Flora and Fauna

painted by Allied Prisoners in Siam 1942-1945

"Flora and Fauna painted by Allied prisoners in Siam, 1942-1945"

10th December - 23rd December 1970

10–6 p.m. Sat 10–1 p.m.
ADMISSION BY CATALOGUE 10/6
In aid of the Far Eastern Prisoners of War Association

THE SLADMORE GALLERY
32 Bruton Place
Berkeley Square, W.1
01-499-0365

Lord and Lady Mountbatten addressing Allied prisoners-of-war in Changi Jail, Singapore, 14th September 1945

Foreword

Admiral of The Fleet The Earl Mountbatten of Burma, K.G., P.C., G.C.B., O.M., G.C.S.I., G.C.I.E., G.C.V.O., D.S.O., F.R.S.

I was delighted to accept the invitation to open the "Flora and Fauna of Siam" Exhibition at The Sladmore Gallery not only because the proceeds from the sale of this catalogue are being donated to the Far East Prisoners-of-War Fund which does so much splendid work for the survivors and dependents of Allied Prisoners-of-War, but because I feel that this unique collection of paintings illustrates the super human spirit displayed by those gallant men, and women as well, who were incarcerated in camps throughout South East Asia, living in indescribable conditions.

My wife and I visited many of those prisons after the Japanese surrender and whilst we were horrified by the way in which these poor people had been treated, we were proud of their tenacity and ingenuity in devising ways and means of making life a little more tolerable not only for themselves but for their comrades as well.

The leadership shown by Lieutenant Colonel Johnson is a fine example of the fighting spirit which existed among so many thousands of Allied Prisoners-of-War, and I am sure that, like me, the visitors to this exhibition will be inspired by the courage they displayed in the face of what must have seemed to them endless misery.

These remarkable paintings, seen in public for the first time, were made by Allied prisoners working on the Burma-Siam Railway during the last war. The artists were inspired by the enthusiasm of their camp commander, Lt. Col. A.A. Johnson, M.C., of the 4th Battalion of the Suffolk Regiment; a keen naturalist all his life, he took an immediate interest in the abundant natural life of the jungle to which they had been taken. He collected many specimens from which these paintings were made, providing at the time a welcome distraction for the men involved, and now a faithful record of the local wildlife.

Colonel Johnson kept the paintings successfully hidden throughout captivity and subsequently preserved them as a unique collection which this Gallery is proud to be allowed to exhibit.

We are grateful to Mr. Ronald Hastain, OBE, a fellow-prisoner with Colonel Johnson, for giving a first-hand account on the following page of the conditions in which this collection was created, and to all those who have helped to prepare this Exhibition.

We would like to thank the photographers, Alan Holmes, 15 Spinfield Mount, Marlow, and the Cavendish Photographic Co. Ltd., 28 Bruton Street, W.1, also Baron Publishing of Church Street, Woodbridge, Suffolk, for their professional assistance.

THE SLADMORE GALLERY

Introduction

During 1943 and the early part of 1944 Allied prisoners-of-war in the hands of the Japanese toiled on the building of the Burma – Siam Railway. They occupied encampments along the northern bank of the River Kwai Noi and that of the Menam River of which the former is a tributary.

The terrain for the most part was monsoon jungle – thick tropical forest sparsely inhabited, and increasingly mountainous in the vicinity of the Burma – Siam border.

Shortly after the fall of Singapore in 1942 senior officers of the rank of full Colonel and above had been taken away by the Japanese and sent to Formosa and Manchuria. Lt. Colonels were left as battalion commanders and were eventually made responsible for the working groups sent to Thailand and Burma.

It was in this way that Lt. Colonel A.A. Johnson, M.C., who had arrived in the Far East with the 18th Division comprising battalions of the Royal Norfolks, the Suffolk and Cambridgeshire Regiments, became a camp commandant in captivity. Not before participating, however, in the battle for Singapore, where he received a chest wound.

Through the chain of POW camps in Thailand Lt. Col. Johnson's reputation was considerable. He was, understandably, familiarly known and referred to as "Ack, Ack". I had heard of his interest in natural history before I arrived at 226K Camp in September of 1943 which was under his command.

The trek to this new camp had been particularly arduous. On arrival we found that owing to sickness little had been done by way of preparation by the advance party. Rain hampered all activity and then cholera broke out, which added to the horrors of the situation. Eventually, however, the weather improved and work on the camp site was easier. Colonel Johnson was everywhere, urging on the work of improvement and personally supervising the construction of huts of bamboo and attap.

After the war I described this "brisk, dapper British commander" as follows:–

" . . . . . He himself set the hallmark for appearance, bearing and conduct; and it was an example which we followed with pride.

"This officer, with his healthy optimism, his courage, his impartiality, and passionate interest in the wild life of the jungle, showed us the way . . . . . I and many others owe him a debt of gratitude".

"Ack, Ack" would go off into the jungle to seek specimens of orchids which he kept and nurtured in a specially built extension to his hut. His enthusiasm was infectious and other POWs were always looking out for "orchids for the Colonel". He also collected butterflies and stored specimens in old tins for identification on his return to civilisation.

In one camp he discovered that some of his compatriots had artistic talents. He encouraged the drawing and painting of the birds, flowers and butterflies of the jungle. He abetted by audacity and subterfuge the acquisition of material from our captors that made these portrayals possible. And he painstakingly kept and concealed the artwork from the Japanese.

This collection is in many ways unique. Now, through the interest and enthusiasm of the owners of the Sladmore Gallery it has been brought together as an Exhibition in the year 1970 – exactly twenty-five years after the end of the war with Japan.

Ronald Hastain, OBE.

After liberation in 1945, Colonel Johnson spent some time in Rangoon where he was visited by the late Countess Mountbatten, who took such a great interest in the welfare of ex-prisoners. In this picture he is showing her the butterflies which he had collected during captivity and kept concealed in old biscuit tins.

A small selection from over 1,000 of these butterflies may be seen in this Exhibition.

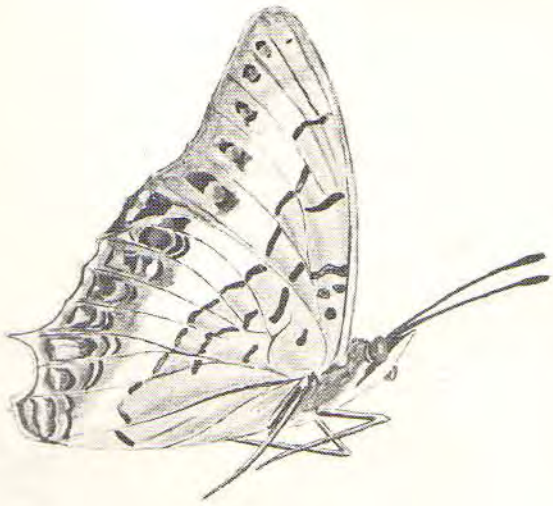
Red-thighed Falconet *(Microhierax caerulescens)* with butterfly.
Signed J.G. Kooiman.
A bird common to Thailand, its range being from the Central Himalayas through Burma to Indo China.

White-crested Babbler or Laughing Thrush *(Garrulax leucolophus)*. Signed Robert Milner Moore.

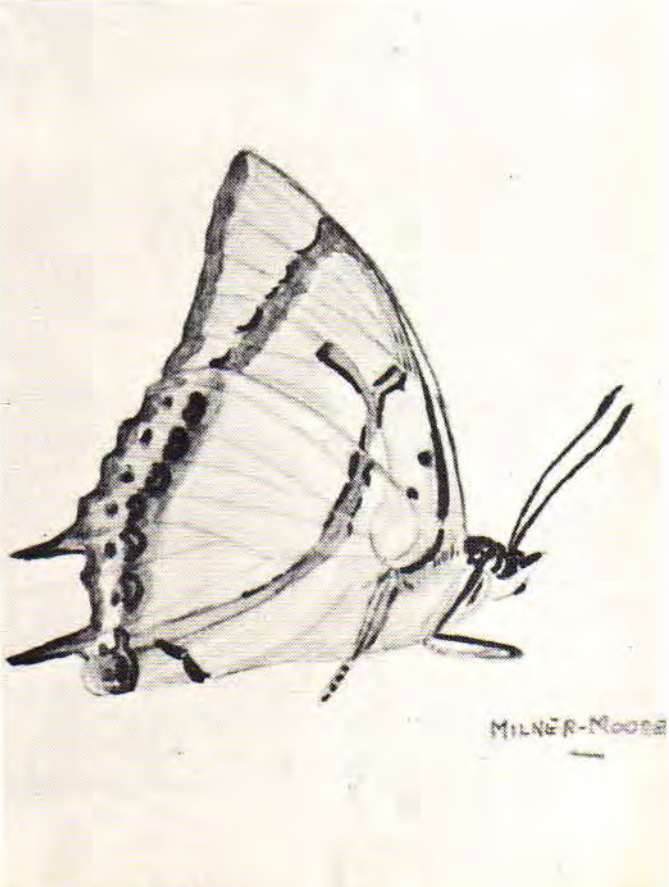
Colonel Johnson had with him in camp an old natural history book from which he removed the original illustrations, replacing them with these drawings of insects so that they would appear to belong to the book if he was searched.

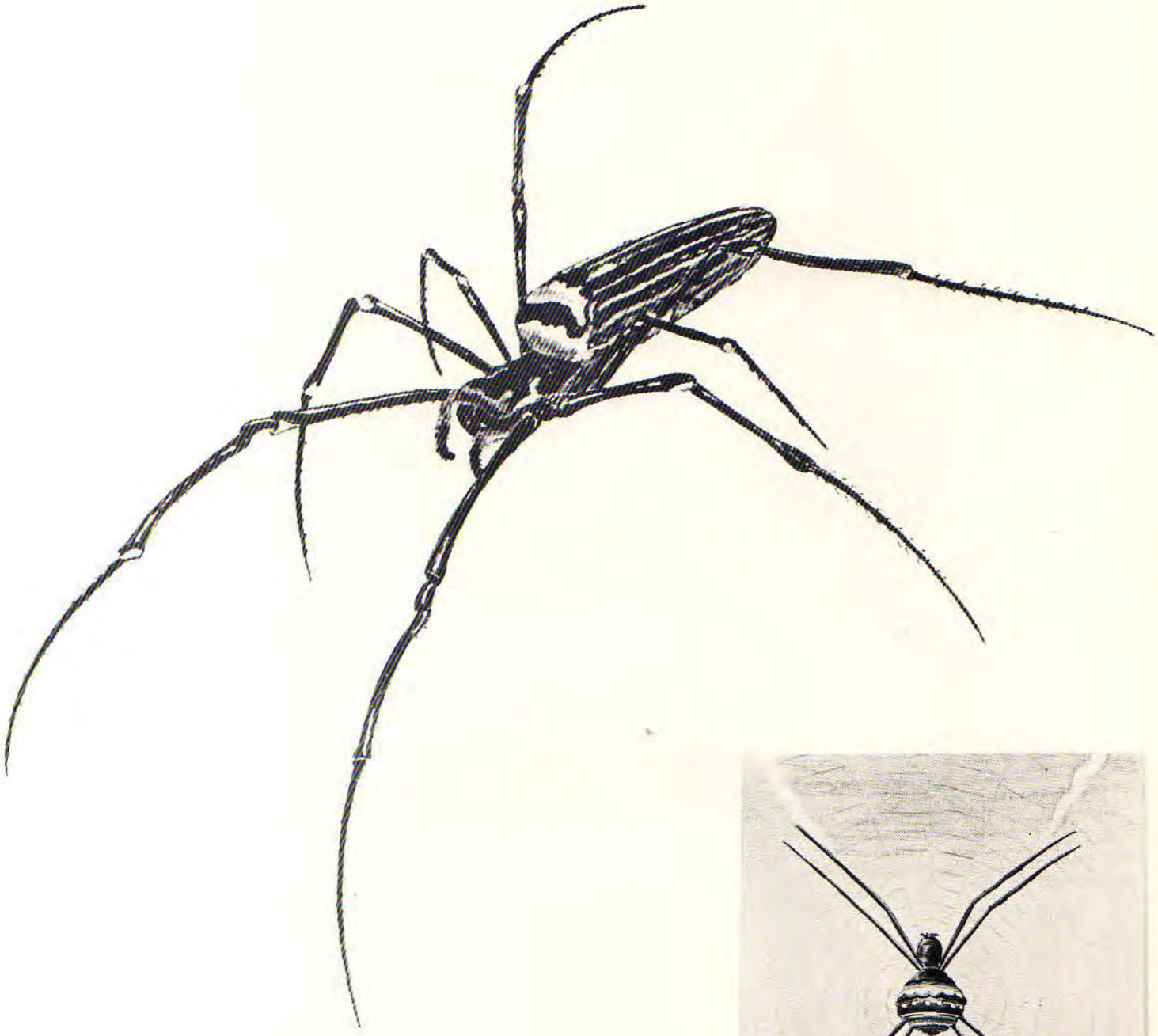
These studies were made from live specimens, many of which were collected during a migration of butterflies which lasted for a fortnight when, throughout the hours of daylight, the air was filled with many species flying along the river where the men were working.

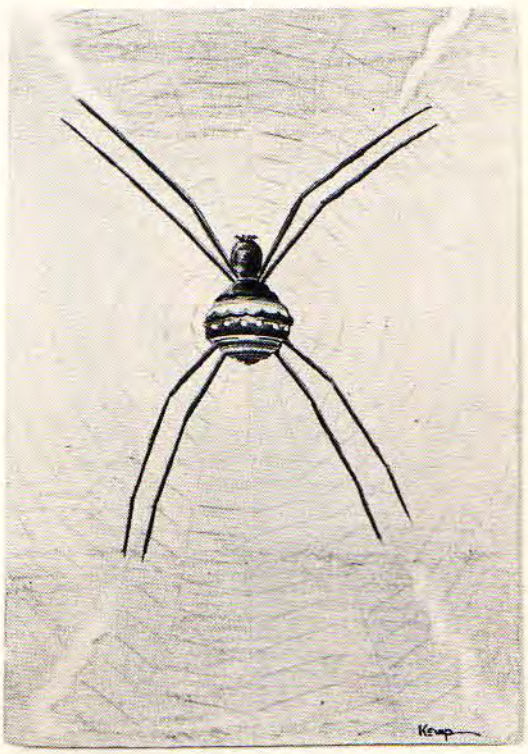
Some paintings bear the signatures R.S. Hardie, Kemp, P. Meninsky, Milner-Moore.



SIAM 19


MILNER-MOORE





Colonel Johnson stayed long enough in one camp to build a bamboo extension to his hut which housed many specimens of orchids which he and other prisoners collected in the jungle. This drawing of "The Colonel's Orchid House" was made at the time.

The paucity of materials available to the artists does not detract from these accurate and attractive studies of orchids.

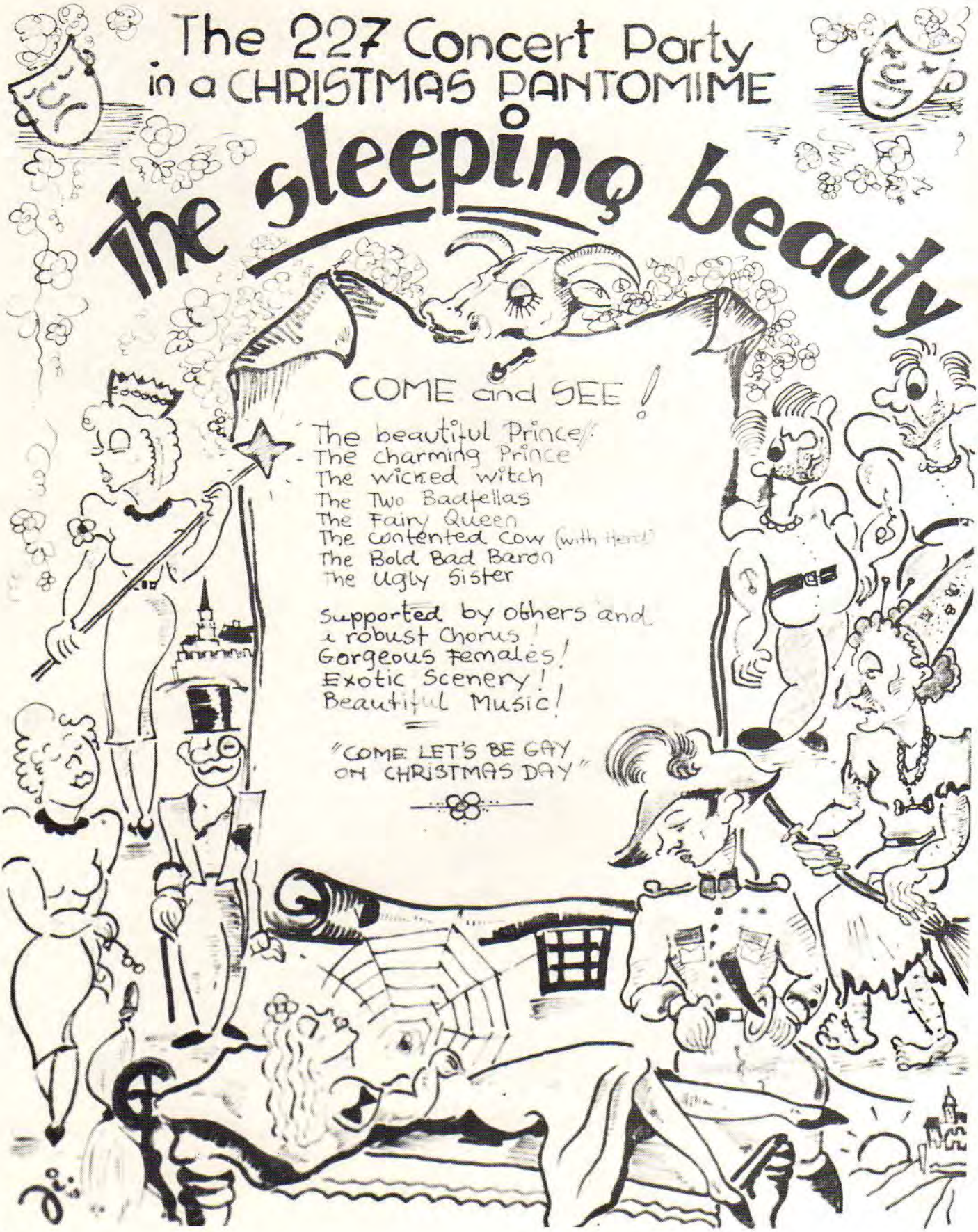
Any scraps of paper available were turned to good use – some carefully cherished since capture and some adapted from other purposes, such as prison record forms. A few paints had survived the journey from Singapore in kit bags; colours which were lacking were handmade from natural pigments.

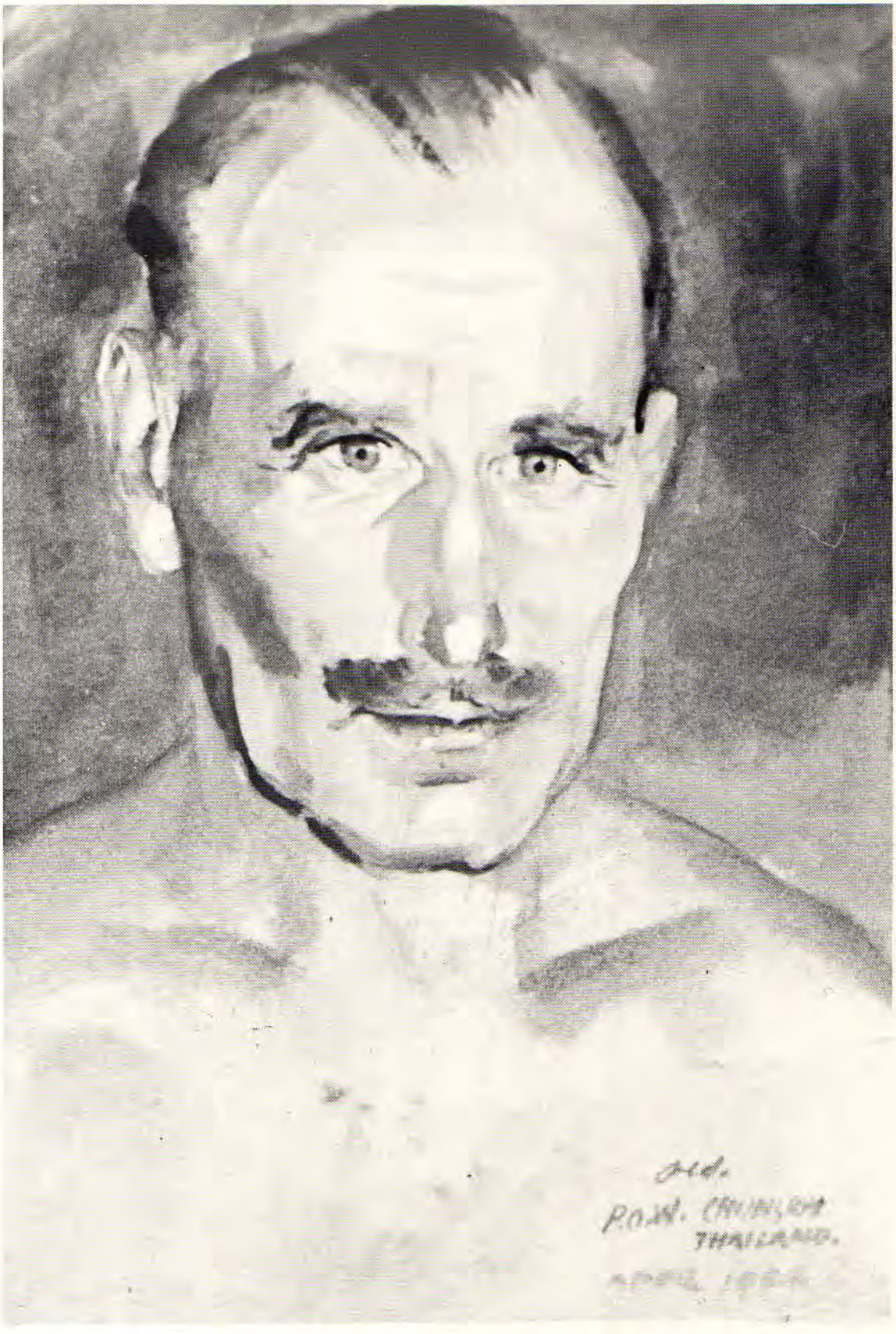
Unfortunately only a few of the orchid paintings exhibited bear signatures – R.S. Hardie, Mike Hardy, Kemp, P. Meninsky, R. Milner-Moore.

Total length of spray 1 ft 8" (15 flowers)

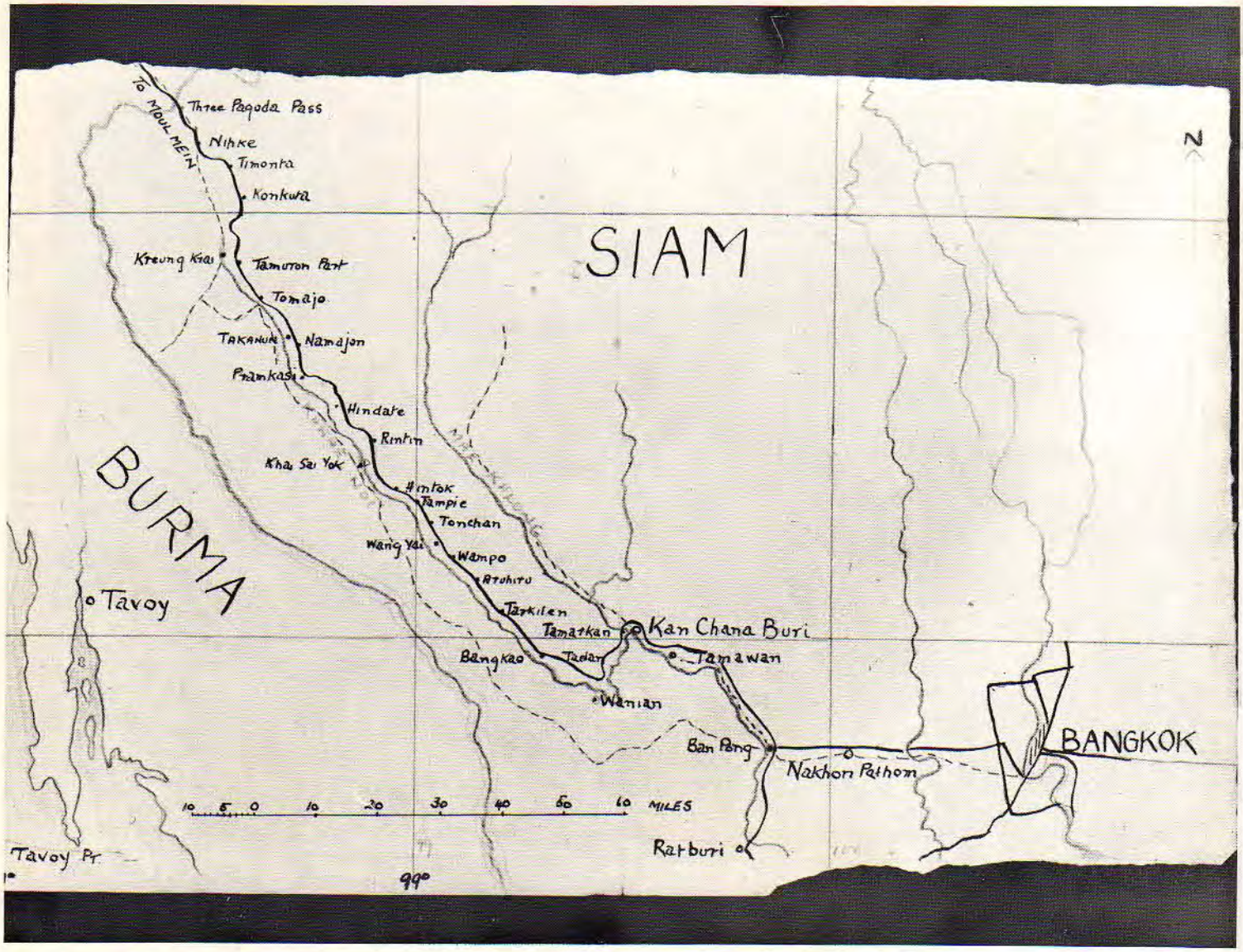
Nikki Heady
Tucson AZ

A set of playing cards made in the camp from Japanese record forms and used by hundreds of prisoners.


The 227 Concert Party
in a CHRISTMAS PANTOMIME
the sleeping beauty
COME and SEE!
The beautiful Prince
The charming Prince
The wicked witch
The Two Badfellas
The Fairy Queen
The contented Cow (with Herd)
The Bold Bad Baron
The Ugly Sister
Supported by others and
a robust Chorus!
Gorgeous females!
Exotic Scenery!
Beautiful Music!
"COME LET'S BE GAY
ON CHRISTMAS DAY"



Lt. Colonel A.A. Johnson A contemporary sketch made in Chungkai, Thailand, April 1944.



Sketch map of the country made at the time and retained by Colonel Johnson throughout his captivity.

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