

# Carry's Story

The story of the woman who inspired

“A Town Like Alice”

By

John Anderson

In the Author's Note in *A Town Like Alice*, Nevil Shute wrote

*“On the publication of this book I expect to be accused of falsifying history, especially in regard to the march and death of the homeless women prisoners. I shall be told that nothing of the sort ever happened in Malaya, and this is true. It happened in Sumatra..”*

This is the story of Carry Geysel-Vonck, the remarkable woman upon whose wartime experiences in Sumatra, Shute based part of the story. This account is based on an article about Carry in the Dutch magazine *Libelle*, translated into English by Joost Meulenbroek, supplemented with additional information.

In February 1949 Nevil Shute and James Riddell were on the homeward leg of their flight from Australia to England. On 10<sup>th</sup> February they landed at Palembang in southern Sumatra. Finding that the hotel Smidt was full they received an invitation to stay at the home of Mr Geysel an executive of the Shell company. In his flight log for that day Shute wrote:-

*“Finally got one bedroom between two of us, and we were resigning ourselves to a peculiar night when Nasse turned up with an invitation for us to spend the night with Mr J.G.A Geysel, one of the heads of the Shell organisation here. Shell has a refinery base employing 20,000 hands, so Mr Geysel is quite a man. Went gladly to his house, a charming man, wife, and house. A good room and every hospitality.*

*Geysel is a man of about 40, his wife about 26-27 with two children. A slight, cheerful girl who looked as if she had led a very sheltered life. Both had been taken by the Japanese in 1942. The husband was put in a camp at once, the wife, aged 21, with their six month old baby, was herded about Sumatra with 80 other women and a large number of children. They were given no clothes and little food: the Indonesians supported them. The Japanese passed them from town to town: they stayed nowhere more than a few weeks. In 2 1/2 years this girl walked 2000 km, 1200 miles, carrying her baby. Practically all the other women and children died. She came out fit and well, and retained her sense of humour.”*

James Riddell wrote in his book “Flight of Fancy”-

*“...The Geysels turned out to be a delightful couple and the house very large and cool and comfortable. She told an amazing story of her war-time experiences in Sumatra under the Japs. How a girl of twenty-one with a one year old child could survive being made to walk 2000 kilometres beats me!”*

Carry was born in Surabaya in the Dutch East Indies in 1920, the second of five children. The family returned to Holland shortly after her birth. Otheline, her older sister, described her as competent, strong-willed child with a sense of fun and a practical outlook. Later Otheline and her husband, an officer in the Dutch army, were stationed in Java. In

1940, with the war in Europe, they suggested that Carry, who was a good shorthand typist, should travel out to join them. She arrived on the last ship to Indonesia. That year she married George Geysel, an executive in the Batavian Oil Company (later Shell), whom she had met before in Holland. On 21<sup>st</sup> August 1941 their son, Don, was born. Geysel was posted to Sibolga, a small town on the remote western coast of Sumatra.

The Japanese invaded and quickly conquered Malaya in 1942; Singapore fell on the 14<sup>th</sup> February. At that time George's first thought was to try and get his wife and baby son to safety by sending them to Lae Boetar, an evacuation camp run by the Dutch army. Following the rapid invasion of Sumatra by the Japanese, the Dutch army on the island surrendered on 28<sup>th</sup> March whilst they were at Lae Boetar. George, with other Dutch civilian men, were taken to an internment camp at Sibolga where they would remain for the next three and a half years. Carry and Don were also interned by the Japanese. She recorded her experiences of that time in a book that she kept throughout her captivity.

***“17 February 1942. Daddy thinks it is better to send you and me to Lae Boetar. The little boat left at half past five. You thought such a little trip would be fun, didn't you?”***

***“22 June 1942. The day started early today. At 3 am already Mummy came to get you out of your bed, your own little bed, with the blue mosquito net and the large pink bow. Luckily you didn't realise that you had slept in this beautiful little bed for the last time. Quickly on the potty, and then we go.”***

On foot, by truck and rickety prauw (fishing boat) they were taken to Singkel a notorious malaria area on the coast. They were housed in the abandoned officer properties. There was little food and the condition of the prisoners worsened. On July 21, they were ordered to move on.

***“21 July 1942. You are up very early, and drank for the last time from your Mummy. It's good, that we had to leave so early, for walking in the bright sun would have been impossible. You're not that light anymore, little bear!”***

. The women are transported by truck, train, boat and on foot. They carry their children on the hip, in the Indonesian way. They sleep where they stop.

***“24 July 1942. The ‘cattle’ must go on to Meulaboh. After a long walk through the town, while being gazed at by the locals, we came to the Chinese school where we will be interned. We have no idea how long we will stay here. Gradually we lose confidence in our travel speed. We are for the first time given real prison food. In the morning at 6am soya beans, with one pisang goreng (banana), at 11 am some bad rice with even worse sajoer (a thin vegetable soup) and the same at four o’clock. We won’t grow fat. Fortunately mummy has been able to smuggle in some oatmeal and milk, so that she doesn’t have to worry about you the first days.***

(About 79 women and children were held temporarily in this school.)

The next stage brings the women and children to Kotaradja, in the far north of Sumatra.

***“19 August 1942. Installed in barrack 3 where have made a nice cabin for ourselves in the hall with a plank and some tikars (sleeping mats). What a hassle, six hundred women and children, together in such a small space.***

(According to one account, the camp was little bigger in size than a football pitch)

The food is bad. The women daily get a portion hard old corn, they start boiling it at 3 am, so that by noon it is more or less edible. But for Don’s milk teeth it is still too hard. Like a bird Carry chews some of her portion fine, before feeding it, grain by grain to him. Despite her good care, he becomes ill.

***“14 September 1942. Fear, high fever, convulsions, bad nights. The fever lasts for three days. What is this now darling? Nobody knows. Oh mummie’s toddler, don’t do anything foolish. I would do everything for you, but it is so miserable here. No chair to sit on. No room, or corridor where I can walk with you at night. As soon as we stick our noses outside the mosquito net, there is a bad draft, but under the mosquito net, it is almost unbearable for you.”***

Luckily Don gets well again. The life of the prisoners is desolate: it is pouring with rain all the time, while the women, without success, try to prevent leaks. All day they have to wade up to their calves through the mud; they always sleep with wet clothes hanging above them. Carry’s practical nature now comes in handy. From local shop keepers, she

manages to get extra food for Don and other small children in the camp. In the new year, Carry, like many others, is stricken by malaria.

***“2 March 1943. Oh woe, if you don’t feel well, camp life is a true hell. The worst is the continual drone of stamping, running and arguing women and children. To make it worse we are having a blackout for weeks now, there is activity in the air all the time. Are there finally changes in the war?”***

On 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1943 the camp was cleared and the women and children have to leave again. This time the Japanese take them high in the mountains of South Atjeh, to Laweh-Sigala-gala, in the middle of the jungle. This is one of the most notorious camps in Indonesia.

***“25 September 1943. Now it really starts. No shop, no soap, no salt, fire-wood, then again not a drop of water. Some times rain, rain, rain for days on end. The bathing cubicles are demolished to be burned as fire wood. I have no idea how we are to live in such a pig sty”.***

From October, on top of all this, 50 women have to work outside the camp for the Japanese. These are notorious corvées (forced labourers): the women have to dig, chop wood and carry bales. Many don’t make it, weakened as they are because of the bad food and all the illnesses in the camp. Carry, with her bare hands, has to help bury many of her fellow campmates. But she carries on, for her son.

***“June 1944. I was not born to be buried in the unknown. I do not want a grave in the jungle, without my parents knowing where to look for me. Many women give up courage, and let themselves go. These women do not have enough hold on their earlier life. Good youth memories give you a hold. I’m sure of that.”***

***“28 may 1944. If my little boy thinks that I look a little sad, or when I lie ill, he faithfully keeps watch. It is touching when you see how that little man puts cold compresses on your head, gives you a mug of water or covers you with all kinds of rags and blankets. Another time he tries to cheer you up, by telling you enthusiastically about “his” or “our“ daddy and the beautiful car that says “toot toot”***

In October 1944 Carry and Don, together with a group other women and children leave the terrible Laweh-Sigala-gala. They are transported to

Medan. There, for the first time in years, Carry gets a sign of life from her husband George,. He is a prisoner of the Japanese in Sibolga.

***“29 November 1944. Finally a letter. It is so good to see daddies handwriting again, even if the letter is so short! I have longed for this for three years.”***

The Japanese are growing ever more nervous, thus giving the prisoners the hope that they will be liberated soon. The rumours get stronger by the day.

***“1 January 1945. Will this year bring us peace? Many of the prisoners are feeling very bad. We are at the end of our strength. Trouble after trouble is piling up. Physically most are very weak.”***

***“1 april. Unfortunately I have had to sell my fountain pen, so I’m now writing with a pencil.”***

***“5 May 1945. We were stuffed into trucks and driven to Medan, where outside the station a train was waiting. The trip in a crowded, sweltering compartment, next to a overflowing toilet, was not ideal. Around 10, the train stopped in Aek Pamieke, and from somewhere in the woods we heard: “Van je hela hola, houd de moed er maar in” (A well known Dutch song). The five kilometres from the station, or rather a stop, somewhere in a rubber forest, to the camp were a nightmare. Because of the pouring rain, the torches went out and we stumbled in the pitch dark, on the bad road. Now and again somebody screamed, when they fell in a hole, or a ditch. All night long we were searching for lost children.”***

And then finally:

***“ Friday 24 August 1945. The war is over! All Dutch will be liberated. Dead silence, silent tears, no hysteria, great moment. The Wilhelmus! “ (Dutch national anthem.)***

George takes up the story.”Immediately after Don’s birth my wife began a baby book to record, like any proud mother, everything about our child. She even stuck in pictures. It is a miracle that during the war she had been able to keep the book, even after she exchanged her fountain pen

for food. During the war we did not see each other for three and a half years. I will never forget our reunion. Sometimes in the camp Don saw other children eating bananas and asked "Mummy can I have a banana?" She knew how some women in their distress sometimes went as far as sleeping with the Japanese and bananas were the reward. She invariably answered "Wait, you be quiet. If Daddy comes he'll buy lots of bananas for you if he can."

On 26 August, shortly after the liberation, I was with the first group of men who were sent to the women's camp to help. As a present, on an impulse, I brought a big bunch of bananas. There was a toddler of four, at the entrance of the camp, looking at us with big eyes, as we were getting out of the truck. As he saw me he suddenly ran towards me and shouted: "You are my daddy!"

I didn't recognise the little boy with the pale face and the beri-beri tummy. A friend of Carry's tried to get the struggling boy away from me and to comfort him. But then I said: "Wait a minute. I don't recognise him, but you I never knew."

"Who are you then?" she asked.

"I am Geysel." The little boy turned out to be my son Don. He had recognised me immediately, because of the bananas

In 1949 we were living in Palembang when we unexpectedly had two guests. They had problems with the aircraft in which they were flying from Australia to England. One of the men introduced himself as "Squadron Leader Norway"; that proved to be the name of the man who was better known as Nevil Shute. We did not know that he was a writer. Over a meal we talked with them about our war experiences and I told him about my wife's baby book. "Why don't you publish it?" he asked. She did not want to, saying "Hundreds of women had the same experiences and some even worse".

In the months that followed we had a letter from him thanking us for our hospitality. I had asked him to send some inner tubes for Don's bike that you couldn't get in Indonesia and he sent them. Then he sent us a copy of his book (A Town Like Alice). In a letter to my wife he wrote "*In the epilogue I have taken the great liberty of using your name. I would never have written the first part of the book if your husband had not told me about your wartime experiences. The reader may know that young women are not just brave in books*".

We were dumbfounded! He had not told us he was planning to base his book on my wife's story. It is not really her story but a romanticised version. In the camps, there was no room for heroes like the Jean in the

book. Others might have been flattered to be promoted to heroine; my wife was not. She was always reluctant to talk to the press and others about this period in her life. My wife did not dwell on the past. She was a strong, positive thinking woman who lived in the present.”

When George retired they built a house in Switzerland near Montreux. They were happy there and the time reminded Carry of when she and George were first married and living in Sibolga. She fell ill but kept it to herself for a long time until the doctor diagnosed her as suffering from leukaemia. She died in December 1984 at the age of 63.

\*\*\*\*\*

Carry and Don survived their captivity and internment. According to one source 273 women and children died during the Japanese occupation of Sumatra.

In the Author’s Note in *A Town like Alice*, Nevil Shute wrote:-

*“I do not think that I have ever before turned to real life for an incident in one of my novels. If I have done so now it is because I have been unable to resist the appeal of this true story, and because I want to pay what tribute is within my power to the most gallant lady I have ever met.”*

In his garden, over the urn with Carry’s ashes, George had a sundial which had the inscription *“She passed on, proud and unbroken”*.



Carry and Don in 1942



Carry and Don in later life





George and Carry

### Map of camps in Northern Sumatra 1942-45



## Notes on prison camps and detention centres

<p><b>1. Lae Boetar</b></p>	<p>At the end of March 1942 it was used as an evacuation location for several Dutch women and children from Sibolga and approximately 90 Dutch civilians from the west coast of Atjeh. They were taken to the rubber plantation by a group of 140 Dutch military personnel under the leadership captain L.H.J. Kloprogge. The accommodations consisted of houses and coolie huts on the grounds of the plantation, without fencing. Families were housed together. The Dutch military personnel surrendered on March 29th and were taken on April 3rd as prisoners of war to Koetatjane. The civilian internees were taken to Singkil in June 1942</p>
<p><b>2. Singkil</b></p>	<p>In June 1942, the civilian internees from Lae Boetar were taken to the military bivouac in Singkil. There they were housed in somewhat dilapidated wooden under-officers' homes and later in the bivouac hospital. The bivouac was encircled with barbed wire. In July all the internees were taken to Meulaboh.</p>
<p><b>3. Meulaboh</b></p>	<p>Dutch-Chinese School in Meulaboh. From 23 July 1942 to 16 August 1942 this location served as a civilian camp. In July and August, 79 interned women and children were held temporarily in the Dutch-Chinese school in Meulaboh. They came from Singkil, and were taken on to Keudah in Koetaradja..</p>
<p><b>4. Koetaradja</b></p>	<p>From 11 June 1942 to 23 September 1943 this location served as a civilian camp. Koetaradja is on the northern tip of Atjeh (North-Sumatra) and is now called Banda Aceh. The encampment was on Keudahsingel, west of the Atjeh river, in the northern part of the city. The encampment on Keudahsingel comprised barracks and houses, encircled by barbed wire. It functioned as a collection camp for women and children from all of Atjeh. On 22 September 1943, the camp was cleared and the women and children taken to the Lawe-sigala-gala women's camp.</p>

<p><b>5. Lawe-sigala-gala</b></p>	<p>From 26 September 1943 to 10 October 1944 this location served as a civilian camp. The 8 hectares of the camp grounds were divided into six separate and individually fenced departments, each with eight to twelve wooden barracks roofed with atap. between the internment camp and the road there were military barracks, a guard building, the camp hospital, and the homes of the higher ranking personnel. The female civilian internees and children were housed in ten barracks, surrounded with barbed wire, gedek,(woven bamboo) and a wooden fence.</p>
<p><b>6. Medan</b></p>	<p>In October 1944 taken by transport from Lawe-sigala-gala to Medan to board the train to Aek Paminke.</p>
<p><b>7. Aek Paminke</b></p>	<p>All of the European women and children (except boys older than 8 or 10) from Atjeh, Tapanoeli, and the east coast of Sumatra were held in Aek Paminke in the last months of the Japanese occupation. There were three large barrack camps there, approximately 6 kilometres from each other, on the road between Paminke and Bandardoeian. In Paminke there was one at a stop for the South-Asahan Line of the Deli Railway Company. The conditions were very primitive; the internees were severely weakened by illness and exhaustion, and dozens of them died.</p>

Sources:-

An article in the Dutch Women's Magazine *Libelle* – date unknown.  
 Nevil Shute "Flight Log" \*unpublished, MS 2199, National Library of Australia.  
 Nevil Shute "A Town Like Alice" William Heinemann, 1950

James Riddell "Flight of Fancy", Robert Hale, 1950

<https://www.indischekamparchieven.nl/>

<http://www.encyclopedia.com/women/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/women-pows-sumatra-1942-1945>

Carry and Don's Journey#		
From	To	Approx. distances in km
Lae Boetar	Singkil	60
Singkil	Meulaboh	320
Meulaboh	Kotaradja	270
Kotaradja	Lawe-sigala-gala	460
Lawe-sigala-gala	Medan	130
Medan	Aek Paminke	250
	Approx total	<b>1490</b>