

**PRISONER OF WAR CAMPS IN AREAS OTHER THAN THE FOUR PRINCIPAL ISLANDS OF JAPAN  
LIAISON & RESEARCH BRANCH AMERICAN PRISONER OF WAR INFORMATION BUREAU**

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**RANGOON PRISON CITY OF RANGOON. BURMA**

1. **LOCATION**: Rangoon Central Prison is in the southwest section of the city of Rangoon and is bounded on the north by St. John's Road, on the south by Commissioners Road, on the east by Pongyi St., and on the west by Keigh Lry St. It is about one mile from the large gold-domed Pagoda.
2. **PRISONER PERSONNEL**: When Rangoon fell to the Japanese in 1942, this prison was converted into a prisoner of war camp. The first occupants were British people who were stationed in Rangoon. The first U.S. prisoners of war arrived in Rangoon on 4 June 1942, and were confined in Rangoon City Lockup until 1942. They were then transferred to the Rangoon Central prison. The New Law Courts Jail, near the docks, also a place of confinement, was of temporary nature, principally for prolonged questioning. The Kemptai Jail was also a place of temporary confinement. Judson College was also used by the Japanese Army as a place of interrogation.

U.S. Military Personnel did not begin to arrive in appreciable numbers until April 1943, after which they arrived at more less regular intervals until liberation in the latter part of April 1945. Most of the prisoners were air corps personnel captured as a result of crashes and forced landings in Burma.

Upon their arrival at the prisoner of war camp in the old Rangoon prison, the men were confined to "semi-solitary" cells, either 3, 4 or 5 men to a cell, and were not permitted out except to empty their toilet buckets once a day or for an occasional bath. The men lived in the solitary confinement cells for about three weeks from the time of their arrival at the prison.

There were no distinguishing marks in the camp to denote that this installation was being used as a prisoner of war camp. In January 1943 Allied Air Forces bombed the prison and completely demolished Compound number 4. This bombing resulted in the deaths of some 40 Dutch, a few English and a few Americans.

There were approximately 1200 Allied prisoners of war in Rangoon Central prison. Of this number about 150 were Americans. With the exception of one or two men, all American prisoners were members of air crews. The prisoners were divided into groups with cell block commanders. Lt. Col. Douglas G. Gilbert, U.S.A. was the senior representative for all Americans in Rangoon. Lt. Col. Roger C. Prior was Commander of the solitary confinement compound.

3. **GUARD PERSONNEL**: 1st Lt. Koshima (Kushima) was most brutal toward prisoners. He was Japanese commandant from June 1942 to April 1944; Capt. Notozo Mitzuni was commandant of Rangoon prisoners of war for one year. April 1944 to April 1945; H. Ito was Chief Officer of Rangoon prison on 29 April 1945; Capt. Tazumoi Tai was commandant from March 1944 to liberation. He was said to have been reasonable and considerate; Sgt. Maj. Wano San was quartermaster of Rangoon prisoner of war camp; Brig. Gen. Ken Hichi Masuoka was Kempetai commandant at Rangoon during 1943 to the latter part of 1944; Col. Matad Jumei was Kemetai commandant from latter part of 1944 to April 1945.

4. **GENERAL CONDITIONS**:

- (a) **HOUSING FACILITIES**: Rangoon Central Jail was enclosed within a roughly circular perimeter and the various cell blocks and compounds were arranged in a manner similar to the spokes of a wheel. The Americans were imprisoned only in cell blocks #5 & #8. Cell block #5 was a two-story concrete building containing 50 cells on each floor. The cells were 9' x 12' and the ceiling ranges from approximately 10' to 15' in height being on a downward slant from the center of the building to the outside. Each cell had one barred door approximately 3' x 6' and one barred window approximately 4' x 4'. On each floor there were 20 cells on either side of a hallway that was 12' wide. A grating was in the center of the hallway between the first and second floors to improve ventilation. There were ventilation ports near the ceiling in each cell leading into the hallway. The cell walls were covered with reasonably clean whitewash and the floors were concrete. The block was known as the solitary confinement block. Each cell in the block was occupied by three enlisted men or one officer. As a whole, cell block #5 appeared to be well ventilated and lighted. Within the compound the exposed and unprotected latrine was approximately 100' from the open and unprotected kitchen. Cell block #8 was a two-story building containing four cells approximately 20' x 55' on each floor. Each cell had five barred windows 4' x 8' and one barred window 4' x 10'. There was a corridor running the length of each floor between the cells and the outside wall. Heavy wooden bars separated the cells and the corridors. Five barred windows were in the corridor opposite each cell. The ceilings were approximately 15' high. Cell block #8 was considered to be well ventilated and lighted. There was a large and adequate exercise yard within #8 compound and also outdoor kitchen facilities and latrines.
- (b) **LATRINES**: British ammunition boxes were used inside the solitary confinement cells as latrines. They were taken out once a day to be emptied. In each of the other compounds there was a frame building with open sides housing a latrine. Ammunition boxes served as stools. The urinal was a hole in the ground. The fecal matter in the ammunition boxes was transferred to metal drums for removal from the compounds and was used as fertilizer. The latrines were located about 40' from the quarters.

(c) BATHING: There was a large water trough of cement construction, 30' x 2' x 3' deep located in the compound of each area. Water was supplied through the Rangoon city water supply. Due to bombings, the water system was frequently impaired. The prisoners bathed from this trough by dipping out of the water and pouring it over themselves. Several wells were dug in the compound area and during the dry seasons the amount of water allowed was regulated by the Japanese guards. At various times, the only water available came from the wells. Men in solitary confinement were allowed very infrequent baths from a 1 gallon bucket brought to the cell. The prisoners on work details were allowed to bathe daily.

(d) MESS HALLS: Men in the solitary confinement cells were fed in their cells. Three meals a day were brought in by Chinese Coolies under Japanese guard. In the other compound there was a cook house which was merely an open shelter. Each cook house was equipped with a few rice vats, pots & pans. The pans were improvisations on the part of the prisoner of war cooks. Two pans were given to each prisoner of war; one for rice and one for tea. Eating utensils were made by the prisoners. Tin cans were used for cups. All food was carried to the quarters and issued to the men who passed by the container for the issue and ate wherever they chose. Prisoner of war personnel acted as cooks and performed their duties well with the available equipment.

(e) FOOD: Food consisted of rice basically, with a vegetable of the okra type. The water in which the vegetables were cooked was poured over the rice. Very weak tea was served with each meal. At various times other items were issued including; spinach, beans, a small amount of fish & meat, and on rare occasions sugar. Eggs & fruit could be purchased.

(f) MEDICAL FACILITIES: There was no hospital as such in this camp. The men were treated in their quarters and no space was made available for segregation of seriously ill prisoners. At very rare intervals the Japanese authorities issued small amounts of gauze, iodine, and quinine tablets. The men in solitary confinement were visited at intervals of 3 to 4 days by a Japanese medical assistant who could speak no English. No interpreter was used on his visits. There was one Japanese medical officer and two medical assistants for the camp in general. The visits of the Japanese medical personnel were sporadic. There were several Allied medical officers in the compounds who made every effort to attend to the medical needs of the prisoners with the inadequate facilities available.

Since most of the American personnel here were air corps crews who bailed out or crashed, there was a high percentage of wounded and ill in this camp. Medical attention for the cuts and bruises sustained by the men from the mid-air explosion and subsequent bailing out was refused by the Japanese. To illustrate: Two badly wounded men were given inadequate treatment 14 to 18 hours after capture. One whose upper right arm had been pierced by a shell fragment had his wound swabbed out with water and a liquid which was described as "diluted mercurochrome", and a bandage put on. The wound festered badly and was quite painful, but the same treatment continued. Every 2 to 4 days the bandage was removed to permit the accumulated pus to drain, the wound was swabbed with the same solution and the same bandage replaced. Miraculously, the arm healed after months of treatment. The other was not so fortunate. His left hand, almost completely severed during the explosion, was cut off with a pair of scissors by a Jap medical orderly and the wrist stump treated and bound. The wound became infected but the Japs would do nothing further about it. After over a month of increasing infection and pain the prisoners of war prevailed on their guards to permit a British medical officer from another building to operate and cut off the arm at the elbow. This was done without an anesthetic, and with an old and inadequate assortment of surgical instruments. The Japs offered no assistance at all. Due to the treatment by this medical officer the arm slowly began to heal.

A type of sick-call was held each morning, but in order to secure medical treatment the prisoner of war had to be critically sick. Practically all the men suffered from dysentery at one time or another but treatment was usually refused unless evacuation occurred as many as 30 or 40 times during the day. One case was reported where by actual count a British prisoner of war had 254 bowel movements over a period of three days. Without treatment, he died on the fourth morning.

Nearly all the men, in addition, suffered from malaria or dengue fever, and viciously infected sores all over their bodies. The only medicine the Japs supplied was quinine, which they seemed to have plenty of and, when possible, some of the men saved their surplus quinine for those who needed it worse than others. Small quantities of drugs had been salvaged from escape kits and successfully hidden.

From time to time, when men were very ill, messages were gotten through to the British medical officer describing their symptoms. Answers came back prescribing treatment. By this method, and with the salvaged drugs, the men were able to help themselves somewhat. The prisoners found that the best treatment for the open sores was to get out in the air as much as possible and keep moving around by engaging in some form of exercise. Exposure of the sores to air and to the sun helped considerable.

(g) SUPPLIES:

(1) Red Cross, YMCA, etc.: No relief supplies of any description were ever received at Rangoon.

(2) Japanese issue: Occasionally enlisted men would be given a shirt or pair of trousers if he was on a work detail. Officers were given no clothing since they were not allowed to work. Most of the Americans had their flying clothes taken from them by the Japs.

(h) MAIL:

- (1) Incoming: American prisoners of war were so tardily reported as such by the Japanese that very little mail was received. Some British prisoners received a small amount of mail in Dec. 1944.
- (2) Outgoing: One postal card was allowed to be written in March 1945. This was a message which had been prepared, by the Japanese and nothing was allowed to be written which could in any way be construed as being detrimental to the Japanese Army.

(i) WORK: Working conditions were very poor. Both officers and men were treated like coolies. The lack of proper clothing for the work details was greatly felt especially in the matter of shoes. Work consisted of construction of anti-aircraft installations and air raid shelters. Much work was carried on in the dock area such as loading boats for shipping war supplies. Work also consisted of recapping tires for Japanese Army trucks, general work in the garages & unloading river barges and railroad box cars.

(j) TREATMENT: On 11 Feb. 1944 an order was issued from the Japanese High Command to the effect that "All captured enemy air personnel will not be treated as prisoners of war. Instead, after being searched for necessary information, they will be handed over to the Gendarmerie. All of them will be dealt with severely by the area army, excepting those who can be put to some special use. They will be separated from other prisoners." The above order was carried out in an extremely harsh manner by the Japanese authorities in Rangoon. Upon capture, American air crews were interrogated by the Kempetai (secret police) where they underwent innumerable indignities Without regard to age or rank. They were kept in solitary confinement for 2 to 3 months. Upon release from solitary confinement, their lot was little better.

The penalty for attempted escape was death. Group punishment was in effect at all times and the prisoners lived in an atmosphere of constant suppressed fear, lest someone of their fellow prisoners would unwittingly violate a rule, thereby bringing down the wrath of the Nipponese on the entire camp. Beatings with clubs, rifle butts, and slappings were daily occurrences. It was apparently the policy of the Japanese to humiliate the white man in the presence of the native population.

(k) PAY: Due to inflation the amount of money paid prisoners varied greatly although the amount paid monthly remained constant. One rupee represented \$1.00 although actually it was worth only 30¢ in purchasing value. Deductions were made for food, housing & medical care. Men who were captured after June 1944 were not paid.

(1) Officers were paid according to rank. The following will give an example of pay data; 2nd Lt. paid 70.83 rupees, deductions 60.00 R; bank deposits 2.00 R, amount to POW 8.83 R. The above reveals that the officer actually received very little money with which to purchase the few items available.

(2) Enlisted men of all ranks received from 25¢ to 30¢ per day only when actually working.

(l) RECREATION: There were no facilities for recreation at Rangoon. The Japanese authorities did not make available any games, athletic equipment, etc. to the prisoners. No recreational equipment was received from any welfare organization. The men held discussion groups and heard talks on various subjects by fellow prisoners. All these discussions were held in strict secrecy since the Japanese prohibited group gathering.

(m) RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES: The Japanese authorities prohibited religious services. However, one English officer held services whenever he could for small groups with one man conducting the service. One Bible was brought into the prison where it was carefully hidden and brought out from time to time. Since the working parties went out seven days a week, this interfered greatly with the religious activities. There were no chaplains imprisoned in Rangoon.

(n) MORALE: Morale was very high generally in this camp considering the conditions under which the prisoners lived. Only 1 man is known to have lost his mind here. The compound commanders kept their men busy cleaning their barracks and doing odd jobs. This helped greatly to keep their minds from their life in prison. News which was brought in by recently captured Americans helped greatly to keep up morale.

5. MOVEMENTS: About 4o'clock in the afternoon of 25 April 1945, 76 Americans and 365 British prisoners of war were evacuated from Rangoon Central Prison by Japanese guards under direction of the Japanese commandant. 38 American prisoners remained in Rangoon. The prisoners who marched from Rangoon traveled for 3 days & nights and arrived about four miles from Pegu on the morning of the fourth day. All prisoners, before the march, were given an opportunity to buy and take large amounts of food, clothing and other necessities of which there was an ample amount in Rangoon. Hand carts and various other methods were used to transport this material. They marched only at night and rested during the day. There was a ration party composed of four members of the prisoner group which rode on a Japanese truck and prepared tea for them on the march, and also prepared a bivouac rest area during the night. Fires were not allowed during the hours of darkness. The total distance marched was 65 miles. Most of the men were barefooted and were out of food or water during the last night of the march. Later in the evening on the 28th of April, the prisoners were ordered by the Japanese to unload the carts which the prisoners were pulling. All food and baggage were discarded. All prisoners were then marched in columns through Pegu to a small village called Naung Pattaya Station. They arrived at this place at daylight 29 April and were told they were at liberty by the Japanese commandant. The same day they were subjected to bombing and strafing attacks by allied aircrews. During these attacks the senior Allied officer. Brigadier Hobson was killed.