

**Lieutenant Russell W Ewin**  
**NX76171 8<sup>th</sup> Division Signals**

**Born at Summer Hill, New South Wales, 5 November 1916.**

**Enlisted in the Militia November 1938.**

**Appointed a Lieutenant in February 1940.**

**Enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force (A.I.F.) 16 July 1941**

**Married Joyce Hammer 19 July 1941 (Photo in text)**

**Sailed from Sydney on S.S. Johan van Oldenbarnevelt 29 July 1941**

**Arrived Singapore 15 August 1941**

**Japan invaded Malaya 8 December 1941**

**Prisoner of War 15 February 1942**

**To Borneo as a POW July 1942.**

**Japan capitulates 15 August 1945.**

**Recovered to Australia and discharged from the AIF 6 December 1945**

*Russell Ewin has kindly given me permission to reproduce the following three chapters, from his history, on my website. I am very grateful to him. I am sure that readers will appreciate the opportunity of reading about the POWs who were in Borneo. Peter Winstanley 2011*

### **Joining the Militia**

During 1938 Major Perc Lewis, one of those WW1 men in our office who had remained in the Militia after the war and now commanded a section in 2nd Division Signals, spoke to me and other young men. He asserted confidently that war would break out in the following year. We should all get a flying start and join his section so that we would be well equipped to play a part. I was the third to enlist, on 28 November 1938, when I became a Signaller in E Section. Our training took place in the Engineer Training Depot in Moore Park Road, Darlinghurst, where the Sydney Football Stadium now stands. I enjoyed the life, the night each week and sometimes weekends at training. Perc Lewis was serious; twice weekly after work we went with him to the United Service Institution, where he gave us more intensive training.

In the army, preparations for war accelerated as events in Europe became more threatening. Hitler's forces "annexed" Austria and the Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia. Our unit was still using horses for cable laying when I joined and all the equipment was from World War I. We abandoned our jodhpurs, black leather leggings and puttees about a month later as we became "fully motorised", a most misleading term, since we had very few army vehicles and the others were a motley selection of trucks and cars hired as required from members of the unit. Our first training camp was at Woonona on the South Coast, which was sparsely settled and provided plenty of space for manoeuvres. Apart from the fact that nearly everyone had diarrhoea, it was good fun and valuable experience.

The long expected finally happened; war was declared on 3 September 1939 when the Germans, having invaded Poland, refused to withdraw. It was Sunday, and I was completing a weekend NCO training course at Moore Park. In the late afternoon we were told that there would be a declaration of war and several volunteers were sought to go to Fort Scratchley at Newcastle the following day. Waiting on Central Station for a train home, I heard of the official announcement. I became a corporal in September 1939 and we had a month's training camp and Signals Officer Training Course in November 1939 at Studleigh Park Golf House, near Camden. Two friends from work, Roy McNab and Bill Harper, also graduated from the course. I was promoted to Sergeant in January, and then Lieutenant in February 1940.

At work, I was going along well. The job I had been doing was reclassified to a higher salary range and I received back pay for the eighteen months I had been on it. Shortly after, I was one of six junior clerks appointed as assessors in the Assessing Section. To our chagrin, a large number of people from other State departments were brought into the Taxation Department at the same time, all older than and senior to me. As seniority was an important factor in promotion, they would always remain ahead of us unless we were considered to be more efficient than they.

In February 1940 another officer, Reg Howard, and I applied to join 6th Division Signals, in course of being formed. Reg was selected and I rejected on medical grounds because of the hernia operation. I was chagrined at this result, considering that all my subsequent physical activity should have made my fitness evident. Medical standards at this early stage of the war were exceptionally high and rigid. Reg went to the Middle East and unfortunately became the first Signals Officer killed in action.

The enlistment and training of men for the services was now moving apace. Men were being drafted under a Universal Service Personnel (USP) scheme; 2 Div Sigs received hundreds of these conscripts, who were required to be in camp for three months. Like other army units, 2 Div Sigs was nowhere near fully established and still poorly equipped, mainly with World War 1 material. The three-month camps served two purposes: the USPs brought

us to full strength and we could advance their and our own training to meet the full requirement of providing communications for the 2nd Division to its infantry and artillery units. I went to the camp at Wallgrove in April 1940; apart from the Mess Rooms and offices, it was a tented camp for accommodation. There were, I think, six to a tent, but officers each had their own, smaller tent.

Training at Wallgrove was testing but interesting. Winter was very cold with frosts and summer full of flies, dust and sweat. With Reveille at 0600hrs and bed at who knew when, conditions at times were very unpleasant. Army records show me there first from 24 April 1940 to 30 November 1940. This period covered two camps, of course and when one course finished we started again with a new intake. In the courses I invariably found people from work and many of them were posted to my section. Fortunately, leave was available most weekends except when I was Orderly Officer or out on exercises. Although most people had to come and go by train from Wallgrove Station, several officers had cars on hire to the Army and usually I could get a lift to make things easier.

It was not all hard yakka, of course. There were sports events, a few films and concerts and life in the Officers' Mess was a little more comfortable than in the ranks. We were able to augment rations, at our own cost, and there was no excise duty on grog, so that there was often much horseplay and raucousness. I neither drank nor smoked and had a constant battle of banter with our CO, Major Fred Tinkler, a veteran of WWI, with his orders to me to have a whisky and my refusal on the ground that it was an illegal order. It was all a lot of fun and I soon decided that it was simple enough to act silly, although sober. I learned the basics of driving a 15cwt truck in the camp (no automatic gears then) and was given a civilian licence by Penrith Police without any testing. My first drive out of the camp was in an emergency, when I was the only available person to take a three-ton truck to a camp in Warwick Farm Racecourse. I was halted at a railway level crossing near the Vauxhall Inn at Parramatta but to the concern of drivers behind me found I could not hold the truck steady on the slope! Ultimately arriving at the entrance to the racecourse, I convinced myself that the opening must be wide enough to go through; unfortunately a rear wheel sank into mud and we were firmly jammed between the gateposts!

I was for a while the Messing Officer for the unit, which meant I could get a vehicle once a week to pick up supplies of fresh food from the Sydney Markets and sometimes call in at home. This work was additional to my own posting, which was command of E Section, some 27 NCOs and men, formed to provide communication to an artillery unit, the 6th Field Regiment, which had a few old 25 pounder guns. In fact, their equipment and ours at this time was all from World War 1; any less old had been taken to outfit the 6th and 7th Divisions. Our first exercise with 6 Fd Regt as part of a divisional operation was in the area south of Wallgrove, around Luddenham, Bringelly, Silverdale and Wallacia, where there was little more than a few farms and villages. The corresponding event on the next course was part of an exercise for the defence of Sydney. "A" Troop had one gun at Church Point, one near Newport, and two at West Head! The most memorable recollections are going to sleep fatigued while driving at the head of my convoy and an invitation to a magnificent buffet dinner at Monash Golf Club.

After Joyce and I separated we had, as I said earlier, remained friends. I tried every subterfuge to see her, waiting on the railway platform on the way to work, walking the streets around her workplace at lunchtime, asking unsuccessfully for the last dance so that I could perhaps walk her home. I had been organizing monthly dances in the Dulwich Hall at Dulwich Hill for young members of Lewisham Meths and Petersham Pres, because dancing was not allowed in the church halls. Joyce came to these dances. However, none of my ploys advanced my cause, and although Joyce would occasionally go out with me to concerts, she

would insist on paying her way. We had exchanged presents on our twenty-first birthdays. She agreed to accompany me to the 2 Div Sigs Annual Ball in Parramatta Town Hall and the attention she received from fellow officers did nothing to comfort me.

Happily, by the end of the year we were again going together, without any commitment on Joyce's part. I had reapplied for the AIF, without any response except an acknowledgment, so Joyce had every reason to think I might go away and was uncertain of her feelings. I was back in camp at Wallgrove from 21 December after three weeks at work assessing salary and wages income tax returns, where the person responsible for checking my work was one Jim Hall. In camp, he became my sergeant, so we each had to take care to avoid provocation in either place, for fear of retaliation when roles were reversed!

Sometime in January 1941 I received the most significant and joyful letter of my life when Joyce wrote to say that all her doubts as to her feelings had been resolved. We formally announced our engagement during February 1941. Joyce was going to Terrigal on holidays shortly afterwards and we planned that I join her at the end of camp. I was to be bitterly disappointed; due to the state of the war our tour of duty was extended by three weeks and I could not get leave. As it transpired, I was then promoted to Captain and transferred to Eastern Command Signals on 3 February 1941. I was disappointed not to be staying with 2 Div Sigs.

My new unit's function was to provide communication between Corps Headquarters and Divisional Headquarters. It was located on the Canterbury Racecourse and, like 2 Div Sigs, had an intake of USPs to train. It was not a satisfying position for me. I did not like the CO or the lax training programmes. An interesting feature was that John Bromwich, the champion tennis player was in my section and my friend Jack Askew—himself a grade player—arranged an exhibition match with Bromwich and his doubles partner Adrian Quist, Frank Sedgman and Bill Sidwell.

### **At home**

Like most young people, then and now, I took many things for granted. Home was where you were fed, given a bed, food and clothing but did little to help around the place unless pointedly instructed to do so. Mum and Dad made few such calls on me, indeed they were both such good homemakers that it probably never occurred to me that they would appreciate assistance, and they helped and encouraged me in all my aspirations. As the years unfolded I was able to appreciate what this meant in terms of sacrifice and effort.

Nor was I on really close terms with my brothers, not seeing a great deal of them, mainly because of age differences, my nights of study, then the time away from home on holidays, walking trips and the long periods in camp. For my loving parents, 1941 was the beginning of years of anguish and concern as they joined the ever-growing ranks of mothers and fathers with sons on active service.

By mid-1941, Bill was twenty-one and had been working as an ironworker for some years. He voluntarily enlisted in the Citizen Military Force in Feb 1939 as N54105, a private in the Australian Army Service Corps Petrol Company, 2nd Division and went regularly to training at Marrickville. Subsequently he was called up for full time service on 1 October 1941, with a detachment of his unit serving with 14 Field Ambulance at Wallgrove. After only nine days service he was discharged and released from service because he was in a reserved occupation.

Les was working and turned 19 on 13 June 1941. Not long before his birthday, Mum confided in me that he was anxious to join the AIF and was exhorting her to give her consent. Parent's consent was a condition if an applicant was aged between 18 and 21. Mum was reluctant, and after several refusals he said he would enlist under a false name if she did not

agree. Mum asked what I thought she should do. I had not seen Les to be able to talk to him about it but said I thought she might be less anguished in the future if he enlisted with her consent, rather than without. I have never found out what transpired between them, but when Les completed his attestation form as part of the enlistment procedure he declared his age to be 20 years and eleven months, overstating it by two years. He took the Oath of Enlistment on 12 June (for official army purposes the day before he turned 21) became NX32289 and was marched into General Details Depot, Tamworth, to be transferred to "A" Infantry Training Brigade. I had not seen him during this time but he wrote to me straight away to ask if I could get him transferred to a Signals unit. Les had always been keen on motorbikes and thought he would like to be a dispatch rider. I wrote to my friend Major Lewis at the Signals Training Depot, also at Tamworth, and Les was transferred there on 28 June 1941.

Alan was then a likeable and engaging young boy, still at Petersham Public School. At Lewisham Church he became very attached to Joyce's brother Gordon and amused everyone by his constant "tagging along", which Gordon took in good part. Eric was a younger schoolboy; at just over nine years, he also was at Petersham PS.

### **AIF and Marriage**

In July 1941, officers were sought to volunteer as reinforcement officers to join 8th Division Signals, part of which had been in Malaya since February. I had been waiting for an opportunity like this; at an interview on Monday 16 July 1941 I was told there were no vacancies for a Captain, but did not hesitate to say I was prepared to accept Lieut's rank. I was accepted as the 2nd Reinforcement Officer (the 1st already being in Malaya) and told to return for medical examination on Wednesday. Lt Ron Foster, whom I knew from 2 Div Sigs, was to be the 3rd RO and we could expect to leave within a week, taking 36 men with us.

Now I had to break the news to Joyce. We had often discussed this possibility. Although she had not wanted me to go overseas, she had always understood my view that I could not in good conscience refrain from enlisting. On Monday night we talked about marriage; I did not think we should marry before I left, as I might well be killed or maimed. Her reply was that we had already made the decision; if I loved her we should marry immediately. Of course, there was still the hurdle of the Army medical examination. Once again I was confronted by a doctor who said he should reject me, this time because of my broken arm. He relented by conceding that service in signals was not as arduous as in the infantry. Committing an understandable act of perjury, I had not told him of my previous rejection and naturally omitted any reference to the hernia. Now, in addition to being NX12589, a rejected applicant, I was NX76171—a big gap in numbers.



So, all the taradiddle over and with me back in camp, Joyce in two days set up all the arrangements for a wedding for Saturday 19 July 1941. She was able to get Cahills Restaurant in Pitt Street for the reception but as they could only accommodate 32 people and we had a list of at least 34, I had to eliminate two of my best friends. The wedding ceremony was conducted in Wesley Chapel in Pitt Street, Sydney by the Rev. George Furner, who Mum knew from the church at Blayney. It was a happy event, inhibited a little by the awareness of my impending departure.

We departed in a small hired car on a honeymoon of uncertain duration. The Army people were to send a telegram advising me when I should report for embarkation and I was to telephone home daily to check its arrival. My CO had grudgingly told me I could go on leave until required to report to the AIF. We were booked into the Carrington Hotel at Katoomba on Saturday evening. On the way we called in at Wallgrove Camp to say a few farewells to our 2 Div Sigs friends, so did not arrive until almost midnight, when we had great difficulty arousing someone to let us in. Perhaps the burnt sausages and toast we were served for breakfast were in retaliation! We stayed the next night at Caves House, Jenolan, then two nights at the Hotel Canobolas at Orange. Snow fell on the way to Orange, the first that Joyce had seen, and we built a snowman on Mt Canobolas. Finally, a night at the Knickerbocker Hotel, Bathurst.

Each day we had dutifully called home, to be assured by Mum that no telegram had come. I was concerned about this, so we returned to Sydney. As there was still no advice I went back to Eastern Command Camp, only to be abused by an irate C O, who denied having granted leave and threatened me with all sorts of charges as the AIF had been looking for me. As I no longer felt bound to him, I was able to respond in kind. I called the authorities to make my explanation and found that a telegram had been sent a few days earlier telling me I was to travel by train to the Signals Training Depot at Tamworth on the evening of the 28th. At least it meant a few more days together for Joyce and me. Later, we found that the telegram was apparently delivered when nobody was home and had been slipped under the door. Unfortunately, it also slipped under a mat lying inside the doorway, where it remained unobserved!

Ron Foster and I had an uneventful journey to Tamworth, first class, with sleeping compartment. My old friend Perc Lewis was in charge of the Depot and assisted us throughout the day as we met the men, obtained our equipment and tropical clothing, etc. before catching the 6pm train back to Sydney, this time sitting up all night on a crowded troop train. We had thirty-six NCOs and men to look after. Perhaps I should say men and boys; as we leaned out of the train windows we saw that there were tears among many of those waving us goodbye and some of ours were also crying. This perturbed and puzzled me, since I did not understand why grown men would act so weakly. The answer, said my sergeant, was that there were more than a few of our contingent who were under age, including four sixteen-year olds. Later, of course, I found there are many occasions when it is perfectly natural for even grown men to be brought to tears.

In the early morn of 29 July 1941 we reinforcements, now very tired, alighted from the train at Darling Harbour, which was then the railway terminal for loading produce for export. We boarded the ferry *Kulgoa* to embark on our troopship, the S.S. *Johann van Oldenbarnevelt*. There was little time to explore the ship as we settled men and ourselves down and received loads of instructions, but nothing could quell the excitement and anticipation. Despite an embargo on releasing details of our departure, when we departed at 4pm there were hundreds of spectators to wave goodbye, but I scanned them vainly for sight of Joyce or another familiar face.

## MALAYA

### Letters and memory

Joyce carefully kept letters and cards that I wrote to her from 28 July 1941, the day before I left Australia, until the surrender of Singapore on 15 February 1942. They are dated from 28 July 1941 to 5 February 1942. Any that I wrote after the 5th did not reach her. There are many love letters but I also sent as much news and impressions as I could reveal. I have been able to use them to reinforce or correct my memory. I had not read them since they were written and reading them now certainly reveals how incomplete and erroneous memory can be after sixty years! I also kept the letters received from Joyce and our families but, alas, after being sent to store when action commenced in Malaya, together with other personal belongings, they were never seen again.

### The Voyage

*SS Melbourne* joined our transport, the *Johann van Oldenbarnevelt*, and our convoy (US.11B) was under the protection of HMAS *Sydney*. Off Melbourne, the *Sydney* was replaced by HMAS *Canberra* and *SS Marnix Van Sint Aldergonde* joined us. *SS Melbourne* was replaced by M.P. (Motor Packet) *Sibajak* at Fremantle. The three ships transported 6,088 Army troops, 42 Navy and 54 RAAF. The *Marnix* had 2/26 and 2/29 Battalions and some smaller parties, altogether 2,384. The *Sibajak* held 2/15 Fd Regt and a few others, total 1,393. Our ship was carrying the 2/30 Bn under the command of Lt. Col. "Black Jack" Galleghan—whose name and fame were later to become so well known—the 2/12 Royal Australian Engineers and other units, in all numbering 2,429.

The *Johann* and *Marnix* were identical sister ships, completed within a week of each other in 1930. With a gross tonnage 20,314 and 609 feet long, they plied between Holland and Dutch East Indies until war broke out. When Holland was invaded in May 1940 they were handed over to the Allies for use as troop transports, still manned by Dutch officers and Dutch East Indies crew. The *Marnix* was sunk off North Africa in November 1942 but the *Johann* was refitted after the war and resumed her former trade. In 1950, she was chartered to the Dutch Government and carried migrants to Australia, South Africa and New Zealand.

On her last voyage to Sydney in 1961, Joyce and I shared the hospitality of the Captain at an afternoon tea and inspection, together with a few others who had been on our voyage. She subsequently became a cruise ship, the *Lakonia*, Southampton-Canary Islands, carrying over a thousand passengers. Tragically, she caught fire in 1963 with a loss of 132 lives. She was then abandoned and while being towed to Gibraltar capsized and sank, very near the spot where the *Marnix* lies at the bottom of the ocean.

Our accommodation was excellent. Ron Foster and I shared a first class cabin on B Deck with another officer; our troops (including eight Engineer reinforcements allotted to me for administration) were two, three or four to a second-class cabin. Most of the men from other units were in hammocks. The Officers' Mess had been the First Class Dining Room. The walls of the dining rooms and lounges were covered with Masonite and it was only when the ship visited Sydney after the war that we saw its beautiful tapestries and stained glass. Food was served in the various dining rooms and although quite good, many of us found the Dutch style of cooking in oil a little unpalatable.

There was not a great amount to do. Training was without equipment and mainly physical and recreative but officers had additional duties such as Blackout Officer and

Orderly Officer. Although letter censoring took up much time, it helped us get acquainted with our NCOs and men, who turned out to be a fine lot. The whole voyage was nevertheless fairly tedious. After the trip across the Bight, during which my cabin mates were seasick most of the time, leave was granted in Fremantle from 1pm to midnight and Ron and I were fortunate in getting a lift to Perth. I had just had a tooth out and then another broke from my dental plate, so it was a rather subdued look at Perth.

My greatest pleasure in the Indian Ocean was to stand on the heaving bow looking down on the porpoises that frequently accompanied us just ahead of the ship or watching for flying fish gliding through the air. At a distance, we could usually see the other troopship in our convoy, the *Sibajak*, and our navy escort moving around us like a dog herding sheep.

### **Singapore and Malaya**

Our arrival on 15 August in the busy Straits of Singapore coincided with an order that we were to be quarantined because of an outbreak of mumps on the ship. We saw little of the land as we were transported next day to General Base Depot at Tampoi, near Johore Bahru, the capital of Johore State. The Depot was a mainly tented area located on what had been a rubber plantation. Our time there was full of frustration. We were unable to get much equipment from 8 Div Sigs to allow practical training, we were not yet accustomed to the rain, heat, mildew and humidity of the tropics and letters from home were slow to reach us.

Quarantine was lifted at the end of August, but we remained in GBD. Ron Foster and I took leave to go to Singapore for a day and this left a myriad of impressions—the smell of open drains and roadside food stalls, haggling in the High Street and Change Alley, the fun fairs and cabarets such as the Happy World, with its Chinese opera, snake charmers, dance halls and a host of unfamiliar races. Plus the British havens of Raffles and Stamford Hotels and St Andrews Cathedral.

Ron was sent to hospital for an appendix operation, giving me extra work, but also the chance to see a bit more of Singapore as I visited him. Relief from GBD came when we were at last ordered to join our unit at Johore Bahru on 23 September, only to find they were still in process of moving in from their previous camp at Kuala Lumpur. Ron and I had an unexpectedly abrupt and rude welcome from Lt Col Kappé, the Commanding Officer, and I was promptly sent off to assist the RSM in erecting marquees. The next week gave me the chance to get the feel of the unit but I was pleased to be posted on 30 September to take charge of a Signal Office at Kota Tinggi, close to the east coast and about 27 miles north of JB. It was part of a system for communication from Johore Bahru to the defended area of Mersing. There were only two pairs of civilian telephone lines connecting JB and Mersing, with an indirect route through an inland village, Kluang. We were staffed with twenty telegraph and wireless operators, linesmen and despatch riders, together with an officer and men from the Royal Corps of Signals, affectionately called the Scotties. As all signal traffic north passed through here, it was extremely busy but it was no longer merely training and I was very happy to be working hard. There were frequent breakdowns, often caused by monkeys swinging on overhead lines, and on one occasion elephants pushing telegraph poles over as they used them for back-scratchers. Some of the cable was laid through the jungle, so I saw for the first time the magnificence of the huge trees and dense undergrowth. Here, too, I learned to ride a motorbike.

My own housing was a small bungalow on a rubber plantation, the Kota Tinggi Estate, which had formerly been used by the assistant manager, so the British lieutenant and I had roomy accommodation, probably envied by the men, who were in tents. The village of Kota Tinggi was about three-quarters of a mile away to the north, reached by a bridge over a beautiful river some seventy yards wide. None of the British residents lived in the village,



although they frequented the Union Jack Club located there, with about 40 members, mainly rubber estate managers and civil administrators. I became an honorary member, had dinner there each Saturday night and on a few occasions played tennis on Sunday morning. One of the members was the Assistant Adviser (District Magistrate) for the area, who invited us to his residence for lunch each Sunday. It was then that I learned the delights of "Curry Tiffin".

I could go on. I was glad to be in the countryside. I had a growing appreciation of the beauty of the tropics and of the characteristics of the people. In a letter home I wrote, "I like the country—the country proper. The cities I would rather avoid except for the entertainment and the desire to see new places and new faces. More and more I appreciate the people, especially the Malays and Chinese".

About 4 November I was posted from reinforcements to the unit establishment, in command of "G" Section, which provided communications to the 2/15 Field Regiment. The regiment was then accommodated in a hutted camp at Tampin, in the State of Negri Sembilan, in a picturesque location with a mountain backdrop. It was a welcome appointment, as I already knew a number of the officers who had been with 6 Field Regiment in Australia. HQ of the Royal Australian Artillery (RAA) was situated a short distance away at Kluang, served by a detachment of five of my signalmen from G Section. I inspected the Sigs area there very early in the piece and, finding uncleaned rifles, ordered the five to be replaced immediately. Strangely, this seemed to galvanise the whole section into a realisation that things were serious and I was serious and it added to my acceptance by the section.

Preparations for war were now going ahead rapidly. The establishment of our unit and my section was increased to match the British establishment, as our numbers and equipment were inadequate for the long lines of communications for which my section was responsible. Men and NCOs were also moving out as part of the reorganisation and we acquired untrained men from other units. Before long we were doing arduous three day jungle exercises with the gunners and on the way to becoming efficient. A letter to Joyce on 20 November said I had travelled 1,000 miles in the past week.

### **Battle Stations**

Receipt of the code word AWAKE on 29 November alerted us to enter a state of readiness for operational roles at six hours notice. SEAVIEW on Dec 5 meant that a declaration of war by Japan was expected hourly and RAFFLES next day said, "Go"! The regiment was rapidly dispersed. With Regimental Headquarters, four artillery troops and 84 LAD (Light Aid Detachment), we were on our way to Kluang. December 8 brought news of the expected declaration of war and the bombing of Pearl Harbour and Singapore.

Most AIF units were still in their original positions on the west coast until 22 December, but it was becoming obvious that 8 Div would soon be required to assist the 3rd Indian Corps. As one of the preliminary steps, G Section was detached from 2/15 on that day and given the task of setting up a larger Signal Centre on the Mengkibol Estate at Kluang that would act as a pivot for expansion to the north and assist the RAF. With the assistance of the Engineers, our office was set up underground.

Christmas Day was just another day. I was instructed to have another civil line installed to the aerodrome, which necessitated getting authority from the British Command at Singapore. I was told that being Christmas Day there was no one on duty who could help me! My first thought was "God help us!" but persistent demands from 8 Div HQ brought the desired result. Our Christmas party was quiet; I arranged short reliefs from duty to allow everyone to participate but had to order a close down at midnight. During this time, too, I had my longest bike ride yet, speeding across to Batu Pahat on the west coast to take over two civil lines as it was expected the Japs might land in that area.

The regiment had left Australia with mortars instead of their proper artillery but the 25 pounders started to arrive and we had to go sixty miles to Mersing to calibrate them by firing at targets in the sea. The Japanese were now advancing rapidly.

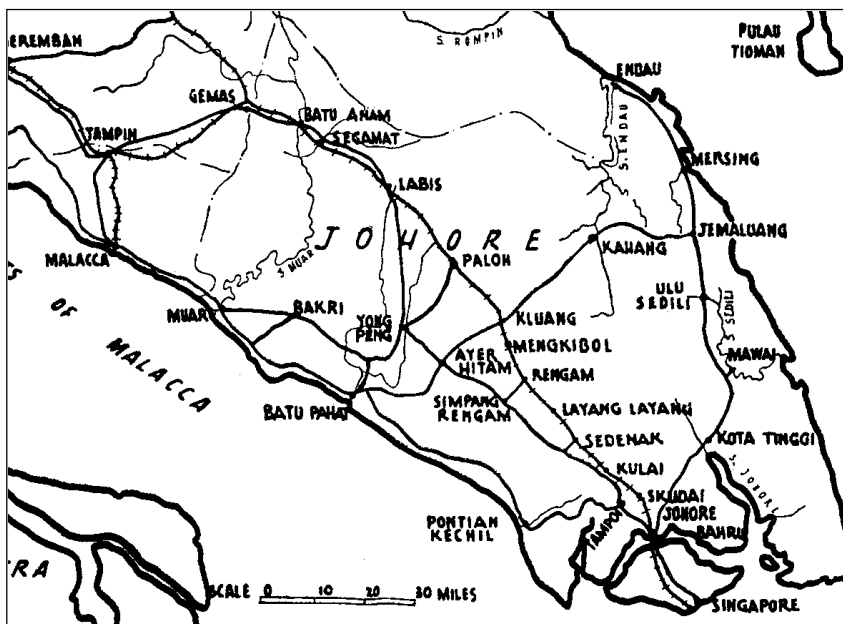
The night of January 9 saw us replaced at the Signal Centre by our H Section under Lt Ted Esler, and we were back next day with the 2/15 Fd Regt, moving north to Segamat, on the northern border of Johore, passing on the way the retreating 3rd Indian Corps, tired and worn out after fighting rearguard actions for five weeks. It was a harrowing experience in pouring rain with no headlights allowed. Fortunately, the rain also kept the bombers away. The batteries of 2/15 took up positions north of Segamat in preparation for an ambush at Gemas, which was carried out by 30 Bn on the 14th. This was a tough time for G Section, now further augmented for our task of providing communications from the regiment's HQ to its two battery headquarters. The distances, 13 miles and 9 miles, were much longer than normal, requiring scrounging extra cable. The two cable-laying teams under Cpl Harry Beed did a tremendous job and he was later awarded an MID (Mentioned in Dispatches). Wireless sets were not operating well and dispatch riders and telegraph operators were under pressure but did not fail in their tasks.

Despite the success of this operation, the Japs were not long in moving forward again and a typical encircling movement threatened to cut off the Australians. Consequently, the order came for 30 Bty to withdraw.

During this time 29 Bty, operating with 26 Bn, withdrew to Batu Annam, so that we had to move some men with them. By January 19, both batteries were in positions in the Labis area. The batteries had heavy fire plans, firing 2,000 rounds during one period of 24

hours. I had not had any sleep for over 36 hours and recall having my first cigarette at someone's suggestion, feeling so lifted by it that I lit another from the first. However, I did not smoke again until our release from POW camp in 1945.

On the night of the 21st, it seemed again that the Japanese might cut us off, fresh troops having landed on the west coast. After an overwhelming advance,



they were held up temporarily, allowing us a difficult and rapid withdrawal to Yong Peng, on the 22nd to Mengkibol and by the 23rd to eight miles south of Ayer Hitam.

I now have to mention that during the course of withdrawal from the Gemas action I was taking part in the withdrawal from a battery position. The sound of Japanese tanks advancing had become clear. I was on my electrician's motorbike, stopping now and then to cut our cable and drag it a little along the road, as it could have been very useful to the Japs. This application of a "scorched earth" policy led to my downfall; the bike struck a stone on the road, veered off and left me straddled in a drain with my left leg jammed between the wall of the drain and the hot exhaust pipe. Fortunately, only the footbrake had been damaged,

so I set off again in some agony, abandoning my self-imposed task. Eventually I found a battalion medical officer. He looked quickly at the leg, badly abraded from ankle to knee on one side, burns on the other and I think decided it was not a gun-shot wound so a swift and heavy application of iodine would do. When I recovered from the shock, I was able to rejoin my section as we withdrew.

By the time we reached Ayer Hitam I was having some difficulty walking and was with the 2/15 Regimental Medical Officer, Dr Rowland "Rowley" Richards, with whom I had struck up a friendship since neither he nor I, as attached officers, had to do Regimental duties and spent a little time together. On this occasion, we decided we would drive in his truck towards Parit Sulong, where the final stand in the Muar action was taking place. On the way we were stopped by Brigadier Thyer, who ordered us to take him there, as he was anxious about the fate of the AIF soldiers. As we approached the probable location of the force and heard the sound of battle he decided, as we already had silently done, that there was no useful purpose and we should retire. We were barely past the bridge at Parit Sulong on our way back when the village went up in flames under shelling and the bridge was destroyed.

Rowley sent me off to 13 Australian General Hospital on 23 January, as my leg was now badly swollen and I could no longer walk. I was badly put out, as I felt I was deserting men who had performed so admirably and with whom I had developed a close affiliation.

One treasured souvenir that I have of this short period is a copy of a letter, that was passed on to Joyce, from one C D (Darcy) Roberts, whom I knew in the Coast and Mountain Walkers Club—and was President of the NSW Bushwalkers' Association—to the President of the Club. It reads: "I have hardly seen Russell Ewin since he arrived to join our unit...I had a ten minute yarn with him shortly after he arrived. The only other time I have seen him was for about five seconds in an unexpected spot a good way from anywhere while we were moving up to the front. I believe he was in our area on the morning I got hit. However, I have heard a good deal about him. The chaps who came over with him all thought the world of him, especially liking his quietness, all too rare in Militia Officers. Since the show started he has achieved quite a reputation for gameness and I have heard several stories that show he has unusual 'guts'."

Fortunately, it turned out that Lt Arthur Shakes, whom I knew in 2 Div Sigs, had been on his way to assist me when the accident happened. I was transferred to General Base Depot for recuperation and was soon champing at the bit to be back in action. During this time, I was able to move about a little and when visiting G Section at Bukit Timah, on Singapore Island, was told that my brother had called in to see me. He had said he arrived in Singapore about a week before, without any pre-embarkation leave and had not been home for a while. It could only be Les, but there was no opportunity to try to find him. More about this later.

It was not until 5 February that I was discharged to 8 Div Sigs HQ, in the formerly beautiful Botanic Gardens, now scarred by roads, tents and slit trenches. Our location there was under mortar fire several times, with some injuries. I dashed one night from where I was sleeping on a groundsheet in the open to a slit trench, as shells approached; returning after the attack I found my tattered groundsheet where a mortar shell had exploded. Thank heaven for the ubiquitous slit trench! In fact, in my second last letter home I described one and told Joyce that if occasion arose this underground shelter was the best. I worried about this through the whole of my POW days, hoping she had not received it, as I thought it might have sounded unnecessarily alarming. The letter did reach her but she says she was unaffected by the reference!

It was becoming increasingly evident that, despite determined and desperate fighting by the defenders on the island, the Japs would soon over-run us, so I had not gone back to G Section but was doing allotted tasks as required. On 13 February I drove to 2/15 HQ at the

end of Cuscaden Road, Singapore and had just set the small car in motion to depart when I heard the typical whoosh of falling bombs, growing louder and louder. There was a small drain nearby, probably 6 inches deep, that I hurriedly threw myself into just as the bombs landed. My tin hat came off in the process; I have never felt so naked and defenceless! Three bombs had straddled the area around the HQ building. Three men from our L Section, serving the 2/30 Bn, had been killed, together with Jack Campbell from my Section. Rowley Richards was quickly in attendance. I pushed the remainder of our people out on various work to get them away from the scene. When things had settled down, Rowley asked what was wrong with me. To my answer, "Nothing", he replied, "Well, what's the blood all over the back of your shirt?" and drove me to the 13 AGH [Australian General Hospital], which was by then established in the Cathay Theatre in the city. I had again been lucky. There was a small bomb fragment in the soft flesh under my shoulder blade. Doctors said it could remain there, which it has done until this day, on one occasion causing consternation during an airport screening. I went back to the Gardens next day, the 14th.

### **The end and the beginning**

One thing about being in the right place in Sigs is that you see messages such as situation reports, from which it was easy to deduce that the end, whatever it might be, was very close. All sorts of rumours abounded. Sunday 15th February 1942 was business as usual for the Japs but by Sunday afternoon we knew negotiations for surrender were under way. "Cease fire" was ordered to take place at 8.30pm, when an eerie silence took over—no bombs, no mortars. Just thoughts.

On Monday, all members of the unit were concentrated in the Botanic Gardens to prepare for our move to a prison camp, revealed in the evening as Changi, located on the north-east of the island. Tuesday 17th was filled with preparations. We started the 17-mile march at 4pm, each man carrying only one kitbag, which held two days rations and whatever else of his personal belongings he chose. For most, this meant discarding quite a bit. The route was to the east along the northern fringe of the city, through Serangoon, past Changi Gaol to the Selarang Barracks, which had housed British troops.

It was a memorable trek. Hundreds of curious Chinese and Malays gathered along the route, some surreptitiously passing food to the troops. As night fell, many of the trees were aglow with the brilliance of fireflies. It was not long before soldiers were tiring. I took the pack of one of my men, then another, to help them to straggle along. On our arrival about 2am we were happy to be met with a cup of tea, then dropped exhausted to the ground to sleep. Next morning we found we had been allotted four splendid brick buildings, which had been married quarters for the British garrison troops. However, all the utilities—water, sewerage and electrical power— had ceased to function. So the essential tasks of building latrines, fetching water, setting up cookhouses and the like kept us busy for a while, albeit getting hungrier already as there was as yet no food delivery and we were rationing out the few supplies we had brought.

At this stage, too, there was no barbed wire or any sight of the Japanese. Ron Foster and I, who shared a room with four other Sigs officers, had a stroke of good fortune. We wandered off to look at the 15" guns in which misplaced faith had been reposed for their role in the defence of the island. We found them, breechblocks blown off, and ventured into the five or so underground floors beneath the guns. They were almost bare except for an abandoned pack containing shirts, shorts, sheets, toothbrush and other personal goods, which were to stand us in good stead in the years ahead. I also took back a stainless steel hospital measuring mug, a hammer, a bottle of ink and an imposing timber government issue clock about one foot high.

As soon as I could, I set about finding Les, only to discover that he was in hospital in Singapore. There was no way I could visit him and three weeks passed before he was transferred to Changi, where we had a happy reunion and were able to swap our stories.

Army records show that Les completed his enlistment papers at the Recruiting Depot in Martin Place on 2 June 1941. His age was shown as 20<sup>11</sup>/<sub>12</sub> because he had understated his date of birth by two years. The religious denomination he volunteered (an optional question) was C of E, although he had been baptised Methodist. He was soon transferred to the Signals Training Depot at Tamworth on 28 June 1941, then on 14 July to 1 Armoured Training Regiment there. On 15 August he was transferred to A.T.T. Depot, Melbourne, thence on 1 December to 2 Armoured Training Regiment at Puckapunyal. Another transfer followed, to Ordnance Workshops, 3 Echelon, at Caulfield on 31 December 1941. On 10 January 1942, he embarked for Singapore via Batavia, arriving there on 26 January to join 2/10 Ordnance Field Workshops. The large batch of reinforcements of which he formed a part had been hastily assembled in Australia from many sources, and included many incompletely trained personnel. Les told me that he had been on a six-month Instrument Mechanic Course, of which he had only completed three months before sailing. There had been no opportunity to visit home for farewells.

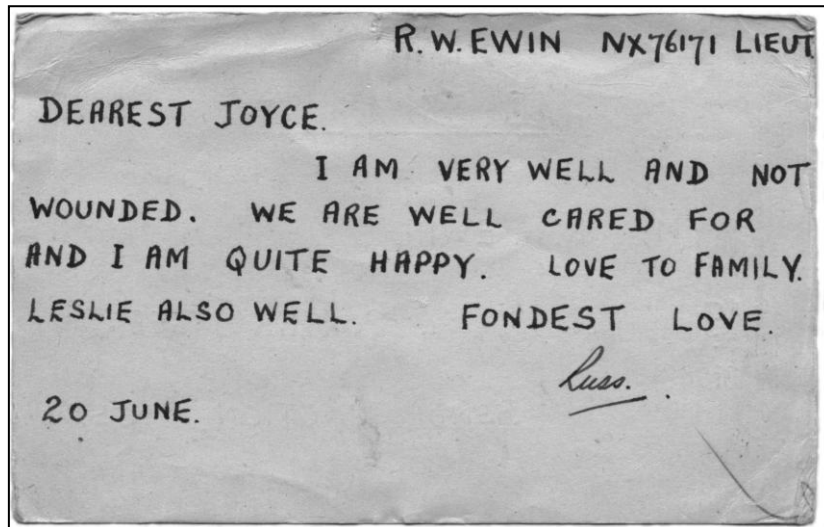
Early in February, a scratch force known as X Battalion had been hastily formed from these reinforcements and spare men from other units. Many, including Les, had not had any weapon training. The battalion was in action in the Jurong area from 10 February and was badly mauled. I do not know how long Les was with this inexperienced and unfortunate unit, as he fell a victim to dysentery and was evacuated to hospital.

Organisation and discipline in Changi remained in the hands of the captured forces at this time, although before long a barbed wire fence had been built around the whole area. Whenever a difficult task arose, there was always a skilled person available. Gardens were established, an education scheme commenced, entertainment of various kinds led to the formation of a concert party. Sporting competitions were arranged, even a Test Cricket Match Australia v England, where our team was led by Ben Barnett, the Australian Test wicket keeper, and included Dick Conway, my old friend from work. With rations short, sport did not survive for long. I started the Law course at "Changi University". My favourite recreational activities were reading and listening to classical music from a gramophone owned by one of the padres.

Despite all this, it was a monotonous life, especially as many useless parades were held as part of the discipline. It was difficult to keep my section interested and that task was not made easier by my sergeant, Jack Hellmrich. He had been a chain smoker and was now reduced to the issue of ten locally made cigarettes per week. He was bearable on issue day, but thereafter made life increasingly miserable for the section. I would wait until mid-week and give him my issue to restore him to normal for another day.

The food shortage had resulted in a black market developing. Some of those who had money would go "under the wire" to buy from the Chinese and then resell at a great profit. By this time Japanese money was the official currency and as it became worthless at the end of the war, some lost out on their profits, although they lived well and many used the proceeds to help their mates. Others foresaw the future and contracted to be repaid in Australian currency after the war, often at exorbitant interest. I had only seven dollars when captured and one of my friends, Lt Ted Esler, had nothing. We bought a few cans of food and shared it on the joking basis that Ted would repay by taking Joyce and me to dinner and a show in Australia. Some ten years later, when he was well established as a doctor and on a trip to Sydney he fulfilled this promise at considerable cost!

Les and I had been visiting each other when possible. One subject we discussed was "claiming". A father and son, or brothers, could claim to be placed in the same unit. This possibility, which we had already discussed, assumed more significance for us when rumours began that some POWs would be transferred out of Singapore. When orders were subsequently received from the Japanese to assemble a party of three thousand to move overseas, we had to make a decision. We agreed that the chances of one surviving were better if we remained separate. When the names were announced, Les had been chosen and he embarked with "A" Force on 14 May 1942.



In June we were able to write the first letter home. We were issued with post-cards on which we could write our message, not exceeding twenty-five words in length, hand printed on the blank reverse side of a post card. What to say? Although some composed cryptic messages that they hoped would be interpreted to show the true position, most of us settled on a bland wording that would not cause any alarm to our loved ones. This was my card: We did not receive any letters while in Changi. However, references in my letters home before war began show that I knew that Beryl and Harry's romance was developing rapidly, Dulcie Harding had become engaged, and Ben Clayton and Glad Harding were to marry on New Year's Eve. Mum and Dad were stoically enduring the absence of two sons and Mum had announced that in future she would be referred to as "Beth". After a lifetime of "Liz" and "Lizzie", this was an unexpected but not surprising decision.

Life continued as previously in Changi, although rations were reducing and more working parties were called for on the island. In July, a second overseas working party of 1500 was announced. Although the destination was not revealed, the Japanese indicated that it would be a place where food would be plentiful and the wounded could convalesce; consequently a large proportion of men not in the best condition, older men and an unduly high proportion of officers (143) were chosen. It seemed to be the promise of a land of milk and honey, so I was not disappointed when allocated to it. I packed all my belongings, including clock, and on 8 July embarked with "B" Force on the *Ubi Maru* for an unrevealed destination.

## BORNEO

This chapter could be expanded into a book in itself. I find myself itching to recount the small but significant events that come into my mind, to explore the relationship between friends and between captors and prisoners and to cover many other aspects. But that goes beyond the purpose of this story, so what I will do is quote from our unit History<sup>1</sup>, published in 1950, and then tell my story briefly as it fits into the history. I suggest three books for more detailed reading, especially about the tragic events at Sandakan after I left there in October 1943.<sup>2</sup> A more recent publication by historian Dr Michael McKernan<sup>3</sup> gives a perceptive insight into many facets of the prisoner of war period; the effect on prisoners and their families, the stories behind the decisions on recovery and rehabilitation, compensation, and the withholding of the facts about Sandakan.

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### The Story as written in 8 Div Sigs unit history,

“B” Force left Changi on 8 July 1942 and was theoretically 1500 strong, although eventually only 1496 were counted on the Jap transport in Singapore Harbour. Of this number Signals contributed ten officers and thirty-five other ranks, the officers being Major C. C. Johnstone, who was second-in-command of one of the three composite battalions formed for the move, the late Capt. L. C. Matthews, Lieuts Gettens, Esler, Ewin, Howlett, Doswell, Weynton, Wells and Foster.

Our Jap transport, the *Ubi Maru*, was of 3,500 tons, of very ancient vintage, and the average space available in half the forward hold occupied by Signals as part of “E” Battalion, was about two and a half square feet each. We left Singapore on 9 July 1942, and with the exception of a couple of days anchored off the Miri oilfields, in Sarawak, went non-stop to Sandakan in British North Borneo, arriving there on 17 July 1942, just before mid-day. Rumour had been rife on the ship, and many theories were advanced as to where we were going. Although Sandakan had been mentioned late in the trip, we really had no idea where we were bound, as a glance at the map will give an idea of the circuitous course we took to reach our destination. After spending the night in the town English school, we were marched the following day to our camp on the old British Experimental Farm, eight miles out. This camp, built by the British to house three hundred and fifty civil internees, was a mile from the aerodrome and had been provided with a few extra huts by the Japs, but we certainly received our first major surprise when shown the accommodation. Immediately after our arrival, the Japanese Camp Commandant, a Lieut Hoshijima gathered us together for a lecture—Hoshijima, very arrogant, and resplendent in riding boots, spurs, etc., whom we were to come to know only too well. We were told that the war would be a long one, and that the aerodrome which we were to build would take three years to complete—little did we realise how close to the mark he was!

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<sup>1</sup>. *Through: The story of Signals 8 Australian Division and Signals AIF Malaya.*

<sup>2</sup>. *Sandakan: the Last March.* Don Wall.  
*Sandakan: A Conspiracy of Silence.* Lynnette Ramsay Silver.  
 Early editions contain some inaccurate reference to my activities.  
*Borneo: Australia=s Proud but Tragic Heritage.* Kevin Smith.

<sup>3</sup>. *This War Never Ends: The Pain of Separation and Return.* Michael McKernan.

Work on the airstrip began soon after our arrival. Parties were in charge of sergeants here, and the job was much the same as that done in Burma and, later, at Changi. At first the officers as a body were not allowed outside the camp, but after a few weeks the Force Commander asked permission for a party to go gardening outside the perimeter, on the grounds that the officers required exercise. This request was granted and a garden was established close by. There was already a working party going out in charge of an Australian officer. This group was required to collect wood fuel for the local powerhouse.

After a short time, some members of the force began to show signs of vitamin deficiency in the diet. Our medical officers sought permission for another party to go out to collect palm nuts so that we could extract the oil for medicinal purposes. This request, also, was granted, and a small party of officers went out daily for about two weeks on this task.

When the force was first organised in Singapore, an officer of the Royal Australian Navy was appointed Intelligence Officer, in accordance with the A.I.F. policy of preparedness. On arrival in Sandakan, this officer lost no time in setting about his job. Unfortunately, he fell sick and then died, and it became necessary to appoint a successor. Capt. Matthews was selected and took up the duties with his usual keenness. He went out as a member of the nut-gathering party and was soon in touch with some of the Europeans of the former civilian administration.

It will clarify the story that follows if a few notes are set down here concerning the situation that existed in British North Borneo before the outbreak of hostilities. The territory was administered as a chartered company, the Crown being represented by a Governor, responsible to the Colonial Office in London. A staff assisted him and his headquarters was in Sandakan. The local police force was known as the British North Borneo Armed Constabulary. The officers of this force were almost entirely British, while the other members were Sikhs, Malays or Dusuns. There was a government hospital in Sandakan under the administration of the principal medical officer of the territory. Electricity was supplied by a private company under government supervision.

When the Governor capitulated, under orders, to Nippon on 19 January, he and most of the other civilians were interned in the Quarantine Station on Berhala Island at the entrance to Sandakan Harbour. A few individuals, however, were ordered by the Japs to carry on. These included Dr Taylor and a small band of companions at the hospital, Mr Mavor and his wife at the power station and Mr Phillips, manager of the British North Borneo Trading Company, at his usual offices. In addition to these European civilians, the Asiatic staffs of the public utilities and the police were retained in their usual capacities. This was a vain presumption on the part of Nippon, as most of the individuals concerned were quite loyal to the British and lost no opportunity of showing it.

Whilst in Malaya, Capt. Matthews had acquired a good colloquial knowledge of the Malay language. This was of the utmost importance to him in Borneo as it enabled him to establish contact with certain natives and through them with other residents. When the palm-nut collecting party was in action Capt. Matthews succeeded in exchanging written messages with Dr Taylor at the hospital and with His Excellency the Governor on Berhala Island. The latter contact was possible because of the loyalty of native members of the police force whom the Nips had conscripted as guards for the internees.

In Dr Taylor, the camp had a very good friend. From the first, he displayed every intention of helping us in any way he could. He had charge of drugs and instruments; he found ways of sending both sorts of assistance to the camp medical officers. On behalf of the Governor, he organised the collection of money from trusted local residents (Asiatic) to form a secret fund to provide assistance for special cases, such as escaped P.O.W.s. In all his work his wife actively assisted him. With full knowledge of all the risks involved, this courageous



lady performed most of the clerical work involved in the organisation. Apart from the police, other natives showed their loyalty to the British cause. Many of them proved their loyalty with their lives. Contact with these individuals was not an easy matter. At first, it was possible to seize opportunities whilst the officers were gardening, but increased vigilance on the part of the Japs soon made this very difficult. Lieut. Rod Wells discovered, however, on one occasion when he happened to be in charge of the fuel party, that one of the Chinese engineers at the power station was friendly disposed towards us. Accordingly, it was arranged that Rod should be permanent O.C. [Officer-in-Charge] fuel party so that the best use could be made of this contact.

Meanwhile, of course, the airstrip construction went on and some members of the force turned their thoughts towards escape. It was not long before several parties went through the wire. As elsewhere, however, the odds against eluding recapture were immense. It was only a matter of time before the men were picked up by patrols. One party remained at large for five months. Help was given in some cases through the fund that Dr Taylor had organised. The men were fed, for example, when they lay in hiding. To make escape effective required an extensive and elaborate organisation. This did not yet exist; it had to be built up slowly and with much care.

During September the intelligence service was consolidated and expanded. Included in the many tasks accomplished were the inauguration of a weekly letter service to and from the Governor, the acquisition of a quantity of radio equipment from various local sources, the collection of much information of various sorts, all of great value, and the beginnings of an armoury. Everybody who went out of the camp on any party kept his eyes open and when he returned reported what he had seen of interest. It was during this month that Capt. Matthews first learned of the Filipino guerrillas in the Sulu Archipelago.

It was learned that there was a force of Filipinos of a thousand or so, armed and supplied, established on islands unoccupied by the Japs, between Borneo and the Philippines. It was also discovered that some of these guerrillas were still carrying on trading activities with individuals in Borneo. One Filipino made contact with the camp in October and reported the presence of the force to his commander. The latter sent a message within a few weeks asking for a report for transmission to Allied authorities through the medium of submarines. This request was complied with and advice was later received to the effect that the report had been passed on.

The first move of members of "B" Force took place in October when a number of senior officers, including the Red Cross representative, were transferred to Kuching. This had no effect with regard to the work on the airstrip; nor were any representatives of the Unit included. It was simply the first indication of the policy of separating officers and other ranks that was followed, at different times, throughout the whole of the Jap P.O.W. administration.

For some time various individuals had steadily been accumulating items of radio equipment in the camp. Eventually one man felt he had sufficient to justify an attempt to assemble a receiver, and he sought assistance from Sigmund Bill Constable. The latter arranged a meeting with Capt. Matthews, who, being anxious for a set to be constructed with the least possible delay, asked Lieut. Gordon Weynton to co-ordinate the work. Under Weynton's direction, the set was soon completed. It was put into operation on 4 November 1942, a most significant day for the camp. The set was a triumph of ingenuity. The high-tension supply was obtained by means of a chemical rectifier using test tubes. Low-tension current was supplied by primary cells.

For some time Lieut. Weynton and one other shared the responsibility of receiving and distributing the news. His confederate was admitted to hospital in May 1943, after which Weynton assumed the entire responsibility for this service. As elsewhere, he had to contend

with severe maintenance difficulties. He overcame these as they arose. At one stage, he had to rebuild the set completely and incorporate many new components obtained through Lieut. Wells and the fuel party. The service was maintained in spite of difficulties and setbacks.

Lieut. Wells was by this time Capt. Matthews' close associate, and the success that had attended the efforts of the intelligence organisation so encouraged all concerned that it was decided to extend the scope of activities. At our request the Filipinos sent, from their modest resources, arms and ammunition, including automatic weapons, and delivered them to a secret hiding-place at the 15-mile peg. It was intended that these should supplement the arms already in the possession of the police in the event of any Allied operation in the vicinity of Sandakan.

In January 1943, the Governor and the other civilians were transferred from Berhala Island to Kuching. The weekly news summaries had been sent regularly to him until this time, and he, in turn had made two contributions, on behalf of the internees, towards the camp hospital funds. The weekly service had been made the means, also, of maintaining touch with Major Rice-Oxley, the British head of the police force. This officer was interned with the civilians and was transferred with them. Before he departed however, he handed over control of the force, unofficially, to Capt. Matthews. The morale of the loyal natives was thus maintained and they continued to give excellent service as observers and agents.

Work at the aerodrome went on relentlessly. Working parties had to be found, as usual, regardless of the fitness of the troops. The camp hospital carried on, short of drugs and equipment, but supported by the periodic contributions of Dr Taylor. An attempt was made to provide regular relaxation for the camp in the form of concerts. A few impromptu concerts had been held by the troops on Sunday evenings and a good deal of enthusiasm was shown. This determined some of the officers upon a plan to organise and conduct a choir. There was no lack of talent and after a period of rehearsal, often in the face of Jap opposition, the first concert was given. It was quite a triumph. The choir was composed entirely of officers, and the men had no hesitation in showing their appreciation of the performance. Cheered by this success, several officers attempted to organise regular shows. In spite of obstruction by the Japs a variety show, called "Radio Rubbish", was produced on 8 December. This received a tumultuous reception and is remembered still by those who came back. Shortly afterwards a second show was staged. This also was very successful. But entertainment suffered an eclipse soon afterwards. The reason was that the Japs were reluctant to see the troops happy even for an evening. How little they knew of Western mentality!

Meanwhile, in Changi, further working parties were being organised and dispatched to various parts of the East. In March, "E" Force was formed. This comprised five hundred members of the A.I.F. and an equal number of British Army troops. Among the A.I.F. were twenty-five members of the Unit under acting W.O.II Norm Cummings. The force departed from Singapore on the 29th of the month and proceeded to Kuching where it was disembarked. After a stay of eight days, however, the troops re-embarked and were transferred to Sandakan. There were two fortunate exceptions: L/Cpl John Lothian and Signalmán Albrecht were sick when embarkation time arrived and were left behind in Kuching.

The force was at first quartered on Berhala Island where the troops occupied two-storeyed wooden buildings which had attendant kitchen and bath facilities. Conditions here were tolerable as the troops were obliged to do little work apart from gathering wood and such similar domestic fatigues. The Japs permitted sea bathing, fishing from the jetty and baseball games; and many of our number took the opportunity to roam over the island.

It was soon learned that "B" Force was near at hand on the mainland, and contact was established through the medium of the loyal members of the police force. One of the first

messages received by "E" Force was directed to Sgt Joe Weston and contained a request for radio components. Now Sgt Weston had left Changi with a quantity of such stores in his possession, portion of which he had received through the Changi central organisation. He was thus able to send Capt. Matthews some of the articles required.

It was decided, early in April, that steps should be taken to acquire the material for constructing a radio transmitter. Accordingly, contact was made directly with Mr Mavor at the Sandakan electric power house. This gentleman, at great personal risk, arranged the manufacture of power transformers and other gear and had them safely dispatched to the camp. He also supplied valuable information regarding movements of Japanese troops and was generally a tower of strength to the organisation within the camp. Because it was felt that communications between the camp and the Mavor's house were more likely to be intercepted, all messages were sent in cipher. Mrs Mavor took it upon herself to do all the work in connection with this precaution.

The design of the transmitter was undertaken by Lieut. Wells. The list of parts available is an astonishing one. It will be sufficient to mention here that it included a number of 6L6G tubes, to indicate that the equipment would have produced a powerful signal. Construction proceeded as well as circumstances would permit; it was never completed, however. There was, in fact, no set time for the completion of the transmitter. The intention was to use it only in conjunction with the plan for co-operating in an Allied operation in the area.

About this time Capt. Matthews received a letter from the commander of the Filipino guerrillas in which that individual asked if the members of the Sandakan organisation would care to join him or to contact the Allied submarines which called irregularly at the smaller islands. This offer must have appeared to Capt. Matthews as a great opportunity. It was referred to the officer who then commanded the A.I.F. in the area, who pointed out that the officers and men concerned were doing invaluable work locally and expressed the wish that they remain with the force. It was characteristic of Matthews that he at once renounced the opportunity for himself and sought only to take advantage of it for his colleagues. In this he was soon to succeed.

At the beginning of May a note was received from "E" Force, through one of the police, asking if the organisation would undertake to assist Capt. Steele of 2/15th Regiment and a party to escape. An affirmative answer to this was sent at once, and the services of the loyal natives were sought in order to make plans effective. The object, briefly, was to have the party led by guides to a rendezvous at the northern end of Berhala Island and thence taken by sea to Batu Batu by way of some other small islands.

But Capt. Steele's party was not the only group of individuals who aspired to escape. Work on the aerodrome was being pushed on relentlessly and conditions were steadily growing worse. On 8 May, two members of the Unit, Signalmen McKenzie and Harvey, in company with another A.I.F. colleague, went through the wire. Unfortunately, this small party had no proper plan and very scanty resources. Ten days later McKenzie and Harvey were intercepted by Japanese whilst attempting to obtain coconuts near the aerodrome. Both were shot on sight. Their companion shortly afterwards succeeded in making contact with one of the loyal natives and through him asked Capt. Matthews for assistance. Owing to the very strict system of roll-calls which then applied, he could not be brought back again into the camp. Accordingly, it was arranged that this man join Capt. Steele's party, and that is what in fact happened.

About this time "E" Force was moved across to the mainland and took up quarters in a camp situated about six hundred yards from that which "B" Force occupied. The Japs tried hard to prevent any communication between members of the two forces, but they were no

match for the troops who wanted to exchange gossip or to pass on items of intelligence. Lamp signalling was improvised, and there were occasional contacts by truck drivers of "B" Force who were working on the aerodrome in conjunction with "E" Force working parties.

At about half-past three on the morning of 5 June, movement of Jap guards in the "E" Force camp indicated some irregularity and it was soon learned that Capt. Steele and his party of seven all ranks had escaped in accordance with the arrangements made by Capt. Matthews. They were joined the same night by the escapee from "B" Force already referred to. The group was divided into an other ranks' party and an officers' party. The former was taken at once to Jolo, the latter left Berhala Island on 26 June. As is now known, members of this party arrived in Australia some six months later.

If the condition of the prisoners of war in Sandakan was deplorable that of the civilian population was scarcely any better. With the usual Asiatic indifference and contempt of other Asiatic nationals the Japanese sought to exploit every avenue of production in aid of the so-called "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere". Co-prosperity, as the Chinese soon found out consisted, so far as they were concerned, in having their property confiscated and their standard of living reduced to as low a level as would permit them still to exist and produce and provide services. There was considerable unrest which was manifested in food riots.

On 10 June, a party of seventeen officers and six other ranks was moved to Kuching. This party included Major Johnstone, who thus rejoined the senior officers who had been removed from Sandakan in October 1942.

The morale in the camps in Sandakan was still high. The successful escape of Capt. Steele's party was a source of much satisfaction. The unrest among the Chinese was construed as a sign of weakness in the Japs. The news of successful landings by Montgomery's forces in Sicily also gave a great lift to all the troops. The time was deemed ripe to put the camp into state of organisation so that assistance could be given any Allied force which effected a landing in the vicinity. Key personnel were chosen and given an outline of the duties they would be expected to perform.

Work on the aerodrome was being pushed on apace and gangs of troops were busy building bomb-proof bays and run-off roads. In the circumstances the troops were in a fair state of health, and Signals were providing a very reasonable quota for all working parties. A few were in hospital and the good spirit prevailing was evidenced by the formation of a fund by the fitter members of the Unit to provide tobacco for their less fortunate fellows.

The officers' work party was engaged in building a sports ground in close proximity to the camp. This was completed in August and was actually used for athletics, boxing and cricket before the remainder of the officers departed in October.

The frailty of human nature is a well-recognised thing the world over. It leads to deplorable consequences. There was an Indian mandore employed by the Japs on the aerodrome, who suspected one of the loyal Chinese of having close contacts among the prisoners. In the accepted manner of his kind he sought to make capital out of this suspicion, and attempted to blackmail the Chinese. The latter would have no commerce with him. Again, after the manner of his kind, the Indian informed against his fellow-Asiatic. In a very short time the Japs arrested both the loyal Chinese and his father-in-law. No doubt the Indian considered honour satisfied at this stage, his antagonist having lost face, but the effects of his action must ever be regarded as a reflection upon his race.

Under torture which may not usefully be described here the two Chinese gave information to the Japs which led to the arrest of several of their colleagues. Disaster followed. On 22 July, the Japs made a surprise search of the camp and discovered some firearms, maps and diaries. Capt. Matthews and three others were taken away under arrest. Two days later, another search was made and Lieut. Wells was confronted with a list of radio

components which had been sent to the camp during the previous year. In an endeavour to save the receiver which was then in operation, he handed over some other equipment and the Japs accepted this. Wells was placed under arrest and with him were also arrested three other officers who were considered to be implicated. About this time also, Dr Taylor and Mr Mavor were arrested, such was the persuasive power of the Kempei interrogation of Asiatics.

Lieut. Weynton was arrested on 29 July, by which time the Japs had a pretty complete list of the radio components which had been supplied to the camp. This left the camp administration no option but to hand over the remainder of the equipment. Further arrests were made as the inquiry proceeded, and eventually nineteen members of the A.I.F., five European civilians and over fifty Asiatics were sent by sea to Kuching for trial.

The feelings of those who remained in the Sandakan camps may well be imagined. Yet there was still an unquenchable spirit. An indication of this is to be found in a pretended advertisement in a paper published *sub rosa* by the officers of "B" Force, relating to a forthcoming film attraction billed as "Our (Sigs) Gang—That Uncertain Feeling." Lieuts Foster, Ewin and Esler had each played some part in aiding Capt. Matthews, and nobody knew when they might not be caught up in the net.

During August, the Japs ordered that the pig-sties and fowl-runs built by the officers outside the camp, and stocked out of the funds held back from them, should be pulled down. The pigs were brought inside the camp and provided a welcome addition to the diet! This should have been a warning of coming events, especially as, shortly afterwards, the Japs decreed that the officers should no longer work. Nevertheless, their action on 15 October, when they suddenly threw a cordon round the officers' lines and ordered all but the chosen few to pack, came as a surprise and caused great consternation. All the remaining Signals officers were included in the party detailed for movement. This left Norm Cummings the senior member of the Unit in Sandakan. He had as colleagues Sgts Vaughan and Hall. Bob Hall, though not, strictly speaking, a member of the Unit (he was attached from the Pay Corps), used to wear the Unit patch and was always regarded as "one of us."

At this point the officers of "E" Force joined those of "B" Force and were embarked on a miserable coastal craft, blessed with the name *Tientsin Maru*, and in due course set out for Kuching. It was fortunate for them that they did, for otherwise they too might have passed into that silence which swallowed up all but a few individuals who remained in the Sandakan camps. The story of our fellows who remained there after October 1943 has been pieced together from scraps of evidence collected by the parties sent into the area after hostilities ceased. It is a grim story; we shall not repeat it here. May we never forget the lessons it teaches.

The *Tientsin Maru* proceeded first of all to Labuan where she took on coal; then, while between Labuan and Miri, she was overtaken at night by a monsoonal storm and shipped a quantity of water. Owing to bad trimming she developed an alarming list to port, and this filled the Japs with consternation. They ordered twenty men to lean their weight upon the starboard rail; this manoeuvre met with some success and provided a certain amount of amusement for the prisoners. The vessel arrived at Kuching on 22 October, and the passengers disembarked and proceeded to the camp which was about three miles out of town.

Here they rejoined their former companions, and others, in one section of a large compound which housed prisoners and internees of many nationalities. The accommodation consisted of three huts and a cook-house, and in it lived one hundred and fifty officers and twenty other ranks. The area of this section was just under one acre.

Officers here were not required for Jap working parties, and after the preliminary work of building double-decker bunks and other amenities to relieve the overcrowding, it became necessary to meet the need for some kind of recreation. The small area of land inside

the wire had been quickly prepared for the growing of garden produce, and with the numbers available the demands upon individual members of the camp were very modest. There were, of course, sundry fatigues, such as wood-collecting and ration parties, but the issues of both commodities were not liberal enough to make these a burden.

With the usual spirit of enterprise the amateur theatrical producers set to work to see what they could do to provide occupation for many and entertainment for all. In this they were very successful indeed. On most Sunday evenings, when Nippon was not in his most obstructive mood, first-class entertainment was provided. This was maintained until New Year's Eve, 1944. Shortly afterwards, the Japs cut off the camp electric lighting. After this, all that could be attempted were occasional brief shows at dusk. Lieuts Russ Ewin, John Doswell, George Gettens and Ted Esler all took part in these shows at one time or another.

A very interesting record of the shows produced in Borneo has been published in book form by a group of members of "B" Force who returned home. It is called "Borneo Burlesque" and is a monument to patience, skill, enterprise and, above all, to the spirit that could not be extinguished by Nippon.

In February 1944, the trials of those who had been arrested in Sandakan during the previous year were held. These all took place in Kuching and were conducted on Japanese military lines. Their outcome is now too well known to need description here. On 8 March, a party consisting of Lieuts Wells and Weynton and seventeen other members of the A.I.F., and in addition, Dr Taylor and Mr Mavor, were sent to Singapore by ship, and there confined in Outram Road Gaol.

A sentence of capital punishment was passed on Capt. Matthews; this was an indication of the fear in which the Japanese held him, and a tribute to his courage and daring. He was executed on the morning of 2 March 1944. On that morning a party of officers from the Kuching officers' camp was "allowed" to attend his funeral.

Time moved very slowly in Kuching from then on. A radio receiver was operated in the compound by the British other ranks for some time, and brief flashes of news were received through this source. But conditions were deplorable and malnutrition was taking an ever-increasing toll.

On 25 March 1945, the occupants of the camp saw their first Liberator, from which was dropped a quantity of leaflets. The arrival of this first Allied aircraft was interesting in more ways than one. Our folk were most intrigued by the attitude of the Japs, who were definitely scared. They took fully five minutes longer than we did to recognise the aircraft as one of ours. From then on the raids became steadily more frequent and business-like. There was some apprehension lest the camp be not recognised as a P.O.W. internment area. But these fears were without foundation, and everybody was satisfied one day when, after a raid by a dozen P38's on the local aerodrome, we had the satisfaction of seeing one machine do a circuit of the area, flying very low, then pass directly over the camp, waggle his wings, and make off. The camp was fairly happy that night.

The camp radio told of the end of hostilities on 15 August 1945. The Japs here in Kuching kept silence until the end of the month. Then the Unit went into action again.

During the first week in September a 115 set was flown into Kuching by Catalina from Labuan. Under the direction of Lieut. George Gettens, Sgt Weston assembled this equipment and contact was made with Signals 9th Australian Division at Labuan. During the next few days Sgt Weston handled all messages relative to the surrender and occupation of Sarawak. A tribute was paid by the relieving force to the efficiency of this link, having regard to the large volume of traffic involved.

On 13 September, Major Johnstone was able to greet a former colleague in Brigadier T. C. Eastick, who arrived and received the surrender of the Japanese forces based on

Kuching. Thus ended another phase of life behind the Bamboo Curtain. Of seventy members of the Unit who landed in Borneo with “B” and “E” Forces, seven officers and three other ranks were repatriated in 1945. Survivors of Outram Road accounted for two other officers and an equal number of signalmen. These were all.

*Note by Lt-Col. W. E. Lambert, O.B.E., E.M., C.O. Signals 9th Australian Division during the operations in Borneo, 1945.*

Communications for the Australian force which carried out the operations in Borneo and the nearby islands, in 1945, were provided by 9th Division Signals and attached Signal units. After the cessation of hostilities on 15 August, some reorganisation of the Division took place in order to provide for the surrender and concentration of the Japanese remnants in the area. By the beginning of September, contact had been made with all the separate Japanese groups, many of whom had been placed behind barbed wire, and preparations had been completed for the relief and recovery of Allied P.O.W.s.

One relief party was landed, and established a base in Sandakan. From this party a detachment set out to follow the “Death March” route, terminating at Weston [on west coast, south of Jesselton (now Kota Kinabalu)], where a rendezvous had been arranged.



9th Divisional Signals provided mobile wireless detachments with No. 22 (Aust.) sets which were man-packed over the entire route. Morning, mid-day and evening schedules were kept. Many graves were found and recorded, both in the Sandakan area and during the march. During the march, also, two survivors from the Sandakan camps were recovered: both had been living with the natives. At Weston, a launch picked up these soldiers and the recovery party as arranged.

For some time before the cessation of hostilities it had been known that the Japanese had moved P.O.W.s to Kuching, and as soon as possible a Catalina was dispatched, carrying medical supplies and a small medical team with the object of landing on the Kuching River. At the same time, stores and provisions for an occupying force were loaded on a warship at Labuan for movement to Kuching. The communication requirement from Kuching was determined, but owing to the limited accommodation available on the Catalina, Sigs could not send the desired personnel and sets. Permission was sought for dropping operators and sets by parachute, but this was not granted. However, a wireless set No. 115 (Aust.) was included in the load carried by the Catalina to Kuching, where it was intended to be operated by Signals personnel who might be found among the P.O.W.s, until such time as the Signal

detachment and the remainder of the equipment necessary to establish base communications should arrive by ship.

It is understood that the Sigs among the P.O.W.s in Kuching had never before seen a set of this type; but they succeeded in getting it into operation within forty-eight hours and established communication with Headquarters 9th Division.

[End of account from *Through* and my story resumes]

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### **The Voyage to Sandakan**

The *Ubi Maru* moved out into Keppel Harbour, where it anchored overnight and sailed next morning. The ship was a rusted old bucket, with fore and aft holds divided into two levels by building an additional timber deck. I was in the aft hold, on the upper level. We were cramped together like sardines, with little more room than to sit up, knees on chins, with head within a few inches of the hot iron deck. At night some would stretch out to try to sleep, then sit up to give others the opportunity.

The voyage was a nightmare, possibly the worst experience of my time in captivity. The air was foul enough the first night, and then became worse as men became sick. The toilet arrangements on deck were planks on which one sat and the body contents fell into a galvanised iron trough suspended over the water. Occasionally a bucket of water would be hauled up to flush the contraption. We were not given the opportunity to stay on deck for any length of time, refreshing though it was, before returning to the foetid atmosphere below, where the heat of the deck, the humidity and stifling atmosphere took their toll very quickly.

Diarrhoea and dysentery hit us, and some could not make it up the steel ladders to the toilets. Drinking water was rationed and at one stage ran out until rain fell, and no water was available for washing. If one tried to sluice himself with a bucket of seawater intended for flushing, he would be lucky to be able to do it before being struck and pushed back to the hold. Cooking cauldrons were on the main deck, where tea was served three times a day and the twice-daily meal was rice and small amounts of cucumber. The rice had been limed as a preservative and had that colour. Uninviting as the colour was, the taste was execrable, and few could persuade their stomachs to accommodate it.

We arrived at Miri on 12 July, giving some hint of our destination, but stayed there two days, when the holds were like ovens. It was only near the end of the voyage that we found our destination was Sandakan. There was a lift in my heart as the majestic peak of Mt Kinabalu (4,101 metres) appeared, unfolding its majesty and remaining in sight for days as we rounded the northern tip of Borneo. As we approached the harbour we passed the beautifully coloured cliffs of Berhala (Bahara) Island before docking at Sandakan Wharf on 18 July. We disembarked and assembled on the padang (a large open grassed area, like our town commons). Rain fell and most of us stripped off to have our first real wash for eleven days and the effect of the voyage was more visible. Everyone had thinned down and skin diseases were rampant. I had large circles of ringworm on my back and stomach, dermatitis on most of my body and a raw scrotum.

### **At Sandakan**

Overnight, most of us slept in the Roman Catholic Church and Convent. As we marched the eight miles to the camp next day, I felt confident that this could be a good place. The beauty of the plants and flowers, the sheer size of the trees and the immensity of the jungle were appealing, while the inhabitants appeared to be well disposed, if cautiously, to us. We turned to the right off the bitumen road at the eight-mile post, where a police station stood, then marched for about a mile beyond that, past an agricultural research station, along a dirt road that I would come to know very well. Below a guardhouse at the camp entrance



was a large parade ground, in which a magnificent jungle tree towered, estimated to be 220' high. There was little other vegetation inside the barbed wire and the perimeter area outside the wire had been extensively cleared.

The camp had been built by the British and was well constructed, with electric light from a generator not far outside the barbed wire, and a piped water supply. The original huts were of sawn timber, with atap (a type of palm) roofs; many of those erected later by the Japanese had only atap for the walls. The officers were quartered in huts in one corner of the camp, not far from the big tree. Huts were divided into three cubicles, which had a sleeping platform on each side of a narrow corridor. In our cubicle were the nine lieuts from Sigs and an Artillery lieut, Peter Bell. [Incidentally, the very recent deaths of Dr Edwin (Ted) Esler and Lieutenant-Colonel Rod Wells, both of whom were only very recently out of school when they joined the Army, has left me the sole unexpected survivor of these ten occupants]. Later, we converted the platforms so that there were five sets of double bunks, a small table where my clock had pride of place, more floor space, and a stool for the small balcony outside.

Although the camp had been neglected and needed to be tidied up, conditions for the first six months were tolerable and food adequate. The camp commandant, Hoshijima had assembled us to tell us, "You are here as prisoners of the Japanese and Japan will be victorious even if it takes a century. You are here to build an aerodrome". For a few weeks, the officers were not required to work, so we had time to read, learn bridge, have discussion groups and so on.

The rather terrifying attempt by the Japs to have us sign a document promising not to attempt to escape and asking to be shot if we did took place on 2 September 1942. During that month, the officers were told they must work in future. Officers took charge of each party of fifty men and also had their own working party. This reversal of policy brought about a change of attitude from the men, since some of the soldiers had an anti-officer feeling after the surrender, enhanced by our not having to work. The officers were now able to stand between the men and their guards as the Japanese became more rigorous in trying to get more work out of non-willing workers. More pressure was put on the workers and bashings became more frequent. The arrival of some Formosans in April 1943 was a step backwards for us. Known as "kechils" [from Malay for "little"] because of their small stature, they proved to be crueler than our former guards.

I was at first on the officers' working party. It was hard work, digging out part of the slope on one side of the 'drome site, carrying it in cane baskets to skips to be pushed along rails to the other side, then tipping the skip into a swampy area and levelling its contents. No longer was there much time for recreation. Six days a week we were up at 6am for the 12 mile trek to the drome, back in time to eat and to bed. Sunday was partly occupied by washing and repairing clothes, taking the planks off our bunk and passing them through fire to kill the bed bugs and their eggs. The bugs had become rampant. I had been using my sleeping bag as a mattress and each Sunday boiled it in a kerosene tin to remove the vermin, but others would rapidly replace them to make life miserable.

Little acts of revenge against the Japs gave us some delight; each party had to send a few men to the aerodrome cookhouse to bring the food and tea for themselves and the Japs. Those carrying the Japs' tea could pause in an unobserved area while each carrier had a cuppa and urinated in the tea bucket to refill it. At one time, the officers had to erect a bamboo building for the Japanese. For days before the official opening, we filled matchboxes with bed bugs and on the final working day released them into their new living quarters.

Ron Foster and I were chosen to go on the oil palm gathering party with Lionel Matthews. Like most others in the camp, we were oblivious of the wide range of underground activities taking place under Lionel Matthews and Dr Jim Taylor. The oil parties were

selected to allow Lionel to have communication with Alex Funk, which he did while Ron and I acted as “cockatoos.” The “scariest” occasion was when Alex brought a pistol and ammunition, a pen and some other small articles for Lionel’s use. Lionel put the pistol in his haversack under a heap of nuts; Ron and I hid the other things in various places, the fountain pen being clipped in the fly of my shorts. It was a tense moment as we approached the guardhouse, wondering whether the guards would insist on inspection. Much relief when they did not and as time passed we found that once the guards knew what a party was doing they seemed to abandon the suspicions and dedication they displayed on unscheduled inspections of the camp and quarters.

Rod Wells had been in charge of a wood party of some forty men who went to a jungle area near the 8 mile Police Station daily to get timber for the boiler that operated the generator. About the beginning of October 1942 I was appointed as 2 i/c of this party and found out what Rod had really been doing secretly under Lionel Matthews’ direction. Soon afterwards, Rod, who had also been working on building a wireless transmitting set, left the party to devote more time to that task. A receiving set began operating on 4 November 1942. I then was in charge of the party for about three months. The wood party was of itself fascinating for the new experiences it brought. The guards were more relaxed, not being under the same compulsion to force the work as they did at the ‘drome. They allowed itinerant vendors to sell food at lunchtime, so our diminishing camp rations were tastily augmented by small quantities of such food as curries and tropical fruits, all for a few cents. I was especially intrigued by one boy, who was always accompanied by a dog when he came with his pot of curry. He turned up one day without the pet and on my enquiry nonchalantly gestured toward the cooking pot!

We were operating in an area of virgin jungle. Massive trees were felled; some of our country boys showed their experience in the game, the logs were sawn into suitable lengths with crosscut saws and split for carriage by motor truck back to the boiler. The jungle was at first full of life, especially huge snakes that slithered silently away after scaring the daylight out of us. Hordes of very large scorpions, often scurrying away carrying dozens of minute white babies on their bodies, made us very wary.

Once or twice a week there would be a small sealed package of tightly rolled letters or news from the wireless to be dispatched to Dr Taylor via Sgt Abin at the police station. The cabin of the wood-carrying truck was open and I sat in the passenger seat. Sgt Abin always had to come out of the police station to salute the Jap guards; when I had a package, I held it in my palm with my arm dangling outside the truck and at a nod from Abin released it for him to recover from the roadway. When Abin had something for the camp he gave me a sign as the truck passed in the morning. There then had to be an excuse for me to walk back into camp alone. Usually it would be a broken axe or to get some bandages for an injured worker. Both our guards and the camp guards accepted these reasons, so that whenever I picked a parcel up from Abin on the way back, after carefully ensuring there were no Japs about, I was able to re-enter camp and deliver to Lionel Matthews. Still, my re-entry to the camp was never without trepidation that my haversack might be searched. I came to be friendly with Abin and was distressed in later years to find that he had been executed.

Lionel would usually tell me what I had brought in, but I knew little of the full extent of the clandestine operations. Those not involved knew nothing of the operations, while those involved were under strict instructions not to talk about their activities and, even in our own cubicle, we kept mum about our part. It was a large and widespread operation, perhaps too large for it not to be inevitable that it would be discovered, since its integrity depended upon secrecy to reduce the risk of exposure.

The following extracts from a statutory declaration declared by me in support of a recommendation for a George Cross for Lionel Matthews give some idea of the kind of operation involved:

4. *When an Officers' gardening party was established about the end of July 1942, I saw Matthews contact Wong, a Chinese from the Experimental Station, and an Indian known to me only as Mahommed.*

5. *In August, the garden party falling under stricter surveillance, Matthews grasped the opportunity of joining Lt Foster and myself, who had permission to gather oil palm nuts for medicinal purposes, and without guards.*

6. *While on this party, Matthews contacted Cpl Abin, Kasiu, and 2 other native police from the 8 Mile police station on at least 3 occasions. He also met Alex Funk, who gave him a 38 pistol and ammunition. There being no other means of taking them into camp, he boldly carried them in a haversack on our return.*

7. *Stating that he thought himself under suspicion, he discontinued going on those parties, but maintained contact by notes carried by Foster and myself. Permission for these parties was withdrawn within a week or so.*

8 *About the beginning of October, I began to assist Lt R. Wells, as 2i/c wood party and sometimes acting in charge. For approximately three months I saw portion of Matthews' organisation in operation.*

9. *I saw Matthews open, among other packets and notes, the following:- (The notes referred to were read by me, except where written in Malay in which case Matthews translated).*

- (a) *Notes from internees on Berhala Island, containing various information, including expression of thanks for news items received from Matthews. These notes were written by H.E. the Governor of B.N.B.*
- (b) *Advice that the internees were forwarding 150 dollars for use in the Australian POW Hospital.*
- (c) *Letter from Major Rice-Oxley instructing native police to take orders from Matthews, as his successor.*
- (d) *Letters from Dr P J Taylor, of the Sandakan Hospital, regarding medical supplies, news, food, and arrangements for exchanging Australian currency.*
- (e) *Letters from Abin (in Malay) giving details of Japanese fortifications, strength and dispositions.*
- (f) *Sealed tins containing Borneo currency, which Matthews told me was exchanged for Australian currency by Chinese under arrangements made by Dr Taylor, and forwarded by him.*
- (g) *Medical supplies, chemicals and food from Dr Taylor.*
- (h) *Various wireless parts, source unknown to me.*
- (i) *A note from 5 Australian escapees at 14 mile post, asking his advice as to further action contemplated by them*

10. *Matthews informed me at various times of the existence of a guerrilla force and American submarines at a base near the Philippines, of a cache of arms and ammunition at the 14 mile post, of his personal contact with a member of the Philippine forces in liaison with the American forces; and that he had delivered a nominal roll of Sandakan POWs to some of his contacts in the hope that it would reach Australia. He gave me little details and in my opinion he disclosed only a little of his activities to any other person.*

11. *I last saw Captain Matthews about 10 days after his arrest. He had lost several stone in weight, was dirty and unshaven. He stood to attention and saluted an officer's working party returning to camp. This was the occasion he was brought to the camp by the Kempei Thai [sic].*

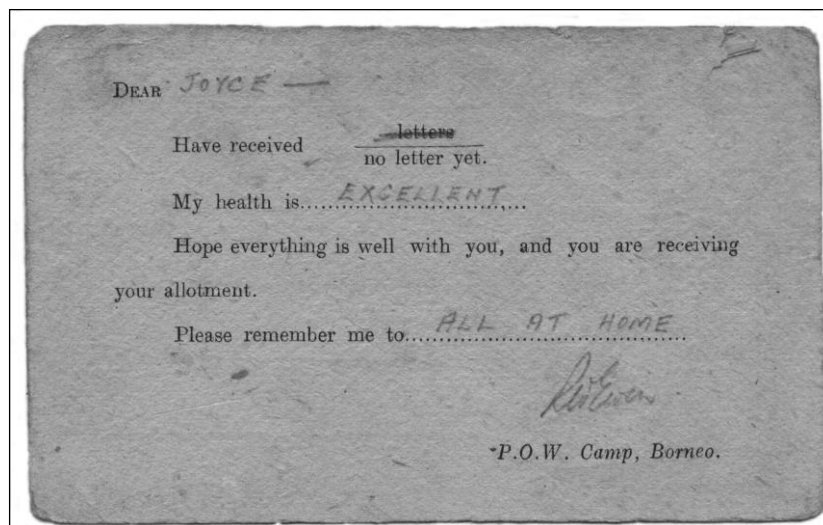
12. *The above information is restricted to my own personal knowledge and information.*

13. *I have read the article entitled "The Underground in Borneo" published in two parts in the Sydney "Bulletin". In my opinion, those sections of the article relating to Captain Matthews and his activities are substantially correct, subject to certain minor errors of fact and chronological order.*

I continued with the wood party for about three months. There were some indications that the Kempei Tai, the dreaded military police, might be getting suspicious, so this channel of communication ceased about the time the civilian internees on Berhala Island were sent to Kuching and another was set up. Toward the end of my tour of duty, our CO decided to have a copy of our nominal roll placed in the stone chimney of the police station for safekeeping. I took this out, together with Lionel's pistol and my diary. The diary was quite innocuous, containing only a factual account of what everyday things I had been doing since 15 February 1942. Nevertheless, I thought it would be better there, to be recovered later. In camp searches the Japanese tended to take away any written matter that did not have their "chop" stamped on it—indicating that it had been seen and could be kept by the owner—so those not stamped had to be hidden when not in use. The diary would have been useful now; unfortunately the police station was later bombed and burned down and although I have enquired on my two return visits post-war, it is clear that everything was destroyed.

I was in the camp hospital for some weeks before 11 May 1943 after developing erysipelas, a streptococcal infection, on my face. Again, I was fortunate in that the meagre medical supplies contained just enough sulphanilamide to prevent the infection spreading fatally. After a few more weeks on no duties, I returned to the more rigorous 'drome party on 19 June 1943.

No letters reached us during our whole stay at Sandakan. After we sent the card from Singapore in June 1942 there was no further opportunity to write home until 1943 in Sandakan. I cannot recall the exact date, but it was probably in May 1943. The completed pre-printed card read:



On 18 July, Lionel Matthews and a number of locals were arrested. On 22 July there was an intensive and thorough search of the whole camp when firearms, maps, compasses and various material the searchers thought could be related to escape attempts were discovered, and the total arrests became twenty from the camp and fifty-two civilians and police. Wells was arrested the same day and Weynton a week later.

During this time I expected that I would be arrested, and had anxious moments whenever a Jap hove in sight. It was not until talking to Rod Wells about the incidents, years after the war, that I discovered the reason why it did not happen. Early in our stay at Sandakan the Japs had provided each POW with an identification number to be displayed on the front of our hat. A small piece of timber with the number burned in. My number was in the 1200s. Later the numbers were changed and allocated progressively through the huts. My new number was 666, Rod's was 667. He told me that during his interrogation and torture he had been asked who was the other officer on the wood party. When he answered that there

was no other they persisted, saying, "We know there was. His number was 666". Rod replied that 666 had been his old number before they were changed. Untypically, the Kempei Tai either accepted this statement or no longer had the records to check.

On 15 October 1943 the officers working outside the camp were abruptly ordered to return to camp. There we found all the other officers already rounded up and our huts surrounded by guards. With the exception of seven who remained behind to administer the camp and hospital, we were given one hour to pack and assemble on the parade ground, without any opportunity to see our men. The dear old clock had to be abandoned. On the parade ground, we were ordered to lay out our groundsheets and empty all our belongings on to them for inspection. Apparently confident that the recent search would have found everything, the search was fairly superficial and there was much passing around of our goods to avoid detection. I still had my pen (a 21<sup>st</sup> birthday present from Grandma Ewin), a bottle of ink, a book and two notebooks and managed to get them through.

Trucks took us to the harbour to board a small coastal steamer, *Tiensten Maru*, where the officers from E Force joined us. She was carrying some civilians and soldiers in cabins and we were squeezed on deck with not much room, but at least we did not have to go through the vicissitudes of life in the holds a second time and there was a canvas awning to shield us from some of the sun. The ship pitched and rolled through several cyclonic storms during the week's voyage. At one stage the engine room was awash with several feet of water and we had the ironical situation of the Japanese, possibly fearful of an insurrection, running around to reassure us that we had no need for panic!

Throughout our Sandakan stay we had yearned and waited in vain for news from our loved ones in Australia. At home, the families were in greater suspense than we, since we knew that they were safe in Australia, although we were anxious until we learned that the threat of a Japanese invasion had been forestalled. At home, on the other hand, official information was sparse, initially as to whether or not we were alive and then as to our location; their wait for letters from us was also a long one.

### **Kuching, Sarawak**

Here, in the land of the White Rajah, Sir James Brook, we found ourselves quartered in one of nine small camps comprising a large compound holding Australian officers, British officers, Dutch white officers and other ranks, British ORs, Indian ORs, Indonesian ORs, male internees, female internees and Dutch male priest internees. Our area of about one third hectare was separated by barbed wire from the Dutch officers, and by barbed wire and some distance from the British officers. The Australian officers' camp had started when officers from B Force with the rank of major and above had arrived there from Sandakan in October 1942, to be joined by E Force senior officers and several others. With our arrival, there were 149 officers and 21 other ranks. There was also a small party of Australians in the British ORs' camp, with whom we had no contact. Accommodation was in three large open-space huts (no cubicles), with each of us allotted a sleeping and living area of floor space about 2' 9" wide, sleeping on the floor. There was a large roofed open kitchen and storeroom, but not a great deal of open ground, and a wide open drain ran between two of the huts.

The fact that so few of us died was undoubtedly because we were not allowed to work. Soon after arrival the Camp Commandant told us that we were forbidden to leave the camp as some officers had been "naughty" in Sandakan. The only exception was one half day a week when a party was allowed out to fetch firewood for the kitchen. This meant a few rubber tree branches could be retained, and with other "scrounged" material such as wire cut from the perimeter fence a few were able to construct double bunks, tables, chairs or shelving. Russ Howlett and I built a double bunk. Before long every available piece of

ground was covered by vegetable gardens, mainly growing kangkong, an extremely fast-growing relative of the nasturtium family. The produce augmented our diet of rice and an infrequent and meagre supply of dried fish or meat perhaps once per week.

Fertiliser—urine and faeces—was in constant demand for the gardens. Buckets referred to as “pissoons” were placed at strategic points for use as urinals and the contents made available to gardeners on a roster basis. Our latrines were the borehole type and the content, although seething with roundworms and other intestinal creatures, was eagerly sought to enrich the soil.

The time available through not working tended to lead to boredom and a pessimistic approach to our future. Two activities commenced which helped alleviate these feelings. In Sandakan, there had been few opportunities for entertainment. In the early days of relative fitness there was a boxing exhibition. Claude Pickford formed a choir, “*Pickford’s Plums*”, which I joined. We rehearsed in one of the huts and gave a performance at Christmas, and the officers had provided two concerts. Talent emerged rapidly in Kuching and ultimately there was a series of plays, revues, concerts, close to twenty in all, most coming from the pens of individual officers, together with *HMS Pinafore* and *Dover Road*. There was an extraordinarily good sextet and two commercial artists prepared colourful posters announcing each performance. After the war, some officers published a book about this entertainment, including reproductions of the posters.<sup>4</sup>

Everyone had read the few books we had in Sandakan but before long the Japs had allowed the Bishop of Kuching to arrange a stock of books from the Sultan’s Palace and the library of an interned Englishman whose specialty was Elizabethan literature. These were made available throughout the camps; our share was 36 books, which were changed each month. The demand led to rosters, so that often one would have a book for only half an hour, more if you could arrange for another person to book for your use or find the rostered person not reading it. On many occasions I found I only had time to make summaries or extract information for future study, in case the supply ceased. As a result, I have a notebook and many scraps of paper filled with a miscellany of information, to most of which I never returned. The impact of this resource, together with discussion groups and attendance at classes, was to extend my knowledge and appreciation enormously. Our group included many mature, highly trained and intelligent persons in responsible civilian occupations and professions, as well as those of more practical bent, in trade or on the land. I provided sessions in income taxation, bookkeeping and shorthand. I sat on many evenings with one of our Roman Catholic padres who, ignorant of business practice, wanted to learn the rudiments to assist in running a parish. In return, I sought to understand some of the tenets of that faith.

We had not heard any news of those still in Sandakan or of the fate of the arrested people. On 2 March 1944 Colonel Suga told the CO there was to be a funeral that day of “a very brave Australian officer” and that he and six officers could attend the burial. He did not name the person, but we had little doubt it would be Lionel Matthews. I was one of those at the burial and as the pallbearers, weakened Australian soldiers from the British ORs’ camp, came into view it was evident from their difficulty carrying the coffin that it was indeed Lionel, who had been a huge man. Blood was pouring from the rear of the plain timber coffin. I have never remembered the rest of the service and today even the casual mention of Lionel’s name conjures up a picture of that terrible moment.

Until March 1944, we had been receiving news from a wireless in the British ORs’ camp, via the British officers. Then the electricity was cut off and news ceased. By this time, rations were being continually cut and most of us were not capable of garden or camp duties.

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<sup>4</sup>. *Borneo Burlesque*. Limited edition of 338 copies.

One hut had been set aside during 1944 to isolate the increasing number of scabies patients and we became separated into the “scabies” and the “cleanskins”. Vitamin deficiencies became very evident, with tropical ulcers and skin diseases widespread. Most debilitating of all, dysentery became more prevalent and I suffered this for about three weeks before recovering, much thinner.

In early 1944, as food supplies dropped further still, I was appointed to control the receipt and distribution of rations and ensure there was no misappropriation or unfair allocation. There were several deaths by August; altogether, seven died by the end of the war. In the British ORs’ camp, where they were forced to work, the death rate was very high and the sound of a bugler playing the Last Post reached us frequently each day. It was many years after our return home that I could hear that tribute without crying.

Leaflets were dropped over Kuching on March 25 and 12 August 1945. 14 August brought the word that the wireless was again in operation. That night I was “cockatoo” at the fence while a British officer gave us the news that bombs had been dropped on Japan, which was considering terms of surrender. News of the surrender came “through the wire” the next day, but we were ordered to keep it to ourselves and continue our normal activities until the Japs made an announcement. It was ten days before they did so; in the meantime several Liberators had flown high over the camp dropping pamphlets with the same instructions. None landed in the compound but were soon smuggled in by locals.

The rest of the story is in the books: suffice to say that food supplies from the Japs increased; a concert in which all the separate camps presented an item and our choir performed was a memorable event; and after 28 August food, medical supplies and clothing were dropped from RAAF Catalinas circling low over the camp. It was a matter of waiting patiently for our troops to arrive; when they did on 13 September the sight of our Australian soldiers marching towards us, headed by huge, obviously hand-picked men was so emotional that most of us were in tears. Before that happy event, two medical officers were dropped by parachute, as was a representative of the ABC (Australian Broadcasting Commission) who promptly started recording messages for broadcast in Australia. It was only by chance that Joyce heard my message, as relatives were not advised of the broadcast.

It surprised most of us, I think, to realise that all thoughts of revenge had passed from our minds. It seemed to be beneath our dignity to hand out the kind of treatment we had endured and merely ignoring our former captors seemed to be enough. Punishment could be left to the appropriate authorities.

Stories started to emerge of the fate of our comrades in Sandakan on death marches. Little was then known of the details, but it was also being said that a similar fate had been planned for us. In later years, the tragic details emerged only slowly and gradually.

Following hints about the disposal of POWs, a specific instruction to Japanese camp commanders from the Japanese High Command, dated 17 March 1945 said, “...Prisoners of War must be prevented by all means available from falling into enemy hands...emergency measures should be carried out against those with an antagonistic attitude...”

Authors Don Wall and Lynnette Silver both refer to orders found in Col. Suga’s office to march the prisoners to Dahan for elimination. While accounts vary in detail, Neville Watterson gives one version of what might have happened in Kuching.<sup>5</sup>

*In March 1943 about 200 men were sent up-river to the Dahan rubber estate, the last of the cultivation before the natural jungle...They were occupied in constructing a road to the Tegora and the Geding mercury mines. This work lasted until early 1945, during which some men were sent back to work on the aerodrome at Kuching. Those who were kept at Dahan to complete the project, returned in such*

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<sup>5</sup>. *Borneo: The Japanese P.O.W. Camps*. Mail of the Forces, P.O.W. and Internees Part 2. Neville Watterson.

*bad health that ultimately none of them survived...*

*The Dahan camp was established to house P.O.W. from Kuching to work on the roads in the Geding and Tegora area. Former P.O.W. were convinced that this work was in preparation for marching the P.O.W. from Kuching into the mines in Geding and/or Tegora, and then blasting the entrance of the mine. This was to be done as the Australian advance approached the Borneo territory and to prevent surviving P.O.W. reporting their treatment by the Japanese to the Allied authorities. Reports of this sort of activity have been seen from as far apart as Singapore and Japan. A similar activity was in effect carried out in North Borneo with the Sandakan to Ranau Marches.*

*There was also a conviction that a date in April had been fixed for the march from Kuching, but that it was postponed at Col. Suga's direct intervention, it was said "as it would inconvenience Suga". Another date was fixed in June after the Australians had landed at Labuan, but this was again postponed.*

*"The Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs saved the Kuching P.O.W. from both complete starvation and a death march".*

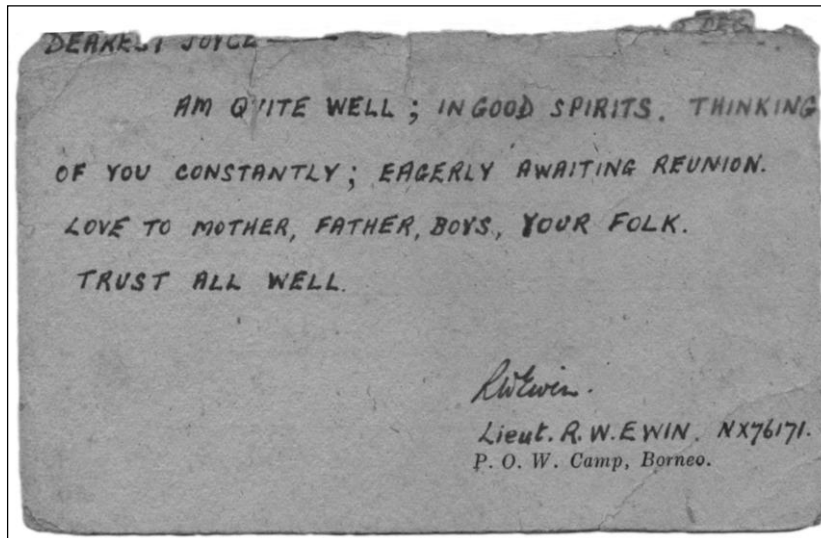
The day before we were to leave Kuching, I had a visit from an Englishman who introduced himself as Jack Atkinson. With him were his wife Phyllis and five-year-old daughter, Anne. He was Lt-Col Atkinson, of the British North Borneo Constabulary, whom I had heard of through Lionel Matthews' activities. The three had been interned on Berhala Island, Sandakan, before being transferred to the civilian camps at Kuching. They were charming people and it was disappointing to know that we would have no further meetings. They were expecting to be repatriated to England at any moment, so we sat on the grass, talked about our families and experiences, exchanged addresses and promised to keep in touch.

I have to point out that the Officers' and Internees' camps in Kuching were not as degrading or demanding as the ORs', where hard labour and brutal treatment took a heavy toll of life, and our special circumstances were far less rigorous than those in most other areas, especially Burma, Thailand, Japan and, of course, Sandakan. I had always remained fitter than most and sanguine about our ultimate release. As well as the more severe erysipelas and dysentery, I had a few small tropical ulcers, dermatitis, tinea, scrotal dermatitis, external otitis, oedema of the legs, conjunctivitis, occasioning altogether about fifteen weeks in hospital. Testimony to the lack of sugar, my teeth, which were full of fillings before our capture, required only one filling on the way home. However, I had broken a dental plate during 1944; a camp dentist wired it together but as a precaution I always removed it when eating! From October 44 to January 1945 I was 63 to 61k (c 9stone 13lbs to 9st 8); March 1945, 56.7k (8st 13); May 1945, 56k (8st 11); 2 August 1945, 50k (7st 10). These were well above the weight of most of the others and in fact in the last days I was called the "Fat Boy". This was a very paradoxical outcome, considering that my weight when I enlisted was a meagre 10 stone 2 lbs (64.4k)!

### **Another card to write**

The third card we were allowed to send was of our own composition, although limited to 25 words, and was handed in to the Japanese on Christmas Day 1943, at Kuching. Mine reached Joyce in December 1944.





The Japanese issued special instructions about this card:

- 1 *Borneo is a land of perpetual summer, full of natural bounty, with plenty of bananas, papayas, mangosteens and coconuts.*
- 2 *Nothing is lacking in this camp and we are satisfied with our life here.*
- 3 *All officials in the camp are kind and generous, so there is no need for you to worry about me.*
- 4 *The Japanese Military Authorities provide us with sufficient food and medicines, etc. by establishing a medical laboratory and providing us with gardens, and we are grateful from the bottom of our hearts.*
- 5 *This camp is a natural flower garden, and how happy I should be if only you were here.*
- 6 *\*My only hope is that this war will be over soon, and we may have a happy reunion.*
- 7 *\*We are allowed religious service every Sunday morning, and in the evenings we have musical concerts or plays, and so we do not notice the passage of time.*

NB 1 *When completed postcards are returned to the Japanese Office those which contain these sentences must be handed in separately from the remainder.*

2 *As soon as this sheet is finished with, it should be returned to the Japanese Office.*

3 *One of these sentences will be additional to the 25 words allowed.*

### **The Mail's in!**

Parents and wives were each allowed to write one letter per month. Letters written after August 1943 were limited to one page and had to be typewritten. Later, this was reduced to half a page. There was both joy and disappointment among us, as some received a large number of letters, some a very few. One married officer did not receive a single letter and his grief rapidly transformed his head of dark hair to white. Many shared their letters with others less fortunate, especially those we knew most intimately. From the letters I was able to glean something of what was happening at home. Although the brief letters were usually matter of fact in style and content, the anguish in the early correspondence was very evident, Mum and Dad especially grieving at the lack of information about Les and me.

It was not until March 1944 that the first letters from home started to arrive at Kuching and morale lifted noticeably. The earliest letter I received was written by Joyce on 26 August 1942. It did not arrive until 9 March 1944 and was the only one I received that day. In all, however, I had 17 letters from Joyce and 16 from Mum or Dad, the last but one written in February 1944. Then a long gap until the last arrived in December 1944. All their letters, with the exception of the last, were received within the six months between March 1944 and September 1944. Many of the first letters from home never arrived, nor did any written after February 1944.

My recollection was that I received letters in three or four batches but analysing them now I find that there were eight batches.

Details of the date written, date received and the writer of the letters that contained news of family events are shown below, but I've omitted the others, which were more general in nature. The limited extent of the news from home shows in the following summary:

August 42/July 44/Joyce: reference to two earlier letters (which never turned up), Harry back from Adelaide.

September 42/May 44/Dad: a touchingly homely letter, also refers to earlier letters posted (but never received). No word from Les or me. Grandma Ewin was well and would be 90 in October. Beryl and Harry engaged. Bill and Phyl well. Joyce had been with them to Aunt Emily's home and Alan wanted to start work at Christmas.

September 42/March 44/Joyce. This was actually the first letter I received and the only one on that day.

November 42/November 44/Mum: Bill and Phyl living at Johnston Street, Annandale, the first indication of the marriage, although it had taken place on 25 April 1942 and no doubt referred to in missing mail. Grandma Ewin had died. Ron Foster's parents had received a card from him.

December 42/November 44/Mum: Dulcie Harding and Spencer engaged. Alan working at Lowndes' Motor Body Works, Summer Hill.

April 43/April 44/Joyce: Joyce notified by telegram about 22 April 1943 that I was a prisoner of war.

April 43/April 44/Mum, Dad, Glad: They had heard from the military authorities that I was interned in Borneo Camp, but had no word of Les. Ben and Glad had married. Glad said Mum and Dad had been wonderful, patient and uncomplaining and Joyce very thoughtful, always keeping them in touch with any news.

May 43/April 44/Joyce: She and Beryl at canteen, Joyce playing piano. Beryl and Harry to marry in October.

June 43/April 44/Joyce: Harry home from Adelaide, where he had been working.

June 43/July 44/Mum and Dad: Bill and Phyl now living with Mum and Dad. Ada Charlesworth had sold the business and now living in Petersham. Bill Charlesworth to marry Peg 'next Saturday'. Glad and Ben living in Longueville.

July 43/May 44/Joyce: Our second wedding anniversary—Joyce celebrated at lunch with Marie Jackson, a close friend. Bebe and Mrs Hammer taking her to the 'flicks' on Saturday night.

August 43/May 44/Joyce: (This was the last of full page letters, future letters limited to only two or three lines.)

September 43/September 44/Joyce: had received card from me. (This was the June 1942 card from Singapore)

November 43/March 44/Mum: "You will be an uncle in January".

December 43/August 44/Dad: Dorrie ill with typhus, but improving.

December 43/August 44/Joyce: said she enclosed photo; none enclosed.

December 43/September 44/Mum: Had received 'another card. Les'. Eric at Garland. Alan cabinet-making.

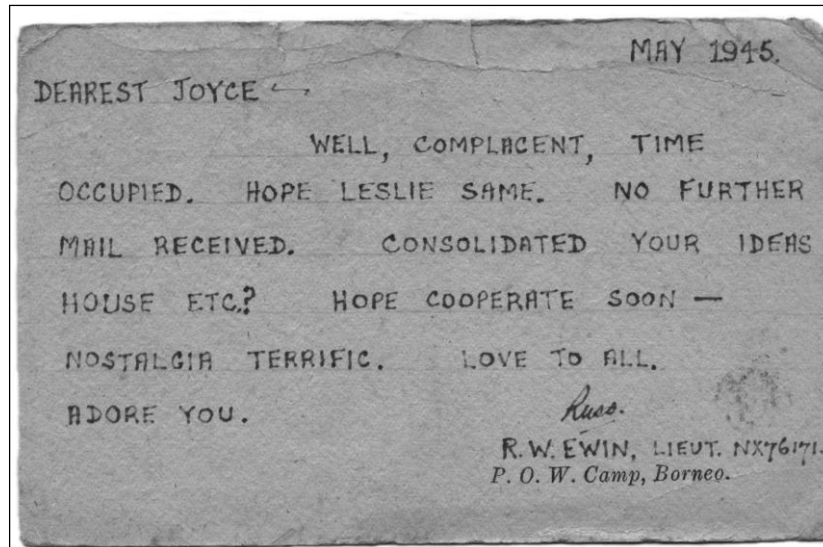
January 44/September 44/Dad: Ada bought business at Taveners Hill.

February 44/December 44/Mum: Phyl had baby girl, 'dark, curly hair'.

Undated/December 44/Mum: Beryl and Harry had nice wedding, enclosed photo. Joyce very well.

### The last card home

The fourth and last card was sent in May 1945 and was delivered after I had returned to Australia. Mine read:



This time there were more of those delightful sentences for our choice.

- 1 *Borneo is a suitable place for living, a dreamland where the scenery is beautiful, little birds sing and very delicious fruits grow.*
- 2 *We feel quite safe as the discipline of the Japanese Army is good.*
- 3 *I wonder when the present war will end and I shall be able to see you again my darling. My heart is filled with longing for you.*
- 4 *In this camp, not only reading, walking and music, but also films and sport are sometimes allowed. We are very grateful for this generous treatment.*
- 5 *How happy I am when, smoking a cigarette in the shade of the coconut leaves in this comfortable dreamland, which is full of beautiful flower gardens and delicious fruits, I imagine your smiling face.*
- 6 *\*Forgetting I am a Prisoner of War on concert evenings when the moon is shining, I remember the parties we used to have at home and again my heart is filled with sentimental feelings.*
- 7 *\*I am grateful as I can borrow various books from the Camp Library and improve my learning, forgetting I am a prisoner of War.*
- 8 *On cool Sunday evenings when we have a concert on the stage and I hear the old tunes from home to my heart's content I cannot help feeling homesick.*

9 *We are saying to each other we must be thankful for the fact that the relief money and goods which were sent through the International Red Cross Society have been distributed smoothly and fairly by the favour of the Japanese Army.*

10 *We really have an impression that moral principles to learn exist in the Orient when we realise the real aspect of benevolence of the Japanese Army.*

11 *We are always grateful for the Japanese Authorities' understanding and generosity in allowing various religious services.*

NB 1 *Sentences marked \* do not apply to internees.*

2 *When completed cards are to be returned to the Japanese Office, those which contain these sentences must be handed in separately from the remainder.*

3 *As soon as these sheets are finished with they should be returned to the Japanese Office.*

4 *One of these sentences will be additional to the 25 words allowed.*

5 *One card in twenty must include one of these sentences, the choice of which will be left to individuals.*

6 *When returning the cards, camp masters will submit a list on the reverse side of this form; showing the names of the persons who have added one of these sentences, and the number of the sentence used in each case.*

7 *The sentence chosen must be included in the 25-word text either at the beginning, middle at end, but must not be written separately.*

The sentences caused much hilarity, plus indignation, because of the blatant misrepresentation of our circumstances. Only a handful elected to use one and there had to be a ballot to get enough to raise the required number!

Although we had not had news of progress of the war since March, we were now starting to be sanguine of release before too much more time passed and our cards would have conveyed our feelings.

### **Going Home**

Laggardly, on 13 September, the day came for us to embark on a variety of small American and Australian naval vessels to travel down the river and out to sea where the 2/2 Australian Hospital Ship awaited us, unable to come closer than about 12 miles because of the shallow waters. The boat I was on was a small American gunboat; the crew made us very welcome, handing out American cigarettes and beer ad lib. The hospital ship was the HMAHS *Wanganella*, a converted liner that had previously plied between Australia and New Zealand. It was a Huddart Parker ship of 9,576 gross tons, built in 1932 and converted in May 1942.

Once aboard we were handsomely treated, only one feature marring our early days—little knowing that we had been regaling ourselves with a great amount of food in the last few days in Kuching, the doctors placed us on a light diet. Our immediate protests, reinforced by dipping into canned food that we had carried aboard “just in case”, soon had us participating in the full menus, that would have done justice to a five-star restaurant. Some much too brief talks on the events of the war, conditions in Australia and the like helped

extract us from our “Rip van Winkle” condition. Movies, with some “stars” we had never heard of, were favoured, especially the music in them. On a more serious note, we learned a little more about the fate of those left in Sandakan, a story we found hard to assimilate. I still had heard nothing of Les.

Among the few personal possessions I had taken aboard to bring home was my old sleeping bag, that had afforded a small amount of comfort between my hip and bed boards. The contrast between the pristine hospital ship and the sleeping bag was so marked that the first day out its worn and faded look and the stubborn stains from squashed bed bugs moved me to push it through the port-hole, through which I sadly watched it bob up and down as the ship moved rapidly away.

Writing letters and the expectation of receiving some were dominant in this period. We had been able to write a half page letter on 10 September, just a few days before leaving Kuching; too short to pass on much other than confirmation of my existence and to ask about Leslie. Now, on the ship, we were given the opportunity, at short notice, to write again, so this time I was able to tell of my experiences at more length. This letter was posted from Morotai about 19 September. At home, Joyce and my family had been without specific news of me. The papers had been carrying news of the horrors of the POW camps for a week or more before Joyce received a telegram from the Army to say that on reliable information I was at Kuching; then on 20 September that I had embarked Labuan for Morotai and gave her an address for correspondence.

The *Wanganella* touched at Labuan on 15 September, where I received letters, including some written after positive news of my whereabouts. Sadly, one told me of Leslie’s death. Joyce also told me of the dreadful shock to Mum.

On 19 September, we reached the huge military base on Morotai Island, where half of us were evacuated to the 2/5 Australian General Hospital, half to the 2/9 AGH. The number of planes and vehicles parked over the whole island astonished us. Of course, we had not seen or imagined the variety.

From Morotai I was able to send the brief telegram “SAFE HAPPY MOROTAI STAY UNKNOWN LOVE RUSS” to Joyce and a similar one to Mum. Mum received hers first and rang Joyce at work.

The kindness of the nurses and staff at the AGH is unforgettable, but once again we blotted our dietary copybook. There were a number of officers’ messes on the island and, against instructions to recuperate quietly, we accepted invitations to these for a few grogs and a look around. After three days we were restored to the *Wanganella* (much to my chagrin, as I had just arranged a flight on a Liberator), which then sailed south to Tarakan and Balikpapan to pick up sick and wounded Australian troops who had campaigned there. Then back to Morotai and on the way home.

Our first port of call was Brisbane, where none were allowed ashore except those Queenslanders going home. We wistfully watched them leave, some of them falling on hands and knees to kiss the Australian soil. Late that afternoon I was told to report to the Ship’s Captain’s cabin, where he was in conversation with a lady in uniform. He told me that he had been so persuaded by her arguments that he was releasing me to her care until the following morning. It was thus that I first met Dorothy Linton, one of Joyce’s first cousins. Dorothy took me to the family home in Bayview Terrace, Clayfield, where Joyce’s Aunt Eda and others of the family greeted me warmly; we had dinner, and I stayed overnight. I eagerly grasped the chance to ring Joyce, who was blissfully unaware that we were even in Brisbane, so our first reunion was by a long-distance call.

Dawn a few days later found almost all of us on deck to catch our first view of the NSW coast as we sailed to enter Sydney Harbour on 13 October, a long two months after

war's end. After a tumultuous welcome from craft on the harbour, we reached the wharf. As only the next-of-kin were allowed to meet a returning prisoner, the wharf was packed with hundreds of people, including Mum and others of the family, although I could not make out anyone I knew. A fleet of ambulances, back doors left open, sped us along Parramatta Road to 113 Australian General Hospital at Concord (later to be called the Repatriation General Hospital). There we were told to walk out through the Reception Area, only to find it lined with our wives, mothers or other relatives. It was a jubilant reunion; I saw Joyce rushing towards me, arms outstretched, to make it perhaps the most splendid day of my life. We sat and talked, until told that we could make our way home, but I was required to report to the Army within a few days for further medical checks before my discharge, which took place on 5 December 1945.

In an ill-fitting jungle green uniform, with my few miserable possessions in a brown kit bag over my shoulder, we caught a train to Lewisham for a joyous welcome from Mum, Dad and the family. How much their joy must have been diluted by the absence of Leslie. After much animated conversation and news swapping, we set out for Bondi Junction to be greeted by Mrs Hammer. Tired out, to bed, where I startled Joyce into wakefulness with my strangulated screams as I had a nightmare about Japanese taking my money, and agitatedly threw myself across her body to search under the mattress for it! A great start, and my nightmares have been part of our life ever since.

## **Leslie**

I said earlier that Les had gone from Changi with "A" Force. This party of 3,000 men, organised on a three-battalion basis, sailed from Singapore on 15 May 1942 for an unknown destination, joined along the way by other ships. At Victoria Point and Mergui in Burma, parties of over 2,000 were disembarked, while the remainder arrived at Tavoy, Burma on 25 May 1942.

All were employed on airfield construction; when the airfields were completed by September 1942, "A" Force went by ship to Moulmein and thence to Thanbyuzayat. They became part of a grand plan to use prisoners of war and coolies to build a railway (now notoriously known as the Burma-Thailand Railway) beginning at Thanbyuzayat to link with the existing Singapore-Thailand railway at Bampong, 263 miles (421k) away. Altogether, some 61,000 Allied POWs and 250,000 Asian natives were engaged on this task until its completion in November 1943, when the parties working from each end met near Nieke.

The treatment of these forced labourers was one of the most savage atrocities of World War II. Altogether, one-fifth (12,568) of the white workers were sacrificed through disease, malnutrition or starvation in the fourteen months of construction; together with an estimated seven times that number of the Asian workers. Of all the Australians engaged on it at various times, nearly 2,650 died.

By March 1944, the prisoners were centred in six main camps in Thailand. The Japanese planned to send 10,000 of the fittest remaining POWs to Japan. The Japan Party of 900 men selected to go might well have felt uneasy about the prospect, after listening to this part of the camp commandant's address:

*All men should be honoured to know they are going to a land of peace and tranquility, where even the birds can nestle on the hunter's hand and will not be harmed. Where the snow covers the land in winter and the warm sun of spring melts it, leaving the country clean. A land of milk and honey. In Japan, it is a sin to eat and not work, so to prevent all men from becoming sinners, we shall put you to work.*

The party travelled in over-crowded rail trucks from Kanchanaburi through Bangkok to Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, then 150 miles by riverboat along the Mekong River to Saigon, to a camp already housing a few British soldiers working locally. The

accommodation and conditions in this former French Foreign Legion town were surprisingly good, including a well-stocked canteen. The party moved downriver by motorised barges, an eleven-hour trip to the convoy staging port at Cape Saint Jaques, and boarded their transport ship. Next morning they awoke to the news, “All men go back to Saigon”! The captain had refused to endanger his ship and accept the responsibility of carrying POWs through the heavily submarine-infested route. During their stay in Saigon, the men worked in small parties on local jobs—docks, airfields, hospitals, whatever. The stay had been beneficial; most had filled out and were in better health. They were now about to revert to the typical working and living conditions of most Japanese camps.

Nearly three months after their arrival, they set off on the backward track to Pnom Penh, where they waited three days for a train, leaving on June 27. At Bampong the train switched to the south-bound track to reach Singapore on 4 July 1944, after a ghastly week of travel. This time on the river they were crammed in the hold with cargo in the equatorial heat of June. The rail trucks were steel box cars, 18 by 18 by six feet, already half filled with bags of rice. Each car held thirty-six men and their guards, it was oven hot, and the guards took the airy space near the opened sliding doors.

The voyage to Japan continued to be frustrated by lack of shipping. Meanwhile, they were accommodated in a transient POW compound at River Road, where the conditions were appalling and life miserable in the extreme. On July 17, some were sent to a small, uninhabited island, Damar Laut, digging out a huge graving dock.

Les sailed from Singapore on 6 September 1944 on the *Rakuyo Maru* (referred to as *Rokyu* or *Rioyoku Maru* in some early publications), which was sunk by two torpedoes from the American submarine *Sealion* on 12 September 1944. The voyage and the fate of this ship and the soldiers on it are described in the official history<sup>6</sup>. Neither of the ships carrying POWs was marked with a Red Cross or any indication that they were carrying POWs. There are books and Internet sites providing a more detailed account and personal stories from survivors.<sup>7</sup> Among those who survived was my companion in the 2/15 Field Regiment, Dr Rowley Richards.

The following account is from the official history.

*A force of 2,300 prisoners, under Brigadier Varley, shipped from Singapore on 6th September was less fortunate. About 1,000 prisoners of this group were embarked on the Kachidoki Maru; 599 British and 649 Australians, with three senior officers including Brigadier Varley, were embarked on the Rokyu Maru. They left Singapore in a convoy reinforced by other ships off the Philippines until it totalled seven transports, two oil tankers, and six escorting vessels. The prisoners in the Rokyu Maru were crowded into one forward hold, capable of accommodating 187 steerage passengers at normal times, but horizontally subdivided to create two decks, neither of which had a ceiling of more than four feet.*

*Early on the 12th off Hainan the convoy was attacked by American submarines; an escort vessel was sunk and at 5.30 a.m. the two tankers blew up within a few minutes of each other.*

*The night, which was pitch black, was immediately turned into day. Our transport [the Rokyu Maru], which was on the tail end of the convoy, was silhouetted beautifully against the two burning tankers. Screams from the Japanese on the bridge heralded the approach of a “tin fish” from the starboard side. It struck abaft of amidships and shook the ship from stem to stern. A minute or two later another explosion rocked the ship as yet another “fish” found its mark. Water from the explosion poured over the ship and down the hold in which the prisoners were standing. An orderly evacuation*

<sup>6</sup>. *Australia in the War of 1939-1945; Series One, Army, Volume IV. The Japanese Thrust.* Lionel Wigmore. Australian War Memorial Canberra 1957.

<sup>7</sup>. *Heroes at Sea.* Don Wall. Griffith Press, Adelaide. 1991.  
*Return from the River Kwai.* Joan and Clay Blair. Futura Publications Ltd. 1980.

*of the hold was made, and although some men were naturally jittery ... there was no sign of panic. Before the last prisoner was on deck the Japanese had left the ship. [Survivors' account]*

*The Rokyū Maru remained afloat for twelve hours, allowing the prisoners, none of whom suffered severe injury from the explosions, ample time to escape. The Japanese crew were eventually picked up by Japanese destroyers, whereupon the prisoners took over the abandoned life-boats and went among the rafts and wreckage that littered the sea, picking up their comrades. There were then eleven life-boats, including one which the prisoners had lowered themselves after the Japanese abandoned ship. These separated, one group of four sailing in a westerly direction, the other, of seven, sailing towards the east. On the 14th September the four life-boats were intercepted by Japanese destroyers, one of which picked up 80 Australian and 56 British survivors. The other group was not seen again but the survivors believed the life-boats carrying them had been sunk by naval gunfire which was heard to the east shortly before they themselves were picked up. Among the missing was Brigadier Varley. One hundred and forty-one survivors of the Rokyū Maru (including 80 Australians) who had clung to life rafts and wreckage, were picked up by American submarines between the 13th and 17th September, taken to Saipan and thence to Australia. They provided the first authentic news of conditions in Burma and Thailand to reach Australia and the rest of the world.*

Leslie was not one of the survivors. There is a beautiful and lovingly tended War Cemetery at Labuan on Labuan Island. Joyce and I visited it on a tour in 1984 and I had the privilege of being there again in 1995. We were unaware that Les' death would be commemorated there, having assumed it would be at the Kranji War Memorial in Singapore, where we were heading. So we were surprised and thrilled to find his name recorded, along with others from his unit, the 2/10 Ordnance Field Workshops, on one of the bronze panels in the colonnade at the Labuan Memorial at the Cemetery. Leslie's name is on Panel 9 in the Memorial. The Memorial displays the names of those Australians and members of local and other allied forces who lost their lives in the Borneo-Philippines area and have no known grave. There were 2,327 in this category, 2,258 being Australian. In the Cemetery there are 1,749 graves of known soldiers (858 Australian) and 2,155 of unknown (309 Australian). Most of the Sandakan dead would be in the graves of the 1,726 entirely unidentified.<sup>8</sup>

I have not found more than a couple of soldiers who knew Les, and their contact with him was brief, so that I have not been able to find much about where he was at any time on the infamous railway or the ill-fated ship, nor about his activities and physical condition. However, one of our Sigs, Maurie Turnbull, who was on A Force, put his recollections in writing recently. He said:

*Les and I were in A Force...I did not know Les then, or that you had a brother in 8<sup>th</sup> Division.*

*I moved from Tavoy (Burma) around late July 1942 to Thanbyuzayat (Burma) when we commenced work on the railway. Part of A Force had been at Tavoy, part at Victoria Point and the third part of our force elsewhere in southern Burma—I forget when—before our move north to commence work on the railway. I don't know which part of Burma Les would have been in then.*

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<sup>8</sup>. *The War Dead of the British and Commonwealth and Empire. The Register of the names of those who fell in the 1939-1945 War and have no known Grave. Memorial Register 27. The Imperial War Graves Commission, London. The Labuan Memorial, Part 1. The four parts also contain information and photos about the Cemetery.*



When the Burma-Siam railway was completed in late Oct 1943, the bulk of A Force was in Thai camp over the Burma border and in November were moved down to Tamakan camp (and possibly Thung Kai). This camp was only three hundred metres from the “famous” bridge.

I was seriously ill with malaria and dysentery at the time of that A Force move and was left behind at Niki camp with other sick men. I did not get down to Tamakan until March 1944. I was in the usual long hut of base camps there, sharing the bamboo decking with others in a space of some 24 inches per man.

Talking with a young soldier there, I said that I was in 8 Div Sigs—he replied that he had a brother, a lieutenant, in my unit—Russ Ewin. I knew you, of course, but not well at that time. As I was an “old” man of 25 years plus, he appeared very young to me. He was thin but not seriously ill then; my memories of him are fairly vague but I do recall that he would have passed for nineteen years of age. In retrospect, he reminds me of my own young brother, now dead, who was then an eighteen year old Flying Officer RAAF training in Canada.

I think I was in that hut for several weeks with Les before moving to another hut. Some six weeks later I was sent with a work party to a jungle camp at Tarso on the railway line. That was when I lost track of Les, as I was at Tarso when they selected men at the base camp for work in Japan. I do recall that he was in reasonable physical condition when I last saw him—the Japs were only supposed to send fit men to Japan. You will know their definition of “fit men”.

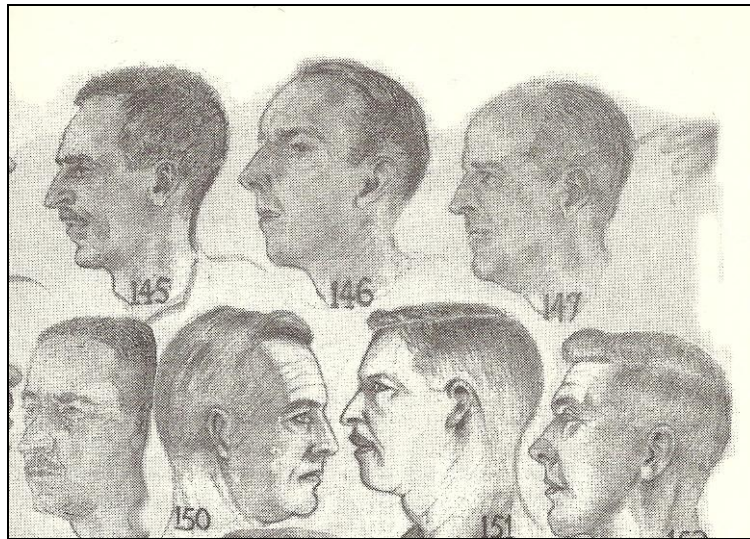
Many accounts have now been written that establish the grim and terrible conditions in which Les and thousands of soldiers and civilians of several nationalities worked and died.

I often ponder the imponderable: where would we have been and what would have happened had we been together and how long was it after the sinking before his suffering ceased?



**Wedding Day photo of Joyce and Russ**

*Enlarged image repeated from article page 5*



The above pencil sketch was done of men who were in Kuching.

The artists were either of Jock Britz ( NX34651 Captain - 8 Div A.S.C.) or Donald Johnston (NX12205 Captain HQ R.A.A. 8 Div ?).

They are

- 145 Lt C.R. Baylis NX34225 2/19 Bn
- 146 Lt R.W.Ewin NX76171 8 Div Signals
- 147 Lt J Kelleher NX16306? 10 R.G.H.?
- 150 Private F.N.Watson QX20948 8 Div Sigs
- 151 Private G.B.Tomlin VX21210 2/2 Pnr Bn
- 152 Private R.J.Gordon NX48095 2/3 Res Motor Tpt Coy

*The above identification has been done to the best of material available to me.*

*Lt Col (Retired) Peter Winstanley - Website owner*