

**GIBSON LANCE ALDWORTH LT 2/3 MACHINE GUN  
BATTALION** Middle East, Java, Japan, Mukden



Lance Gibson was born in Echuca 24 August 1915. He enlisted in the AIF 11 July 1940. He served in the Middle East and this is where he met the lady, who was to become his wife post war. Lance was with the 2/3 Machine Gun Battalion in the Middle east and later when the unit surrendered in Java. AS a POW he was sent by the Japs to Japan, He survived being on a ship when it was torpedoed when close to Japan. Eventually, Lance was recovered from a POW camp in Mukden, Manchuria when the Japs surrendered in the second half of 1945. His story follows. Courtesy Mary Gibson and Ian H K Ilton.



Lance and his wife Mary – Anzac Day 2005.

LANCE GIBSON

My mother and father owned a farm at Nanneella, when I was born in Echuca on the 24th of August, 1915. I had an elder brother and a sister. On our farm we bred and grazed sheep and cattle. We didn't cultivate many crops. In my younger days I went to the Nanneella State School and then on to Rochester. Later I lived in Melbourne and attended Wesley College. In 1932, when I was seventeen, I left school and returned home to the family and the farm. Later I returned to the City and attended wool classing courses, at the Working Men's College, now the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT). After that, it was on to the Burnley Horticultural School for agricultural studies. These courses took me a year to complete.

There was indeed a feeling that a war could eventuate, sometime in the future. I was now twenty two and had enlisted in the local Militia. It was a squadron known as the 17th Light Horse Regiment. No horses, it was fully mechanised. There were three Troops; one stationed at Lockington, one in Rochester, the third at Echuca, being the Headquarters. We became a Machine Gun regiment and underwent all types of training and attended camps.

We were at a camp, when the War broke out and we were transferred to a camp that had been established at Torquay, on the Victorian southern coast. At the three month long camp, the training was hard and intense. Being all country boys together, we decided that we would enlist as a complete unit, in the A.I.F., but the powers that be would not allow this, so naturally we were most disappointed.

George, a good mate of mine, and I, decided we would join the Air Force. We both found out that we were not "healthy" enough, to be enlisted in an air crew. Our medicals were held at Bendigo and I was told that I had high blood pressure. Poor old George, never made it past the initial examination. I had almost got the whole way through.

When I found George after the medicals, we chewed over the fact that we had both failed. 'Twas then we made our decision. "Stuff the Air Force, we'll join the Army!"

In April, 1940, we had enlisted and were encamped at the Caulfield racecourse. England, was now under extreme pressure and enlistment numbers had greatly increased. Along with many others, George and I were sent to the Balcombe camp near Mornington. Here we met up with a squadron leader, Hec Griener who had been our Captain when we had been in the Militia.

He was now the Commanding Officer (CO) of B Company of the 2/3rd Machine Gun Battalion, and as there were a lot of chaps here from home, we all joined the Company and were then encamped at Trawool, just outside the town of Seymour.

We underwent more training over the next four months, and in this time, I had become an N.C.O. (non-commissioned officer). At the end of the camp, I was sent to Randwick in Sydney, to take an Officer's School course. There were fifty or so of us in the school, from all over Australia. Our C.O. was a tremendous "old soldier", who really put us through our paces.

Two months of extreme, intensive, practical training. The C.O. had said, "...no good being an officer, if you're no better than your men!..." This was followed by a month of administrative studies. I don't think I had ever worked so hard, in all my life. We actually completed a ten month peace time course, in only three months.

The C.O. was a cunning old fox. He would line one State up against another. Tauntingly, he would say, "...you're pretty good, but not as good as the boys from the West!" This sort of comment, would always bring the best out in you. I guess it did, as I and nine others from home, passed.

Back at home our C.O. Colonel Blackburn, V.C. (he'd won the Victoria Cross in the First World War), handed us forms, to make out our applications for the commissions we were now entitled to. Eight of the ten signed, two refused. Had we known what was in store for us, we would not have signed either. The two who hadn't signed sailed for overseas, as Sergeants.

Adelaide, not overseas, was our posting. Here we attended school after school and became the most educated useless, Lieutenants, in the Army.

Finally I was granted a platoon, and we received our orders for overseas service. Before leaving Adelaide, I went to say farewell to Mary, a nurse I had met, who was working at the Woodside Camp Hospital. From here we were entrained for Sydney and embarkation.

We sailed for Fremantle on the 2nd of November, 1941, on board the "Queen Elizabeth". It was an uneventful trip, apart from ack-ack duty, each morning and evening. I had a big surprise on board however, when I met up with Mary. Her nursing Unit, was also heading for the Middle East and we saw a lot of each other, when our off duty periods coincided.

We called in at Fremantle and then on to Colombo, where we met up with the "Queen Mary" and together, we sailed onwards to the Suez Canal and Port Taufiq.

On reaching our destination, we disembarked and then by train, we headed out across the desert, for Palestine and our camp. I was most disappointed when we arrived, as I found out all my blokes, were out fighting with the 2nd Syrian Forces. I so desperately wanted to be with them. It was not to be, as I was with a Training Battalion instructing new recruits, who, when fully trained, would be off to the front line and action aplenty.

Mary at this stage, was based at a camp only six miles away and I managed to visit her on a few occasions. We actually spent one evening at the Gaza Officers Club and I remember it as a lovely night.

I was mortified! After two months of schools of instruction in the desert, I could not return to my Battalion until I had undergone another month of Infantry school, under a "Pommie" Warrant Officer's instruction. Teaching a commissioned officer Infantry drills, was a bit hard to take!

My Battalion finally returned from the Syrian campaign and I rejoined them. Before we knew it, we were bundled on board the liner "Orcades", headed for home. With us on board, was the 2/2nd Pioneer Battalion. It was on the way home, I realised, how little action I had been involved in.

Conditions on board were pretty good and, although we once again called in at Colombo, this time there was to be no shore leave. Then we began, what we thought would be the final leg home. How wrong we were. Our "Orcades" swung towards the tropical islands to the north.

We sailed up through the Sunda Strait and on to the island of Sumatra. Here we were off loaded onto landing lighters, in readiness to be carried ashore. Previous to this, the C.O. had taken with him a group of men, to reconnoitre our landing zone and the territory beyond. They came back in one "hell of a rush". They had come across a multitude of Japanese soldiers, only a few miles inland, making their way to our proposed landing site. It was totally futile, to even consider an attempted landing, more vital however, to get back on board as quickly as possible.

You would not believe it. We could not locate the ship. A sudden storm, had come in out of the night and visibility was down to zero. In latter days, the CO would make a great yarn out of this. He would remark, ".....a brilliant flash of lightning, just like Providence, and there was our "Orcades". I don't remember that happening, but I do remember the mad scramble from all the lighters, as we regained the security of the decks. "Machine gunners to the right, Pioneers to the left!"

We headed further north and, on the day that Singapore fell to the Japanese, we hightailed it out of there and headed back south, to the island of Java and its capital, Batavia. (Now Djakarta).

After days on board, sitting in the harbour deliberating on whether to disembark or not, we finally came ashore and set up camp. Our CO, had now been promoted to the rank of Brigadier and had formed us into a Brigade, to be known as, the "Black Force".

Boy, were we well equipped! No guns, no ammunition, no transport. Nothing at all. All our gear had gone back to Australia, on another boat and not to us. Although we were machine gun specialists, we had to arm ourselves with anything we could lay our hands upon, or what we could gather from the Dutch forces on the island.

I was appointed the Brigade's Transport officer and I had any amount of vehicles. They had been supplied by the Dutch, at my disposal to be used by the two units or anyone else, that needed them. My major problem at this stage, was that of drivers, or the lack of them. It was amazing to find, that among so many men, so few could drive. We ultimately came to grips with the problem, we made them!

Amongst the variety of vehicles we had, were a great number of "armoured cars". These were converted English Humber sedans, that had Bren gun turrets, mounted on top. They had been designed for use in England, as a prevention against any paratroop landings. They could knock them out of the sky, before they reached the ground. They were a beautiful car, but they had a "...forty acre turning circle...!"

There were frequent Japanese air raids, bombing the docks or alternately the airstrips. I must have had a

"charmed life", as it was quite incredible, that wherever a raid was taking place, I was at the other location. I guess that's being in the right place, at the right time. There were casualties from these raids, both for us and the Dutch.

From time to time, after these raids, Hurricane fighter planes would fly over, perhaps in pursuit. One afternoon, a fighter plane was brought down by ground fire. We had all been having a "ping" at it and, as we saw a parachute open, we all claimed a victory, as the dull thump of the plane's impact reached our ears. Imagine our embarrassment and shame, when later we met the pilot and realised we had shot down, one of our own!

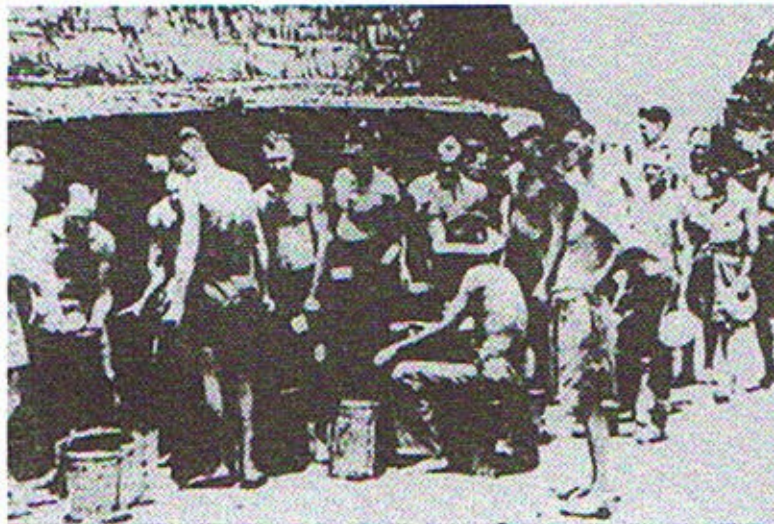
The Dutch forces decided to join forces with us, to play 'merry hell' with the oncoming invaders and we pulled back from the airport. I was now Battalion Transport officer, in charge now, of all vehicles for all the units and their deployment. The commanding officers decided to retreat some miles to the south of the capital. In the morning, we headed off using very basic map references.

We joined forces with the Dutch, to form a defensive line, on the south side of a large river. We had taken out the bridge after we had crossed, hoping this would slow down the enemy advance. They arrived in large numbers, attacking us and the Dutch, who were on our right and left flanks. We held them for over twenty four hours, until we were very much aware of our allies, moving in behind us. They had left their positions undefended, and now we were both in a bit of strife.

Knowing full well our position would be overrun, we began a slow, defensive retreat. We reckoned, if we continued to move south to the coast of Java, the Navy would provide for us, a means of escape. The Japs followed us and although there were no "out and out" battles, they were always near to us as we continued our retreat. Finally we reached the port of Talatap, where we were told, there would be no evacuation supplied by the Navy. They had either been sunk, or were engaged in action, elsewhere.

With this news we left Talatap, and headed back into the jungle and made the best of our situation. Here we existed for quite a while, living on our rations, until disaster once more befell us. One of our senior officers had received the news, that the Dutch had surrendered and, as we were under Dutch command, had to surrender as well. We saw no Japanese for quite a time, until finally they arrived, and, as we could offer very little resistance, became prisoners of war, ( P.O.W's).

Over the following months, after leaving Talatap, we were interred at several camps. Life became difficult. Supplies of food was always a problem and our stable diet of rice, was at times supplemented by vegetables we had been able to cultivate. Feeding was an enormous task, as there were over six hundred in the camp.



"Mess" POW Camp, Java, 1943

At one of the camps, I contracted the dreaded Beri Beri, (amoebic dysentery) and for a time, I was extremely ill. Fortunately, I was admitted to "Weary" Dunlop's "hospital", where they still had medical supplies to treat my illness. When I had recovered and returned to my section of the camp, a senior officer informed me, I was take over a platoon as they had lost their officer. Army life still existed, even in a prison camp.

In Java, towards the end of 1942, the Japanese guards began forming "drafts". Each draft had an officer and fifty men and from the camp, they were being taken to Burma, to work on the construction of a railway.

We were moved to a very tough, "Cycle" camp, with over four hundred officers and four thousand soldiers. They had been brought in from Surabaya, Timor and many of the nearby islands. To feed and care for all these men, became a nightmare. And always, there was the heat. I came down with a massive dose, of what they referred to as, "prickly heat". It was a heat rash, that covered your whole body. This intense heat would really pray on your mind. You could go twenty four hours a day, three hundred and sixty five days a year, and never need to wear a stitch of clothing.

Without warning, five or six of we officers were told to get together, what little effects we had and we moved on to a new camp, where was formed a new draft. Mine was made up of one hundred and fifty men, all Australians. To go with us, was a draft of Dutch and another of American soldiers. We were then presented with some American Red Cross parcels. One each to the Yanks, but we had to share. We reckoned it was a bit unfair, but I suppose we were lucky to get anything.

From this camp, we were railed down to the port of Batavia and loaded on board a rusty old ship and then down, into its dark, stinking furnace like hold. My prickly heat got "prickly" again. It was sure hellish down there. On reaching Singapore, we were taken ashore and encamped there for a fortnight.

Again we were at sea, on board an old bauxite carrier, a four thousand ton wreck! We made up part of a convoy of cargo ships, escorted by Japanese naval vessels. We didn't expect any trouble from our Navy boys, as we reckoned that no self respecting skipper would waste any ammunition on our old "tub".

Action stations sounded one night, with all ships in the convoy taking some part in the "encounter". Even our old crate fired her ancient cannon, which had somehow been mounted on her deck. Being confined in the hold, we were subjected to massive echoing and showers of "rust rain", from her corroded hull. The next morning, the crew told us of how they had chased the attackers away during the night, but we had our doubts, as to whether there had been anything there at all.

Manilla, the capital of the Philippines, was our only port of call, on route to the island of Formosa (Taiwan). Two days after leaving Manilla, we ran into a typhoon. A terrible storm and our ship was severely damaged. When we reached Takao, a southern Formosan port, we were transferred to a newer and much larger vessel. Our final destination, Nagasaki, a major seaport in Japan.

Midnight. Forty nautical miles out from Nagasaki, a torpedo attack from a single American submarine, saw four vessels in the convoy, hit and sunk. It was a unbelievable action by the American skipper, but unfortunately, one of the ships sunk was ours.

Many had been killed on deck, when the torpedo unleashed its power of destruction. Holes, in the ripped open hull, let in cascades of sea water, that rapidly filled the ships holds. In the pitch blackness, I had no idea of what was happening, except that I had broken clear of the hold's confinement and had managed to cling to some floating wreckage. There was no sign of the ship or anything else. The whole catastrophe, had taken less than five minutes.

My immediate thoughts were, that I was the only survivor. Seeing a much larger chunk of wreckage, I swam towards it, recognising it as part of a ship's bridge. I was not alone, as out of the darkness, hands reached forward, to haul me out of the water. With the others, we managed to pull several more out of their watery grave. Although our "raft" was only a support, it kept us all night, afloat and alive.

Came morning, and amongst our survivors, were several Japanese civilians. A naval vessel came alongside and took off these persons, but left us where we were. Fortunately, a Formosan whale chaser was in the vicinity and they were permitted to take us on board. There were several of our POW's, on board a Japanese corvette and they were mercilessly thrown over board and made to swim to the whaleboat. Two of the men couldn't swim and, as we were forbidden to assist them, they drowned. It was so needless and so callous.

We landed on the wharves of Nagasaki, on the morning of the 25th of June, 1944 and we immediately were transferred to a camp. Two hundred and eleven survivors, from the original seven hundred and seventy five men, who had set forth from Java.

Arriving at the camp, we were dressed in our "finest array". Singlets, underpants and odd bits of clothing. We remained there for two weeks, before being transferred to yet another camp, where we were reunited with our fellow survivors and other POW's, who had been here for over twelve months. All the Australian POW's were placed under our control. The entire camp itself, was in the hands of captured Dutch officers. Our responsibility, was to keep our blokes in order and getting them to work. They worked for a time at the Mitsubishi ship building yards and then, later on at the foundries.

As winter approached, temperatures dropped to zero and the conditions in the camp were poor, to say the least. There was no heat for comfort, until it finally reached the stage, when we had an epidemic of pneumonia. In those three months, we lost another twelve of our "survivors". We were getting very little to eat and what was given, was very, very poor. So bad at times, we would rather have a smoke than eat.

At the close of 1944, came the first air raid. It was only a reconnaissance flight, but it caused one "hell of a panic" amongst the Japanese. Raids then, became quite a common event. We were never hit and we regaled in the news that the War was at last, coming "home" to Japan. The only unfortunate thing about this was, we were at the "wrong end" of it.

The raids then became heavier and heavier. One raid consisted of over seventy B29 bombers. Again we missed any direct hits, but things were becoming quite "hairy". The island of Okinawa, to the south of Japan, had been taken by the Americans, who were now using it as a base for more intensive raids on Japan. The Japanese were now, extremely panicky over the possible threat of an invasion.

Early April, 1945, and without any prior notice, two Dutch officers, a naval officer and myself, were "hooked out" of bed at five o'clock in the morning, put on a train at the local railway complex, then railed off to the portside. We heard later, that only hours after we had departed, the station we had just left had been completely demolished during an intensive air raid.



P.O.W.s in Camp, 1944

Again down into the hull of a ship, all in readiness for a voyage into the unknown, but before we sailed, we were bundled back on to the wharf, as air raid sirens wailed mournfully out of the darkness, over the docklands. We spent the night on the wharf, with no action at all, as the raid had taken place, further up

the coast. However, during the night, I met up with some of my officers I had not seen since we had originally been taken prisoners, way back in 1942. It was great to see them and to know that they were still alive.

Before my final departure from Japan, I had been given two tins of rice and seven herrings and I enjoyed a great "feast" that night. However, before reboarding the ship in the morning, the last thing I did on Japanese soil was to have massive bout of diarrhoea, right there, on the end of the wharf.

Our unknown destination turned out to be Korea, across the Sea of Japan. After our arrival, we spent two nights in a picture theatre, before taking a train that was to carry us through Korea and on to the city of Mukden, in Manchuria.

Here in Mukden had been established, what could have been described as a 'modern' camp. Its construction was of concrete bricks, with concrete and electrified fences and armed sentry positions. It had been set up to confine senior officers, of all Services, from the island war zones. Personnel from Singapore, Hong Kong, Java, even the Governor of Singapore, was held here as a prisoner.

One of our senior officers, Wilfred Kent-Hughes, of Victoria, (later Sir Wilfred), was always afraid of, as he put it, "losing his marbles!" He would do anything he could to maintain his mental exercises. He would read diaries, dictionaries and their meanings, anything he could get his hands upon. He even wrote a book about his involvement in the War, all in rhyme. It was indeed a great effort, but it never really sold!

When I reached Mukden, I was placed in the Australian sector, not many of us and mainly high ranking officers. I was attired in complete Japanese clothing, that we had earlier been issued with, when we were in Nagasaki. A dark green button-up jacket, a bright green Japanese cap, with a red band displaying my POW number, leggings and those split-toed Japanese boots. The senior men were quite horrified with my appearance, so they rummaged around to refit me in far more suitable attire, all Australian made!

One thing our captors would not allow and that was long hair. Hair that got anywhere near your collar, was "long hair". It had to be cut that short, that it was impossible for it to be pulled. It was just a fuzz all over your skull. Oddly enough, you were permitted to grow a moustache, so one appeared.

The Generals, the Colonels and all the Senior men, had been in camp for a very long time at this stage. Not on the move, as I had been, even though a POW. They had heard no really confirmed news, since very early in the War. Only suspicions, of what may have been happening on the War fronts. I was interviewed by them all, not only the Australians, as to what had been going on.

Food as always, was a problem, as there was never any rice. We ate buns made from a corn meal, three a day, along with servings of soup. I was a very fit, seven stone, (forty kilos) Our General gave me an official "title", Commodities officer, handing out the food.

Fortunately I had arrived in the Spring. Others told of the winter just passed, with temperatures so cold, forty degrees below zero, that the ground was frozen solid, to a depth of six feet. No-one could venture outside, they just stayed inside the barracks. With the little heating they had, condensation would run down the walls, just like the inside of an igloo. But Spring now had brought forth, all the wonders of nature and the countryside just blossomed.

We received "news" from the Chinese around the camp, of the "bombs", very shortly after they had been dropped. It was not that long after, we heard the rumour of a surrender. That's all it was, a rumour. One afternoon, planes appeared away on the horizon and from them, we saw fall, tiny dots that blossomed out into parachutes. That night, the Americans came into the camp, with the news of the Japanese capitulation. This we did believe.

The Americans began dropping supplies, food and clothing, but there were complications. They were using B29 bombers for supply runs, but, as they could not slow down to a safe speed for dropping, parachutes on opening, would rip apart, allowing supply crates to hurtle earthwards. Many supplies were smashed or destroyed, exploding on impact when reaching the ground.

Liberated. It was time to go home. As Senior Officers had important tasks to undertake, they were immediately airlifted to their various destinations. We laboriously travelled by a Russian troop train, down to the Chinese coast and the ancient city of Port Arthur. We embarked on board a Yankee merchant ship, that was doubling as a hospital vessel, reaching Okinawa, on the last days of September, 1945.

Americans are very emotional people. On our voyage from China they played over the ship's intercom sound system, the hit song, "Sentimental Journey", over and over and over again. So much so, it was most

unbearable at the finish.

We were all airlifted from Okinawa to Manilla by a DC3, back to the Australian Administration base. It was here I learned of the death of my very dear mate, George. He had died, working on the Burma railroad. It was a great disappointment to me.

The "HMS Formidable" a British warship, was to give us our passage home to Australia. As officers, there were only two of us assigned to each cabin. Also, we had two marines to cater to our every whim, so we enjoyed a good trip home. We landed in Sydney to a very warm welcome, by huge crowds at the quayside. Quickly we were taken to the Sydney station, placed on a troop train and we headed south, for home.

Mum had received a special petrol ration, which enabled her and the family to come down to Melbourne and welcome me home. It was a most relieved and happy occasion. I was granted special leave for a week, following which, I had to return to camp to proceed with the finalities of my service.

As an Officer, I was not "demobbed". I went onto the Army Reserve list and would remain there for many years to come. Because of these regulations, I had to undergo a thorough medical examination at the Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital. In just twenty four hours I was cleared and I headed home to the farm and my family.

On the way home, I thought of how it would be. Everyone you would meet would want to know, how was it, how did it go, how did you really feel? We decided that a hall would be hired, invite anyone who may be interested and give a talk, "once and for all" about our experiences. I never did, but that was the reason, that for so many years, I shunned or avoided meetings.

In the only letter I was permitted to write home in all those years, I expressed to my mum, "... that all I want, is to be in a real room, with real chairs, and I will never complain about food, ever again..."

Many of the returned men, felt and looked lost. I was lucky, as I returned to where and what I loved and had a career to go on with. So many of these chaps, had nothing to look forward to at all. Very little, if anything at all, was done for the POW's, or their families.

They came home, some extremely ill and suffering. So many of them, because of their treatment at the hands of the Japanese, their starvation, their privations and humiliations, were quite disorientated with all aspects of life. There were no rehabilitation schemes or counselling available to them, "just get back into the normal stream of life, as best you can!..." The only advice offered to the families was, not to talk about or even mention, what they had been through or how they had suffered. It was very much a taboo subject. So many of these poor chaps, had to repress their feelings and emotions for many, many years. In a lot of instances, it caused much grief and turmoil with family life. In the light of all that, I was very fortunate.

I went back to the farm to take up life again. I wanted to see Mary, but that had to wait as she was still on nursing duty, at a military hospital in Brisbane. It really seemed such a long time.

I have always believed, that the use of the atomic bomb was justified. Although many died in Hiroshima and in Nagasaki, many thousands of our boy's lives were spared. I later saw, in the Mukden camp, a directive from the Japanese authorities which stated, "...Kill them all, leave no traces..." There is no doubt this would have occurred, had an invasion of Japan taken place.

Mary and I were married in November, 1946 and we settled here on our farm at Nanneella, where my family had been for many, many years. We have three children and eight grand kids.

Life has been good to us and we have many pleasant memories. We have shared, a good and happy life.