

Charles Roskelly Bawden

Bletchley Park and Colombo 1944 – 1945. RNVR officer translating deciphered Japanese messages. Extract from biographical notes, provided by son, Richard Bawden, 11 October 2016.

.....So I stuck to it, and got a first in Part I of the Modern and Mediaeval Languages Tripos in 1942. Of course, there was no chance of study abroad during the war years, and we had to make the best of a vacation course at Somerville College, Oxford, run mainly by scholars from France and Belgium. I was not able to finish my second year. Just as well, perhaps, as I had decided to switch from French and German where I felt at home, to Spanish where I definitely was not, and the end of year exams would have been a disaster. Call-up intervened, and in early February 1943, I joined the Navy at HMS Excalibur, situated at Alsager, near Stoke-on-Trent, as an Ordinary Seaman. I wish now, looking back, that I had taken more advantage of where I was to explore the Potteries, but at that time I had no interest in ceramics or the Industrial Revolution, and never made full use of odd afternoons in Stoke – the only alternative to Crewe as a temporary respite from service life. Before being called up I had already been selected to learn Japanese, and somehow the authorities managed to pick me out of HMS Abercrombie, the monitor I was serving in on the Clyde, and get me via Chatham Barracks to Bedford, where I joined No. 4 Military Intelligence School and settled down to six months' Japanese under the late Captain [Tuck](#) RN and his assistant, [Eric Ceadel](#), then a lieutenant in the Royal Corps of Signals, and until his early death, Librarian of Cambridge University. By good fortune I coincided at Bedford for a while with [Eric French](#), who had been a fellow undergraduate at Peterhouse, and I also made some lifelong friends, including [Duncan Poore](#) and George Hunter FBA. We were mostly seamen, though there were three girls on the course too, Miss Egan, Miss Anderson and Miss Ferguson, a soldier, [Peter Soskice](#), and a civilian, the late [Frederick \(Barnabas\) Lindars](#). Most of us were young, but one, Douglas Petrie, a solicitor

from Scotland, seemed very old to us, at almost forty. How this mixture was achieved remains a mystery. In six months we acquired a knowledge of written Japanese which was supposed to be adequate for operational purposes, and after being commissioned and undergoing a two weeks' OLQ (Officer-like Qualities) course at Portsmouth I joined the staff at Bletchley Park, working on decoded Japanese messages. After a few months George Hunter and I, together with Wilfred Taylor, were appointed to HMS Lanka in Colombo. We arrived in the summer of 1944, and though the war had only just over a year to run, and our stay lasted only till the month of December 1945, this proved perhaps the most formative period of my life. It was not for us a violent period, but the experience of working on current enemy messages, always incomplete and requiring emendation, the experience, that is, of applying text-critical techniques, learned on the spot, to practical warfare, was something never to be forgotten. It was, too, a period when lifelong friendships were formed. We were a compact and harmonious group of civilians, naval officers and Wrens, and the unique association we formed then has lasted, for some of us, ever since.

We sailed in convoy on a P and O liner, Stratheden, from Liverpool to Bombay. That, in itself, was an experience which seemed commonplace at the time, but of course was unique. It took the best part of a month to cover a journey which would take half a day today. After a fortnight in transit camp in Bombay I took passage to Colombo and after a few uncomfortable days in rather scruffy quarters in the dockyard, joined my colleagues in St Thomas's mess on the Galle Face, and began work at HMS Anderson, a hut complex on the golf course. Some time later I moved into a private house by the sea shore, and later again moved back into a naval mess in Guildford Crescent. Until the end of the war we spent our working time trying to make sense of Japanese naval messages, taken down by hand by naval ratings, decrypted and decoded as far as was possible by Wrens, and presented to us in sometimes a very incomplete form. During the periods off duty which were

available, I managed to see a bit of the island, especially the remains of the Dutch period, at places like Galle, Matara and Trincomalee. With the end of the war in August 1945 our raison d'être vanished as it were overnight. We hung around doing very little until early December when George, Wilfred and I were sent to Hong Kong via Australia. I seem to remember that we lived afloat for a while, and were then quartered in the old Cecil Hotel. We reported to an intelligence office where, again, there was no real work to do. However, I remember very clearly spending some days at the Supreme Court, supervising Japanese internees who were translating depositions for a war crimes trial which was in progress. Even at the time, it seemed to me that this particular trial was a rather dubious procedure, and the verdict a foregone conclusion. I was invited to witness the subsequent hangings, but declined the privilege.

Hong Kong was in those days a ravaged city. Most of the houses above harbour level had been looted, right down to the doors and window frames, apparently in the interlude between Japanese collapse and the British resumption of authority. The population was small, about half a million, and the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank occupied the tallest building in the city. As well as the British occupation forces there were US Navy vessels in the harbour, thousands of Japanese prisoners of war in camps, and a somewhat ragged and uninspiring Chinese army lounging around and waiting to be sent against the communists. But even then it was a bustling business and entertainment centre, and I have always been glad to have seen Hong Kong as a Chinese city before its development into an international market-place. George and I took lessons in Cantonese from an old gentleman called Sung Hok-pang who had been teaching since the beginning of the century. As it turned out, most of the teaching was done by his daughter Katherine, while he listened to us from behind a partition. Many years later Katherine, who also worked as a civil servant and a dressmaker, came to this country and stayed

two weeks with us. Before the fortnight was over she had taken a shop in Pont Street, where she became a well-known London dressmaker.

Little enough happened to me in Hong Kong. We were really only waiting for demobilization, but before that happened I went to Japan, taking passage in a fast mine-laying cruiser. Going through the Inland Sea we could see at every turn evidence of the last days of the Japanese navy – the coast seemed to be littered with sunken ships. In Kure I lived on board ship, the town being completely wrecked. Again, there was little to do. I belonged to a unit called Disposal of Enemy Equipment, and looking back I can only remember going round the countryside by jeep looking wisely at dumps of paint and such like. I paid a couple of visits to Hiroshima, not far away. It was still, in April 1946, quite devastated, though superficially the damage looked similar to that in Kure. Life had already begun again, with shops and stalls springing up.

After only a month or so it was time to go home to a different life. I took passage to Hong Kong in an Indian warship. There was just time to say goodbye to the Portuguese girl-friend of the moment, and then I was aboard a cruiser, HMS Suffolk, for the voyage home. I remember little of that voyage, except finding time in Colombo to go to the government book store and replace some rather rare books which I had bought earlier, but which had been lost when our luggage was stolen on the way to Hong Kong. We disembarked at Portsmouth and I went to stay with my parents, who at that time were living at West Moors, near Wimborne, where my father was headmaster of the village school. Then to the Admiralty for demobilization, including a promotion for a day or two to the rank of Lieutenant. My memories of half a century ago are naturally somewhat disjointed, and I cannot refresh them, as my parents destroyed all my letters.

In October 1946 I resumed my life at Cambridge.....