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Chapter 7. “The Show Must Go On”: Nong Pladuk Relocation Camp

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Chapter 7: “The Show Must Go On”

Nong Pladuk Relocation Camp

When Lieutenant-Colonel Philip Toosey and his troops arrived in Nong Pladuk from Tamarkan on 11 December 1943, they found that there were actually two camps at the site: “The ground layout was P.O.W. No. 1 contiguous with the Rly. sidings and W/shops, P.O.W. No. 2 contiguous with the A. A. [Anti-Aircraft] position.” British, Australian, and American POWs were billeted in Camp No. 1, where Sergeant Watanabe was the I. J. A. NCO Administrator; Netherlands East Indies POWs were placed in Camp No. 2 with Sergeant-Major Saito in charge. Communication between the two camps was strictly forbidden.

Colonel Toosey’s arrival coincided with that of Major Ebiko as the new I. J. A. Group Commandant for Group VI. Toosey called Ebiko “the most sincere and tolerant Gp. Cmd. in Thailand.” Under Major Ebiko, life in Nong Pladuk became less restrictive, and through the intercession of Sergeant Watanabe, the POWs in Camp No. 1 were allowed to build a theatre and produce weekly shows.

Backstory

Nong Pladuk, situated just east of the transit camp at Ban Pong, had been the starting point for the Thai end of the Thailand-Burma railway. Built during the summer of 1942 by an advance party of POWs from Singapore, it was located in former paddy fields and banana plantations alongside the Bangkok-Malaya Railway line, at the junction where the new line to Burma would be built. It functioned as the supply depot and marshaling yard for the railway and was also the site of the Hashimoto Engineering Workshops, a maintenance facility—all of which made it a prime strategic target for Allied bombing raids. As in other places, the Japanese had refused to do anything to identify the site as a POW camp that might protect it from these attacks.

During 1942 and 1943, entertainment in Nong Pladuk had taken place only sporadically at best. For Christmas 1942 there had been a show in which “Ace” Connolly and his “Kings of Swing” orchestra performed at one end of a Japanese hut nicknamed “the Old Grotto.” (Connolly, a trumpeter, and his orchestra had been part of the P.O.W. WOSS concert party in Changi POW Camp.) Following the show’s closing moments, the audience, as had happened back in Changi a month earlier during “the Selarang Incident,” demanded the singing of “God Save the King,” forbidden by the Japanese. “Two thousand lusty voices took it up spontaneously,” reported G. F. Kershaw, “despite the screamed obscenities of our Japanese audience. The louder they yelled the louder we sang. Rifle butts, feet and fists were generously used by the Imperial Japanese Army, but we sang it through fortissimo to the last word. Wonderful.”

But as Kershaw had to admit, their outburst “rather prejudiced a possible repeat” of the concert, and it must have been a while before any other entertainment was permitted. During 1943 the fledgling concert party continued to attract other performers and production staff. Norman Pritchard, stage manager for several of the Optimists concert party shows in Changi and who had been retained in Nong Pladuk since late 1942 suffering from a knee injury, became associated with the troupe. By early June 1943, a new group of entertainers arrived from Chungkai, led by the former Keppel Harbour concert party producer Lieutenant John D. V. Allum. Allum persuaded the POW commandant to release his group from further work on the railway so they could join the concert party.

Although monsoon rains and the demands of “the Speedo” prevented entertainment activity, once

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1 They had arrived in Chungkai hospital camp at the end of May and put on several shows.
the two sides of the railway were joined in October 1943, there must have been some occasions when concert parties were allowed but no records of such have survived. Now that they had received permission to build a theatre and produce weekly shows, the entertainers immediately started planning a pantomime for their Christmas celebrations.\textsuperscript{10}

**A Christmas Panto**

The pantomime chosen for the POWs’ Christmas entertainment was the old favorite *Cinderella*, selected because of its metaphorical implications that spoke to the plight and the hope of the POWs. It was written and produced, this time, by Lieutenant Allum.

William Wilder’s program cover for *Cinderella* shows the Prince bowing to Cinderella below the pantomime’s title. Above is the name of the new theatre, “The Prince of Wales”—its bold white lettering lit up against a dark pink background.\textsuperscript{11} As one POW explained, the prisoners’ attempt to use this same name on the new theatre’s proscenium arch failed: “we called [it the] Prince Of Wales Theatre hoping that the initial letters, which we made as prominent and conspicuous as possible, would be read by aircraft as Prisoner Of War Thailand. But an artful Japanese officer, who spoke English, saw the significance of this and made us take the name down.”

\textsuperscript{ii} William Wilder was an artist, like Jack Chalker and others, who set out to document the lives of the POWs. Besides his sketches of life on the railway and in Nong Pladuk, he produced souvenir programs for sale to the audience and cast members.
The playbill for *Cinderella* reveals a large cast of twenty-three players, including five officers, plus musicians and production staff. Dance routines were choreographed by Ben Diamond, Sergeant Phil Hutt was responsible for the costumes, and a crew of eight technicians, including a Sergeant “Tich” Harrison, produced the props. “Ace” Connolly and Bob Gale are credited with the music, which was played by the Kings of Swing orchestra, although at the moment, Connolly’s “orchestra” consisted of only three musicians: its fourth member, saxophonist Gale, was in hospital.

One of the original songs Bob Gale wrote for the show from his hospital bed was “She Told Me,” with this chorus:

\[
\text{Oh she told me the day that I sailed away,} \\
\text{That she would never go astray, she told me.} \\
\text{She told me that she would always be true,} \\
\text{And never do a naughty thing if I promised to [too].} \\
\text{Then she told me there would be lovely days} \\
\text{If I'd been the goody-goody I had promised to be.}\]

The lyrics reflect the stereotypical fears that “a girl” voices about her sweetheart’s behavior away from home. But Gale’s final verse (given below) has an unexpected twist that reveals the anxiety that also existed for the POWs, who worried whether their wives or sweethearts had remained faithful to them or had taken up with someone else—perhaps one of those American servicemen who had poured into England in preparation for D-Day and who, in the POWs’ imaginations, were believed to be sex maniacs.
I’ve got a letter from my girl who’s waiting at home,
She said it’s time I settled down, it’s silly to roam.
I’ve written back to say I’ll hurry when I can,
Provided she can prove she’s been with no other man.²⁴

In addition to the many new songs written for Nong Pladuk shows, Gale would extended his abilities as composer and lyricist to the creation of original revues and musical comedies—and, as a playwright, to short dramatic works. Bob Gale became one of the most creative and prolific artists on the Thailand-Burma railway.

Charles Steel, who was in charge of the P.R.I. Canteen in Nong Pladuk, thought the panto had “some fine ‘women’ for the female leads”—a comment that can only refer to Paul Phythian (Cinderella) and Basil Ferron (Fairy Queen) and not to Edward Ingram, who played the outrageous “Pantomime Dame.”²⁵ (Ingram had previously been producer of the Bam-Booz-Lers concert party in Chungkai.)

It may have been the panto’s beneficial effects on morale that prompted Major Ebiko to allow the POWs to form a permanent concert party with Lieutenant Allum as officer in charge. From the captors’ point of view, the boredom and apathy conditioned by confinement could be deleterious to the prisoners’ usefulness on maintenance parties and other work details, such as construction of the mammoth hospital camp for chronic cases nearby at Nakhon Pathom.

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Figure 7.3. Caricature of John D. V. Allum. Jan
van Holthe. Courtesy of Eve Allum.
Nong Pladuk’s New Theatre

The theatre in the background of Jan van Holthe’s caricature of Allum is Nong Pladuk’s first theatre—a pitched roof proscenium theatre sitting on a raised mound of earth. The front curtain has the concert party’s new logo painted on it. Because of the ban on lighting due to the fear of bombing raids, it’s possible that the roof had a large hinged flap that could be propped open to allow the sun to light the upstage areas. Afternoon shows given in the blazing sun might deter some POWs from attending, but the performers would never lack for an appreciative audience. Band leader and trumpet player “Ace” Connolly, along with other members of his band are visible in the orchestra pit.

Under Lieutenant Allum’s skillful leadership, Nong Pladuk’s concert party became a vibrant organization, producing show after show of original works that would be a continuing delight to the their audiences and a constant challenge to the performers’ imaginations and ingenuities. Many of the men listed in the credits for Cinderella became core members of this entertainment unit. As it grew in size, one of its unique features will be its inclusion of former members of several different concert parties that had operated in the Changi/Singapore camps before being sent Up Country. Another unique feature will be the number of original plays and musicals generated by this company to make sure the shows continued.

“The Harboured Lights”

On 13 January 1944, “The Harboured Lights Concert Party” appeared for the first time with Radio Guest Night, produced and directed by Allum. The name was not only a reference to Allum’s earlier concert party in Keppel Harbour (“The Harbour Lights”) but also a pun on the men’s prisoner status. (Unless otherwise noted, the Harboured Lights will produce, and Allum will direct, all the shows in Camp No. 1.)

Allum’s goal was to produce a show every week. In order to accommodate the many POWs who
wanted to see a production, and to allow time for the entertainers to develop the next production, each show would have a two-week run. As time went on this goal of a producing one show each week would become more difficult to achieve. But the entertainers in Nong Pladuk—similar to those in other POW hospital and relocation camps—were a group of resolute performers who would not be defeated in making sure the shows went on. In Nong Pladuk that determination would be challenged by the most disastrous events.

Radio Guest Night was a staged radio show with a cast of thirty-plus musicians, singers, comedians, and technical staff, filled not only with performers who had appeared earlier in Cinderella but with new faces and turns. Following a standard radio show format, it consisted of performers impersonating a series of famous British and American singers, comedians, and musical groups (see playbill above).

Basil Ferron, an Anglo-Indian who impersonated the movie star Dorothy Lamour, became the Harboured Lights’ primary “actress.” Pritchard described Ferron as “a very small chap . . . slight . . . and could pass for a girl easily.” Fergus Anckorn saw him as “a gorgeous looking Indian girl . . . flashing eyes and all the rest of it.” Paul Phythian, who played Stella Moya, a well-known British singer, became the leading “female” vocalist with “Ace” Connolly’s orchestra.

Since Connolly’s orchestra only had four musicians, they were constantly on the lookout for new members. “Whenever a new group came into the camp,” Pritchard observed, “they marched in the main gates, and waited their instructions in the middle of the camp. Any man who was carrying a musical instrument was grabbed immediately and introduced to the Concert Party. He was obviously keen, or would not still be carrying an instrument.”

Two important members of Allum’s theatre organization were Sergeant “Tich” Harrison and Phil Hutt. Harrison was in charge of prop construction. As Allum recalled, Harrison and his assistant, Jock Cameron, were willing to tackle any request.

Whatever was suggested by the artistes as an absolute “must” for some scene,
however improbable it was, somehow was built by these two stalwarts. How well I remember a desire to have the curtains of the stage properly pulled by wires as per “pukka” stage! It was “Tich” who, one night, removed the telephone wire linking the Nip guardroom to the Nip officers’ quarters, stripped all the rubber away and fixed the curtains up before the phone was missed. The best part of it all was that the Nips congratulated us on the curtain system at the same time as they were searching for some rubber-covered telephone wire.

Sergeant Phil Hutt took on the job as costumer for the new company.

With Radio Guest Night “Pritchard Publicity” makes its official appearance. Pritchard, like Wilder, now began to produce a series of souvenir programs for the Nong Pladuk shows.

During the next eleven months, Pritchard produced a series of souvenir programs all drawn, printed, and painted by hand one at a time, which allowed for a wide variation in design and execution of programs for the same production. According to Pritchard’s own estimation, he printed approximately twenty programs for each show. His programs represent an extraordinary artistic output, produced, as they were, under increasingly extreme conditions with few resources. Paper, always in short supply, was, Pritchard claimed, “stolen from the Jap Office, with ink or paints similarly obtained, or scrounged from one source or another.”

**Wilder and Pritchard: A Comparison**

Wilder’s and Pritchard’s skills in drawing, painting, and printmaking differed significantly. Wilder had the ability to draw and paint freehand, including three-dimensional human figures, which Pritchard did not. As a graduate of the Fine Art Department at Reading University before the war, Wilder had been heavily influenced by the work of the British artist Walter Sickert. This influence is evident in the artwork for his programs, which contain human figures painted in a mixed naturalistic-impressionistic style in scenes with an implied narrative.

Pritchard, on the other hand, had trained as an architectural draftsman before the war; therefore, his cover designs, such as that for Radio Guest Night, above, are predominantly arrangements of geometrical shapes, strong in the use of bold and dynamic lines and lettering produced with the use of a straight edge. The spare use of color may have been Pritchard’s attempt to preserve his supply of inks and watercolors for the long haul.

Whereas Wilder’s program covers (as far as we can tell from the few that have survived) remained similar in style, content, and technique, Pritchard constantly explored his graphic design and printmaking abilities, experimenting with various techniques for applying watercolors or inks to paper. One of his favorites was to use masking devices and stencils with an old toothbrush for spattering.

In the account that follows, comments will be made on notable examples of Wilder’s and Pritchard’s program artwork.

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iii With the scarcity of POW diaries and memoirs describing the entertainment in Nong Pladuk, Wilder’s and Pritchard’s programs become, along with the interviews and correspondence with Pritchard and Fergus Anckorn, the primary documentation for reconstructing the role entertainment played in the life of the camp. There is also a list of the shows produced at Nong Pladuk and Ubon hand printed by an anonymous POW on the inside of one of Pritchard’s souvenir programs in the IWM Archives: IWM 9165 Misc 116 (Item 1834).

iv Pritchard supplied the twenty-seven different programs and other drawings for this book before he passed away.
Colonel Toosey Takes Command

When Colonel Toosey took over command of Nong Pladuk from Major Gill on 16 January, there were approximately 4,000 Allied POWs in the two camps. But as more POWs were brought down to Nong Pladuk from construction camps up the line that number swelled to over 8,000, one-third of them N.E.I. troops. These men became a ready supply of laborers to be sent back up the line on maintenance parties.

Knowing that Nong Pladuk would eventually become a target for Allied long-range bombers, one of the first actions Toosey took was to seek permission from Group Commandant Ebiko for the POWs to dig slit trenches around the bases of the huts for their protection. He also assured the performers and artists of his support for weekly entertainment. According to Pritchard, Toosey “did everything he could to maintain performances . . . and said they were of immense importance. And he said [it] publicly, in my hearing.” Fergus Anckorn agreed. He remembered Toosey saying, “You know, you chaps are doing the best thing you could ever do. You’re keeping the spirits up.’ And we knew we were doing that.”

To ensure that his entertainers had the time and energy necessary to produce shows, Toosey persuaded Ebiko to allow them to be assigned “light-duty” work inside the camp, such as digging latrines, working in the cookhouse, or general cleaning. This, according to Pritchard, “led to some difficulties and criticism—although it was generally acceptable.”

New Faces

On 10 February, audiences in Camp No. 1 witnessed the debut of a new group of entertainers “The Dramatics Society” with their production of an original mystery-thriller Murder at Sea.

The founding members of this organization were young officers, two of whom, Lieutenant Lowden and Lieutenant Huntriss, had appeared in Cinderella. Another key figure, Lieutenant Michael J. Curtis, had performed as a female impersonator in the “New Windmill Theatre” productions back in Changi.
Murder at Sea will be the first of a series of original plays presented by this group in the camp. Though not produced by the Harboured Lights, their plays will be directed by Allum as well.

As in other camps, all scripts had to be submitted to the Japanese interpreter for censorship days prior to performance. At Nong Pladuk, Fergus Anckorn recalled, they had a unique personage in this role:

We had a Japanese interpreter. His job was to censor the stuff. And he would cross out bits and pieces here and there. And on the night of the show, he would be sitting there with the script in his hand. And suddenly, “Stop it, stop, stop, stop!” And go up and slap a few faces. And we found [out] he didn’t know a word of English anyway. He was drawing pay for being an interpreter and censoring these things, and quite often he’d be sitting there with it upside down, and we could see him doing this, you see. And in the end we gave him the same script every week. Whatever the show was, he would check it, and cross bits out. And I had a lot of admiration for him, because he had obviously worked in this racket where he was, I presume, getting paid for doing interpretation—for censoring things. But he knew nothing. So that was how we went on.

Murder at Sea was followed a week later by Watch Your Step, a Harboured Lights revue about the movie business. One of the front curtain acts during scene changes featured the sleight-of-hand artist “Wizardus” (Fergus Anckorn) in his first Nong Pladuk appearance (he had been a member of the Optimists Concert Party in Changi and had recently appeared in the Christmas show at Chungkai hospital camp). Norman Pritchard recalled that his “egg trick” involved fooling more than the members of the audience.

[Anckorn] saw the Jap Commander, who gave him a bit of paper to go to the store to get the egg he needed for the show. But when he got to the source of supply, the Jap had asked him how many he wanted. So, he just realized there was no number on the order.

So he says, “Fifteen.” . . .

And I thought he was going to do this egg trick every night for two weeks—with fourteen eggs. And Lester Martin, Gus, and I got a pin—each a pin—and totally took a section of the egg out—a section of the shell out large enough to get the yolk out, put it in a saucepan, and made a lovely omelet . . . which the three of us ate.
And the next day after the show, the General pulled him in and asked for an interpreter.

“What happened to the other eggs?”

So Gus said ([he] had to think pretty fast), “Rehearsals!”

And he got away with it.  

On 24 February, the Harboured Lights returned with Hi Gang!, the first of Bob Gale’s original revues and musical comedies. Two songs featured in the “In Town Tonight” finale, “A Simple Country Life” and “Take My Seat,” contain some of Gale’s most sophisticated lyrics. The opening verses of “Take My Seat” are a good sample (see the complete lyrics for both these songs in the “FEPOW Songbook”).

Lovely little lady won’t you take my seat.
Guess you’re going shopping down in Oxford Street.
Wish that I could come along with you and buy,
Any latest fashion that you care to try.

Lovely little lady won’t you please sit down.
Are you from the country? Do you live in town?
Guess you’ve got somebody else on your mind to meet,
’Cos why is it you hesitate to take my seat?" 

[For a contemporary vocal rendition of Bob Gale’s “Take My Seat,” listen to the Audio Link in “The FEPOW Songbook.”]

For Hi Gang!’s finale, “Tich” Harrison and his technicians produced a revolving stage—a marvel out of wood, steel, and bamboo seen nowhere else in POW theatres along the Thailand-Burma railway (see details of its construction and operation in Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!”).

Among the new cast members who appeared in the variety show When Day Is Done on 2 March were “Akki” (Bombardier Basil Akhurst), formerly of the P.O.W. WOWS in Changi, and, in a first for the Camp No. 1 stage, “The Hawaiian Serenaders” from Camp No. 2.

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v After the war, Allum used to sing this song to his wife, Eve. For this book, Eve and her daughter Jo, who is a teacher of music and plays in an ensemble, were able to reconstruct the music and ask a fellow musician to perform it.
Camp No. 2 Entertainment Makes an Appearance

The appearance of Dutch/Indonesian performers in a Harboured Lights production suggests that restrictions on interactions between the two camps at Nong Pladuk had eased. A Pritchard souvenir program for “De Hollandsche Revue,” which opened in Camp No. 2 a week later, confirms this idea.

![Image](image1.png)

**Figure 7.7. Souvenir program for Ik hou Van Holland. Norman Pritchard. Courtesy of Norman Pritchard.**

_Ik hou van Holland_ is the first known performance by an N.E.I. concert party in Nong Pladuk. Some of its members had previously performed in Kanburi hospital camp. The title, which translates as “I love Holland,” is a famous Dutch song, often sung ironically when it’s been raining for weeks. The show was produced by Kaptain Sluimers and Lieutenant van Dijk, with music provided by “Matzer en z’n Boys.”

![Image](image2.png)

**Figure 7.8. Playbill for Ik hou Van Holland. Norman Pritchard. Courtesy of Norman Pritchard.**

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vi Pritchard’s program cover for the show illustrated with a windmill and billowing clouds in the background was produced by a series of stencils and toothbrush spatterings.

vii The translation of the title from the Dutch and comments on it are by Margie Samethini-Bellamy, daughter of Han Samethini, the beloved N.E.I. musician.
Among the more than thirty-five N.E.I. performers in the show were the stand-up comics De Zwart and Meyer and the illusionist Kopuit. As a revue, it contained the usual series of musical and comedy sketches, including “De Leeuwentemmers” (The Liontamers) and “De Eeuwige Driehoek” (The Eternal Triangle), as well as a Javanese dance by Keller and Scholten and a Kronsjongmuziek\textsuperscript{viii} offering. It closed with the cast on stage singing the rousing “Eens Komt De Dag” (The Day Will Come), which, because their national anthem was forbidden, became the song of hope that closed all their shows.

Life in Camp No. 2, largely inhabited by N.E.I. troops at this point, was no better than in Camp No. 1. In fact, it may have been worse. Jan van Holthe, the young Dutch artist who had drawn disturbing pictures of the inhuman treatment of POWs by the Japanese in Rin Tin and Tamarkan camps, drew a sketch of the horrors of their dysentery ward.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{hospital.png}
\caption{“Hospital!!” Jan van Holthe. Courtesy of Norman Pritchard.}
\end{figure}

The bottles lying among the emaciated sick illustrate the Dutch/Indonesian habit of using bottles of water to cleanse themselves after bowel movements.

Unlike Sergeant Watanabe in Camp No. 1, Sergeant-Major Saito, the NCO administrator in Camp No. 2, allowed concert parties only once a month. For some reason, shows in the two separate camps were never allowed to occur simultaneously, so any show that took place in either camp had to be counted as the only one taking place that week.

**New Arrivals**

Among the thousands of new POWs flooding into Nong Pladuk during March 1944 and placed in Camp No. 2 were British and N.E.I. troops from Hindato, including entertainers Jimmy Walker, Ken Crossley, and Geoffrey Adams. Major Chida, I. J. A. commandant at Hindato, also came down to Nong Pladuk to become second in command under Group Commandant Ebiko. POWs like Charles Steel thought

\textsuperscript{viii} Kronsjong music was popular folk music developed by Eurasians in the Dutch East Indies.
Major Chida an odd duck: “He is very ancient, almost bent double and puts one in mind of an old chicken. He gets drunk regularly and, in spite of his senility, is a lad with the girls who attend him regularly . . . He is terrible absent minded. One day he fell down a disused latrine.”

Major Chida valued the entertainers, especially the musicians—he himself played the shakuhachi (bamboo flute)—and came up with what he thought was a brilliant idea for their use. He demanded the POWs produce a band, which they did (although at this point it consisted of only a “guitar, a kettledrum, a saxophone and a concertina”—the four musicians in Connolly’s orchestra) whose main function was “to march troops out of the gate and back into Camp.” Jimmy Walker observed Chida’s band at its assigned task:

As each squad marched by the orchestra would give forth with a tune appropriate to the lads marching by: “Blaydon Races” or “The British Grenadiers” heralded the Northumberland Fusiliers, “Highland Laddie” for the Argyles and Gordon and so on. But the laugh came in the tailpiece.

The Japs had a cow and it was one prisoner’s task to take it out to grass every morning. He was always last in the procession and as he led his mooing charge past the dais, the band struck up with “I’m An Old Cow-hand From the Rio Grand [sic].”

This wasn’t the only brilliant idea Chida enacted to keep the POWs occupied. Another was the construction of “a vast [Japanese?] garden,” that required “hordes of slaves” to carry stretchers filled with “soil from banana plantations to a part of the camp.” And to top it off, they were put to work “building of a huge replica of the Fujiyama, complete with precisely placed shrines.”

**Escapado Argentino**

The last two weeks of March witnessed one of the most popular shows ever produced in Nong Pladuk: Bob Gale’s first musical comedy, *Escapado Argentino*. 
Besides Connolly’s Kings of Swing, the musical aspects of the show featured the Hawaiian Serenaders and a new vocal group, “Robson’s Male Voice Choir.”

The cast included all the regulars of the Harboured Lights concert party plus several new performers like Kitna Price (Dancer) and Fred Knightley and Bernard Hart (the two halves of “Horse”).
One of Gale’s new songs for the show was “Some-Day.”

Some day troubles will be over.
One day, right will conquer wrong.
Peace will come to stay for ever,
And at last we shall view,
All our dreams come true.

Life is full of tragic figures,
Fighting vainly to exist.
Why should people have to struggle,
When there’s plenty in our midst.

One day we will build a new world,
Fashion the shape of things to come.
We’ll forget about the blue world,
And the things we came thru
When I come back home to you.

Norman Pritchard remembered the show’s funniest moment:

Basil [Ferron] was the girl who was kidnapped by the baddie . . . and we [had] a bedroom window on the stage somehow . . . At the window climbing up a ladder were Hank and Frank, who in the program are labeled as Ben and Joe Speedo . . . and the famous line is that [given by] Basil [as she] stands there as the victim—and there are these two clowns [who] are rescuing her. And she says, “Ben, Joe Speedo! What a relief!” [Laughter].

Benjo is the Japanese word for toilet/latrine. Benjo speedo! was the expression used by the POWs to tell the Japanese/Korean guards they had to “Shit fast!” (in Anckorn’s “rough” translation), usually due to an attack of dysentery.

One of the most remarkable artifacts that survived the POWs’ years of captivity is a typescript for

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ix Pritchard produced two different souvenir program covers for the show. Both show him exploring a new, more free-hand style, but still in two-dimensions. One has a cowboy figure in chaps and hat strumming a guitar with multiple colors applied with a brush. The other has the silhouette of a cowboy on a bucking bronco created by the use of a stencil, in which images of the cowboy, horse, and ground are positive images filled in with brown paint. Since he could not draw human figures, Pritchard asked others to draw these for him that he would then trace and cut a stencil. The cowboy with his guitar and the cowboy on his horse look very much like Wilder’s contributions.
Escapado Argentino preserved by Lieutenant Allum (see the full text at Figures 7.12-7.15 in the Image Gallery).

In an entirely new venture, Norman Pritchard took on the role of set designer for the show (see his rendering for the set in Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!”).

**Anckorn Gets a Bashing**

As the “famous” sleight-of-hand artist, Fergus Anckorn was frequently called upon to give private performances for Japanese officers. On one occasion he got into serious trouble.

Up country as you know I had quite a reputation with the Japs who treated me with awe and the odd cigarettes!

I learned to do a 45 minute show entirely in the Japanese language which our interpreter—Thomas—taught me parrot fashion.

At Nong Pladuk I was sent to do a magic show to some Japanese officers including a general (with Toosey’s permission). I did the show entirely in perfect Japanese, and they were delighted, lots of clapping and food. The general came and spoke to me and asked questions (ka?) And I said “wakarimasen” (I don’t understand). He then knocked me down and kicked my face and blackened my eyes. I think he thought I was being arrogant, having heard me speaking Japanese for three quarters of an hour and then saying “wakarimasen.”

When I got back to camp that night Col. Toosey was waiting. I had two black eyes and my top lip stuck out. Col. Toosey said, “My God, Anckorn, what happened?” I said, “They didn’t like the show.” Actually we both laughed!

Toosey then got a card printed for me with words to the effect that I had learned the Japanese words for my show—but spoke none!

In any trouble after that I could flash the card and save a bashing!

**The Show Must Go On**

Since the middle of February, musical and theatrical shows had been produced on a regular weekly basis. But the day before Preying Guests, the Dramatic Society’s next mystery-thriller, was scheduled to open on 6 April, it was suddenly cancelled by the Japanese. Their rationale? It was “inappropriate for the POWs to have murderous thoughts!” Below the credit line on the program Pritchard had prepared, which read “Produced and Presented at Nong Pladuk, Thailand,” is an additional note obviously printed after the cancellation that reads, “Reduced and Resented by the I. J. A.”

Actually, the complete credit line on the program for Preying Guests reads “Produced and Presented at Nong Pladuk, Thailand, by Nong Pladuk Theatre(s) Ltd.” “Theatres.” Allum’s organization, it appears, was now responsible for administering the entertainment in both camps.

In order not to disappoint their audiences—and in the finest of theatrical traditions—the concert party put their creative energies to work and hastily pulled together a variety show entitled The Show
Must Go On that opened on the sixth instead. Making a virtue out of necessity, they even touted their accomplishment: “the entire show devised and produced in less than 16 hours!” All the regulars were in the show: Hank and Frank, Basil Ferron and Kitna Price, Ben Diamond, Paul Phythian, “Wizardus,” etc., with music provided by the Hawaiian Serenaders and the Kings of Swing.

The Show Must Go On was the last appearance of the Hawaiian Serenaders in Nong Pladuk, which suggests that they were sent up the line on a maintenance party. One musician in the Kings of Swing also disappears from the orchestra at this time, and it must have been unsettling to the producers and conductors to know that their performers were not exempt from placement on these drafts.

This turn of events made it more important than ever for the concert parties to be on the lookout for fresh talent. When men who played a musical instrument or had sung in hut sing-alongs or on working parties were found, they were encouraged to try out their talents in “Amateur Night Contests.”

In fact, the performers in the first item on the bill for Stardust, the next show in Camp No. 1 (13 and 20 April), were three men who had recently been discovered in one of these contests. At the same time, “Ace” Connolly had been successful in finding six new musicians for his orchestra, so his group now totaled nine players. At least one of them, the appropriately named drummer Johnnie Tap, was on loan from the N.E.I. concert party in Camp No. 2. As a conductor, Fred Knightley recalled, Connolly was “a stickler for having things right and many times he had the lads in the band sweating rivers playing a certain piece of music until they had it as nearly right as they could under those conditions.”

Stardust featured the first appearance of Nong Pladuk’s “Crazy Gang,” the British equivalent of the Marx Brothers. The composition of this group of six farceurs would change over time as men went sick or deployed elsewhere, but they always remained popular with the POW audiences—and with the Japanese as well, “who laughed as heartily as the POW’s, especially when water or whitewash was thrown about.”

One week later in Camp No. 2, De Hollandsche Revue opened Mars Express, a new show for
April. Like most revues, it was built around a series of scenes that took place in unusual locations: “De Marsdewoners” (Occupants on Mars), “In De Bar” (In the Bar), “In De Opera” (In the Opera), and so on. It was followed back in Camp No. 1 on 4 and 11 May by an original musical comedy, Rock and Roll, written by a group that included Norman Pritchard.x

**Figure 7.17. Souvenir program for Rock and Roll.**
Norman Pritchard. Courtesy of Eve Allum.

“A Great New Theatre”—Under Construction

It would be five weeks before another Harboured Lights show was produced in the camp. One of the reasons for the absence is explained by what Charles Steel called a “great new theatre” being built in the northeast corner of Camp No. 1.43 Steel also described the “turf war” that had taken place between Sergeant Watanabe and Sergeant-Major Saito regarding permission to build it: “Permission given by one Japanese Sjt. Permission refused by t’other. Great argument between the two. A great failing of the IJA: no two departments ever work together.”

But another reason for the absence of Harbour Lights’ shows was the fact that two new performing groups made their debuts in Nong Pladuk at this time, which means their shows were the only ones allowed to be produced in the camp. In Camp No. 1 “The Radioptimists” presented a variety show, Blackpool By-The-Sea, on 14 May. Their goal was to serve a totally different and needy audience by playing to the sick in the hospital wards.

x For this production, Pritchard became more adventurous in his printmaking. He employed a series of masks and stencils on the outside and inside of the program to create the waves, the boat, the man in the boat with his raised oars (which must have been drawn by Wilder), and the title. These were then detailed with hand-drawn seagulls, fish, and the lettering of the playbill (see Figure 7.18 in the Image Gallery)—all pulled together by an overlay of spattered paint. To manufacture these in any number must have been time consuming.

x Since Steel doesn’t specify, we can’t be certain who promoted and who opposed the construction of this new theatre. But from prior behavior, it can be assumed that Watanabe (who had given permission for the old theatre to be built) had approved the new theatre and it was Saito who opposed it. As a sergeant-major, Saito must have believed he outranked Sergeant Watanabe and therefore had more authority in the matter.
Blackpool showcased two new camp discoveries: Paddy Flaherty and Pinky Kerswell. It is not clear what Flaherty performed, but Kerswell had the unique ability to “imitate any noise.” The mere mention of his name sparked another story from Fergus Anckorn:

And I remember one day, myself and Bill Wilder, another artist, passed Pinky Kerswell in camp . . . we were walking along, just for fun. And some Jap guards came along, and they looked at him, and he’s going, “Boom.” Then you hear, “Ba-do-oom, ba-do-oom, ba-do-oom, ba-do-oom, ba-do-oom.” And then he got out of this non-car, went round the front and was doing this [Anckorn mimes turning the crank], “Ba-do-oom-do ba-do-oom-do.” And it suddenly roared into life again, and he rushed back and jumped in and went [off] with screeching tires. He was doing all these noises. And the Japs . . . they just looked like this [Anckorn makes a startled, puzzled expression]. And Bill Wilder nearly fell over, he couldn’t stand for laughing. And I must say, we laughed our heads off. The Japs laughed as well. And I think they thought he was quite mad . . . ’cause he used to do this whenever he was working, he’d made these noises.

As the Radioptimists were soon to discover, performing in the hospital wards was not without its dangers. Colonel Toosey’s “Official Report” describes an incident wherein a severe beating was meted out to three members of the Radioptimists for allegedly insulting a Japanese sergeant during one of their

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Audio 7.2

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Pritchard’s design for the Blackpool program cover is his first to employ a three-dimensional image drawn free-hand. A representation of the famous tower at the Blackpool seaside resort has a long banner attached to its top that swirls behind and in front of the tower.
performances.\textsuperscript{xii}  The other new concert party was a British troupe in Camp No. 2, who opened a show ten days later for Empire Day. One of the producers, Geoffrey Pharaoh Adams, had been involved in shows up the line at Hindato. In Nong Pladuk he was successful in persuading Sergeant-Major Saito to allow the group to use stage lighting, which might have been Saito’s attempt at one-upmanship over Sergeant Watanabe.

It would be three weeks before another show was produced in Nong Pladuk. In addition to the new theatre under construction, two other happenings foiled attempts to keep the shows going on. One was the early arrival of the rainy season, which collapsed the air-raid trenches dug around the base of the huts, bringing them down as well. It took all hands to get the huts quickly rebuilt.\textsuperscript{iv} Instead of new air-raid trenches, Ebiko ordered that all POWs should immediately move to their huts during an air attack and remain there. To ensure compliance, he threatened to bayonet any POW found outside. This policy would have disastrous consequences.

The second event also caused considerable disruption to camp life. The POW administration had received orders to prepare drafts of Nong Pladuk prisoners for overseas deployment to Japan. Among those in the first drafts were Jimmy Walker and Ken Crossley. Transported by train down to Singapore, they were crowded onto “hell ships” and departed for Japan on 2 June.\textsuperscript{v}

\section*{The “Great New Theatre” Debut}

The opening of the long-awaited “great new theatre” in Camp No. 1 took place on 15 June with the Harboured Lights production of \textit{Sawdust, the Greatest Farce since “Charley’s Aunt”}—a takeoff on \textit{Stardust}, their last show. \textit{Sawdust} was a musical comedy featuring the six members of the Crazy Gang playing members of “The Woodwork (but won’t) Family,” along with other characters, in a plot that involved some sort of contract dispute between a Night Club Manager (Fergus Anckorn) and a group of entertainers.\textsuperscript{vi}

One of Bob Gale’s songs for the show, “I Don’t Mind,” expresses what most of the POWs fervently hoped as they worried about their loved ones back home:

\begin{quote}
I don’t mind what happens to me,  
As long as nothing ever happens to you.  
I don’t mind if someone harms me,  
As long as no one ever tries to harm you.  
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{xii} Toosey kept a record of all such brutal treatment so that it might be used in testimony against their captors at the end of the war.  
\textsuperscript{xiv} Of the ten unmarked ships in their convoy, only six reached their destination. The others were sunk by American submarines trying to disrupt the Japanese supply route. Walker and Crossley ended up in Iruka, Japan, where they teamed up with a playwright named “Plum” Warner (who was an Oxford graduate), formed another concert party, “The Iruka Players,” and produced a remarkable series of entertainments until their liberation [Walker, Interview, 20–24 passim].  
\textsuperscript{xi} From the crude artwork on his program cover, it appears that Pritchard did not have the services of anyone who could draw human figures for him, so he made an attempt to draw them himself (see \textbf{Figure 7.20} in the Image Gallery).
William Wilder’s sketch of the “great new theatre” shows a large proscenium theatre sitting on a raised mound of earth with a pitched roof that comes down on either side to cover the offstage areas, thus making them more commodious than the previous ones. Each of the proscenium’s side walls, as well as the front curtain, is decorated with the new Harboured Lights logo. A woven bamboo “awning” shields the front of the stage from the rain. Since lighting was never allowed in Camp No. 1, its likely the roof still contained a large hinged flap that let the sunlight into the upstage areas. As in the previous theatre, the shallow orchestra pit is separated from the audience by a raised mound of earth. Notes on the back of Wilder’s sketch give the theatre’s dimensions: “Height 22’, Width 32’, Length 40’. Stage 20’ long X 22.’ Auditorium 30’ front widening to 60’ back.”

A week later an all-star variety show, Anything Goes, had among its standard format of musical numbers and comic sketches several new faces and unique turns: “Fleas in Custody” (performed by Professor [Major] Mitchell and “Oscar,” his performing flea) and “Nong Pladuk’s First Illusionist,” the N.E.I. performer Rene Kopuit in his first Harboured Lights production. Incorporation of N.E.I. performers from Camp No. 2 in Harboured Lights’ shows was now taking place on a regular basis. Another new face was Frederick “Bunny” Austin who had replaced Johnnie Tap as drummer in the Kings of Swing. Austin had been a Private and Bandsman (Percussionist) with the East Surrey Regiment. During an interview when he was ninety, “Bunny” remembered one verse from “Oh What A Night for Love,” one of Bob Gale’s songs. “It was a humorous song, you know. This one verse was:
A rosy garden may be all very well,
But when the air contains a horrible smell,
She thinks it’s you, she may be right, who can tell?
Oh what a night for love!”

[To hear “Bunny” Austin sing these lyrics, listen to Audio Link 7.3]

With Anything Goes, “Tich” Harrison disappears from the entertainment scene at Nong Pladuk and his second in command, Vic Cameron, takes over responsibilities for set construction. It’s possible that Harrison had been placed on one of the Japan drafts.

William Wilder was also scheduled with one of these Japan Parties, but a clever use of his artistic skills got him removed from the list. Before departing, each POW was examined to see if he not only were fit to travel but would be fit to work when he arrived in Japan. Anckorn recalled the ruse Wilder used to get off the draft:

We all had ulcers and things on our legs and on our feet—and Bill Wilder, on this particular occasion, had a very sore big toe (I think it was an ingrown toenail, or something like that), but he was having difficulty walking. But what he did, before he went on parade for the Japs to examine him, he painted his toe with greens and reds and purples, and all sorts of colors all round it, and it looked disgusting [Chuckles] and horrible, and as soon as the Japs saw his toe they sent him back. So he didn’t go on that party [Laughs]. Oh dear, the things we got up to.

Wilder’s painting skills had probably saved his life.

In Camp No. 2, Geoffrey Adams’ days as a concert party producer were also short lived as he, too, was included on a draft for Japan. He would end up in Omuta, a POW camp where entertainment rarely took place. For the next two months, large numbers of prisoners from Nong Pladuk were sent overseas to Japan, greatly reducing the population of POWs in the camp.

**Reality Check**

As the months dragged on, discouraging news about the long, hard slog it was going to be before victory in the war in Europe could be achieved sank in, and the “quiet optimism” faded. As Allied reconnaissance (“recce”) flyovers became a daily occurrence, raising fears that Nong Pladuk would soon become a target for long-range bombers trying to prevent continued use of the railway, the entertainers would face an even greater challenge in keeping their audiences’ hopes alive.
Because the camp had no effective air raid warning system, “Ace” Connolly and his trumpet were enlisted to provide such a service when notified by the Japanese that an air raid was pending. Fred Knightley remembered one instance when that scheme almost went awry following a beating Connolly had received by a Japanese soldier for some unknown offense.

The serious part of it was that Ace’s lips were split and swollen so that he couldn’t play his trumpet. After this had happened he was called to the Jap guard house and was told to blow the air raid warning as a raid was imminent. Pointing to his lips he told them that it was almost impossible. Anyway he did his best and the camp got the message and went to ground. The raid did not materialize and no one got hurt except the Jap who had beaten Ace because he in turn was beaten by his own Sergeant Major Watanabee [sic] for endangering the lives of the Japs by putting the air raid warning system out of action.55

“Ace” Connolly was never beaten again.

On the second Sunday in July, the Radioptimists presented their next hospital ward tour show, the radio play Home Affairs. This drama dealt with attempts to get a falsely accused condemned prisoner released before it was too late—a theme that certainly carried resonance for the POWs. And Pinky Kerswell, finding his ideal niche as a performer, is credited with providing all the sound effects for the show.56

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55 As with his previous program for the Radioptimists, Pritchard’s piece for Home Affairs explores the techniques of perspective drawing even further. Here he uses an off-center vanishing point toward which the city buildings on right and left recede. In the foreground are the back ends of a number of vehicles, including a double-decker bus, which are also moving into the distance. By using multiple masks, stencils, and limited colors, Pritchard produced one of his most unusual and handsome covers.
The Harboured Lights returned to the stage for a two-week run (13 and 20 July) with another “non-stop variety,” *Any More for Sailing.*

Figure 7.23. Souvenir program for *Any More for Sailing*. Norman Pritchard. Courtesy of Norman Pritchard.

Figure 7.24. Playbill for *Any More for Sailing*. Norman Pritchard. Courtesy of Norman Pritchard.

In marked contrast to the limited range of color used for his previous programs, Pritchard’s program for *Any More for Sailing* explodes with bright color—the result of his recent purchase of a new box of eight tubes of watercolor paint from a Dutch POW [Pritchard, Interview, 10-11]. With its complex and imaginative use of stencils, masks, and spatter creating a multi-layered, three-dimensional look, this program shows Pritchard at the height of his graphic design and printmaking powers.
Besides the concert party regulars performing their turns was a large-cast comedy sketch that
had many new performers, a “topical sketch,” performed by four officers (members of “The Dramatics
Society”), and a fourteen-character two-act play written by Bob Gale.

As the playbill discloses, by the time Any More for Sailing went on, Connolly had lost four of
his former musicians, including Matsy (one of his original group of four), but had gained two new N.E.I.
players, bringing the size of his ensemble down to seven.

“Bums on Seats”

The playbill for Any More for Sailing signals an important change taking place in the content
of Nong Pladuk productions. They were evolving from band or variety-type shows into revues with more
sketches or even full-blown musical comedies. Without fresh input from the outside world, band and variety
shows, even with the capabilities of a gifted songwriter like Bob Gale, were losing their attraction. What did
appeal, as Any More for Sailing reveals, were sketches, plays, and musical comedies with engaging plots
and characters devised by a pool of talented writers. Including more of this type of material in productions
was not only a way to relieve pressure on the musicians but a means to keep the audiences’ “bums on seats.”

Nongpladuk Nonsense, which opened on 27 July, confirms this hypothesis. The show was
Does Not Pay”; followed by a burlesque of it, “Crime Does Pay”; and the resurrection of a favorite sketch
from Keppel Harbour days, “Smiles on the Nile,” in which Hank Phillips repeated his starring role as
Cleopatra, but with Frank Moule, instead of Jimmy Walker, playing Mark Antony “without his pants.”
With thirty-five performers, this large-cast show also had many new faces.

xviii Although simpler in design than his previous one, the program for Nongpladuk Nonsense is rich with color, and here Pritchard returns
to his explorations of free-hand drawing with a playful performing seal and clown figures (see playbill, Figure 7.26 in the Image Gallery).
It opened with a talent competition showcasing new camp discoveries, one of whom was “The Whistle Willie”: William Wilder in his first—and only—appearance on stage playing a tin whistle. “Went down fairly well I think,” he wrote. “There was a prize, judged by the amount of applause; a sketch and two singers competed, however I won! Was presented with $2 on the stage by Colonel Toosey.” Wilder was convinced that his friends, Anckorn and Pritchard, had been clacks in the audience leading the applause.

It wasn’t until 24 August that Camp No. 1 saw the next production, *Hi Spirits*, another Dramatics Society comedy-mystery-thriller. The magical “séance effects” for the show were created by “Wizardus” and included a scene where “two candles actually came up out of their candlesticks and crossed across the table, passing each other on the way, and went back into the other candle sticks . . . [which] brought the house down.” Another “séance effect” involved appearances and disappearances achieved by repeated use of the revolving stage.

In Camp No. 2, De Hollandsche Revue, hard hit by the loss of troops on maintenance and Japan Parties, had not produced a show since May. *Geef Me Nog Een Droppie (Give Me Just One Little Drop More)* was their show for August. Presented on 31 August in celebration of Queen Wilhelmina’s birthday, it, too, like the recent Harboured Lights productions, was composed primarily of sketches. In its second half there was a four-act play, “Klein Duimpje” (Small Duimpje), with such characters as Bibo, Babo, and Bobo, and “De Gelaarsde Kat” (The Gelaarsde Cat) played by “Nigger.”

Everyone knew who “Nigger” was. She was the black female cat who hung around the canteen and was adopted by the POWs as a pet. They were always delighted when she produced another litter of kittens they could play with. It’s possible that “Nigger’s” presence in the show was inspired by the cartoon film character Felix the Cat and represented on stage by a human being in a cat costume.

Instead of the usual small group of musicians, “Ace” Connolly and his Kings of Swing provided the music. Since many Dutch/Indonesian musicians were already in Connolly’s orchestra, this *quid quo pro* arrangement allowed De Hollandsche Revue to have the benefit of a full orchestra for their show.

The First Bombing Raid

The comparatively quiet life in the Nong Pladuk camps was about to come to an end. On 5 September Major Ebiko announced that he was leaving and that Major Chida would become the new camp commandant. That night at 2 a.m., the first long-expected Allied bombing raid took place. Steel wrote about its terrible aftermath in his diary: “As soon as it was possible to move about, we found that four bombs had been placed directly across the centre of the Camp, while another stick had fallen down one side. The scenes were gruesome in the extreme as the bombs had exploded while the POWs were lying asleep, tightly packed in their huts.”

This was the disastrous result of Major Ebiko’s orders confining the POWs to their huts during a bombing raid.

Captain Ewert Escritt, a member of Toosey’s staff, summed up the terrible carnage: “One bomb wounded several Offrs., of whom one died and one lost a leg; 2 other bombs fell on the central hut of the Camp and immediately outside the Hospital, respectively. These 2 caused over 400 casualties, incl. over 90 killed and died of wounds.” Like others, Anckorn tried to escape being placed on the burial detail by volunteering to work that day at the Hashimoto Engineering Works. But the ploy didn’t work.

*And when we came back in the camp, those corpses were still there, and Colonel Toosey met us, and he said, “I want to ask you boys a favor. Now these men have all got to be buried, and the grave is about a half a mile down*
As the burial party made its way to the cemetery, a huge storm with thunder and lightning came up. The deluge of water dissolved the stretchers' fabric, depositing the body parts on the ground. Anckorn called the scene, “Surreal. Awful!”

One unlikely recipient of special commendation in Escritt's report was Sergeant Watanabe, the I. J. A. administrative N.C.O. for Camp No. 1: “One Japanese preferred human duty to self-protection—Sgt. WATANABE, I.J.A. N.C.O. of the Camp, proceeded at once to the bombed area, himself carried to the Hospital one of the first casualties and assisted generally in directing P.O.W. to drains while the raid proceeded.” Since the hospital had been badly damaged in the attack, many of the seriously wounded were immediately transferred to the hospital camp at Nakhon Pathom. One of these was the actor “Ted” Ingram. Once recovered, he would become a major player in the Nakhon Pathom concert party.

Out of this tragedy Norman Pritchard gained a new friend: the Dutch artist Jan van Holthe. “Over one hundred men died that night, including several of Jan’s friends,” Pritchard wrote. “Jan’s hut was burnt down and he lost all his possessions. I was able to help him, by sharing my own meagre supply of paints and paper. . . . He gave me many lessons in perspective and drawing techniques. This joint activity helped us both tremendously.”

**Camp Amalgamation**

After the disastrous air raid, and in response to Colonel Toosey’s protestations, Chida allowed the POWs to dig slit trenches away from the huts for their protection. But in a perverse reaction to Toosey’s insistence that the more vulnerable of the two camps (Camp No. 1) be moved to a safer location, Chida ordered “all the personnel from the second P.O.W. Camp further from the Rly. [Camp No. 2] moved into the more dangerous one. The less vulnerable Camp was thus left empty.” The POWs now believed the Japanese were deliberately trying to protect their supply depot by using the prisoners as human shields. But it’s quite possible that a befuddled Major Chida had confused which camp was which in his orders.

During the amalgamation of Camp No. 2 into Camp No. 1, a new I. J. A. administrative N.C.O., Sergeant Takashima, was put in charge of the combined camp. In retaliation for the bombing attack, he immediately limited the number of performances to one every three weeks—a policy meant to have a negative effect on the prisoners’ morale. And when entertainment did resume, it would not be in their “great new theatre.” One detail not mentioned in Escritt’s report of the destruction caused by the air raid was the fact that the theatre had been so badly damaged that it had to be rebuilt, which would take some time.

With the two camps being combined into one, a decision was made to amalgamate the two concert parties as well. There would be no further shows by De Hollandsche Revue in Nong Pladuk.
And Captain Escritt wasn’t the only person to acknowledge N.C.O. Watanabe’s humanitarian assistance during the raid; so did the concert party—and publicly. One of the farcical sketches by the Crazy Gang in *Band Scramble* contained the following lines: “What a Temple! ‘What a Chapel!’ ‘What an Abbey!’ (Wa-ta-nabe). And we did it two or three times,” Pritchard recounted. “And he [Watanabe] clearly acknowledged us afterwards because we were so anxious to applaud what he’d done . . . that we used, ‘What an Abbey!’” The literal translation of that phrase, as well as its context, had gotten it past the censor. Its real meaning only became apparent when spoken aloud by an actor on stage.

Since the audiences now contained a large number of Dutch/Indonesians, there was a concerted effort to include as many N.E.I. performers in the shows as possible. *Band Scramble* had Maxie de Vlught (promoted as “Java’s Cab Calloway”) and the “Continental Dancers” Frans and Scippy in guest spots. Anckorn had fond memories of these latter two performers:

*Frans and Skippy were Dutch and really excellent dancers. Skippy was exactly like Marlene Dietrich! Wilhelm something or other . . . was as queer as a clockwork orange—and dare I say it—to us at the time, she looked gorgeous. He was a partner of a black, Javanese fellow [Frans]. And they used to dance ravishing tangos and dances. She (he) had the most wonderful gowns—God knows where the material came from (we scarcely had material enough for a handkerchief).*

*I mean, you’d swear he was a girl. And people would cheer like mad when she came on. I say, “she,” because that’s all you could have [thought]—blond, blue-eyed, and with a face like a doll.*
Band Scramble had been an appropriate title for the show in more ways than one. Not only had the Harboured Lights “scrambled” to get a show on as soon as possible—and at a new location—to counter the low morale caused by the loss of life in the bombing attack, but Connolly’s orchestra, either from death or injury, had been “scrambled” as well. Six new musicians were added to the group, five of whom were Dutch/Indonesian.

The New Theatre Reopens

On Wednesday, 18 October, a Pritchard program cover proudly announced the reopening of the rebuilt “great new theatre”: “Nong Pladuk Theatres request the pleasure of your company at the New Theatre . . . for a performance of Invitation to Murder,” another original comedy-thriller produced by the Dramatics Society. Unlike the earlier comedy-thriller Preying Guests, which had been cancelled for “having murderous thoughts,” there had been no objection on the part of the Japanese to this production.

“Toothy” Martin, the camp dentist, remembered being cast in this play as a dashing spy: “The Saint or 007 (“Ian Sinclair”), and had to embrace Ferron beautifully dressed as a passionate female spy (“Lorna Winkworth”), with great cries from the audience, ‘Kiss her, Toothy!’ ‘Have a go, Toothy!’” (Whether he did or not was not revealed.)

Given Takashima’s new restrictions, it was three weeks before another show went on. Rhythm Roundabout, which opened on 8 November, included De Hollandsche Revue’s leading “Conferencier” (“Master of Ceremonies”) and comedian, de Zwart, and a reappearance by the popular Dutch dance duo, Skippy and Frans. Henceforth, these two dancers would become regulars in the Harboured Lights’ productions.

The Second Bombing Raid

In the second week of November, another bombing raid took place during the night but incurred only minor damage and no casualties. As a further consequence of this raid, however, life in Nong Pladuk became, in the words of one POW, “very severe.”

Suspicious that the POWs were somehow in communication with the Allied Forces, the I. J. A. required all valuables and writing instruments be handed in. Not willing to comply with these orders, Wilder, Pritchard, and van Holthe had to make doubly sure their paper and art supplies were well hidden, for they would be severely punished if caught. Under these tightened restrictions, shows could be cancelled seemingly on a whim by Sergeant Takashima, and Charles Steel, for one, was not happy about the situation: “He will cancel a concert in ten minutes before it begins or suddenly announce that there must be no talking on stage, no laughter among the audience. Or he will stop a football match if he sees the Koreans [guards] enjoying it. Or, perhaps, send half our [canteen] staff to work without notice. I’d like to kill him!”

Takashima’s intent, of course, was to harass and dishearten the POWs—and the Koreans, too, it appears—from taking any pleasure in their leisure-time activities while the war was going badly for the Japanese.

The first show produced after the second bombing raid was Damages: One Hour of Music, another radio bandstand variety show that opened on 22 November. The title is a pun on Gamages, a well-known

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xix With only one further personnel change, this Kings of Swing orchestra would remain stable for the rest of the prisoners' time in Nong Pladuk.  
xx A casualty of the new restrictions was a musical revue, The Sheik, that had been scheduled for 24 October.  
xxi For the Rhythm Roundabout show Pritchard’s continued his profligate use of color on the cover as well as on the playbill in a design that visualizes the show’s title (see Figure 7.28 and Figure 7.29 in the Image Gallery).
London department store. But in the best barracks humor tradition, it also referred to the state of their own “shop.” Like its predecessors, it had an all-star cast combining British and Dutch/Indonesian performers, including the N.E.I. violinist Nico Brunz, who “always started the show with a rousing piece on his violin – quite often backed with the orchestra,” Anckorn remembered. “And it was just like a theatre in England, you know, the overture. . . . And he was a brilliant violinist and we liked him.”

Anckorn Takes a Flyer

It was about this time that Fergus Anckorn was involved in another incident that was even more threatening to his future in the camp than the previous one had been.

But did I tell you about the Korean who got hold of me one day? Walked over to me and said (he spoke a few words of English—in the whole time I only met two who knew anything of English).

And he came over, and he said to me, “You magic man?” I said, “Yes.” And he said to me, “You have beautiful hands.” I thought, yeah, you know that. What’s this?

And I said, “I don’t know you.” He said, “I see you in Wampo.” So he must have seen me doing some of these things and remembered me. And I said, “How do you know me?” He said, “I see you. I magic man, too.” I said, “Are you?”

He said, “Yes. You teach me magic?” I said, “Yes.” (His name was Tomimoto.) So he said, “You, tonight, come to my house.” (He called it “my house.”) So I said, “Oh, I don’t think I can do that.” “You come, you’re my guest.”

So, I went over to his barracks. Now, the whole of the camp area was [riddled with] air raid trenches, ‘cause we used to get bombed a lot. You couldn’t walk without having to step over one, in any direction.

So I went to him—I asked the Colonel [Toosey] first, “Is it alright that I go? Because he says he’s a magician.” And he said, “Anything you can do to foster a little bit of feeling, fine.” (I wanted to make quite certain that I didn’t get a reputation of being “Jap Happy,” ‘cause that’s a terrible thing.) So I went.

[To hear the unexpected and shocking outcome of this attempt at friendship between two enemies sharing an interest in magic, listen to Audio Link 7.4.]
A Third Bombing Raid

Intent on destroying the strategic importance of Nong Pladuk, the Allies unleashed a third major bombing raid on 3 December while the POWs were eating their evening meal. The first wave of bombers attacked the engineering workshops, the storehouse, and the POW cookhouse. A second wave included incendiary bombs that burnt down the hospital. Anckorn, who was out of his hut when the planes came over very low, dove into a slit trench and ended up being buried alive for several minutes when a bomb burst on top of him. Several POWs were killed in the raid. Following the attack, Colonel Toosey made a strong protest to Chida about the vulnerability of some of the POW accommodations, and this time the cookhouse and personnel in several huts nearest the railway were evacuated to new and safer areas.

In retaliation for this new bombing attack, further shows were cancelled—until Christmas. Morale among the POWs now reached an all-time low, and it became more important than ever to produce shows that would keep their spirits going. As Christmas approached, rumors of an elaborate production of the traditional pantomime *Babes in the Wood* were spread through the camp. At the very least, the rumors provided anticipation of future delights.

Back in 1943, the POWs up the line at Takanun had been able to pull the wool over their Japanese censor’s eyes about the real significance of their version of the pantomime, even though they had openly called it *Babes in Thailand*. As Norman Pritchard reveals, the POWs at Nong Pladuk were not so fortunate:

(By the way, most Nip interpreters could read little English, and an Allied interpreter would invariably be on hand to explain doubtful passages—this meant translating the lot!). When “Babes in the Wood” was explained, the official Jap reply was—No, you may not perform this pantomime. We consider that the Babes represent you prisoners of war, the Wicked Uncles refer to the Japanese, and Robin Hood and his Merry Men . . . were the Allied Parachutists coming to rescue the POW’s.

Not deterred by the refusal, the entertainers rose to the occasion once again and on Christmas Day, instead of the panto, presented *Escapado Argentino: The Sequel*, Bob Gale’s follow-up to his earlier smash hit. This time it was Pritchard’s Dutch friend, Jan van Holthe, who designed the scenery for the show.
Figure 7.31. Souvenir program for *Escapado Argentino: The Sequel*.

Figure 7.32. Playbill for *Escapado Argentino*. William Wilder. Courtesy of Anthony Wilder.
For this *Sequel* the original cast had been increased significantly from fourteen to twenty-four players (see playbill above). Because of the death and injuries caused by the bombings—as well as absences due to the maintenance and Japan parties—only a few of the original cast members remained: Basil Ferron repeated his role as Rosita, and Frank and Hank appeared once again as Ben and Joe Speedo. (Would they repeat the famous gag line from the earlier show? Their audiences would be waiting for it and overjoyed to have their expectations fulfilled.) One intriguing twist to the new plot involved Pinky Kerswell playing “Ben Spedo’s [sic] double.”

**The Last Bombing Raid**

Any New Year’s Eve festivities planned for Nong Pladuk were forestalled by a fourth bombing attack that occurred during the late afternoon on 31 December. The results, again, were devastating: several men were killed, Hashimoto’s workshop heavily damaged, the hospital burnt down, the cookhouse destroyed, and several other buildings severely affected. For many, the psychological damage was even worse. “Men are walking about with just a ball bag on,” observed a badly shaken Steel, “having lost all other kit. Many men with mental disorders. The strain of being Aunt Sallies [sitting ducks] is rather great.”

1945

In spite of the attack, the Harboured Lights went ahead with their production of *Crazy Café* on New Year’s Day as planned. It would divert attention from the attack and help keep morale up. *Crazy Café* was a compilation of favorite turns from their 1944 variety shows. “Johnnie” von Holthe again designed the scenery.

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**Figure 7.33. Souvenir program for Crazy Café.**

**Figure 7.34. Souvenir program for Café Craze.**
Norman Pritchard. Courtesy of Norman Pritchard.

Both Wilder and Pritchard produced programs for this show. Pritchard’s has a large, three-dimensional figure of a saluting café doorman. And the artist who drew the human figure on his cover this
time was Jan van Holthe as “Pritchard Publicity” had become “Pritchard—van Holthe Publicity.”

**Farewell Nong Pladuk**

With the war going badly for Japan, the captors began to fear that the POW officers might at some point lead their men in a breakout and join up with the Free Thai guerillas. To forestall such an event, all the officers in all the POW camps, except for a few essential medical personnel, were ordered removed to the new officers-only camp at Kanburi by the end of January. There they would face some of their greatest challenges in keeping entertainment going (see Chapter 9: “The Battle for Concerts”). This phased departure eventually claimed the Harboured Lights’ remarkable producer-director, Lieutenant Allum, who had inspired his entertainers to persevere no matter what the circumstances. The concert party carried on until he left.

On 10 January there was an *Impromptu Show*, followed a week later by a show called *Three Moods*, with Jan van Holthe returning Pritchard’s recent favor by inviting him to join in designing the setting.

![The Harboured Lights present Three Moods.](image)

*Figure 7.35. Souvenir program cover for Three Moods. Norman Pritchard and Jan van Holthe. Courtesy of Eve Allum.*

Pritchard and van Holthe’s program is rich with color and caricatures that show the comics Hank Phillips and Frank Moule, the saxophonist Bob Gale, and the Dutch violinist Nico Brunz (see Figure 7.36 in the Image Gallery for the playbill).

On 31 January, *Farewell Nong Pladuk*—the last show produced in Nong Pladuk—took place. With
all the loss of life and limb suffered in the bombing attacks, it was a bittersweet celebration.

It wasn’t long before the other ranks, too, received their marching orders. They were to be sent three hundred miles to the east to start construction of two airfields at Ubon. The POWs would be glad to put Nong Pladuk behind them. Once a theatre could be established at the new location, “Ace” Connolly and his Kings of Swing—and all the other British and Dutch/Indonesian entertainers—would make sure the shows still went on (see Chapter 10: “Strike A New Note!”).

Endnotes

1 Escritt, in Toosey, 15.
2 Toosey, 10.
3 Toosey, 11.
4 Toosey, 11.
5 Anonymous, IWM 95/9/1,196.
6 Baume, 47.
7 Kershaw, 63.
8 Kershaw, 63.
10 Dewey, Judy & Stuart, 40.
11 Anonymous, IWM 95/9/1, 196.
12 IWM 9165 Misc. 116 (Item 1834).
13 IWM 9165 Misc. 116 (Item 1834).
14 IWM 9165 Misc. 116 (Item 1834).
15 Best, 95.
16 Pritchard, Interview, 51.
17 Anckorn, Interview, 62.
18 Pritchard, “the undefeated,” 5.
20 Pritchard, Interview, 70; Anckorn, Interview, 55.
21 Pritchard, “the undefeated,” 3.
22 Wilder, n. p.
23 Toosey, 11.
24 Pritchard, Interview, 85.
25 Anckorn, Interview, 50.
26 Summers, 231.
27 Pritchard, “the undefeated,” 3.
28 Anckorn, Interview, 47.
29 Pritchard, Interview, 28-29.
30 IWM Misc. 116, Item 1834.
31 Best, 108.
32 Walker, Of Rice, 51.
33 Coombes, 140.
34 Walker, Of Rice, 51.
35 Walker, Of Rice, 51.
36 IWM Misc. 116, Item 1834.
37 Pritchard, Interview, 51-52.
39 Pritchard, Handwritten note on photocopy provided to author.
Pritchard, Program Collection.
Pritchard, "the undefeated," 1.
Best, 100; Baume, 125.
Best, 100.
Anckorn, Interview, 54.
Anckorn, Interview, 54.
Toosey, 13.
Toosey, 14.
IWM Misc. 116, Item 1834.
Anckorn, E-mail, 20 October 2005.
All dimensions taken from Wilder's sketch.
Pritchard, Program Collection.
Anckorn, Recorded comments on draft, 1
Adams, 122, 184-185.
Dewey, Judy & Stuart, 40-41.
Anckorn, Recorded comments on draft, 3.
Pritchard, Program Collection.
Best, 126.
Best, 140, 103.
Escrìtt, in Toosey, 15.
Anckorn, Recorded comments on draft, 3.
Anckorn, Hand-written notes on draft, 31.
Escrìtt, in Toosey, 15.
Pritchard, Hand-written notes, n.d.
Escrìtt, in Toosey, 16.
Pritchard, Interview, 14.
Anckorn, E-mail, 20 October 2005.
Composite description from Anckorn, Interview, 59, and E-mail, 1 July 2004.
Program Cover for Invitation to Murder, Pritchard Collection.
Pritchard, Hand-written note accompanying photocopy of program.
Martin, Letter, n.d.
Best, 107.
Best, 108.
Anckorn, Recorded comments on draft, 5.
Anckorn, Interview, 64-66.
Anckorn, Hand-written notes on draft, 31.
Toosey, 16.
Pritchard, "the undefeated," 1-2.
Best, 110.