

# Tragic sequel to Bill's brave escape attempt

One of the most daring prison camp breakouts of the second world war ended in tragedy 70 years ago. **Steve Snelling** charts the story of a Norfolk man's involvement in a great escape that went disastrously wrong.

**S**hackled and louse-ridden, the captives emerged blinking into the tropical sunlight. The evidence of their cruel incarceration was painfully apparent as they were lined up outside the guard-house in Kuala Lumpur's wretched Pudu gaol.

Unshaven and unwashed, their faces bore the strained look of men resigned to their fate. And yet despite everything their spirit remained unbroken. In response to a ripple of cheering from fellow prisoners, they smiled bravely as they struggled in a shambling procession towards the main gates.

One of those who witnessed the melancholy spectacle later wrote: "They were prodded and shoved, clumsy with their arms and legs bound, into a truck. They turned to face us; we smiled. The guard spoke to them: they looked down at him: our smiles vanished. The guard stopped speaking: they looked up: we smiled. Then the truck lurched off and the big gates shut. They were gone..."

Though no one knew it then, the truck with its cargo of captives was headed on that September day 70 years ago for Cheras cemetery and the closing act of one of the bravest and most tragic escape dramas of the second world war.

Among the seven men who headed out of Pudu gaol on that September day 70 years ago was a high-spirited Norfolk farmer's son whose extraordinary exploits during the disastrous Malayan campaign have yet to be fully acknowledged.

Bill Harvey was not a soldier by profession, but his unorthodox fighting qualities and prowess in the art of guerrilla warfare had outshone the sorry performance of many more longer serving military men.

In a doom-laden struggle characterised by retreat and defeat, he had played a leading role in some remarkable hit-and-run operations that were among the campaign's few redeeming features.

His was truly a tale of triumph in the face of adversity. And it was a saga of largely unsung heroism that was not without its irony.

For the man who proved to be one of the Japanese army's most resourceful adversaries had been striving for months to quit Malaya in order to play a more active role in fighting the German army!

A former Norwich Union worker who

had served as an officer in a Territorial Army artillery unit, he had left his family in Hainford, aged 24, to seek his fortune on a 4,000-acre plantation in the west coast state of Perak.

Adventurous and, by nature, wilful, he hoped that his enterprise would give him the financial security to enable him to marry the girl he'd left behind.

But it was not to be. Within two years, war had broken out in Europe and the plantation manager found himself marooned in an imperial backwater while the action he craved threatened to envelop his family back home in rural Norfolk.

"I'm almost crazy to think of all my relations and pals doing something to help whilst I am buried in the jungle doing absolutely nothing at all," he wrote.

With his job regarded as vital to the war effort, he was forced to content himself with part-time soldiering as a member of the Federated Malay States Volunteers, an equivalent of the TA with which he had served back in Norfolk. But as months grew into years of inaction his frustration threatened to boil over.

At one point, he wrote home: "I'll get back somehow even if I have to work my way home."

However, events much closer to Perak would render that journey impossible and provide him with all the action he could handle.

In December 1941 the Japanese launched a blitzkrieg offensive of their own against British and American territories across vast tracts of the Pacific and South-East Asia. Landings in northern Malaya were quickly followed by the sinking of the battleships Prince of Wales and Repulse and rapid advances towards the imperial bastion of Singapore.

Mobilised as a machine-gunner, he found himself embroiled in futile attempts to defend advance airfields before being offered a role that was far more to his liking: volunteer guide to a newly-recruited force of Australian commandos specially organised to strike behind enemy lines.

On his first raid, he disguised himself as a Malay native to infiltrate enemy territory. The operation was a rare morale-boosting victory. Not only did he succeed in rescuing a party of British troops who had been cut-off by the advancing Japanese, but the commandos were able to ambush an enemy convoy, whose dead

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included a high-ranking officer.

Buoyed by the success of the operation, Bill Harvey promptly volunteered for a yet more hazardous operation, one that would see him join forces with other planters engaged in a guerrilla campaign designed to slow the Japanese army's progress towards Singapore.

Under the command of pre-war explorer Freddie Spencer Chapman, the so-called 'stay behind' parties were trained to wreak havoc along the enemy's lines of communication by blowing up roads and railways. As the British army fell back, Harvey and his fellow saboteurs pushed forward, establishing arms dumps and hidden bases deep in the Malayan jungle from where they struck to leave a trail of destruction.

During a "mad fortnight" in February 1942, Left Behind Party No 1, with Harvey as second in command, carried out attacks almost nightly, against railway or road communications, running outrageous risks in the process.

In the course of one nocturnal sortie, Bill single-handedly covered two men as they crept into a lorry park to place explosives beneath six trucks while their Japanese crews slept.

Raids with grenades and machine-guns turned some stretches of road into

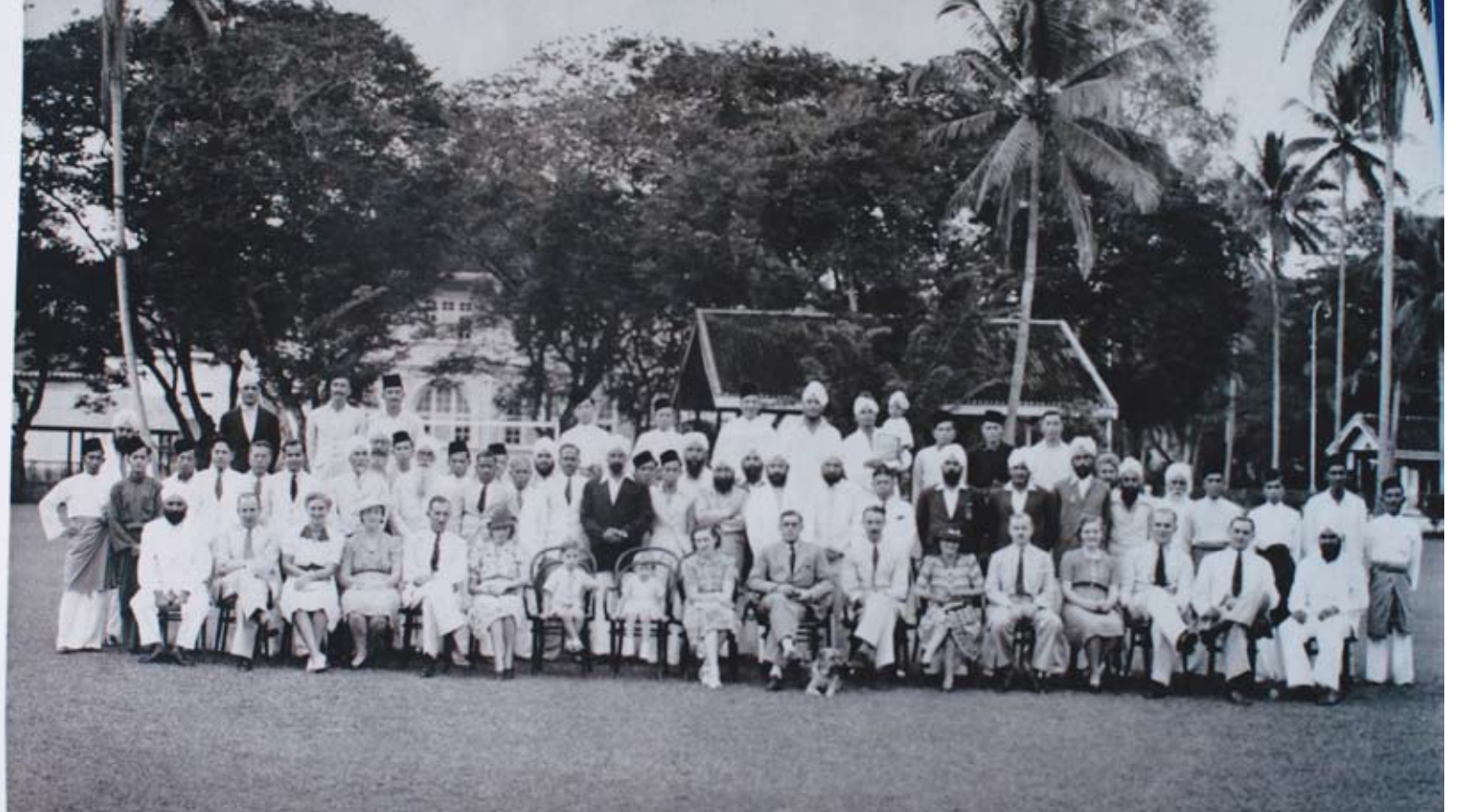
virtual 'no-go' areas for enemy convoys. According to the party's commander, the two weeks of mayhem resulted in seven or eight trains being derailed, at least 40 motor vehicles being damaged or destroyed and somewhere between 500 and 1,500 casualties being inflicted on an enemy unused to setbacks of any kind.

But their luck could not last. They were too few and their effort too little and too late to affect the outcome of the campaign. A little over a month after the fall of Singapore, while they were planning a breakout by boat to India, three of the saboteurs, including Harvey, were caught.

"We were on foot, pushing our heavily laden and ancient bicycles which were no longer fit to ride," wrote one of the men, "when Japanese soldiers with fixed bayonets appeared out of the night and captured us."

Bill and his compatriots were taken to Pudu gaol, newly converted into a prisoner of war camp, where they were soon reunited with members of other 'stay behind' parties who had gone 'into the bag'.

Despite the appalling conditions and rapidly rising death rate, Bill remained defiant and within days had embarked on his most audacious plan yet: a prison



returning before the end of 1942," he wrote. And he remembered how convinced they were that "thousands of Chinese were waiting outside for their leadership". Above all, they felt certain that their local knowledge and understanding of the local languages would see them through.

Planning began in April. The initial focus was on gathering provisions and equipment and making duplicate sets of keys for the three doors that would lead to freedom. Vanrenen's cell was selected as the place to manufacture them on the dubious grounds that the Japanese guards could be closely observed from there.

Foster Pelton, one of the original list of would-be escapers, reported: "The tools and materials for the making of the keys were stolen by Vanrenen and myself while on working parties... Two sets of duplicate keys were duly made by Lieuts Vanrenen and Harvey."

Over the course of the following weeks, the plan took shape. Large quantities of hand grenades, explosives and small arms ammunition were smuggled into the prison and hidden - some of them in a water fountain. Tinned foods were accumulated and contacts made with friendly Chinese on the outside which enabled routes and refuges to be planned.

It was even said that Bill had crept out of the gaol at night to speak with the local

**Main picture, Norfolk farmer's son Bill Harvey relaxes on his Malayan plantation during the last days of peace. He played a heroic role in guerilla operations against the Japanese.**

**Outpost of empire: Top, Bill Harvey, second from right front row, in a plantation gathering before the war.**

**Gateway to freedom: above, a post-war shot of Pudu Jail, scene of an audacious second world war escape that ended tragically 70 years ago.**

**Left: Bill Harvey as a youngster on a Norfolk beach.**

breakout, the failure of which he knew would result in almost certain death.

Originally intended to comprise two three-man escape parties, the scheme grew to involve 13 men and countless helpers before, eventually, being reduced to a final tally of eight men, split into two groups.

The instigators and leading figures in the daring plot were Bill Harvey and fellow planter turned guerrilla fighter, Frank Vanrenen. Years later, Pat Garden, one of their fellow captives who assisted them, recalled their enthusiasm for what seemed to him a mission impossible.

"They talked confidently of the British

people who were to help them.

By August all was ready. An escape that had, at one point, involved four parties had come down to two groups. The smaller of the two, consisting of a rubber planter, an Australian soldier and a Dutch airman, planned to make straight for the west coast at Port Dickson with the aim of crossing to Sumatra at the start of an ambitious island-hopping voyage to Australia.

Bill Harvey's five-man party, who included Frank Vanrenen, another member of a 'stay behind' team and two Indian army officers, intended to hide up in a Chinese temple for a few days before making their way to the site of a guerrilla arms dump. From there, they planned to head north to Ipoh where it was rumoured that the Chinese were resisting the Japanese occupation.

If the rumour proved unfounded, they would go further up-country and establish a hideaway in the area around Kroh while the two army officers explored the possibility of reaching India.

On the night of August 13 plan became reality. With a small team of prisoners keeping watch on the guards, the escapers moved out. To the sound of a whistled version of The Lambeth Walk, the pre-arranged signal for the way ahead being clear, they slipped through one door and then another before walking out of the prison compound without a single sentry noticing anything was amiss.

As they left, one of their fellow prisoners quietly closed the door behind them, padlocked it and returned to his cell. "The escape went off without a hitch," wrote Pat Garden. "When the door had been opened the gang appeared with their packs on their backs and filed out into freedom."

For some, that taste of freedom was extremely short-lived. Two of the three-man party were recaptured and returned to Pudu within 48 hours of the escape. The third man was at large for a fortnight before being picked up near Malacca.

Of the two groups, Bill Harvey's was far and away the most successful in its early progress. Passing through the gaol's vegetable garden, the five escapers followed the line of a nearby railway track before splashing along a watercourse that drained the local golf course.

Making the most of their Chinese 'intelligence', they managed to get well clear of the city, skirting the eastern suburbs before striking north.

After some dispute among senior British officers in Pudu, it was agreed to fake two roll calls the following day in order to give the escapers a head start.

When, eventually, the Japanese discovered eight men 'missing' all hell was let loose. One of the Pudu prisoners, a Cambridgeshire officer captured in the January fighting, recalled: "They were like madmen." There was, he recorded, a "great commotion" as "all cells and PoWs [were] thoroughly searched, all privileges taken away and roll calls [taken] at all hours of the day and night".

Bill Harvey and his four fellow escapees stuck together and remained safely hidden for almost three weeks - but their faith in the native population and their own local knowledge proved unfounded.

Eighteen days after their bold bid for freedom began they were prisoners again. Four, including Bill, were brought back to Pudu and placed in cells next to the other recaptured men and the four prisoners who had assisted them to get away.

Pat Garden was close enough to have whispered conversations with Bill during which he discovered something of their travails. He heard how one of the party had fallen into a disused mine working in the dark, injuring his back. Despite all their planning, they had gone astray and become disoriented.

They decided to risk asking some Malays where they were. It was their downfall. "The Malays proved treacherous and they were overtaken and fired on by a party," wrote Garden.

One of the fugitives was wounded in the neck, another in a leg. Bill Harvey had a narrow escape when a bullet struck a mess tin in the haversack he was carrying.

It was his last piece of good fortune in an otherwise luckless affair. Denied bedding or blankets and any washing facilities, their only food was scraps smuggled in to them. Their ordeal lasted for about a week, until one evening in the third week of September when they were manacled and taken out into the compound.

Loaded onto a waiting truck, their last journey took them a few miles north of Kuala Lumpur, to Cheras cemetery. Closely watched by armed guards, some of whom were carrying spades and shovels, they were led away while the Malay driver was told to stay by the truck.

A short while later, the peace was shattered by a single volley of fire. Twenty minutes later, the guards returned, carrying bundles of clothing and with spades and shovels smeared with fresh soil.

Despite exhaustive searches after the war, the unmarked graves were never found. Their names were merely recorded on the Singapore Memorial, mute testimony of a grim fate and a great escape worthy of a better end.