



Peter Rhodes

Peter Rhodes, who has died aged 89, was taken prisoner in 1942 after the fall of Singapore and spent the rest of the war in a Japanese PoW camp.

Rhodes, a surveyor gunner serving with 155 (Lanarkshire Yeomanry) Field Regiment RA (155 FR), was on Singapore Island in February 1942 when he learned that the British forces had capitulated.

His regiment destroyed its weapons and trucks and marched to Changi Jail.

A few days later, he joined a working party which was given the revolting job of clearing bodies from 600 yards of beach. He subsequently worked in the port as a stevedore and became skilful at smuggling goods into the camp.

He also designed and painted the sets for the camp concerts. Permission to borrow clothes or materials, when given, was almost invariably accompanied by a clout on the jaw.

Rhodes got a poisoned foot and had to stay at Changi when the rest of 155 FR moved on. He was unjustly accused of stealing tools, ordered to dig his own grave and underwent three mock executions – each of which he believed would end his life – before being beaten up and returned to his cell.

In May 1943 he was one of 900 men who crammed into a small cargo ship; the "rust bucket" was nicknamed the Mukki Maru and set off for Moji on the Straits of Shiminoseki, Japan.

A day out from Formosa (now Taiwan), they ran into a typhoon. The next day, Rhodes spotted a torpedo streaking towards them. He shouted a warning and was rewarded for his vigilance by being knocked into the hold by the end of a rifle butt. The torpedo missed the bows by 30ft.

At Moji, the prisoners were put on a train to Orio before being marched in the dark for two hours to a mining camp. Rhodes later discovered that the distance could have been covered in 15 minutes; their captors had been trying to disorientate them.

Rhodes was in the mining camp for two and a half years. The back-breaking work, brutal guards and inadequate rations took their toll on his slight frame and he spent many weeks in hospital. In

July 1945 the PoWs learned that, in the event of an Allied invasion, they would have been marched into the mine, the entrances would have been sealed by explosives and they would have been entombed.

Peter Stephenson Rhodes was born at New Moston, Manchester, on July 8 1919 and educated at Rockferry High School, Birkenhead. After training as an architect in Liverpool with Clarke & Sons, he was called up.

He had a facility with trigonometry, slide rules and theodolites and was posted to 155 FR.

One night in his barracks, he was awakened by shouting and a flash of light. In the doorway he saw the dim outline of a policeman. "I have a woman outside," said the special constable, "who claims that one of you fellows has pinched her knickers." The constable entered with the woman, who was immediately recognised as "Carnwath Kate", a lady of uncertain age and dubious reputation. The sergeant ordered everyone to "Sit to attention!" Rhodes and his comrades sat bolt upright in their beds but, in the bunk next to his nobody stirred. The blankets were pulled back to reveal a soldier, fully clothed and still wearing his boots. "That's 'him!'" shrieked Kate, who retrieved her property and was hustled outside.

In March 1941, 155 FR sailed from Greenock to India and arrived in Malaya in August. In November they were supporting a regiment of Gurkhas near Kampar. On one occasion, Rhodes was invited by the Gurkhas to look around their trench. A bag was held open for inspection. It was full of human ears.

On another, he was asked by some Gurkhas to share their lunch.

They were squatting in a circle in the middle of which was a large white enamel plate. On it was placed the head of a Japanese soldier, complete with cap.

The Japanese aircraft proved very effective in bombing 155 FR's vehicles. The gunners, however, were ordered not to fire back. When Rhodes could stand this no longer, he and his comrades left an unserviceable truck in a clearing as "bait" and concealed themselves behind the trees. When the enemy aircraft came over, they opened up with a Bren, Tommy guns and Lee-Enfield's, and brought it down; but they had to keep quiet about it.

After the dropping of the atom bombs, Rhodes returned to San Francisco by a combination of American cruiser, B24 bomber and troop ship. He arrived back at Southampton in November 1945.

He returned to Clarke & Sons for a spell but gave in his notice after his boss, in his view, promoted the wrong man. In 1953 he moved to Bangor, Northern Ireland, to take up an appointment as a structural engineer in the architects branch of the Ministry of Finance.

He was eventually chief structural engineer in the Province's public sector and, during the recent Troubles, was an assessor for bomb damage.

The cruelty of his overseer in the mine, a man nicknamed "The Pig", haunted Rhodes for years. In 1970 he returned to Japan and met him again. This gave him some respite.

Rhodes was a founder member of the Belfast Geologists' Society and also enjoyed amateur theatricals and field sketching.

He published *To Japan to Lay a Ghost* (1991), an account of his experiences in the PoW camp. Peter Rhodes died on June 3. He married, in 1947, Dorothy (Dea) Critchley. She predeceased him and he is survived by their daughter.

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I did an unsuccessful search for a photo of the Mukki Maru instead I found a website about the Allied POWs who met an untimely end when the ships they were being transported to Japan on were sunk by American & British submarines.

I was Gob smacked to read that 21,650 POWs went down with those ships. Ed.