

## John Adams Nauen 09-03-1916 to 22-03-1996

Having served as a Lieutenant (R. E.) with the Madras Sappers and Miners (as they were then called) in an Indian Field Company (362) in the Imphal region during the period in 19<sup>1</sup>+2 and 1943 following the "Retreat" (from Burma) and up to the end of the Siege (of Imphal), I was particularly interested in the excellent biography of Slim ( "The Standard Bearer" by Ronald Lewin) whom I and countless others of 4 Corps and of 14th Army have greatly admired.

I was especially involved in the event referred to in a note on pages 167 and 168 of that book: that is, the shattering by suicidal (?) Japs of the suspension bridge some 40-50 miles from Imphal along the Bishenpur-to-Silchar track which followed the old telegraph line between India and Burma 0 this is hilly, wild country, full of minerals of all kinds, highly inaccessible and physically of extreme beauty.

It is also very unhealthy.

Perhaps the War Diary with the official details is available to this day but I still recall the night this way: I woke to see a flash, to hear a bang, some sound of running feet along the bridge deck, a few shots from the sentries on my Section's Side of the river and likewise from the other and the bridge was gone.

"No survivors" it says: of that, regrettably, there was no proof which satisfied me.

I was probably the closest officer to the scene as my "billet" was a tiny ledge just over one end of the bridge on the cliff which formed the boundary on my side of the river and which, on the other side, was even steeper. Chat ledge was to be my "home" for three months with a piece of stout canvas overhead to keep out some of the torrential rains in which we were soon engulfed for it was monsoon time, together with a ground sheet and one blanket on the bare rocky earth. We were tough in those days and certainly lived rough.

Next morning there were urgent consultations ("appreciations of situation") and two days later we completed a very adequate causeway which allowed "communications" – if that is the correct word – to be resumed between one bank and the other, at least until the river flooded with the arrival of the rains very little later.

Meanwhile, longer term plans were laid: to reconstruct the bridge and fast.

Basically, three Sapper and Miner companies were on the track supposedly to widen and improve it following the departure of a Gunner outfit who had earlier done some sterling work. (This is recorded in a book published at the time in India called <sup>ft</sup> lthe Lampi <sup>tt</sup> – I have a copy somewhere: )

For this purpose we had been pulled out of Irnphal immediately following our own withdrawal from Kongkang on the Palel-Tamu road which we had been building and surfacing to an <sup>t t</sup> all-weather" standard. We were used to isolation and improvisation having, for some time, successfully manned a small <sup>f</sup> box <sup>T</sup> against rugged assault by the enemy. We were ordered to leave behind, in Imphal base, all our **Engineer** stores and had little else but picks and shovels.

So to the task. As a professional gas engineer my skills were initially de-  
ployed to making charcoal, since otherwise we had no hope of reforging the metal  
badly bent or broken in the explosion. We needed fuel.

Next, and I was given the task of reconstruction, we secured a small forge. It needs to be understood that our links with any base where stores were held were most tortuous. In one direction we were cut off by the Japs from Imphal. In the other, about 80 miles of narrow track to Silchar, one of the wettest places on earth and whence comes some of the finest Assam tea.

All ammunition, food and military stores had to come along this track in jeeps of which we had a dozen, four or five of which were operational at any one time. To drive along the track was a slow painstaking business in the lowest gear ratio and it required two full locks of the steering at each of dozens of steep hair-pin bends, up and over the high hills, which were also of great scenic beauty, to Silchar.

As an occasional booster, we secured one or two air drops of food, ammunition and, yes, of mail, together with copies of our own newspaper, SAC. mose Dakotas were magnificent and their pilots seemingly imperturbable.

The first lot of stores included an anvil and some native bellows with which to make our forge. Also we procured one sand-bag of coal to light the fire which was to be sustained with the home-produced charcoal and an old vertical hand-drill on a stand.

We had luck with our human resources, as people seem to be called these d ays. A Sapper had been quietly working as our medical orderly for many months. chance remark elicited that he once had been a blacksmith (or perhaps a mate) in his South Indian village: and a real craftsman he was. Within a week of lighting the forge and from a pick or two used as raw material (and duly written-off?) he had made a set of smith 's tools complete, sharpened and tempered. (Later he went on to produce a good side-line of kukris - regretfully I failed to get one for myself. ) The bridge, a tattered mess of old iron in the river bed, was long and narrow, and, at a height of about 80 ft. over the river, had been suspended (over concrete gantries) in the space between the two high banks forming a ravine cr causeway along which the river flowed at that point. (The scene of the main feature in the film "Bridge on the River Kwai" is not dissimilar: we too bathed in the pools unguarded at times risk of war.)

To get on or off the bridge on to the elevated access tracks each side required much manoeuvring of the steering wheel of a jeep since the tracks to the bridge were at right angles to the line of the bridge, This had been fine for mules in earlier days, but was bad for the vehicles we used. The bridge, by the way, was about 100m long (I recall) and exactly the width of jeep.

It was necessary quickly to extract all the material from the river, since the monsoon rains were due. Then we had to sort the frail steelwork of the structure which was built up only from angles one and a half inches wide.

Our radioed call to Corps for the details of the formula of a catenary which enables one to define the distance at intervals from a horizontal datum up to the curved (elliptical) shape naturally taken by the ropes of a suspension bridge went unanswered, to this day 0

Fortunately my brother-officers were all clever people and they solved the problem from first (engineering) principles. .

And so work commenced. We dared to "splice; ' not the mainbrace but 3-inch steel wire ropes, but hedged our bet (and it is a gamble that an "amateur" splice be made to hold) with some enormous bulldog clips, obtained from a tea plantation near Silchar. We re-manufactured in situ whole sections of bridge. We relaid the ropes, tensioning them with a jeep recovery winch we "happened" to have. We recurved the steel (flat) hangers. We rebuilt the roadway itself. During the construction our fearless Sappers literally dangled over the gorge and the swollen, fast flowing river below unsupported and unprotected except from plank fastened to the bare wires we had re-strung.

We fought off Jap patrols and increased their list of casualties. We patrolled the jungle ourselves. We guarded our perimeter, with fixed and mobile defence, day and night.

Food was never plentiful. Our troops including V.C.O's (Viceroy Commissioned offices (now J.C. O' s), N.C. O' s and Sappers had rice and a fraction of "curry" plus much hot, sweet tea and some chappatis. The few British officers and N.C.O' s lived entirely on bully- beef and biscuits (supplemented by an occasional jungli- chicken killed with a single barrel shot gun when they came to the paths to "scratch") as well as tea ad lib. For recreation the officers, almost to a man, played "bridge" - the other sort - when not on duty in daylight hours. At night officers were connected to the sentry on duty by lengths of string tied to the wrist so as to be woken for slightest sign of enemy activity.

In two months the job was done. On completion we were ordered out, taking a long way round via the Brahamaputra to reach Kohima again from Dimapur, not long after it was relieved and the road south to Imphal re-opened.

We were awed by the Kohima (tennis-court) battle-ground and moved by the immortal words of the "Memorial" to the casualties, already in place. I have a treasured photograph of the permanent memorial there - given to me by my fellow directors when I retired recently from the Company I worked for all my working life, a firm of international process engineering contractors. The picture was supplied by the British War Graves Commission in London.

Our own casualties had been light fortunately and, unlike the preceding monsoon season, malaria caused us almost no trouble, thanks to Mepacrine.

The journey on from there is another story.

By improvisation and doggedness we left a better bridge behind than we had found prior to its damage just after we arrived and before the "dushman" had the audacity to blow it up. How it was done remains mystery to me. A pressure charge? Doubtful. Limited explosives and luck? Yes. I think the Japs were lucky to break the steel ropes so effectively in one quick dash. They were brave.

Written in 1981