

Frank account of a journey to hell and back

Seventy years ago, thousands of East Anglian soldiers began a horrifying ordeal in brutal captivity that many would not survive. On the eve of a memorial service in Ely, **Steve Snelling** speaks to one of a dwindling band of veterans from the 18th Division who has just chronicled his extraordinary experiences.

The long march had a punishing pointlessness about it that drove men to the brink of bedraggled despair. Wasted by disease and starvation, the ragged column of walking skeletons plodded on, hopelessly, towards apparent oblivion in the wilderness of central Thailand.

After more than three years of brutal captivity that had reduced soldiers to slave labourers morale had sunk to rock bottom. Ken Adams had never felt so low. Not even the worst days at Changi or in the camps that freckled the notorious Death Railway, built at such fearful cost through the pestilential jungles of Burma and Thailand, compared with the misery of that forlorn trek through the spring and summer of 1945.

Deprived of food and hope, the young medical orderly, a former conscientious objector drafted to an East Anglian ambulance unit consigned to the disastrous defence of Singapore, remembers hobbling on for hundreds of miles "haunted by the fear of falling by the wayside".

"We were starving to death," he recalls. The daily obsession with food had descended into a "gnawing emptiness" that filled every waking moment. "We became shadows of the men we'd been," he adds.

And yet, resigned though he was to his uncertain fate, Ken refused to surrender to despair and refused to give up the daily struggle for survival.

Now, 70 years after his wretched ordeal began, the extraordinary story of his grim battle to stay alive has been laid bare in a vivid and revealing war memoir that explores not just the horrors of Japanese captivity but the painful psychological scars that have never healed.

Healing in Hell is an astonishingly reflective and thought-provoking

record of suffering and survival against the odds that is notable for its searing honesty and searching self analysis. A deeply introspective account of one man's nightmarish odyssey to hell and back, it is a remarkable book born of an even more remarkable father and son collaboration spanning opposite ends of the world.

Based on more than 70 hours of tape-recorded interviews, conducted when Ken was already in his 90s by his Australian-based son, Mike, this intensely personal story sheds fascinating light on the harrowing experience shared by thousands of East Anglian soldiers and its dark legacy which conspired to blight so many families' lives in the war's immediate aftermath.

Surprisingly fair-minded in its judgement of the Japanese, *Healing in Hell* tells much about life and death in the camp hospitals and the wearying work carried out by a selfless band of doctors and medical staff, but it tells even more about the inner strength of a man who counts himself fortunate that his POW experience made him "tougher, more determined and more resilient".

The project, which began two years ago, represented for one a journey of discovery into unknown territory and for the other a release from more than six decades of self-imposed silence.

"My father had bottled all this up for years," explains Mike, who took leave from his work as a diplomat with the Canberra-based Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to record and edit the memoir. "I grew up knowing very little about what he had gone through. He rarely talked about it and when he did it was usually to tell some amusing anecdote.

He certainly never spoke about what it was like to be a prisoner, never spoke about the conditions, what it felt like to face indeterminate imprisonment and what hardships he faced when he returned to England in

Life-savers: overworked surgeons and medical teams worked miracles in their efforts to save lives in disease-ridden jungle prison camps.

“Those who died were best out of it. They were so thin and hadn't a cat in hell's chance of getting better.”

Happier times: Ken and Marion Adams on their wedding day. Ken described their meeting after 3½ years of captivity as a 'reunion of strangers'.



the immediate post-war period.”

A process that had started with a few conversations with his grandson, then studying at Cambridge University, in 2005 developed four years later into a full-blown, trans-global historical family investigation.

And with the deafening silence finally broken the story began to flow in a torrent of memories undimmed by the passage of time.

"Being a prisoner of the Japanese was such a trauma you can't forget it," Ken explains. "I can still see it all so clearly. I can remember it in almost every detail. It seems so fresh in my memory and it won't go. It just won't go. It's still there."

Ken's story begins in Norwich on an April Sunday in 1940 when he arrived at a former girls' school taken over by the Royal Army Medical Corps. Married with a newly-born daughter, he had started the war as a conscientious objector, but, having told a tribunal he was prepared to serve in a non-fighting capacity, he found himself posted to 198 Field Ambulance.

The unit formed part of 18th Division, a mainly East Anglian force with no fewer than seven territorial infantry battalions recruited from Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridgeshire. Assigned to coast defence duties in the wake of Dunkirk, the division spent months preparing for active service.

For Ken, spells at Coltishall Hall, Barton Hall and Necton Hall were followed by billets in Scotland. "We were being trained for desert warfare with the old system of advanced dressing stations and casualty clearing stations," he recalls. "It was as though we were expected to fight the

first great war all over again. But then, suddenly we found ourselves in the jungle and having to alter all our tactics."

Diverted while en course to the Middle East by the Japanese blitzkrieg in the far East, Ken was part of the advance guard rushed to Singapore and into Malaya in a vain attempt to stop the Japanese advance.

A little more than a month later, Ken and thousands of his comrades in the 18th Division were crammed into prison camps on Singapore island and three and a half years of cruel captivity began.

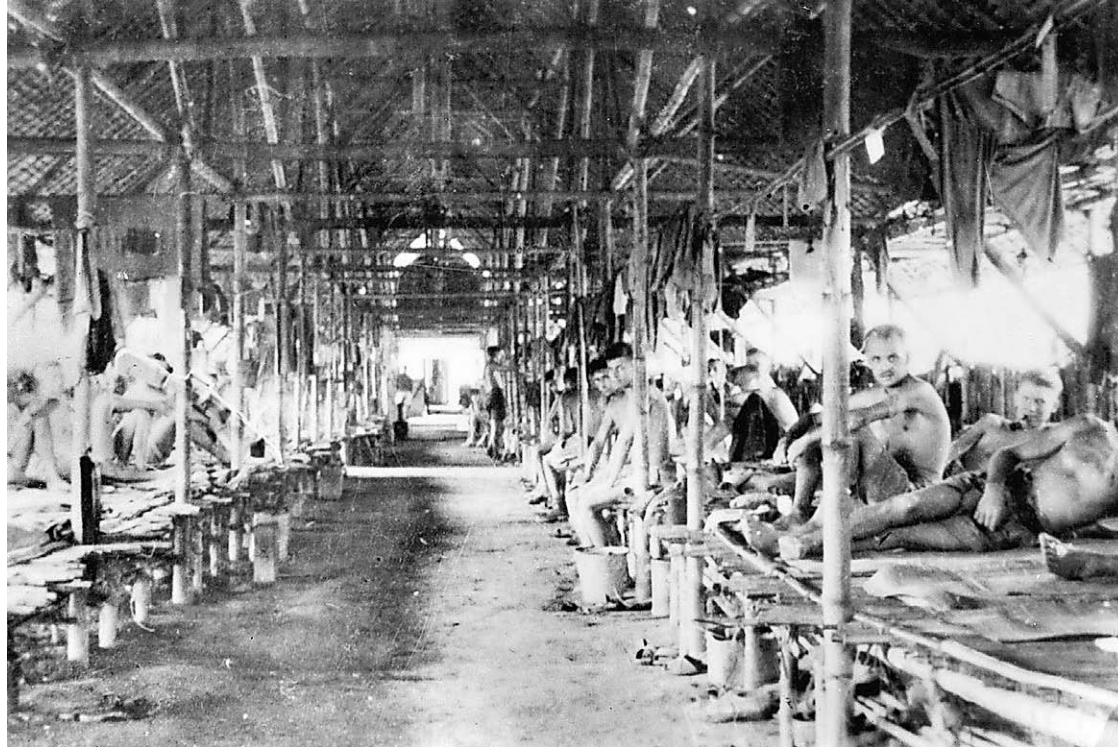
As a trained medic, Ken quickly found himself pitched into the front-line of the fight that would define his war - the struggle to save as many lives as possible in the face of disease, ill-treatment, neglect and starvation.

It was a gruelling battle in which, as he testifies, the heroes were the hapless army doctors confronted by a veritable tidal wave of sickness with minimal supplies of medicine.

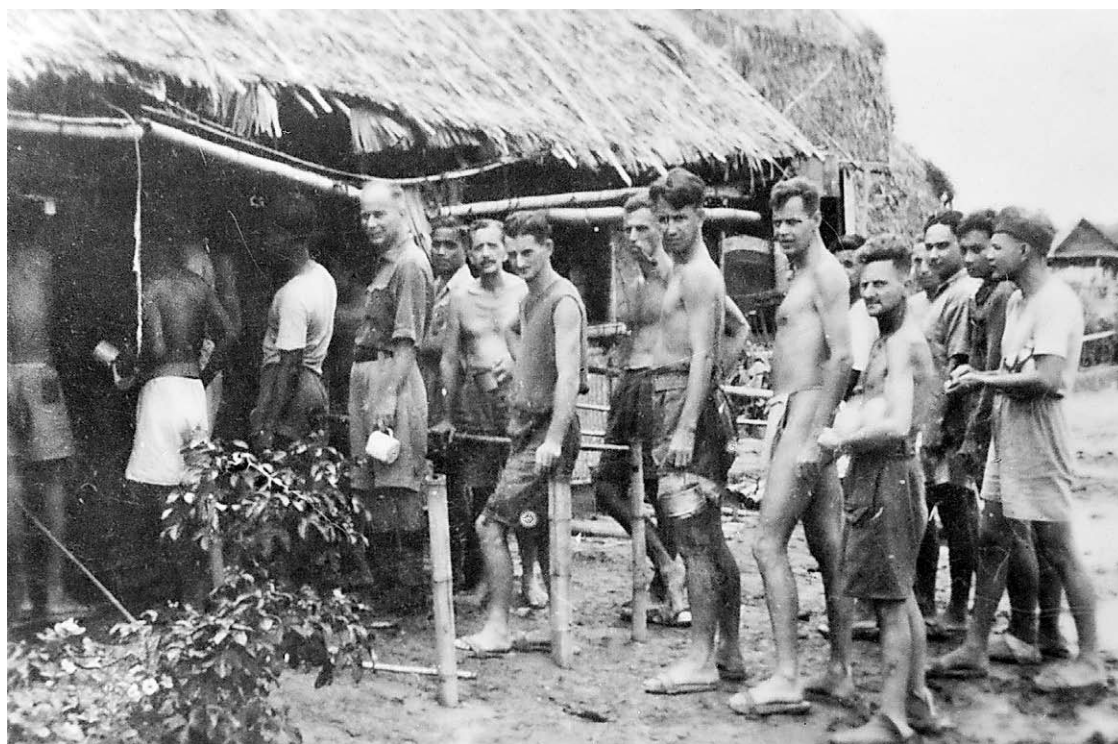
Over-stretched doctors, loyally supported by teams of orderlies operating on 12-hour shifts, had to work "creatively, and often at personal risk, to augment supplies", notes Ken.

But it was a relentlessly uphill struggle often waged in the face of Japanese indifference. During the early months of captivity, dysentery proved one of the most prolific killers. Men considered to be fading were screened off, but Ken couldn't bear to see them die alone.

"Spending time talking to blokes, holding their hands and offering meagre reassurances didn't change outcomes in the vast majority of cases," he admits.



Struggling for survival: a British medical ward at Kanchanaburi Hospital Camp where Ken toiled as a medical orderly.



Rice with everything: a meal queue at Kanchanaburi in January 1945.

“Those who died were best out of it. They were so thin and hadn’t a cat in hell’s chance of getting better with the food and medical supplies we had.”

Even then, the death rate at Changi was as nothing compared with that on the Burma-Thai railway the following year. By mid-1943, when Ken was employed as a medical orderly at the key base camp hospital at Kanchanaburi, one of the so-called ‘cities of the sick’, there were more than a thousand patients with each day bringing more.

“Diseases like dysentery, malaria, diphtheria, beri-beri and pellagra were almost out of control,” he says. “Virtually everyone succumbed to malaria in one form or another... Everyone came down with dysentery. All it took was a lapse in hygiene and just bad luck...”

He cites the case of a friend who offered him coffee in a mug that had been crawling with flies. He declined, but his mate drank up, chiding him not to be afraid and urging him to toughen up. A few days later he fell ill with dysentery and within a fortnight he was dead.

Reflecting on such matters from a distance of almost seven decades, Ken is struck both by the fragility and the resilience of the human body and spirit. “Lives can be snuffed out so easily,” he writes, “but, for the most part, blokes hung on tenaciously to life without any pretence of bravery. What could be endured month after month, year after year, was amazing; battered and shrunken men struggled on with a little food, occasional repairs from doctors and support from mates.”

Although he doesn’t say as much, his own experience is testament to that indomitable

determination to pull through, even during the darkest days, shortly before the war’s end, when it appeared he was being marched and starved to death with no prospect of ever being released from his ordeal.

So, how did he do it? What made him a survivor among so fatalities?

Beyond good fortune and the miracles performed by the camp doctors, there was a kind of comradeship that transcended normal friendship and was known as ‘mate-ship’ and in Sid Browne, the son of a Norwich fish and chip shop owner, Ken found the best of mates. “We shared everything and went everywhere together,” recalls Ken. “Friends like that were so important. You knew they’d be there for you if you fell sick and while as an individual you might not be able to afford certain extras, like eggs or bananas, together you could. It’s funny how close we became, more like brothers than friends.”

Even then, it required something more to survive - a strength of mind and, in Ken’s case, a resolve to focus on the positive, practical things of life in the present rather than dwelling on the past or looking to the future.

Sometime in the second half of 1944, he recalls deciding to “push thoughts of home and freedom into the background”. It reached the point where he told himself “there was no such place as home”.

“This wasn’t being disloyal to anyone...” he writes. “It was easier to live day-to-day, accepting the possibility of remaining a prisoner forever and making the best of it. Freedom, if it came, would then be a wonderful bonus.”

During the bleakest of times, he believes,

this attitude helped prevent him from sinking into despair. “It’s amazing how focused your thinking becomes when the margin of subsistence starts to thin,” he writes. “You focus on the moment... You don’t care what’s around you... You are consumed by getting through the moment and then the day. You endure. You think about food, keeping ‘healthy’, staying alive. Mates help you. You help them. You do your job by instinct. The future barely exists. That’s how I got through it.”

But freedom, when it came in the late summer of 1945, did not come without its share of problems that persisted long after the war was over and the wretched misery of prison camp life was a distant if recurring memory.

Ken does not shy away from the difficulties he faced in re-integrating into his community and family life. His first meeting with wife Marion felt like “a reunion of strangers”. For three and a half years she hadn’t known whether he was dead or alive.

During the immediate post-war years, Ken struggled to fit in. His daughter, Diane, was unrecognisable to him and they struggled to bond. He shied away from social gatherings and feelings of anger and resentment, so long suppressed, would explode at real or imagined attempts to oppress him.

At the same time, there were constant reminders of his painful recent past. “Something as simple as the smell of fish conjured up memories of washing ulcer

patients’ dressings” and would be enough to bring him out in a sweat and start his heart “racing”.

Each of them dealt with it in their own way. Marion sought to cope with her “argumentative, food-hoarding” husband by closing her mind to the war. And Ken went along with the charade, even to the point of refusing to join his local branch of the Fellowship of Far East Prisoners of War. “I shut out the past, at least during the day: it returned at night when I couldn’t sleep,” he says. “I knew the importance of human relationships but it’s hard sometimes to apply commonsense understandings in a complex world. I couldn’t have both my real family and the POW community. I chose Marion.”

More than 60 years on, the couple are still together, though now Ken cares for Marion, who has dementia, in much the same way he once cared for his fellow captives in their dying days.

“It isn’t easy and there isn’t the same level of support for sufferers of this affliction that there is for those with other terrible diseases such as cancer,” he comments. “In some respects, accepting things that can’t be changed and taking each day as it comes isn’t too different from POW days.”

And he observes: “If the comparison is valid, it adds an odd symmetry to my life.”

Healing in Hell, by Ken Adams and edited by Mike Adams, is published by Pen & Sword, priced £19.99.