

CANTERBURY HISTORY GROUP



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Newsletter June 2022

Greetings to all members and friends of the Canterbury History Group

Our June meeting will be held in St Paul's Parish Centre, Church Street, Canterbury on Monday June 27th at 7.45 for an 8.00 pm start.

Speaker: Philip Barton will speak about his mother Dr Nancy Nicholson who was a Maling descendant and grew up in Camberwell. She left her extensive correspondence to the State Library and Philip has only recently collated and summarised it. This will enable the letters to be searched more readily. The letters describe her life in London during the Blitz where she'd travelled to study and her war-time research work. This led to a breakthrough rapid test for gas-gangrene which saved many lives. But her early career as a woman scientist was not without its difficulties. It was a challenge to social norms.

Planned Meetings : Please add these dates to your calendar.

July and August Our usual winter recess with no meetings. We will have newsletters.

If you would like a Zoom meeting in July please let us know. Perhaps another Show and Tell or Who do you think you are? Contact Libby at canthist@gmail.com or Neil at 9830 5896

Tuesday 16th August: This year we will have a **combined meeting with Surrey Hills Historical Society at The Cottage, 1 Bedford Road at 8pm**. Judy Archer will tell us about the research she's done on her grandmother who was a domestic servant: a hardworking housemaid. The family and house where she worked as a live-in employee have relevance to both Surrey Hills and Canterbury.

Monday 26th September at 7.45 for 8.00 Loreen Chambers will speak on 'The Land boom and Bust' which has particular relevance to the growth of Canterbury.

October History Month: As we've already held our Annual Dinner, other events are planned

Monday November 28th at 12 noon - our end of year lunch at Ruby T's, Canterbury

Canterbury Community Precinct: Your committee has been very busy attending Governance workshops with other community stakeholders. The precinct will open later this year.

Heritage Centre : We have also met with Council planners, The Canterbury Neighbourhood Centre & the Surrey Hills Historical Society to discuss various issues. Hopefully, the Centre will be ready early next year.

Technology: Wonderful news! Philip Clewlow, our new committee member, has helped us retrieve our whole catalogue before the old computer died. We've needed professional help and hope to be able to transfer the data to Collections Victoria. We've also, with Surrey Hills Historical Society, applied for a Community grant to fund new websites and support materials for community use in the Heritage Centre.

Dr Eric Bode and his experiences as a Prisoner of War in Sumatra during World War 2.

by his daughter Leila Griffiths who spoke at our CHG meeting on April 26th with Jenny Norvick.

Eric Bode's German grandparents came to Australia in about 1878 to help with the sugar beet factory in Maffra- he was a sugar beet engineer. Eric's father, Heinrich known as Harry, was about 3 when they arrived. Eric's mother Emmy was born in Hildesheim, Germany and met Harry when he went back to Germany as a young man to study engineering at Brunswick University. They married in Hildesheim in 1909 and came to Australia.

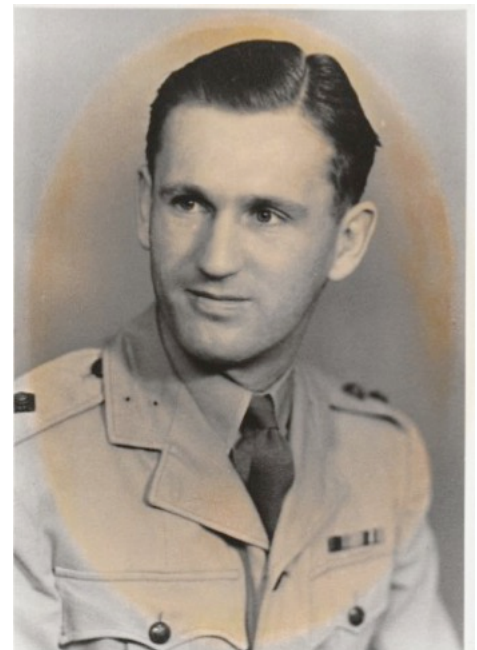
Eric was the third child and was born in a hospital in Armadale in July 1919, just after WWI. His parents had built a house on a large block at 74 Balwyn Rd where his father dug out and levelled a tennis court. Eric's older siblings had been at Balwyn Primary School during the war, where they were called 'the little huns'. His sister was then removed to a small private school called Carisbrooke in Hopetoun Avenue, Canterbury. Eric went to Balwyn Primary School and Box Hill High School the year that it opened. He went on to Melbourne Tech, now RMIT from 1934-5.

In 1939, he worked for the head of the Metallurgical School at Melbourne Tech and in 1940 was working at the Explosives Factory in Maribyrnong as a lab assistant. While he was there, in May he enlisted in the second Tenth Field Company of the Royal Australian Engineers but three months later was he was discharged as medically unfit. They wanted him to continue working at the Explosives Factory.

Someone in the metallurgy school at RMIT suggested he apply for a position at Eastern Smelting Company, Penang. So, in June 1941 he travelled by flying boat from Rose Bay in Sydney to Penang via Singapore and then took the train to Butterworth. There he worked for ES Co. for approximately 6 months as a technical officer. His Australian unit, the second Tenth Field Company were stationed in Jahore just over the causeway from Singapore Island and he'd met up with them when he landed in Singapore.

In December 1941, the Japanese air force sank the British battleships, 'Prince of Wales' and 'Repulse' around the same time as the attack on Pearl Harbour. Soon after this, Penang was bombed and all Westerners evacuated; most sailed to Singapore. Eric drove his Austin 8 south with a member of the 101 Independent Company and when he arrived in Singapore he tried to enlist in the Australian Army. However, he was told he'd have to return to Australia to do that. So, on January 3rd he enlisted in the British Army. Someone asked him if he could build a bridge and he thought that if he was given plans, he probably could, so he said, 'Yes' and he was made an officer, 2nd Lieutenant and posted to the 35th Fortress Company of the Royal Engineers. This was the only unit that operated as sappers right through the Malayan campaign – others were sent to the front line as infantry. His company blew up small bridges, culverts and causeways to slow the progress of the Japanese.

On 13th February 1942, bombs were being dropped all around but Eric wasn't hit. Two days later on 15th, Singapore fell. From the Jardine steps, Eric looked across Keppell Harbour and saw a ferry grounded on the island of Palau Brani, so he swam across to get the lifeboat. Then he rowed back to be told by Major Grant that the British had capitulated to the Japanese and to lay down their arms. Eric asked if anyone wanted to row to India with him and 5 men accepted. It turned out that Eric and one other were the only ones who could row so he had to teach the rest. Fortunately, they



had 3 oars so one could steer. They told him he'd been mad to swim all that way to the island because the harbour was full of sharks.

They island hopped and had rests waiting for the tide to turn. The local population on these islands helped and on one they met up with others escaping from Singapore. This island had a cache of food - mostly baked beans. After about 10 days they stayed in a hut built up on stilts and were given a tasty meal. They realised they were close to Sumatra. About ½ km off shore, Eric got out of the boat and sank in mud up to his waist and had to be hauled back into the boat. From there they rowed south until they reached the mouth of the Indragiri River. There were 4 – 5 metre crocodiles basking on sandbanks. About half an hour later, a Chinese junk towing a barge and manned by Australian soldiers offered them a lift on the barge. They travelled up the river overnight.

The next morning, Eric met up with Bill Francis, the assistant commercial manager of ESC with some of his friends who were also on the barge. After reaching their destination upstream on the Indragiri River, Bill and his friends hired a taxi to take them to Padang. There was one space left. Eric was offered it but declined because he was the only officer in his group of escapees and he felt he should stay with them.

Bill Francis and his group, with about 2000 people, were evacuated from Padang by the HMAS Hobart on 28th February, 1942 and arrived safely in Western Australia. They had left 12 hours before Eric and his group reached Padang.

When Eric's group eventually left by train for Padang, the trip took 10 hours. The Dutch forces in Padang disarmed all troops, except officers who were allowed to keep revolvers. There were about 1500 British and Australian troops assembled there and the Dutch told them they had no intention of fighting the Japanese. They also refused to give them any food. Eric was housed in a local hotel and his 3 sappers were housed at a sports ground and the other 2 were in hospital with infected coral wounds. After about 2 weeks they heard that the Japanese were at Fort de Cok and would be arriving the next day. The British officers were to vacate their rooms for the Japanese. That night, Eric plus the 3 who weren't in hospital, plus 2 new friends of the sappers, marched 60 kms south of Padang.

Eric said, ' We had 2 revolvers and 800 rounds of ammunition between us. We got hold of a 20 foot native boat with outriggers, and provisioned her with rice we bought from the natives. We set sail for India, but contrary winds decided us to try for the west Australian coast instead. The second night out, the boat began to leak badly and we put in to a small island to make repairs. In four days we had her sea worthy again and we were just about to push off when a patrol-boat flying a Dutch flag anchored off the island. She landed a party of 25 armed Indonesian soldiers commanded by a Dutchman, Captain Prinz, a harbour master at Padang. On Prinz' orders the native Dutch troops surrounded us with levelled rifles. We were forced aboard the patrol- boat. As soon as we were aboard, she hauled down the Dutch flag and ran up the Japanese colours. There were only Dutch on board – no Japanese. We were then herded into a little dinghy and towed behind the patrol-boat. Prinz took us to Padang and locked us in the local gaol.' ¹

'Two hours later we were escorted to Japanese headquarters and interrogated. The Japanese treated us well and gave us a first-class meal. We were then taken to the POW camp at Padang. Later, I was taken by truck to Medan [on the north east coast] where I spent 2 years in captivity.'

That trip took 3 days travelling North, passing Lake Toba. From Medan, 3 months later, half the POWs were shipped to work on the Thai Burma Railway. At that camp there was cholera but there was no cholera in Medan and only one death in the camp in 2 years. Eric said that particular death could have been prevented but the person refused medical treatment. They had one kind guard who was also mentioned in the book, 'Judy a Dog in a Million'. ² He gave them extra rations on Christmas Day.

However, bacillary dysentery was rife and the cure without medicine was starvation for about 10 days. They were allowed to drink strong cold black tea. Eric was in Medan hospital for a short time. He contracted malaria which was treated with an antivenereal drug Salvosan used in Mesopotamia to treat syphilis. It cured 1 in 50 people and it fortunately worked on Eric. The army had plentiful stocks of this drug.

They were all hungry for protein and Eric told of a group who stole the Japanese goat and killed, skinned and ate it in one night with nothing left as evidence. This story is also told in the book about Judy. The Japanese never solved the problem of the missing goat; they presumed a tiger had got it. The prisoners learnt to growl like tigers to frighten the guards. The camp had geese as guards as well as Japanese and Korean guards. The geese were vicious and noisy if you went near them. Some prisoners ate rats, dog and snake. Eric only ate snake.

The prisoners were enterprising. In this camp Eric bought packs from the Dutch for \$12.00 and out of the linings which he sewed together, he made shorts which he sold for \$200 to the locals. This gave him money to buy food. One egg cost \$12.00. He also started teaching maths to prisoners who were interested and he learnt from a Dutch engineer about calculating the strength of materials.

They were organised into working parties growing vegetable gardens. They mostly grew pawpaw and tapioca. The leaves of the tapioca plant are edible but the root was ground into flour that was like eating glue. The added problem was that in digesting it, vitamin B was used up and beriberi became worse. This is what a lot of POWs died from.

A radio was found by the Japanese and the person who owned it confessed so others wouldn't be in trouble. He was asked: Didn't he know that no radios were allowed and wasn't he searched when he entered the camp? His reply was 'No' to both questions. He thought of trying to escape but his fellow POWs talked him out of it. That was fortunate as the next morning the Japanese put a notice up that no radios were allowed in camp and they heard no more about it. Eric felt that they didn't want to lose face as they hadn't informed or searched the prisoners.

Eric also felt that the Australians were treated better than the Dutch by the Japanese. He wondered whether this was partly due to the news of how the naval officers on the submarines that entered Sydney Harbour were given a proper burial. They knew that Australians were fighting in New Guinea. He said that the guards who knew you were Australian, mostly treated you OK but they beat up the Dutch.

The camp was at Gloengoer, a suburb of Medan. The camp size was about 2000 but later the railway camps were much smaller. Eric was in hospital for a short time with a large tropical ulcer which had a fistula. He needed it to be cleaned to heal and with no anaesthetic or equipment he was held down and the ulcer was scraped out with a spoon.

On the 25th June 1944, they were taken to Belawan, the port of Medan and boarded a former Dutch cattle ship, the Harukiku Maru [formerly SS van Warwijk] that afternoon. Eric wrote, 'Several hours later we left to travel south in the Malacca Straits. The ship anchored at dusk, the Japanese captain informing us that we were close to a very dangerous area where many ships had been sunk. The convoy of seven ships up-anchored and continued travelling south on the 26th June.'³

'Early that afternoon there was a loud explosion and the ship rolled on its starboard side. As I was near an opening, I poked my head out, water rushed up to my nose and with difficulty I pulled my head in. When the ship rolled back the opening instead of being about 5 metres above the waterline was now only one metre. I decided to get into the water and swim before the ship rolled over. Just entering the water, a second torpedo hit the ship, when I surfaced I was coughing frothy scarlet-coloured blood. As I



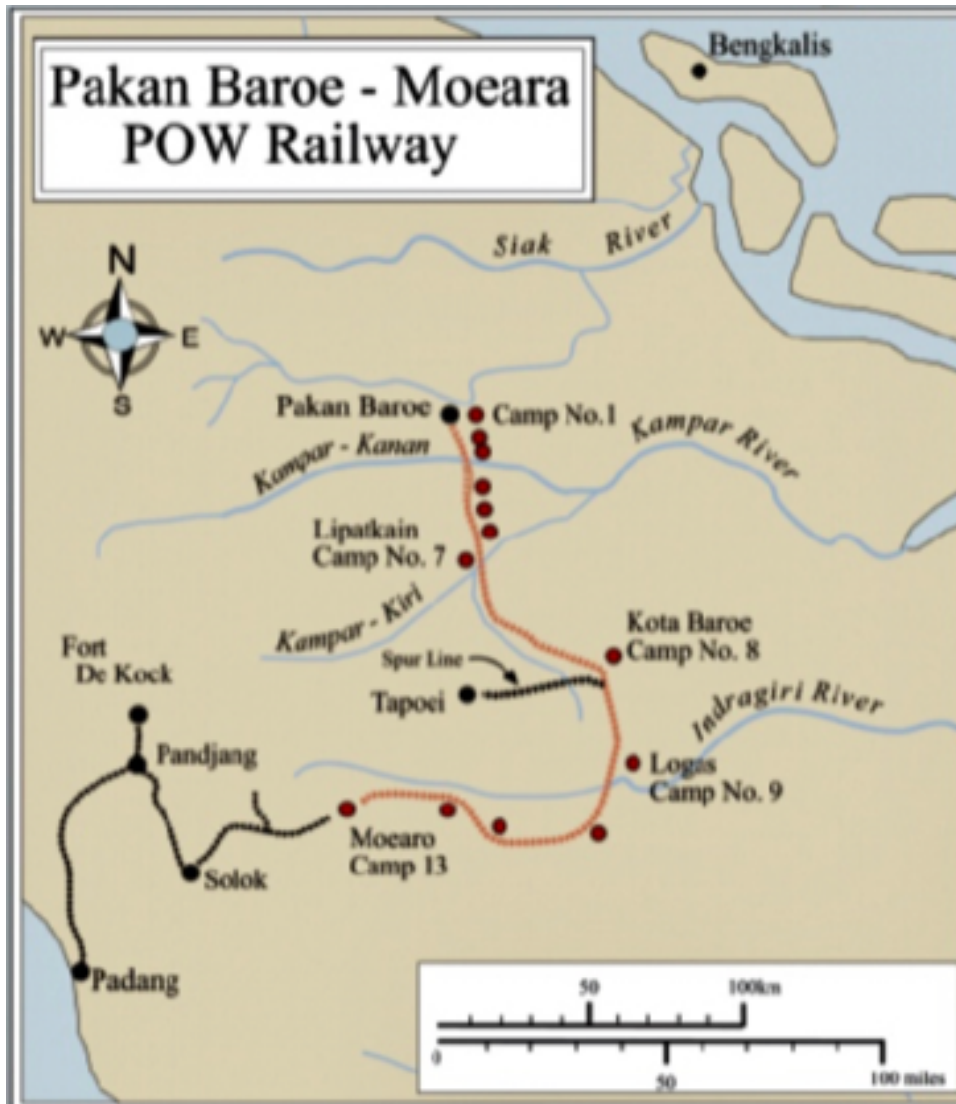
Map showing Sumatra and Malaya, the Indragiri River, Padang, Medan, and the Pakan Baroe railway. The blue dots show the voyage of the Harukiku Maru

was struggling to untangle my legs from sisal in the water, a Dutch MO swam past and told me not to worry about the damage to my lungs and they would heal rapidly.'

'Finally, I managed to get on a raft, but as the number on the raft was high it only kept our heads above water. Most of the POWs scrambled to the Portside of the ship, with some being badly burnt by burst steam pipes. Persons in the lower decks who could not squeeze through port holes, unfortunately went down with the ship.' [198 lives]

'After looking around, a further two ships were seen to be sinking and many masts from earlier sinkings could be seen above water. The four ships still afloat dropped anchor and commenced picking up Japanese in the water and followed up with us. Of the POWs, the persons who entered the water from the portside of the ship were closest to the anchored ships and were picked up next, and our group after we'd been about 4 hours in the water. One of the British officers found a 2/3rd full bottle (approx. half a litre bottle) of opium syrup floating in the water. Lt Col Hennessy (Medico) took charge of the opium, and because I was in pain due to suffering from the bends (thickened neck near the shoulders due to gas released from the blood) I received ½ teaspoon of opium and spent the night in a coma. The ship that picked us up was a small tanker carrying aviation spirit which was not comforting knowledge. The Japanese captain assured us that he was taking us to Singapore and would be travelling at 18 knots, that is faster than a submarine.'

'On arrival at Singapore we were taken to River Valley Camp and whilst there, during July 1944, an



eclipse of the sun took place. Eric also wrote that he understood when he arrived at River Valley Camp, Singapore, they had lost 25% of POWs in the sinking. Some had escaped by swimming to the Sumatran Coast. After 5 or 6 weeks, we were then transferred by boat to Pakan Baroe, Sumatra to build a railway line from the East to the West Coast. We were on this project until the war ended.'

' At Pakan Baroe some POWs were used to build an aerodrome and it was from this aerodrome that the RAAF flew Australian POWs to Singapore after the Japanese surrendered.'

The railway was 220 miles long and built to join the East and West coasts of Sumatra so coal could be

freighted out from coal mines to support the war effort. It was an idea investigated by the Dutch: to join up with the existing railway from Padang at Moeara.

Eric thought he was at camp 5 on the railway and as he was an officer, he was an overseer of the work. He was at camp 2 when peace was declared because that's where his friend Percy Haworth died - according to the online records which Leila found.⁴ She said her father never gave specifics of what happened except funny stories. She remembered him saying one day that he knew how to fell trees so they would land without hurting anyone. She presumed one of his tasks was felling timber for building the railway.

About 700 POWs died during the 12 months building the railway. But among the Ramusha, the Indonesians, of 120,000 who worked on the railway, only 16,000 survived. They'd been working on the railway from 1943, before the POWs. The Japanese recruited these people as volunteers to work and they thought they were to be well paid and the railway to the mines would be good for their country. But they were used as slave labour. It is said that for every sleeper laid, one person died.

The railway was finished the day peace was declared. Eric's friend in the camp, Percy, died that night from beriberi. Eric did the burial, as he'd done many others as he was the only Australian Officer and it was his responsibility. He told his family the grave wasn't long enough and he had to extend it. He also told them that he was grateful that atomic bombs were dropped as he couldn't have survived much longer and neither would many other prisoners. After 1946 the jungle gradually took over the railway line and the bridges started collapsing.

The Australian prisoners were flown out of Pakan Baroe where a group had previously built the airstrip. They flew to Singapore. Eric said the plane was so overloaded on take-off that it barely skimmed the trees. On arrival in Singapore, he was given fresh bread, baked on a naval vessel, with butter found in a cool store in Singapore. The Japanese hadn't realised the cool store had another room. Eric waited about a month in Singapore for a ship to take him home. He was six foot tall and weighed 6 and a half stone [41kg] ; he didn't want to arrive home looking so emaciated. He arrived in Sydney on the 'Highland Chieftain'. He said that 'whilst on board he heard a broadcast of the VFL (Bloodbath) Grand Final between South Melbourne and Carlton.'

In Sydney he then had to wait nearly a month to be discharged from the British Army. It took 30 hours by train to reach Melbourne as the train had to use sidings for any other train approaching. Eric's mother was a widow and for most of the war had no idea if he was alive. She waited hours for him at Flinders Street. He had phoned her from Sydney and the girl on the switchboard let him talk as long as he wanted as she heard he'd been a POW.

Eric married Kathleen Anderson in 1946 and returned to Penang, continuing to work for ESC. They had two daughters whilst there. The family returned to Australia in 1950. Eric worked at the Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation and completed his Diploma in Chemistry at RMIT. He then did teacher training at a secondary level. He did some secondary teaching but then was employed at Swinburne Technical College where he taught at tertiary level, mostly in the evenings, while he studied full time at Melbourne Uni to obtain a Bachelor of Science In 1960. He majored in Pure Mathematics and Chemistry.

In 1964 he started an honours degree so his education was on par with the engineers at Swinburne. This led to him completing a PhD. His thesis was on the Radiolysis of Carbon Tetrafluoride. He was promoted to be Head of Chemistry and eventually Dean of Applied Sciences (Equivalent to a Professor today).

Leila said.' Dad rarely spoke about his time as a POW, he always said those things are best forgotten. It was the way he coped. He never marched on ANZAC Day and we weren't allowed to go with our school either. I started learning a bit about his story when I helped him obtain a 'Gold Card' by typing up his letters of application. Also, when his grandchildren interviewed him for school projects, we learnt about the "funny bits". In the last year of his life, I came across the book 'Judy a Dog in a Million' by Damien Lewis and realised it was relating stories about the same places Dad had been during the war. When I read it to him he opened up a bit more but the book gave us a much better understanding of what our Dad and these men suffered.'

'Dad led a long and fulfilled life till his death at almost ninety-seven and a half years. So much for being medically unfit!'



¹ News article about Lieut Bode in West Australian, Thursday 18 October 1945, p. 4.

² 'Judy A Dog in a Million' by Damien Lewis, 2015

³ The sinking of the Harukiku Maru -1944, article written by Eric H Bode, published in News Bulletin of the Ex-Prisoners of War and Relatives. Issue 229 ; Feb-April 2001.

⁴ Percy George Haworth AIF 2/29 btn. He was only 25. He was an only child of George and Nellie Haworth who lived in Surrey Hills. When he returned to Melbourne, Eric visited Percy's mother who was a widow. It was very sad. The lists and details are found by googling Pekanbaru Death Railway .

There is an excellent video of the Pekanbaru Death Railway on utube: https://youtu.be/h64xcd-s_10

Apologies for the clarity of the photos.- Ed

150th Anniversary Anniversary of St Barnabus Anglican Church, 86 Balwyn Road

This year there will be a variety of opportunities to celebrate this milestone

Sunday 5th June at 10.30 am : St Barnabus Day service 150 year launch

Sunday 9th October at 2.00 pm: '150 years of History' Book Launch with Philip Barton speaking about the Maling family who for 3 generations were involved building the church.

22nd December 10.30 am: Anniversary of the 1st service

11th June 2023 at 10.30: 150th year celebrations finish

