



**THE TERRITORY
REMEMBERS
75 YEARS**

Commemorating the Bombing of Darwin
and defence of Northern Australia

2/21 Battalion Camp site

The Territory Remembers

From Darwin to Darwin – Recalling Gull Force

By Sandra McComb

Gallipoli resonates strongly for many Australians as the most significant battle in our wartime history. More recently and closer to home, the Burma-Thailand Railway and the Kokoda Trail offensives have been highlighted in history books and documentaries. Another initiative less well-known, but equally poignant, began from the shores of the Northern Territory, sailing from Darwin to Ambon in Indonesia, and for those who survived, returning to Darwin. At intervals in the latter part of the 20th century historians wrote of this battle.¹ It deserves continuing recognition, remaining a significant story, depicting a struggle of human endeavour, of futility, of courage and endurance, of death in wartime. It also serves to demonstrate a massive lack of judgment and duty of care on the part of the military establishment of the time. Regarding human beings as expendable should never be acceptable practice.

Individuals who survived this battle have told a number of stories of their experiences of Ambon and surrounding islands. Those who survived lived full lives. But these were few, and always the memories of their wartime experience backgrounded their existence. I met some of these men as the daughter of one member of the 2/21st Infantry Battalion, 23rd Brigade of the 8th Division, named Gull Force. Only two groups of men survived – those who battled as POWs for the length of the war in appalling conditions, and secondly those few who escaped. As the Australian War Memorial describes:

“The 2/21st Infantry Battalion, part of the 23rd Brigade of the 8th Division, began assembling at Trawool in central Victoria on 11 July 1940. Approximately half the recruits were from Melbourne and the rest from rural Victoria. Training was conducted at Trawool until 23 September when the battalion began to move to Bonegilla, near Wodonga on the New South Wales-Victoria border. It made the 235 km journey on foot, arriving on 4 October. Training soon resumed and occupied the battalion until it commenced another move on 23 March 1941 for Darwin in the Northern Territory.”²

At Bonegilla preparation for war involved getting fit. There were route marches and sporting activities. These activities were accompanied by the selection of officers and officer training. If the men were frustrated by lack of purpose and inadequate training equipment here, their subsequent transfer to Darwin was even less ennobling. And what was to befall as they left the shores of Northern Australia made little use of fitness, except as a basis for survival. Hierarchical selection later served only to create a bitter dispute within the POW camp between officers and common soldiers.

Various backgrounds and reasons for joining the Army existed prior to enlistment, but mostly the men who came forward simply felt it was time to do their duty for king and country. Arthur Young enlisted as a corporal on June 13 1940, age 27, shortly after the start of World War II assuming he would see service in Europe or the Middle

East: "I saw myself going off over there with some vague idea of fighting England's enemies and therefore ours."³ His experience at the Vacuum Oil Company was to stand him in good stead.

Eric Kelly enlisted on 4 July 1940, age 21. As a tailor he was also to find his skills useful in wartime. Both Kelly and Young, decades later, considered themselves lucky to have survived the war years. Young escaped, and was posted to manage oil installations in Papua New Guinea. Kelly remained a prisoner and used his talents repairing clothes of prisoners and Japanese guards while enduring the horrors of three years of imprisonment.

Max Gilbert enlisted on 10 July 1940. He was only 19 years old, a boy as he puts it, nevertheless describing his reason for joining as "patriotism - we were part of the British Empire". Born on 24 April 1921, he is at the time of writing 94 years old, the only surviving member of the 2/21st battalion. Witty and accepting, he still displays the spirit and determination which saw him emerge from the camp in 1945.⁴ They, along with others, represent the survivors.

The members of the 2/21st were not initially sent abroad as many hoped but dumped, as fate would have it, to Darwin, after chugging slowly through central Australia on the Ghan train line. As one member commented:

"A few miles south of Darwin where there is no railway station

Our train came slowly to a halt: it was our destination!

To conclude our story, our luck is surely 'cursed'

It's not our fault we're not abroad,

*It's the fate of the Twenty-First."*⁵

Cattle trucks were used as transport when the train lines ended. At Winnellie near Darwin they camped for eight months, frustrated and dispirited. A disastrous fate was to follow. As young recalls:

"It all started for us, the 2/21 Battalion, Gull Force, A.I.F., when after some eighteen months' training in Australia, we were encamped at Darwin on that fateful day of December 7 1941, the day the Japanese fleet attacked and devastated the American Pacific base at Pearl Harbour. There had been no declaration of war or any warning whatsoever, but suddenly America had been brought into the Second World War, as an ally of the British against the axis powers - Germany, Italy and now Japan. While this sneak attack was shocking to America...Britain [already at war in the Asian sphere] (and therefore ourselves) and America were at war with Japan from that day.

"We were given our orders to move out; to where, most of us knew not... It was fairly exciting to be moving out at last. We were bored just squatting in Darwin. Anticipating Japanese entry into the war our generals and our politicians had long since decided on the deployment of Australian forces to the north of Australia...I don't suppose this situation concerned us rank and file soldiers as we naively believed in our own capacity to meet anything that opposed us. After all the Japanese would have to break through Singapore first and they would have to deal with the 2/21 Battalion (all 1200 of us) if they managed to struggle this far.

"We were confident they were in a no-win situation. Didn't the Japanese get air-sick? Weren't they so short-sighted they could scarcely see their target? And wasn't their equipment so inferior that their guns were more dangerous to themselves than to anyone they aimed at? So our information led us to believe - just a pushover for us."⁽ⁱ⁾

In fact, 12 days before Singapore fell on 15 February 1942, the Japanese attacked Ambon.

In December 1941, Gull Force had sailed for Ambon Island then known as the Netherlands East Indies (present-day Indonesia). The force of 1090 was made up of the 2/21st Battalion and C troop 18th Anti-Tank Battery, three sections of the 2/11th Field Coy, one section Australian Army Service Corps, 2/12th Field Ambulance Detachment, 23rd Special Dental Unit and 104 Light Aid Detachment.

Picked up by three Dutch tramp steamers at Darwin, diverted with their contents of Javanese families, goats, poultry and general cargo Gull Force set out. After three days on the water, told of their destination only when it came into view, these men were landed on the Island of Amboina, portrayed as "an important naval base, the capital of the South Moluccas, the Spice Islands of the Dutch East Indies".

The village in which the Australians were landed was Tan Toey (later Tan Tui). The barracks comprised a number of large thatched huts with concrete floors, upon which blankets and boots served as sleeping quarters. Cooks from the Army Services Corps provided plentiful meals. As Young said: "...why not enjoy the picturesque little island we found ourselves on - its food, its climate and its friendly people?"

Morale was high as they set about defending the island, but no-one at infantry level yet knew of the background to this foray to Ambon, the doubts and outright warnings provided by officers of the 2/21st to senior army officials in Melbourne. Neither were they concerned that Dutch seniority and poor resourcing might affect their wellbeing. As recorded in Fall of Ambon, Australia's War 1939-1945:

"The Dutch commander, Lieutenant-Colonel J R L Kapitz, was senior to the Australian commander, Lieutenant-Colonel L N Roach, and took control of both forces, dispersing them into two groups. One group was sent to defend the airfield at Laha on the west side of Ambon Bay and the others were deployed to the east of the bay, south of the town of Ambon. Both the Australian and the Dutch forces were inadequately prepared and under-equipped. Lieutenant-Colonel Roach, aware of the futility of their task, made repeated requests for reinforcements of both men and equipment from Australia, even suggesting that Gull Force should be evacuated from the island if it could not be reinforced. Instead, he was recalled to Australia and Lieutenant-Colonel John Scott, a 53-year-old Army Headquarters staff officer from Melbourne, replaced Roach as commanding officer of Gull Force in the middle of January."⁶

Scott had volunteered himself as Roach's replacement when he heard that the British General Wavell had suggested to the Australian General Sturdee that Roach's views were unacceptable. During this period in Australia's wartime history Britain still held sway. Australian lives meant little given broader British and likely Dutch objectives.

Respect is one aspect of successful military behaviour. Roach had earned that in the time spent with his battalion at Darwin before active service began. Reading comments from survivors of Ambon indicates that Scott never won respect. Cliff Warn, an escapee who did not have to endure imprisonment for a lengthy period, was able to see immediately that communication was a problem. Scott was 'the officer type' who never talked to the troops.⁷

Warn was supported in his assessment of Scott by others such as Ralph Godfrey, who also suggested that Roach would have fought harder and not surrendered so quickly, within four days, potentially allowing more to escape.⁸ The dreadful consequences of Kapitz's actions only added to the misery of an ill-planned offensive.

Ignorant of these concerns, Arthur Young was allocated 20 Ambonese soldiers to 'wire the island for sound', running out miles of insulated steel cables mostly hooked on to trees. Young was attending to a faulty line, which in fact had been chewed by goats, when his signals section crossed to Laha. He was left behind, saved by the hillside goats of Ambon. Eric Kelly was occupied as quarter-master, managing stores when his unit transferred to Laha. Both much later recognised that fate played a part in their first reprieve from death. More than 200 Australians sent to Laha by Kapitz were massacred there on 6 February 1942 and between 15 and 20 February 1942, not that Kapitz could possibly have imagined the likelihood of such slaughter. In fact, as long-time survivor Max Gilbert recently pointed out: "We on the other side of the island had no idea what was going on across the bay...until three-and-a half years later".⁹

The Australians were overwhelmed by the Japanese. Even Roach's request for more men and equipment, had it been granted, could not have prevented eventual capitulation. Bombing was increasing from above, but the major problem was the unexpected naval attack. Warn was on the bridge in the town with one solitary machine gun when the Japanese Navy arrived. Young was stationed on the grassy hill above the town. He recalled:

"We were no match for their strength of numbers nor could we deal with their equipment. We were driven back and back until we were spread up the side of the mountain at a place called Amahoesoe.

"There we waited for another assault across a ravine about a thousand yards wide. The mountain was steep, sloping to the sea and barren except for a tree or two and grass up to six inches in height. We lay in this grass in the early morning peering over the ridge, looking for any movement, and waited. I had a sugar bag full of grenades and my Lee Enfield rifle and bayonet. With about half a dozen young chaps I was positioned about half-way up the mountain. Presently great activity took place on the bay – a mixed flotilla of

naval craft appeared fairly close in shore on our side of the bay. We could see the gun crews on deck and suddenly the leading ship opened up its guns on us. There was a puff of smoke and almost simultaneously a sound of gunfire and the screech of a shell bursting around us. Each of ten or eleven other ships followed suit; then all turned and sailed past Laha and subjected our chaps on the other side of the bay to the same treatment.



An unarmed man disarms an armed attacker in training at Bonegilla

"Out of the bay they sailed only to return in half an hour to repeat the performance. We had no way of responding and became almost fatalistic about it. The Japanese land forces were standing back while their navy subdued us. To this day I cannot understand why they didn't annihilate us -- they could have. We simply sat up opened our tins of bully beef and hard biscuits and took a swig of water from our bottles, and watched the show.

"After several hours our C.O. ordered us down from our positions and informed us he had surrendered unconditionally to the Japanese after they had refused passage to an ambulance headed to our field hospital – which was already in Japanese hands. The C.O. explained that he could not say how the Japanese would treat us as prisoners of war, but the option was either to fight it out and be annihilated or take the chance. Had we known then of the massacre at Laha, we might have decided differently".¹⁰

There were dissenters at the time as to surrendering. Platoons out on patrol such as that led by 2 IC Major Macrae, having heard whispers of a surrender and being near the coast, aimed to seek local help to gain freedom. Lieutenant Bill Jinkins similarly rebelled against surrender but eventually had to march with his fellow officers and surrender arms.

By February 1942, Gull Force was in captivity at Tan Tui (on Ambon). In October 1942 the prisoners were divided into two groups. One group was transported to Hainan Island aboard the Taiko Maru, disembarking on 5 November 1942 and being imprisoned in Haicho Camp (Colonel W. J. R. Scott's Force). The other group remained on Ambon.¹¹

The men who remained at Tan Toey comprised those who stayed until release and those who managed to escape. The barracks had become the prison camp, with wire perimeters added. They found food where they could. As has been described over the years, conditions became appalling. Publications which relate the treatment by Japanese soldiers, including those based on interviews and war records, tell of starvation, beatings, disease and war crimes. The fact that Japanese soldiers also suffered does not eliminate responsibility for the cruelty, not to say murder, that some committed.

Most survivors would say that in the very early days of capture 'Ike Ouchi' as interpreter was not harsh in his treatment of prisoners, rather niggling internees with

commentary: "See aeroplanes? They are going to bomb Darwin. Australia finish. Melbourne, Sydney, Darwin all finish!" There was no information available to challenge that. But it still seemed that there was hope since the Japanese failed to keep count of those who went out under the wire and returned with food from the locals. But when 'Ike Ouchi' became Camp Commandant things changed. He was hanged as a war criminal for his actions.

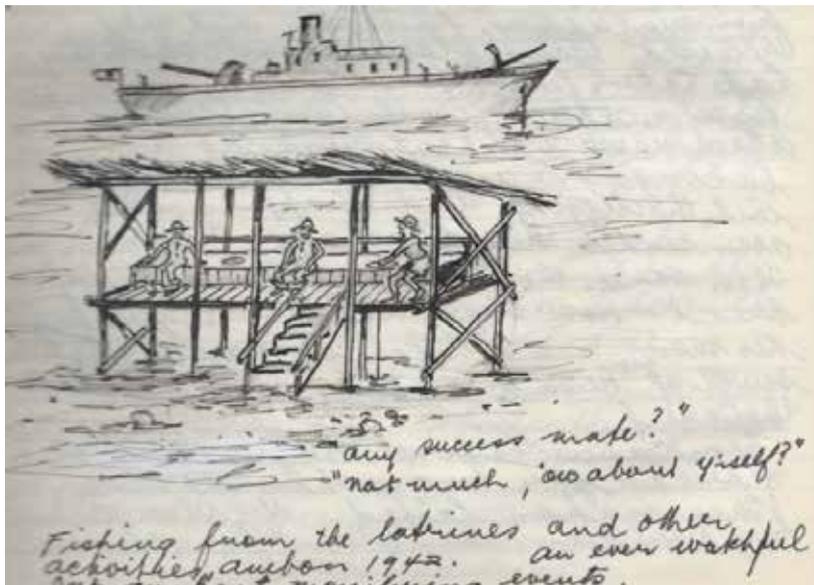
It is not necessary to describe the horrors again. Nor is it possible to assign particular reasons for survival to the end, but some attempts have been made, allowing for massive doses of fate to be taken into account.

Eric Kelly, assigned the role of tailor living in the Q store, traded Japanese uniform repair for cigarettes, which he would then barter for miserable amounts of food. He was also able to avoid work parties which destroyed the health of so many of his fellow internees. Many of the officers survived because they refused to join work parties. Kelly, Young and Godfrey all pointed to the collapse of discipline immediately upon internment. Some of the officers hid in their huts. There was no leadership. They were not really regarded as officers any more but simply fellow POWs. And since everyone believed the war would end shortly, hardship did not create a need to pull together – until later when survival became the sole objective.¹²

Then, as Max Gilbert put it, mateship for him became a moral and practical support through the years, even though he lost his best mates one by one. He also put his survival down to being skinny: "I say that because from my recollection it was the big men who died first. They were needing more nutrition than I".¹³ Corporal Arthur Young, in the camp for almost two months, saw disease starting to take its toll very early on, so that "some simply gave up and lost interest in living". Others appeared content to sit out the war. Of course, that contentment was to be shattered by violence. Max Gilbert "never wanted to escape but neither did he ever give up, like some did." He "never believed he would not get home".¹⁴

Such determination played out in different ways. For some the will to live could not outlast the physical deprivation – the starvation which took its toll in the last days of captivity. Stuart Swanton, a religious man, who had taken over as 'pastor' when the unit chaplain had died, offered Gilbert conversation other than football. Gilbert still has a printout of Rudyard Kipling's poem If which Swanton quoted word for word as a "good model to live by". Maybe the lines: If you can... hold on when there is nothing in you/

Except the Will which says to them: "Hold on!" helped both men to exist. Sadly Swanton died only a month before the last survivors were released. Very early after being taken prisoner he had told Arthur Young that he was "ready to meet his maker". But something drove him to continue until beri-beri took his life.



Young was not interested in dying or remaining a prisoner. Aware even in the first few weeks of captivity that others were falling ill, he seized the opportunity to leave. Approached by Lieutenant Gordon Jack under Major Macrae's request, he joined six members of the official escape party. Lieutenant Jinkins was in charge. Without knowing who else was involved, Young was given tasks to assist Jack in planning

and was finally told "Evening 17 March. Go". Private Cliff Warn was also included, without prior knowledge of how events were to proceed. Lieutenant Rod Rudder, Private Alex Chew and Private Harry Coe completed the group, all chosen for a variety of skills such as seamanship, experience with fuel and boats and fitness of mind and body. Duty to escape played a part for some individuals in agreeing to join the official party, despite keen feelings of remorse at leaving mates behind. Young had to leave Swanton, a pre-war family friend, without telling him of the escape. Many years later he still regretted this action. Deciding to escape was a duty and a risk – if caught it meant certain death on recapture. But the possibility of freedom outweighed many doubts and furthermore there was a role to play.

The escape was supported within the camp. The officers were replaced at roll call and as Gilbert says all were pleased when no-one returned. Macrae sent the party off with orders to get to Darwin and advise military personnel of the situation on Ambon. As senior officer, Scott was told of the escape and wanted to join but health issues, viewed as a risk to progress, prevented this. Later that year in October 1942, Macrae and Scott were transferred to Hainan and survived.

Officers remaining long-term at Tan Toey also survived. Gilbert explains why – they stayed in camp while rank and file went out on work parties. Officers were able to establish a vegetable garden but did not share food.¹⁵ Officers' quarters on Hainan were clearly more comfortable than for ordinary infantry men but perhaps their ability to grow food, unlike in Tan Toey, saw a lower death rate. Survival for the seven escapees from Tan Toey was not dependent on defeating devastating hunger, disease or mental and physical deprivation and ill-treatment. It rested



L-R: AMON, myself and ANGER (K.I.A) signalling to "HMAS SWAN" from a beach position on the bay of Ambon — prior to Japs invasion.

first and foremost on the cooperation of local Indonesians. It depended upon physical skill, on holding one's nerve and on group support under Jinkins' leadership.

After clearing the prison camp – all out under the wire in 70 seconds – they disappeared into the trees to be welcomed by the family and friends of Barbara and Bill Gaspaesz. Jinkins had been out several times and arranged through them to have a boat ready on the other side of the island. The story of the escape is captivating but too long to include here.¹⁶

Extraordinary risks were taken by the Gaspaesz and others. Whatever world news was available to Macrae before the escape was gathered via a hidden radio, which Bill monitored and passed on. Macrae also crawled out of the camp on various nights. Bill and his younger family members had already suffered beatings at the hands of the Japanese. Worse was to befall the young Ambonese boy, Peter, who was beheaded on his return from escorting the escape party on the first leg of its journey. After the escape the radio was buried.¹⁷

At every island stopover after leaving Ambon, there was the danger of the occupying Japanese capturing the escapees and the various vessels begged, borrowed and purchased from local people. The Dutch assisted on occasion but without support in kind from Indonesian people – coconut oil for engines, a certain amount of food for the men, local knowledge of Japanese positions – the journey would have faltered. It seems that Bill Jinkins, undisputed leader, had a strong negotiating capacity.

And, as Warn pointed out, despite losing several craft to the sea and winds, they had significant luck on their side. The Japanese fighters overhead ignored them. The sands on the northern coast of Australia did not swallow them up. No-one was ill and they remained a focused team to the end. Reach Darwin they did, on 4 May 1942, not knowing that the pub they were dreaming of had been bombed. As Young pointed out 'Ike Ouchi' was partly correct.

A slight disappointment can be detected in the writings of both Warn and Young as to their reception in Darwin. An element of disbelief by the interrogating officers of three services – how could such a journey have been possible? – delayed their going ashore. Then placed under security, they were forbidden to discuss their adventure. Jinkins was interviewed separately. His main aim was to alert the powers that existed to the Ambonese situation. Jinkins' plan to rescue the POWs on Ambon came after he recovered from the shock of the greeting he received in Melbourne from General Sturdee, Chief of General Staff: "I never expected to see you again." It was now clear that the Ambonese

mission had been suicidal. Nevertheless, Sturdee managed to convince the Navy to go ahead with Jinkins' plan. He at least had recognised the mistakes made.⁽ⁱⁱ⁾ But as he moved off to the United States, replaced by Generals Blamey and MacArthur, seemingly politics intervened and the mission was cancelled. POWs were to stay imprisoned to the end of the war. Had the military powers known of the Laha massacre, the decision may have been different. As it was Ambon was not a priority.

The futile expedition to Ambon was beleaguered from the start, not as extensive as Gallipoli, but at least as horrific, created and upheld by those safely ensconced in locations far away from the fields of battle. Problems of planning and leadership saw the return of just on 300 of those 1190 men who set out from Darwin to hold Ambon in the face of Japanese invasion.

The friendships which later evolved were all there was to cheer. Fraught with ugly memories, tinged for some with a guilt which they were not meant to shoulder, survivors simply got on with being alive. Somehow they pushed the memories aside. For many years Macrae, and Jinkins were intermittent visitors to our home. As a family we visited Cliff (Pitt) Warn at his home in Merimbula. Most rewarding was the relationship which developed between Barbara and Bill Gaspaesz with several members of the 2/21st Battalion. Many visited Ambon in official groups to recognize their contribution. Arthur and Shirley Young visited Ambon in 1972, 30 years after the seven escaped along the steep track. None of Jinkins' escape party had seen in it in daylight.

On 30 April 1996 Arthur Young noted in his diary: "Bill Jinkins (my co-escapee from Ambon POW camp) died yesterday... I think only Harry Coe, now in his 90s, and I, are the only two survivors of that escape party of seven." All have now gone, but their stories remain. It took 40 years for many on Ambon to speak out – to set aside the horrors of the camps, but they succeeded. The war changed them. Both Gilbert and Young lost their faith in the forms of religion they held to before the war. For Max Gilbert, freedom was the ultimate prize. He 'went in a boy and came out a man'. After anger dissipated he recognised that he had a life and needed to live it. He continues to do so, with his family.

Arthur Young, my father, also married Shirley and set about enabling rich lives for me, my brother David, and our children. Our parents travelled to Japan viewing the Japanese people in a favourable light, wondering how such terrible events should have occurred, only decades earlier.

Notes

- (i) This was the reason for holding troops near Darwin for such a long time. 'The Australian 8th Division of which we, the 2/21 Battalion, the 2/22 Battalion and the 2/40 Battalion formed the 23rd Brigade, was ordered to take up prearranged strategic positions. The two other brigades of the division with attached troops went to Singapore and Malaya, while the 2/21 Battalion went to Ambon in the South Moluccas, the 2/22 Battalion to Rabaul, and the 2/40 to Timor. As a result of the wide deployment of the three battalions of the 23rd Brigade, the Brigade Headquarters was disbanded and our headquarters then became Land Headquarters at Victoria Barracks, St Kilda Road, Melbourne, at least three thousand miles away from us, so that you couldn't just drop in for a chat and a coffee with the Brigadier if you needed to get your daily routine orders'. Young, Arthur, Post-war Diary. Private papers.
- (ii) General Sturdee's signed paper of 15 February 1942 stated: 'So far in this war against Japan we have violated the principle of concentration of forces in our efforts to hold numerous small localities with totally inadequate forces which are progressively overwhelmed by vastly superior numbers. These small garrisons alone without adequate reinforcement or support never appeared to have any prospect of withstanding even a moderate scale of attack. In my opinion, the present policy of trying to hold isolated islands with inadequate resources needs review.' www.awm.gov.au/collection/RCDIG1070592.

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6. Fall of Ambon, Australia's War 1939-1945. (Australian Government, Department of Veterans' Affairs)
7. Bowden, Tim. Interview with Clifton Warn, 8 April, 1984 for ABC Radio Series, Prisoners of War, Australians Under Nippon.
8. Roberts Billett, Janet. Interview with Lieutenant Ralph Godfrey, 2 March 2000. Australian War Memorial Sound Collection www.awm.gov.au/collection/SO4326.
9. The Courier Mail, Brisbane, August 30, 2015. Mr Gilbert, 94, travelled to Darwin from Victoria for the 70th Anniversary of Gull Force on Sunday 30 August, 2015.
10. Young, Arthur, Post-war Diary. Private papers.

11. Of the 263 prisoners of war sent to Hainan Island, 182 were still alive at the end of the war. They returned to Australia on HMS Vindex and the hospital ship Jerusalem. Those who remained on Ambon returned, via Morotai, on HMAS Glenelg, Junee, Cootamundra and Latrobe, or went directly to Sydney on the hospital ship Wanganella. Amboina, Australian War Memorial Records.
12. Roberts Billett, Janet. Interview with Eric Kelly.
13. ABC News, 23 April, 2012. Digger recounts brutal life in WWII prison camp.
14. Interview with Max Gilbert, 8 November, 2015 by Sandra McComb.
15. *ibid.*
16. Research and compilation is continuing and this story will be part of a forthcoming publication. Sandra McComb.
17. Roberts Billett, Janet. Interview 10 August, 1999. Bill Gasparesz and Barbara Gasparesz, discuss their experience as citizens of Ambon during the Second World War. www.awm.gov.au/collection/SO4325.

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