

Home Turken

On the morning of 20th February, the sun was battling to break through the heavy fog that still persisted over "Three Spurs" situated in the foothills of Portuguese Timor, this was where part of the Australian 2nd Independent Company was camped.

No.7 Section of "C" Platoon were up and about, most heading down to the waterfall for their daily ablution, boy! was that water cold! Anyone who still had romantic thoughts of girl friends back home, soon had those thoughts washed away when that water hit them. A quick towel down and into the clothes, the ration truck was due to arrive and no one could afford to be caught with his pants down. Today was the big day, a day's leave into Dili, the thought in everyone's mind was food, something different from buffalo meat and rice, which had made up the bulk of our food over the last few weeks, boats from Darwin never reached Portuguese Timor, they only got as far as Koepang, the capital of Dutch Timor. So luxuries like beer and cigarettes were a thing of the past. Not that cigarettes worried me, that's one vice I never had. A smart sprint back up the road to deposit our towels, pick up our rifles and tin hats, then all aboard the army ute, a bit of a crush (14, including the driver), no one was worried about the travelling conditions. The topic of conversation was food, eggs and fried chicken being the most popular. Then some one brought up the subject about the Portuguese soldiers, who were supposed to be arriving any day now, to relieve our Unit, then we could go back to Dutch Timor, or even Darwin. Perhaps the Porto's might even have arrived last night, if that was so, we would have a drink with them in Dili. Down out of the foothills roared the ute, across malaria riddled Tibar flats, then the climb up on to the coast road that overlooked the ocean and what a sight! Ships in the channel! The Portuguese had arrived at last! On the side of the road was a very old truck with a Javanese soldier standing by it; our driver pulled up alongside to see if he could offer some help, but after a close look at the engine, decided nothing could be done. The Javanese spoke no English, we spoke no Javanese. "What a pity," the last we saw of him he was making a smart sprint down the road. He must have been thinking, "There goes some very brave Australians, or some very stupid ones". Little did we know we were driving up on to the rear end of a big Jap Force heading for Dili. A few miles further down the road, the truck was brought to a halt by a burst of machine gun fire. I remember someone saying, "These Portuguese bastards are not very friendly, we had better get out and have a word with them. We got out of the ute, to be surrounded by these slit eyed little blokes, still thinking they were Porto's. We quickly had those thoughts dispelled when one of them produced a roll of Sig wire and each of us had his hands securely tied behind the back. Ten of us were pushed back into the ute and four walked alongside, one of these being my best mate, Keith Hayes. I wasn't to see Keith again until three and a half years later on the wharf at Fremantle. He had been shot and bayoneted, left for dead, but he still managed to pull through. The ute, with a Jap driving, had only just started to move, when a machine gun opened up on it. Luckily for us in the back, the bloke operating the gun, had his sights set a bit too high. One burst ripped through the top of the ute's canopy, it was then we were told to get out and into the drain. That was a big mistake on their part, for the bloke behind that machine gun must have had it sighted straight along that ditch. The Japs were all spread along the opposite side to us and that was where the next couple of bursts were aimed. The Japs copped a few casualties in that short exchange. The one opposite me let out a scream and I looked across to see his knee cap had been sliced by a bullet and appeared to be held by a thin piece of skin. After the firing ceased the Japs were in an ugly mood, we were ordered out of the

drain and to stand in a line, a length of Sig wire was then passed through the piece that already bound our wrists and so down along the line. I was on one end. It was then that this Jap about four feet tall with a face like an ape came dancing down the front of the line pointing to a Lewis gun magazine he was holding, then pointing to us. He was making his point quite clear. Another Jap then produced a packet of cigarettes and proceeded to light and place one in each mouth. When he got to me, I promptly spat it out, that one vice I never had and it looked a bit late to start taking it up then. I was thinking back to a remark Ken Hogg made when we were having our hand tied behind the back. He remarked that he hoped someone had brought along a pack of cards, said we would need something to fill in the time. Where we were going I don't think cards would be allowed. The number one Jap on the gun appeared to be having a bit of trouble with the mechanism, little monkey face was getting impatient, he wanted to get that magazine he was holding attached to the gun. I don't think it would have been the first time he had done a job of this kind. These Japs had come from Hong Kong to Ambon to Timor. That Lewis gun that was being set up was probably captured on one of those islands. It was at this stage a lone Jap came full belt out of the trees, screaming his head off, he pulled up and started jabbering to the officer-in-charge. I think the same thought passed through all our minds, perhaps we were going to get a reprieve. I have heard it said, one's dirty past flashes before one's eyes when caught up in this situation, I must have led a clean life, I don't remember anything dirty going past my eyes. The officer gave an order and a Jap came up and cut me off the end of the line, that was the last time I was to see my mates. I don't ever remember hearing that machine gun fire, so I was always living in hope that they were not gunned down. A couple of prods with a bayonet and I was told to hurry it up, back along a track where that running Jap had come from. A few hundred yards further on we came to a Jap officer sitting under a palm tree, he was making a meal out of a tin of baked beans. Alongside the officer was another Jap who spoke very good English, he told me that Captain Soand so wanted to know what we had done with the Japanese Consul, his wife and family. I had ten minutes to tell them, if I didn't my head would be cut off. Talk about out of the frying pan into the fire! I never knew there was a Jap Consul in Timor, let alone knowing where he was! As the minutes tick away more Japs started to gather round, as I was to learn later, a beheading was a big event, if the victim wasn't decapitated with the first stroke of the sword, the officer could lose face. While the last few minutes were ticking away, there was one mighty explosion from somewhere up in the foothills, the Japs lost interest in the execution, all having their say as to what caused the bang, maybe they were thinking a bombardment was about to start. By the time the Japs all settled down again the clock must have gone past the ten minutes allowed to answer the question. There was to be another interruption, a Jap coming down the track, yelling and pointing back over his shoulder, then there came into view what looked like a few civilians. They turned out to be the Japanese Consul and family. When they eventually arrived there was much bowing and scraping going on, after about fifteen minutes they all must have decided to head for Dili. The interpreter said something to the officer, who gave an order, the interpreter then told me I was to be taken into Dili and maybe they might let me live. It was not until we were eventually in the main street in Dili that my hands were untied. That was sure a relief, although it must have taken an hour before the blood really started to circulate through them again. It was here that I met up with about twenty Javanese P.O.W.'s and ten or twelve Dutch, including a Dr. Bloomsma, whom the Dutch said was reported to be one of the best surgeons in Java.

Two or three of the Dutch spoke English, also a couple of the Javanese. It was while I was sitting down speaking to the Dutch, a platoon of Japs came down the street and halted opposite to where we were. They were dismissed and a lot of them came over to inspect the P.O.W.'s. One said something to the interpreter, who pointed to me, the Jap then came up and gave me a boot in the ribs, then went off with a satisfied look on his face. The interpreter told me that was a very angry Japanese soldier, whose best friend was killed in the fighting round the aerodrome last night. The Japs didn't appear to be worried much about the Dutch or Javanese, it was the Australians they were crooked on. Their pronunciation of Australian sounded something like "Australica" and the Dutch were "Hollanda". The day wore on with still no sign of a drink coming up, the interpreter had long gone, so there was no one to communicate with. Eventually when the mosquitoes started to attack, the guards must have thought it was time to move. We were taken in and around to the back of one of the buildings that lined the street and put into a shed that looked as though it could have been used as a stable, the floor was covered in about six inches of straw. Two of the Javanese were taken away and eventually arrived back with two buckets of water and a few tins of Dutch rations. After a drink and a small portion of meat cut off one of the tins; it was like eating sawdust, when I asked one of the Dutchmen what it was, he told me, horsemeat. Later on we were lined up and counted by the new guard taking over, then we were told to get some sleep; it was then I discovered the straw was full of big yellow centipedes! I was told by the Javanese, not to worry, they were not poisonous! The Japs changed their guard every hour and the incoming guard would not take over until the prisoners were in a straight line and the count was correct. Boy! what a night! between mosquitoes having a feast, the centipedes crawling around, then guards screaming their heads off every hour, no one got much sleep that night. It was just starting to break day when the Japs told us to move outside and on to the road where a truck was waiting. We were lined up and counted and it was then that I heard that word "Australica" spoken again, two of them came down the line and stopped in front of me. I thought, "Christ, not another shooting party"! They said something to each other, then one walked over to the cab of the truck and came back with a piece of rag and tied it around my arm. The interpreter arrived on the scene and I was told if I tried to escape or refused to work, I would be shot. We then boarded the truck and were driven out to the aerodrome where the Japs had started to lengthen the runway. The paddy fields across the road had to be flattened out, this was where I was introduced to my first Chunkel, sort of a pick and shovel combined. It wasn't to be the last time I was to use one, they played a big part in the building of the "Burma Railway" on which I was to toil later. One incident that comes to mind, that day while toiling on the runway: the Japs arrived with this bloke, I had seen him before when our company first arrived in Dili. I'm not sure what nationality he was; he certainly wasn't Portuguese or Timorese, but I remember he was the proud owner of an old truck, and transport being very scarce, he got a bit of work carrying company gear in and around Dili. The Japs arrived with him on the back of a truck, pulled up near a hole on the edge of the runway, unloaded him, took him across, stood him up in the hole, his head and shoulders just sticking out of the top, then proceeded to bury him. They finally left him with only his head sticking out of a mound of dirt. He was letting it be known he was neutral in this war, but I'm afraid it fell on deaf ears. I think one of the locals must have told the Japs about him helping us out when we first arrived. The guards finally called it a day, when the sun disappeared behind the hills. When we boarded the truck, the bloke was still in the hole, he sure must

have been thirsty, I don't remember him being allowed a drink throughout the day. On arriving back at the stable, we found the Japs had thrown in a bit of gear, mostly Dutch. Included among the bits and pieces was one of our Unit's sleeping bags; on taking a close look at it, I found it had belonged to Sig Gannon, who I was to find out later had been killed in the fighting around the Drome. That sleeping bag was to prove a Godsend over the next three and a half years, especially on the Burma Railway, where the nights could get pretty chilly. There were times when I had to share it with bugs and lice, the bugs I could evict, but the lice proved a bit more troublesome. I never did find out the fate of the poor old bloke in the hole. When we arrived back at the drome the next morning, he wasn't to be seen, but the hole was filled in and smoothed over, so we all had a fair idea where he was. The next couple of weeks passed by with the P.O.W.'s working on the drome and unloading the odd boat, which continued to arrive out in the bay. The material unloaded consisted mainly of bags of rice, these were put on Jap landing barges, which were then brought in to the beach. It was about this time that the Japs decided to make their first push into the hills to get rid of the Australians once and for all. A big force was assembled near Dili, including a couple of mountain guns and a few of the top officers were astride horses. The P.O.W.'s were invited along for the trip, each one being weighted down with a sack of rice. I had a length of rope tied around the middle and a Jap guard tagging along about ten feet back on the other end; I felt like a dog being taken out for a stroll. After a few hours of marching, we were beginning to approach the Australian camp on "Three Spurs". At this point a Timorese, who had been leading the show, started waving his arms about and pointing towards the camp. At this stage, a peculiar thing happened, the Japs grabbed the Dutch Doctor and marched him out in front of the column. Apparently they were thinking if the Australians opened up, the presence of the Doctor in front, would make it awkward for them. No shots were exchanged and when we eventually came level with the camp, I could not believe my eyes, the whole hillside where our camp had been was flattened; that magazine that was blown, sure packed a punch! The road on up past "Three Spurs" started a sharp incline, it was here that I was to observe that the Japs were not fit. Before the column had reached half way to the top, I think we used to call it the "Look Out", a lot of them started handing over their packs to the Javanese, a couple even gave over their rifles. At this stage a halt was called, a Jap had collapsed in the middle of the road. He got no sympathy from his mates, a couple of swift kicks in the ribs and told to get up. I was to find out that if there was one thing Japs hated it was a sick man, they reckoned if you were sick you could not eat, so therefore there was no rice ration. The Dutch Doctor was called back to have a look at the Jap, who was found to be suffering from malaria. The march got underway again, with the officers on the horses going to the front and the P.O.W.'s running second. The rope that held me had become taut, the Jap on the end was beginning to shorten stride, I was pleased when the top was eventually reached. The officers had dismounted, one of them gave an order and the two Japs, who had handed over their rifles to the Javanese to carry were marched over and stood to attention before one of them. They then received a tongue lashing, followed by a severe face massage, in other words, a few smart back handers. After about half an hour's rest and a cup full of rice, we were on the feet and headed towards Railaco, that was the furthest native village I had been to when my section was camped at "Three Spurs". It was while the Japs were still some distance from Railaco, spasmodic rifle fire broke out, the column broke up, with Japs fanning out up the side of the hills. A mountain gun was brought into action and a couple of shells dispatched into the air. I think there was more chance they had

disposed of a few of their own blokes, rather than Australians. It took about an hour to regroup and then on towards Railaco, which was reached about dusk. After the usual cup of rice and a small portion of whale meat, the P.O.W.'s were then placed in a hut with a guard in attendance. I don't think a guard was needed, we were all asleep within seconds of hitting the floor. Those sacks of rice didn't get any lighter by the time we had reached Railaco. The dawn broke all too quickly, the usual rice and a piece of dried fish and after about an hour the show was ready to get on the road again. There was to be one holdup, the mules pulling the mountain guns refused to budge; must have reckoned they had come far enough. After much screaming, belting and pushing, the mules took off, scattering Japs right and left. Things eventually settled down and the column moved along at a much quicker rate; the country appeared to be much flatter. Things went well until we reached a fairly wide river, which had been spanned by a concrete bridge, but that bridge in the past couple of weeks had been blown apart. This caused the Japs a bit of a problem, the troops could wade across, the river being down to a very low level, the guns were the problem, these were eventually pulled apart and manhandled over. The crossing of the river took up most of the morning and it was late into the afternoon when the Japs arrived at the next village, unknown to me, but there were a few Portuguese men, women and children around the Jap officers were doing a bit of questioning, about Australians I presumed. We left the village, which I think could have been "Vila Maria" the next morning and on up into the mountains. Early into the afternoon, ominous storm clouds started to build up, the lightning flashed and thunder rolled through the hills. The Japs called a halt and started looking for shelter, of which there wasn't any, not even a native hut. The P.O.W.'s were herded together and told to sit down. A Jap sergeant came up, said something to one of the guards and I was taken across to the nearest tree, told to sit down next to it and then my lead rope was securely bound around me and the tree. I think that was to be the most uncomfortable night I was ever to put in. When the rain came it just bucketed down. The Japs tried lighting fires, but soon gave it away, it was just hopeless. The Japs had wet weather gear, the P.O.W.'s were soaked to the skin in the first few minutes of the rain starting. Boy! it sure could get cold in those mountains, one could hear the teeth chattering all round including mine. The rain continued well on into the night before abating. With the first light of dawn, the Japs were up and about; within a hour they had packed their gear, turned their backs on the mountains and the Australians and were heading down the track and back to Dili. The river where the bridge had been blown proved a headache for the Japs. The water had risen considerably due to the overnight downpour. The biggest holdup was the mules, they just didn't want anything to do with that water, after much coaxing and pushing they eventually swam across. The crossing of the river took up most of the morning and it was getting dark by the time Railaco was reached. The Japs spent the night there, then headed for Dili the next day. We were to receive another drenching near Three Spurs; that didn't worry me much, it was much better getting wet walking along, than sitting down tied to a tree. Dili was eventually reached late in the afternoon, all the P.O.W.'s were tired and hungry, we had seen more meal times, than meals. I was wondering what the officers-in-charge had to tell their superiors about their sojourn into the mountains, probably that the Australians had been eliminated and everyone could sleep safely in their beds. It was only about a week later I was taken before a Jap officer, who wanted to know how they could get the Australians to surrender. Apparently they had given the Javanese notes to take up, but they had been told if they came back again they would be shot.

I told the interpreter that I would take a note up and maybe I could talk them into coming back with me. This was repeated to the officer, who had a bit of a laugh; apparently told the interpreter the scenery in the hills was very beautiful and I might stop there admiring it. One afternoon we were taken down to the foreshore, a Jap boat had just arrived and anchored in the bay. It had hardly settled in, when out of the cloud cover came a plane; I knew it was one of ours, a different sound to the Japs. I thought "you beaut" here is one boat we won't have to unload." It came in low and let go with a stick of bombs and missed by the proverbial mile. The Dutch and Javanese had a laugh, even the Japs told me "Australica pilot number tenca", I was thinking that way myself. Bet that bomb aimer's ears were burning when he eventually landed back in Darwin, every time a bag of rice was dumped on my shoulders, I cursed him. A few days after the bombing incident, we were told to pack our gear, we were being moved to a new camp, an empty house down the end of the street. I wasn't sorry to leave the straw bed and the centipedes, although I do think we had just about eradicated them. The house at the end of the street could have belonged to a Portuguese family. It consisted of four rooms, a porch across the front and a type of a kitchen out in the backyard. The house was made of brick and cement and not of bamboo, which most of the houses in the area were made of. This was to prove very lucky for the P.O.W.s a week or so later. It was just after settling in that the Japs announced that they would be bringing in another P.O.W., an Australian. I could not believe my ears, I felt sorry for the poor bloke having been captured, but it was going to be nice to have someone to yarn with, who spoke Aussie. In due course a truck arrived with the P.O.W. aboard. He turned out to be a West Aussie mate of mine, Merv Ryan! Merv told me how he had been wounded in the fighting round the drome and the next day had been picked up by the Portuguese and taken to their hospital, where the Japs had kept a close eye on him and when he eventually was able to get around on crutches, thought it was time he went behind barbwire. It was only a few days after Merv arrived at the camp that we were to have a visit from some more Aussies, but these blokes had no intentions of staying. It must have been after midnight, when all the P.O.W. were rudely awakened to the rattle of machine guns and rifle fire, Jap guards racing through the house, banging doors and windows shut. Bullets could be heard thudding into the cement walls, the odd one tearing away the wooden window slats and into the walls of the room, to have stood up would have been asking for trouble. After about ten minutes things quietened down a bit, a couple of small Jap tanks arrived on the scene and could be heard spraying a few rounds out into the undergrowth. Two or three Dutch had army field stretchers to sleep on, the Japs raced into house and quickly confiscated these. I don't think anyone went back to sleep that night. There appeared to be a few new faces among the guards and the guard hut down the road looked to be in need of a few repairs. One Jap came into the yard carrying a rifle and a Aussie hat, he proceeded to point to these, then started stamping on the ground telling us the owner was now underground. We did learn later that there were no Aussie casualties in that raid, the rifle and hat had been dropped in the getaway. A few nights later we were awakened by rifle fire, everyone thought the same thing, another raid, but it wasn't to be, a pig had been coming into the yard tearing the ground up, so the Javanese decided to set a trap. This consisted of a sloping trench about four metres long and into the walls they put sharpened bamboo sticks and some rice at the end for bait. The pointed bamboo allowed the pig to go forward, but not being able to turn around had to try and back out, which proved impossible, eventually it was not a pig.

walked into the trench. He soon began to let everyone know he wasn't very happy in there and the Japs apparently were not keen on getting him out, so decided to silence him with a few well aimed shots. Next morning the Javanese were all smiles, I think they preferred the dog to a pig. Lots were drawn to see which two would have the tail, apparently this was the best part of the animal. The rest of the carcass was left lying in the yard until we returned from work that night. Then the big barbecue was on. Merv and I stuck to our rice and green stew, although I must admit the dog smelt good,; we were to partake of some Timor pony later on. One day a group of Japs arrived at the camp, including an interpreter. One of the Japs had his shirt off and was displaying a number of tattoos, I couldn't spot one dedicated to his mother. The interpreter told us that this gallant Japanese soldier, who had been brought to Timor, was known as the "Singapore Tiger" and he would be going up into the hills and kill all the Australian soldiers. The "Tiger" then proceeded to demonstrate his swordsmanship by laying low all the vegetation in the front yard. The guards didn't inform him there were two Australians in the audience, perhaps they did not want their workforce reduced by two. We were to hear later that the "Tiger" was eliminated on his first trip into the hills. The days continued to drag by, then one day we were informed that we were to be taken down to the prison camp at Koepang where there were many Dutch and Australian prisoners. We were all loaded aboard a couple of landing barges and proceeded down along the coast. I wasn't sorry when we eventually arrived at the port of Atapupu. Those landing barges can sure get hot, the Japs were O.K. sitting under a canopy. It was then out of the barges and onto trucks, the next stop being the town of Atumbaca. We were placed in a deserted Dutch school, just across the road there were old Dutch Barracks occupied by the Japs. It was late into the afternoon, the P.O.W.'s were sitting out the front of the school with the Jap guards in attendance, when four planes were seen approaching... One of the guards made the remark "Nippon Number One", he had hardly got the words out of his mouth, when the planes went into a dive over the barracks, opened up with machine guns and let go a few bombs. A couple of the bombs landed between the barracks and the school spraying a lot of shrapnel around. The action was all over in a couple of minutes, the planes heading back the way they had appeared from. Next day it was back on to the trucks, it was at Atumbaca that I was to meet up with another West Australian, Harry Holder. Harry like many other P.O.W. had been forced into driving trucks, there were very few Japs who could drive. It was on down through the island until the prison camp was eventually reached, the site was a coconut plantation a few miles out of Koepang. The Penfoi aerodrome was close by and we had a grandstand seat whenever the RAAF came to do it over. Also we would count the Jap bombers and fighters heading out for Darwin, then the count would be on again as they started to arrive back, it did the old morale a bit of good, when it appeared that a few did not make the return trip. I must say it was a different atmosphere being in the camp at the Dutch end of the island, being able to walk around yarning with other Australians, going for a swim, one side of the camp backed down onto a beach and ocean. I was just beginning to settle into this style of life when the Japs decided it wasn't to be. Practically everyone with a WX number and including most of the top officers from other Units were told to pack their belongings and prepare to be moved out to a boat that arrived in the bay. It was at this point I was to say Goodbye to Merv, he had been placed in the hospital hut. It was nearly three years before I was to see him again. When the landing barges moved out into the bay and headed towards the boat, I remember looking towards the mountains and thinking about my unit, which was

still fighting on, that served to lift my ego quite a bit.

This brief story was compiled by
Mr Peter Alexander who was
taken prisoner by the Japanese on 20/12/42.
It is a true account of what happened
to him on Timor.

Mr Alexander lives in Fremantle WA
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His health is not the best.
