Corporal Harry Walker

VX22708 "C" Company 2/2nd Pioneer Battalion

CORPORAL
HENRY EDWARD WALKER
VX22708

SERVICE	AUSTRALIAN ARMY
DATE OF BIRTH	13 MARCH 1918
PLACE OF BIRTH	ALMA, VIC
DATE OF ENLISTMENT	5 JUNE 1940
LOCALITY ON ENLISTMENT	RED CLIFFS, VIC
PLACE OF ENLISTMENT	CAULFIELD, VIC
NEXT OF KIN	WALKER, THOMAS
DATE OF DISCHARGE	29 JANUARY 1946
POSTING AT DISCHARGE	2/2 AUSTRALIAN PIONEER BATTALION
PRISONER OF WAR	YES

HARRY WALKER ex-POW

A story about family
Survival
And achievement

Adapted from tapes

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Home and family

1918 - 1940

Life on a small farm

World War 1 ended in 1918, a very easy year to remember, because it was the year I was born.

I was named Henry Edward, always called Harry. I was brought up in a family of eleven, five older, five younger: in all seven boys and four girls. We lived at Alma, near Maryborough, in central Victoria.

It was a gold mining district that became a mixed farming area with fairly small holdings.

There was a lot of crown land in the area that could be purchased for a pound an acre (two dollars) paid up over twenty years. This particular land had the right of a miner to mine that land for gold. I'm not to sure if the law still remains but we had to have a plate on the gate post allowing anybody to enter for mining purposes.

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Back row from left: Albert John, William Garnet, Isaac, James Robert, Henry Edward.
Front: George Edgar, Mavis, Roy Charles, Ellison Sarah, Florence May, Agnes Matilda.

Old ways

Clearing and selling the wood from these properties was all pretty well done by axe and wedges.

Schools were built about four miles apart in areas where there were sufficient pupils. We always walked to school but in heavy rain we went in a buggy. The school was a little over a mile from home.

Our first home was made of mud bricks with a weatherboard kitchen at the back. In those days we had horses and they were always stabled very close to the house. If a horse took sick through the night it could be heard.

To see a motor car was quite a novelty. Nearly all farmers, or those that could afford it, would have a horse and buggy, or a horse and gig. Any well to do farmers would have what we called a buggy and a pair - two horses.

Bicycles were scarce and expensive. I didn't purchase a bicycle until I was in my teens

Growing up in Alma

I can't remember very much of my pre school days but the day we looked forward to most was Christmas Day. We had to go out into the scrub, not very far away, and break bushes off the trees to sweep all the yards, around the stables and everywhere to get ready for Santa Claus. We were always very willing to have a real good clean up at that time of the year.

The other important day was New Year's Day when there were sports held at Maryborough. They were the two days in the year that we really looked forward to.

Our chores

After school, from the age of seven or eight years old, we were all allocated various tasks.

Somebody had to bring in the cows for milking. The cows were often turned out in to what we called the common, the crown land, especially when there was not much local feed. And they would always have a bell. Somebody would have to walk off to get them. Quite often the cows had to be brought back some two or three miles to be milked.

Others would have to gather dry sticks to light the fires in the morning. The pigs and the chooks had to be fed and the eggs gathered. We certainly got into heaps of trouble if any of these jobs weren't done by dark.

In the winter time the cows and horses would need extra feed. A share farmer would grow oaten crops that would be cut into sheaves. After school we often had to go out and put these sheaves into stooks so they could mature before they were put away for the winter.

On Sundays and also of a night time we would go out and look for rabbits, through the week we would trap rabbits. This was a main source of income. It amounted to a shilling (10 cents) a week which was quite good in those days.

Most of the family worked in either pairs or threes and we would share what ever we were able to achieve. There didn't seem to be any problems in relation to who was entitled to what. All seemed to understand that we had very little so there was very little to argue over. I shared income with the brother next to me for quite a while - the few pennies that there were.

Home comforts

In our home we had no electricity and no refrigeration. As for keeping anything cool people either had a cellar or they built a coolgardie safe, this was an evaporative cooling system.

The main source of energy for lighting was kerosene. It came in a four gallon square can, known as a kerosene tin. It is still used today by some of the elderly people. The kerosene was used in lanterns. If you went outside it had to be protected from the wind as did the lamps used in the house.

Every house had at least one lamp. Sometimes candles were used. If there was a breeze candles were not satisfactory. Candles were lit to go into a bedroom at night so as you could see your way.

It is now very hard to imagine that we were brought up in an era that had no plastic. The main wrapping was brown paper or brown paper bags.

Transport and energy

Energy for heating was mainly wood. We were able to sell wood to nearly all the homes in Maryborough five mile away. Wood was required to heat homes through the winter and of course the bakeries had to use wood for their ovens and the butchers had to have wood to run their steam boilers. The flour mills and the butter factories relied on wood for all their energy requirements.

The wood was taken to customers on a dray. A dray had wooden wheels with a steel tyre and was generally pulled by one draught horse. About a ton and a half was about as much as a horse could pull. The load had to be balanced on the shafts. It was quite an art to know how to load a dray so that it would not be too heavy on the horse and break him down or to load too far back that it would lift the horse up in the air

Horse teams

Farmers would take their hay and some times their harvest grain into the Maryborough flour mill on wagons pulled by up to six or eight horses. In the prime of the season their coats would be shiny and it was very nice to see. We would look out the school window and see the teams going past. I think the farmers used to put their very best horses on the outside so everyone could see how good they were.

Often the only form of transport to town was to walk. My parents would say that in their time it was an achievement just to get a lift on the back of a dray to town. Often they had to walk five miles to do their shopping, or whatever they had to attend to, and then had to walk back home. If they were able to hitch-hike on a dray, well their day was made.

Working conditions

Around the turn of the century and up to about 1918, most of the grain crop was cut into stooks and then into stacks. A threshing machine would then be used to thresh the hay to get the grain out. Farmers would have to feed the work gang of about 6 to 12 people.

My father would recall what the owners of the threshing machine would say to his workers.... "Look you will just have to put up with this, these people aren't very rich, they can hardly afford to pay me, let alone feed us, so you can expect to get potatoes in the morning, again for lunch and again for tea." This often happened. When they had finished for the day, being summer time, they would go to sleep on top of the stack where they were. That was just the way of life in those days.

I'm not to sure how often these workers had a bath. They just battled on as there was nothing any better. That's what they were brought up with and that was what they accepted.

The straw left over from threshing the grain also had a use. Up to about 1924 the straw was woven into bottle covers for insulation and protection. Bottles of methylated spirits had covers. They were like a sock when pulled over beer bottles. This kept them cool when stored in a cellar and also stopped them from breaking on the rough roads. There were no sealed roads in those days

Family entertainment

One highlight occurred about 1926 or 1927. We had fairly rich cousins in Melbourne, shoe manufacturers. They arrived one day and installed a wireless set. There was a lot of excitement when they put up the aerial, switched a few knobs and this thing started talking and making lots of music. It was just unbelievable.

Before that the only entertainment or music we had was a neighbour's gramophone. Occasionally they would bring it down and play records in the evening.

We had two picnics held on a reserve during my school days. We all got there fairly early. We had to break off bushes and put them in a circle. We would sit on them and when it was time, or after the parents had finished talking, they would start serving out the goodies, mainly sandwiches followed up with lots of cream cakes and lamingtons. I've never forgotten going to one of these picnics. We had a few sandwiches and some jam tarts followed by lamingtons. Then the lamingtons would be brought around again. They were terrific. I don't know why I couldn't eat the second one but that was how it went. I'd had enough.

The drinks were generally raspberry cordial, very popular. There was a lime juice cordial too. But there were no bottles of soft drink or anything like that.

Recreation

Being a big family we occupied ourselves. We played backyard cricket in the summer time and a little bit of football, kicking to one another in the winter. But we never had the money to join any particular team.

We would always look forward to Christmas time when cousins would come up from Melbourne. They would spend lots of time with us and play various games. They used to bring us up to date with the latest in all the city sayings and so forth. We used to have a lot of fun.

Our house

The first home we lived in was all hessian lined and it was covered with paper from time to time, different colours from different newspapers and it looked quite good.

As the family got bigger and the house became over crowded we built another home of mud brick and it is still standing today after about 70 years. In fact I slept in the bedroom recently and it was still very nice. It was very cool in the summer and quite warm in the winter. The outside walls were finished with cement plaster.

We made all the bricks on the property and everybody, including my mother, had a go at laying them. The only professional person employed was a carpenter to put on the roof frame and iron.

Harry beside the mud brick extension built about 1928.
Photo taken April 1995.

After school work

As we got older we had to do other work when we got home from school. One job was cutting chaff for the horses. The chaff came from sheaves of hay. A binder was used in the paddock to make the sheaves and it was our task to bring the sheaves into the stable and to put them through a chaff cutting machine. A big crank handle was turned to drive a wheel with big knives attached to it. We had to turn and turn. It was a very boring job and nobody liked doing it. But it was a job that had to be done.

Family health

The only immunisation in those days was for small pox. That was absolutely necessary. I had whooping cough when I was about six or eight. Our family got through all those problems fairly well.

Whooping cough was responsible for a number of deaths in many families. Other illnesses were chicken pox, measles and mumps. I didn't get measles or mumps until I was in my twenties, and I certainly knew all about it then. All in all there
wasn't very much sickness in our family. We had a very plain diet and small amounts of sweets that were kept for very special occasions.

Home remedies

Parents had a lot of old cure alls for treating sickness and some of the remedies they used were as good as the ones we use today. It is quite possible that some of the antibiotics that get pumped into us today are worse than the disease.

For a sore tummy we would probably get a dose of castor oil, that was always in a blue bottle and that was something that was very hard to take.

Throat infections were treated by my mother getting a tea spoon full of sulphur, rolling it up in a piece of paper in the shape of a pipe and blowing the sulphur down our throat. It seemed to be very effective.

A mustard poultice was used for a cold on the chest. This would be put on your chest and a flannel put over the top to keep the heat in.

Eucalyptus was a cure for colds. We would have to swallow half a teaspoon full of sugar with five drops of pure eucalyptus.

A hot wet bread poultice was the cure for an infection in the skin, or boil or splinter that was inflamed. This would be rolled up and put on over night and it would draw all the infection out.

First job

I left school at the age of 14 years. My first job was sheath turning to help build a hay stack.

The sheaves would be brought in on the wagon, thrown up on top of the stack and my job was to turn the sheath to the right position for the stack builder to pick it up with his fork. Going around and around a big stack was a lot of work.

On the first day I was that keen to be on time I was there at daybreak, ready to start. I didn't have to go out into the paddock to load. There was time for a rest between loads. They were fairly long days as they always worked until sundown. For that we were given 40 pence a day and our food was provided. Up until the age of 21 all our wages were returned to the family. We were given back small change to buy things we required.

Working the puddling machine

Every summer we would have to handle the hay. During the winter we would be on the wood and in between times we would try to find some gold. Father had a puddling machine. This is something not in use today.

A site was chosen and top soil was tipped into the machine. Water would be added. A horse would be hitched up to walk in a circle pulling very heavy wooden harrows to create a slum in the machine.

It was our job after the slum was let off to fill up the machine again with water using a hand suction pump. The horses would go around and around to work the dirt and water into a thick slum. This would be repeated several times.

We were not to get the slum too thick otherwise the fine gold would run off. It took seven or eight hours to remove all of the soil so that at the end there would be just gravel and maybe some gold.

The clean gravel was shovelled out into a wheel barrow and moved over to what is called a sluice box. There we had to continually pump to keep an even flow of water while our father would throw the gravel up to the top of the sluice box. The water would wash all the gravel away and the gold and lead would be left up at the top. This was a very laborious job taking about two to three hours. It was very hard work.

There were a number of puddling machines around, but we never found very much gold although there was quite a lot of gold in the area. We never liked that particular job. There didn't seem to be any future in it and it didn't get the best out of our labour at that time.

The gold we didn't find

It was known that there was a splash of gold on the eastern side of every hill. It was right on top of the surface and would gradually go deeper and deeper. Half a mile away the layer of gold would be about 50ft to 60ft deep but water was a problem at that depth. We put most of our effort on the surface collecting the clay and carting it to the machine, working it and then hoping to find some gold.

There was always a story. My mother told me that somebody told her that a clairvoyant had said that at the front of our house there was a fortune. Well at the front, about half a mile away there was apart from the alluvial gold in the surface also gold in stone and it went down fairly deep.

A lot of people had the opinion that the fortune would be found by locating the seam, following it down and crushing the gold out of the rock.

Around1985-86, with the introduction of metal detectors, a piece of gold worth about $50,000 was found by a prospector on a spot that could be seen from the front door of our house. I don't believe in fairy tales but this was one that came true.

Had we had found it in our younger days we would have been some of the wealthiest people about.

Getting a job away from home

My first away from home job was at a place called Bung Bong, on a farm, with very nice people. I lived in an old house there. They gave me my meals. I was 16 at that stage and I used to help with the cows and clean up after milking.

They had beautiful standard roses in their garden and I had to keep them tidy. I also had a job at shearing time. I rather enjoyed it there. Those people have remained friends all my life.

They were astounded that at the age of 16 I had never seen a film. As there was a film coming to Maryborough they invited me to go along. I had to walk about three miles from home and they picked me up on the road to Maryborough. I saw the film and they dropped me off at about 11 o'clock that night and I had to walk another three miles to get home. The name of the film was "Tell me tonight"

Farm work at Laanecoorie

I was about 17 when I got my second major job. I worked at Laanecoorie for Roy Cain and his family. They had a fairly big farm. They were just starting off and money was very tight and we worked fairly hard. I got on quite well with them. In fact in later life they looked on me as one of them. When I stayed with them after the war I was invited to sleep in the guest's bedroom and not the worker's hut.

My work there was general farm work. I had to learn to drive a team of horses, to do the ploughing, drilling, cultivating, harrowing and at harvest time I always got up first and fed all the horses in the stable.

It was all horses in those days. At night we'd get in at dark and we'd have to milk seven or eight cows. So it was a long day. We used to start about 5.30 in the morning and it would be 9 o'clock before we sat down for our evening meal. I got a pound a week and my keep for that and of course that pound a week went home to my parents.

Picking sultanas

It was 1936 when my brother and I went to Red Cliffs for grape picking. It was quite an achievement to be so far away from home. But the Holdsworth's were very nice people to work for.

The following year another brother came as well. We all worked on the one property and they treated us as members of the family. We quite enjoyed it really.

After that I went back again to the Cain's and worked another full year on the farm. Laanecoorie was 22 miles from home and I had to ride my old second hand push bike all the way when I had my weekend off once a month, from Saturday afternoon to Sunday night.

When I got back on the Sunday night I would often find that the Cains were out visiting and the cows wouldn't be done. I would have to bring the cows in, milk them and separate the milk, feed the calves and feed the pigs.

There was no such thing as a 40 hour week. I worked seven days a week, apart from Sundays, when all we had to do was milk the cows in the morning and then again at night.

Chopping wood at Hattah

In September 1939 we were chopping wood around Maryborough and we got a call from Wally Holdsworth that there was work available cutting wood for the steam engines at the Red Cliffs pumps. So my brother Bill and I went to the Hattah Lakes south of Red Cliffs to cut the wood. It was the middle of summer. We camped in the open, had no refrigeration and cooked on an open fire. We got provisions once a week. Imagine that in the middle of summer!

But we had some very good timber and it looked like we were at least going to make double wages which was very good in those days. Unfortunately, the river rose and flooded and a lot of the wood we cut went under water.

We were forced to go into the hilly, sandier country where the timber was solid right through which made it very hard work and actually it was not very successful. Had we stayed in the timber on the lower ground we would have really made money.

Work policy

During our teenage life we'd done all sorts of work and all the family was well sought after. Although we were in the middle of the Great Depression we were never out of work, but we never got paid very much for what we did.

When farmers had the money they always looked to employ us. There was fencing and clearing work if the money was about. We had a policy, and this was told to us repeatedly by our parents, that we should always be welcome to return to any job we left.

Joining the army

When we finished cutting the wood, around January 1940, we went again picking grapes. We had a fairly good harvest and made quite a reasonable amount of money. I stayed on after picking. Most of the pickers would move on but I thought there might be more work in the Mildura area. I got work trellising and putting in strainer posts on the Holdsworth's property.

Wal Holdsworth came to me around the end of May and told me he was going to join the army. World War 2 had begun the previous September. He wanted me to take over and work his property. He said I could have his car and tractor and I would not be called up.

Conscription was coming in but I would be exempt because I was running a property and producing food. Therefore I wouldn't be liable for service.

But I had memories of Armistice Day at school with the flag and speeches and so forth. I always felt that one day I might have to go to war. I don't know why but I always had the premonition that I would be in the army.

I thought about this for a couple of days, and the thought of being protected. I decided it would be far better if I took the plunge and joined the army myself.

Brother Bill and Harry chopping a belah tree at Holdsworths.

Army life

Training and the Syrian Campaign: 1940-1941

I joined the army in Mildura as a resident of Red Cliffs on the 5th of June, 1940. We went by train to Caulfield where we stayed one night. Then we were put onto trucks and taken off to Puckapunyal. My first choice was to join a transport division but as I didn't have a driver's licence there was no position for me and I was asked if I wished to join another battalion called the 2/2nd Pioneers.

With a lot of other friends I decided to give it a go without knowing much about the duties of the battalion. It was much different to the pioneers of World War 1. We were looked upon as an independent battalion. The original conception was to combine the functions of the field engineers and the infantry. We always felt we would be sent in where it was too dangerous for engineers and it was too technical for the infantry. But active service was to be so different to what our training led us to expect.

Puckapunyal

We had a lot of training at Puckapunyal in relation to handling of machine guns and rifles. Most of us were issued with a 303 rifle. We had an awful lot of route marches and we became a fairly united team, about 1000 altogether.

Our CO (Commissioned Officer) was Colonel Wellington. He had seen service in World War 1. So had a lot of the other officers, either in the civilian military force (militia) or in the first world war. Most of the NCO's (Non-Commissioned Officers) had been in the militia. They all had a lot of experiences of drill and how to strip a machine gun. They could do it, put it back together, load it and get ready for firing while we were still getting down to see how the thing worked. This put us at a slight disadvantage. A couple of times I was asked if I was interested in promotion but I felt inferior to the people that had been well trained in the militia.

I never really enjoyed army life at first. It didn't conform to my way of thinking. We sat around for ages and ages waiting in queues, waiting for things. The food was quite wholesome but it was fairly boring. We did have quite a few social facilities at Puckapunyal but I normally stayed back and either wrote letters or cleaned my gear up or something like that.

Harry, Joe Colman, Ivan Martin and Jack Clement in training:
"We were good mates who could rely on each other." 1940.

Mates

I seldom went down to the free pictures in the hall. I didn't seem to get into the flow of things but I did make a lot of friends and we would more or less find our own type and sit around and play cards. After a time we got welded into a very united body. There were 10 men in a section and there were three sections in a platoon. We got to know each other really well. Funny things would happen, we lived as if we were in a family and we got support from one another.

Mildura trip

We were entitled to leave, so many days a month. I used to let my leave add up so that when I took it I had a long break. Some of the boys hired a bus for a trip to Mildura and I agreed to go along to make up the numbers. It was a new bus but we were held up at Bendigo with petrol trouble.

We stayed there for about an hour trying to get the carburettor or petrol pump fixed. We got going again but half an hour later we had the same trouble. I was seated in about the centre of the bus and fell asleep. The only way they could keep the bus going was by pouring petrol from beer bottles into the carburettor.

Apparently this was going fairly well but when they got closer to Mildura, somewhere around Carwarp, they tried to go a bit quicker by pouring faster. The engine back-fired and the whole front of the bus went up in flames.

I was woken up and somebody was shouting there was a fire and smashed down the windows. I put my hand on my opened window not realising it had been broken. As I was about to jump somebody put their boot onto my hand. The glass was up about two inches and it cut my hand nearly right through.

The bus destroyed by fire, Carwarp 1940.

Extended leave

Apart from the bus I was the only casualty and I was taken by car to the Red Cliffs hospital where they cleaned and stitched up may hand. Mrs Holdsworth picked me up at about 10 o'clock that night and took me to their house and I stayed there for two or three days. I had to see the doctor again so I was able to get an extra two or three days leave, but it was not very enjoyable.

On the move

About the 21st of February, 1941, the battalion was moved from Puckapunyal to Balcombe, on the Mornington Peninsular. It was quite a change there. We had slightly different training but we knew we were getting ready to move overseas. We got additional clothing and that sort of thing.

Convoy

It was the 6th of April when we left Balcombe. We were taken on a train to Sydney and then put on the Queen Mary in Sydney Harbour. It held about 5000 soldiers. The other ships in the convoy were the Queen Elizabeth, a very big ship. There was the Ile de France, Nieuw Amsterdam, and another one, the Mauretania. The HMAS Australia was our escort cruiser.

The Queen Mary was a very interesting ship. It was designed for the cold Atlantic Ocean run. There wasn't sufficient air conditioning for the tropics and boy did we swelter. We got relief out on the deck in the evening. We could walk right around the promenade deck, it took a long time and we got plenty of exercise that way. It was like an oven down in the hull.

We didn't know our destination. It was such a big convoy, I think the biggest ever to leave Australia. We were north east for a few days, then we noted one morning that some of the ships had parted. I think most of them went to Malaya and Ceylon. Anyhow we went to the Red Sea in the Middle East.

Middle East

We were transferred onto a smaller ship and went up the Suez Canal. That was an interesting voyage because although there was a lot of ships sunk along the canal there was a clear way and as the sand was down to both sides of the canal we got a close up view of the desert.

The first thing I noticed was a very strange smell that we came to associate with the Arab countries. I really didn't know what it was. Some say it was camel manure. We eventually settled into Hill 95 on the Gaza Ridge in Palestine. Here we did a lot of marching and preparing for what ever might happen. The most interest was in where we were to be sent. Crete and Greece had just fallen. After France fell, Syria was under the control of the Vichy French, a government supporting Hitler.

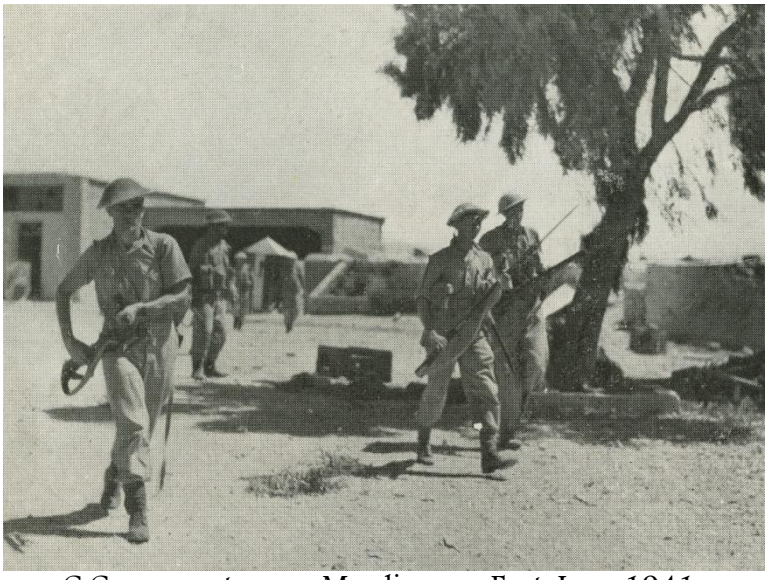
The Syrian campaign

It was about the first week in June, 1941, when we got orders to move. We weren't too sure what was going to happen but we had a fair idea because Turkey was about the only country which separated the German army and Syria and of course being next to Palestine it looked as though the enemy could come our way. The idea was to try to establish a base in Lebanon or Syria and we made a start on that around the middle of June.

Major battle

One date that is always remembered by the battalion is the 17th of June when we were ordered to attack Fort Merdjayoun. It was a hopeless task. We lost a lot of men. The enemy had tanks and they were in a big fort on top of a hill. Walls were about six feet thick all made of rock and whenever anybody got too close they just came out with the tanks and the infantry and we had very little chance.

Some of our fellows were taken as prisoners of war. Other than that we were involved in a lot of skirmishes and we found that by cutting their supply line or attacking it we were more successful. One night they evacuated the fort and we were able to move in.



C Company troops, Merdjayoun Fort, June 1941.
Harry centre. From the Story of the 2/2nd Pioneer Battalion.

Reflections on the training

During training we were told this would happen or that would happen but when we were in action it was hard to relate to the training. An important aspect of the training, however, was that we were disciplined and that we accepted regimentation. Training seemed very monotonous back at Puckapunyal but when we saw action the training stood by us although it was so different to what we expected.

At one time we came under an artillery barrage and we were caught in open country. The officer gave the signal for military formation. Well military formation is marching in an entirely different order to normal marching. Normally we were spread out, so many paces between each person and so may paces between each line. It was amazing that we had very few casualties, again, it was just training.

An assortment of an army

The Syrian campaign was a bit unfortunate in many ways. I don't know how committed the Vichy French were. They had German support with aircraft. They had battalions from the French Foreign Legion. We seemed to have a mixture of a number of British units and a mixture of Australian units - an assortment of an army, and of course no air force, but a fair amount of artillery.

Victims of war

We made an assault on one particular village. We had a good artillery barrage and a lot of machine gun fire to give us cover. By the time we got to our objective the enemy had withdrawn. I felt sorry for the women and the kiddies that weren't able to evacuate as quickly as the soldiers could. We didn't know if all elements of the enemy had evacuated and there was always the task of mopping up.

In one particular building we broke into, the kiddies were crying, and the women were frantic. We had all learnt a little bit of French and Arabic for words like thank you, water, what direction? This was picked up fairly quickly. We were fairly short of water and I had to ask a woman for water in French. She ran off to a well and brought water back for us. I don't know if they were pleased to see us or see the enemy go but it was not really fair that they were put in that situation.

Food relief

Our battle with the Vichy French was called the Syrian campaign, but mostly the fighting was in Lebanon. When the fighting was virtually finished, we were put in an outpost, a small town, where they had a lot of food stored. People started coming back to the town as they were short of food. I was told to issue grain, a small bucket for each person. I was in charge and I noticed a woman who was nursing a little kiddie and hanging on to another one.

I took her out of line and told her to get her ration and go. When I looked around nearly every person was holding up a child. We only got half way through and we got orders to close. I don't know why, but everybody was evacuated.

Losses in battle

The Syrian campaign lasted around five weeks. During that time we lost a lot of our members. After the fighting the troops came together in a big convoy through the streets of Beirut and up to Tripoli where the oil terminals were. We then occupied positions around the wharves and oil terminals guarding against sabotage.

During this time I was taken to hospital with infected sores and that sort of thing. I was put in a Beruit hospital run by the English. I was there only a week and I was very pleased to get back to the unit, it was like getting back to home.

Looking around

The occupation of Syria, or keeping order in a foreign country, can get fairly confusing. The local people were mainly Lebanese. Although they were very shrewd and very cunning, they were also fairly co-operative. We didn't have any major problems. When we weren't looking after ammunition dumps and air fields and so forth we were allowed to go on leave.

For transport I elected to go on what they called a cook's tour. It was a convoy of about six or eight trucks to show the flag up towards the Turkish border. We went through to a place known as The Cedars. It was a French ski resort on top of the mountains. Although it was quite warm at sea level it was really cold at the top of the mountain. There was no snow at that time.

Ruins

We went on to near the Turkish border and did a round trip lasting about a week. We did a stop over at the ruins of the ancient city of Baalbek. There were giant pillars up to 40ft - 50ft high. The stone would be about 6ft wide, very smooth. Way up high on the pillars that hadn't fallen

were terrific carvings. We also visited a crusader fort built in the Middle Ages. I took one day of leave in Beirut, another French holiday resort. I rather liked it. The sandy beach came right up to the city with a bitumen road that ran right across it.

Much to see

I also had leave in Damascus in central Syria and also in Jerusalem. We were given addresses where we could stay and we had to inform our officers as to where we were going to be.

A lot of people stayed at places more like army barracks but three of us decided to stay in a more private hotel where we were right away from regimental or army discipline. We had our meals in either a Methodist or Presbyterian mission.

Sites of interest

The meals were European similar to the style we had at home and the atmosphere was very cordial and very quiet and we enjoyed that. We took on quite a few tours around Jerusalem. I visited all the Stations of the Cross with a Roman Catholic chap who had studied religion more so than I had and it was very interesting. There was a church built on every station of the cross. We did visit Christ's tomb - that was well under ground. Probably Solomon's Caves were the most interesting to visit and also the gates of Jerusalem.

We visited Bethlehem, Mount of Olives and also the Wailing Wall. There were two sections in Jerusalem, the Arab section and the Jewish section and that was pretty well the same up in Lebanon. Even in Haifa, down near the coast, there was the Arab section and back further in the hills there was a big area full of modern homes which was the Jewish section but it had all been evacuated.

On leave we more or less ate in the quieter spots if we weren't eating at the missionary places and most of the people were Jewish evacuees from Germany, Poland, Hungary and those areas. They could speak reasonable English and they were more interested in providing hospitality than getting the money out of you. Nevertheless time went fairly quickly and we had to go back to our camp.

On leave in Syria with Ivan and Allan Martin. The soldier on the left went down with the boat torpedoed by the allies 12 Sept 44 transporting POW's from Singapore to Japan.

With M Todd and North Africans who had fought with the Vichy French. Mick Todd was also lost on the same boat.

Back on patrol

Another time I had to go to Beirut on patrol as part of a group of six or eight to round up anybody who was misbehaving during the time our unit was on leave. Our headquarters was the lock up place that the French or the Lebanese police used for all nationalities that misbehaved. I wasn't impressed by the way they treated the people they brought in.

Construction work

Later on our camp moved up to near Damascus. We were doing a lot of construction work, building roads, and defence work in case the Germans attempted to come down through Turkey. We were trained in the use of explosives and we used a lot in the mountains to try and make roads for tanks. Then we moved on again not very far from Damascus. Around Christmas - new year time we had a blizzard.
It started raining for a while and then it snowed. At this stage we were in galvanised iron huts, about 20 or 40 people in a hut.

Snow storm

During the blizzard the snow came in through every little crack. Boots on the floor would become that hard they would no longer fit. We had to keep them near our feet so as they wouldn't freeze. The blizzard lasted for about three days and it was very cold.

During the snow storm we couldn't see our way back from the mess hut even though it was only 10 or 20 metres away. It was very easy to get dis-orientated and the food was pretty well frozen by the time we got back. We were completely snowed in and when the blizzard ceased we had to get shovels and try and clear the snow which was up to six or seven feet deep over the road. It was terribly cold and we were pleased to see the last of that place.

Promotion

I always said I would never accept promotion. I'd prefer somebody else to make the tough decisions as to who would do the dangerous work, or who could possibly get killed. Anyhow during the campaign I was often put in positions where I had to make decisions.

I was offered the position of Lance Corporal which I accepted. Then a little later on after the campaign finished they asked me to be Corporal. That meant I was in charge of 10 men. It also meant I got another 40 pence a day in pay which was quite a lot in those days. I seemed to enjoy army life a lot better. I felt I had to become responsible and I handled the position much better than I anticipated.

A good offer

It was only about a week before we left the Middle East that I was called up to the officer in charge or the Colonel in charge. Colonel Wellington had left. We had Colonel Monaghan, during the Syrian campaign. Then when he left Colonel Williams took over the battalion. He had done service in the Tobruk area.

He asked me if I would consider further promotion. He told me they wanted to reconstruct the battalion and put in a mortar platoon. I was asked if I would go to Cairo to do an officer training course and become the platoon commander.

I accepted and I was told I had to leave within two days. There would be transport to take me to Cairo. The day I was supposed to go we got orders that we were to leave the Middle East and after a lot of waiting, we were all aboard trucks making our way down towards the Suez Canal.

With mother and father at home on final leave before going to the Middle East, 1941.

War close to home

1942

On the trip back to the Suez Canal we stopped near the sea of Galilee. I always wanted to see it so during the evening meal, on the pretext that I wanted to wash my dixies, (that's our food containers) I walked down. I stood there at the Sea of Galilee for quite a long while. It was a very nice area and it was an evening I would never forget.

The Orcades

We moved on to near the Suez Canal by train and eventually were put onto a smaller ship to go onto the canal out to the Red Sea where we boarded the Orcades. The Orcades was a very nice boat about half the size of the Queen Mary. It was very smooth. But a lot of our gear was left on the wharf. A baggage party was left behind looking after our gear. We had our rifles and ammunition with us but very little ammunition.

Oversight

The second / third machine gunners also got onto the Orcades without their machine guns. Apparently the train carrying the luggage was held up. However the boats could not wait. As the saying goes: If it has got to sail, it has to sail. The practice was to pull up anchor and go regardless. Who's on goes. Who's not just gets left behind. As it was we were terribly over crowded. We expected air raids and that sort of thing. And we had no idea as to where we were going. We thought it would be back to Australia. We were not sure.

The Japanese advance

At this time of the war the Japanese were coming down very fast towards Singapore. We thought we were probably going to Burma. That was a good guess. When we stopped at Colombo and were told that the troops had to start disembarking at 11 o'clock that morning. I was the orderly corporal for the day. Everything was packed up, the boat was in position to be unloaded but instead of doing so we got further orders that the ship was pulling up anchor and would be away again.

Then we didn't know where we were going. Burma seemed to be out. We now thought it would either be the Far East or Australia. We were all hoping it would be Australia.

It wasn't too bad on the Orcades in the tropics. It had a bit more ventilation than the Queen Mary.

Oosthaven

At the time we didn't understand what was happening. We were always kept in the dark. One night the ship dropped anchor. It was just south of Sumatra. The port was called Oosthaven. We were put on another boat to be taken off at this particular port. We had about 2000 on board. On this vessel we sat where we could.

We got to Oosthaven just on dark to be met by one surprised service man. His greeting was: "What are you doing here? This place has been evacuated. The allies have capitulated. I'm waiting here for a tug boat to take me off."

He apparently was about the last to leave. This caused a terrific lot of confusion as it was dark and we were in fairly dangerous waters. The captain refused to go back out to sea without a pilot. The pilot had shot through. I didn't know what had happened to him. Anyhow the captain eventually took us back without a pilot and it was about mid-night when we got back to the Orcades. We were relieved to find the ship waiting for us.

Batavia, Java

Why we weren't bombed then I do not know because the Japanese were only 10 minutes flying time away, about 20 to 30 miles by road.

We thought we would be getting back to Australia after that episode but instead we landed at Batavia now known as Jakarta on the island of Java.

We disembarked there and the intention was to defend the airports or whatever might be necessary. In fact nobody knew what was going to happen. There was utter confusion.

It was the 17th of February, 1942, when we landed. We received a very warm welcome from the Dutch Red Cross mainly run by women. They gave us lots of nice food and they were very happy to see us. Everyone appreciated their assistance. We never saw much of them after that. But I know all our units never forgot their hospitality.

Not so much could be said for the Dutch men. They seemed to have an entirely different attitude. A lot of them were Euro-Asians. They were half Javanese-Dutch and the communications in Java were not very good. We were under different command at different times. Our first job was to protect the Semplak airport.

Air raid

There was the first air-raid. I'll never forget that. The bombs seemed to just come and come. We didn't lose many people. Not many people got injured. Bombing is not terribly dangerous. As long as you lay flat on the ground there was no great risk. Then there was a reshuffle in some of the positions and I was appointed an acting Sergeant. Again I felt much happier. I could make decisions and I knew a little bit more about what was going on. I always thought I had the respect of every one under me and that was a big help. The second air-raid came. The Japs practically flattened all the aircraft in the aerodrome. We were expecting parachute landings but fortunately this did not happen.

Confusion in battle

We left the airport and moved to Buitenzorg where we assumed the Japanese would land. About the 24th of February the first contact was made with the Japanese. As soon as the action started some of the Dutch army disappeared. Many of the Javanese and Euro-Asians changed into civilian clothes and didn't want any part of the action against the Japs.

That just dis-organised the transport, communications and everything. In fact the Dutch just didn't want to go into action. They thought the less they upset the Japanese the better the treatment they would get. Never the less our battalion fought the Japanese near Llewiliang and we lost a lot of the one company in one night.

During that time we had only limited contact with command. We would make contact and then it was broken off. There was nothing other than confusion. We were moved from pillar to post trying to take up defensive positions and it was just too hard to know what was really going on. Some of the officers said afterwards that they didn't know what was going on either. When supply and communications break down it is very difficult to be effective.

Dutch capitulation

It was about the 7th or 8th of March, 1942. We were on guard and a big convoy of Dutch trucks came along and they all had white flags. Every one of them had a white flag. We had no idea. We eventually heard that the Dutch commander had capitulated. Well that threw us all into a panic.

It was only eight or nine months before that we were in a convoy that was victorious through Syria and now it looked like we would be the underdogs in this situation. It put a funny feeling in our stomachs.

We called together everyone who was still in an orderly position. It was decided to keep the unit together as much as possible, not capitulate, but make our way down south hopefully there would be a boat to pick us up.

Abandonment

To get to the port we had to go through the mountains and it was raining very hard. It was at the end of the wet season. Tracks got slippery. Trucks were going off the road and they called a halt. The CO called us together, told us the situation and the troops of course got very hostile. They reckoned we were led into a trap and we were dumped on the island, not given any supply, not given any reinforcements or back up.

Propaganda

There was a lot of propaganda in the papers and over the radio and this applied to the situation in Java as much as anywhere else. In the Middle East we found out more from the radio than from own internal reporting.

There was a fellow who put out the German messages on the radio under the name of Lord Hawhaw and he would always tells us a lot more about what we were doing or where we were going than our own officers would, strangely enough.

The chaps taken prisoner off The Perth, which was unfortunately sunk by the Japanese in the Sunda Straits in February,1942, along with the Houston, Exeter and Jupiter, told me this story some time later. They had been in action in the Middle East and also in the Mediterranean. When they left the Mediterranean Lord Hawhaw wished them a "Jerry Christmas" and a "Jappy New year". He said they would be bombed on the way out. They weren't bombed then but they certainly did have a Jappy new year.

Lost cause

The defence of Java was going to be lost even before it started. I said before there was a lot of mis-information in relation to the defence of Java, in particular about all the Americans landing there.

In fact there was only one battery from the American 131st artillery. The other Australian units that supported our battalion including the 2nd 3rd machine gunners were disadvantaged by the equipment and armoury having been left at the wharf in the Middle East. There were a few other part units in support

They did scrounge some of the Dutch guns and equipment, but they didn't have anything to back them up. The air force was virtually non existent. We had a few planes, the Tomahawks. They

would disappear after the air-raid siren came on and would keep out of site until the air raid was over. They were just no match for the Japanese fighter planes. Without air defence or air attack we were in an absolutely hopeless position.

The surrender

The troops got very hostile when we were told we had to surrender. There was much discussion and much confusion. One officer said, I think he was a Colonel: "Well okay if you want to do something about it get yourselves together and I'll send an officer with you". Then he told us his thinking of the situation. He said that if we had a chance of survival it was far better that we kept together.

Escape routes

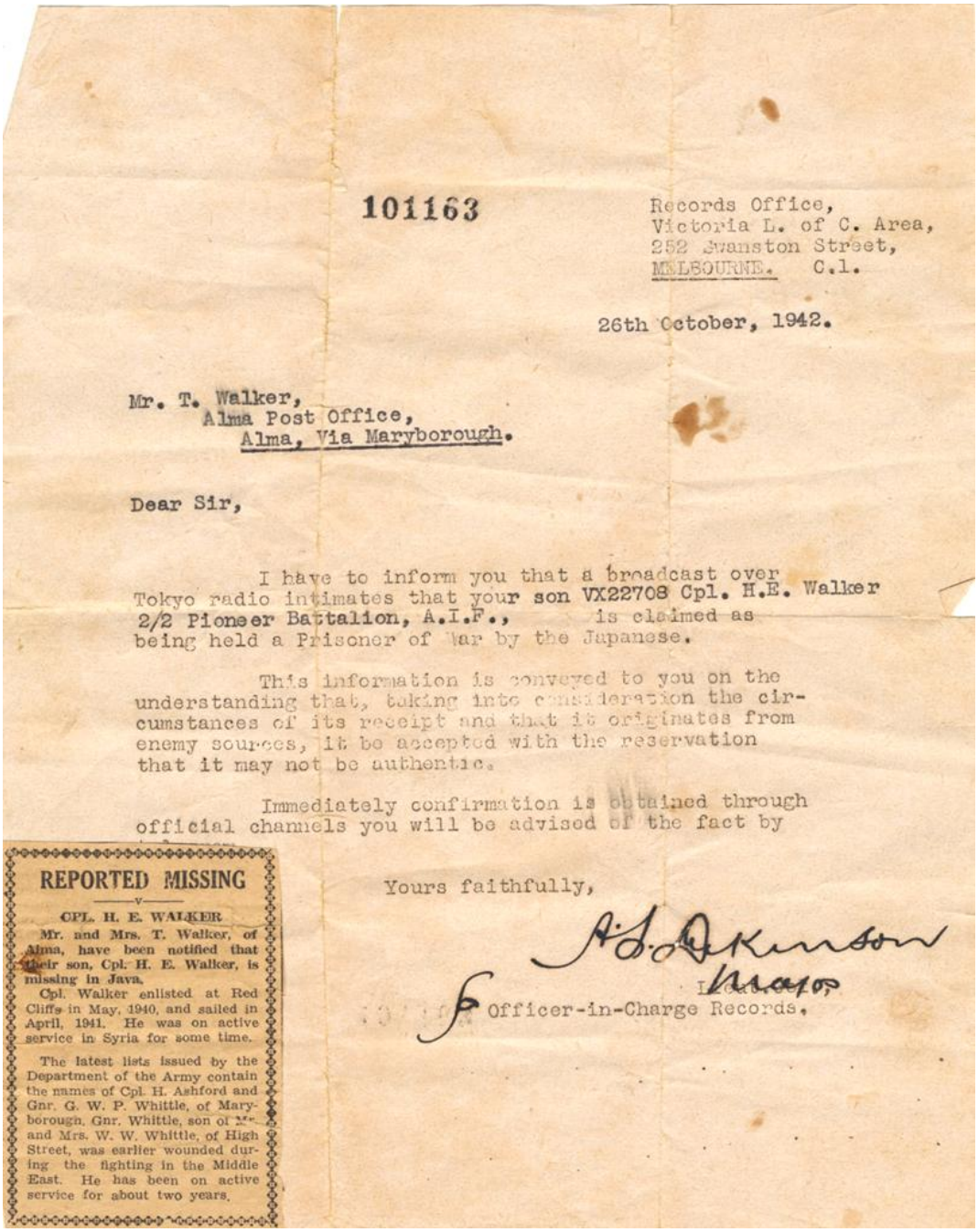
There was a group of five to six fellows and an officer who did make for the mountains. They did hide out for quite a while. They were ineffective as far as guerrilla operations were concerned. They received supplies from a few friendly Javanese. They had to contend with malaria and all the other diseases without medical attention

Waiting for the Japanese

The Japanese had put a price on everybody's head - so many gilders for any one captured. Well that meant that all the Javanese potentially became the enemy and it wasn't long before everyone was back in the camp. We were moved back when the group decided it was better to capitulate. I had a machine gun and I took it to pieces and threw the bolts into the river. I threw other parts away so it was rendered completely useless.

Most of the rifles had to be stacked in heaps and it was very depressing. We moved back about four or five miles to a tea plantation and we had to guard ourselves against natives in case there was an uprising because the Javanese were very hostile to the Dutch. The Dutch were foreigners who had taken over their land and so they welcomed the Japanese. They did change their thinking later on. But that was the situation then. There was still a lot of grumbles in the battalion because we had certainly been sold very cheap.

We found out after the war that our landing at Java did delay the Japanese from going straight on to Australia. Whether that was right or not I'm not sure. Some of the records I've checked since say that, others are not quite as clear.



101163

Records Office,
Victoria L. of C. Area,
252 Swanston Street,
MELBOURNE. C.1.

26th October, 1942.

Mr. T. Walker,
Alma Post Office,
Alma, Via Maryborough.

Dear Sir,

I have to inform you that a broadcast over Tokyo radio intimates that your son VX22708 Cpl. H.E. Walker 2/2 Pioneer Battalion, A.I.F., is claimed as being held a Prisoner of War by the Japanese.

This information is conveyed to you on the understanding that, taking into consideration the circumstances of its receipt and that it originates from enemy sources, it be accepted with the reservation that it may not be authentic.

Immediately confirmation is obtained through official channels you will be advised of the fact by

Yours faithfully,

A.S. Atkinson
Major
for Officer-in-Charge Records.

REPORTED MISSING

CPL. H. E. WALKER

Mr. and Mrs. T. Walker, of Alma, have been notified that their son, Cpl. H. E. Walker, is missing in Java.

Cpl. Walker enlisted at Red Cliffs in May, 1940, and sailed in April, 1941. He was on active service in Syria for some time.

The latest lists issued by the Department of the Army contain the names of Cpl. H. Ashford and Gnr. G. W. P. Whittle, of Maryborough. Gnr. Whittle, son of Mr. and Mrs. W. W. Whittle, of High Street, was earlier wounded during the fighting in the Middle East. He has been on active service for about two years.

We stayed in that tea plantation for about a week and then we were moved on to a market place. Here we had the full run of the area. The market was only 100 metres away and we were able to buy things and to do whatever we wanted to do. In fact we used to go for fairly long walks to try and keep fit. Still we hadn't seen any Japanese.

Humiliation

The Japanese did finally pay us a visit. We were all lined up and we were checked and counted and so forth and then about another two weeks later we were taken off to a place called the Bicycle Camp at Batavia, it was a Dutch military camp. The camp was quite good but once we marched into that camp we lost all our rights, all out liberties, we were down to nothing and it was very soul destroying to be in that position.

Newspaper clipping.

Prisoner of War Part 1

Burma Thai Rail line

1942 -1943

While at the Bicycle Camp near Java we were taken out on working parties loading petrol drums. Half full drums of petrol had been left by the Dutch in various locations and these had to be rolled into heaps. We loaded a lot of tin ingots and that sort of thing onto boats. We had to do a lot of clean up work and collect car parts. They were all rolled up and shipped back to Japan. All the cars were taken and put in parks. Nobody was allowed to have a car. Nobody was allowed to use petrol.

Language problem

We were told we had to learn Japanese because those that could speak Japanese best would be given preferential treatment. When Japan took Australia we would be given the responsible positions under the Japanese government to run the country. Nobody really fell for that. It took a while to learn the Japanese sounds, we never really learnt their language or their writing, but it did help if you could understand a little.

For a start we absolutely refused to learn the language but they had ways of making you learn. As we did not understand their culture they found us very arrogant. We had to bow from our waist when we saw a sentry, if we didn't we certainly got a pretty good slapping. If a Japanese officer or soldier, or even a private, walked into the building everybody had to jump to attention, give the Japanese word for salute, and then stand at ease again.

We were allowed to continue what we were doing once they had left. Once I was washing a few clothes out under a wash tap. I never saw the sentry walking up to me. He started to slap me around the face. I didn't have a clue as to why I was slapped. I knew I had done nothing wrong. I just stood there to attention and after he had made about half a dozen swipes he walked away. I stood there for about another minute. I couldn't see him so I just disappeared.

We didn't really know what they wanted us to do. Had we have known we may have been a little more co-operative, but they didn't like our arrogance at all.

Leaving Java

Things were pretty tough at the bicycle camp at Batavia but this was nothing compared to what was to happen later on. About October, 1942, after about six months, we were told that we had to move from that camp. We were allowed to write one letter home or to fill out a card.

We were then put on a ship at Batavia and taken down into the hull. We thought that fifty people would fit in there but they finished up putting in 200. This ship was fairly clean as far as their standards went but it was very hot. Our first stop was Singapore. We stayed in Changi, the British military barracks, which had become a POW camp, for one or two nights. It was a nice climate and the buildings were beautiful and clean. We thought Changi was very good.

Second boat trip

Two days later we moved to another ship with the same cramped conditions as the first. We buried one or two people at sea. They were just casualties of the conditions. There were no medical services or anything like that.

This ship was an old coal boat and was worse than the first because it didn't have divisions. We sat right down on the bottom. We got to Rangoon on the Irrawaddy River in Burma at about 10 - 11 at night. There we were then hit by mosquitoes. I think every mosquito was there to welcome us and nobody slept. Perspiration was just pouring out of us and the mosquitos really liked it. One fellow, a baritone, sang the Road to Mandalay. It did cheer us up a little bit in that the Japs didn't attempt to stop it. Normally the Japs would put a stop to anything like that because they did not want us to be seen to be enjoying ourselves.

Burma

The next morning we were put on a barge to go down the Irrawaddy. That was interesting with two or three hundred people on a barge on a river running fairly fast tied to a tug boat. We went down the river ahead of a tug boat. It was a long trip and we finished up stopping in the middle of the night somewhere outside of Moulmein, south of Rangoon. Here we were put into the Moulmein district jail.

Prison cell

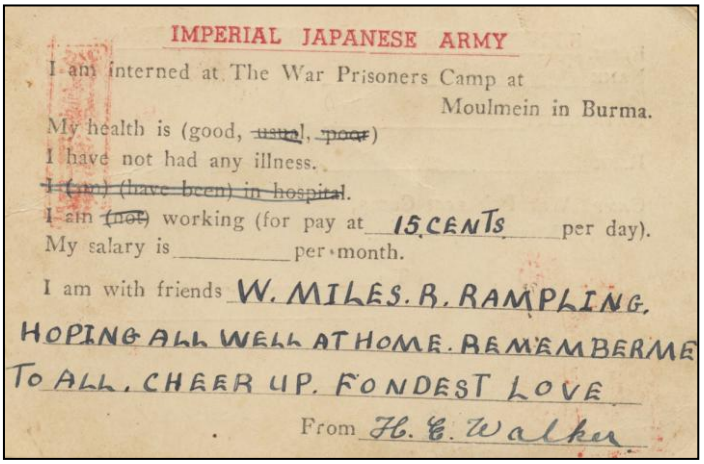
When we arrived it was a beautiful bright moonlit night. In fact Burma was noted for this. We could see nearly as well as in the day time. We got a big shock when we got inside. The prisoners were divided into certain areas depending on what their penalties were. It was very depressing to see these natives chained, some were dragging very heavy chains around when they walked. Others were chained to a big ball of steel on the ground. They couldn't go very far. They had a roof shelter, but no sides. They hardly looked like humans really. I'm not too sure what their crimes were but it looked most inhumane.

Village hospitality

At this stage we were starting to feel the pinch too because there was no food and we had to wait a long time before we got some rice. Fortunately we left the next day and we had to go through a small town, then on to a railway and go a short distance again.

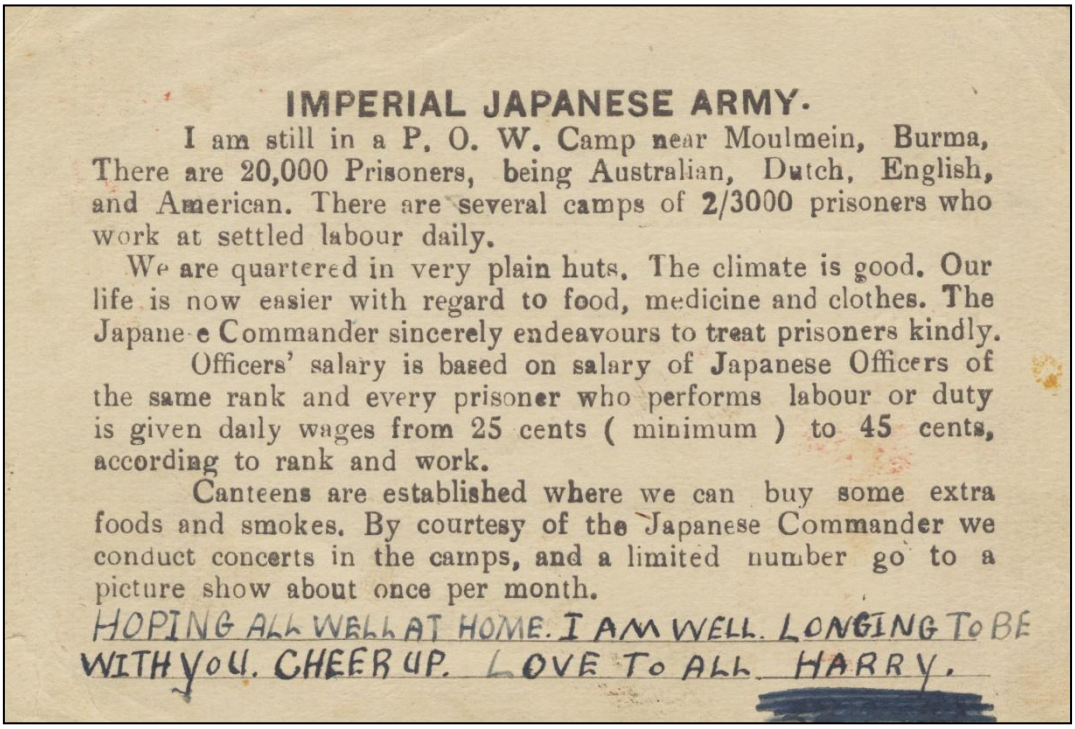
When we got off we walked through another village and the native Burmese were running backwards with all sorts of rice cakes, cigarettes, sugar and salt. It was the only occasion in all the time that we were POW's that the Japs didn't seem to worry about the natives giving us small things like fruit and food. I think the reason was to give the impression that we were being well looked after because once we left the village the normal discipline applied. After the war our unit sent gifts to that village.

Letters to home:



IMPERIAL JAPANESE ARMY

I am interned at The War Prisoners Camp at
Moulmein in Burma.
My health is (good, ~~usual~~, ~~poor~~)
I have not had any illness.
~~I (am) (have been) in hospital~~.
I am ~~(not)~~ working (for pay at 15 CENTS per day).
My salary is _____ per month.
I am with friends W. MILES. B. RAMPLING.
HOPING ALL WELL AT HOME. REMEMBER ME
TO ALL. CHEER UP. FONDEST LOVE
From H. E. Walker



IMPERIAL JAPANESE ARMY.

I am still in a P. O. W. Camp near Moulmein, Burma, There are 20,000 Prisoners, being Australian, Dutch, English, and American. There are several camps of 2/3000 prisoners who work at settled labour daily.

We are quartered in very plain huts. The climate is good. Our life is now easier with regard to food, medicine and clothes. The Japane e Commander sincerely endeavours to treat prisoners kindly.

Officers' salary is based on salary of Japanese Officers of the same rank and every prisoner who performs labour or duty is given daily wages from 25 cents (minimum) to 45 cents, according to rank and work.

Canteens are established where we can buy some extra foods and smokes. By courtesy of the Japanese Commander we conduct concerts in the camps, and a limited number go to a picture show about once per month.

HOPING ALL WELL AT HOME. I AM WELL. LONGING TO BE WITH YOU. CHEER UP. LOVE TO ALL. HARRY.

The only correspondence prisoners were allowed to send to families was a note at the bottom of these printed cards. Letters from home were not received until I was in Singapore after the completion of the rail.

The Rail line

We finished up at Thanbyuzayat, a base camp for the railway. All around the camp were signs in English "work cheerfully". We were addressed then by the commander who was in charge of all the POW's working on the railway. What he told us did not impress us very much. Never the less he was the boss and there was very little we could do about it. We stayed in the camp for about two days and then were taken to Tanyin, we referred to it as the 35 kilo camp. That was around the end of October, 1942.

It was still the dry season. Our work was to carry dirt for the embankments. Every body had to carry around a cubic metre a day, probably had to walk 40 or 50 yards for it. The only way we could transport the dirt was in a cane basket that held 3 or 4 shovels full.

We had to dig it, put it in a basket then walk up the embankment, tip it, and go back. It wasn't too bad. The harder we worked the quicker we were able to knock off. Fortunately the Japanese officer at our first camp had been educated in England and he did not allow harsh punishment. We always looked on Tanyin as the best camp we had.

Korean guards

On the way to Burma we were advised, I'm not too sure how, that our guards would be Koreans. One chap, Albert Martin, who was in my section, had an Auntie that worked for the missionaries in Korea. He thought this was going to be good because his Auntie thought they were wonderful people. He was looking forward to getting away from the harsh Japanese treatment. However they were worse. They were under the control of the Japanese and this was the first time they had been allowed to have any authority what so ever.
We were at this camp for nearly six months, the longest we were at any camp. It was the dry season and the food wasn't too bad. As the line progressed we had to walk a fair way to work and then walk back again.

Our diet

We suffered from not having enough vegetables. Our diet was mainly rice. In Java we had a little bit of pork in the soup. Well the soup looked a little bit greasy so we assumed it was pork. The first disease that showed was pellagra. We lost the skin off our mouth and lips and also down below. It was very painful. In Java I did have kidney stone problems and I had one injection of morphine

In Burma the lack of vitamin B caused burning soles of the feet at night. It was all right when walking around but at night the burning pain was just unbearable. Many times you would see fellows standing on one foot trying to sleep. Unfortunately it got the better of a few of them and they gave up. Strangely enough, after we left that camp, I can not recall having it again or any body else complaining about it.

Another disease was wet beriberi. A bad case of wet beriberi was virtually the end because the body would retain all fluids and blow up to three times the normal size. The last thing the doctor would try to do was to extract some fluid by tapping the spine but I never heard of any success.

Tooth ache

At Tanyin we still had our own doctor, Captain Godding. At one stage I had a shocking tooth ache. I didn't know what to do so I went to him and he said I'll have to take it out. He told me there were no injections and the best thing I could do was to bring someone big and strong to hold me down.

Well I didn't know if he was pulling my leg or not but I fronted up the next day and I took a chap with me called Freddie Spicer. He was a survivor off the Perth. I had only met him a few days before. He was a very solid sort of a fellow, no taller than I, but much heavier and he was of the same rank. I'm not sure but I did believe that the doctor did rub something over my gum because Freddie didn't have to hang on to me that badly. I know I lost a tooth. I just don't recall having extreme pain or any thing like that. I know it was better out.

Rail line mate

But Fred and I kept together for most of the time until we got parted in Japan. The fellows taken prisoner after the sinking of the Perth were in a group with us known as Williams Force after our Colonel. We also had fellows off the Prince of Wales which was also sunk along with the battleship Repulse. The Prince of Wales had been looked upon as the unsinkable ship.

War strategy

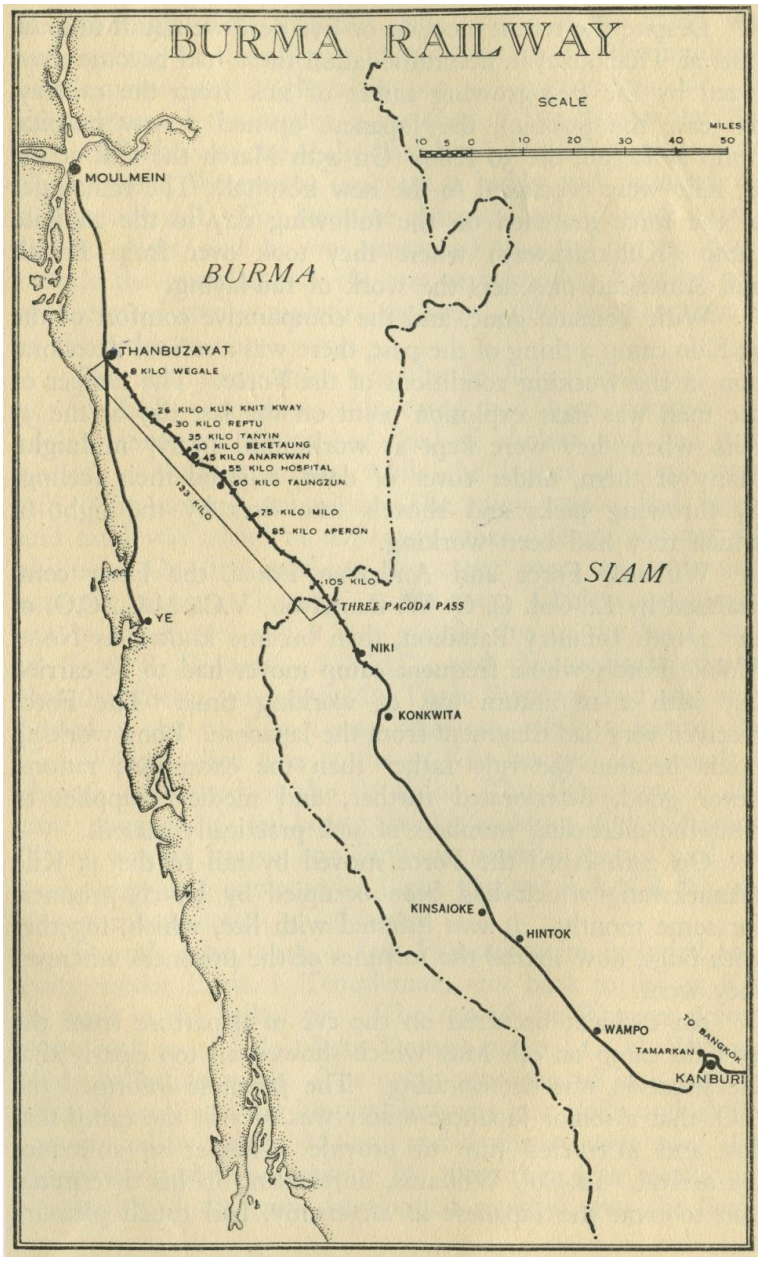
While we were at Tanyin the Japanese showed us the propaganda films that they had shown to their own people. The photography wasn't wonderful. There were two films, one was the bombing of Pearl Harbour, their theory, and also the sinking of the Prince of Wales and the Repulse.

From what I can gather from the fellows that were rescued it was suicidal. They were put into no win situation. The Japanese controlled the air and they controlled the sea and any one that tried to venture in was certain to be destroyed. A lot of the ships would have been better off if they had waited awhile and consolidated. The Perth and the Houston were sunk but it could have been quite a different story if the Prince of Wales and Repulse had been held back.

Close call

From the 35 kilo camp we moved onto the 45 kilo camp. There was one incident the night before we moved. We were kept out terribly late working and we hadn't had our evening meal. The Japs lit fires for us so as we could finish a job on the bridge. It was just about mid night when we were told we could finish. Some of the fellows, just in disgust, threw their shovels and picks into the fire.

We always had to take our tools back to a certain position in the camp and they were always checked off. When the shortage was noticed, the officers were called out in the middle of the night. It looked like there would be repercussions along the line. But nothing came of it and I don't know why. I just felt that the guards realised that they might have been in a difficult position and the matter wasn't taken any further.



Our group worked on the rail from the 35 kilo camp to the 131 kilocamp. Map copied from the Story of the 2/2nd Pioneer Battalion p.159. The 60 kilo camp was one of the worst.

Camp conditions

About April 1943 we moved to the 45 kilo camp. It had been a Dutch camp and we were confronted with our first contact with lice and other bugs. The remainder of the time we were in the jungle we never ever got rid of the lice. Sometimes the bugs weren't too bad.

The next camp was the 60 kilo camp which had been occupied by the Coolies. It was filthy, many had died and were sort of half buried. They had had a lot of cholera. We had to try and bury the bodies that were lying around.

Wet season and disease

The rain season had begun. The Japanese could not get food to us along the line because of the mud. Dysentery and malaria got worse. I'm not too sure when I first got malaria. Not until about

the 60 kilo camp. After that I got it after every 18 days. The shivering would last for two or three hours no matter what was done to keep warm.

A lot of people sat near or stood near fires with whatever they had - a rug or a blanket or a canvass. Their legs would get too hot from the fire and they would peel and get ulcers and that sort of thing. Then after the shivers there would be hot sweats. That lasted for about two or three hours and then back to normal but no appetite. This would normally go on for about three to four days in a row and then it would seem to pass. There would be about a fortnight's break before it would all happen again.

Rations reduced

During the wet season the rations got very light. Normally we had just plain rice. The only vegetable we had looked something like a white marrow that would be cut up and would be floating around in water. Earlier I said we did have some meat. The yaks would be slaughtered, sometimes brought up live. There was nothing wasted. The blood was used, set in rice and the really sick were allowed to eat that.

If the Japs, (we always referred to them as Japs) heard the word Japanese then someone was in for a bit of a bashing because they were nippons. Everything was nippon so naturally we called them the nips as well. They didn't seem to mind that so much but they were nipponese. They were very proud of the fact that they were going to liberate all south east asia from the terrible Dutch, the English and the French.

More propaganda

They did put out a paper, printed in Bangkok in English, and occasionally we got a copy that was passed on from camp to camp. The Japs did this themselves. It was their propaganda paper and from that we could guess or assume what was happening. They would say in certain instances that the Americans attacked certain islands and that the Japanese air force and navy absolutely annihilated the Americans and the islands were back in Japanese hands.

Then the next issue, about a month later, would state that the Japanese air force had bombed some islands and had completely wiped out the Americans. This meant of course that the Americans were occupying these particular islands. This was the only way we had of knowing what was going on.

One or two fellows did keep wireless sets. They had to be strictly hidden. It was just amazing what technicians with their varying training backgrounds could achieve and how they could make things work. But this had to be very secret. One or two were caught with sets at different camps and of course they paid the ultimate penalty.

Hope and faith

We were always interested in getting any news at all. We were always prepared to believe anything we heard because we were just hoping that eventually the war could come to an end. First of all we thought we would be prisoners for no more than six months, and then when the first Christmas came we were quite sure we wouldn't be there for the next Christmas. And when Christmas came of course we would be out by Easter. This went on and on. We only just hoped that something would happen.

Agreement

The morale among most fellows was reasonable under the circumstances. We had to sign an agreement with the Japanese early on in Java that we would not try to escape. Well this was hard to accept because it went against our instructions. By doing that we would probably be court martialled. But after a stand off and the officers being taken away and being severely tortured it was agreed that we would be signing under duress and therefore it would not be binding in relation to the military courts. So we all signed.
This gave the Japanese the right, they believed, to execute anybody that did try to escape.

Escape attempts

When we first got to Thanbyuzayat in Burma we had heard of different fellows who had tried to escape. None were successful and were all brought back and either shot or decapitated by sword. I could have escaped virtually every day I was in Burma. Often there were only imaginary lines around the area that we were allowed to be in. If we went outside that we were looked on as trying to escape.

We had a lot of escape plans of course. We talked amongst ourselves about what we could do and how we could do it if the opportunity ever arose. But we had the fast flowing Irrawaddy River to cross if we wanted to get through to India.

All the Burmese at that time were anti British because Britain had occupied that area for some time. There was a price put on our heads. And this was what so often did happen. Anyone escaping would be met by the Burmese and shown a place they could stay with the promise of a boat in the morning. Sometime during the night the Japanese would come in and they would make the arrest and of course that was the end of that. So we had to be very careful with our thinking and planning.

Taking ill

The climate was bearable during the dry season but during the wet season it would just rain and rain. We would become completely saturated. It was not terribly cold during the day but it got cold at night.

The rain would come straight down in bucketsfull as there was not a lot of wind. Things got terribly dirty and morale suffered. I went down with dysentery and malaria. I was put in a hut for the very sick and I got talking to the medical orderly, Les Miles.

I discovered that he came from Maryborough and he was fairly friendly with a cousin of mine. I don't know whether or not I got preferential treatment. The Japs had told him that three of the sick would be allowed to go to Thanbyuzayat to a hospital camp. But he said there were four that he thought should go. He came around the next morning and said I was one of the three. I don't know if I was in a coma at that stage, I think I was. I don't remember anything of the trip going back to Thanbyuzayat or how long it took. It was generally in an open railway truck.

Camp medical hut

Before going to the hospital camp I had four nights in the camp medical hut. We slept only two feet apart. Each morning I was there I discovered that the fellow on my right had died in the night. It seemed strange. When they were brought in they usually could still talk but they were unable to recover from the dehydration associated with dysentery. The thought crossed my mind as to how sick you had to be before you died.

It was so crowded in the medical hut that we slept feet to feet. I knew the fellow opposite me. He just sat there, ate very little and never got up to be washed. The orderlies eventually got him up and washed him somehow or other. There was a river close by. They brought him back, the next morning he was dead. All I could think of was a disease called cerebral malaria. It got to the brain. Some would be sitting talking to you and they would just fall over dead. Malnutrition made it worse.

Thanbyuzayat hospital

When I got to the hospital at Thanbyuzayat I found the rations to be a little more nutritional. Despite that, there was still a lot of dying there.

I had a watch that was given as a presentation by the family before I left Australia. I had hung onto this as a last resort. The Burmese brought the food to the camp and there was a well established black market. I decided I would sell my watch. I think I got four rupees for it. I'm not too sure. But the watch disappeared. I had to trust somebody to handle it, because it would pass through many hands before the money would come to me.

I eventually did get the money and I bought some peanut oil, some sugar and some salt. By doing this I was able to grind my rice into a dough, put a little sugar in it and use the oil to fry it. This produced a slightly different flavour that was more agreeable to the stomach. I did this for myself and also for a few other chaps who were very sick. It did seem to work.

The essentials of life

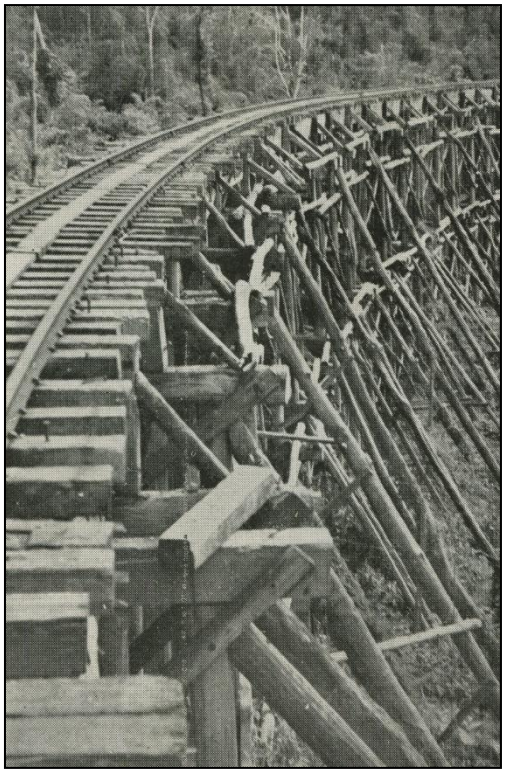
On the railway we were paid about say 15 cents a day, for the days worked. That was okay for a start. It was possible to buy a few extra things but inflation took hold. Where as a little bit of palm sugar about an average size of a block of chocolate was costing 10 cents, within about three to four months it was up to a dollar. Salt was virtually unprocurable. That was very important to us.

What we lacked most was salt, sugar and fats. They were the three things we really craved for. The perspiration that ran down over our face and into our mouth was just like plain water. There was no salt in it at all.

Thanbyuzayat must have agreed with me fairly well because I did make a fairly good recovery and I spent a fair amount of time helping a few other people who were very sick.

Unknown survivor

There was one chap I did help. I cooked his food so as he could eat, he just wasn't eating. Some time after the war my sister, who was working in Melbourne, was approached by a chap who had been looking at her for quite awhile trying to identify her. He asked her if she had a brother called Harry and was he a POW? And so forth. He said that when you see him tell him he saved my life. He was one of the chaps in Thanbyuzayat that I did try to help. He didn't belong to my unit. I didn't know his name. I wish now I had got to know him better.



Left: A bridge of the railway

Below: Kanburi Camp in Thailand. Showing huts in new condition that were similar to the camps along the rail line further north in Burma.

Photos from The Story of the 2/2nd Australian Pioneer Battalion.

First bombs

Thanbyuzayat was the headquarters of the railway with a stock pile of sleepers. While I was there the air raids started. The planes were bigger than what we had seen before. The bombs smashed a lot of the camp.

The second time they came round we were waiting for them. We were put into slit trenches where we could get down below ground level. I had had experience of bombing, so it wasn't terribly new to me but the secret was to look up and watch the bombs being dropped.

If you could see them dropping, well, you were safe. If you couldn't see them moving, or you thought the bomb was just a dot in the sky and it didn't look like it was dropping, then you knew it was coming straight for you. You had to quickly move as far and as fast as you could. This tactic was fairly successful.

Surviving a bombing raid

If the bombs looked as if they were flying on, well, they were going to go over your head. If it looked as though they were dropping then they weren't going to reach you. So you had to read the position of the bombs to identify a safe position. The main thing was to crouch down as low as possible.
The trench only needed to be 2 to 3 ft deep but it was terribly important not to put your head hard against the wall. You had to lay as low as you possibly could but you had to leave 2 to3 inches between the head and the wall otherwise when a bomb landed the vibration would break your neck. This happened to one or two people.

Then you had to check for shrapnel because it was generally hot and would burn. On one occasion I had to pull shrapnel off a fellow laying next to me but I had got out of it scot-free.

Journey back

Eventually I had to leave Thanbyuzayat and return to the work parties on the railway. On the night going back I was put in a closed steel carriage with quite a few Burmese and a few other nationalities. In fact I was a bit scared. I didn't know if they would just tip me out at the appropriate time or not. I was on my own. I was completely out numbered and I was glad when that night passed because they didn't look very good types.

Harsh treatment

Local Burmese and natives of Malaya, Java and Borneo were also required to work on the railway. I don't know why they never tried to escape as they had been promised wonderful conditions, high wages and plenty of food. There would be hundreds of thousands living in the camps and working on the line and many thousands died.

They did not have very much discipline amongst themselves and their health standards were very poor. They had a tremendous number of deaths. The Japanese treated them very harshly.

On one occasion during the wet season, we had worked all day and our mid-day meal had not arrived. It eventually came at about 8 or 9 o'clock with the evening meal which was also late by that stage. The first lot must have been on the line for about two days because it was absolutely putrid.

We ate the rice from the second lot of buckets. It was right next to one of the native camps and a dozen or so made their way down and started to eat the sour rice from the first lot of buckets. It was nearly rotten actually. We would have eaten it if we didn't have the other.

Anyhow as they were helping themselves to the free rice, the Korean guards saw them. They just took to them with their rifles and belted them up the line. It was one of the most pitiful things I had seen.

Not fit to eat?

We had been brought up to revolt against anything that was sour and anything that was putrid. It was natural to want to vomit if anything nasty was swallowed. Well we had to train ourselves to do the absolute opposite. It didn't matter how stinky it might have been or how rotten it was, the possibility that there might be some vitamins forced us to eat that sort of food. Musty rice was pretty common. We ate the weevils or grubs in the rice for the nutritional value.

Vegetables were scarce. There was very little meat because it was impossible to get the cattle up to where we were working. It would have had to come up slaughtered and by the time it had got there it would have gone rotten and become a sort of a jelly. Often the medical officers said it was too dangerous to use. Anthrax was a fairly bad disease among cattle. It could be passed on to humans but sometimes we had to take the risk.

Stop over

The journey back to the camp might have taken two days, it was either the 90 km camp or 105 camp. I'm not too sure which one it was. On the way back we spent one night at the 75 km camp.

I had a look around. There was mainly the sick left at this camp. I came across Bert O'Donnell. He was in my section. I always tried to find, as best I could, fellows that were closest to me in the army.

Fortunately I was able to find Bert but unfortunately he was very sick and all he wanted was some salt. I was carrying a little salt with me so I was able to give him some salt. I had a few words with him but he died a week or fortnight later.

When people say something is not worth a pinch of salt I think of Bert. It was gold to him.

Morale

When I rejoined the unit, morale was at the lowest it had ever been. Everybody was getting very edgy, becoming very difficult to get on with. It did appear that everybody would finish up dying on the line.

Our only wish was that somebody would survive to let our families know what had happened to us. The guards were getting more severe in their treatment. It had us very concerned. We were working all hours, sometimes we would be out for 24 hours, sometimes only 12.

Guards and personalities

We had names for all the guards. The Boy Bastard was one, the Bull, and Baby Face were others. Another, Christian George, wasn't too bad. He could speak fairly good English. He said he was a Christian and he was probably one of the better ones. We used to find out as much as we could. All you had to do was to tell them how good the Nips were and he would go on and tell you what they were doing in the war and so forth.

We had to kid to them to find anything out. The Bull was a big Korean, about 6ft 2 in. He was really causing lots of problems, bashing everybody for no reason at all. A group of us got together and we decided we would have to do something about it.

Revenge

It was our job when the guard's food arrived to place it in a particular spot near their hut. The plan was for one of us to keep guard and another to carry a little bit of mucus from the latrines from a fellow who was bad with dysentery or might have had a touch of cholera. The guards like us had dixies and the dixies all had names on them. We found out which dixie belonged to the Bull. We managed to get a little bit of mucus on his rice and it was only 3 or 4 days later that he was missing.

He was away for about 2 or 3 months. When he came back he had lost about 4 or 5 stone and he was much easier to get on with. He stopped a little bit of his bullying. Frankenstein was another guard. He seemed to take the place of the Bull. He was fairly dark. We had ideas of getting rid of him but luckily the opportunity didn't arise. I was pleased the plan fell through because we could have been worse off.

Medical supplies

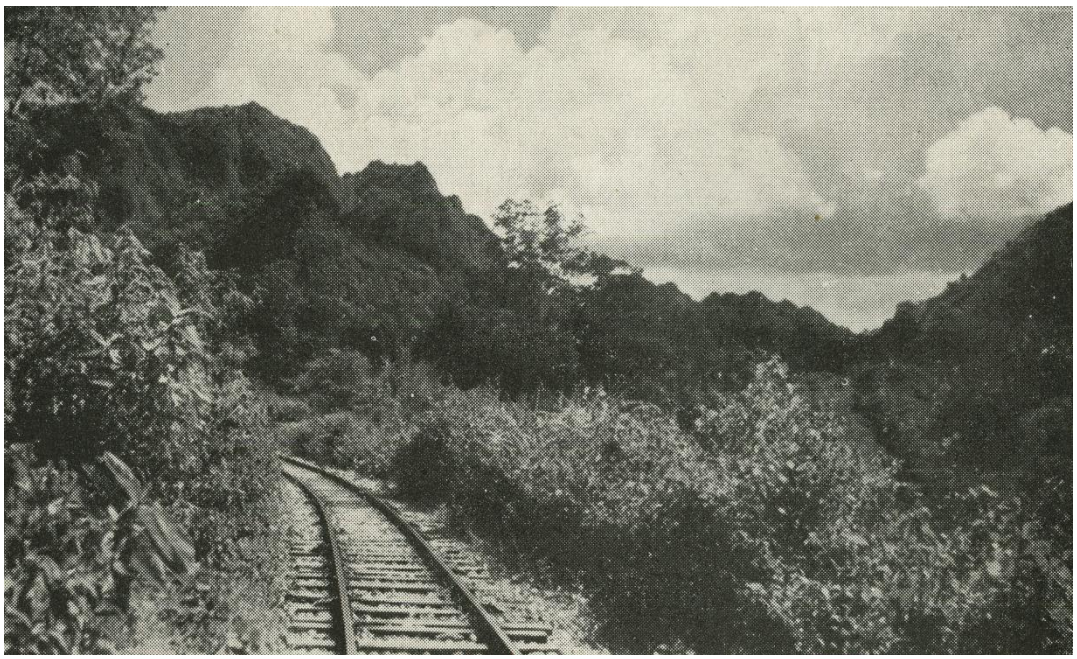
We were working on the Burma side of the railway. The same operation was also taking place in Thailand. I think their conditions were worse. They had far more dysentery and I think we were better off for food as bad as it was. Of course we had no medical supplies. Occasionally the

natives did smuggle in a few drugs. It had to be done very secretly. There was some outside contact being made.

Before I was taken back to Thanbyuzayat to the hospital I was helped by Les Miles, a medical orderly, who I mentioned before. He gave me half a teaspoon full of something. I didn't know what it was. It was dark. It could have been heroin or opium. He told me to take it and that would see me through the night. Well I did take it and I sort of went into a twilight sleep. I didn't have a worry. I didn't have an ache or a pain. I seemed to be on a complete high as weak as I was. I can see now the dangers in getting on to drugs.

Two lines meet

It was in October, 1943, when the Thai and the Burma lines were joined.



Railway line near Niki in Thailand. The Burma-Thailand rail crossed the border at Three Pagodas Pass, near the 113 kilo peg. Williams Force was at the 131 kilo camp when the lines were joined on the 25th October 1943 at the 145 kilo mark. From The Story of the 2/2nd Australian Pioneer Battalion. P. 166.

Prisoner of War Part 2

From Burma to Japan

December 1943 to December 1944

After the two lines were joined we did have a few days off. Then about December 1943 we were inspected by the Japanese medical officers to see who was fit enough to be part of a working party to go to Japan.

Timber Cutting

We were taken to the105 kilo camp where we cut wood for the steam locomotives. The axes weren't too bad, the food was a little better, and the guards weren't so severe. We had to cut a quota of wood. It was beautiful timber - teak. I don't know what the greenies would say today but the trees were up to 40ft high.

We cut the straightest and the best. I think we had to cut it into 2 or 3ft lengths, and packed it into heaps. This went on for a couple of months. Then in March, 1944, we got another medical inspection, and we were vaccinated a second time for small pox. We were given needles by the Japanese two or three times, mainly vaccinations.

Better times?

I was of the opinion we should volunteer to go to Japan as it was likely that conditions there would be better and there was the possibility of improved medical services. If we were to stay in the jungle there didn't appear to be any hope for us. Malaria and that sort of thing would beat us in the end.

Following this inspection a group of us were moved to Tamarkan, in Thailand. There we met some of our fellow prisoners who had been treated at the hospital for two or three months. The stories they had to tell us were mouth watering. They had meat, they had onions, they had vegetables. They had put on weight, in fact, I could hardly recognise them. Some had put on 3 or 4 stone but they said that the food was starting to taper off.

Promised benefit

We were promised while working on the rail line that we would have plenty of food once the rail line was finished. How could we take any notice of what they were telling us? But this was one instance where they did keep their word. Those who were fortunate enough to get out of the jungle really did benefit by it.

But they did have their problems later on when they were very severely bombed. There were a lot of casualties. I only stayed at Tamarkan for two nights.

Peninsular crossing

We travelled by truck or train, I'm not sure, then we were put on to a small boat. The river trip took about 24 hours and was quite pleasant, very scenic actually. It was the first time I had taken much notice of the scenery.

Saigon wharves

We finished up at Saigon and were put into a camp not very far from the wharves. There from time to time we loaded stores on to boats whether it was at night or day. Rice was put in full size wheat bags. We found that terribly heavy to lift. But the guards were not so severe providing you did the right thing.

By this time we had learnt a fair amount of Japanese. Or they could understand us and we could understand them a little better. Occasionally we were made to help build big embankments which the Japanese used to synchronise the guns on their aeroplanes.

Tricks of the trade

We were being paid about 15 cents a day. As well we could top up by trading behind the guards' back. We would keep a guard talking, mainly by telling him what a good bloke he was. This would allow someone to sell or trade something with the Vietnamese.

The Indo Chinese were always ready to trade anything we could pick up. Cloth was terribly scarce, and clothing was as scarce as food. All we had by that time was probably a G string which was what we wore in the jungle. We probably always had one bit of a blanket we carried with us or a piece of tarp to lie on. Anything at all that we could find.

Shopping in Saigon

The Japanese stores were kept in Indian tents around the aerodrome. It was amazing to see how many there were. These tents had three linings. A white inner lining, a brown or a camouflage coloured outside lining and a blue inside lining that was made of pretty good material.

Freddy Spicer who had been with me since the early days on the rail line took a liking to this material. I had to keep the guard occupied while he went into the tent and cut a big lump of blue out of the inside lining and then wrapped it around himself. He was wearing a pair of shorts that he had previously made and they were pulled up to hide the blue material. He had to keep the material hidden for the rest of the day until we got back to the camp.

He was fairly handy and he would turn this bit of blue material into a pair of shorts. The next day he would put them under another pair of shorts and go to work. During the lunch break he would take them off and he would negotiate a sale with the locals using sign language.

He would point to the shorts and put up five fingers. That meant he wanted five dollars, we will call them dollars. There was a lot of arguing and eventually they would agree. The shorts would be put down at a particular spot and the money likewise. Then he would walk to the spot and pick up the money.

Fred was pretty good at that. He did it twice. I was not game enough or silly enough to try it. But we would take the money back to camp and we were able to buy eggs and bananas. The eggs were very old. The food was sub standard but it certainly supplemented our diet.

Malaria attack

Saigon was very humid and hot. I had a very bad attack of malaria there, one of the worst attacks I'd experienced.

The extra money coming into the camp was noticed by the guards. We all got lined up one day because everybody was on the same racket. There had been, say, $1000 paid out in wages and about $2000 had gone through the canteen.

So this caused quite an uproar and they realised trading was going on. There was a complete search of the camp, but nothing was found. After that we were a little more careful about how we went about scrounging for things.

Turning a blind eye?

However there was one interesting oversight by the Japanese. We were always searched when we came back to camp. Rice was taken out to the work party in a bucket. If we happened to be working at a site where there was a sugar supply it was possible to do a deal. When we got back to camp we would be searched. As this was happening we would pass the bucket with the sugar from one to the other in between ranks and so forth. I don't know why they never caught us out.

Back to Singapore

We were kept in Saigon till about June or July, 1944. It was too dangerous for the ships to leave the harbour because they were likely to be sunk. We were told we would be transported to Singapore. Well we did the reverse trip on the boat, again quite a nice trip, taking about 24 hours. Then I think it was another short train trip and then we were put on the line from Bangkok to Singapore. That took five days and five nights.

We were in ordinary steel trucks that were covered, around 32 to a truck. There was no room to move and it was very hot.
The trucks had previously carried hides and the floor was completely covered with maggots. We had to brush them out as best we could. We were unable to wash.

Taking a shower

The train would stop for meals twice a day and we were let out for toilet breaks.

Occasionally when the engine pulled up for water somebody would jump out and turn on a tap but generally we were chased back by the guards. We got away with it if we were quick enough but those who were slow were in for a pretty good bashing.

Guards in Singapore

When we got to Singapore we were taken back to the old British barracks at Changi. For some reason or other one of the chaps went out of bounds and had managed to sneak back. We were all lined up by the Indian guards and it was reported that one of us had strayed over in to the wrong area and we were all to stand there until such time as that person came forward.

Eventually one fellow stepped out. I didn't know his name. He was taken away and handed over to the guards and when he came back we could hardly recognise him. I had

differing opinions of the Indians. They do vary considerably. I can quite understand why they sometimes had problems getting along with each other.

Water front

In Singapore we worked on the wharves. We loaded sugar, rice, ingots of tin and lots of machinery. Many nationalities worked in different parts of Singapore. The Tamil Indians were another group. They kept more or less to themselves. They had to work.

Lucky escape

Eventually we were told we had to go to Japan. First we had to load the boat that we were to travel on. It was a reasonable sort of boat. We did load a lot of tin ingots on it. About 3000 prisoners were to go on this particular boat. I was in number 39 kumi, the Japanese word for company, and some of us were separated from other members of our battalion. Fortunately for me as it turned out our kumi was sent back to the camp as more British prisoners than expected had boarded.

In September on the way to Japan that boat was sunk and only six of our battalion survived along with some British and American prisoners. There were very few survivors. They were picked up 4-5 days later by the very US submarine that had torpedoed them.

Dry docks

Having been sent back to the camp we were taken to a little island off Singapore. It was a very small island and we had to travel by landing barge back to Singapore each day or night, depending on the shift. The Japanese were going to extend the docks and we had to dig out the dry dock.

Guards were stationed only at the landing. While we were on the island we were more or less free to roam around. The craft came and departed; thatched huts on the island were quite reasonable.

A lighter moment

The work on the dry docks wasn't too bad. There were lots of incidents. We had to fill small railway trucks each holding about a cubic metre with dirt. About six of these trucks were hooked onto a little steam engine that would pull them up a steep temporary line to the top of the open cutting.

One night a Jap driver who had had a bit too much to drink stopped the train near the top and then took off all of a sudden. The cable broke and the trucks rolled back with a rush, sparks flying everywhere. We were down in the bottom, 20ft to 40 ft or so, and got out of the way by running up the side. As nobody got hurt we had quite a laugh. Whatever happened to the poor old Jap in charge I do not know, he certainly was never back again.

Good and bad

The time I spent in Singapore was marked by several events.
I got my first mail from home as a POW. I got two letters and they were about 18 months old.

The only time I ever had food poisoning was in Singapore. About half the camp went down. It was a horrible experience and we thought we were going to die - vomiting and diarrhoea and shocking pains. It took about 5 or 6 hours to work off.

For a start we were given a little salt water to force us to vomit but I'm sure anyone who was really sick had nothing to vomit. They did have some medicine that was supposed to help settle the stomach. Only two of about three or four hundred died from that episode. It wasn't too bad in that regard.

One of the chaps working on the wharf got out of line a little and pinched a pack of cigarettes from of big bag that, I guess, was to go to the Japanese army. We still had Korean guards in charge and also the Japanese navy guards.

The Japanese and the Koreans often had a shouting match with each other. We couldn't understand what they were saying but obviously they had no time for one another. The Korean guard caught our chap pinching the cigarettes. I did see the incident and I thought he was in for a bashing.

Instead he was called over and the guard said: "Okay, you go back and get a packet for me." He kept a look out so as he wouldn't be caught by the Japanese naval guard. It made us wonder what was going on.

Christmas Day, 1944

It was the 24th December, 1944, when we were taken down to the wharves and put on a boat. We spent Christmas Day sitting out on the Singapore Harbour. The boat was tied up, waiting I suppose, for a convoy to be put together.

We did have a minister, I'm not too sure if he was Catholic or Anglican, but word got around that he would have a communion service on the ship aft and anyone interested could go along. Well I suppose about a dozen or so of us went. I hadn't been confirmed but he said that wouldn't matter. We had weak tea for the wine. I'm not too sure what we had for the bread. It may have been make believe.

The church service seemed to have a lot of meaning because the Japs had told us that the previous boat had been sunk three months earlier. By this time the Japanese lines of communication had been virtually cut by allied forces. We were the only boat that was carrying any cargo. There were about four or five old gun boats as escort boats about a kilometre away all around us.

We expected to be bombed or torpedoed at any time. It was an old coal ship and we were put right down on the steel bottom. There was no seating. Whenever there was a raid they would place battens over the hulls so there was no hope of anybody getting out. Had we been hit, the hulls would have filled with water within a few minutes.

Occasionally we were allowed to go up top to the toilets, they were just boxes put over the side of the ship. Whenever anyone had to go, they would try to work out our direction. It did appear we kept very close to land all the way. Often we could see land and when we reached the China Sea or the Yellow Sea we noticed it was really yellow.

Better intelligence

A number of times we were battened down and the depth charges could be heard and we could feel the vibration from the depth charges. Eventually we got to the southern island of Japan called Kyushu. I'm not sure if we landed at Nagasaki or not. I don't think so. It was just a small wharf a little further north.

I'm of the opinion that the survivors who were picked up after being sunk in September may have helped. The American intelligence was possibly better and more active. I wouldn't have been surprised if they knew we were on the ship because we were about the only ones to get through without being bombed.

Prisoner of War Part 3

Coal mine in Japan

1945

When we got to Japan it was snowing. We were taken into camps near the coal mines right on the sea. The first two days they showed us around the top, what we called the surface.

They explained all the things that we would be doing and what everything was called. By this time we could understand a fair amount of the Japanese language and we had to learn what the name was for a pick, jackhammer, explosives, trucks and also, of course, we had to learn the Japanese drill.

All movement had to be done with regards to the Japanese drill. The only thing I liked about it was the about turn method, it was better than ours. It was absolutely essential that we picked up on our Japanese because when we got down the mine only Japanese was spoken.

Pecking order

In Japan a big change came over the formation of POW's. Back in the jungle, from the time we were taken prisoners our officers were always in charge. They were in charge of us, and the Japanese were in charge of them and the rest of us as well.

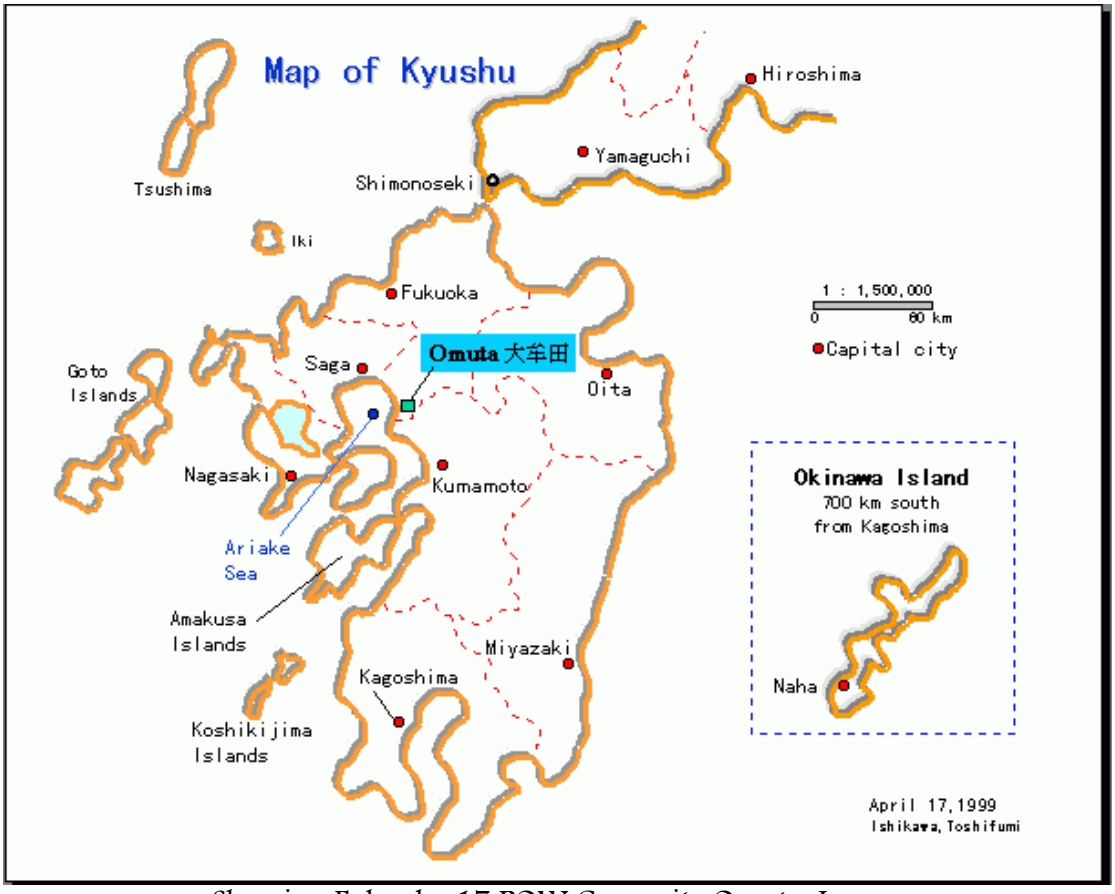
Therefore we were kept together as a unit as much as possible. But in Japan it was down to the individual. The hut I was put in held between 40 or 60 people including a Sergeant Major so I was not senior. But somebody had to be put in charge to be answerable to the Japanese officers. I don't know how I got the job. But it meant I had to improve my Japanese because they were hard enough to understand when they were calm and quiet but when they got into a rage it was practically impossible.

Work gangs

On the first day down the mine we were put into groups. My particular gang was called the extraction. We took the coal out. The preparation gang moved all the conveyor belts over ready for the next shift. Extraction were supposed to be the best fed. We did get an additional bun. It was the size of a yeast bun, quite good actually, something to look forward to. But we had to shift a fair amount of coal to earn it. After three months that small privilege was stopped.

We had a guard for each group of four. First we had to drill holes for blasting. Then after the blast we had to shovel the coal on to the conveyor belt. It wasn't so bad for me as I had had experience with a shovel.

Map copied from http://myweb.cableone.net/lv/fukuoka/images/kyushu.gif



Showing Fukuoka 17 POW Camp site Omuta, Japan.

From Mansell pow web page:
"16 Jan 1945: approximately 191 Australians arrive aboard Awa Maru"
From Harry: a rusty old tub that should have been scrapped
– see The Burma Railway, Hellships & Coalmines - Tony Carter & Neil MacPherson

Pictures copies from:
http://mansell.com/pow_resources/camplist/fukuoka/Fuku_17/fukuoka17.html

Koreans in the mines.

Loading chutes: A bun was a bonus if you filled the quota.

Timbering

Some of the prisoners had problems with the timbering and those who did not understand it got knocked about really badly. Timbering was installing the big timber in the mine. It was put in once an area had been cleared out with the shovel. Posts were about 6ft - 8ft high. A beam was put across the top. Posts had to lean in a little and the beam had to be jammed up against the ceiling.

The coal face was normally around the same height. Generally a band of rock ran through the middle of the coal face about 6in to 8in wide. It looked like bluestone and this had to be broken. First a jack hammer operated by compressed air was used to put a hole in the coal about 6ft deep. Then gelignite would be put in and be detonated straight away.

We had to go back a little but as soon as the explosion was over we were required to go straight back in. The whole area would be completely covered with dust and fumes. It was very hard to breathe.

Dangers

The air in the mine was always bad. We felt sleepy as soon as we got down because of the air. It was a really old mine. We were more or less taking out the corners that were holding up the mine. On one occasion the power was cut. Everything was in blackness and we couldn't do anything. While we were sitting and waiting in the darkness we could hear all the timber creaking and cracking.

The pressure on the timber poles was tremendous. A month after putting in a 6ft opening it would be down to 3ft. Water in the mine was a major problem as well. Often we had to work in water or cross water to get to where we were working.

Electric short

At one particular site in the mine the opening was very small. We had to nearly crawl for a start and the bar above carried the electricity. If it was touched it would have produced a nasty shock. The jack hammers were also live with electricity and were difficult to operate because of the current going through.

At one time I went to get some timber. The poles were about 8 feet long and 9 to10 inches through; I found three Koreans lying face down in the water. They must have been standing in the water and touched something. I had to make a very quick decision as to whether I would try to roll them out or whether I'd duck back into the burrow. I looked both ways and as there was nobody there I went back without the timber. A bit later on there were people running around everywhere and the power was cut off, and I think the short was fixed up. It was quite dangerous.

Cave-in

On another day we were about to enter the mine. The preparation gang had moved all the conveyor belts and motors into position and just as we were about to go down a great cloud of dust came out the opening as the whole ceiling had crashed down.

There was one Japanese who I thought was about 10 or 12 seconds ahead of me and I thought he was gone. Strangely enough he turned up behind me and I don't why

but for some reason or other I was pleased to see him. He wasn't anybody special or anything but that was what I felt on the spur of the moment. He had worked with us I suppose for so long. Had we been 15 to 30 seconds earlier we would have all gone for sure.

Leg injury

Sometimes a dome would appear in the ceiling, we used to call them niggers. These would be tapped and if they were found to be loose they were likely to break away. They weighed about half a tonne or more. On one occasion we had to work under one of these domes. Unexpectedly it did fall and broke into lots of pieces. My leg was covered and cut fairly badly around the knee. I never reported it because morale was very low at that stage.

I also wanted to stay with my work gang. I had seen what was going on in the other groups. The guard in charge, to the best of my knowledge, hadn't hit me nor the other members of my group. He was a big bloke but I think he understood the position we were in. I thought it would be far better to work with a sore leg than to be hit over the head with a shovel or stick by one of the other guards.

Another malaria attack

Prior to the accident the malaria had returned, the only bad malaria attack I had in Japan. Conditions on the surface were very cold but down the mine it was very hot. I did work on during the malaria attack but I got a terrible pain in the chest. It wasn't so bad shovelling unless the shovel hit a bit of a ridge causing a jar that would feel like my chest was splitting in half. I was just about getting over that when the rock fell. I had a tight bandage put on the leg at the camp. Working and walking around caused it to swell and the more it swelled the tighter the bandage got. So one or two of the fellows said I was mad if I didn't report the injury to the superintendent at the mine.

Injury report

Food was short in Japan and rice rations were strict. So many grams of rice were issued for the sick and so many grams for the working. But for injured workers the rice ration wasn't reduced. This was only a quota issued to the whole camp. Everybody got the same but the camp quota was worked out according to the formula.

So I eventually went up to the superintendent and reported the injury. He didn't ask any questions, he just came out with this waddy and did me over left right and centre. He went berserk. I did not know what he was saying. The best I could do was to stay on my feet. It was most important not to fall down.

The day before I reported the injury, an American had put his foot under wheels and had some toes cut off. It was very depressing in the mine and the superintendent probably thought I had injured myself to get out of work.

Back at the camp I was put into hospital or what they called a hospital. I didn't have to go on parade. At that stage I couldn't walk.

Hold your tongue

The chap next to me came from the Riverina area. I think it was Deniliquin. He'd had his legs taken off well above the knee. In fact he virtually had no legs at all. He was only about 22 and I asked him about his injury.

He said that he was only new to the mines, he was on day shift and his mate was on afternoon shift. All he said to his mate was "don't work too hard." The Japanese who understood a little English had heard this. He was accused of trying to stir up trouble so he had to stand outside the guard house in the snow. Naturally he got frost bitten and they saved his life by taking off his legs. Despite his situation he was quite a happy sort of a chap.

Food trading

As I said before, in Japan you had to be an individual to survive. I got separated from Fred Spicer at the wharf. He was sent off to a copper mine and I went to a coal mine. The Americans had been at the mine for quite a long while and they had established a barter system in the mess hut. In the two years before our arrival food was fairly plentiful and they traded their food. They would say I'll give you rice today but I'll want your rice and soup next Thursday and this would go on and on. Or one or three cigarettes would buy a bowl of soup.

Going hungry

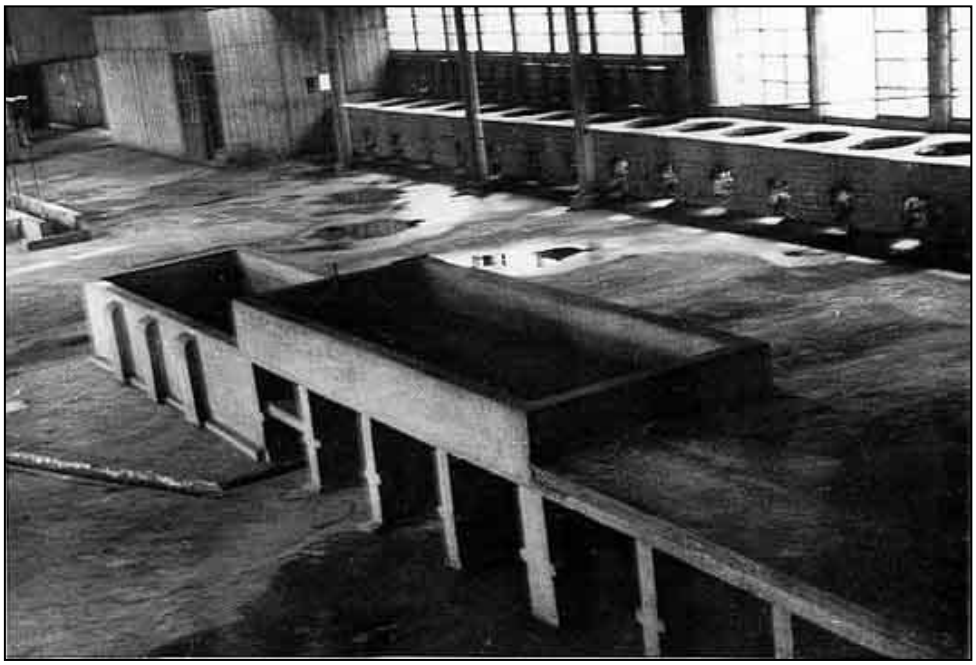
The soup was just a little of anything, sometimes a bit of whale meat, or radish or vegetable or a little dried fish. It was very poor but it was better than nothing. Bartering in the mess queue was the hum of the mess room, people trading their food today for more food in a week or fortnights time.

Sadly the hungry people would fall for this. Often when they came to pay up they were left without any food for themselves. Under their own rules these particular people were declared bankrupt. Apparently the Yanks had their own tribunal, and defaulters were disallowed from trading any further.

Occasionally we were given cigarettes and I traded them. We had no canteen and I don't think we got any money in Japan for working. Two cigarettes would buy a bowl of soup, or may be a bun from members of the work gangs on extraction. Sometimes it cost three cigarettes for a bun.

Pictures copied from:
http://www.mansell.com/pow_resources/camppics/fukuoka/fuku-17/fuku17-pics.html
Fukuoka # 17 Pow Camp.

View of Camp



Camp kitchen: Rice pots under the window.
Work table and water tanks in the centre.

Ways of thinking

I could never understand the thinking of the Americans who had been at the mines in Japan since their capture in Philippines compared to the Americans we had met in Java and on the rail line. They seemed foreign to us. They were complete pessimists whereas we were optimistic that things were being done. They had been at the mine all along whereas we had been about. All I could say was that it was the environment that made them think that way. I guess our experiences made us think another way. But we were two different groups.

Recovery

I don't know how long I was off work. It could have been two or three weeks and I just dreaded the thought of going back to the mine and starting off with a new gang. Sure enough I was put in a new gang, and I had a new boss. I started shovelling and after about five minutes I heard my name being called out. It was a number in Japanese and I had to answer to that. My number was being screamed out again and again- sen yon hyaku hachi juu go (1485).

My old boss had recognised me and had come down. There was a great conflab between my old and new boss and I thought they were going to come to blows. Anyhow I ended up going with the old boss. I knew his name quite well at the time, I've forgotten now. Over there you never called him Mr so and so. It was always something san like Mitsubishi san. San was Mr but it always followed the surname.

Like old times

I followed my old boss like a little puppy dog. He seemed to have a fair bit of faith in my understanding of timbering a mine. We had been trained in explosives and it was in our interest not to do too many silly things underground.

One time we were put in what they call a dead end. It was a tunnel driven into the coal before what was called a "long wall" was installed. This particular tunnel looked risky. He left us there with the jack hammers and told us roughly where we had to drill the holes and the distances between them.

I said to one of the gang that this was just no good, it was too dangerous. So we decided to drill a hole in quite a different direction. When the explosive was set the ceiling and everything came down and we were out of there. We moved on somewhere else. We certainly would have had a total collapse had we gone on and tried to establish a long wall in that location.

Bombing starts

About three months after we landed in Japan, the bombing started. By about June – July it was very intensive. They would come over at night time and drop incendiary bombs to light the whole place up and then they would come in and drop their bigger bombs.

The bombing raids demolished a lot of the huts in the camp. In the camp we did have air-raid shelters of a kind, at least they were below ground level. It was better to be working night shift because we seldom saw the planes of a day time. At least we could sleep. But it got very demoralising trying to sleep sitting up in a slit trench at night after having worked the day shift. We knew it would take a miracle if we were going to survive.

Meat in the diet

Food was very scarce, and the rations were insufficient to sustain our weight for the amount or work we were doing. The Japanese themselves were on a very strict ration.

The mine operated around the clock with 3 shifts of 8 hours. But it took about 12 hours to do an eight hour shift by the time we got paraded. We were inspected many times before we left the camp, and again at the mine. The same thing happened after the end of the shift.

As we were going to work one afternoon we noticed six cats with their heads left on that had been gutted and were being carried on a pole by two people to the mess hut. The whispers went around about what was on for tea that night. The talk down the mine was whether we would have the soup or not. I'm quite sure nobody knocked it back. The little bit of meat we got in the soup had a very sweet taste.

Occasionally we would get a fish head, it was a bit of salted fish really. It would stink to high heaven but the salt gave it value.

Hungry as:

For one particular meal I had a fish head, it was my meat issue for the day, but it was not much more than one and half inches across. I chewed it and chewed it and sucked out all the salt I possibly could. I wasn't game to swallow the bones so I took it out of my mouth and just put it to the side of my dixie to drop it in the rubbish bin on the way out. But an American came by just grabbed it, shoved it in to his mouth and swallowed it - that's how hungry we were. Hunger was something that was just unbelievable. It seemed we had no vitamins or minerals in our bodies.

When we arrived in Japan we were issued with very cheap boots for the work in the mines but they had worn out. I saw yet another American use his toes to pick up a piece of orange peel out of the gutter, put it in his hand and flop it into his mouth without breaking a step.

Down the mine we tried to take our mind off hunger if it was possible. I used to chew pitch. It was a bit like chewing gum or coal that hadn't gone hard. You never got rid of it but you could chew it.

Having a bath

The coal dust got into our skin and we looked very black. We used to be allowed a communal bath holding about 10 to 20 people. In fact the Japanese made it compulsory, but without soap we could never get clean. We were so black the whites of the eyes were showing.

Discipline was very strict, more so in Japan than any where else. If we were wearing a hat we had to salute when we met a guard otherwise we had to bow. We had to spring to attention, give the attention salute, stand at ease in Japanese military fashion whenever a guard entered our hut.

Punishment

The camp commander would have been the equivalent of a major in our rank. He was not a nice type and he finished up being executed following the war trials. Any penalty imposed generally included a bashing up at the guard house.

Offending prisoners would be stood up against the pillar at the gate, head leading forward and they would receive a smash to the buttocks with a big pole. They

would drop down but would then have to get up again. This never happened to me but it was just absolutely demoralising to see it happening to other people.

Drawing the short straw

Some of us close to starvation would try anything. The camp commander had a horse and a couple of the fellows went down to the stalls looking for oats that had been blown out from the feed trough where the horse was feeding or oats in the horse manure.

They were caught and they were harshly treated. They were paraded in front of us absolutely naked. All they had across their chests was just a note "we are thieves" and they had to stand on a platform while we went into the mess to get our rice ration. We passed the word not to take any notice, not to look at them because we would be helping the Japs if we did. They just stood there but nobody looked at them. We all just felt very sorry for them.

Waiting for the war to end

At different times during the three and half years I was a POW, the Japanese made it quite clear that either they would win the war or we would never be released. Even Christian George, a guard on the rail line, would tell us this. So when the bombing got heavier and heavier we knew that something would have to happen if we were to survive.

On one occasion we saw a lot of red colour in the sky. We thought the planes must have been busy that night because it looked like a mallee dust storm covering a large area. I dare say now it was the bomb that was dropped on Nagasaki; the second atomic bomb to be dropped on Japan.

Early on air raid warnings would sound and then there was quite a while before the planes dropped their bombs. But we noticed that the time was getting shorter and shorter. In fact one day when we were going to work a plane strafed us, it must have been a reconnaissance plane, it came right down, it seemed to be only 50ft to 100ft above us and flew off.

Good sign

After the plane had gone the sirens went so we knew then that things were not all that bright as far as the Japanese were concerned. The day before we were told the war was over we had quite a fair amount of suspicion. I had been on day shift and we were just going up as the afternoon shift was coming down in to the mine. They normally came down in the trucks and we were taken back up. However we were all told that we had to go up together because there was to be no work. Well that caused a lot of speculation. It was supposed that some people who worked on the surface had heard the war was over.

Rumour and speculations

Nobody believed anything at that stage. We got back to the camp and being in charge of the hut I was told to go up to the guard house as were other hut leaders. I was given six Red Cross food parcels to hand out. This caused much speculation.

Somebody said there had been a landing in Japan and we were all going to be taken under ground. Don't eat anything whatever you do, keep it, that was the word.

Others said we would be moved and we would not be released. So many stories did the rounds. Everybody had the good oil. I think everybody was hoping the war was finished but nobody was prepared to let themselves be disappointed again to think it was over but only to find out that it wasn't.

We knew that there would be one good indication that night if the lights stayed on and there was no air raid. We would reckon that there was a good chance that the war was over

Handing out Red Cross Parcels

The six Red Cross parcels had to be divided among the members of the hut. That meant one parcel had to do 10 men for a hut with sixty. I divided them all up and gave them a parcel each. There was a lot of advice as to how it should be divided.

I allocated one man to each parcel and he had to divide it into six or eight or ten ways depending on the number in the group. He would let everyone else take their pick and he would take the last. I would always used that system. Anyone who was outspoken or who claimed to know what to do could go ahead and do it but they had to have the last pick. I found things were always divided up evenly using this system.

Rules on smoking

Another indication that the war was over was with regard to smoking. To be found smoking near your bed would mean nearly certain death. You would get taken up to the guard house and be put through a severe beating.

Those that wanted to smoke could do so in the alley way. There had to be a dish of sand there and the butts had to be put into the sand which did make a bit of sense.

With all the excitement and getting American cigarettes in the food parcels, the fellows were relaxing on the matting and smoking near their beds. When the officer, who was second in charge, came to the hut everybody jumped up and said "kiwotsuki" attention salute and so forth. He said no, waved his hand and then said sit where you are.

Well we knew then something was going on because he would have been ropable otherwise.

False alarm

It was only just dark and the lights first went dim and we thought there was an air raid. Again the lights dimmed and everybody felt like dieing. But it only went dim for about 10-15 seconds and then there was full power again. So nobody slept that night. They all talked and talked, everything was looking brighter all the time.

Saving face

The next morning the Japanese announced a three-day lantern day, three days of mourning for the dead. There would be no work. Once again many stories did the

rounds. But we were paraded in a day or so up on the main parade ground and the camp commander got up on a stage and told us we were all to be returned to our native lands and wished us well and so forth.

Feelings of relief

We were standing on the same spot where we were to be shot should there be an allied landing in Japan.

Parapets had been built for that purpose and we were told where we were to stand. So it was quite a relief to know that we would be released.

Taking over the guard post

Immediately we placed a guard in the guard house. The Japanese guards had left all their sentry boxes open so we were concerned that civilians might attack. It was quite funny in lots of ways. We would answer the phone and there would be a lot of jabbering in Japanese. We would just hang up the phone. I think I was only on duty for about two hours. I never got put back there again but it was a strange experience going from being guarded to being on guard.

Food drop

We had food supplies dropped to us by parachute. A lot got spilt and damaged. We got a lot of chocolate, bacon and additional rice. I stayed in Japan in that particular camp for about a month, and I never stopped eating. I could never find enough to eat. It didn't matter how much we were given we just ate and ate.

Impact of the bomb

We eventually left on a train. Instead of a steel box truck we were put in a proper passenger carriage. Instead of about 24 there was only four to a carriage and we travelled over night to Nagasaki. It was in Nagasaki where we saw all the damage done by the atomic bomb. It was quite interesting. I'll never forget how the strength of the explosion could be seen in the debris. Into the hills and mountains the destruction was less and right up on top of the mountains there were houses with the roofs only partly blown off. There seemed to be no building material scattered about, just dust.

Fumigation

The wharf at Nagasaki was taken over by the Americans. We got fumigated, deloused, and new clothes and we boarded an American air craft carrier. We got well looked after but they couldn't get us to leave the mess. We'd never ever had food like that. They had dumplings in syrup, white bread that we just kept eating and eating. We would be served two or three times and we wouldn't leave until the cooks had knocked off.

Hungry mouths

We arrived at Manilla, in the Philippines. We were probably in the Philippines for three or four days. Here again the Red Cross started to issue us with all sorts of things, food and other things we required. They worked very hard for us. I was a

little disappointed with the behaviour of some of the troops because I'm quite sure some people wouldn't have understood. They would come into the room with a dish of cakes and they would be swamped with hands reaching for them, virtually no manners at all.

Back home

1945-1946

From the Philippines we were put on another boat called the Speaker and it brought us to Australia. Again all we did was stand in the food queue, for breakfast and then for lunch. We just couldn't seem to get enough to eat. It was very crowded and the queue was long.

We got into Sydney around about the middle of October, 1945. We stayed over night in a military camp and then travelled by train to Melbourne the next day.

I guess we must have travelled overnight and a lot of the family met me at Spencer St Station. I got home at about 7 or 8 o'clock that night and they had a big meal ready. I had two or three bites and that was as much as I wanted. They wondered why I couldn't eat. They had forgotten I had been eating for a full two months without missing a meal in that time. I gained 64 pound from the time we were released in Japan. I was home.

Memories

I had the memories of the ordeal and the personalities I met. One fellow I'll never forget. He was an American Civil Engineer who worked in the Philippines before the war. I'm not too sure whether I met him in Saigon or whether it was on the Burma rail way. It wasn't in Japan.

But he was a gentleman through and through. He had never done anything more than push a pen all his life. He had a family in America and I very much doubted that he made it. He was a prisoner and treated as a soldier, one of the enemy.

Civilians I felt had a very hard time. They were not trained to make do in that environment. Their thinking was different. His name was Artie, and he came from Oklahoma. He used to tell me so much about that state. He probably was one of the best fellows I had anything to do with while I was a POW.

Tough Englishman

The hardiest fellow I ever met was a red haired English serviceman, army I think. After falling ill he developed a coma. For five days he laid there. I don't know why he wasn't taken to a sick bay. It may have been a camp where there was no sick bay.

We put a blanket over him to stop the flies getting near his eyes and mouth and that sort of thing. We would give him a bit of a push to check that he was still alive. After about the fifth or sixth day we found him standing up trying to tidy up where he had been lying.

I don't think he knew what he was doing. So it was just a miracle that he was walking around. Anyhow he went to bed and the next morning he was dead.

Australia had fewer casualties than other nations. Still we had one in three die. The native born had the worst death rate followed by the Dutch and then the British.

Lung condition

When we came back through Spencer Street Station we were given a leave pass for a week or so. Then we had to go back to be medically examined. I finished up having a scar on my lung. They called it tuberculosis at the time. I went into hospital and was x rayed. I suppose I was in hospital for two or three months. Eventually I got discharged and then I thought about the future.

What to do?

While we were POW's we talked about what we would do if we were released. That's when we weren't talking about food. Some thought they would qualify for a job in the postal department. Others would like to get a job on the railways or a job with the tramways and be a conductor. In the thirties they were the good jobs because your income was nearly always assured. But I discussed with other chaps what I would do. I always wanted to settle on the land.

At one stage we worked through the night on an old bridge installing railway sleepers. We held several torches that composed of a piece of hollow bamboo with some oil in it and a piece of burning hessian sticking out. We took turns with the hammer and drove the dogs into the railway sleepers.

This particular night we had run out of sleepers. We had been working a 24 hour shift. It was teaming with rain and all we did was lie down and got talking.

Working the land

Someone mentioned Wodonga and the land that would be opened up east of Albury that was very good dairy farming country. Another chap knew about land that he thought would be opened up in King Island. King Island was looked on as virtually undeveloped and he would go there after the war. I told them how much I liked Mildura and Red Cliffs. That discussion never left my mind.

I was discharged from the army at the end of January, 1946.

The move to Monak

1946-1947

I arranged that I would draw only 24 pence (20 cents) a day out of my army pay for personal needs. The rest was deposited in the bank. My mother took care of it for me and she never missed one banking all the time I was away. The promotion from private to corporal virtually doubled my pay, so I had a little money in the bank when I got back.

In early February, 1946, I went back up to Holdsworth's at Red Cliffs for the grape picking season which normally lasted about 6 to 8 weeks. Because of my lung condition I was given a job on the drying racks to avoid the dust under the vines, so I guess I got preferential treatment.

Growing vegetables

After picking I stayed in the district doing various work but there was nothing really permanent. I did have the opportunity with Wal Holdsworth to put in some vegetables at Lake Hawthorn. The first pea crop turned out fairly well. But then later on the water quality was poor and rabbits caused a lot of problems. It was obvious there was no future for me out there.

Looking over the river

I spoke to Wal one day about how I could get on to the land. We got in to the car one Sunday with the family and went over the river to New South Wales to Gol Gol, Trentham Cliffs and up to Monak. I was impressed with some of the land between Trentham Cliffs and Monak. I thought I could be quite interested in the land that was fairly close to the river. Not understanding the rules and regulations relating to acquiring water I never proceeded along that line.

Wal later introduced me to Roy Hollins who lived at Red Cliffs but had property at Monak. As he would drive past the Holdsworth property about the same time every morning Wal was able to flag him down and we were able to ask him about the procedure to get land over that way.

He replied that I was just the fellow he was looking for. There was leased land that he held over there that he did not want to go on with. He was thinking of getting a group of returned soldiers together to establish a settlement over there. But he was having difficulty in getting people interested because it was seen as long term and the finance available might not see them through.

Getting together

I was very much interested in his proposal. After a little more time and some negotiations we did get a team of five returned soldiers together and we decided to proceed. The first thing we had to do was to establish a recognised entity that we could use to borrow money and to get things moving.

Bonnie Cliffs Soldier Settlers

So the five of us formed a co-operative called the Bonnie Cliffs Soldier Settlers. It was the name and the entity we used for legal matters. We were equal partners and we had a legal agreement with each other.

The solicitor said he would draw up the agreement as if we were the worst of enemies and this would cover any situation that might arise. While we were getting on with one another the legal agreement would not be required. It was only when a dispute arose that it would be needed, he said.

Now after more than fifty years that legal document still remains. The name Bonnie Cliffs came from Bonnie Doon, the dairy, and Mallee Cliffs the adjacent sheep station. The area was later renamed Monak.

Co-op members

The other four returned soldiers came from different backgrounds. Jack Pollock worked for the Mildura City Council as a draughtsman. Don Duncan was from a Red Cliffs fruit block. Reg Keens was from a fruit property at Merbein. He later transferred his allotment to Noel Keens, his brother. The fourth member was Ken Keays who worked at Roy Hollin's property. He was probably the most junior in relation to working on the land but he fitted in very well.

Getting started

Resources to develop property were very scarce after the war. There were no vehicles, no materials and progress was necessarily slow. Jack Pollock did a lot of the legal work and ordered all the pipelines and pumps and motors we required.

We all had virgin ground. It had to be fenced to protect against rabbits and cleared. We had one tractor between the five of us and we did have a bull dozer for one week to pull out or knock over most of the bigger trees. That was all we could afford. Therefore we had to spend a lot of time doing the clearing ourselves.

Transfer and water licence

This work was being done before we knew whether or not the transfer of the lease would be agreed to. And if it was agreed to would the water authority grant us a water licence. We had a number of meetings to discuss this and we were kept in suspense for quite some time.

Wedding Day

During this time I was married on the 5th of April, 1947. Rene and I started married life living on the river bank in a work shop that had two bed rooms and a kitchen next to it. Rene came from the same area of central Victoria as I did. So it was a big change for her. We were there for about 12 months. At that stage we were still waiting on the transfer of the lease.

Development costs

It became apparent that the cost of installation of the pump and pipe lines was going to be fairly expensive in relation to the number of acres that were to be put under irrigation. There was another area of 50 acres between our joint property and Roy

Hollins'. He had knocked the big trees downs with a bull dozer but had no intention of going on with it. We negotiated to buy this from him.

So we offered him a fairly good price which was to cover both the 50 acres and the original area to be transferred making a total of 200 acres; eventually subdivided into 40 acre lots. It turned out to be fairly expensive land compared to other areas.

Banks and finance

Finance was another problem. The Rural Bank of New South Wales took first mortgage over the leased land. At the time they considered it was valueless as far as returns went. However, they wanted it and we had to have that money to finance the pump and pipelines. We all of course had to enter into a number of individual agreements. As the Rural Bank had first mortgage on everything we had no further security to obtain carry-on finance.

Here again we were fortunate that the Bank of New South Wales, now known as Westpac, made funds available to me without security. Under the soldier settlement agreements, for returned soldiers, we were allowed a certain amount of loan money to develop land. I think this was around three pounds a week for 12 months while we were getting established. That three pounds came in very handy.

Supporting role

During this period, Rene provided the other four fellows one hot meal a day. I know that was very much appreciated. If any officials came from Sydney or from the bank they would come down for afternoon tea. Don Duncan would say - "lets go to Rene Walker's, she makes the best chocolate sponge anywhere around here." We generally got on fairly well with anybody who came

As we had no power we eventually built our own power line and hooked it on to a line coming across from Victoria. Originally it fed the dairy and two other properties.

Married in Maryborough, 5 April, 1947

Getting by

All the digging for the one and half mile of pipeline had to be done by hand. All the clearing and ploughing had to be done with the use of only

one tractor. We worked the 200 acres as one unit until we all got the first crop in.

We had no money to employ labour and no house on our property. I knew eventually we would build a house on the property but for the first two or three years after the war, building materials were very difficult to purchase.

House bricks

Two of the boys went to Darwin to a disposal sale and bought an old Chev truck. They brought it down and that became our main transport for quite a while. By driving to Hay we were able to get a truck load of cement that had come from Sydney. We shared out the cement and I was able to get started on making bricks for the house. I tried to make 20 or 30 or perhaps 50 bricks every night using a little electric cement mixer. Eventually we got enough made for the house. At the weekend when we weren't working on the block we would be making bricks.

I intended that the house would be for the first 10 or 20 years and that we would build a better one up the hill. But that original house still stands today.

Citrus nursery

While we were building the house we had to also start an orange tree nursery. Roy Hollins made some land available for the nursery. We had germinated the seed the previous year and had enough seedlings to plant out to cover the whole area. It was a good experience because Roy Hollins was a real fanatic and very conscientious. He passed on his knowledge and what he taught us has stayed with me.

Cash crops

I originally thought I would be growing vines but he certainly talked me out of that. I don't regret that now. As we had no income we had to grow vegetables as a sideline to get some cash. Our first crop of peas started off fairly well but when we got into our main crop the price had dropped and it was just enough to see us through.

In fact the vegetable market was up and down so things haven't changed very much today. One of the best crops we had was carrots. I didn't plant carrots in the first year or two. I tried them later as they were popular in other areas. With this crop of carrots we started harvesting in September and the first load was sent to Sydney.

Price variations

We received a hundred pound a ton in Sydney for the first load. That was very good, I'm not too sure if we had one or two loads at that price. But the next time they came down to eighty pound a ton and we hoped that the price would go back up. However they fell to sixty pound a ton. We hesitated for a while and actually finished up ploughing them in. The price had dropped whereby we couldn't cover the cost of picking and freight to Sydney. But the load that sold at the higher price made it a good season.

We also grew a lot of pumpkins but they were more or less our bread and butter. We grew a lot of beans in the autumn. The price was good in some years and not much more than your money back at other times.

Potato success

I think the best crop I ever had was one that did not normally pay well. In 1956, a wet year, I put the whole property under potatoes. I thought it would be the last crop because the orange trees were starting to grow and produce fruit at that stage. Fortunately for me as it was too wet down south to grow potatoes. We had a very good year. I got up to one hundred and fifty pound a ton for potatoes.

That year I was able to pay off all my back debts and I think we probably also bought a car. We got our head above water probably for the first time.

Valued labour

For vegetable pickers we were fortunate there was a displaced persons centre at the aerodrome which had been used as a university during the war. The migrants from this centre would come out by bus for the picking. There were many nationalities and most of them wanted to work to earn the money so we really had no problems.

Without them I don't know how we would have got on because picking beans or peas in all sorts of weather was not very nice work. It was pretty hot too in the summer time pulling the carrots. We certainly appreciated their work. At certain times I would have 20 to 30 people picking and often they had brought their children with them. They were about 10 to 12 years of age and at weekends they had learnt to speak English. I used them as the interpreters.

Moving in

When we first moved into our house we had no doors, ceilings or windows. Probably nobody would live under those conditions today but back then there wasn't any alternative. To keep things cool we used to have a coolgardie safe. I think it was around 1952-53 when we got our first fridge.

We eventually put in a septic tank around that year. It took a long time before the house was completely finished. Floors were just concrete. In the early stages things often looked bad financially. I never had any doubt that eventually things would turn out all right.

We went through phases and there was always the unknown. When the oranges came into bearing the prices fluctuated, the same as they do today. In some years we would make some money. In other years we would wish we never had trees and that's how things are today. All in all we did quite well.

The citrus industry

I eventually took an interest in citrus industry affairs. I was on a citrus management committee and was appointed chairman of the Murray Valley New South Wales Citrus Marketing Board. I was also chairman of the local citrus co-operative society and eventually became president of the Australian Citrus Growers Federation for three years. This appointment required a fair amount of travelling. I found it quite interesting with politics playing a big part. I was fortunate to have very good executive support in Hugh Cope.

Above: Bob Kemp of Gosford takes over as President of the Australian Citrus Growers Federation 1983.very good executive support in Hugh Cope.

My children

We had five children - Ron, Joan, Ken, Lindsay and Coral, and we had to start thinking of their future. We invested in a citrus property at Dareton which Ron later took over. Some time after 1974 Ken took over the Monak property. We built a house at 599 14th Street Mildura where we lived in semi retirement for about 28 years until we moved into a unit in Kalimna Village in Mildura.

I've seen many changes in our standards of behaviour over a number of years. What society accepts today would never have been tolerated pre World War 2. I have found that there was much to be gained by maintaining a strong family unit. Family breakdown has an effect on society that produces an on going effect on the nation. We should respect one another and be prepared to accept a certain amount of discipline and regimentation.

On my 80th birthday: Coral, Joan, Rene, Harry, Ron, Lindsay, Ken