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# Introduction

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# Captive Audiences / Captive Performers

Music and Theatre as Strategies for Survival  
on the Thailand-Burma Railway 1942-1945

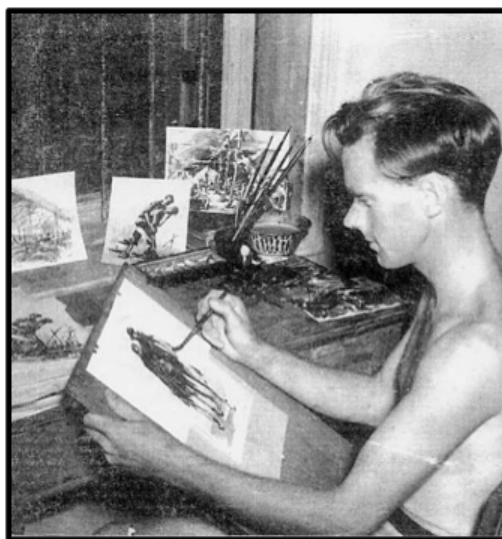


By Sears A. Eldredge

## DEDICATION



**Laurie Allison**



**Jack Chalker**

All art is a challenge to despair.

—Eric Bentley  
*The Life of the Drama*

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In the performance they affirmed the drama as freedom. They asserted the superior life of the imagination. In the moment of performance they were not in custody. They created character from a longing for other life. They demonstrated by their conviction that drama was a necessity and not a pleasure or a diversion.

—Howard Barker  
“On watching a performance by life prisoners”

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One has to wonder whether the act of performing art—whether theatre or music—may be accompanied by a wholeness of self that transcends time and place and creates a buoyancy of mood and spirit. By engaging an audience who needed something emotionally meaningful to hold on to, perhaps they temporarily sustained the will to live.

—Rebecca Rovit  
*Theatrical Performance during the Holocaust*

## Introduction

### *Wonder Bar*

On the evening of 19 May 1944, a remarkable theatrical event was about to take place. Intensive musical and staging rehearsals had gone on for weeks under the leadership of a dictatorial British director. The sets, including a splendid backdrop of snow-capped Alpine mountains, were ready on the wide proscenium stage. An extensive array of costumes had been designed and constructed with expert care. The orchestra was tuned up and waiting in the pit to take its cue for the overture. Footlights were lit, and the curtain was about to rise on a revival of the 1929 musical comedy *Wonder Bar*.

But this wasn't London's West End. This theatre was located on the edge of the jungle in Thailand. The sets had been constructed from bamboo and *atap* (palm fronds). Ladies' dresses were made from mosquito netting; high-heeled shoes were carved from wood. The lighting was a combination of borrowed pressure lanterns and homemade slush lamps. And the performers were all men: Allied prisoners of the Japanese during the Second World War.



FIGURE O.1. PUBLICITY POSTER FOR *Wonder Bar*.  
CHUNGKAI. COURTESY OF JOHN SHARP.

This extraordinary theatre production took place at Chungkai hospital camp, where a proscenium stage, also made out of bamboo and *atap*, had been constructed with auditorium seating carved out of a sloping bank for 2,000 sick and recovering POWs. The authoritarian British director was actually a corporal who had been in the cast of the original West End production; the orchestra and cast were a mixture of officers and men from the British and Netherlands East Indies armed forces. On opening night the Japanese camp commandant and his staff sat in the front row.

The POW performers and audience members were at Chungkai recovering from the physical and

psychological damage incurred while building the infamous Thailand-Burma “death” railway.<sup>i</sup> For an hour and a half the show allowed them to escape the rotten smell of gangrenous leg ulcers, the debilitating bouts of malaria and dysentery, and the growing mountain of crosses in a plot behind the hospital marking the graves of hundreds who had not survived. *Wonder Bar* not only allowed the POWs to forget their past and present horrors, but with its music, laughter, and “beautiful girls,” it reawakened and sustained their memories of the home that was waiting for their return.

In their secret diaries and in later memoirs, many Far Eastern POWs (FEPOWs) noted this production of *Wonder Bar* as one of the most memorable events in their long years as prisoners of the Japanese. But it was only one in an astonishing series of musical and theatrical entertainments performed by British, Australian, Dutch/Indonesian, and American entertainers in this and other camps that had kept the POWs’ spirits going since their capture in 1942 and would continue to do so until their liberation in 1945. The FEPOWs readily admitted that this show, and others like it, gave them the courage and hope to carry on.

### *Captive Audiences / Captive Performers*

Stories of the POWs on the Thailand-Burma railway have been told many times, but here for the first time the focus is on a group of men who continued as combatants in another war—not with the enemy without, against which they could do little, but with the deadly enemy within, who employed the powerful weapons of uncertainty, boredom, and despair to try and defeat them.

*Captive Audiences / Captive Performers: Music and Theatre as Strategies for Survival on the Thailand-Burma Railway, 1942–1945* is about these combatants—the musicians and theatrical entertainers—and the performances they devised to keep morale up and hope alive. It is also about the creative imagination and ingenuity exhibited by POW designers and technicians in constructing theatres, scenery, lighting, costumes, and makeup out of scrounged or stolen materials. And it is about the value of the performing arts to prevent minds and emotions from atrophying while fostering a collective identity in the midst of a world where solitary withdrawal was a death sentence.

## Contents

The hitherto untold story of these POW entertainers begins with the surrender of Allied Forces in Southeast Asia in early 1942 (Chapter 1). During the first months in captivity, their ability to restore morale among defeated troops was rediscovered and embraced. The narrative then follows the POWs sent to Thailand and Burma in late 1942 and 1943 to build the Thailand-Burma railway (Chapters 2–4). Here amid the disease and squalor of the construction camps, individuals and small groups of entertainers fought their toughest battles to keep themselves and their fellow prisoners from losing the will to live.

<sup>i</sup> This railway was made famous by David Lean’s Academy Award–winning film, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*.



FIGURE 0.2. "WORKING MEN, KANYU CAMP" PEN AND WASH DRAWING. JACK CHALKER, COURTESY OF JACK CHALKER.

With the railway's completion, the POWs were removed to hospital and relocation camps in Thailand for rehabilitation. So many musicians and theatrical performers now congregated in these camps that entertainment committees had to be set up to manage their activities (Chapters 5–8). The entertainers faced two major challenges: how to restore the men to the fullness of their humanity after months of degradation and brutality, and how to sustain their morale during the long wait until liberation. The extraordinary shows produced during 1944 to meet these challenges became the high point of POW musical and theatrical production on the Thailand-Burma railway. Where sources permit, these are examined in some detail.

During 1945 and the waning days of the war in the Pacific, the Japanese, recognizing the importance of entertainment in keeping the POWs' morale high, intensified their efforts to severely restrict or eliminate it altogether. Unless performances were specifically banned, the entertainers continued to refuse silence (Chapters 9-10). A montage of victory shows created by the entertainers in celebration of their liberation and brief accounts of their repatriation ends the historical narrative (Chapter 11).

In a change of focus, the latter chapters of the book become more analytical, looking back thematically at the entertainers and the entertainment they produced. Here are found details on how various aspects of the productions (sets, lights, costumes, etc.) were created (Chapter 12); how musical and theatrical producers trained and rehearsed their ensembles (Chapter 13); and how female impersonators were chosen and treated by their fellow prisoners (Chapter 14). The final chapter considers the ways in which music and theatre functioned as strategies for survival.

The book also includes "The FEPOW Songbook"—a collection of lyrics to original songs and song-parodies written and performed by the POWs in their camps.

### “For the Troops, By the Troops”

There is a long tradition of musical and theatrical entertainment associated with the military. Regimental bands and marching songs are used not only as a means to keep soldiers in step but as ways to inspire martial fervor and foster unit cohesion. They also lighten the drudgery of a long, hard trek. Spontaneous sing-alongs around bivouac campfires or on the deck of a troop ship during the long voyage out to overseas postings dispel the tedium of military life. One eighteenth-century account relates how British Admiral Lord Nelson “encouraged his men in dancing, music, theatricals and cudgeling.”<sup>i</sup> Other historical records tell of garrison theatricals in remote postings.<sup>ii</sup>

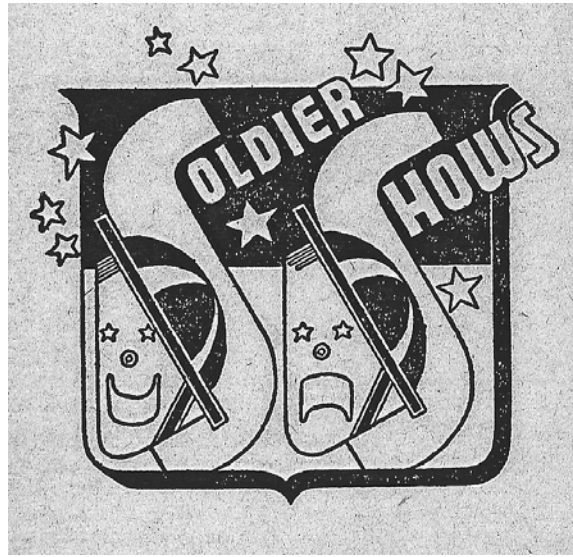


FIGURE 0.3. MASKS OF COMEDY AND TRAGEDY. SOLDIER SHOWS LOGO, 1943.  
COPYRIGHT THE INFANTRY JOURNAL, INC., 1943.

More pertinent to this investigation are the unit “concert parties” [American *Soldier Shows*] that took place behind front lines during the First World War, encouraged by the military hierarchy as good for morale boosting and for socialization purposes.<sup>2</sup> A concert party was supposedly a more polite middle-class version of the boisterous and often bawdy working-class Victorian music halls. But one would have a hard time calling the unit concert parties frequented by the troops “polite.” Better suited to this definition were the concert parties produced by the YMCA or other civilian organizations and performed further back.<sup>3</sup> Some of the older officers and other ranks involved in entertainment on the Thailand-Burma railway remembered these World War I shows—and, in a time-honored theatrical tradition, “stole” some of the material for their own productions.

Following the evacuation of their defeated Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk, France, in June 1940, the British Army encouraged the formation of unit concert parties to entertain infantry troops undergoing extensive training in remote areas of Great Britain.<sup>4</sup> To underscore their importance, the War Office prepared a pamphlet, “The Soldier’s Welfare,” that stated categorically, “Boredom is the worst enemy of an Army’s morale.”<sup>5</sup> Besides “practical help” on how to ameliorate boredom through recreation, such

<sup>ii</sup> See Sylvia R. Frey, *The British Soldier in America: A Social History of Military Life in the Revolutionary Period* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), and Leslie O’Dell, “Amateurs of the Regiment, 1815–1870,” in *Early Stages: Theatre in Ontario 1800–1914*, ed. Ann Saddlemyer (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 52–89.

as sports and games, welfare officers were instructed to ensure their troops had access to entertainment.<sup>6</sup> When such diversion wasn't available through outside sources, such as local cinemas or E.N.S.A.,<sup>iii</sup> then it had to be provided through their own efforts:

It is good that men should have to make their own amusements as it develops their initiative and keeps them occupied. It is an officer's duty to see that his men get sufficient entertainment to keep them happy, to help and organize it in the unit and to give every encouragement to their efforts to entertain themselves.<sup>7</sup>

Typical of the newly formed concert parties was the 18th Infantry Division's "The Optimists," charged with touring the Territorial Army's installations where troops were preparing for desert warfare in the Middle East.

### Concert Party Organization

Other than an officer in charge for administrative purposes, leadership and participation in military concert parties were determined by talent and experience, not rank. While most concert parties were led by an officer with some background in amateur or professional theatre (who then functioned as both producer and director), this wasn't always the case. In situations where the designated officer in charge had no theatrical experience, a qualified producer was sought among the officers and other ranks. When first formed, the Optimists were led by a civilian with professional experience from E.N.S.A. who not only produced but also staged the show.

#### Producer/Director

Until fairly recently in the British theatre, *producer* was used to denote the person who developed the production, choosing the designers and director as well as the cast; whereas in the American theatre, the term is used to refer to the person who provides funding for the production, and the term *director* is used for the person who functions in all the other capacities. One of a director's most important functions is to determine the flow and pattern of movement (*blocking*) of the characters on stage. In the British theatre, that person was credited with having *staged* the show. Then there is the *stage manager*, who is responsible for running the show during performances once it has been "set" onstage. In the diaries and memoirs of POWs outside the theatrical profession, these terms become muddled yet again, with *producer* and *stage manager* sometimes used for the director's role.

#### The Company

The Optimists consisted of ten performers seconded to the concert party from various units within the 18th Division. Besides magician Fergus Anckorn (an important contributor to this study), there was a soldier who did impersonations, a professional violinist, an accordionist, two classically trained pianists/

<sup>iii</sup> Established in 1939, the Entertainments National Service Association "had been given the task of supplying the Forces with music and other forms of entertainment" [Colonel A. C. T. White, V.C., *The Story of ARMY EDUCATION 1643–1963* (London: George G. Harrap & Co., Ltd., 1963), 110]. Because it badly misjudged what kind of entertainment the troops really needed, its acronym came to signify "Every Night Something Awful."

accompanists, a professional vocalist, an actor, a comedian, and a stage manager.<sup>iv</sup> Larry Croisette, a cowboy singer who had been a carpenter in civilian life, doubled as the technical director.<sup>v8</sup> Versatility was an important factor in being chosen for the concert party. All members of the company were expected to participate in sketches as needed and to function as part of the technical crew.<sup>9</sup> “Scenery, props and equipment had to be loaded on to a lorry, off-loaded at the venue and put up before a performance could take place,” explained Richard Fawkes. “When the curtain fell on a show everything had to go back on the lorry before the company could return to barracks and bed.”<sup>10</sup>

Like the soldiers “down under,” training for the First Australian Army Entertainment Unit, all concert party performers were told, “You are primarily soldiers. You will fight when called upon, learn to live off the land; but your most important role will be to entertain, to boost morale of our boys at the front.”<sup>11</sup>

After nine months of touring, Lieutenant John J. Mackwood, “a sort of actor, very show-bizzy sort of little man,”<sup>12</sup> took over the Optimists as officer in charge and producer-director. Mackwood had been granted special permission to bring his wife, Marianne, and another actress (“some sort of soubrette”<sup>vi</sup>) into the concert party, giving it just the fillip it needed (and what had always been an essential component of military concert parties): the presence of female figures and “glamour.”<sup>13</sup> In most military concert parties the “glamour” had to be provided by female impersonators.

## Concert Party Formats

Since variety shows and revues were the easiest to mount, these theatrical forms were favored by military concert parties. In a “Soldier Shows Guide” prepared for American “Military and Naval Establishments,” Edwin Duerr enumerated their advantages:

This type of show will be most frequently produced because in addition to its entertainment values, it utilizes the services of a crowd of performers, because the various specialities of each individual can be advantageously displayed, because the rehearsal time for the separate acts will be relatively short, and because the actors will never have to sustain their parts for any great length of time.<sup>14</sup>

**Variety.** A variety show [American *vaudeville*] consisted of a series of musical, specialty, and comedy acts (*turns*) introduced by a master of ceremonies (*compère*) who kept the audience entertained in between the acts with jokes and clever repartee. The traditional format of a concert party differed in that opening and closing choruses were performed by the full company, and these required additional rehearsal time.

**Revue.** “Revues . . . differ from vaudeville [variety],” continued Duerr, “only in that they are usually better organized and more integrated as a whole—often employ[ing] some sort of vague continuity or framework which holds the many parts together. The revue director, then, will customarily design or

<sup>iv</sup> The other company members were imitator Oliver Thomas; violinist Denis East; accordionist Fred Coles; pianists Jack Appleton and Cyril Wycherley; vocalist John Downey, actor Richard Goodman, comedian Reginald Tonsley; and stage manager Chris Buckingham [Anckörn, Interview, 3–4].

<sup>v</sup> Croisette will become an important figure in the concert parties in Thailand.

<sup>vi</sup> A soubrette is an actress who plays young, pretty, flirtatious character types, also known as soubrettes. Unfortunately, at the time of this interview, Anckörn could not remember the soubrette’s name.

collect his acts with a general subject in mind, or, as is more likely to be the case, he will gather together his material and then hope he can manufacture a theme from it.”<sup>15</sup>

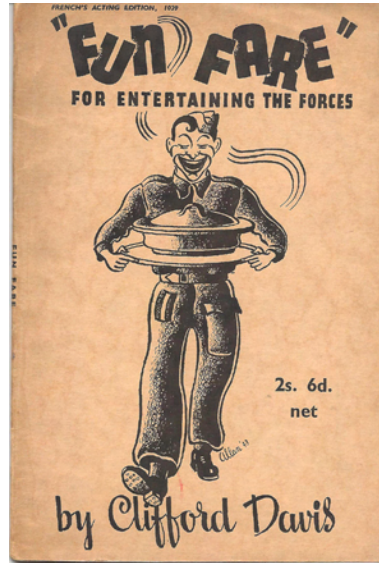


FIGURE 0.4. “*Fun Fare*” FOR ENTERTAINING THE FORCES. SAMUEL FRENCH, LTD., 1943.

## Kinds of Acts

According to Duerr, playbills for variety shows and revues should consist of songs, dances, skits, monologues and impersonations, mimes, and a few specialty acts (i.e., jugglers, acrobats, whistlers, etc.), although, in his opinion, the latter should only appear “in small doses.”<sup>16</sup>

## Content

“It isn’t easy, or wise to generalize about Army shows,” wrote Dick Richards of “The Wightwick Rags”<sup>vii</sup> in his introduction to a collection of comic sketches for the British military. “But I find the audiences prefer the accent on laughter.” He went on to caution about acceptable and unacceptable types of humor:

They don’t care for over-sophisticated stuff, but on the other hand don’t pin your faith exclusively to slapstick. For a man doesn’t leave his brain behind him with his civilian clothes. They will not stomach “blue” or unpleasantly suggestive material, but they do like their fun garnished with a little sauce.

They are very fond of material which pulls the Army’s leg hard. Particularly do they enjoy gags at the expense of local camp conditions and local camp personalities.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>vii</sup> *A concert party in the European theatre.*

**Censorship.** The hardships of life in the military and the foibles of its leadership had traditionally been fair game for concert party send-ups, tolerated in the spirit of camaraderie and as a safety valve giving voice to the grumbling always prevalent among the ranks. This relative permissiveness doesn't mean censorship wasn't an issue, however.

There had always been an understanding that military concert party shows should be "clean and free from smut."<sup>18</sup> Plenty of foul language may have been spoken around the men daily, but it was not to be countenanced publically on stage. "There is no need for it," wrote Major Leofric Thorpe. "Shows resort to dirt when they have run out of talent and ideas."<sup>19</sup> "Nevertheless," as Jack Boardman and Geoffrey Monument noted, "there were plenty of double entendre and risqué remarks."<sup>20</sup> For example, John Wood,<sup>viii</sup> dressed as a very attractive woman, sang a song that always got a rise out of his audience: it contained the line, "I've got the deepest shelter in town."<sup>21</sup> Or there was the sketch in which a young officer calling home tries to explain to his mother the use of Indian troops: "You see, mother, they are white officers with black privates."<sup>22</sup>

There were times, though, on the Thailand-Burma railway when the "rough stuff" got presented as well. "Some of the jokes and songs were very low but that is quite excusable with all male audience," wrote medical officer Ian Mackintosh following their Boxing Day pantomime *So Tite and the Seven Twirps* [sic] at Chungkai in 1943. "Someone even produced tha[t] limerick abo[u]t Mary keeping her lamb in a bucket!! I must say I never expected to hear that on the stage."<sup>23</sup>

## "Light Duty"

The idea that entertainers should be released from all but nominal camp duties so they had time to plan and rehearse the shows was a tradition that began with the First World War concert parties. This provision frequently caused complaints from other troops, who thought the entertainers were having it easy. But Corporal Leonard Stewart of the Australian 8th Division's concert party vigorously defended the practice:

Many people do not appreciate the preparation that has to be gone through to stage even the smallest of entertainment, the time, worry and anxiety shown by all that administer and participate. The scenes, setting, suitable music and the general atmosphere, all these things have to be studied with the greatest of accuracy. Most would think that a concert of entertainment just happens, giving little thought to what goes before the staging. Obstacles such as these do not enter the head of many people, [who believe] the artist or artists step onto the stage and begin their parts parrot fashion, but this is not so. Much time and hard practice must be indulged in to ensure the success of the scene or item. Hence the arduous task in preparing for and setting out a programme that will appeal to all.<sup>ix24</sup>

<sup>viii</sup> Of the A.I.F. Malayan Concert Party.

<sup>ix</sup> Though Corporal Stewart wrote this statement in 1944 as part of an official report on the Australian Imperial Forces [A.I.F.] Concert Party, the arguments he presents were always valid. Stewart was an assistant to Captain Val Mack, the concert party's officer in charge, and you can hear Mack's voice dictating the justification. When the POWs were removed from Changi POW camp to the Changi Gaol in the spring of 1944, the A.I.F. concert party was combined with other companies and a British officer placed in charge. The report must have been Mack's attempt not to have the unique story of the A.I.F. Concert Party lost to history.

The entertainers understood that their release time was conditional, “with the proviso that if need be they would revert to fighting soldiers.”<sup>25</sup>

## Diversion

Once the 18th Infantry Division received orders for overseas deployment, the Optimists disbanded and the performers returned to their original units. They embarked for the Middle East from Liverpool in November 1941. It was after the division sailed around the Cape of Good Hope headed to Bombay, India, where they would be fitted out for their new posting, that the Japanese launched their attacks in the Far East. In an attempt to bolster the Dominion forces defending Malaya and “the impregnable fortress” at Singapore, the 18th Division was diverted to Southeast Asia. The convoy arrived in Singapore on 29 January 1942, and the troops were immediately put into battle. Fergus Anckorn wasn’t the only soldier who thought they had been sent on a fool’s errand: “Three and a half months without setting foot on land. Talk about being ready for action. Our knees were jelly. And, you know, we had to go off that ship under fire, under bombing.”<sup>26</sup> Seventeen days later, they were prisoners of war.

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## Notes to the Reader

**Unit and Rank Designations.** Rank and unit designations, while terribly important to a military person’s identity, have been given little acknowledgment here. This decision was made not to disparage their significance but so the reader, already burdened with a multitude of details in this text, would not suffer further.

**Racism.** The reader will encounter many instances of racism in the sources for what follows. The war in the Pacific was not just a power struggle over geographic possessions and material resources but a clash of beliefs and cultures. In the years leading up to the war, both sides fueled their public’s prejudices with racist propaganda of “the other” in posters, newspaper articles, and films.

To embolden their fighting spirit, Japanese troops were indoctrinated with the belief that they were freeing the nations of East and Southeast Asia from colonial rule so that a “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” could be established. The Japanese were helped in this regard by the colonists’ tendency to treat their Asian subjects as inferior and to resist any attempts at self-determination. But the Imperial Japanese Army’s horrific treatment of defeated Chinese soldiers and civilians in Nanking and other places belied their stated goal.

On the other hand, the Allied Forces, which also included colonial volunteer forces, believed they were defending the peoples within their colonial empires and spheres of influence from “the yellow peril.” Those servicemen who became prisoners of war had to contend with the Japanese warrior code of *bushido*: its proscription against surrender on the battlefield—a dishonorable act—would determine their treatment. Nor did they understand that corporal punishment for the slightest infraction of the rules was part of the Japanese soldier’s life.

During construction of the Thailand-Burma railway, POWs from various units and nationalities were forced to live and work side by side in cramped and squalid camps sharing scarce medical supplies and food. The stress of harsh conditions and prolonged association exacerbated national, ethnic, and racial tensions normally kept in check. In the more stable environment of hospital and relocation camps, “turf wars” occurred between ranks and nationalities regarding rights to produce entertainment, some of which,

in the treatment of Dutch/Indonesian performers, had distinct ethnic and racial overtones. Petty artistic jealousies also surfaced among entertainers as they vied for recognition and status.

And now, “Beginners, please!”<sup>x</sup>

## Endnotes

- 1 Turner, 98.
- 2 See Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture*, and <http://www.reocities.com/CollegePark/4825/concertparties.html>.
- 3 <http://www.reocities.com/CollegePark/4825/concertparties.html>.
- 4 Fuller, 179.
- 5 War Office, 4.
- 6 War Office, 1.
- 7 War Office, 15.
- 8 Anckorn, Interview, 6.
- 9 Anckorn, Interview, 3–4, 18.
- 10 Fawkes, 37.
- 11 Dawson, 97.
- 12 Anckorn, Interview, 4.
- 13 Anckorn, Interview, 4; E-mail, 8 August 2006.
- 14 Duerr, 121.
- 15 Duerr, 122.
- 16 Duerr, 127.
- 17 Richards, 4.
- 18 Jack Boardman, “The Changi Concert Party,” 2–3.
- 19 Thorpe, Letter to Allison, 21 February 1988.
- 20 Jack Boardman, “The Changi Concert Party,” 2–3.
- 21 Jack Boardman, Letter, 5 January 2004.
- 22 Monument, E-mail, 6 December 2008.
- 23 Mackintosh, Diary, 26 December 1943.
- 24 Stewart, “AIF Concert Party Report,” 1.
- 25 Fawkes, 36.
- 26 Anckorn, Interview, 22.

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<sup>x</sup> A British theatre expression instructing actors for the opening act of a show to take their places on stage.