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Tom Pledger's war diary

[Japanese translation](#)

While this diary was being written my mother, Jess who met my father before the War waited without any knowledge of him for three years. They married on December 1st, 1945. My father went to the War Crimes Trials in 1946 and used his diary when giving evidence. The diary and other personal items are now located in the [National War Memorial](#), Canberra, Australia. The National War Memorial has an excellent searchable online [data base](#) of photographs relating to Gull Force, the atrocities, scenes of the islands and the release of the prisoners.

An excellent history of the 'Gull Force' has been written by historian Joan Beaumont, (1988) *Gull Force : Survival and Leadership in Captivity 1941-1945*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney .

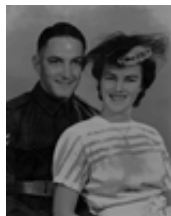
The movie '*Blood Oath*' screenplay by Brian A. Williams, was based his father's transcripts of the War Trials on Ambon in 1946.

The *Australia Remembers* Video and CD-ROM, sent to most Australian school libraries during the year commemorating the 50th anniversary of World War II, has film and data about the prisoners on Ambon.

Paul Pledger



Tom Pledger's Prisoner of War Diary 1940-45



Wedding Day December 1st, 1945

I joined the A.I.F. **27th August, 1940**, put in camp at Broadmeadow for one week then sent to Tamworth No. 7 Block Manilla Road, worked in R.A.P. with Jock Bruce. Joined A.A.M.C.[*Australian Army Medical Corps*] & transferred to Sydney Showground and there transferred to 2/12th Field Ambulance and went to Liverpool for 5 days working in C.C S. Then back to Showground and on Boxing Day 1940 shifted to Cowra. Did our training there and on 12th March, 1941 left by train for Darwin. Went through outskirts of Melbourne and Adelaide onto Terowie where we lived in tents and covered with red dust for 8 days and then entrained for Alice Springs, were held up at Fink River where river was in flood for 24 hours, had a wonderful time there, good meals but I got dysentery and had it for a week, stayed at Alice for 12 days.

I tried to go through to Birdum in the motor convoy (600 miles) but got as far as Barrow Creek, the dysentery got me again so I spent a week there and continued my journey. At Birdum we got in cattle trucks and did 300 miles to Darwin in them, was camped at Winnellie until 13th December.

Sailed on the 14th December on Patras with the Bhot and Valentine and landed at Ambon on the **17th December, 1941** Air-raid alarms on 17, 19 (2), 20,22, 23, 24, 25, 29(R) December, 1941. 12(2), 13(2), 15(15), 4 killed Market .HMAS



Winnellie Camp near Darwin



Mass grave of eleven Australians executed by the Japanese for breaking out of camp in search of food in November 1942. On the left is J.F. O'Donoghue brother of one of the victims.

Swan arrived 16(4), 17, 18, 21, 23, 24, 25, Dump Halong January, 1942. Raids 29th December, 7th January, 15th January, 16th January (2), 22nd January, 23rd January (2), 24th January, 25th January and 26th January, 30th January (Church).

Total 13 raids, 127 alarms in last 3 weeks. On 11th January we shifted out to Winitoe and destroyed all letters and text books. Built CCs, working from daylight until dark and we filled 6000 sandbags and dug a hole 30 feet x 14 feet x 4 feet deep and rivetted the sides and built 5 sleeping huts consisting of a bamboo platform about 2 feet off ground and a tent fly to cover each hut, they held 8 men. We dug our shell slits under our beds so we could be into them at the first warning.

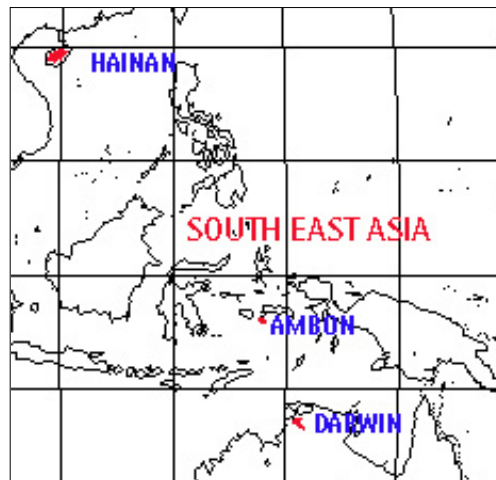
We were only allowed one bottle of beer per day, this we generally kept for after an air raid, because then you would enjoy it. We all put "Guilder" into a fund and I was elected buyer and we lived like Lords. I bought two sucking pigs, fruit, baking powder, the cook made a couple of cakes and cooked ducks etc.

But on **Saturday, 31st January, 1942** it was raining all day and Japs arrived with a total of 37 ships including warships and transports and 23,000 troops against our 1,100, 400 Dutchmen and about 5,000 native troops. They made a three point landing at Leahari, Hitoelama and Latoehalat. We were taken prisoner at 7.00 a.m. on 1st February, 1942 just after breakfast and taken to the Sanatarium till 11.00 a.m. then to the Japanese headquarters in Ambon and then put in a school, 52 of us were put in a room 20 x 16, at 10.00 they threw us a couple of tins of powdered milk and some lollies and a tin of green paint and at 11.00 a bowl of rice and a couple of tins of meat. Next day we were shifted to the Hotel "Whasing" (what a-hotel) where we stopped until Thursday, 5th February. The troops after putting up a good show, surrendered on Tuesday, 3rd. Then we were all shifted out to Tan Tooey, where we lived on rice and fish and more rice and fish. On May 13th we had our first raid by ally planes in which they damaged 1 ship and sank 3 others, lost 1 plane, that same day I contracted Malaria and had it for a week. The next raid was by 9 planes, no damage Shot down 3 fighters on May 24th, Garden Party [*About 30 Dutch prisoners interned in Tan Tui with Gull Force were caught by the Japanese trying to communicate with their wives who were detained in a camp nearby. The punishment took place on a hill about 30 metres from the Australian camp. The Japanese used pick handles, iron bars, wire cable and other weapons to beat the prisoners. The beating lasted for 2 hours. Three men died and the injuries to the others were horrific. Paul Pledger*] July 12th I sprained a ligament in my knee, playing basketball spent 10 days in hospital.



Map of Ambon

On the **25th October, 1942**, 263 of us and 245 Dutch sailed on the Taikio Maru and after 11 days at sea landed at Hashow on the island of Hainan on 5th November.



Got Dysentery on 13th December and fell from 10 stone, 10 lb to 7 stone, 8 lb in 9 days. Released from hospital on **17.2.43**. The cooks put on a special Christmas dinner, but I missed out. Also contracted Beri-Beri which doesn't affect you much except that you swell up as

soon as you exert yourself and if you push your flesh it just leaves a hole where you press. I did not know what vitamins were until now, but do we chase anything with Vitamin 'B' in it. The meals have been terrible although won't it be lovely to get my teeth around a good slab of steak, 1/2 dozen eggs. We have rice three times a day. Mainly our breakfast consists of 1 cup of rice and a cup of soup. Dinner is 1 cup of rice, 1 cup of soup and about once a week we have salt fish or tinned fish. Tea is 1 cup of rice and 1 cup of soup, about twice a week we have fresh fish (rotten) sometimes some greens (grass). Once a month fresh meat. We have lost five men in the first 6 months from dysentery.

I developed Beri-Beri on **July 25th, 1943** and this time it was wet Beri-Beri and last time dry. I have been the 3rd worst so far, but now we have about 70 odd in hospital and really everybody outside has it. This time my weight increased from about 10 stone, 10 lb. to 12 stone 8 lb. in 6 days, this consists of fluid in the tissues. For anybody who hasn't seen it, it is hard to imagine what a chap looks like. I was the same



Beri-beri's effects - victim recovering in hospital at Moratai.



The RSL Memorial to Gull Force at the site of the Australian lines on the southern edge of Ambon city (Kota Ambon).



North Ambon Coastline



Tan Tui Camp Ambon 1945 - bombed early in the war, it was located just north of Kota Ambon and is now the site of the War Cemetery (Photo taken in the 1950's).

thickness from the top of the head to the shoulders and everywhere you have a joint it just cracks open. My testicles were the size of a small football and everytime you walked you carried them in your hand. This is true. I am starting to come down now and am nearly normal again. It is terrible to see the boys coming home from work, as they are all JUST able to walk now.

Yesterday **7th August, 1943** one was carried home and four supported by the other chaps. How long this will last it is hard to say, but the sooner it is over the better otherwise Boothill will be calling again. We read in papers the other day, where there were 700,000 letters-being sorted for P.O.W. and we are all praying that some will be sent here, but our camp was not mentioned in the list of P.O.W. camps, so it would be our luck not to get any. Oh Mum, I would give all my money to get a line home to you, to show you I am still alive, but the Japs don't seem to think it necessary. Well, it is the end of August and I have just celebrated my three years in the Army. It was young Pebs birthday the other day and I did not forget you dear, I suppose you are quite a young lady now. Lets hope dear your birthday was happier than mine. With the news that Italy has fallen, all the boys have great hopes of being free by Christmas but I can't see it. March or June '44 is my guess. I have traded my sweater for 250 Vitamin B which will do me for 6-8 months, but it is better to be cold for a few months than for good as I have a hell of a lot to make up for now. It is raining and we have been trying to dodge the drops as this roof is one mass of holes. When the sun is shining you can lie on your bed and watch it from sunrise to sunset and it is never out of your vision so you can just imagine what it is like when it is raining. This is the time you long for a nice mums meal, a good bath, then curl up in a chair and switch on the wireless, Oh when will it come true.

This is the end of **September** and what a bleak month it has been, ten of our chaps have died mostly from Berri-Berri and it has been very disheartening for us as we have not had a single success with any of our bed patients; and it is very hard to sit there and see them grasping for breath, for about 24 hours before they pass away. The Japs have woken and are giving us a bit more Vitamin B food. News is very scarce, but rumour rife again. Well it is Tommy's birthday once again, 26 this time. I'll soon have grey hairs. I have just worked out what I am worth from my pay book and find my pay is pounds 231.14.2 deferred pay pounds 99.2.0 and the allotment to Jess pounds 79 4.0 a total of pounds 410.0.2, but what use is it to me at present. I would gladly give the lot for a trip home, and a good Aussie meal. They have a system here that on your birthday, you receive an extra of some sort. I was extremely lucky and I got a Meat Pasty. Tommy Betts, an old cobbler, gave me a tomato he grew. We sat down to meal fit for a King, but lacking in quantity. Food is getting very scarce, all we hope is that the Japs are feeling it too.

At last we are getting on towards Christmas. It is the **4th December, 1943** and there is feverish bidding on the Stock

Market. Neil McKellar, Tonny Betts and myself sorted out what clothes we could spare and went into business because we are determined to have a good time at Christmas, so far with a lot of haggling we have procured 2 tins pineapple, 2 bottles of sugar, 4 bottles of chinese whiskey, 2 bars of chocolate and 30 packets of cigarettes, so all we want now is a Christmas pudding and a few old faces to finish it off. I'll tell you when we get home how we got it all. It is the middle of February now and are we optimistic' We received an old newspaper at last from November and the news is excellent and to back us all up we have just had two air-raids, a single bomber came over on the 13th February at 3.10 p.m., it came hedge hopping in and dropped a stick over at the wharf. We were playing cricket at the time it flew about 30 feet above us, just think only 30 feet between us and home, and we couldn't make it. The next day two or three came over the same way and bombed the wharf and gun pit, but we don't know if they hit anything. As soon as an air-raid starts, we have to go for the huts and put our windows down and wait inside and woe betide anyone who is caught outside. We expected them over yesterday but none came. Well dears, it won't be long now before I am with you again.



Latrine duty Hainan Camp - excrement was used to fertilise gardens. The accommodation huts are in the background.

It is **March 28th** and we have just witnessed a good air-raid It was Sunday, 26th about 3.00 p.m., I was watching two patients playing cards, when I heard the drone of planes, and I rushed to the door. I saw one plane going flat out for the big cranes I could tell it was ours, so I yelled "their ours" I counted five of them. I about turned and got all the windows down, as I was in charge of the hospital, then made a dive for a crack in the wall. Our camp was on a very slight rise, so we could get a good view. The heavy Ack-Ack opened up at them but they just treated them with scorn and flew round and round just above the ground and dropped their bombs, but we couldn't see what they hit and then flew away. It was a stirring sight and made you long for home. This last week I have had a terrible fit of the blues and home-sickness just like I used to get when I was small - Remember? News has been very scarce lately but I am in good health and that is all that counts here. Our tomato crop has turned out a bumper and since Christmas I have tomatoes for 2 meals a day, we have to carry water about 60 yards and they sure like water, but it is worth it. We planted some carrots the other day and are hoping for the best. We haven't had any rain since the 13th December, but just at present a storm is hanging around so here's hoping. The place looks like a chinese garden as everyone is growing vegetables. It would make you laugh to hear the discussion on food values and vitamin contents of different fruits.

April 15th, 1944 - Well we have a new epidemic now, about a week ago it broke out, para-typhoid and at last we got the Japs interested and now they spray everything they see. I was in charge of the ward where the sick were and I got it, you run a step ladder temperature for a week then remain the same then go down, in the 3rd and 4th week you get backaches, constipation or slight diarrhea and it gets into the blood stream and you get toxemia which is the danger. I have had it a little

over a week now and feel much better.

On the **8th April** twenty (20) of our chaps with some Jap guards were going by-lorry to the foothills to work when some bandits ambushed them, killed 9, 10 prisoners, 5 O.K.

Killed - Sergeant Gilder, Pte. Cornell, Pte. Claxton, Pte. Russel Talbot, Pte. Dyer, Pte. Wharton, Pte. Armstrong, Pte. McKenzie, Pte. Hymes.

Missing - Corporal Youngbery, Corporal Davidson, Pte. Stafford, Pte. Hawking, Pte. Stokes, Pte. Lynch, Pte. Haines, Pte. Ratcliff~ Pte. Struhs, Pte. Chansworth.

O.K. - Pte. O'Donnell (W.), Pte. Hillier (W.), Corporal Nelson (Pte. McMahon, Pte. Murnane.

June 17th, 1944 - It has been a gala day for us lonely boys. Three days ago we heard there were some letters in at Kokorie for us and we have been out to meet the ration truck each day since with a beaming smile and an ache of hope in our heart only to turn away downhearted because there were none but today the lorry pulled in with our mail, about 400 letters and the camp was one big noise. Everyone held their breath, as it was being issued, you could see eyes hungrily watching the sergeant as he read the names out and the look of joy as your name was read out. Anxiously I held on, oh how those moments seemed like years but at last my name, then everything stopped still and I could picture you sitting down to write just as excited as I am one, two, three, four, fancy four whole letters from my dear ones, they had even held the pen in their hands and written their thoughts on that single sheet of paper. How far away it seems, you have no idea how hard it is to conjure up your image in one's mind after 3 years. I couldn't open it I just ran round like a kid with a new toy telling everybody that I had got four. If this is how I am going to feel when I receive a letter, it will kill me when I am arriving home again. At last I plucked up courage and going away by myself with the letters tucked away against my heart I opened them one at a time. The first was Mum's and it was written two years ago, but it didn't matter, I was so pleased to hear of you all but it seemed so short, only one page, then one from that big brave true blue girl, Jessie. Gee, my heart went out to her to think I have a girl like her waiting for my return. God look after you Dear. One from Marie and one from Ray, it was as though you were all sitting around me urging me to read your letter first. Since then, I have read and re-read them a-dozen times and Neil has read mine and I have read his. Some of the boys have not been so lucky, some have had bad news and others did not get any mail at all, but I think they have got over it as we have read them part of ours. We even know that Colonus won the cup at 25/1 and beer is 9d a pot and the pubs are closed from 2.00 p.m. 'till 5.00 p.m. We have not been allowed to write but if we could only get word to you that would be the greatest joy of the lot as it would relieve your minds. Well Dears I will have to read them again so will sign off.

16th July, 1944 - Time marches on. What are the Allies doing? Everything seems so slow, news is scarce except,

rumours and we believe them until proved incorrect, otherwise life would be unbearable. The food has been good lately. We were issued with 18 packets of Prince cigarettes yesterday. How that weed builds up the moral is hard to believe, everybody is cheerful and hopeful while they have a smoke. I have spent the afternoon reading my letters and looking at my photos, what memories they bring back, they set you thinking of the welcome home you will get. Will things be changed much or not. I am sure we will have to prepare ourselves for changes, but I am hoping that they are not great as I would like to find things the same as if I had been away for a holiday.

14th August, 1944 - I haven't been too well lately so I decided to go out on a work party for a week and quite enjoyed it only it must be terribly monotonous and hard for the chaps who have to go out each day. One day I was shovelling sand into small trucks and then pushed them up a hill and so on making a road. Another day we went out into the wild country after wood, a distance of about 35 miles over the worst road I have ever seen, this country is infested with Chinese bandits and of course we had an armed guard with us. About every ten miles is a Japanese Outpost with its high walls and look-out tower in the centre. Rumours which are authentic have been coming in and does it look good, be home for Christmas or shortly after, wouldn't that be great but least we can say they can't make us do the 2.5 years again, anyhow if it doesn't finish I won't have a stitch of clothes to my name as they are all falling to pieces, but although our clothes may be worn out our spirits are a long way from it.

8th September, 1944 - Oh, how high our spirits are, we know best about the Pacific and the Yanks and it looks a certainty to be over this year, but the time now is drawing to a close it is getting terribly hard to put in. We do nothing else but talk about our home and home coming. Of a night we sit outside Les Pyers, Alan Brownley and myself and as we are all from the North Coast recalling old faces and places and trying to work out what will be our last few moments before we hit home. I have a bottle of Brandy on order for the last dash down St. Helena and believe me I'll need it. It is hard to make you see our real feelings. It was Peb's birthday about a fortnight ago, that means 4 years in the army for me. I haven't forgotten you Dear, I am not sure of your age, but I believe you to be seventeen or eighteen. What a big change I can expect when I step off the train, only a kid with plaits when I left and now a young woman but you're still only a kid to your big brother. Well hopes are high but the tummy is empty as the food is very poor and scarce again. Oh to be able to dip into the old cupboard and get a scone or slice of cake, by the way what is cake? and what does it taste like, another joy to come.

10th October, 1944 - I feel I must write something or else go mad. My ear has given me hell for 12 days and nights and it has just about got me down, there are moments when you wonder if you can really carry on, the monotony of it all, nothing to see but faces you know off by heart, you know just what they'll say and you feel like screaming at them and

having a go at the Japs by yourself, but then comes the despair, what good will it do you, you'd only get belted to death and so reason takes its place and you start to dream, dream oh there was never a dreamer in the world like the 210 in this camp, home, mothers, wives, sweethearts, good times before and after, that is our life and so it carries on one day after another, I have built and finished Jessie's and my home time out of number. God this war must finish some day, but how long. But let me finish up this moaning, because it is not like me as I always manage a smile and am a great optimist. News is good, right up to date, the rations are very poor, now we are living on rice and soup most of the time and the vegetables are lily leaves and delicious. Oh yeah' my garden is full of Hong Kong Biam and tomatoes but I haven't picked any as yet. Gee only a month and I'll be 27, soon be due for the old age pension.

9th December, 1944 - Gee its cold, this last week it has been blowing a cold northerly wind and the sky is overcast, everybody is cold. It would be O.K. if you could get out of the wind but the huts are so full of cracks that it is just as bad inside as out. The temperature has reached 48° I did my overcoat about 3 weeks ago for 180 yen and bought a jacket made out of blanket for 60 and got a supply of oil, beans and rice in for winter so Brom and I are doing fairly well. News has come to a standstill, but we are still optimistic but I am sorry to say we won't spend this Christmas with you all. Well I had my birthday, but I don't feel much different. Gee' poor old Pop's on Monday. You ought to see our boys, a lot have made bag coats, jackets and trousers. I have two Jap blankets and a Wagga made out of 2 rice bags, but who cares. There is a chap here who is a Manager of Woolworths and he goes to work with rice bag with a hole in the top for his head to go through. Gee, what a shock you would all get if you could only see us now.

10th January, 1945 - Another New Year is on its way once more and the hope still burns. We had a very good Christmas we had a couple of bottles of sting and I sang at the Concert so guess how I was. Christmas Day we had a good filling meal and presents of cigarettes, soap, handkerchief, tooth powder from the Japs.

I am having a couple of days rest. The cold has let up and the weather is good. We are almost broke now, a bottle of oil is all we have left and no smokes which is the hardest of all. News is still good and if this year doesn't finish it I give up.

5th February, 1945 - Gee, we have been 3 years P.O.W. It is hard to believe it is 3 years since we were taken out of civilisation and put into slavery, but this is the last year, just to think that the Aussies are again so close yet so far. We are all hoping this will be the next place and then look out Aussie here I come.

27th February, 1945 - Well things are starting to get real tough now. We are living on 300 grams of rice per man per

day and a weak soup of marigold and lily leaves. We get very little meat, 2 pork chops for 211 men for two meals is our best. The Japs are not nearly as bad. Our chaps are thieving food every chance they get. Many nights I have gone to bed hungry and get up in the morning hungry. I have never known what it was to be hungry before and I hope you never have the experience. But to bolster that up we learned the yanks were on Volcano and things are going fine in the West and Manilla has fallen so all we are praying for is a quick finish. Two Dutch escaped the other night and haven't been picked up and lets hope for their sakes they don't.

March 16th, 1945 - It's getting very hard to keep the old chin up. These days, extra hard, meals are bad, 450 grams a day and going down fast, no meat, some marigolds and onions. Boys getting weak, Japs bashing and beating because the boys can't do the work. Beamsley's arms broken. The only thing keeping the chin up is the news, they are fortifying the Island flat out so hopes are high that this place will be next as Burma show is moving east to F.I.C. I wouldn't care how much action happened as long as something would break. Well the worst has happened, today we started by all being confined to camp to work and are cut down to 2 meals per day at 8 a.m. and 6 p.m. which means 300 grams of rice. The Japs are flat out electrifying the fence around the camp and digging fortifications. Rumours are high, a convoy is moving this way an armistice is in progress. The British are moving across Burma into F.I.C. God' let it finish, as we are all fed up and terribly hungry. I have never eaten so little in my life, about twelve spoonfuls of rice and a mug of water and some marigolds thrown in and called soup. If only I could get a go of some of your cold meat and salad, see I still remember what we use to have on Sunday nights for tea, then scones and cakes. Pray to God it finishes quickly.

March 31st, 1945 - I am still alive, but only the meals are shocking, 300 grams per day. The soup is reduced to calabashes like a jam melon, and have had no salt for nine days. I am getting very weak, have fallen from 159 lbs to 135 lbs in less than 1 month, badly want meat and quantity We are still locked up, the last three nights Yank planes have been around all night and each night have bombed. The nearest bomb falling about half a mile away. You must be getting tired of my optimism, but it still is high, that this will be next and very soon. Prays of a thin man.

April 9th, 1945 - Bombings, we are being bombed night and day by the Yanks and are they big planes B.24's and 29's. So far today we have been bombed three times, they seem to know we are here and keep away from the camp. One piece of schrapnel came through the roof from Jap Ack-ack, a couple of days ago. The food is terrible, I am only 129 lbs. now and terribly weak; but still getting around and attending to my garden and hospital duty. Three more Dutchmen have gone to the hills. One thought in everybody's mind is food and how long before we are free. Gee I think of you a lot lately and wish to God that I could be with you all again once more.

April 23rd, 1945 - Well am in hospital again. Now got

Erysipilis and a fever but am O.K. again. Bugged that's all, like 200 other Aussies just starved. Now all we get as food is plain rice only and little of that, 200 grams if lucky, when cooked a jam tin full and three melons between 200 men, only for our garden we would be done and that is getting very hard to look after now. Something will soon have to happen or we will be in a very sorry state. We still see Yank planes every day, as they bomb this place. To think four of them could take us away in a couple of minutes too bad isn't it? We have heard the news of the landing on the Rioku group and let's hope you are giving their prisoners what we are getting. But I am afraid it isn't in your nature, but myself well I could torture or kill any Jap without the least hesitation on my part, because they are no better than or even worse than a dog. Six of our chaps including Ron Leech escaped on the night of the 16th into the hills, let's hope they live better than we are, but it is hard to know if you can trust the Chinese as you have to depend on them so much. Myself I wouldn't trust them.

May 3rd, 1945 - The general opinion is that there is big things doing in the world at present. We know Berlin has fallen to the Russians and that Germany is confined to a very small area in the Central Northern part. They have been shifting guns and men away from here and of a daytime we only have a couple of guards left in camp. There has been no bombing and only one plane over in the last four days and the rations have improved slightly. We are all very optimistic, God don't dash our hopes to the ground now as life is very hard to bear, most men have lost weight, the average weight for the 204 men is 116 lbs. I am not exaggerating when I say I can put my 2 hands around the waist of at least 10 men. I have eaten rat and snails. Rats are a delicacy and nearly everybody has a rat trap. We cook them with onions and tomatoes from out of our garden and they taste like beef stew, fancy me developing into a person who would eat rats, but dears, well we have to eat to get home to you all and I'll eat anything to do that. The snails, it is funny to see grown men down on hands and knees chasing snails, horrible slimy things but still protein.

May 14th, 1945 - The food has got so bad that we are only getting two small tea cups of rice a day and four men died of malnutrition and we got in touch with Japanese General at Hokurie and he was terribly astounded to see us like we were and it seems it was the chap who issued the stores who was robbing us and now things are improving but we still aren't getting near enough. We can't even get salt. My weight is down to 117 lbs. from 159 lbs. We have had no news lately but are very confident we will be home soon.

May 29th, 1945 - Was it fate I'm sure it must have been which blew the papers and bulletin into our camp after being days without a rumour that Germany has finished on the 8th at 11.00 hours and Japan had refused unconditional surrender and was going to fight on, silly blighters. It must be great news to you, but it is marvellous to us, but now every minute counts as we are living on plain rice and the hot winds are ruining our gardens, so although a couple of months does not mean a thing to you it means life and death to us, so far we have lost four in eight weeks, and Berri-Berri is very bad, I have it



Australian POWs boarding a train for Sama (Sanya) 31 August 1945. The train was derailed by Chinese guerillas and the prisoners were forced to return.



Ambon City from Mt Sirimau



Paul, Pat & Tom



Liang

myself but our moral is high and these yellow cows won't have the satisfaction of planting me. Men who normally weigh 14 stone are 8-9 stone and can hardly carry a bucket of water, it is terrible to see them, but you can't break the good old Aussie spirit.

June 20th, 1945 - Time marches on. Well our numbers have been reduced by 3 and now we are 197 left out of 263. Lately we have been fairing a little better getting 300 grams of rice per day, some meat, fat sweet potatoes, beans, only small amounts but very helpful to starving men, because that is what we are. Everyone watches the next to see that he gets his right rations. Tempers are frayed but still we exist. Everybody is hungry from one day to another. It would be lovely to fill your belly with any rubbish so long as it was full.

We heard the news on the 14th about the Jap diet meeting and our hopes are high in fact Mum I'll be home with you all in a couple of months, see if I am not right. These blighters can't last, it only stands to reason they can't fight the world. The Japs themselves are fed up and tell us Scorche Martie Martie (wait awhile) when they discuss unconditional surrender twice in a month it means they are looking for an honourable way out. We'll be seeing you shortly. We have to put a concert on tonight for the Japs, but we aren't going to any trouble.

July 1st, 1945 - It is Sunday and a beautiful sunny day, but three Dutchmen have died before dinner and we are down to 190, so that puts a damper on everybody, but we are getting a little better rations and can exist on it for a few months as long as you don't get sick. Weight 117 lbs. No news, still talk only of food, meals we will eat when we are free, and of home faces of friends, etc. but we have all talked ourselves out 2 years ago, it is just repetition and one is sick of it, but food never seems to wear out and some of the recipes that are thought out here makes your mouth water. I suppose it is very cold at home now. It was only last night we went over our return trip home by train from Sydney to the Bay and we have arranged to have a big port packed in Sydney and eat all the way home. My idea is to get Jessie to go up home and then I will land home by the mail at 5.30 and meet everybody at once so that there would not be any jealousy, but yet again you might all be in Sydney to meet me, so it is hard to form any plan. I have arranged a little small goods run for Pop so he won't have to worry about money matters after he retires. It is only small but should return him and myself a nice little income and so give him an interest in life, which is for his own benefit, but it is early yet and we will see when we get home eh' Pop. I wish we were having a few jugs of beer together today as it is nice and hot for it and I would enjoy it and I'm sure you would. But never mind Pop we will make up for it one of these days and have a day out in Lismore, don't tell Mum will you .

Sweeps are very popular and I am in the Unit one which has been going for a couple of years and just lately now it is a day to day matter. We have 110 to 5 one which would be very handy. Each time I write I say I will be seeing you soon and I say it again as it must shortly come as by the law of averages

we have overdone our turn of suffering and it must break soon, God willing.

July 24th, 1945 - Well yesterday was a gala day for me in one way - we had fairly good rations which we have been getting now for about 3 days and feel much better, it is only rice, 300 grams and dried sweet potatoes and dried fish. Next and most hopeful and cheering was between 7 - 13 fighters. including Hurricans came over and had a good look round,-can they move. It is the first fighters we have seen, we know they must be off an aircraft carrier or close land bases, which is wonderful, but the most cheerful is that I have a smoke again. I managed to sell my blanket lumber jacket for 160 yens and believe me that is the best news of the lot. You have no idea what a great uplift it is when you have a smoke, then you can beat anything. We haven't had any news since the 4th and I believe the Japs have had no bulletin since the 9th which is a good sign.

We are still talking about food. Gee Mum you will have to have a good cook to keep it up to me. Oysters, beans, kidneys and sweets. Makes your tongue water to think of them. The Dutch have at last caught up with us, we are now 187 each when originally we were 500 strong. They have lost 16 this month and us 3. But I am in good health only weak and only 116 lbs. but keep me a chair at the table for Christmas dinner.

August 16th, 1945 - Still a P O.W but still in good health, but a little bit disappointed with the way the war is going. Heavens they should be stuck into the Japs by this. It is 3 months since they beat Germany We have heard a pretty consistant rumour that Russia is in against Japan, so we hope that will hurry it up. Rice is pretty short on the Island so we haven't had any for about 3 weeks and are living on dried sweet potatoes, pumpkins and a small amount of dried fish (10-22 lbs. about once a week). The potatoes are very nice but they have given a lot diarrhea and we are still losing men, we are down to 182 and it looks like losing a few more yet worst luck. I purchased an I.O.U., half share in a dutch blanket for 10 and got 300 grams of tobacco and a half tin of salt - a white net for 4, got 3 bottles of ketchup and 180 smokes, so am doing reasonably well. A lot have given up the garden, but I am persevering with mine. Get a meat tin of cooked greens a day which helps a lot. Pebs birthday in 10 days, I never thought I would have been here this long, but I'm afraid if some of us could have seen the future we wouldn't be here as it is only hope and optimism which keeps us going. No one at home can ever realize what we have been through. I hope you never have to, all we ever worry about is to get a full belly, eat anything, any sort of weed is good and snakes, snails are a delicacy. One chap is even rearing a couple of frogs to eat so you can see what it is like. Two chaps next to me sat down to a feed of roasted wood grubs and believe me they were good as I had one to taste. Well cheerio and God help us.

Postscript

31 January 1996

It is exactly fifty-four years today since we were taken P.O.Ws. The reason I am writing this episode is because everybody who reads my diary says I never completed it, as the last entry is on 16 August 1945, therefore I have not put my thoughts and experiences of when the war finished. So I am trying to recall how I experienced the last days. The War had finished when I wrote my last entry but we were not informed till 26 August, 10 days later, which would have possibly saved a few more lives.

We had been confined to camp for over a fortnight and were told to paint the letters P.O.W. on the roof of one hut.

At about 6 pm on 26 August 1945 , I was in the hospital giving vitamin B powders to the patients, the vitamin B was made by crushing the husks off the rice into a powder and then we wrapped a dose in a piece of paper this helped with Beri-Beri. The next thing I heard was our adjutant, Capt. Clive Newnham running across the parade ground from the Japanese guardhouse shouting "its over, the War has finished". I threw the rest of the powders in the air and shouted 'you won't need these'. The camp was in an uproar. Groups of friends were excitedly laughing and hugging one another. I remember Neil McKeller, Allen Brownley and myself had a small green pumpkin growing, but it was soon in the cooking pot and eaten. I don't think anyone slept that night as we were all planning what we would eat and do when we arrived home. Next day an American plane flew over and dropped three American soldiers by parachute but we never saw them till next day as the Japs wouldn't allow them in. But they defied the Japs and came in and wirelessly to Kunming in China and they sent planes down and dropped food, cigarettes etc and we were like kings smoking Camel cigarettes one after another. The Yanks arranged to transport our chaps by train about 100 miles to the Jap air base at Sama, but the train was ambushed by the Chinese and had to return but left the next day and got through OK. Dr Aitkin, Dal Griffin and myself stayed behind to try and do something for the Chinese labourers from Hong Kong who were in a bad way. We were there about a week and then went by fishing boat to Sama, where the Yanks had established a hospital and did they look after us. Most of the well chaps left by destroyer for home, but the medical staff stayed with the sick and were picked up by the English hospital ship "Gerusalem" and taken to Hong Kong and there transferred to the British Aircraft Carrier "Striker" and returned via Manila, and Manus Island to Sydney. Don't ask me what day we arrived because I can't remember. It now seems so long ago, but I married my sweetheart, Jessie the day after I was discharged and we had a very happy life, having twins Paul and Nan of whom we were both very proud. I lost my pal last year but she is forever with me.

Tom Pledger

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