Chapter Ten

SUMATRA IN DEEPEST DORSET

'They mocked up the most wonderful camp. Seeing the exteriors was quite extraordinary. It gave you an awful sense of the confinement, and of how helpless the real women were.'

Ann Bell

A HOT DAY IN LATE July 1981, West Lodge, near the sleepy Dorset village of Moreton. A lorry loaded up with potted palms arrives at a huge compound of wooden buildings, surrounded by a barbed wire and wooden fence. The driver is met by *Tenko*'s designer, Colin Shaw. After the palms are unloaded, the driver remarks to Colin: 'Very lucky to find all this here, weren't you?' Over the coming weeks, this driver would not be the only person to make this assumption when visiting what would become the home of the production for the remainder of the summer.

Although there were no extant photos of the Sumatran camps, they had been drawn and vividly described by their inmates, so Shaw could aim for a very authentic re-creation of a barracks-style prison camp in Sumatra, circa 1942. This type of camp was also described in *Women Beyond the Wire*:

> Its walls were formed by the backs of the wooden barrack buildings which enclosed a central open space: the padang. Where the backs of the barrack blocks ended the gaps were filled in with a solid fence and surrounding all there was a barbed wire. Inside the long windowless blocks… was a central walkway of beaten mud flanked on either side by a raised platform for sleeping purposes: a bali-bali. Here the women would sleep side-by-side in rows. The only accommodation for personal belongings was a narrow shelf above their heads (Warner 1982: 178).

Despite the design team's dedication to detail, there were some necessary compromises here and there – the compound's part-wood, part-wire fence for instance, as Pennant Roberts recalled:

The finished camp at Moreton, Dorset (Evgeny Gridneff)

A solid wooden palisade fence encircled the camp buildings. We couldn't resort to a barbed wire fence all the way around because we had to disguise the true nature of the surrounding scrubland, and that open ground stretched in an easterly direction for half a mile. Because all scenery flattage, whether Regency Bath Stone or Dickensian hovel, was costed by the BBC at a unitary price, we couldn't afford to complete the ring of fencing even though we could have commissioned it locally within budget! So the wooden fence would oddly terminate behind the larger huts where it couldn't be seen. The camp therefore was only designed to be shot looking from the inside out. Viewed from the outside one could see all the scenery supports.

Digs and sand

The cast and crew were put up in the Dolphin Hotel (the Falkland Square shopping complex now stands in its place), High Street, Poole from the evening of 29 July 1981, having been warned in advance that, if they were not taking the coach from TV Centre, to choose their travel times carefully due to the fact that the nation was expected to come to something of a standstill that day. The cast were required to be on location at the 'camp' from 10am the following morning, to rehearse for episode three. Pennant Roberts's memory of the day was that the covering up of the grassy floor of the compound with sand was problematic:

> We had ordered sand from a local contractor, and it had been delivered the day before shooting commenced. On the day of the first camera rehearsal in situ, my actors experienced great difficulty ploughing their way through eight inches of fine sand. So the contractors were brought back to remove half the sand they'd deposited: 'BBC can't make their bloody minds up.' The very same patch of land was used the following year for the BBC serial *Beau Geste*, set in the Sahara desert, and presumably the same contractors were required to deliver an even greater quantity of sand!

Transported back forty years

Although the actors may have struggled with the sand, they were all far more preoccupied by the wonder that was Shaw's barracks camp. Like the contractors before them, they were astounded when they first clapped eyes on the set, as

Arrival at the camp (Evgeny Gridneff)

Joanna Hole remembers:

> I was completely gobsmacked. I'd done one scene in a television [programme] in a studio, but this was my first glimpse of an exterior fully-budgeted BBC set. I thought it was bloody marvellous. I couldn't believe what they'd achieved. And I was thinking: 'I'm not really here.' That was one of those moments when I realised that I was doing something that might be quite good. We'd already shot some interiors but that's different, seeing the whole set and how big it was, the sweep of it and how much detail they'd gone into.

She goes on to relate that: 'Somebody told me they were wiring bananas to the palm trees, but I didn't believe that,' in such a way as to suggest that she is still not quite sure how true it might have been! Veronica Roberts thought the camp 'pretty amazing,' while Ann Bell remembers: 'Seeing the exteriors was quite extraordinary. It gave you an awful sense of the confinement, how helpless the real women were.' Burt Kwouk was also struck by the size of the place: 'For a change there was a lot of space. It was a big set. Not in the sense of big grand buildings, but there was a lot of room in which to work. I also thought it was very convincing.'

However, it was the later reaction to the camp by a woman who had actually been incarcerated in the real camps, Molly Smith, which Colin Shaw took as the greatest compliment: 'When I went down on location in the first week, when I

got out of the car and stood and gazed at the camp, I was amazed because it was so like one of the camps we'd been in and I really was transported back forty years.' Ann Queensberry remembers the tears that rolled down Molly's cheek as she stood and surveyed the camp: 'It was amazing having her there. A great honour.' Lavinia Warner, who had escorted Molly to Moreton, was also overwhelmed by her response: 'The realisation that for her the camp existed again, but this time she was blessedly safe in a clearing near Bournemouth.' Stephanie Cole recalls that, later in the visit, she and some of the rest of the cast and Molly were wandering around the compound getting used to the location and decided to take a break from the sun under the *pendopo* – a covered area in the centre, where the women would have sheltered in the actual camps:

> So Molly was sitting in the Dorset sunshine, surrounded by an exact replica of what she had been surrounded by when she was a girl, with a group of women, talking about women's things – we weren't talking about Molly's experiences, just passing the time together. Three extras – young Chinese waiters from the local Bournemouth restaurants – wearing their costumes as Japanese guards, came into the compound and silently walked past us. As they came into her peripheral vision, Molly leapt to her feet and bowed. It was a purely instinctive reaction. It was shiver-making. If you needed to know what it was like – that told you everything (Cole 1998: 132).

Smith recalls that she recovered her composure by reminding herself: 'This is today, not forty years ago.' Meanwhile, Jeananne Crowley remembers a visit from another former internee, Dame Margot Turner, who also confirmed the authenticity of the camp size and arrangement and 'described to us how they tried to keep the standards up and how they'd invite each other for tea – where 'tea' was a cup of muddy water on the floor in someone else's hut. And we got a real sense of how confined they were and what captivity would have been like.'

Although she'd had her slim hopes dashed of taking part in the Dorset filming as a regular cast member, Wendy Williams now visited the set to see what she was missing out on: 'I stayed with Stephanie Beacham, who I'd got on so well with in Singapore. It was nice to be part of the troupe again even though I wasn't acting.'

First scenes

On the subsequent two days, the cast rehearsed in the compound for episodes four and five respectively, before having Sunday 2 August off. The following day, the very first scenes shot at the 'camp' were the women's reaction to the sight and smell of the latrines, and Sylvia overhearing Marion telling Beatrice about her crystal set, with the arrival at the camp held over until Tuesday 4 August, for which a crane was hired specially for several shots. Director David Askey

Blanche arrives (Evgeny Gridneff)

visited the set on this day too, in order to get a feel for the compound and the shooting possibilities, ahead of his taking over the reins from Pennant in two weeks' time.

On one of these first days of filming, as the actresses began to acclimatise to their surroundings, Louise Jameson remembers that Jeananne Crowley had a bit of fun at Ken Riddington's expense, referencing the 'armpits incident' at Acton: 'Jeananne had these fake armpit hair things made up. She got the camera on her and, knowing Ken was in the Outside Broadcast unit, held them under her arms and said: "Is this long enough for you, Ken?"'

Taxing tenkos

The actresses' first *tenko* was filmed on the morning of Wednesday 5 August. As filming progressed, they were to find these *tenko* sequences the most taxing, as Veronica Roberts recalls: 'We used to dread the *tenko* scenes when we were called onto parade, because inevitably there were lots of close-ups, lots of wide shots, and you'd be standing around forever. And if it was hot it was a nightmare. Of course, it was not as nasty as the real *tenkos*: people would bring us water and we'd insist on chairs for some of the older actors, but one got into feeling that you were doing the real thing.'

Stephanie Beacham describes these scenes as, for her, the most 'boring': 'We just talked a lot, but because of my deafness it was a drag, if I was on the wrong side of someone, and couldn't have the normal hushed conversations.'

However, Burt Kwouk – who Michael Owen Morris remembers as: 'sat there with his newspaper, but always ready to go' and 'always word perfect' – didn't mind these scenes: 'It was rather like an actor standing on a stage in front of an audience and banging on and nobody being allowed to interrupt me! They were like political speeches.'

Although Kwouk was clearly enjoying his role, it transpired that some of those playing the guards were much less comfortable at first, as Jeananne Crowley recounts: 'When we didn't come out in time for the *tenkos* the guards were supposed to hit us or push us very roughly. The Japanese actors didn't like this as they did not want to portray the Japanese as violent or aggressive and one or two of them went to Pennant Roberts during filming of the scene. They said: "We can't do this. This is wrong."' Their complaints were apparently met with less than helpful responses from the cameramen of: 'What the f*** were you doing in the war, then?' but Roberts was nevertheless able to make the actors see that they needed to behave in this way. One of the reasons for their reluctance was their lack of knowledge of the behaviour of the Japanese during the war, as Ann Bell recalls:

> They couldn't find many Japanese people who would come in as extras to play the guards; they found Chinese waiters instead. However, I remember there was one 23-year-old Japanese student who was playing a guard, and I was giving him a lift back to where he was staying and he was terribly upset as he said they didn't teach this in Japanese schools: 'I knew nothing about this. I feel responsible. I didn't know.' I said: 'Nor did I.' I remember thinking as well, I'm sure there's plenty of things the English have done that aren't taught in English schools. He was truly upset when he learnt about this history.

Marion and Sylvia (Evgeny Gridneff)

She adds that she sorely felt the need for *Tenko* to strike an appropriate balance: 'It was awfully hard, but it couldn't be the demons and the good guys.' When it came to her own young children, Rebecca and John, who accompanied her during the Dorset filming, Bell was to find that she had no need to worry about this balance: 'When they came out to the set, the men who played the guards played with them and were wonderful. Burt was lovely with them too. In fact, Burt let John hold a rifle and I was very cross, but Burt said: "It was only for a minute." They were ruined by them. And my son said to me: "It's a war, isn't it?" "Yes it is," I said. He replied: "Well I hope the soldiers win," because he loved them so much.' Despite her children's closeness to the men playing the guards, she herself felt there was a bit of 'you and us' going on, due to the nature of what they were there filming. Ann Queensberry even goes so far as to say: 'It was almost as if the actors playing the Japanese were the real prison guards. We [actresses] bonded and became very close and it was 'us against the world' in a way. It was almost as if we were in a camp and had to be loyal and stick together. It felt quite real and there was blurring of fiction and reality.' She illustrates this by recounting an incident that took place at the hotel in Poole, where most of the cast were staying, including her youngest daughter Alice who was working as a supporting artist: 'Alice had a nightmare one night and said: "There's a Japanese man trying to get in at the window." She was terrified. Burt Kwouk was in a room near me and when I told him about her nightmare, he said: "Thank God I didn't come tapping on the door!"' Alice can be seen quite prominently

Official BBC publicity shots are taken (Pennant Roberts)

towards the end of episode five, holding the mirror in the scene where Kate cuts Blanche's hair.

The *Tenko* team were fortunate enough to be blessed with relentless sun throughout the Dorset filming, which was, of course, in keeping with the conditions the real women had experienced on Sumatra. Michael Owen Morris recalls that: 'The Dorset weather was unbelievable. It was *so* hot during the whole thing. How lucky can you get? It never rained once'; while Ann Bell relates: 'I love the sun. I knew the heat would be difficult in Singapore but I knew I wouldn't dislike it, but there I had so many creams and I really watched it. However, in Dorset I wasn't so careful and I burnt on the first two days. It's ironic, isn't it?!'

The filming on Friday 7 August began with the arrival of the Dutch prisoners, with Elizabeth Chambers appearing in Mrs Van Meyer's very first scene. New to the series was Maya Woolfe, playing Gerda, although she is listed in the filming schedules and scripts as 'Jopie' instead. One unlikely sounding scene filmed that day, which was later excised from episode four, was of Christina striking a child. The following day, Chua Kah Joo and Susie Leong joined the cast as Jo the trader and his wife Lia, respectively.

All work and no play

The filming schedule was pretty demanding for all concerned, as Veronica Roberts relates: 'I think we did six days a week, although we might have occasionally had two days off at the weekend. One wasn't on every single day. Sometimes you could do a great long riff and suddenly get days off.' Of the working hours each day, Louise Jameson recalls: 'We were sometimes there from 6am in the morning until the light went.' Ann Queensberry remembers that this meant they'd 'just have supper together and then go to bed,' and that there was no real time for socialising, unlike when they were back in London. However, despite the long working hours, Claire Oberman remembers she still managed to make time to 'run and swim every day,' a feat that was marvelled at by some of her co-stars.

Stephanie and Jeananne (courtesy Stephanie Cole)