

burdens. . . . At one point . . . he picked on Sergeant Brooks and bellowed out a few staccato phrases. Bickerton translated, 'The sergeant-major says you have been working hard, have a rest and a cup of tea'. Brooks, exasperated, shouted back, 'That isn't tea, its fucking piss.' . . . Everybody collapsed with laughter; even the sergeant-major smiled.

"At 8.00 am we knocked off; we had moved over 1000 bags and 900 cases. . . . We were dead tired. . . . We were searched and the Sgt-Maj had his last say. . . . 'The sergeant-major says he saw a few men steal. He is very angry. All day he works for you and then you steal his rice. Men who work for him must be honest.' All this was said with much gesticulation and shouting. One dare not smile. In his hand was his baseball bat with which he tapped Inspector Clark's bald head [we were all sitting down] after at first going through the motions of smashing it."

A bag of rice weighed about 240 lbs. One man was expected to carry it. I shall always remember Matsubishi.

Thankfully one of the worst of the Japanese staff was not with us for long as he had, until 1944, been employed at other POW camps, and was transferred from Stanley before the end of that year. He came to us with an evil reputation. This was Niimori Genichiro, who had been nicknamed "Panama Pete", the senior of the official Japanese interpreters in Hong Kong. He was a small Japanese/American with pointed ears who wore military field boots and a khaki cloak, although he had no Army rank as such. He had lived for years in Ohio, where he owned a sideshow in an amusement park. He coupled the attributes of an American gangster with the cruelty of the worst Japanese. He addressed everybody as "Youse guys".

He had been primarily responsible for the deaths of some 800 British prisoners of war when the *Lisbon Maru* was torpedoed on 1 October, 1942, by an American submarine. A draft of 1816 British prisoners had embarked for Japan in a transfer from Shamshuipo and other camps. Men of the Royal Scots, Royal Artillery and Middlesex Regiments formed the bulk of these men. On board was Niimori, theoretically subordinate to Lieutenant Wada, the camp commandant at Shamshuipo, but in practice the man who wielded most authority on the ship, having executive power over the prisoners.

After the explosion Niimori gave orders that the hatches over the

holds containing the prisoners be battened down. Packed like sardines in a crippled ship, with no drinking water and a dwindling supply of air there was fear that all might die. Lieutenant-Colonel Stewart appealed to Niimori to at least pull back part of the tarpaulins to let in fresh air, and to supply fresh water. Niimori's response was to appear at one hatch and lower a bucket full of urine. In No. 3 hold, which held mostly Gunners, the ship was making water and pumps had to be manned by the prisoners. The heat and exhaustion were so acute that the average number of strokes at a pump that a man could manage before he fainted was six. Several men died during that first night; and because the ship was thought to be sinking all the Japanese were taken off by another vessel, which then put the *Lisbon Maru* under tow.

Shortly after this the stricken ship gave a sudden lurch and began to settle down in the water. Stewart organized a party to break out onto the deck. A tiny opening was made enabling Lieutenants Potter and Howell, with a Japanese-speaking prisoner, to clamber out. As they made their way towards the bridge guards opened fire, hitting Howell, who was later to die of his wounds. The party retreated to the hold closely followed by the Japanese who fired down into the prisoners, wounding two officers. Lieutenant G. C. Hamilton of the Royal Scots has described what happened next:

"As soon as the ship settled the men stationed at the hatch cut ropes and the canvas tarpaulin, forced away the baulks of timber, and the prisoners in my hold formed queues and climbed out in perfect order. The men from the other two holds broke out at the same time, but many in the foremost hold were trapped by the onrushing sea and drowned before they could get out.

"When we emerged on to the deck the Japanese opened fire at us and continued firing after the men had jumped over the rails into the sea. . . . Four Japanese ships were standing by. . . . Ropes were dangling from these ships into the water but any prisoners who tried to climb up them were kicked back into the sea."¹

The Japanese later did pick up survivors; some swam to nearby islands and yet more were rescued by Chinese fishing junks. On 5 October 970 prisoners answered their names at the Shanghai docks where they had been assembled. Niimori addressed them. He told

them that their survival was a great disappointment to him. "You should have gone with the others." When a senior officer complained about the battening of the hatches Niimori responded, "You have nothing to worry about; you are bred like rats, and so you can stay like rats." When some of the sick and exhausted prisoners, who had been forced to stand, tried to sit down Niimori beat them unmercifully with his sword and ordered the guards to do the same. Before they re-embarked Niimori forced them to hand over what was left of their clothing. One sergeant-major who refused was kicked in the testicles.²

When Niimori came to Stanley his reputation had preceded him and I for one sought to avoid him. One incident involving him had its amusing moments, however. In mid-September, 1944, the Japanese ordered that one of the camp's four pianos be brought up "the hill" to their quarters. This was duly done with a great deal of heaving and sweating, but Niimori suspected the worst one had been sent up, although of course he was told it was the best and that it was the one normally used by one of our expert pianists, one Arthur Hyde-Lay. "Well, send your expert up here at once," said Niimori.

Hyde-Lay hurried up "the hill", sat down at the piano and ran his fingers quickly over the keys. "What do you think?" demanded Niimori rather naively. "It's not bad," replied Hyde-Lay, perhaps feeling it prudent to veer towards an honest opinion, as it was in fact the worst piano we had. "Take off your glasses," yelled Niimori, as Hyde-Lay's answer had confirmed his suspicions that it was a lousy piano. Hyde-Lay did as he was told and stood calmly to receive the violent slap that bruised his face. Two days later I was told what had really happened and I wrote it down.

"22 September, 1944

Arthur Hyde-Lay was not slapped once over the piano episode but several times. The story why is now out. On being slapped the unfortunate fellow farted and Niimori, hardly believing his own ears, slapped him again and this was followed by another fart. Every time Niimori slapped Hyde-Lay the slap was followed by a fart. After about half a dozen slaps Niimori turned to Davies, who was present and could hardly control his laughter and said, 'Did you hear a noise?' 'No,' said Davies, not knowing what to say. Exasperated, Niimori

chased them both out of the house. Incidentally, it was the worst piano that had been sent up the hill. Farting is a nervous complaint of Hyde-Lay's and the man could not control himself."

Niimori was found guilty of eight war crimes by a British Military Court in Hong Kong in October, 1946. All his crimes involved incidents of extreme brutality and, in several cases, the ultimate death of the victim. He was sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment – in my view a ridiculously light sentence. I subsequently read that he had in fact been sentenced to death but that it was commuted by the acting commander-in-chief Far East while his superior was away.

With Niimori's departure in late 1944 there was considerable relief. His replacement as interpreter was as different as black is from white or chalk from cheese. Years after the war this middle-aged Japanese was to appear on British television in the "This is your Life" programme. After the programme this man was dining in a restaurant in London and was recognized by a waitress. She enquired quietly, "Is this the Japanese gentleman who was on television last night?" On being told he was she said, "Up until last night I hated every Japanese that ever lived because my brother was tortured by them and died in Hong Kong. But after seeing you, sir, I can never hate them again, because I know now that there must have been good Japanese too. God bless you."³

On 1 December, 1944, I recorded:

"A new face appeared among the Japanese calling the roll this morning. He was in officer's uniform but was not wearing a sword. On his left breast was a large yellow star. His left trouser leg was half hanging out of his field boots. Suzy Potts, who recognised him, said that he is a Roman Catholic the Police call Father John and that he has done good work for our troops in other camps. This may be so."

'Uncle John', as he came to be known to many, was John Kiyoshi Watanabe. He was formerly a Lutheran pastor (not Roman Catholic) now in his mid-fifties who had been called up as an interpreter in 1941. He had a sister married to an American Japanese and had himself studied theology at the Seminary at Gettysburg in the US. Personally, I had little contact with him, but he was certainly a remarkable man whose quiet Christian courage was never fully

appreciated until after the war. No book on Stanley would be complete without reference to him.

Watanabe was in a terrible personal predicament. He was an intensely loyal Japanese with a great love of his country but his conscience could never be reconciled to the terrible atrocities and suffering he saw inflicted by his fellow countrymen. He did his utmost to serve his country, but at the same time help the unfortunate victims by carrying messages and bringing medicines into camp at great personal risk. Prior to Dr Selwyn-Clarke's imprisonment Watanabe was of immense help to him when they both worked at the Bowen Road Military Hospital, then run by the dreaded Japanese doctor, Major Saito.

Watanabe arrived in Hong Kong in February, 1942, and was under the direct control of Colonel Tokunaga whose prison camp administrative headquarters was set up in Prince Edward Road. Not long afterwards, at Shamshuipo camp, he was forced to witness the torturing of a British soldier by an evil Japanese called Inouye Kanao nicknamed "Slap Happy" or "Shat in Pants", a swarthy Japanese Canadian interpreter, the seat of whose uniform trousers hung in a heavy, pendulous bag. When the Britisher moaned, as Inouye slashed him across his naked chest with a heavy buckled belt, Watanabe fled the scene to the lavatory in an attempt to escape the horror of what he had seen and heard. The shame and revulsion overcame him – he vomited.

Watanabe, as an interpreter, was at times expected to beat information out of prisoners himself, something he could never bring himself to do. Lieutenant Roger Rothwell, a former patient at Bowen Road Hospital, has written of one such occasion:

"Then he [Watanabe] said, 'The commandant is very angry. He has told me to beat you with this belt until you tell the truth.' He paused, and then he said, 'I think it will be better if we are friends,' and taking my hand, he shook it. I asked him how he would arrange matters with the Commandant. Watty replied, 'I shall tell him you are an honest man and speak the truth.' Then he added, 'Perhaps you can help me and pretend you are in great pain from your beatings.' Poor Watty – how he managed to persuade the commandant I shall never know. . . .

"I kept up the pantomime [of being in great pain] for a few days, and the matter was never referred to again. . . . There is no doubt that Watty saved my life and perhaps those of many others that day, for no

one can say how long he can withhold information when under torture."⁴

Nevertheless Watanabe's behaviour infuriated his seniors, including Tokunaga and Saito. After witnessing the latter in one of his rages in a hospital ward, during which he had the patients paraded so that he could dash up and down screaming and striking out indiscriminately, he wrote in a letter to his wife which the latter destroyed:

"He is a doctor, but has never attended a post mortem while I have been here. . . . He is just interested in marching about with a revolver strapped on his hip. All he has time for is swaggering about in that fashion."⁵

Not long after this episode Saito complained yet again to Tokunaga about the attitude of his interpreter. The "Fat Pig" sent for the humble priest. Without preamble he yelled at Watanabe, "I'm not wasting any words on you. Major Saito is dissatisfied with you. He's sick of you. Get your stuff out of the hospital immediately. I'm moving you to Stanley camp."

He arrived shortly before Christmas in 1944 and one of his first requests to Mrs Winifred Penny, who was organizing a children's carol service, was that he might attend. There was much discussion. Should a Japanese in uniform attend? What effect would it have on the children? His attendance was eventually agreed but still with misgivings. As Mrs Penny later recorded:

"We needn't have worried. The children took to him straight away, and Mr Watanabe stood there listening to their little voices. After the children's rendering of 'Away in a Manger' he said he would like to sing for them. First he sang 'Holy Night' in Japanese, and then a Japanese Christmas carol. After that he spoke and brought home to all of us the true meaning of the Christmas message. . . . There was something fantastic about the fact that it was a Japanese, one of our enemies, who, of all people should be standing there telling us of Christmas."⁶

Regrettably Watanabe's stay at Stanley was short-lived. The Japanese authorities had had enough of this snivelling little Christian. When one morning Watanabe was summoned from Stanley to Prince