

El Tigre : Frank Holland, M.B.E. - commando, coastwatcher / [editor: Peter Stone, with Mabel Holland & John Holland]. - Yarram, Vic. : Oceans Enterprises, 1999: 96-101, 102.

With Lizard 3, two officers, Lt. L.W. Ross and Capt. R.C. Neave, went into Timor under the command of the leader of Lizard Party on a mission connected with obtaining supplies of rubber for Australia. They acted under the orders of Lt. Col. L.W. Elliot, Special Reserve, A.U.S., and were successful in evacuating a few tons of rubber. (See previous chapter).

MOVING RUBBER UNDER THE VERY NOSES OF THE JAPANESE

Rubber being taken out of the Japanese occupied territory, under their very nose, was the exploit of two Australian officers. This work was very dangerous, as the Japs were sending patrols through this part of the country fairly often, and air reconnaissance up and down the coast every day, and any movement on the ground would be easily seen from the air as there was not much cover such as trees in this part of the country.

The native chiefs were very shrewd, as when they heard of the arrival of the Japanese in their country, they ordered that all the rubber should be taken away from the main village and hidden around the country, in small lots, and if any Japanese were seen to be coming around that way it would be moved.

At last, we got to hear about it. Two officers were chosen to go and interview the chiefs, Camisiro, Afonso and his brother Luiz. (The latter two were later killed by the Japanese as they would not assist in their new order). The interview was carried out and it was found that there was not as much rubber to be found as thought at first, but they would take what was available. After a lot of talk and bargaining about the price of the rubber, and the use of native carriers and horses, a settlement was arrived at. The work of bringing the rubber in from the hideouts was started without delay. As the rubber was hidden in small quantities all over the place it was some considerable time before it all gathered together in the main hideout selected by the two men. Native guards had been put out and ordered to keep a sharp eye open for the Japs, and to report at once to the two officers.

At last all the rubber was at the main base and it was estimated to be about four tons. The three chiefs were paid, as were the carriers who had brought the rubber in. All were quite pleased with the deal and glad to see the last of the rubber as it had given them a lot of work and worry which a native does not like. And now the task of transporting the four tons of rubber to the coast, a trip of two days. The natives and horses had all been arranged for this, and scouts had been sent ahead to spy out the lay of land and find out if any Japanese were around the vicinity of the port or if any of the other natives along the road were collaborating with the Japanese. Many of these did so not because of their love for the little yellow men, but to save their own skins and their families, as the Jap stood for no nonsense and cut their heads off quick if his orders were not obeyed to the letter.

Reports came in that the coast was all clear and that Nip had left that part of the country for a few days at least - it was only a few days that was needed to get the rubber out of the country. A line of two hundred of the strongest natives were picked. Many of the women of the men were included and so made up the two-hundred strong. All the horses for miles around were

also brought in and one hundred and twenty of the strongest were selected. All reports indicated that the road was clear, and the men were told not to leave their post, so all was well. The only trouble now was aircraft; the natives had been instructed what to do in the advent of planes coming over. This was impressed on them for their own safety also.

Everything was made ready the night before for an early start in the morning; it was known that Japs have their air patrols run to clockwork. His time in the morning was around ten, sometimes he was not on time, but it was hoped he would be in the morning, as an early start would bring the pack train to a little bush about that time, and all could take cover there until the plane had passed - and it would also be a rest.

The two officers were up bright and early, had a snack, and set to work to get the pack train on the move before daylight. It was some job to get horses used in the operation packed and two hundred natives moving. Some of the natives were carrying 30 to 40 lbs. of rubber; others led the pack horses, and more to act as extras to give others a spell on the road. More were armed with dyman (spears) to look after their families in case of trouble, but what could a few spears do against a machine gun or rifle - it gave them a certain amount of confidence.

So, at daybreak the train pulled out, and was ordered to keep on the move as it reached the little patch of bush decided previously where a halt would be made until all clear again. The sooner everybody reached there the longer the rest they would have, and the first to reach the place were told not on any account were they to light a fire or camp out in the open ground. The country around here is very mountainous, and the pack train wound its way along narrow paths, really only native tracks. All were in single file and of course the train was stretched out for a mile or more and looked like a great snake going around the hills. What a nice mess a Jap plane could make of this. With very little cover around he could machine gun and bomb just as he liked. Ears and eyes were kept open in case 'one fellow' (the Japanese airman) was on an early morning constitutional for his health but it would not be so healthy for the pack train.

Time seemed to drag on and all seemed to be going slow. It seemed that the ten o'clock camp would not be made, so all were urged on and on. On the way two horses knocked up and their loads transferred to natives and the horses left on the road to be picked up by the natives on their way home; more time wasted. But those who were in front by now should be nearing the camp, and things looked brighter as it would not be so bad if only a few were still on the road when the plane came around. The camp site could be seen now and the first were in and under cover and the others were urged on. The time was moving on. Another half an hour to go. It was hoped he would sleep in. Gradually the little hiding place took them in when the drone of a plane could be heard. This worked a lot better than all the swear words that had been used to move them along, and they moved very quickly. When the aircraft was spotted he was quite some distance away. He would be back again about four, but it was known that a good camp awaited ahead about two and a half hours away.

The horses were unloaded and given a spell and a meal made for all around and everyone was contented. After about an hour some started to move out to the next stopping place. Others were tired and had to be made to move. It had been a long morning. All had a good load, and the tracks were not the best to walk on; many stones that had cut their feet and the thrill of the job had worn off as far as they were concerned.

So, at last all were on the road again but very slow now - it was only a short distance, approximately six miles and a fairly good track, and the camp had to be made before the next Jap patrol came around. This was about four to four thirty. On this part of the trip three more horses knocked up and their loads transferred to natives. It was a good thought that spare natives had been brought along. These horses were also left on the road, but this time a native stayed to look after them and take them back along the road and also pick up the others. The scouts on the road were coming in to tell the two men in charge about their reconnoiter of the enemy, and so far all was well.

The leading men were making good pace as they were drawing near the end of the day's march. Some natives came out to meet them and take their loads and so give them a well-earned rest. Some walked along the long line looking for someone they knew and take his load. The last man and horse arrived, and a few small fires started as we were now in a village and when the Japanese plane came around he would take no notice of the fires.

At four the drone of the plane was heard, and natives scanned the skies to see where he was, but he could not be seen. Japanese planes always stay near the ground forces, so it was presumed that some Japs were about the country that the two officers did not know about, and the chief of the village where they were stopping was called and asked to send out men in the direction where the plane was heard and to see what good could be found out. Six natives were soon on the road. After a short while the plane came in sight and flew over the top of us, passed on, and that was the end of him for the day. The only worry now was if there were any Jap patrols were about where the plane had been flying, so more scouts were sent out and told to keep a strict watch all night and to come in at once if anything to report. News should be in by the morning if anything was doing, and preparations were made for a quick exit, should anything crop up.

Up early but no news yet of the Japs had come in, so things were made ready for the road again. As the last of the train left the camp, natives scouts came in to say that about fifty Japs were over in the direction of where the planes were heard. They had camped in the village for the night and took all they wanted and asked the natives if they had seen any Australians about and had left early that morning and gone in the other direction from us. This was very good news. As the pack train made its way slowly towards the coast it started to rain. This was good as long as it did not rain very heavy and make the tracks just a bog and then it would be hard walking for the carriers and horses. The light rain gave us protection from the air when the ten o'clock flight came over. It started light but got heavier and started to pour. This was bad so we had a talk with the natives, and they told us that a little way along the road was a small village where the party could stop. This camp was made, and all took shelter, as the rain now was torrential and lasted for many hours. The natives said there was a large stream to be crossed about two and a half hours away and that it might be in flood.

It was decided to push on as the rain had now eased off a little and there was a good camp for the night. So, on they go through the mud and light rain. By the time the last of the natives on the road it was just a bog and very hard walking. The river was reached at last by some of the natives who had crossed over but many were on the near side as the river was in flood and they could not swim. The depth of the water was only about six feet but running very swiftly. The

strong swimmers were told to get bush ropes across so the others could hang onto. This was done after some delay of getting strong bush ropes and they started to cross. Those who could not swim were helped by those who could. The horses were put into the water and they got across all right except one; he was a lot of trouble to get into the water and when he was at last got in he floundered about like an old hen and fell over with his load of rubber and got into such a mess that before he could be freed was drowned, and after a lot of trouble he was got ashore and his pack taken off and loaded on to some natives. The owner of this horse was quite upset about it but was told he would be paid for him when the camp was reached.

One of the officers making the crossing was not a good swimmer and as he got into the strong current about waist high he stepped on something which tripped him, possibly on a large round smooth stone, and his legs went from under him. He was flung into the raging torrent and washed down stream. Not being a good swimmer, he could not make much headway to the other bank. Two natives went in to help him and his hand was grasped and so helped to the bank and dragged out much to the enjoyment of the onlookers.

All are over safely except for one horse and several pounds of rubber lost in the crossing. Then about half hours walk the camp was reached and fires started, and a meal got ready. The plane had been around today, but it was heard, not seen. The chief in this small village was very good and sold the party food, such as rice, pigs, fowls and maize. No information was gained from the natives regarding the Japs. The rain had cleared now and was quite a cool evening. Tomorrow the coast would be made and if all went well the end of the trip, and in a few days the rubber would be taken out of the country. Later in the night some natives came into the camp and on being questioned it was found that the Japs who had camped near the party had the same day walked along the same road as the pack train. They had been about two hours ahead - so much for the scouts that had been sent. The party could have walked right into them. It was a good thing they were not behind, or they would have seen the tracks that had been left by the big party on the road.

On the road again early next morning. Undergrowth along the track would give us cover when the recon plane came around. The drone of the plane could be heard again. On time orders were given to take cover quickly. Horses and natives scattered about the place in the small trees. Some horses were left out; they went on feeding as if the war was no concern of theirs. Over the plane came flying at about a thousand feet. Not a man could be seen and if the pilot did notice the horses he would only take it to be some natives moving food. They themselves gone to hide in the bush and so he passed on.

It was quite some time before the natives were got together again and the train got on the move. The same thing happened again in the afternoon, and the coast was reached safely and the rubber put into a native house in the village. The natives who had carried the rubber wished to return to their village in the morning, after they had all been paid for the work. Arrangements were made with the chief to have his men standing by after the others had left. He said he did not have a great number of men as it was only a small village, but he would have all the strong women on the job also. He was told that he would get paid even if his people did not have to be called on but when they were wanted they had to be on the job quick. Next morning the carriers were paid off and they made their way home taking their horses.

At ten the patrol plane was heard, and he came down very low and flew about the place for about half an hour, always in sight circling around; twice he came over the village and had a look around. Had the Japs got word of the rubber being moved or had he seen the long line of natives on their way home? Things did not look so good. He might even be having a recce for a patrol that was about the place and heading our way. Scouts had been put out to watch all the tracks and the one road and to watch the beach as patrols had often been seen walking along the beach quite out in the open and on the soft sand which must have been very tiresome for the Nips.

About 1.30pm news came in to say a party of Japs and about twenty natives had crossed the river near the mouth and had walked around the sand bar and were on their way down this way. Sometimes they walked along the beach and when there was a road near they would go on that and come out again on the beach. They were calling in at the villages on the way. It was reckoned they were about one and a half hours away.

The chief was warned and told to get all his men out as quickly as possible. They turned out with all speed and the rubber was taken in small lots and hidden about the bush which about here was fairly thick. Everyone was told to lay low and keep quiet. The village was deserted. The Japs were closely watched and at last they arrived at the village. They came in very cautiously and ready for trouble, but they did not know that sharp native eyes were watching their movements, and all was being reported. The Japs went into every native hut and some kept guard. Some of the natives with the Japanese sang out for the natives to come in as the Japanese were their friends and would not kill them. No one came to their call.

The Japs stayed around for about two days. Whether they were suspicious, or had heard of the movement of the rubber, one will never know. Sometimes the Japs would split up into small parties and take a few natives with them, but they were always watched, and their movements reported to the two officers. At last, the Japs moved on, and again they were followed, to see that they did not double back. All the time the two officers were in radio contact with H.Q. in the mountains, under the charge of another officer. This small wireless set was carried by the natives. All the natives had head dress on, the manolain. This is a long narrow leaf around the head, and a few leaves sticking up from it. This is only worn in time of war.

A few days after the Japanese left the area word was received from H.Q. that a ship would be coming to the port to evacuate women and children, and to take the rubber, if all was clear, and to keep in constant touch with H.Q. regarding the movement of the Japs. The time and day were all arranged. The day of the arrival of the ship no Japs were to be seen. The rubber was brought out again and taken once more to the port. It arrived there a little after dark. The evacuees also were coming in, about two hundred of them. Signals had been arranged with the ship days before in Australia. The party on the beach had three fires burning. This was the shore signal that all was clear. At midnight there was a flash out to sea, and the signals were exchanged from ship to beach. Then boat came ashore and took the people and the rubber, and got away safely, and arrived in Australia and so the Son of Heaven were beaten again, and thanks to the officers. The rubber helped the war effort in a small way, to chase the Japs back to Japan.

Transcribed by Edward Willis

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