

Murray Griffin, official war artist

I am not writing a war history, I am writing the confessions of a War Artist and what I say concerns matters of which I have very vivid recollections.¹¹

As far as sheer excitement is concerned you can't beat a war. It can alter your whole life.¹²

This was Murray Griffin's reaction to his appointment as an official war artist to Malaya and the Middle East, where Australian forces were stationed. He particularly enjoyed being able to purchase enough painting gear for six months (the expected length of his stay in both places) and a specially designed box with a shoulder strap to hold his paints and brushes. His wife, on the other hand, had a vivid dream on the night he was informed of his appointment:

She saw me marching, or trudging, along a road, heavily laden, one of a long line of men as prisoners of war. When she told me we both laughed because it seemed so ridiculous. War artists never got caught that way! As I was to find out later the men of the 8th Division never considered it a possibility either. You either fired at the enemy, or were fired at by them, but you didn't get caught.¹³



Murray Griffin, *Hello, Joe*, 1943, oil on hardboard, 78.2 x 61.8 cm, Australian War Memorial (ART24479).

Normally he would have travelled by sea to Malaya, as all the troops did, but because events were moving fast in Malaya, it was arranged that Griffin should leave on a Qantas service on 30 October 1941. It was a fairly leisurely flight compared with today's air travel, on an Empire flying boat to Singapore via Townsville, Karumba, Darwin, Koepang in Timor, and Batavia in Java. That night he stayed in the famous Raffles Hotel, where he dined "in the courtyard surrounded by soft music and the attention of waiters moving in and out of the hibiscus bushes. Those blasted hibiscus! ... just a few months later I was to dine on them, not among them."¹⁴

Griffin spent a few days in Singapore waiting to be sent for by 8th Division Headquarters, a happy state of affairs as far as he was concerned as it allowed him to see more of the city and its people.

¹¹ Murray Griffin, *Changi*, (Sydney: Edmund & Alexander, 1992), p. 28.

¹² Griffin, p. 21.

¹³ Griffin, p. 21.

¹⁴ Griffin, p. 21.

One of my most vivid recollections of Singapore were of boatbuilding along the canals. They were tidal and at the ebb stank horribly, but the boats themselves were beautiful. A forest of hulls in all stages of construction, with graceful curving ribs of pink wood in abstract traceries against the heavily massed clouds. The clouds too were beautiful, constant but everchanging, brilliant pink and gold curving shapes against chunks of deep ultramarine sky.

And the smells! Of dried fish, garlic, spices and curries. The aromas of the stalls of the street vendors as they prepared their meals of chicken, fried rice and satay, at once tempting and off-putting. This was my first real contact with the exotic East: Malays, Chinese and bony Tamils, appavelled in rich colours that only dark-skinned people can wear with success.¹⁵

Griffin spent most of his time before the Japanese invasion of Malaya visiting army units, making his drawings. The Australian Imperial Force (AIF) were located in the Mersing–Endau River area, on the south eastern coast of Malaya. Griffin sketched and painted the lives of the troops as they carried out their jungle training, prepared their defences, and occupied themselves during their leisure time. He wrote of his early impressions: “It seems to be mostly rubber trees and thatched palm huts, half-naked troops and trucks that have a habit of hiding themselves by camouflage in the surroundings.”¹⁶

I remember very vividly the day the war began in Malaya. The code word “Raffles” was sent out to all units warning them that a Jap invasion force was approaching Kota Bharu...There was an immediate rush back by us to HQ [Headquarters]...Life after that



Murray Griffin, *Cable-laying in a jungle clearing*, 1942, oil on hardboard, 63 x 81.5 cm, Australian War Memorial (ART24488).

day was extremely different. There was a tenseness, a tight-lipped attitude, a realisation that the fortress of Singapore was to be tried.¹⁷

Very early on in the war—a couple of days after the Japs attacked Malaya—those two fine British ships the “Prince of Wales” and the “Repulse” were sunk off the easy coast. It was a shattering blow, and had much to do with the lowering of morale throughout Malaya. We had all been told, over and over, that the Japs were poor airmen and had been badly trained and that their planes were greatly inferior to ours. How could they have sunk those great ships so easily? It spread gloom throughout the camp.¹⁸

Griffin said that he was introduced to the “realities of war” at Mersing when the Japanese landed at Endau, 25 miles north:

I was painting near a bridge over the river near Mersing when a long line of refugees from Endau passed by. They had push carts, prams, any sort of vehicle which could carry household goods—bikes, with Grandma on the handle bars or Grandpa on the back of the stoutest grandson. Most of them would stay in Mersing and be caught by the Nips just a few days later.¹⁹

¹⁵ Griffin, p. 22.

¹⁶ V. Murray Griffin, *Exhibition of paintings and drawings by V. Murray Griffin, official war artist*, (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1946), p. 4.

¹⁷ Murray Griffin, *Changi*, (Sydney: Edmund & Alexander, 1992), p. 31.

¹⁸ Griffin, p. 28.

¹⁹ Griffin, p. 28.



Murray Griffin, *The road to Mersing*, 1943, oil on hardboard, 71.2 x 63.5 cm, Australian War Memorial (ART24487).

Shortly after, he visited Mersing for the last time and saw the 22nd Brigade dug in “in a sea of red mud” :

I remember talking a lot with a young lieutenant whose name I have now forgotten. He was a broad shouldered, good looking youngster, the sort artists like to illustrate showing a victorious war hero plunging his bayoneted rifle into the enemy. His end was not like that at all. In a surprise attack by the Nips, as he reached for his rifle, a bullet entered his forehead and with a look of surprise his world faded for ever.²⁰

Griffin's only direct experience of combat in Malaya was when he was machine-gunned by a Japanese fighter pilot: “I was so surprised I stood stock still.”

In late January 1942, as the Allied troops retreated down the Malay peninsula to Singapore, Griffin wrote:

It has been most difficult to work lately—movement all the time and more to come. I've divided my material—some in Singapore. There are thousands of action pictures now to paint and I know the country and the boys—now the ruddy trouble is that—I don't know how to put it—I'm still tremendously bucked over my job—but I'm seriously thinking of chucking it—temporarily if possible—I visualise a time when—it is possible things may get so tough when every man is wanted for the fight for life—it may not come—I feel very worried over what is the right thing to do.²¹

By this time (on the orders of General H. Gordon Bennett to all non-combatant military personnel in Headquarters) he was carrying a rifle: “Because of the Jap skill at infiltration (and the possibility of parachute landings) we might at any time be surprised by enemy troops...I felt a little more on equal terms with a gun.”²²



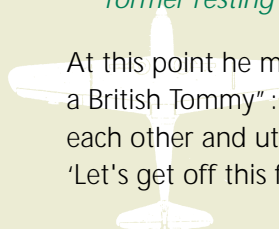
Murray Griffin, *Action at Parit Sulong, January 1942*, 1943, oil on hardboard, 64.5 x 81.5 cm, Australian War Memorial (ART24477).

20 Griffin, p. 29.
21 Griffin, p. 15.
22 Griffin, p. 35.

However, he was now burdened with the rifle, his long army kit-bag full of his gear, an easel, rolls of canvas and his specially made paint box, which weighed about 50 kilograms. He made it across to Singapore, sometimes riding a bike, sometimes getting a lift in a car, carrying all his gear.

But the end was nearing. I joined a small party, about platoon strength under the charge of Bill Kent Hughes. I think they were Administrative HQ boys. We camped that night in a deserted house on the outskirts of Singapore, a fairly small place set in a very pleasant garden...Next morning after breakfast we prepared to move when the Nips' planes came over. It was uncanny how they picked up troop concentrations. All the way back through Johore as soon as any centre point was set up, HQ or otherwise, the Nips knew. They undoubtedly had a thorough fifth column organised in Malaya because within a few hours of arrival at a new site the place would be bombed or shelled. Our house was no exception and we heard the whistle of falling bombs. We hadn't dug slit trenches so just flattened ourselves on the ground with as much of ourselves as possible under our tin hats, which wasn't much! Two men were killed outright. The plane turned and came again, but I for one had had enough. I grabbed my gear, including my precious paint box and cleared out...[When I was] about 300 yards away another stick of bombs fell across my former resting place. ²³

At this point he met up with a "private AIF and a British Tommy": "The three of us looked at each other and uttered the common thought, 'Let's get off this flaming island'." ²⁴



TYPE 3 SSF TONY

Span 39' 3" Length 29' 0"

(APPROXIMATE FIGURES ONLY)

²³ Griffin, p. 37.

²⁴ Griffin, p. 37.

²⁵ Griffin, p. 37.

²⁶ Griffin, p. 37.

²⁷ Griffin, p. 41.



As they made their way through shelled Singapore, they came across groups of soldiers who had become separated from their units and who "I think were as dazed as we were". On the way he progressively lightened his burden, leaving his kitbag, some extra clothing, his camera and several canvases in the houses and gardens he passed through. At one stage they "rested in a living room exquisitely furnished with rugs, dark wood furniture and some beautiful Balinese carvings. There was a strange air of desolation!...The houses were completely empty of humans." ²⁵ Finally, they reached the shore:

On our left was the aerodrome, spotted with burnt out planes, mostly ours. Huge columns of black smoke were soaring up into the sky from burning oil tanks and shells were lobbing haphazardly in the central area of the city.

Then we saw our "ticket to freedom" a native prahu, its bottom buried in the sand, its prow pointing towards Sumatra; it seemed a direct invitation for those about to leave. ²⁶

With pen knives they fashioned some oars from wooden planks, launched their boat and watched it sink. At this point they decided to make their way into Singapore on foot, taking advantage of one of a long line of abandoned cars left near the dock in order to complete their journey. Griffin left his paint box on a shelf in the AIF Kit Store: "I knew my painting days were over. I could only experience, and if I ever got out of this stinking mess, record later." ²⁷

A few days before the surrender, he offered his services to the Assistant Director of Medical Services. He was sent to St Andrew's Cathedral, which had been converted to a hospital to receive and treat casualties from the bombardment that continued all around it. Shells fell in the grounds, killing and wounding a few, but none hit the Cathedral.



Murray Griffin, *St. Andrew's Cathedral, Singapore, 1946*, oil, pencil on hardboard, 109.4 x 91.6 cm, Australian War Memorial (ART26531).

The end came the next day. Wild rumours were circulating among the orderlies. The first example of rumour activity that I had met. "Americans have landed at Padang... Hold on for a few more hours... A large fleet of transports and warships to take us off..." and other absurdities. A drowning man will clutch at straws!... Actually arrangements for our capitulation were underway though none of us knew about it.²⁸

Singapore was a raging furnace, columns of smoke rising everywhere and the sound of burnt out buildings crashing to the ground. Everyone was arguing over the rights and wrongs of capitulation—after years of POW [prisoner-of-war] life the troops were still arguing.²⁹

The day after the surrender, Griffin decided to return to Headquarters at the Tanglin barracks; he describes the scene there:

Rows and rows of artillery pieces, 25 pounders, 18 pounders. Silent men; grim, dirty men. Never before had I seen so many utterly frustrated men. They were stacking their rifles, their faces hard, their hopes shattered. They felt they had been got at, been let down, with never a real chance to fight—a denial of everything they had been trained for—a denial of all their dreams. Sleepers in a real nightmare. I have never since felt such an aura of frustration and bitterness as I felt among the men of the 8th Division that day. A beaten army.³⁰



Harold Abbott, *Defeat, Singapore, February 1942, 1946*, oil on canvas, 76 x 61.8 cm, Australian War Memorial (ART22927).

²⁸ Griffin, p. 42.

²⁹ Griffin, p. 43.

³⁰ Griffin, p. 45.

³¹ Griffin, p. 47.

The next day they were ordered to collect their belongings and two days' rations. They were marched about sixteen miles (25 kilometres) to Changi at the far eastern end of the island, a march none of the men ever forgot. It took them twelve hours:

*The natives watched us as we marched. What a change from rulers to slaves, to a position more lowly than theirs in so short a time. Some of the Malays laughed. The Chinese viewed us blankly but underneath with deep sympathy and eventually with help. We were so often to appreciate this in the trying years to come.*³¹

Here Griffin spent the next three and half years of his life, recording the everyday lives and sufferings of the prisoners in his paintings and drawings. He managed to get his painting supplies back from the AIF Kit Store in Singapore, and when they ran out, he scrounged or manufactured his own colours and tools. The Japanese did not interfere with his work, though in the later years he decided to hide his pictures, bricking them up into a recess under some stairs, or hiding them underground and in the roof of his hut. They were retrieved after the war. He had sent 25 paintings and sketches to Australia at the end of December 1941 and in January 1942 that, unfortunately, disappeared without trace.

His wife, like the families of all the captives, was "subjected to the mental torture of not knowing whether we were dead or alive for some fifteen months after our capture."³² Murray Griffin says that he has forgiven this and the treatment they received as prisoners of war, but

One does not forget these things, even if with time the memories have dimmed. From time to time a noise in the night is like the slam of a borehole lid [the wooden cover on the latrines] a death notice in the



Murray Griffin, *A 100-metre hut, Changi*, 1944, brush and brown ink and wash over pencil, 28 x 38.3 cm, Australian War Memorial (ART25063).

press, an anniversary, a song on the radio, the sight and smell of boiled rice—all can bring clear memories to the forefront of the mind...

*But I do believe that all that happened was meant. It is surprising how many ex-POWs now say that they would not have missed their experiences. Is this a recognition of their passage through life? Is this a gradual return to sanity?*³³

Vaughan Murray Griffin was born in Melbourne on 11 November 1903. He died in 1992, six months before the publication of his memoirs, on which this case study is based.



Harold Abbott, *Murray Griffin*, 1945, oil on canvas, 76.6 x 61 cm, Australian War Memorial (ART22926).

³² Griffin, p. 75.

³³ Griffin, p. 75.