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Sport in Changi Prisoner of War Camp



Pre-war: Aerial view of the new civilian prison at Changi, which later became the Prisoner-of-War (POW) Camp for allied POWs during the Japanese Occupation. 1936. Source: Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No: 19980005075 – 0055)

A Sporting Distraction

In captivity, the Prisoners of War (POWs) managed to create a sporting distraction from the brutality of incarceration. One which reinforced their sense of toughness and resilience.

As most of the captives were brought up with a British Empire perspective on sport, it was not surprising that the major team games that might link British and Australian soldiers together were cricket and football. What was surprising was that some Japanese guards were drawn into the fascination of childlike play with footballs and cricket balls.

POW Playing Grounds

There were three main playing grounds for games. One near Selarang Barracks, which was occupied by Australians. One near the Roberts Barracks, which was occupied by the British. And one near the India Lines, which was occupied by British and Dutch POWs.

The Australians played Aussie Rules from the start of captivity and the British kicked a soccer ball around. There was a hidden message

behind these games: it remained, as in times of peace, as a way to prove oneself. Still strong and fit.

The game that most symbolized the ailing British Empire was cricket. Thus it was no surprise that a cricket Test series would be initiated. Among the POWs were a significant number of first-grade Australian cricketers and county cricketers from England. It seems that the Australians were the dominant force!

Serious Play

There was rugby (both League and Union varieties), boxing and basketball, but football was the most enduring even though it adopted a particularly aggressive form. It was the only game that's survived a ban that had been imposed as a result of over-zealous play.

If the Aussies dominated the cricket and rugby, then the Brits called the tune with soccer. Most of the games were played on their 'turf'. They played their games in the early evening after tea.

"The POWs not only had a well-organised soccer league, but they also played competitively in the more physically violent contact games of Australian Rules, rugby league and rugby union."

"The players and officials took the game and its rules very seriously. They even had rules regarding the 'transfer' of players from 'club' to 'club'."

"Green (steward of Victorian Australian Rules team) described how when he was at Selarang Barracks, 'Max Street, a friend of mine, persuaded me to go to the hospital area to play football for "Melbourne". I was given three bowls of rice for transferring'."

- Quote from 'The Sportsmen of Changi' by Kevin Blackburn



The infamous Death Railway constructed during the Japanese Occupation. 1942-1945. Source: National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No: 20050000103 – 0011)

Playing with the Enemy

One apparent contradiction about the environment at Changi was the involvement in sport of some of the Japanese and Korean guards. Soccer was a popular game with the guards. They watched and learned and might play an informal game together.

It was very rare for guards and prisoners to appear in the same match. Not impossible though. There was one Japanese dispatch rider who earned the nickname 'McKenzie'. He would take all the knocks that might be expected and carried on regardless.

Casualties and Ban on Sport

Other games and sports appeared on the calendar at Changi. There was boxing, baseball and basketball. They were not accessible to the POWs throughout their internment. Gradually as food supplies were more limited, the physical condition of many of those tough blokes began to decline.

Despite their weakened condition due to the poor diet, the medical staff and the unfit men *'still felt that the benefits of playing sport more than outweighed any drain on the physical condition of the men'*.

"In Jan 1943, the casualties resulting from football and boxing were a drain on the decreasing drugs, and acting on medical advice, these two sports were banned."

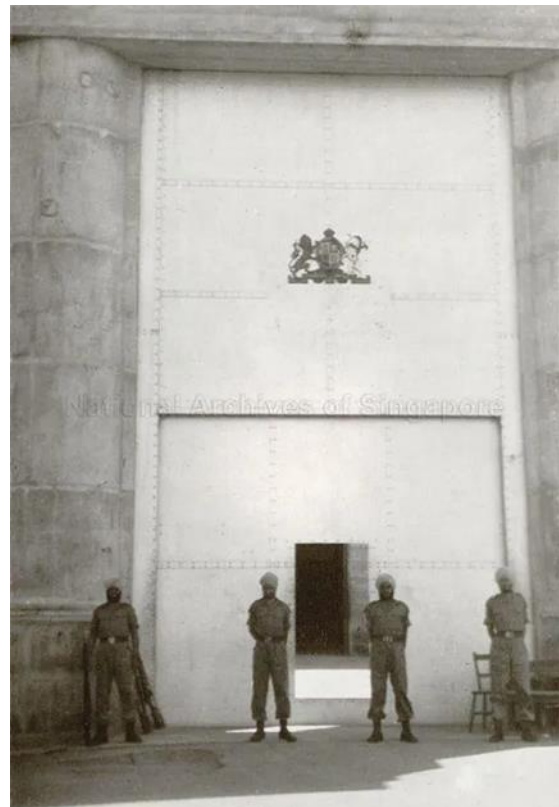
– War diary of AIF Headquarters in Changi

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The medical staff were the fittest as many of the fitter men were sent as work parties for the Burma-Thailand Railway. For many of the surviving men who escaped being sent to the infamous 'Death Railway', Changi 'seemed like heaven compared with other places where POWs were forced to work'.

By 1945 there was a ban on sport and an almost total lack of desire to compete.

Sport played a significant role during the dark days at Changi in lifting morale and up-keeping of self-esteem, as was evident in the daily diaries kept by POWs, where details of scores and best players were meticulously recorded.



Entrance to Changi Prison. 1940s. Source: Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No: 20080000057 – 0058)

Acknowledgement to Kevin Blackburn, author of 'The Sportsmen of Changi'.

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