

SURVIVAL - AT SEA AND ON LAND

A WARTIME RESUME OF AN AUSTRALIAN SAILOR – by Arthur Bancroft

ARTHUR BANCROFT celebrated his 18th birthday on 24 November 1939 shortly after World War II was declared against Germany on 3 September 1939. On 14 November 1940 he obtained leave of absence from his employer, the Union Bank of Australia Limited, to enlist for wartime service in the Royal Australian navy.

After a period of training at land based depots in Fremantle, Melbourne and Sydney, he was drafted in September 1941 to join the crew of the Australian Light Cruiser HMAS Perth. The "Perth" was in Sydney being repaired from bomb damage, experienced during the evacuation of Australian soldiers from Crete in April/May 1941. "Perth" had been in continuous war service in the Mediterranean since December 1940: She also earlier participated in the 'Cape Matapan' Sea battle with an Italian battle fleet and the evacuation of Australian soldiers from Greece.

"Perth" was in Sydney when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour on 8 December 1941 and in January and early February 1942 was active on convoy duty escorting Australian troops to New Guinea and the first USA troops to Australia.

Late February 1942 "Perth" was seconded to the ABDA (American, British, Dutch and Australian) fleet based in Surabaya, Java; an international force rushed together in the defence of the Dutch East Indies from invading Japanese forces. The defence of East Java from a large Japanese invasion fleet on 27 February was a disaster and the allied fleet took a battering in what has been historically termed as "The Battle of the Java Sea". The only allied ships of note to escape from the battle scene were "HMAS Perth" and "USS Houston".

"Perth" and "Houston" endeavoured to exit the Java Sea area through Sunda Strait just before midnight on 28 February but ran full tilt into another Japanese invasion fleet landing troops at Banten Bay on the north west tip of Java. Surrounded by about 15 Japanese destroyers and cruisers, the two allied ships held the enemy at bay for close on an hour and a half. Both ships were on the verge of running out of ammunition before taking heavy shell damage and four torpedoes and sinking within about 15 minutes of each other in the oil covered waters at the entrance to Sunda Strait. This final battle is referred to as "The Battle of Sunda Strait". Japanese records later revealed that 83 torpedoes had been unleashed by the Japanese destroyers in the course of the battle. Japanese losses in this battle have never been actually revealed by the next morning revealed many of the invasion ships with only their super structure protruding above the water in Banten Bay. Of "Perth's" crew of 682, 353 did not survive the battle and of "Houston's" crew of 1065, 697 were lost as a result of the final battle. Historically the action was the first time that ships of the two nations ever fought together in a sea battle.

Of the surviving crews of the two cruisers (329 and 368) a large number reached land on Java, some swimming to islands in the strait and others to the mainland of Java. Two groups of Australian sailors actually endeavoured to sail to Australia in two lifeboats from sunken Japanese troop ships. One group of 12 were captured by the Japanese on the shores of Sumatra some six weeks after the battle and the other group of 10 got as far as the south coast of Java before being captured two weeks later. About half of the survivors from both ships were taken aboard a couple of Japanese destroyers late on the afternoon of 1st March.

It was at this stage that the author of this article went from survival at sea to survival on land.

After about 12 hours in the oil covered water at the entrance to Sunda Strait - about an hour of which was in a Japanese life boat from one of their sunken ships - Arthur (known as 'Blood' by his mates because of his red hair) was reluctantly taken on board a Japanese destroyer. The Japanese sailors were curious as to our nationality but treated the Australian and American sailors kindly with eye drops for oil blindness and water and dry biscuits. Our oil covered clothing was taken away and replaced with new white cotton loin cloths (quickly referred to from thereon as 'G-Strings' as they became the main item of clothing that the survivors wore for the bulk of their time as Prisoners of War).

Complete exhaustion took over once night fell and the survivors slept for 12 hours where they fell - for me that was on a coil of rope on the ship's quarterdeck. The next morning the survivors had to row life boats to one of the anchored invasion troop transport, the "Sandong Maru". A limited amount of water and cooked rice was lowered down into the ship's hold where the prisoners were herded. The water was drunk from a ladle and the rice out of cupped hands. There was no medical attention for the wounded and the prisoners were allowed up on deck in limited numbers at a time for the use of the toilets hung over the side of the ship. One "Perth" survivor died from his wounds. There was about 300 Australian and Americans.

After 7 days, the prisoners were taken ashore and placed in two holding areas in a small provincial town of Serang on the mainland of Java. One building was the local theatre and the other the local jail. There was barely room at either site for other than sitting room with crammed space for sleeping on the concrete floors. A large ditch was dug outside for toilet needs, which quickly flooded during the regular afternoon rain squalls. Limited water was made available and a handful of rice was dished out morning and evening. The wounded, mainly from shrapnel wounds, were helped as best as possible by our own medical people, including one "Perth" doctor. The best the Japanese guards could help with were limited supplies of bandages. Through lack of food, constipation became the norm, anything up to a week or more, but then bouts of dysentery developed. The proved to be the forerunner of a real scourge in the years ahead.

After 37 days in this squalor class accommodation the prisoners were trucked out on the backs of army vehicles to Batavia, where they joined up with British, Australian, Dutch and America soldiers and airmen who had been taken prisoners when the Dutch Government capitulated in early March. Here conditions were much better with good medical attention for our wounded, better food supplies and laid on water, sewerage and electricity. The sailors still covered in oil, unshaven and still dress only in 'G Strings' were a sorry sight compared to the other inmates who had been captured with their full battle kits, including toilet and eating gear. This camp, known as Bicycle Camp, having been a residential camp for the Dutch and Javanese troops, was to be our home for the next six months and the health of the sailors soon recovered. In early October groups of the Allied prisoners were herded on board a Japanese transport, "Kin Kon Maru", a ship of some 3,500 tons, headed for Singapore. Here the men from "Perth" and "Houston" got separated and became parts of separate Army groups. On this ship, limited toilet facilities over the side of the ship were supplied and the prisoners were crammed into filthy unventilated holds. Dysentery again became a scourge and one prisoner died en-route to Singapore, a trip that took 3 days in extreme tropical heat.

The stay in Singapore was far too short. The camp here, known as Changi, was run very much on military lines and was occupied by a large number of British and Australians. Food was ample although we sailors were upset at being referred to as the 'Rabble from Java', mainly because most of us were still unshaven, had very little attire and were barefooted; shaves and haircuts depended on friendly army men with the right gear. It was now 8 months since the loss of our ship and capture by the enemy and we have received no messages from home: in fact we were completely unaware whether our loved ones even knew of our existence. While here, we were allowed to send a short message home on a Red Cross Postcard. We were not to know that our first mail from home was not to be received for close on two years.

Prior to departure from Singapore, the groups from Java were given a small share of a Red Cross parcel, five men to one parcel. This proved to be the only Red Cross parcel we were to receive during our captivity. My share of the parcel included a tin of condensed milk which I was lucky to swap for a water bottle from a Dutchman who had two water bottles. This bottle was to prove invaluable to me during the ensuing fifteen months. In mid October our group departed Singapore in another rust bucket Jap transport, the "Maebasi Maru" and headed north towards Burma. After four uncomfortable days we arrived at the port of Rangoon where we were herded into the holds of another transport "Yamagata Maru". It was then only a short voyage of one day to Moulein another Burma port and city. After 4 days in a large jail, occupied by lepers, we left by rail for the railhead town of Thambyuzayat about 40 miles south west of Moulmein. It was here that we were informed by the resident Japanese Commandant, Col Nagatomo, that we had been brought here to build a railway through the Burmese jungle to Thailand, over "the white men's bodies if necessary". A cheerful welcome !!

The other group of "Perth" and "Houston" survivors left behind in Java, followed two months later in another transport the "Dai Nichi Maru" and transhipped into the "Moji Maru" in Singapore for Burma. En-route to Burma this small convoy was attacked by two allied aircraft based in India. One ship was sunk with heavy loss of life to a group of Dutch POW's but mainly Japanese troops. The "Moji Maru" suffered slight damage from a near miss resulting in the death of two "Perth" survivors.

Over a period of some 15 months the building of the Burma-Thailand Railway was to take our group through the dense jungle of Burma to areas where no white man had previously trod. Living and climatic conditions became extremely harsh particularly when the 1943 wet season set in. The sailors were at a great disadvantage by having no footwear and had to work under all conditions in bare feet. Some were fortunately in obtaining boots previously belonging to the Indian Army but were all of small sizes unsuitable for the predominantly larger Australians. With the onset of the wet season diseases such as cholera, malaria, dengue fever, dysentery, tropical ulcers and beri-beri took their toll. By the time the rail ends, from Burma and Thailand, linked together in December 1943, no less than 56 "Perth" POW's were left buried in the jungle.

The total death roll amongst the POW's in the construction of the Burma-Thailand Wailway was

12,626 made up of	Australian	2,710	Other: Asians	80,000
	British	6,540	Japanese	1,000
	Dutch	2,830		
	American	133		
	Indian	413		

The allied POW survivors from the "Railway of Death" were eventually taken to rest camps in Thailand, mainly to Tamarkan Camp on the River Kwai, next to the bridge which became so well known, post war, as 'The Bridge on the River Kwai'. This was from December 1943 to January 1944.

By mid 1944 the Japanese commenced sending parties of the most fit to Japan as forced labour in their coal mines. The main groups were first sent by rail and river to Saigon, via Phnompenh in Cambodia on the Mekong River (French Indo China). However because of submarine blockades of Saigon harbour and allied air raids on the city, the POW's were eventually taken by river and rail back through Phnompenh and Bangkok down Malaya to Singapore for shipment to Japan.

There were to be two groups of "Perth" survivors to depart Singapore for Japan. The first group of 41 departed on 6 September 1944 along with the main party of 1300 old, which had left Tamarkan earlier in the year. They boarded a 9,000 ton passenger/cargo vessel the "Rakuyo Maru" a 1921 vintage ex-British ship. A smaller group of 21 "Perth" survivors departed on 26 December as part of a larger group of army men on the "Awa Maru", a more modern passenger/cargo ship of about 15,000 tons. Because these two ships had some limited space for passengers these areas were taken up by Japanese, including some Geisha girls - returning to Japan. The prisoners were of course herded down into the cargo holds. By this time, the prisoners had been issued with a pair of shorts and a shirt for the colder Japanese winter climate.

The first convoy was waylaid by a wolf pack of 3 American Submarines (USS Growler, Sealion and Pampanito) at 0500 hours on 12 September with the tragic loss of some 1,000 POW's but the second convoy reach Japan safely.

The prisoners on board the "Rakuyo Maru" escaped injury from the two torpedo explosions on the ship but the Japanese destroyers rescued only the Japanese survivors of the several ships that were sunk in the attack. Although the POW's successfully abandoned their sinking ship they were left drifting in the ocean to survive as best they could. Any hope of survival seemed to rely on the possible return of the Japanese destroyers or chance picking up by some other convoy of vessels which may pass by en-route to Japan. Another prison ship in the convoy, the "Kachidoki Maru" a similar ship to the "Rakuyo Maru" of about 10,000 tons and also of 1921 vintage, was carrying about 900 British POW's of which close on 400 did not survive the two torpedo hits on their ship.

Three days after the attack on these two ships 150 prisoners from "Rakuyo Maru" and 500 from "Kachidoki Maru" were rescued from several lifeboats from sunken Japanese ships by a Japanese destroyer and eventually arrived in Japan. There were 8 "Perth" survivors amongst this group.

The balance of the POW's from the "Rakuyo Maru" continued to drift with the ocean currents in the South China Sea, without food or water, coated with fuel oil and holding onto the wreckage from the many sunken Japanese ships that littered the surface of the sea. By day two the survivors were widely spread over a vast area in small groups, mainly out of sight of each other. Luckily, the sea water was warm and the ocean quite calm. Without drinkable water, temptation encouraged many to sample mouthfuls of the sea water. Those who did so, quickly lost all sense of reality and had vivid hallucinations which made them think that rescue was imminent and encouraged them to gulp down mouthfuls of sea water as they swam away from the safety of their rafts and quickly drowned. With no rain in sight, there appeared little hope of survival without a quick change in the weather.

Late in the afternoon of the fourth day throbbing engine noises could be heard and two submarines appeared on the horizon. These submarines proved to be the USS "Sealion" and "Pampanito", two of the submarines instrumental in the sinking of the "Rakuyo Maru" convoy, they were fortunately returning along the same route looking for further targets. Once they established that the floating

men were not Japanese a unique lifesaving operation in dangerous enemy waters commenced. The "Sealion" recovered 54 men and "Pampanito" 73 men (unfortunately 2 died after their rescue) but with approaching darkness they had to leave the scene for the island of Saipan in the South Pacific because of the need to seek urgent medical assistance for a number of the survivors.

However the Naval base at Pearl Harbour alerted two other submarines, "Barb" and "Queenfish", who were two sailing days away to the north of the situation.

In the afternoon of the fifth day a turn in the weather brought urgently needed rain, which no doubt proved to be a lifesaver for those still drifting aimlessly on their floating rafts and debris. With the rain came a dramatic change in the sea conditions, which made clinging to the rafts most difficult but the men were encouraged with the thought of survival because of the activity of the submarines.

Late in the afternoon of the sixth day the throbbing engines of submarines could again be heard and the "Barb" and "Queenfish" could be seen searching for survivors in the angry sea. Despite a long search which extended well into the night the "Barb" and "Queenfish" could only find a further 32 live survivors but sadly 2 of these died shortly after rescue. With a typhoon moving in from the north continued searching into day seven proved fruitless and with many of the survivors suffering from exposure problems requiring hospital treatment, the submarines finally left the scene for their base at Saipan which was seven days sailing away. The Bancroft group (1 "Perth" survivor and 5 AIR men) were the last to be rescued).

In total 152 men were rescued by the 4 submarines which, including those saved by the Japanese, resulted in something like 300 of the 1300 POW's on board "Rakuyo Maru" being saved. Of the 41 Navy men on board only 12 survived and then 4 of them were killed in air raids in Japan. The Australian group of survivors from "Rakuyo maru" totalling 92 (including 4 from HMAS Perth) were returned to Australia by the American Navy on a minelayer, via Guadalcanal, and arrived in Brisbane on 21 October 1944. They were the first POW's of the Japanese to return to their homeland.

The author of this brief story arrived home in his home town, City of Perth, Western Australia, on 25 October, being the first Western Australia Navy man to escape from Japanese captivity. He was discharged from Naval Service on 30 June 1945 and returned to his occupation in the Union Bank of Australia Limited, which he had left in 1940. He retired as a Senior Manager in the Australian and New Zealand Bank Limited on 30 September 1980 and passed away aged 91 on the 28 July 2013 .

The following telegram, dated 14 November 1944, was received by the survivors of "Rakuyo Maru" from His Majesty the King - George VI

THE QUEEN AND I BID YOU A VERY WARM WELCOME HOME THROUGH ALL THE GREAT TRIALS AND SUFFERINGS WHICH YOU HAVE ENDURED WHILE IN THE HANDS OF THE JAPANESE. YOU AND YOUR COMRADES HAVE BEEN CONSTANTLY IN OUR THOUGHT. I REALISE FROM THE ACCOUNTS WHICH YOU HAVE ALREADY GIVEN HOW HEAVY THOSE SUFFERINGS HAVE BEEN. I KNOW TOO THAT YOU HAVE ENDURED THEM WITH THE HIGHEST COURAGE. WE HOPE WITH ALL OUR HEARTS THAT YOUR RETURN FROM CAPTIVITY MAY BRING YOU AND YOUR FAMILY A FULL MEASURE OF HAPPINESS

GEORGE R