

THE STORY OF A TOOTHBRUSH

On the 15th February, 1942 Australian and British armed forces, under the command of General Percival, surrendered to the Japanese advancing down the Malay peninsular. Among the men in the Australian forces was Lieutenant Lindsay Orr (Ret.) 3rd Division Australian Services Corps, who has kindly presented the author with a toothbrush which was manufactured in Changi Prison; the toothbrush, and its story, are valued mementoes of his comrades' ingenuity under conditions of appalling stress and privation.

The toothbrush (Fig. 1), bearing the inscription "H. Sterilized made in U.S.A. ROYAL", was given to Lieutenant Orr while he was in hospital in Singapore recovering from a leg wound; and before he was transferred to Changi Prison. In the camp the original bristles finally wore away so that all that was left was the handle. The brush was renovated in the "toothbrush factory", one of many workshops set up by the troops and, in this case, managed by the British and Australian dentists. There, longitudinal cuts were made through the back surface of the head of the brush, and the

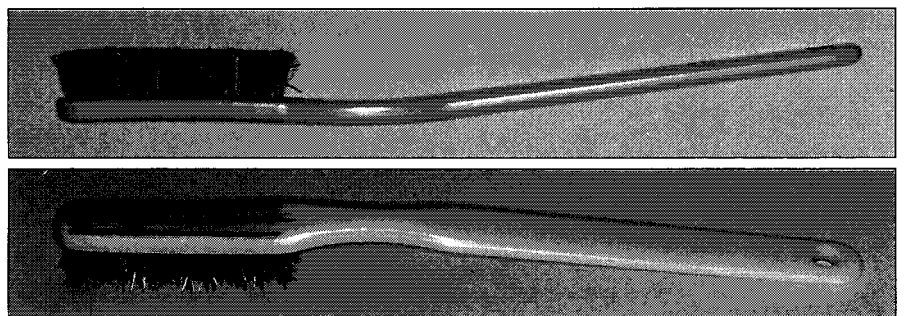


Fig. 1.

bristles, obtained from the husk of a coconut, were re-set in the original holes, in pitch extracted from bitumen retrieved from the roads near the camp. The brush lasted for the next three-and-a-half years and was "rebristled" several times before Lieutenant Orr was repatriated.

Oral hygiene was particularly important under the conditions prevailing in Changi Camp. Vitamin deficiency, owing to the prisoners' poor diet, caused looseness and sometimes loss of teeth, both of which Lieutenant Orr experienced; but with restored diet and periodontic treatment on his return home to Australia, he was able to overcome these problems. To combat the vitamin

deficiency, the prisoners made a soup from grass and each man was obliged to have some each day; the addition of fish offcuts and rice probably added some Vitamin A.

Lieutenant Orr had four or five amalgam fillings inserted whilst in Changi Camp. The amalgam was made of mercury smuggled into the camp and coinage filings. These amalgams lasted in his mouth for over thirty years.

Dr Duncan McLaren has kindly provided photographs of one of his patients, who was also a prisoner during the war. He was imprisoned in Thailand where a fellow prisoner, a dentist, filled his upper anterior teeth with a similar amalgam; it is still in place today, as shown in Figure 2.

Lieutenant Orr can remember the names of some of the Australian dentists; but unfortunately not those of their British counterparts. Perhaps there are some British dentists who were in Changi who might read this article; if so, would they please contact the author, or Lieutenant Orr, at the following address: 69 Wedge Street, Kyneton, 3444, Victoria, Australia. The Australian dentists involved in this work were Major Darryl Porter (N.S.W.), Major Harold Park (Vic.), Captain John Rossiter (Vic.), Captain Clareborough (Vic.), Captain Fred Finger (W.A.) and Captain W. (Bill) Scullen (S.A.).

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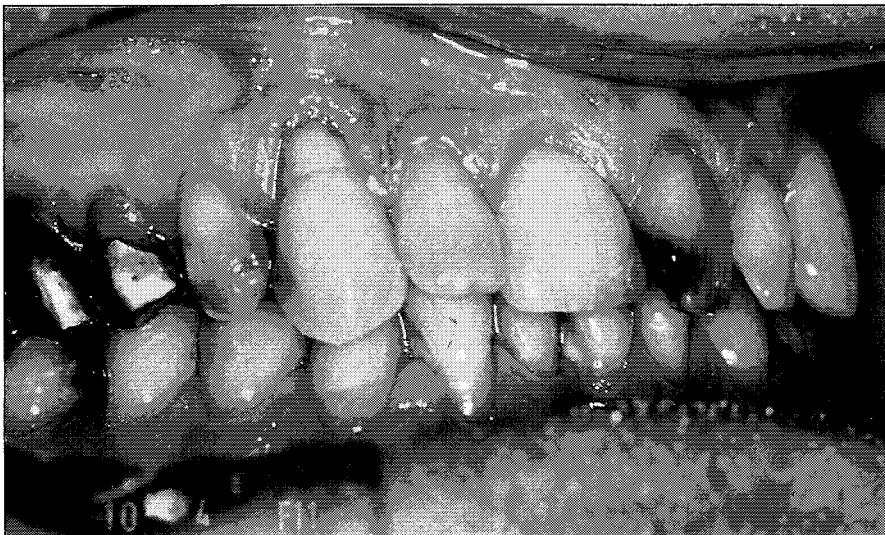


Fig. 2.