and time his silences most skillfully.”⁷⁷

Spong had first become well known as a solo performer—a singer-comedienne—in “The Mummie Bees” concert party productions back in Changi POW camp, Singapore. His repertoire included impersonations of famous female stage and film entertainers, like the British comedienne Beatrice Lillie and the German film star Marlene Dietrich, singing songs such as “Love for Sale” and “See What the Boys in the Back Room Will Have.”⁷⁸ Another performer he loved to imitate was the renowned 1930s British female impersonator Douglas Byng, whose songs, including “No-one Loves a Fairy When She’s Forty,” were liberally salted with multiple double-entendres.⁷⁹ Spong’s singing voice was, to John Durnford’s ears at least, “of Sophie Tucker proportions and huskiness.”⁸⁰

It was in “The Mummie Bees” productions and the weekend *Café Colette* shows in Changi where Spong first branched out as an actor in comedy sketches and revues. His versatility as a singer, dancer, and “actress” reached its apex in the POW camps in Thailand:

On stage, [wrote Frank Samethini,] the men say, he is superb in depicting whatever type of woman would be required for the situation, moving about in a variety of dresses from a flimsy nightie to a plunging neckline evening gown. In most cases the script requires a young frivolous wench caught in a web of naughty innuendo or straight out dirty jokes applauded by a roaring audience. Sometimes at the finish of the show he would convincingly figure in the sacred role of the soldier’s wife waving good-bye to her slowly backward stepping husband, departing for war, while the orchestra plays a heart-rendering, “When the Poppies Bloom Again.”⁸¹

Others, like Tom Boardman, also wrote glowingly of his acting abilities: “[Spong] always gave of his best and ‘lived’ every part he was given.”⁸² Chalker called him “the supreme ‘actress.’”⁸³

It had long been the tradition in military concert parties for female impersonators to take responsibility for getting their own costumes together and for transporting the articles wherever they went. When Spong unpacked his kit, hut-mate Cosford noticed that

[Spong] carried a full set of ladies attire with him and for his stage appearances would wear a complete woman's rig-out, roll on corsets and all. It amazed me how he had managed to keep it all and carry it about with him, because apart from his entertainment appearances he was like the rest of us, "Jap Happy" or tattered shorts and precious little else.⁸⁴

John Coast provides a verbal snapshot of Spong in his ladies' underwear backstage in the dressing room prior to a performance: "Bobby, the leading lady, has a wardrobe of his own, including scanties which he has made himself. You see him now made-up and patting his hair, walking up and down in a pair of light blue silk panties, looking at himself in the mirror."⁸⁵

Competition over the quality and extent of their dress and underwear collections was supposedly the reason Bobby got into a feud with Joqui ["Jackie"] Steenhuizen,⁸⁶ the most stunning of the Netherlands East Indies female impersonators in Chungkai. "There is too much bad blood between the 'girls,'" Samethini remarked. "Some say because of an instant mutual dislike, others say jealousy of their personal wardrobe had been the cause for the feud."⁸⁷ But the real quarrel between Spong and "Jackie" wasn't just over who had the most extensive wardrobe; it was really a contest over who was going to be recognized as the most glamorous female impersonator in Chungkai.

Bobby Spong Offstage

Spong was one of those female impersonators who enjoyed playing his onstage role offstage wherever and whenever he had opportunity. He was given to understand that these appearances were an important part of the POWs' psychological rehabilitation. One place he performed was in the hospital wards for those who were too sick to be brought to the theatre. Leofric Thorpe wrote that Spong loved doing these hut shows: "And he used to go round singing numbers and so on, and adjust the people's moods with his jokes."⁸⁸ Cosford noticed that, during his "individual turns in the wards," Spong would sometimes "sit on patients' beds looking so much like a woman that they would blush and attempt to cover their nakedness."⁸⁹

Spong was apparently a good sport and game for anything. On 29 April 1944, when a POW show was suddenly cancelled because the Japanese had taken all the theatrical paraphernalia to Kanburi to put on a show of their own in celebration of the emperor's birthday, Spong participated in a hastily arranged burlesque soccer match to ensure that the men would still have some sort of entertainment to attend on their *yasume* [rest] day.⁹⁰



Figure 9. Notice for soccer match. Image copyright Museon, The Hague, Netherlands.

Previously, it had been Spong's two offstage appearances during the 1943 Christmas–New Year holidays where he made the biggest splash. On Christmas Day, he was among the entertainers who visited the hospital wards to hand out gifts to the patients. One of those patients, Stanley Gimson, wrote, "I saw Bobby Spong, looking 'smashing' in light green and orange frock and hat, causing a sensation as he distributes cigarettes, escorted by Mark Quinn in a natty grey suit."⁹¹ His second appearance was at the race track event on New Year's Day. These race track meets were a time for everyone in the camp to dress up and role-play. An oval racetrack was created with the camp band in the center playing appropriate music. There was a paddock where the "horses" could be evaluated and enclosures where the POWs could circulate dressed not in their everyday "Jap Happies" but in the best clothes they still had left in their kits. There were jockeys in "silks" made from sarongs and other bits of colored cloth and a tote board made out of web belts for placing bets. And there was Bobby. "Bob appeared dressed in a floppy Ascot bonnet, and a long, chiffon-type dress of mosquito-netting, to parade the enclosures with a parasol, leaning negligently on the arm of two other members of the 'theatrical profession,' splendid in tail and grey toppers," noted Durnford.⁹² The day ended with Spong under a large tree, accompanied by an accordion player, giving a cabaret performance of songs from Douglas Byng's repertoire.⁹³

Others found Spong's antics that day unacceptable. Captain C. D. L. Aylwin was greatly upset that fellow officers, including their camp commandant, accepted Spong's offstage cross-dressing and behaviour: "There was a big hospital sweepstake on one of the races drawn by Colonel [Cary] Owtram and 'Miss Bobby Spong,' the actress. The latter dressed in the latest creation of Chungkai and with [Lieutenant] Quinn, dressed in a light sandy coloured suit looking like a pimp (it

made me want to vomit to see him)—as her beau, stood self-consciously in the ‘paddock’ watching events.”⁹⁴ Lieutenant James Richardson thought Bobby’s actions crossed a line when he ended up “kissing the winners of races. All rather distasteful!”⁹⁵ Some of the other ranks exhibited uneasiness with Spong’s “feminine” presence and behaviour offstage as well. In further comments on how Spong affected the patients when he sat on their hospital beds, Cosford added, “I could remember their feelings for I myself, who knew him so well, often felt most awkward in his company.”⁹⁶

“A Luscious, Seductive Bitch”

It is obvious from the examples given that many POWs experienced Spong onstage or off not as a male performer in drag but, in de Wardener’s words, as “utterly feminine, utterly.”⁹⁷ Major Leofric Thorpe, who first gave Spong the opportunity to perform in “The Mummie Bees” shows in Changi, wrote that he always thought of Bobby Spong “as a young woman.”⁹⁸ Fergus Anckorn agreed, stating, “there’s no way you could tell that he wasn’t a woman.”⁹⁹ And they weren’t the only ones taken in by the illusion. W. G. Riley remembered an incident that happened during Spong’s reappearance onstage at Chungkai late in 1943 after he had returned from a work camp up the line: “His feminine mannerisms and act was so convincing, that on his first appearance in this role . . . the Japs attending the concert . . . were so convinced that he was female, that they stopped the show and made him prove his manhood!”¹⁰⁰

Spong’s appearances always provoked a sexual response. This reaction had been true from his earliest performances back in Changi, even from such POWs as James Richardson, who would later decry Spong’s behaviour at Chungkai. After seeing Spong onstage in August 1942, Richardson wrote in his diary, “Bobby Spong as a girl—very good (a luscious, seductive bitch who always looks like a forthright whore!).”¹⁰¹ And Tom Wade recalled a statement by an unidentified POW in Changi: “I had a wonderful dream about Bobby Spong last night.”¹⁰² Leofric Thorpe followed up on his remark about always seeing Spong as female by admitting, “Perhaps it was just as well that after some months without the correct vitamins etc in the diet all sexual urges vanished!”¹⁰³ But this was Changi in 1942, not Thailand in 1944, when those urges returned.

In Chungkai, “Fizzer” Pearson, who played the male lead opposite Spong in Somerset Maugham’s comedy *The Circle*, was overheard quipping, “I could have had Bobby last night, balls or not balls!”¹⁰⁴ Watching Spong from the wings during a performance of one-act plays, stage manager John Coast thought, “[T]he leading lady, Bobby Spong, looked as bed-worthy as many of his opposite sex.”¹⁰⁵ Cosford believed that “more than one [Japanese] fancied [Spong] in his female attire.”¹⁰⁶ Durnford recalled that the Japanese and Koreans frequently asked Spong to give private performances for them in their quarters. And he did: “Accepting gracefully

inducements of fruit and cigarettes from the lascivious ‘apes,’ he would slip neatly out of their grasp and fly over the padang in the moonlight to the safety of his own hut.”¹⁰⁷ All of this, of course, fueled speculation about Spong’s own sexual orientation. Anckorn mused, “I suspect that he was slightly gay . . . but he really was wonderful.”¹⁰⁸ When asked about this possibility, Hugh de Wardener said, “Whether he was a homosexual or not, I don’t know . . . he probably had inclinations that way. . . I’m sure he had several admirers who might have tried something on him. And I don’t know if anything was going on at all.”¹⁰⁹

Spong’s Final Appearances

Spong’s portrayal of “the Follies Girl,” Mirabelle Swam, in the musical *Wonder Bar* in mid-May 1944 was a singular triumph. It was also his penultimate appearance in the camp. Following the final performance, Spong shocked everyone in Chungkai by volunteering for a Japan Party draft. He did so, it was understood, because “his pal Vic Marshall” had been placed on the draft, and he wanted “to stick” with him.¹¹⁰ His last show in Chungkai was *Café Colette*, a revival of the show he had performed back in Changi. As usual, it contained sketches loaded with multiple entendres and sexual byplay. Richardson was outraged by the antics of the two prostitutes depicted on stage (one of whom was Spong): “culturally in the gutter, quite the worst creatures, almost I’ve ever seen prancing on the stage.”¹¹¹ What elicited Richardson’s negative response to Spong on this occasion isn’t known. Others found the show “very amusing” and “a fine musical.”¹¹² For his swan song, Spong may have thrown caution to the wind and given one of those drag performances that Bérubé witnessed in some of the American soldier shows—performances that “undermined the audience’s heterosexual assumptions” with the result that “spectators sometimes became offended and hostile, reviewers attacked the show as obscene, authorities closed the show and arrested the actors, and, in the military, discharged the soldier-performers, as homosexuals.”¹¹³

In his diary entry for 5 June, John Sharp mentions a poignant detail about Spong’s preparation for his imminent departure: “Our leading lady has joined a Japan Party, and had her hair off.”¹¹⁴ The Japan Party left three days later. Unfortunately, Spong and Marshall, and most of the thirteen hundred other POWs crammed in the hold of the Japanese transport ship, did not survive the long and dangerous sea voyage to Japan. Their unmarked ship was spotted and sunk by an American submarine trying to disrupt the Japanese supply routes. Frank Samethini, who left Chungkai on an earlier Japan Party, heard news about Spong’s fate from the few survivors after they arrived in Yakkaichi POW camp, Japan:

It is disclosed that among the drowned comrades there is one called Bobbie [*sic*], “the gorgeousest phony-broad this side of Suez,” [who] had gone down with twenty frocks in his rucksacks. That could only be the “uncomparable

Bobbie” who so well portrayed “woman,” the throb of many men’s dreams in those days of the great concerts in Chungkai. Poor Bobbie.¹¹⁵

Though Spong had been forced to have his abundant brunette hair shaved off before departure, with “twenty frocks in his rucksacks,” he was obviously determined to take up his responsibilities as a female impersonator once again at his new destination. W. G. Riley believed Spong “deserved a decoration for his services as an entertainer and morale booster to so many of his fellow P.O.W.s. “Alas, it is to my belief,” he wrote, “that he was denied this honour by losing his life in tragic circumstances.”¹¹⁶

Afterword

If J. G. Fuller’s assessment about the worth of female impersonators in military concert parties behind the lines in the First World War—that the real significance of their popularity had been their “glamour” and “trappings of elegance and luxury,” which were seen as “the negation of war and squalor and, as such, a potent fetish of peace”¹¹⁷— is valid, then how much more was this the case for the POWs in their isolated camps in Burma and Thailand during the Second World War?

Yet this intellectualisation dismisses the audience’s complex emotional and physical reactions to the impersonators’ audacious corporeal presence. “In reality,” writes David Boxwell, “the spectacle does not involve the simple suspension of disbelief that the ‘woman’ is actually a man. Rather, a simultaneous and conterminous process of avowal and disavowal never loses sight of the fact that the female impersonator is always-also a man, never not-just a woman.”¹¹⁸ The “intensity of the desire to believe” may have prompted the POWs to momentarily forget that these “girls” were men. But it also prompted them to forget, if only for a few hours, that the shows were being performed in atap and bamboo theatres in POW camps in Thailand.

¹ In addition, upwards of 80,000 to 100,000 Asian conscripts known as *romusha* were also transported to work on the railway.

² And the context for several theatre-release films: *The Bridge Over The River Kwai* (1957), based on Pierre Boulle’s novel; *To End All Wars* (2002), derived from Ernest Gordon’s memoir *Miracle on the River Kwai*; and, most recently, *The Railway Man* (2013), based on Eric Lomax’s autobiography.

³ When choosing the men who would be sent to Burma or Thailand to work on the railway, POW officers in charge included military bands and concert party personnel to ensure that the men would have some entertainment to keep their morale high in their new postings.

⁴ Basil Peacock, *Prisoner on the Kwai* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, Ltd., 1966), 224.

⁵ See Sylvia R. Frey, *The British Soldier in America: A Social History of Military Life in the Revolutionary Period* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981); and Leslie O’Dell, “Amateurs of the Regiment, 1815–

1870," in *Early Stages: Theatre in Ontario 1800–1914*, ed. Ann Saddlemeier (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 52–89.

⁶ J. G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies, 1914–1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 106.

⁷ Jimmy Walker, interview by Sears A. Eldredge, 10 January 2001, 26, transcript in author's possession.

⁸ Laurie Allison, letter to the author, 10 October 2000.

⁹ Tom Henling Wade, *Prisoner of the Japanese: From Changi to Tokyo* (Kenthurst: Kangaroo Press Pty., Ltd., 1994), 46.

¹⁰ Charles A. Fisher, *Three Times a Guest: Recollections of Japan and the Japanese 1942–1969* (London: Cassell, Ltd., 1979), 81.

¹¹ Tom Morris, interview, 23 May 2002, 18, 4, transcript in author's possession.

¹² Ted Weller, "Basic History of 'A' Force Concert Party on the Burma/Thailand Railway Line 1942–1944," 1, in author's possession.

¹³ James William (Jim) Jacobs, *The Burma Railway: One Man's Story* (1947), www.pows-of-japan.net/booksetc/Jacobs-Maj.pdf, 139, 106.

¹⁴ Kyle Thompson, *A Thousand Cups of Rice: Surviving the Death Railway* (Austin, TX: Eakin Press, 1994), 107–8.

¹⁵ Fergus Anckorn, e-mail messages to author, 1 July 2004.

¹⁶ Fergus Anckorn, interview, 6 January 2001, 58, transcript in author's possession.

¹⁷ Alon Rachamimov, "The Disruptive Comforts of Drag: (Trans) Gender Performances among Prisoners of War in Russia, 1914–1920," *American Historical Review* 111.2 (April 2000): 379.

¹⁸ Jack Chalker, letter to the author, 24 July 2000.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Fred Ransome Smith, letter to the author, n.d. [June 2011].

²¹ I am extremely grateful to Martin Percival for allowing me to use these photographs from his father, Frank Percival's collection. As a POW, his father transcribed scores for the Chungkai orchestra and worked backstage for the theatrical productions.

²² Some play scripts from the libraries formed in Changi POW camp, Singapore, were among the literature carried to Thailand and Burma by the POWs. But most scripts were reconstructed from memory by men who had been involved in theatrical activities before the war broke out.

²³ Barry Custance Baker, *Memoirs* (Pamisford: Altone Ltd., 2008), 13.

²⁴ Tom Morris, letter to the author, 20 November 2000.

²⁵ Pat Stephenson, *Pat's Story: The Perfect Cure for Insomnia* (Privately printed: n.d.), 47.

²⁶ Baker, 11, 25, 5.

²⁷ Peacock, 231.

²⁸ "After first rice" was after the first serving of food. If there was any food left over after all men were served, the POWs could get back in line for "second rice." Baker, 13.

²⁹ Laurie Allison, quoting letter from Leofric Thorpe, 7 December 2000.

³⁰ Anckorn, interview, 60.

³¹ During World War 2, Koreans were conscripted into the Imperial Japanese Army to serve as cooks and guards.

³² Morris, interview, 5.

³³ Chalker, letter, 24 July 2000.

³⁴ Fisher, 81.

³⁵ Museon's extraordinary collection of visual artifacts produced by POWs on the Thailand-Burma Railway are can be found online at www.museon.nl/en.

³⁶ Papers of Lt. J. A. Richardson, Diary, 12 February 1944, Imperial War Museum, London [hereafter, IWM] 1705 87/5811.

³⁷ Papers of Lt. J. A. Richardson, "Memories Bittersweet," 161, IWM 1705 87/5811.

³⁸ Roy H. Whitecross, *Slaves of the Son of Heaven: The Personal Story of an Australian Prisoner of the Japanese during the Years 1942–1945* (Sydney: Dymock's Book Arcade, Ltd., 1952), 128.

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- ³⁹ Gavin Daws, *Prisoners of the Japanese: POWs of World War II in the Pacific* (New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1994), 124.
- ⁴⁰ Baker, 16.
- ⁴¹ Anckorn, interview, 60.
- ⁴² Daws, 125.
- ⁴³ Fuller, 105–6.
- ⁴⁴ David A. Boxwell, “The Follies of War: Cross-Dressing and Popular Theatre on the British Front Lines, 1914–18,” *Modernism/modernity* 9.1 (January 2002): 12.
- ⁴⁵ Terence Charley, *Muang Thai*, ed. David Cartwright (2004), p23, IWM 09/17/1.
- ⁴⁶ Baker, *op. cit.*, 14.
- ⁴⁷ Alan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 85–86.
- ⁴⁸ Baker, 18.
- ⁴⁹ Iris Rachamimov, “Camp Domesticity: Shifting Gender Boundaries in WWI Internment Camps,” in Gilly Carr and Harold Mytum, eds., *Cultural Heritage and Prisoners of War: Creativity Behind Barbed Wire* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 301–2.
- ⁵⁰ Anckorn, interview, 60.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 58–59.
- ⁵² “Smalls” refers to women’s panties.
- ⁵³ David Wince, e-mail to the author, 2 May 2007.
- ⁵⁴ Japanese term for his own hut of junior officers.
- ⁵⁵ Actress Judy Garland played the role of Dorothy in the popular film. Norman Carter, *G-String Jesters* (Sydney: Currawong Publishing Co., 1966), 167.
- ⁵⁶ Weller, “Basic History,” 19 April 2002.
- ⁵⁷ Ted Weller, “Questionnaire,” 2, in author’s possession.
- ⁵⁸ Baker, 13.
- ⁵⁹ Thompson, 109.
- ⁶⁰ Terry Morris, self-interview #2; 1, transcript in author’s possession.
- ⁶¹ Papers of Capt. Cyril “Pop” Vardy, p. 262, IWM 67/166/1.
- ⁶² Anckorn, interview, 59.
- ⁶³ Benjamin Dunn, *The Bamboo Express*, rev. ed. (Murphysboro, IL: Jackson Printing & Publishing, 1996), 139.
- ⁶⁴ G. F. Kershaw, *Tracks of Death: The Burma-Siam Railway* (Sussex: Book Guild, Ltd., 1992), 130.
- ⁶⁵ John Durnford, *Branch Line to Burma* (London: Macdonald, 1958), 179–80.
- ⁶⁶ Bérubé, 37.
- ⁶⁷ Anckorn, interview, 59.
- ⁶⁸ Charley, 50.
- ⁶⁹ Chalker, letter, 24 July 2000.
- ⁷⁰ Durnford, 148.
- ⁷¹ John S. Cosford, *Line of Lost Lives* (Irthingborough: Gryphon Books, 1988), 104.
- ⁷² *Ibid.*, 104.
- ⁷³ Durnford, 148.
- ⁷⁴ Dr. Hugh de Wardener, interview, 9 January 2001, 48–49, transcript in author’s possession.
- ⁷⁵ Frank Samethini, *The Sky Looked Down: A Memoir of the Burma Railway* (Harbord: The Author, 1992), 75.
- ⁷⁶ Jack Chalker, letter to the author, 23 June 2003.
- ⁷⁷ Wade, 46.
- ⁷⁸ Norman Smith, *Songs and Stories of a V-J Day Survivor* (Ilfracombe: Arthur H. Stockwell, Ltd., 1998), 19.
- ⁷⁹ Cosford, 104.
- ⁸⁰ Durnford, 148.
- ⁸¹ Samethini, *op. cit.*, 74.

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- ⁸² Tom Boardman, "Response," 3–4, in author's possession.
- ⁸³ Chalker, letter, 23 June 2003.
- ⁸⁴ Cosford, 104. The everyday outfit for men in the camp was the Japanese undergarment called a *fundoshi*, which the POWs called a "G-string" or a "Jap Happy."
- ⁸⁵ John Coast, *Railroad of Death* (London: Commodore Press, 1946), 178.
- ⁸⁶ Frank Samethini misremembered the name as "Johnny."
- ⁸⁷ Samethini, 102.
- ⁸⁸ Leofric Thorpe, interview by Sears A. Eldredge, 23 March 2000, 13–14, transcript in author's possession.
- ⁸⁹ Cosford, 104.
- ⁹⁰ *Yasume* is the Japanese military command for "at ease" that was also used to mean "rest day."
- ⁹¹ Papers of Lt. G. Stanley Gimson, Diary, 25 December 1943, IWM 66/328/1.
- ⁹² Durnford, 148.
- ⁹³ *Ibid.*, 148–49.
- ⁹⁴ Papers of Major C. D. L. Aylwin, p172, IWM 67/330/1.
- ⁹⁵ Richardson, "Memories Bittersweet," 158.
- ⁹⁶ Cosford, 104.
- ⁹⁷ De Wardener, interview, 48.
- ⁹⁸ Leofric Thorpe, letter to Laurie Allison, 22 February 1988, copy in author's possession.
- ⁹⁹ Anckorn, interview, 31.
- ¹⁰⁰ Papers of W. G. Riley, p129, IWM 86/87/1.
- ¹⁰¹ Richardson, "Memories Bittersweet," 103.
- ¹⁰² Wade, 46.
- ¹⁰³ Leofric Thorpe, letter to Laurie Allison, 21 February 1988, copy in author's possession.
- ¹⁰⁴ Stephen Alexander, *Sweet Kwai, Run Softly* (Bristol: Merriots Press, 1995), 185, 202.
- ¹⁰⁵ Coast, 176.
- ¹⁰⁶ Cosford, 104.
- ¹⁰⁷ Durnford, 148–49.
- ¹⁰⁸ Anckorn, interview, 31.
- ¹⁰⁹ De Wardener, interview, 48–49.
- ¹¹⁰ Papers of Sapper Geoffrey B. Gee, Diary, 8 June 1944, IWM 10/10/1.
- ¹¹¹ Richardson, Diary, 5 June 1944.
- ¹¹² Papers of John C. Sharp, Diary, 6 June 1944, microfilm copy of diary transcription, IWM 11381 Box PP/MCR/209; Gee, Diary, 5 June 1944.
- ¹¹³ Bérubé, 72.
- ¹¹⁴ Sharp, Diary, 5 June 1944.
- ¹¹⁵ Samethini, 141.
- ¹¹⁶ Riley, 129.
- ¹¹⁷ Fuller, 106.
- ¹¹⁸ Boxwell, 16.