HERB TRACKSON - Side 1

1 Identification: This is an interview with Herb Trackson recorded in Brisbane on 21st February 1983.
I think we'll pick the story up, Herb, at the B force and going off with the, in the ?Uvi Maru. What are your recollections of first seeing the Uvi Maru and getting on board?

Well, we were just marched down to the boat and it was, just looked like a, an ordinary tramp ship, very rusty and dirty, and marched on board and down into the hold and, er, just like sardines in a can and all battened down, no room to sit down or lay down or, and, er, just cramped down in there and closed in. And set off for - didn't know where we were going, but anyhow, eventually we found out we were going to Borneo. But on the way over it was, they used to take us up on deck once or twice a day to go to the toilet - the toilet was just a box hanging over the side and it was sort of in and out, because there was hundreds of you to go and they just marched you up and in and out and back down in the hold again. The food was something terrible, it was almost impossible to eat, but you was that hungry you had to, had to eat it, and it was, consisted of rice and some sort of green soup mostly, but the rice was contaminated, but we all thought that it was, been limed to keep the weevils out, it was a yellowy colour and terrible to taste. But, er, we, er, sort of had to eat it, and anyhow we were on that boat I think about eight, nine days.

What was that, that rice? What did it do? Did it taste rotten, or what did it taste like?

It just tasted like lime. If you've ever had a bit of lime on the end of your tongue, that's just what it tasted like. There was no, nothing else, just this limey taste, just nothing else.

What had the ship been carrying?

Well, I don't know, we - I don't-even remember. We were put down in, in this hold, we were just all, crammed up together, whether the ship had been carrying cement or what, it was dirty, but what it had carried prior to that I don't know, but that's all I can remember, just this limey tasted rice which was, would stick in your throat sort of thing, but - and that's all there was to it - that's all there was to eat. And eventually we got to Sandakan and we were taken off at Sandakan and marched -

Just before we get you off the boat - how did the blokes pass the time, you know, was there any bad behaviour, did people behave well, and what, you know, how were things on board?

Well, you was just all cramped up down in there, or mostly, it was just quiet, no one said anything, you didn't know what was in store for you, and there was - well, you would say there was no behaviour at all, it was just like a big stack of logs put in there, we were just sort of stunned. There was just - just nothing. Just down in this dark hole with the top over the, the hatch - although on the way over the captain of the ship did persuade the Jap guards to take the top off the hatch, because it was just getting that way down there that you, we all would have probably died. But they took the top off the hatch eventually and, er, kept it off, and I think we was getting towards Sandakan, but, and things were a bit better then.

What did you think you were going to?

Well, we didn't know. Oh, we were told that B Force was going to Borneo. And, um, I think we did have some clue that we were going there to build an aerodrome. But apart from that, nothing; we just were loaded on there and, like cattle, and we just - well, that's what we were told by our own fellows back in Changi, but, er, you get to the stage where you don't believe too much, so you just sort of, that was it, we didn't know whether we were going

to Japan or to ?Sh..? or Borneo or where we were going. But anyhow, eventually it was Borneo, Sandakan.

Did you volunteer, to go on B Force?

Oh, well, yes and no.

Could you come forward a bit.

See, they picked out, all these fellows that went up on the line sort of thing, and I was sort of left there, and they then - well, there was no volunteering really, it was just said, well, B Force is going to, to Borneo and you'll be on it and that was it. Like, when, to that stage of the game you sort of reached to the stage where you just done what you was told sort of thing and, er, it was, I don't know who up the roster of who was going on what force or who was going here and there, but there wasn't a hell of a lot of people left in Changi at that time and this was one of the last lot to go and, and that was Borneo; I don't know how I come to stay in Changi so long, I was pretty sick with dysentery before that time and possibly that's the reason why I didn't go away when the force was going up north, but when it came round to Borneo, well, I was on it, and that's all there was to it.

When you got to Sandakan, what happened?

They took us off the boat, marched us off the boat, and then marched us out of -

Would you mind saying - when we got to Sandakan --

Well, when we got to Sandakan, or Sandakan, whatever, they marched us off the boat and up into the jungle along this road till we came to what was to be the camp, and when we got there it was just a few atap huts, I don't know

what it had been in previous times, but, er, they were leaky and bamboo slats on the sides to sleep on. There was very little preparation. We brought a few dixies and things of our own from, from Singapore, and, er, that was it was to cook, cook in and, er, I don't think, if I remember, it was a fence around it, yes, and these huts came almost right up to the fence, and when we got there, well, no work had started in the nine days I was there and it, all the work that was being done was to fix the huts up to make them some sort of livable, with nothing, going and cutting bamboo poles and that sort of thing, and consequently I couldn't see too much future in staying there and, er, I decided that it was as good as anything to leave, because we had nothing to lose. So eventually a friend of mine, Matt Carr, and I, we decided that we would hike out of it. And, er, we, there was nothing in Sandakan in the way of preparation, although the officers gave us a few matches and, and, er, we had no medical supplies of any kind. We waited until the night of a big storm and we had a couple of blokes keeping a lookout for-us, where the guard used to patrol down the fence, and in the middle of this big storm we crawled under the wire and off into the jungle.

Right, well just before we get you out of the place - you weren't in this new camp at Sandakan for very long -

No.

But, just tell me a bit about how the Australians were organising themselves. Were the officers messing with you, or had - were they quartered separately - what was the, what was going on?

Er, the officers, from what I remember, they weren't quartered with us, but they were in huts near us and they were sort of organising the camp, the same as in Changi, the Japs let them organise the camp. But the organising they had to do was with nothing to do it with. And, er, while the Jap guards were

there patrolling the outside and that, our own officers were still at that stage, were still more or less in charge, we took our orders from our own officers.

Now what was the attitude to escape in the camp? And I'm asking this because, was there some fear of reprisals or, or did you get all the help you wanted to, to escape? What was the talk at the time?

Well, the talk at the time was that, er, while you weren't, er, er, prevented from escaping and you weren't, the idea wasn't put in, in your head to escape. It was just, well, just nothing, because it, the outlook on the whole thing at the time was it was no good escaping anyway because it was, the general camp attitude, there was nowhere to go, only into the jungle, and, and there was nowhere to go to get away. So the attitude was, well, stay here, but if you want to go, you go, sort of thing, but then knowing full well that, that, er, when you did go, there was a certain of element of doubt about reprisals after you went. But I spoke to our officers, Captain Milner and Captain Crozier, and, er, they, er, said, well, you know, if you want to go, give it a go, well, go by all means. So that was what helped us to make our decision and we left.

Herb, where did you think you were going to go to? Now did you know that there was a good chance that you could get away? Because of all the places that prisoners were, were kept, Australian prisoners were kept, Borneo in fact gave some of the best chances of getting away. Certainly more than in Malaya.

Well, the, the thing was, when you seen the camp and under the primitive conditions we were in and had been in for, up until that period, there was no future in staying there anyway. So if you was going, you'd be better off to die outside than inside. So even if you just made a try, when you got out,

and got down to the coast, well, then, well, it was just in the lap of the gods what would happen, but there was always a prospect of getting somewhere. **But** it was still, in my mind it was still better to, to try than to stay there, where, under the circumstances we were in.

Did you know where to head at all, did you know where to go?

Well, not really. We, we knew we, we were going to get out of the camp and then down to the coast, and then sort of explore along the coast and, and look for our opportunities from there on.

Did you know that you should head towards the Philippines, for instance.

Well, they were too far away for, for us sort of thing, you know? And, er, we had ideas, if we headed down the coast, we might, like after reading books and early days and that, there was natives and wild men in the hills and that and we was thinking that the Japs would never have contacted them and maybe some possibility we could join up with them and, and work something out from there. But, er, as far as, er, it was impossible to have any real plan of action. It -

What - sorry.

Because there was just no data or maps or, or any way, all you knew was Bone - Borneo was a jungle island in the Pacific somewhere, ?and we had without any idea where it is and where the Celebes and so forth was, but as far as anything else, no way.

What had you read about Borneo?

Well, not very much except when I was a t school and a few books, I read one

particularly in the, in the Hands of the Dyaks, and, er, and, um, a few of, those native novels about the, when the British were there, in North Borneo, but I knew that it was a jungle covered island and it was very mountainous and very rough and apart from that, not very much at all.

Did you know that the local people might be friendly, having been British?

Well, we thought the majority of them would be.

Would be -

Would be friendly towards the British people and the Australians and so forth, but, er, as the Chinese, I would say, were. But the, other population, the Malays and that, I don't think so.

Right. Now let's go back - I stopped you when you were starting to describe, now I'd like you to go back a bit on it, how you picked your moment and, and take up the story from when you actually did it.

Well, as I say, we were there about nine days. Well, after we were there about seven days, we, we started to kick this thing around, about leaving, and of course there was a few fellows said, well, you, it's just impossible, you, you're mad, sort of thing. And, and Matt, Matt and I sort of, I don't know how, but we came to an arrangement that we would be the two to give it a go.

Had you known each other long?

We were in the same unit. We were in the same unit right through. So, er, from then on it was only a matter of a day or so before we got what we could get, which was very little, and, er, and, er, the night of the big storm, well

then, we decided that that was the time to go, so that was when we, we took off.

What did you have with you?

Oh, we had a little haversack. A few matches, a ground sheet. Er, a knife. And, er, a dixie, a dixie each, you know, a little Army issue dixie. And, er, possibly that was about it.

Food?

Er - very little.

Sorry - would you say, We had -

Well, I think, I think we took, er, we took a little bit of stuff that we got from the cookhouse, but when I say a little bit, I don't remember really, but I think it was probably a dixie full of rice each, and, er, a couple of little johnny cakes or something made out of rice, but they didn't have much to eat there anyway at the time, so we didn't have very much.

Right. So there it is, there's thunder and lightning and rain -

Thunder and lightning and pouring rain, absolutely pouring down, it was black. And the jungle was cleared a couple of hundred yards back, but they'd just fallen the jungle and, and all the trees were just laying there as they fell sort of thing, hadn't been burnt off or anything, and when we got through the fence, might have been a chain or so cleared away and then into this fallen jungle. And, er, getting through those, over those logs and through that into the jungle proper was, was some feat.

OK, well, so you got into the jungle -

Well, we got into the jungle then and, er, and made our way down to, er, this, er, this river there, and, er, various means, and anyhow, we eventually, we, we got this canoe and got across to this island - it wasn't much good, but we got across to this island, this island as far as I know was in the Sandakan bay or harbour, and that's when we decided to try and get another boat. And eventually we got this boat from under this Chinese fellow's house and, er, and the dogs barked and one thing and another, but eventually we got it and we pushed out and pushed it along - it was a sort of an inlet or river type of thing and we must have pushed that for about half a mile in the, in the mud down along this river, until we got far enough away, and then got in it and sort of, um, got around, along the coast of this island a bit, and then er, made these, er, sorts of paddles Out of a few bits of wood we found, and, er, then we got from there across to the mainland,, which was on the other side of the, the bay, and started going down along the coast from there. And, um, but the boat was no good for the sea, so we used to take it along a, the beach at night sort of thing, and get out and row a bit at night and come back in and then walk it sometimes along the beach at night and lay up in the daytime, till eventually we come to the conclusion this boat was no good to us, so we pulled it up under, underneath the grass and hid it and started walking.

What were you doing for food?

Well, we used to, er, when we started walking - at first we were raiding a few native gardens and that sort of thing was round the place, but when we started getting up along the beach, there was no native gardens and it was - the jungle there come almost straight down to the beach and there was little kampongs, they might be a mile, two miles apart with just a little sort of plantation or native garden or some native living there, well, we'd get in at night time and, and pinch a few sweet potatoes and melons they mostly had, and a bit of corn

if there was anything, and then as we got on further, they sort of cut out and we were living on coconuts mostly, but there was a few kampongs with, er, fish traps, these fish traps that run out in the water. Well, we used to go out there and get pieces of wire netting and drag around in, but we never got anything any size it was just little, wee crabs and things, and cook these up and, and eat them, and the coconut, which kept us alive, sort of thing. And, er, we kept going down along the beach until, er, we came to a big river. And, er, that, that river, I, we decided we'd swim across there, and, er, crocodiles and all that sort of thing didn't come into the picture, you didn't worry about little things like that. And we swam across this river and, er, the next day, I found out that I was pretty bad with malaria, but, er, we went along to this, er, place where they were boiling down this salt, and, er, the native - the Chinese they were, used to carry the salt water up in tins with cross, a stick across their back and empty it into these trays and boil it away and then keep filling it up until they had a reasonable amount, and then they'd bag it and a bloke used to come down and send it away. Well, we contacted these Chinese and, er, at first they were a bit worried about it, but then anyhow they decided that they'd help us for a while and, and they told us there was a boat coming down from ?Taui Taui to pick up this salt and they'd try to get us on this boat from Taui Taui, and they said that the guerillas were still fighting in the hills of Taui Taui and if we could get us, they could get us on this boat we could get down to Taui Taui and join up with these guerillas. But in the meantime this boat came and we didn't know it was (?wasn't) the boat to pick up the salt, but these Malays, or we assumed they were Malays, were on it, and they didn't seem to be very friendly at all and there was a lot of rowing and going on there, and we came to the conclusion that these fellows were going to, er, going to put us away to the Japanese. So we took off from there. And then, er, just after we left there this Malay, whether he'd come from there or not I don't know, called us back and told us, took us to this plantation, was a derelict plantation with this but in the centre, raining like mad, and told us to wait there and he'd go and get some food for us. Anyhow he went away, and we were just dead beat and by this time

I'm pretty bad with malaria and, er, during the night he comes back and he sings out, and of course Matt opened the door and, it was just a sort of a propped-up door and he opened the door and the Japs were all round us and this fellow's with them and, er, the, um, ??NC.. - one NC.. - the officer of the, in charge of all the Japs there's a ladder coming up into this hut, it was, oh, about eight feet off the ground, he come up this ladder with his revolver pointing into the but and get to the top step and it broke and he fell into the hut. And, er, which was a great opportunity for us, but what could we do with 50 or 60 guards right around the but with torches and guns and God knows what. Anyhow, they handcuffed us then and took us back, they came round from Sandakan on, by boat, and they had it anchored down along the coast and anyhow they took us back onto the boat and, er, handcuffed and tied up, and taken us back to Sandakan. Although we didn't know where they was taking us, but that's what, where we finished up. But when we were taken onto this boat, this Malay - well, I'm saying he's a Malay but I don't really know what nationality, he looked like a Malay - and the Japs tried to get him to give us a, a bit of a cuffing up by actions and so forth, but I don't think he was even game, he, he didn't try that. And they took us back to, er -

Just to sort of break in - how did the Japanese treat you?

Well, they - they didn't belt us or do anything. There was no one there that could talk English, they just indicated to go on the boat and when we got on the boat they, they sort of, most of them ignored us except that one or two that was more or less in charge, in charge of us sort of thing, I suppose they were guards, and there was nothing really happened and we got down to Sandakan and they took us from the boat and took us up into this gaol in Sandakan. It was a makeshift gaol, I don't know whether it was there in English days, but under the Japs used to sleep up top I think, and underneath there was these three or four cells made of three by twos, all spaced about three inches apart and they put us in there, and, er, they, er, I can remember them

taking me out once or twice for interrogation, but er, I don't remember what it was all about, and I was in a coma there for the first three weeks, and there was no, no belting or no harsh treatment or anything like that. And the food - well, after I came to, and they had the doctor treat me, I came to, the food was reasonably good.

What treatment did you have?

Well, when this - apparently I was pretty bad. But as I say, I was more or less unconscious, I didn't know too much about it. But, er, Matt, he was in the next cell to me and he has told me that they brought the doctor down and he gave me a transfusion and, and they used to bring a couple of the local natives down to bath me every day. And -

This was in Sandakan?

In Sandakan, in this gaol in Sandakan. And, er, I can remember on one night, I think it was a Sunday, they came - I must have been conscious at this time and they came and they took me out and sat me down at a table and there was three or four Jap officers and an interpreter. And they sat me down at the table and, er, they, um asked me what I would like. And, er, I was a bit amazed at this and I said, oh well, I had a craving for mild and bananas. So, along comes a big jug of milk - I think it was powdered milk, condensed milk made up - and bananas, and I had that, and they said, What else would you like? Would you like some wine? Or - and I said No, no, no. Anyhow, they said, Would you like some cake? Oh, yes, So they brought along some cake. And the, the whole thing - I suppose it lasted half, three quarters of an hour. And it wasn't interrogation, I think it was just a sort of a, something for them to do more or less. But they did ask me a lot of questions in the nature of why I joined the Army, and, and, er, and where I came from and, er, things like that that was – well, I suppose there was, their interest

to them, I don't know whether it was, er intelligence or what, but they asked me about Sydney, and .I told them that I'd never been there, and they asked me about Brisbane, and I said I just came from the country, I didn't know much about it, and I sort of hedged around everything. But there was no pressure put on or, or - it was a just a sort of, um, a bit of a talk, and I couldn't, couldn't fathom that, and then when it was all over, they asked me if I wanted any more milk or anything - no, I had all I could eat, and then they put me back in the cell. Well, it was, er, knowing the Japanese in general, it was a sort of a, a, it was just amazing. You couldn't sort of fathom it. But they put me back in the cell and then they - we were there for six weeks, I only knew three weeks about it, but we were there for six , so Matt was, told me, and they took us down to Kuching.

How did they take you down there?

Took us down in a coastal, tramp boat. They took us onto the, onto the boat and, er, Matt and, um, they already had caught the other four fellows, that had escaped after us, but they weren't out very long, I think we were out for a bit over a month. And they, er, they had been brought in there only a few days previously if I can remember, and they brought, took us down to Kuching and on, down to Kuching. On the way down to Kuching apparently I was in a pretty bad way again and I can remember the Japanese doctor coming on, we stopped and anchored, and I think it was off Jesselton. And, er, they brought this Japanese doctor on and he gave me another transfer, transfusion of serum, I can remember them putting this thing in my leg and running this stuff in, I know it was colourless. And left some powders and some pills there for me. And, er, then we carried on to, er, Kuching. And when we got to Kuching we were taken off the boat in Kuching, and, er, and taken to the gaol in Kuching. I can remember it was up on a big hill just outside the town, it was apparently the British gaol in days gone by. And, er, when we got to Kuching, well, the, the Japanese there, whether they were Kempei-tai or what

they were the guards, but they, they were, started this cuffing and pushing and kicking and bellowing and all the usual things that you've heard about, they put **us in** this gaoi with this, we were all **in one** big cell, and, er, things weren't **to6** bad there for a start, they, er, used to take us out for exercises and, er, they used to, er, bring a Japanese, whether he was a prisoner there or what, down to cut our hair, just cut the whole lot straight off, and, er, an old razor blade and a razor to have a shave and , and, as, at the beginning we had a Chinese - dresser, they used to call him - he was all dressed in white and he used to come just about every morning and he had a lot of bottles of medicines and that out in the passageway up on the shelf and, er, he'd indicate to the guards which one he wanted to see and they'd bring us out and he'd give us some medicine and some - what it was I don't know, but most of us had dysentery and that sort of thing, and he used to give me some white stuff out of a big bottle, must have been two quarts, a huge bottle he had there and it was white, and he said that there was opium in it. And, er, he used to give me this and something else and I improved a little bit there. But this only went on for a couple of weeks and then one day I was out there getting, getting this medicine, and what happened I don't know, but the guards just sort of took to me and gave me a hell of a hiding and, er, threw- threw all the bottles on the floor and kicked the dresser out of the place and we never seen him after. And that was the end of that. Well, we were there for some time - just how long I don't know - until the trial came up and they took us down to, to the court house for trial –

Just break here –

END OF SIDE 1

Just pick it up if you would, Herb, about -'they kept you there for what, possibly a couple of months or just in that -

Er, it could have been. It could have been two months. But eventually the trial come up - we lost a couple of fellows there that died, they just take no notice of that, when they died they just used to sort of, hoofed them out and that was it, sort of thing, like chooks in a pen. And anyhow, one day they came and tied us all up with handcuffs and your hands tied to your ankles sort of thing, and they put them, put us in cars and took us down to the, er, to the court house in Kuching, I suppose it was the British court house. The car I went down in was a Rolls Royce and they put me in the back seat and of course I sunk so far down and all these ropes and things, I couldn't get out of the flaming thing. But they soon hoofed me out of there and they -

They took you down in a Rolls!

Yeah. Jap - er, native driver and a couple of Japanese guards in the front and three or four of us piled in the back of us and down to the courthouse. And we get into court and there was a form along the back which we sat on, and up on the, the bench there was about six or eight Jap officers with more ribbons and things on them than you could shake a stick at, and one interpreter. And the, I suppose it was prosecutor, gets up and rattles off a lot in Japanese that you didn't know what he was talking about and then the interpreter would get up and give you just the gist of it, you're charged with escaping from the Japanese Army and you was guests of the Japanese and so forth and this was what you shouldn't have done and, and all the rest of it. And, er, then they announced the sentence. Well, just about the time they announced the sentence I fell in a heap on the floor, I didn't know any more about the happenings then, I come to again when we were back in the, in the gaol, and we stayed there for another few weeks and then they put us on a boat -

Just – what was the sentence?

Four years -

Would you just go back and say -

I was told that I was sentenced to four years' penal servitude. And, er, they took us back to the, to the gaol and we were there a while longer and then, just one morning they came and took us and took us down to the wharf, and put us on a boat, and it was a Japanese troopship, that they took us back on. And all the Japanese were on sort of tiers, all around in the hold they had these racks built all around, and all these Japanese troops were on this ship, but they, they completely ignored us, and they put us in a little room in the hold that was just off the, the main hold -

A car went past then. Just say - they put us in a little room.

Well, they put us in this little room, it was in the hold but it was a little room off the main hold. And we had our own guards that they had sent with us, the Army had nothing to do with us, all the troops that were on there had, just ignored us, they had nothing to do with us. Put us in this hold, handcuffed and tied up, and - but I wasn't handcuffed and tied up because I was too sick to do anything. And on the way over, there were some Japanese women on it, whether they were nurses or, or what, there was half a dozen of them. Anyhow, they sent us down some packets of cigarettes and the guard kept chasing them away. And, er, eventually they let us have a couple of these packets of cigarettes when they was a little bit out from Singapore, it was really an uneventful trip, and, er, they let us smoke up big until we got to Singapore, and when we got to Singapore they took us off this boat and into a truck and took us out to, into Outram Road Gaol.

Right. Now, before we get to Outram Road;-those girls on the boat - they would have been prostitutes being carried for the troops.

Well, they could have been, but as I say we had no way of knowing what they were, they weren't in, they was just in ordinary civilian clothes, well, they were young girls, I suppose could have been anything from 19 to 25, and, er, they were quite pleasant in appearance, neat, clean, but, er, what they were I don't know.

Now, when you were in that court and - well, of course you collapsed and you don't remember much about the end of it. But about that time, when you were waiting for trial, did you think that you were going to get through, or what - what did you think your chances were? At that stage?

Well, that's a funny thing. When you get into a, a situation like that and you're sick, you've been through all you have - it doesn't seem to enter your mind what's going to happen, whether you're going to be executed or what. There was - well, it was every possibility that that's what was going to happen, well, that was the natural thing to happen, but you just didn't care, you didn't even, even think about it, what was going to be tomorrow was going to be tomorrow, you could be dead from malaria or anything else, it was just, you'd lost hope and all, all sense of thinking about future or, or what's happening. You're just there for that ??? minutes and you're a zombie, more or less.

But did you have a will to, to hang onto life? I mean -

Oh yes, yes, you, you, um, well, it's a peculiar situation, you sort of, er, done everything to keep yourself alive without, without thinking about what's going to happen and what's tomorrow going to bring. But always in the hope that right through the whole thing, that someday you were going to be rescued, you were going to get out of it. But you never, you never thought about dying

or being executed, it just didn't enter your head.

Were you sort of **on** automatic pilot **o**r **-**

Well, I, I suppose you could say that. You, could say that. There was - between us, if we did get a few words **in** or that, there was no, no discussion about - this is it, we're going to be killed, or, or what was - it never sort of entered the, the whole thing, it just wasn't, wasn't on.

In this period when you were waiting to go to trial, did you, did you manage to talk very much to anyone else?

Oh, well, there was guards there all the time. But you could, you know, just get a few little words in here and there, but, er, but - it was, sort of er, individualist way that you sort of existed. What I mean to say, you, another bloke was laying alongside of you sort of thing and - but he just wasn't there, you was just you, you was - in orbit, put it that way. Nothing sort of existed around you, only just - well, as I say, you just became a zombie.

If you did - did you talk to Matt at all, what sort of things would you have said?

I don't, I don't ever remember talking to Matt. I don't remember talking to anybody in that, er, in that gaol there really. Whether I did or not I don't know, but, er, of course, at that period, right through that period I was so sick, what, er, malaria I had I don't know, but, er, so sick and disheartened and that, I don't really honestly remember talking to anybody.

Right. Well now, what was - when you went back to Singapore, of course you had no contact with, er, with Changi at all, you were just in the military system.

That's right, yeah.

What was your first sight, of Outram Road - Did you know about Outram Road, I mean -

No. No. We were, we were taken back to Singapore, and, er , we knew we were going to, to a gaol somewhere, well naturally when they sentence you to four years' pern,.. - er, penal servitude, we knew that it wouldn't be at Changi. But we, apart from that we didn't know where we were going until the, they pulled us up at Outram Road and took us in and slammed us in a cell, individual cells, one each, and, er, er, the, er, they fed us through the door there, I don't think we were out of the cell for, for a week or so. And, er -

Just before you get into that. Did you have a, did you see the outside of the place? What were your first impressions of Outram Road?

Well, the first impression, we pulled up in front of these big gates and all we seen was this big brick wall around with broken glass bottles on the, on top of it, so we knew it was a gaol, but, er, where it was, somewhere in Singapore, we didn't even know where that was, because - I'd never been in Singapore until, until then, when we went over, you see, we were taken straight up to Malacca, we never had any, and I never had any leave in Singapore and it was never, only just through Singapore to Malacca. So I knew nothing of Singapore. And into this gaol, which, Outram Road was a gaol that was condemned in British times before they built Changi. And, er, whether it had been closed and the Japs opened it up again as their military prison I don't know, but, er, it was, seemed to be in a fair state of repair. And, er, all these cells - there were three floors, and we were on the bottom floor and all these cells, we were put, as I say, in individual cells. And, er, we were taken out , once a day - not every day, but nearly every day, and there was a big tank, concrete tank outside, we used to go out there and , er, there was a little dipper there,

you could throw **the** water over you and you had **a little** piece of rag, about 12 **inches** by about 6 inches and sort of wipe most **of it** off and then back into the cell again. And that went on for the first nine months.

Now when you say we - how many of you had come over in that, **in** that ship?

Er, well, I think there was only six of us, at that time. I think Matthews and all his crew I think came over on a later, a later one, I'm not sure.

Well, Matthews of course didn't come at all, but, er -

No, no. But Rod Wells and that. And - well, they might have came on that ship. As I say, it's very very hazy about that time what was going on.

Right. I'd like to - sorry, could you come forward, I can't reach you over there. So let's talk a bit about this first nine months, because I know that conditions changed quite drastically at, you know, from time to time. But during this first nine months - well, first of all, tell me what you were allowed to have in your cell, what the routine was, how they were feeding you, in that first nine months.

Well, er, we were put in this cell in, er, isolation. One, one to a cell. And in the cell there was two boards, about eight inch boards, inch thick, that you used to lay on, that was your bed, and a block of wood, 3 x 3 block of wood, and one tattered blanket. And a bucket in the corner for latrine purposes. And that was it. Absolutely nothing else. The cell was about, er, eight foot long by about five foot wide. Very high roof with a light in the middle of the ceiling, right up top, and bars right up top, about six bars in the back of the window, and the door was a big, heavy wooden door with, er, a square, or an oblong cut out, just ¯.big enough to fit the mess tins through - they were aluminium dishes, the mess tins, and they used to

push them in through the door. Well, they'd come, nearly every day, and open the door and take the buckets out -

Just half a sec.

Er, this big heavy door with the, er, hole cut in to put the food through, the light was on all the time in the top of the ceiling, and, er, the, er, only contact we had with anyone was to empty these buckets. Well, we had fellows that had been in the gaol prior to us, they used to bring them out and they had this tray, and one on each end of this tray with handles and a strap over their shoulder, and they'd go along, and there'd be another couple, the Jap would open, and the guard would open the door and they'd reach in and take your bucket out and put it on the tray and then close the door and that would be it. Er -

What did you wear?

Well, we, er, the clothes that we came in we had for a while. Well then they took them off us and they had, er, a pair of shorts and a sort of a coat, jacket that was patched and patched and patched, and that's, that's all the clothing you had. And they used to give you a change of clothing about once a week. And, er, a haircut every few months, you'd, they'd bring you out in the, they'd have a, mostly it was a Jap prisoner that was - from their own part of the gaol, they had their own prisoners there, they were mostly upstairs, and he'd come along and just shear you like a sheep, just cut from the bottom of your chin to the top of your head and back in your cell again. And, er, but, er, when you, you say you were in solitary confinement in a cell like that, well, it, it is to a degree, but the things that you can devise for, by, er - there was nothing to do, only think. So I happened to have a signaler, which I think was Chris Neilsen, in the cell next door to me, and we managed to, he managed to teach me Morse in a sort of a way, and you'd dig a little

stone out of the cement, and, tap on, the wall, and, er, by virtue of no contact whatsoever, except through the wall, I learnt to, to, er, to speak to him, how to understand one another in Morse. And the Jap used to wear those little slippers, and he'd sneak around and he could hear this tapping. And he'd come and sneak up to the door and look in through this hole there and try and see what's going on, and, er, they, er, most of the time they didn't know what it was. And if he was really a bit upset and he knew there was something going on he'd open the door and come in and give you a bit of a cuffing around. And, er, close the door again. In the daytime you weren't allowed to lay down, you could sit on the floor with your legs crossed, or you could walk about. But you couldn't put your boards down or lay down and, on, in the daytime. You couldn't talk or sing out to anyone or make any sound whatsoever. But as I say, I learnt this Morse code with the fellow across the road and then there was a doctor came, and he was in the cell across the road from me, and, er, he taught me through the hole in the wall - the hole in the door, to talk -

-- Okay. Sorry. Just go back to where you were saying about the doctor -

The doctor, he came, he was in an Indian brigade and he was brought down there - I don't think he'd escaped or anything, I think he was later picked up and they made out he escaped. And he could talk deaf and dumb language. And he taught me the deaf and dumb through the, through the door and I used to talk to him at certain times during the day. Got caught a couple of times, but of course the guard didn't know what we were doing, but, er, or what I was doing, because they didn't wake up that you was talking across the road in deaf and dumb language. And they opened the door and got a few cuffs and kicks for this sort of thing, but, er, you just sort of carried on when he was out of the road, but you could mostly hear them coming, their sword would scratch on a doorstep or something, they had to step up one step to look in your cell and generally you could feign all innocence by the time they got there. But sometimes they did catch you, but they didn't know what you were

doing. And so when you say, it was solitary, you were to an extent, but that was the only recreation, or, or, er, things that took your mind off anything, was trying to talk a bit of Morse code 7one side, and across the road, well, that helped to fill in the day. But night times was, was the worst, you, naturally you couldn't sleep very much and, er, and, er, you, at times you got so depressed that, er, you, you'd think of all sorts of things, I spent night after night planning how I could get up and get the glass out, break that electric light bulb and get the glass to commit suicide, or - but there was just no way, if you leaned the boards against the wall and tried to get up you couldn't get there, and there was just no way. But in there you could hear fellows - not so much the Australians, but I know a lot of the Chinese --

Getting back to this first period of the, er, nine months, er, solitary confinement. Just, could you just describe the cell?

Oh well, the cell was just a, oblong block with a big thick, two inch thick wooden door with a hole sawed in the centre where they used to put the aluminium dishes through to, to eat, of the , the rice and another smaller dish with a bit of liquid in it with a, you know, a bit of soup they used to call it, but it was a few sweet potato leaves and perhaps a, occasionally you'd find a little piece of squid about as big as the top of your little finger, or perhaps one piece of meat in it, and, er, after you ate your, your soup sort of thing, when that was finished, you'd hold the dish out and they'd half fill it with very very weak tea water. And that was your meal for the day. Three times a day that used to come around. And, er, the cell was just the two boards on the floor and a block of wood, 3 x 3 block of wood and a tattered old blanket and a bucket in the corner. And that was the whole thing that your cell was consisted of. Er, there was one light in the top, which was continually burning all the time. Er, there was two little sets of bars up on the top corner, about three bars in each hole, it was virtually, if

the light wasn't on it would be pretty dark, and you, on a wet day, it got very very cold. And, er, they, it was infested with bugs. Every cell, you'd see the marks all round the wall, blood marks where fellows had squashed the bugs with the finger and that. And the, in the bed boards and in the walls where the plaster was, er, the cells were infested with bugs. And cockroaches. And the walls was covered in blood marks where fellows had, we done it ourselves, you'd see a bug on the wall and squash it with your finger and all the stripes of blood down the walls and the, parts of plaster, cement plaster was chipped and the bugs would be in behind there and, er, in your boards, and you was continually, whenever you got a chance of, of chasing bugs and squash them, but they were still there, in thousands. And, er, cockroaches, great big, big brown cockroaches. They used to walk on, on their feet like a goanna, they'd come out, and honestly, you never see cockroaches in Australia that size. They'd be, they'd be every bit of two inches long, and you'd squash it, tramp on them. With a few mice. And one, one stage there I had a mouse used to come out and I'd save a few grains of rice and try and coax him up and I used to, night after night I'd save a few and I got him up to come to the end of my fingers, but he'd never get into my hand. So one night I was in a bad mood and depressed and I'd put a couple of trails of rice under, to my bed board, it was sort of curved up, and when he went under it I jumped on it and squashed him. Not a very nice thing to do, but it was just how your mental attitude was, you'd get wild at the slightest little thing.

What about your mental attitude? You know -- it wasn't just a question of being in solitary confinement, was it, because you, you couldn't lie down and you had to do certain things, you had people coming up to spy holes making sure you were doing, you know, what you were supposed to be doing. How did you keep your act together?

Well, er, as - I don't know whether I said it before about this, er Morse code, there was a signaler in the cell next door to me, I think it was Chris

Neilsen, and he taught me Morse code, we used to dig a little stone out of the wall and, er, he taught me Morse code through the wall without any contact verbally or, or other way, just by the, the taps on the wall -

How did he do that? I mean, how did you work out what he was trying to tell you?

Well, it started off with just the taps, sort of thing. And then, er, through some way or other, I don't know how, but, er, I got to learn A and B and gradually picked up the lot. But how, I couldn't really tell you. I never got good at it, but I got good enough to understand a sentence over a period, what I mean, might take him a quarter of an hour to, to tell me a sentence, but, er, I got to be able to understand what he was talking about. It was only simple sentences. And the, er, the doctor, a doctor was put in the cell across the road from me, an English doctor, that had been with an Indian brigade, and he could talk deaf and dumb with his fingers, and he taught me to speak deaf and dumb through the hole in the wall across the passage, by giving me a signal with his fingers as A , and, till I eventually picked up the alphabet, and while I never could talk real fast or that, but we could have a short conversation while the guard was up the other end, and, and you know, good morning, and how are you, and that sort of thing, but, er –

Anything else? what sort of information would you trade, if any.

You didn't have any information to trade. Like, it was only just - well, you couldn't talk about your experiences and, and that sort of thing. We could talk of where you came from and little things about how you were feeling and, um, and, er, get minor little sentences, but as far as trading information, well, apart from your past experiences, which would be too long for a conversation like that, but it wasn't interesting to one another at that stage and it was just, just the contact that was the thing, not, not the

information or anything else, because no one had any information, it was just the virtue of being in contact with a human being.

What about warnings about a certain guard, or, or intelligence about where you might pick up some food or something if you were outside or -

There, there was no warnings about certain guards because you knew them all by sight, we had names for them all, like Pigface and, and all that sort of thing, but, er, and as far as warnings about where you could pick up food, well, you weren't going anywhere to pick up any food, so there was, there was really, there was nothing, nothing outside of your, how do you feel, and so forth, there was to talk about, because you was, you was just cut off from everything.

You mentioned, just before we broke last time, about hearing things, and I wonder if perhaps we could get back to that, I don't know whether you were going to say that this was a way of passing the time, the things that you could hear from the cell. I don't know what you meant by that.

No, I didn't say anything about hearing things. But you could hear the guards at times, you knew when they passed your cell - of course sometimes they'd sneak back, but you could hear when they were down further, you know, they might go to a door and you'd know they would be down the other end and they'd sing out to some bloke in a, in his cell - ?call is generally the, the word you'd hear, but you'd know it would be a fair, how far away, and there was only one on at a time.

?? mean -

well, just sort of Hi, you know, and they bellow this out at you, that's about the main thing that they ever, they'd just come to the door and put

their head in and - even if you was doing nothing, and you were, you didn't even see them there, **or** kid you wouldn't see them, and they'd just yell out ??CROWR you know, just to make themselves look a bit superior or something, I presume. But, er -

Let's talk about other methods of communication. Now you had the Morse through the wall and you had the sign language to the doctor across the way - wasn't there something about messages being scratched on the tin dishes that were - did you ever, did you ever take part in that?

I never ever took part in that. There were writing, scratched on the tin dishes, and, er, but there was nothing really that I ever saw on it that would in any way be a message, because there was I suppose hundreds, or two hundred of these aluminium dishes that used to go through, and so to get to the, if you want to send a message to someone, but if it was a message in general, yes, maybe so, but the scratchings on the dishes never ever meant anything to me sort of thing, I could never really make any real sense out of it or - whether I just didn't bother or not, but, er, I wouldn't think that there was any real communication by that sort of thing, no.

You used to look them over, did you, to see if you could find anything?

Well, you'd just look them over and see these scratches, you might pick up one or two words, but you know, they were pretty well knocked about and that, you know, and there wouldn't be any real communication, I don't think, between - the other bowls was aluminiu.. er, enamel, and this one dish was an aluminium dish. And, er, two chopsticks they used to send in with it, and that was it.

END OF SIDE 2.

HERB TRACKSON - Side 3

Tape 2 of Herb Trackson. Look, we were talking about the, um, er, communication you know, the Morse code and presumably whatever, albeit unsatisfactory conversations you had with the guards themselves. But in all that time that you had to spend by yourself, in that cell, how did you keep yourself occupied mentally?

Well, I, I suppose, when I came back from the war, I could relate things that happened at home to my family - there was eight of us in the family and when I went back my father and mother were still alive, and we started talking about old things and that. And I could remember minute details that, when I was just a. little kid, that they'd forgotten all about, and I could tell you more about family history, in the time up until the war, than they ever dreamed had ever existed. Because, er, I suppose your mind wandered from one thing co the other, naturally there wasn't much else but back home, and consequently you'd think of these things over and over again and, and, er, that's what was more or less the main thing you was thinking about.

Did you take yourself deliberately back, say now this morning, now I'm going to try to remember back when I was six years old and, and the different things that happened - how did you sort of organise your thinking?

Well, I don't think there was any organising in it. I think, from what I can remember, it was a sort of, you'd come into a self, self hypnotised state. And it was sort of a dream that just - you sit there and all this dream would run through you, just continuous. And, er, your mind would jump from one thing then to another, you know, just little things, just like as if you was in a, in a dream, you could -- you'd sit there for hours with all these things running through your mind without you consciously thinking about it.

I remember talking to Francis James once, when he was locked up by the

Chinese for three years, and he said that he, he was, he knew a lot about music, for instance, and he'd try and remember the score of a particular musical work, and When he'd get sick of that and then he'd try and remember a poem that he learnt at school, and then he, he'd like he'd give himself a concert in his mind and then he'd give himself some, some reading in his mind and - did you ever do anything like that?

Well, I don't think consciously. But er, er, well the best way I can put it is like I put it, you were sort of self-hypnotised, you'd sit there and these thoughts would run through your mind, and then suddenly leave and something else would come on and it would run through your mind, and this sort of just kept coming and going sort of thing, while you, you knew what you were thinking about, but it was a sort of an unconscious sort of a thing.

And was there anything else that you could do to amuse yourself in the cell?

Well, you could sit there and do your thinking. Or this sort of hypnosis business. Or else you could get up and walk around and round and round this little cell, which you had to do to keep yourself mobile, you couldn't sit all the time, otherwise you, you had to have some exercise to keep your legs and that working. Well, you'd walk round and round your cell and stop and look at the wall, or peer out the, the thing to see if there was anything you could see outside, hut, er, virtually there was, there was just nothing else, there was nothing else to occupy your mind, you've studied every inch of the cell and every inch of the hoards and every inch of yourself and you could spend your tide ticking Off your little scabs and putting them in a heap and putting them in the latrine bucket, or, er, - but I suppose you would virtually say you were just like caged monkeys, sitting there and doing a bit of a pick and a look around and a hit of a scratch and a walk around and, and that was it.

Did you ever contemplate suicide?

I did. I spent a lot of time trying to work out - there was a, the electric light bulb was just a bare bulb hanging on a string, right up on top of the ceiling. And I spent many days trying to think how I could get up and get that, get that bulb to break the glass, but there was no way of getting up there, I'd -

What would - what did you plan to do with the glass?

Well, I planned to commit suicide, to cut my wrists or, or Whatever, but the first thing was to get something to do it with and, er, there was no way you could get up there, the big bed boards weren't long enough to, to reach up, if you lean them on the wall there was no way, you was too weak to crawl up, but even if you did you couldn't reach them, there was just no way you could get up there to, to get them, so that was, er, one thing you couldn't do. But, um -

Do you think you would have? If you could have got the globe?

Well - that's a, that's a difficult question to ask, because if you're contemplating suicide, when it comes to the point, you don't know whether you would or whether you wouldn't. At the time I thought I would, that was the intention. But I'm not saying that if I had of got the globe and that and that and when I got it down, whether I would have had second thoughts or not, I don't know. But, er, that's just one of those things that you can't answer, because as you know, you can contemplate suicide, but when it comes to the thing, it's a little bit of a different story. So I don't really know at this stage whether I would have or whether I wouldn't, but at that time I think I would have.

So there you are in your cell, going through this daily routine, light on all the time, meals coming in - what do you think you were getting in terms of food, by the way, did you work oat, er, you know, how many ounces of rice a

day or anything like that?

Oh, I wouldn't know how many ounces of rice a day, but I suppose three times a day would be somewhere in the vicinity of a little less than a teacup full.

So just put that - so that I can use it without my question --

Well trying to estimate the amount of food we got three times a day, I would think as near as I could guess would be a little less than an ordinary teacup full of rice. And this very weak watery soup would amount to, I suppose, half to a quarter of a. teacup full, and as a. half a teacup full of this weak tea, and that was the meal, three times a day.

Now, how long did they give you to eat this?

Oh, the - by the time they put the meal through the door - the rice would come first and then the soup would come next and then, after you'd finished that, then they'd come around with the, with the, er, you'd hold your soup thing out to get your tea. But the the time lapse before they picked up the dishes again was really plenty of time, sometimes it might be half an hour, sometimes it might be even more, they mightn't come and get them for another hour.

Rod Wells said that he only had a minute, that they, that they used to put them in and if you hadn't, in the unlikely event of you not finishing in that they'd take it away again.

Well, I never experienced that, I always had plenty of time to, er, to, er, to eat. Well, it didn't take long to eat, really, the bit you had, but from my recollections of it there was never ever any hurry.

Now - so there you are you're in your cell, er - when did you ever get out of your cell?

Well, they used to take us out for for a bath, as they say a bath – nearly every day, sometimes if there, there was something on, like their, some religious ceremony or something, well, you wouldn't get out that day, or if something happened around the place, well, you mightn't get out for a couple of days. But, er, they'd come and open the door and you'd stand outside your cell and then they'd march you out to this cement tank. that was outside, about three foot six high, and you had a little piece of rag about a foot by about six inches, and there was little dippers, you'd just pick this water up and throw it over yourself and wipe yourself off with this rag if you had time, sometimes they were in a hurry, sometimes they wouldn't even give you time to wipe yourself off, you'd throw the water off and they'd have you back in the cell again. And, er, er, that was your bath for the day. Well, you was always thirsty, and they used to watch you and see, when you tipped the water over yourself, whether you'd try and drink a bit of water out of your dipper; if you did, well, they were onto you for that, because you, that was, boo, no no, drinking water out of the tank. And when you got back to your cell, of course, you'd be in the nude then and they'd, you'd hold your shorts out in one hand and the arm in the other in front of your cell, and they'd go along to make sure you're not taking anything inside - what you'd get out there and take in, I don't know where you'd find it and then they'd come along and open the door and you'd go in and, um, then they'd come along and slam the door. But I have heard stories about, er, fellows putting bits of paper or something in their doors and, and so that they could open them, and that, but, er, er, to me I can't see how that'd be right, because they'd - you'd go in your cell and they used to generally - sometimes you'd close the door yourself, sometimes they'd close it, but when everyone was in, they used to go right along and give them, ever door a good push as they went right around the whole thing. Sometimes they might miss, but on most occasions. But, er, as far as putting a pin in your door and leaving it open, well, that was flogging a dead horse, because when the guard came on, he was put inside, and there was barred doors each end of, of the floor, and he was put inside and he was

locked in. there, with you, so if you got out of your cell and done him over there was still, you still had to get out of the gaol, so I couldn't see any point in, in, er, sort of saying that they put paper in - I've seen it somewhere or read it somewhere, but -

OK well, well, there was the bath, so called - was there any other reason for leaving your cell.

That was it.

What about the latrine bucket routine.

Well, if you was lucky enough to pick, be picked on the latrine bucket routine, it was a, a tray with two handles, each end, and one fellow each end carrying it and then three or maybe four going along and getting the buckets out and putting them on, on this tray. Well, the guard would be with you, there'd be the guard in the cell block, but then there was another special guard that used to go with you and he'd get the key and he'd go along and open the door and you'd go in and get the bucket, put it on the tray and then he'd close that door and then he'd go on to the next one and open it and so it went on until you had a load, and then you used to take it out the door and up onto the bank and they had a big pit built there, and they used to tip this, all this latrine waste into this big pit, bring the buckets back down, throw a bucket of water in them and rinse them out and then go back and put them back in the cells and pick up the next lot and take them out.

Was there any opportunity, when you were doing this, to either get food from somewhere or maybe communicate with other people?

Well, I only seen this opportunity twice. One of them was, CT, while you're out picking up these buckets, of course naturally you could have a few words

with one another while the guard was opening the door or something like this, but apart from that there was not much; there was nothing to talk about anyway. But on one instance, to get the extra food, we, er, took the bucket out and emptied them into this big pit, and they used to have pawpaw trees growing up along the bank, at Outran. Road, and there was a lot of pawpaws, young, green pawpaws on at this stage, and, or, so anyhow, we had decided about getting some of these pawpaws, and, er, we didn't know how we were going to do it, but -

Who's we?

This, this gang of us that was on this bucket brigade to empty these, er, latrine buckets. So anyhow when we got up to the pit, there was a young fellow from Sydney with us and he was a pretty wide awake sort of a bloke, so he races over to the hole and starts (pause) And the group that was on this latrine duty, we were up emptying these buckets, but we'd sort of -- well, with no real plan of action, but, or, we'd had a couple of whispered words trying to get some of these pawpaws, but how we were going to do it we didn't know. Until we got up there, and this young fellow from Sydney, he's emptying the bucket out and then he started screaming out that there, the pit was full of alligators and rushing around and pointing in it, and of course with that the guard rushes over to see what's wrong and he's looking in there and this fellow's pointing into this pit, and in the meantime we're taking the pawpaws off the trees and breaking them in half and putting them in the buckets. And, er and put them int?, and when we took then back to the cell, well, they got half a green pawpaw - which they ate, but nowadays I suppose if you done it, it would make you that sick it would kill you, I don't know - but they ate them, but there was a few green pawpaw skins left in the bucket and the, the Japs saw these on the next emptying and of course he's wondering where they came from, but, er, I don't think they ever connected where they came from. So the boys had a few green pawpaw

bites that night. Another time we were taken out to do a cleanup around the yard, picking up leaves off the pawpaw trees and that sort of thing, with one of these trays, and we were up behind the Jap guards' kitchen And three or four buckets of rice - fresh, been put out that day, out the back for the pig bucket to come and collect, it was nice and fresh, this rice, so we get these buckets and put them on the ?bikini tray and cover them over with our pawpaw leaves and so forth, and we get them back to the, to the, er, outside the door where we had to leave all the rubbish and that, and in the, in the end cell, that war kept for a sort of a work room where there were shovels and things in there and there was a few old plastic groundsheets in there and we tore these up and put them in the bucket, and a couple: of blokes went inside and they're putting all this rice in these torn groundsheets in these buckets, and somehow the guard thought they were a bit long and he races in and sees it. So immediately, he takes us all back into our cells, and we're locked up in the cell with no food, no water, nothing, for a couple of days, and then we, er, thought that this would be it, this is where they're going to fix us up. So anyhow, after a couple of days they marched us out into the passage, all us fellows that was on this - I think there was a -

Just, just take it back to the punishment.

Well, we tried to, er, get this rice into these buckets and the guard came in and seen it, thought/there was a few of them in there, in this room too long, so marched us back to our cells and locked us in and nothing happened for a couple of days except that they didn't give us anything to eat and nothing to drink for two days, Then they brought us out and lined us up OR the cell floor in front of all the cells and the camp officer came along and an interpreter, and he went beserk and the interpreter told us that, again, we were guests of the Japanese and we're thieving this stuff. It was just on Christmas, I'm not sure whether it wasn't Christmas Eve when it happened. And anyhow this interpreter said that, youse are all going to be executed. So back to the

cell we go and we were there for, oh, over a week with very little to eat and very little to drink, just enough to keep us alive, and then, er, nothing happened, it just all blew over and nothing happened. But in that week we were in, we reckoned that after this lecture we got and this interpreter told us that, you know, we were in for the big chop, there was - that was it, sort of thing, we were all prepared for it, but they let us stew in our own juice for about a week with not much to eat. I suppose it *was* a form of punishment, knew that we'd be mentally upset about the whole thing, and then after that of course they banned us from working on the, on the buckets or anything, for - none of us ever got back on to anything like that, until they started the working parties after that. And we just became just the same as any of the others. So, as I say, you can't, can't sort of fathom them, we were all prepared to die, there was no ways about that but then it just all fell through. So you, you just can't follow the thinking of them, and their methods or what happens.

How were you physically, though? I mean that week of being, and two days without any food or water.

Well, I could, I could still walk about, I could still stay on me feet. I wouldn't say I was -

Just say, if you wouldn't mind, after the two days--

Well, after the two days without food or water, I was weak, but still, still able to walk, and very thirsty. But two days without water locked in a cool, damp cell, probably is a lot different from two days without water in the desert or something like that. It was, it was bad, but I wouldn't say it was as bad as, as the time with the --I don't know whether I've told you about the salt fish episode.

No, you haven't

But er, at one stage there we were, it was in the early part of it, that was before this happened, they gave us our meal and then gave us four or five wee small, salty fish with it, It was just the rice and this salt fish. And after we'd eaten our meal there was no water came round, no tea. And that night of course after eating just the rice and this salt fish, we were really, really thirsty. And, er -

?Tongues?

And that night, I can remember that my tongue was swollen up and I had all my clothes off and I was laying on the cold concrete to try and get some moisture and I reckoned this was it. And there was one particular guard, the only one that survived from the Outran Road guards, this little short fat fellow, he was one of the whole lot that was, the only one that was any way lenient towards as at all. I don't, didn't ever see him ill treat anybody or - well, he didn't give us anything, but he didn't um, I suppose It wasn't within his power to, but he seemed to be one guard that was different, was a cut above all the rest of them. And he came along and he could see the plight I was in, and, er, he went down and emptied out all the tea cans, they were hanging on a hook at the end of the thing, I could hear him rattling the tea cans and he brought me back, I suppose there'd be three or four tablespoons of water in a, in one of these little dishes and gave It to me, otherwise I don't know whether I would have survived the night at that, stage.

Let's talk a bit about the guards. Now, did they give you the appearance of being people that were enjoying ill-treating people or were they just obeying the rules or, you know, tell me about the guards.

Well, I would say that, that, er, they, the whole lot of them were just a lot of sadists, except this one particular fellow. But all the rest, if they could do anything at all to make you uncomfortable to or the least little excuse to give

you a belt in the ear or, er, er, to me maybe they were suffering from a inferior complex and, er, they done everything to sort of try and cow you. But, er, I would say at that stage in Outran Road, I never saw them cow anybody. I'm not saying because it was, we were all brave or anything like that, but I would think that, looking back on it, we were past the stage of being able to cow; what I mean to say, we were so, um, bad that in such a bad condition and such mentally deprived of everything, that we were at the stage where nothing they could do could hurt us any more. So, er, they, they used to come round and they used to contrive all sorts of things -

Could *you* just say - the guards used to --

The guards used to come round and they could, they'd contrive all sorts of things to make you uncomfortable, they'd come to the door and yellow and bellow at you and if it just, if the mood would take them, they might open the door and, er, and, er, give *you* a few cuffs under the ear or something, or bump you off the wall a couple of times just for the, the sheer fun of it. And the, the keys to the cell was a big steel, key and they had this on a string and they used to take great delight in coming into the cell and, and whirling this around, and hitting you on the top of the head with it. While it didn't do much damage, it used to blooming hurt more than anything, because it was steel and it wasn't all that heavy, but whirled round on a string and give you a few belts on top of the head with it, it used to blooming hurt, I tell you.

What -- defences could you use when you were being belted and so on?

Well, I always found that there was no defences that you could use, because for one thing you were too weak, but then on the other hand if you did do anything, well, straight away they'd just call the whole lot in and, and that would be - call the rest of the guards, they - I don't know what communication they had from outside but they must have had a bell or something where they could, if anything happened, they could call the ones outside. But there was really nothing you could

do to defend yourself. The only defence you had is to stay on your feet. If you stopped, could stand up, while they could cuff you with open hand or hit you with their sword they used to unclip their sword and give you a belt with that, but those sort of things, while it might hurt, it wasn't really detrimental to you because they had no idea of punching or, like they couldn't punch you and break your nose or break your *jaw* or anything, because they, they didn't seem to have any idea of punching, It was mostly open hand stuff, and, but providing you could keep standing up; because if you fell down on the floor and they had boots on, well then you was in real trouble, but most of the guards used to just wear these sneakers so they could sneak up on you, but sometimes there'd be guards with boots on. And, er, they'd let out a few kicks at you. But while you could stay on your feet you was reasonably safe. Like, you might get, get hurt, but it would be nothing detrimental, they couldn't break any bones or anything if you could stay on your feet. But otherwise, well, if you fell down, well, that was the end of it.

You say that the guards were, were sadists, did you get the feeling they were enjoying what they were doing?

I did, yes, I would say they did. But there was - you could only draw one conclusion, that more than - that they were absolutely mad, they were fanatical. I, when we used to do this, collecting these bikinis with this tray -

Bikinis?

The latrine buckets I can remember on two instances with the guard there and we would go along with this tray and he pulls out his sword and races up to this, to the pawpaw trees and goes on with all this Japanese commotion and screaming and, and lopping all the leaves off the pawpaw tree. And it just, you could swear he'd just gone mad. And then he'd put his sword in and - whether he was just showing off to us or that, but the look on his face and the way he used

to go about it, you'd think, Jesus, I wonder if he's going to turn round and come for us. It just, just, er, maniacs. And, er, well, they were sadists, I think they enjoyed it in the main, but they were just - well, they were maniacs, there's no two ways about that, they were just, Whether it was part of their military training or what, but, but, all except one.

Only one?

Only one. He never, he never carried on like this.

What did you call him?

Er, I don't know that we had any name for him.

In what way - you've said this of tape before -- in what ways did he sort of take it easy on you?

Well, er, he

Could you just start by saying --

Well, this one that was -

This guard that was better -

Well, this guard that I'm saying was better than the others, while he couldn't do anything for you, or whether he would or not if he could have I don't know, but, er, When he came on guard duty he'd come around and poke his head in and poke his face into the cell there and look at you and, and go off and it was a sort of a, understood thing that when he was on you could, you know, have a little bit of a talk across the cell if you could make anyone hear you and providing it

was only sort of a half whisper, but, er, there was no, no real tight, er, quietness or anything like that and he'd come to the cell - well when he was on duty you could hear the boards getting put down - fellows that was, you know, feeling, was really sick, they could lay down and that, and then before he went off he'd come around and he'd hang on the door with a big ??koor sort of thing and then you knew that when that happened, that he was going off, so everyone would get regimental again, the boards would go up, and when the next guard come on you'd be doing the right thing. But, er, he was a fellow, if he was on duty when you was emptying the buckets or so forth like that, you could pick a few hibiscus leaves or they had a few sweet potatoes growing around the place, you could pick a few of them and eat them and he wouldn't say anything to you, just, er, and, er, he was, he was really as free with us I think as he was allowed to be.

You I think mentioned to Hank an incident w.ere he once actually hit a prisoner in the cells.

Well, on one occasion we were out on a working party, and er, there was quite a few of us and, er, we were all, you know, trying to have a bit of a talk and that and of course he yells out to keep quiet and there was an officer, or a superior of his coming on the scene, and there was one particular fellow that didn't take much notice of him and of course he took off his thong or slipper, those split slippers they use, and he hopped into him and really.. gave him a good hiding around the face and that, and the rest of u was very much cheered up about this, in fact I think we gave him a few hoorays for doing it, because he was the only one that was a little bit easy with us and, er, we tried, we knew that if they knew that he was easy with us, well, he'd be in trouble and er, so we always tried to do the right thing, and this other fellow, we told him, try and tell him to shut up and do the right thing, but, er, no, So he got his deserts for it. But, er -

You cheered, did you?

Weil, we gave a little bit of a - Good on you mate, sort of thing, you know.

To the guard?

To - well, well, in general, I suppose to the guard too, but, er, while we, we, el we didn't think that, that he was really on our side, but, er, he was the only one which stood out amongst the whole lot of them that was any way civilised or any way slightly soft hearted. I wouldn't say that had let you get away with too much, because I don't think it was in his power, but at the same I think that he let us have as much freedom as was in his power to give us.

END OF SIDE 3.

HERB TRACKSON - SIDE 4

Right. Now we've been talking so far about the period of solitary confinement. Um, which went on for -

Approximately nine months.

Approximately nine months.

And then, I think due to over, overcrowding or too many prisoners, because they were bringing in more and more, and, er, Chinese, there was a lot of Chinese brought in there and executed from there that was apparently fifth column, or that what - all this is supposition on our part, but I had seen them being marched out in chains and, er, and I knew they was executed because when we used to go out on this, um, with these buckets, to pick up the cell buckets and that, and one time I seen a stream of them taken out, I couldn't count how many, they were in chains and they were marched down past our cells, and some of them could talk English and they sung out as they were going down "Goodbye, boys". And then the next day, when they went to empty these buckets there was shovels and that sort of thing in this storeroom at the end and some of them had blood on them. So we knew that they were - well, we knew that they were going to be executed and we knew that they had been done but, er, they used to take them away, they weren't done in the gaol, where they used to take them I don't know, but, er, er - where were we going?

You had - you say the population -

So anyhow, during to all these things, I think that they might have been, come over a bit overcrowded, and then they decided doubling us up, put two in a cell. And, er, while this was a good thing in some instances, and I had one particular fellow in the cell with me that, er, was, er, very morose and quiet and that and being in a badly nervous state like I was, he wouldn't talk to me and that, and,

er, and I threatened to, to kill him, but, um, whether I would or not I don't know, but, er, just through the mere fact that he used to lay down and didn't say good night to me. But, er, I -

Actually, you told me that rather better the first time, so if you wouldn't mind, I think that's worth going back in on. So just say - I think you also said that he was a young fellow.

Yes. Well -

Just say how every night, you know, just lie down on his planks and go to sleep and not -

Yeah. Well, I had this young fellow put in the cell with me, and, er, he was very quiet, he didn't use to talk much, but, er, when we used to go to sleep at night, they used to sing out or blow a whistle and that was the time when, you know, you could lay down, it was generally about nine o'clock, and that was the time when you was allowed to put your planks down and you could lay down. And, er, this fellow, he used to just put his planks down and lay down and pull his tattered blanket up over him and, and that was it. Say nothing. And, um, after quite some time this sort of got dragging at me and, and, er, I, er, one night I really flared up and I said to him, Look, I said, there's only the two of us in the cell if you, and we're in the same predicament, if you're not going to even say good night to me, I said, I'll fix you up good and proper, I'll bloody kill you, I'll have only by then a cell by myself. And, er, that was an example of a typical nervous upset.

Did he say good night after that?

He did. Oh yes, yes, he did, after that.

Sorry, just say --

After that he, he did at least say good night to me, but, er, I don't know why, but we never talked very much and, and he never ever told me where he came from or, or anything, but, er

What nationality was he?

I think he was English, I'm not sure. Well, then I was put, after that, we were changed around every now and again, and the next cell mate I had was a fellow named Shelley from New South Wales, and, er, he was a, an ex-wheatlumper, but a very, very nice sort of a bloke, but he, he got dysentery very bad. And, er, he wasn't **in** my cell at that time, but when he was **in** the cell with me, we got on very well. He taught me a piece of poetry that, a long piece that I could recite word for word right to this day, and, er -

Just give me a little bit of it?

Er - I want free life and I want fresh air, And I long for the canter after the cattle, with cracks of the whip and ?blood shots in the ?battle, And milling horns of hawks and heads That wars and wrangles and scatters and spreads. That's it.

And he was with you for - what, how long?

Oh, a few weeks.

A few weeks. See, I think I can remember Rod Wells telling me that, er, sharing a cell was, er, was not easy **in** many ways, because, er - not so much arguments, but the fear that the other fellow might get more food than you or -

Yeah, oh yeah.

Did you have any experiences like that?

Yes, well, I would think that this sort of thing went on. It wasn't a, a case of animosity, it was just - well, self preservation, or, er, maybe it was just something to, to let your pent-up feelings out on. But, er, we, we did have, when, when we were, when I was in the cell - not with this fellow, but when I was in the cell with Shelley, we had a very, very friendly relationship. And we used to do this too, of, this, this meal that I take one bowl -not because we ever fought about it or -

I, I mentioned that -- I'd like to keep my question out of it --

Well, when it came to the point of food coming in the cells, er, naturally you was so hungry and you'd see one, er, probably when the rice was tipped into this bowl, it was all in one piece standing up, or one got shook and went down and it didn't look to be, one looked to have a lot more in than the other sort of thing, and, and this became a sort of a, a, well, naturally you'd look and see if the other fellow had more than you, and, er, we devised a system with mutual agreement, that you know, we'd bring our bowls in and say , well, is there more **in** this one than that one? Well, we didn't have any actual argument about it, so anyhow, we decided that when they came in, one day he'd have first lot **in** and next day I'd have first lot **in**, but virtually, that the difference in the size of them I don't think would be - well , they used to use the one scoop to scoop it out with, but it was the appearance of the thing, one lot of rice would sit and it would look nearly up to the top, and if you'd shake your bowl and that it wouldn't be, it would only cover the bottom, but, um, but, um, this one particular case of this fellow that I was in with, I wasn't with him very long before we were changed, that I had the, bit of a do about going to bed at night, but apart from that, the only other one I can remember being in with was Shelley, and, er, we, we didn't have any, any, er, sort of, er, differences between us, we were, we were real, real friendly, probably our natures suited one another, we were both from the country and probably both suited one another. But that was quite all right. Well then, when they, it wasn't long after they doubled us up that they decided that, I think they were being pressured from outside or that, they decided to, er, build these tunnels. But

before we get onto these tunnels. The, the treatment back in the gaol was no, no treatment whatsoever, and, er, I did hear that Black Jack Galleghan from Changi tried to, er, to, er, send us in some, what medical supplies that he could or something, but they wouldn't let him have anything to do with us at all, and, er, there was an Indian there, ??Goono ?Rattrem, and he could speak Japanese and he was the sort of - he was a prisoner too, but he used to do a lot better than us, he used to be out, was serving out the food and that sort of thing, and, er, and interpret between the guards and us. If there was anything higher up they'd bring the other camp interpreter in, but he used to do all the minor interpreting. And, er, he, er, he, er - where was I?

Oh, you were going to talk about - Black Jack was trying to get -

Oh, and we asked him to, to ask the guards if they'd give us some sump oil. See, we were covered in scabies and sores and this sort of thing and we knew we couldn't get any medical treatment, so we asked him could we, er, to, if they'd give us some sump oil, just to rub on ourselves, but they wouldn't be in that at all. And, er, at one stage we had beriberi and around our scrotum area and up under the arms and that used to become red raw and all the skin used to peel off with, and itch, and this was something to do with malnutrition I think. And, er, at one stage they decided they was going to give us some treatment, so they lined us all up in the raw and then with a paintbrush and they painted this - we had to go along and they painted this stuff on, whatever, I think it was methylated spirits, and of course that really chewed things up and the, the guards that was looking on and that, they're very delighted to see our agonies and the tears come to our eyes with this stuff painted on our raw parts. But that only happened, only the once, and that was it, that was all the treatment that we got within there. But the fellows that were **in** there that had beriberi and that, and some of them were in such a bad way, swollen up, you wouldn't believe, that they couldn't even walk, that that was, of us that was fit enough, they used to open the door and get us to carry them out and put them out in the sun in the passageway, and there'd be

anything up to two dozen laying out there that couldn't walk, and I've seen the, er, camp commandant come down and they were laying on this passageway and that, and just step over them and walk through them without even looking at them.

You mentioned that one of the side effects of this water beriberi is that you, it swells up your testicles -

Well, that was the, first your legs and testicles and that sort of thing, like, well - I didn't swell up at all. But, er, some of them, like apparently there's dry beriberi and wet beriberi and it was, and, er, well, it's - like, I'm not a doctor, I don't know, but some of them used to swell up like footballs. Their feet, legs, testicles would be, oh, well, you couldn't imagine, be absolutely the size of a football, they'd have to sort of hold them in their hand, with water, in this, this beriberi business. And quite a few of them died there. Well then, er, they, when they got, to, well, what I would think would be on their last legs within a day or so, some died, some they decided then that they'd send a few out to Changi. Well, when they were on their last legs they used to send them out to Changi and while they managed to save most of them when they got to Changi, but they used to, er, leave them there till they got, you know, well enough, on their feet again, and bring them back. To finish serving their, their time.

Did you get the impression, that, that they were keeping you in Outram Road to kill you or that you were just there to serve a military sentence and if you got sick well that was too bad?

Well, my opinion was that you were put in there and, it was just something to do with you. Well, the Army might have sentenced you to prison term, but whether you stayed there for your term or whether you died, that was, that was just too bad, it didn't seem to be any concern of them whatsoever. Er, there was, like if some fellow died in his cell during the night or during the day or that, well, he was just carted off, there was nothing, that was just, just nothing as far as they

were concerned, it didn't interest them at all, and these fellows that couldn't walk, and some of them were so bad that they couldn't be even taken out of their cell. And some of the cells, the floor and that was just covered in pieces of dead skin, where they'd been laying there on the floor and that until they died. There was just no, no interest whatsoever.

The reason I ask, this was that, I think it was Rod Wells said to me that he thought that, er, if people died there it was an administrative inconvenience, you know, and you were expected to serve your time, and even though the rules were harsh and tough, but, but that they didn't actually want you to die.

Well, all the indications about not wanting you to die, my impression of it, they didn't care whether you died or not. And, er, well, it seemed to me that better off if you did die and get out of their hair. They, they didn't - that was my opinion, they didn't, well, they done, they done everything possible to make you die, but whether, to say that they didn't want you to die, I can't see at all.

Well, how did you get back to Changi for treatment?

Well, then, after they doubled up in the cell, and then, er, there was a few, a couple of air raids, over Singapore, and they decided then that they'd, er, build, take us out to work, get some use out of us, on this, er, digging these tunnels, they used to put us in a truck and take us out to where these hills were, and we were tunneling into these hills with, we used to carry the stuff out first to start in two to a basket, and couple more digging inside, and quite a few different tunnels, and when you got in a bit they used to, er, run in a, a ?skiff, a small skiff on a small track that you put down, and then you'd timber it up as you go. Well, there was no ventilation or anything. And, er, they used to timber this until you got, got right in. Well, we were working on that, there was quite a few Englishmen and they used to take us out there every day to work on this, and when we started work on this, I would say that the food got just a

little bit better. And, er, while it wasn't anything that would fatten you or anything, but it was, it seemed to be, you know, just a little bit more ingredients in the soup and the rice, while it mightn't be any more, but the soup and that seemed to be a little bit more nourishing. Plus the fact that you was out in the fresh air and, and, er, while the work was fairly hard, you weren't, you weren't running, if you know what I mean, they sort of kept you going, you were there, and had to go and fill your basket and carry it out or load the Skiff and push it out, and -

Did they give you any clothes? Anything to wear on your feet?

Nothing on your feet, just the pair of shorts and then this, er, this little coat-shirt that we used to have in the gaol. Er, but when you went to work you had two pair, the pair that you wore to work, which was the same patched-up things, but when you came home, you'd throw a bit of water over yourselves and you could change into your nightwear, which was the same thing only, a pair of shorts and the coat-shirt. And, um, taken out in trucks to this, to do this work. Well, when we were at this, I was working in the tunnel with a couple of English fellows, and I thought to myself, well, I'll try and get out of this. So I said to them, if I tunnel underneath there and you put your chunkel in on the top, which is a big hoe, and drop the dirt down on me and then I'll make out that I'm really hurt. So, all right. So we did this and they dropped this dirt down on me and I lay there, and of course they made a big hoo-de-do and the guard that was with us was a Japanese prisoner, or trusty I suppose you'd call him, and he had no weapons. But the main guard used to stand out with a rifle outside the mouth of the tunnel. And anyhow, he got them to pull me out from under there and take me outside and put me on the ground there„ and, er, then they were shooed back to work. And the Jap guard came and had a look at me and I just lay there, and, and then he sent for a truck and they threw me in the truck and took me to the Jap hospital in Singapore; I get to the Singapore Hospital and they just took me off the truck and put me down on the grass out on the front lawn of the hospital.

And, er -

Why didn't they take you in?

Oh - well, they wouldn't touch us, we were covered in sores and scabies and thin and, and, er, just untouchable. And while I was laying on the lawn there was a couple of Japanese nurses came along, and, er, they had a look at me and came over and they were absolutely disgusted. Er, I don't know whether - they made sort of "tut tut" noises, you know, much as to say, how terrible this is, you know. Well then the Japanese doctor came along with an interpreter and, um, he asked me what happened, the interpreter, and I told him the tunnel had caved in on me, and he said, What happened to you? And I said, I don't know, I've hurt my back. He said, Can you walk? I said no. He said, Well, move your feet. I said, I can't move my feet, they're dead, no feeling in them. Oh. The Japanese doctor didn't put his hands on me or touch me or anything, so immediately they called another truck and sent me out to Changi, where our own doctors were, and they took me in to the main gate of Changi, took me out of the truck and our own fellows came out with a stretcher, and, er, they took the prison clothes off me and I'm in the raw there on the stretcher and they, our blokes carried me in and put me down in a ward in the Changi, what was the Changi prison hospital, if you know about Changi, it was our own administration, the Japs used to be round the outside of that, but inside there wouldn't be any of them around. They put me down on the floor there and all the blokes are crowding around and, er, anyhow, they said, What's the matter, Dig?, you know. And I said, Has the Jap guards gone? They said Yes. So I jumped up off the stretcher, I said, well, for Christ's sake, give me something to bloody eat, that's all. And of course then the doctors came along and they interviewed me and they were just panic stricken, or don't – but amazed, you know, how I got away with it. So anyhow, they put me in a ward there and put a screen around me, and I didn't know at the time, but I know there was no one near me, only the doctors, for four days, and afterwards they told me that, you know, that I had gone to pieces -

You had a mental crack-up?

Yes. And, um, I was there for, oh, quite a few weeks. Well, they put us in the camp hospital and when they used to serve the rations out, then they'd send up what was left to us, there was five or six of us in there that came out from Changi, me because I instigated it, but some of them because it was, on their last legs sort of thing, they reckoned they were going to die. And, er, they fed me up and they used to , I used to stay near *my* bed or in my bed and when the Jap doctor used to come out to have a look at me, they'd get warning through the grapevine that he was coming and of course the doctors would come and cover me with red curachrome or something at the back and that and of course he'd come along and he'd have a look at us all and he'd come to me and stand me up and feel my back and I'd put on a big turn about it hurt and so forth and then I managed to stay there for, oh, I must have been there for maybe six, seven weeks, maybe two months, and in that time I was really fattened up.

Did Black Jack come and see you at that time, at any stage?

No, no.

How did you report, to whom did you report on conditions in Outram Road.

Oh, they, they interviewed me, but -

Who -

Well, I don't know, a fellow came along there and, a couple of them came along, I suppose they were our Intelligence, I don't know, and interviewed me, and the doctors interviewed me. And, er, but even up to that stage there had been, you know, a few come out that had lived, of course they knew pretty well what was going on in there. And then, er, by this time, the doctor came out and he

told me, back. And that afternoon I was on a truck and back into Outram Road again. And, er, when I got back into Outram Road I was about 131/2 stone, the fittest bloke in the whole, whole place there, I must have looked like a big pig to the rest of them, but in six weeks they tore all that off me. We were still going to work and so forth and things carried on the same as that until it was getting, towards the end of things - which we didn't know it was getting towards the end of things, but I got pretty thin and pretty, pretty sick again. And, er, one day, they took - oh, must have been eight, nine of us, took us out and put us in a truck and sent us out to Changi. And of course, when you're in that stage of thing you don't know how sick you really are. You, right, you're that weak and mentally down cast and that and you don't know how sick you really are. Well, when I got out to Changi, they - of course there was no medicine or anything left at that stage, but I was still pretty, must have been pretty sick, because when the release came, they, er, put me into, the fellows that was the sickest, they put us on a flying boat and flew us to, er, to, er, Morotai. And, er -

Sorry. Yes.

To, to Labuan I think, and they put me in a hospital in Labuan, and, er, I was, that night that I got there, I didn't know anything about it, but I know that the sister was with me all night that night and I nearly died that night, but I started to improve from there on. And then they took us down to Morotai and, er, I was there for quite some time, and then on the hospital ship back to here, and I was still supposed to be a bed patient when I got back here, although I was walking about. But, er, I wouldn't come off the ship on a stretcher, I walked off the ship, and from there on I progressed to what I am now.

Well, we've jumped ahead a bit. The end of the war - were you aware of that and, er, or were you too sick to know --

Well, why I was - I was told about it. They had some, some idea that there, the end was, was just about here, but how close or that I don't, I don't think they really knew until - well, as far as I'm concerned, until the last, until eventually the last few days of it. And the first, the first contact we had, they flew in a paratrooper, er - I don't know what went on before, there was all sorts of rumours, they'd flown in some paratroopers and the Japs had executed them and all that, but I don't know. But the first I can remember is this big, er, Australian paratrooper, he came down in the road and he was tall - and of course we were all skinny and that, and we were frightened of him. We were frightened of him. He had revolvers and grenades and tommy gun and, poof! And he came down to the gate there and, er - this was at Changi. And he said to the Jap on the gate, I want to see the commander. And then, the commander of the gaol. And they said, we'll take you to him. No, he said. Here. Bring him here. And he sort of started to take over from that.

Must have been a great moment. How long - can you remember what you, what you said to him, or -

Oh well, I didn't see him personally, we were all there just gaping. Just gaping. Frightened. Poof!.

Oh, dear!

But that's -more or less of it, there's probably some other little things in, in between and that, but, er, but that's about the guts of it.

I don't want to distress you too much, but I've got a bit of a problem with the story about Shelley and that is that there, there was a sequel to it, and that you shared the cell together and - could you tell me about when you saw him again?

Well, after we were, we were parted, he was put in another cell, and, er, he

got very sick and I was on this, emptying these buckets at this time. And, er, I could see that he was getting worse and worse and I asked this Indian that was a sort of cum interpreter sort of thing, could they, you know, could he instigate anything to be done for him, but he couldn't do anything. And I wasn't really allowed to talk to him, but I sort of stuck my neck out to - you know, he could talk to the Japs and tell them what I wanted or something or other. But, er, the last time I seen him I went to his cell to empty his bucket and he was sitting on the bucket, and he said of me, "This is it, Herb", he said, "I won't see you tomorrow". And I said "Oh, Geoff, don't talk like that". And he said "I'm bleeding", he said, "it's just pouring out of me". And I said "Oh well, we won't be able to empty your bucket". And he said "No, you can't take the bucket". And, er, he looked terrible. And anyhow, that night he died and I didn't, I didn't see him again after that, but they must have kept his cell locked and took him away the next morning.

He - is - was that Indian, was he Jap-happy? The one that you were talking about that was -

Well, he was supposed to be a prisoner. And he was locked in the cell every night. But he was out all day, every day, and er, er, well - and he was, terrific condition, you know, real shiny black skin, he was eating well and living well. Er, but I, well, I don't know whether he was just, er, just treatment he was getting because he was looked on as the interpreter or what, or whether he ever - but, er, he certainly, he certainly was, well you could say very near on the Jap side. But whether he was or not I don't know. But, er - you see, we had no way of knowing. But he was -

It sounds as though he was in a very privileged position, anyway.

Well, that's it. And sometimes I would think a bit more than privileged position though I don't know what was going on there.

Did you think he ever actively informed on people? Or was, was not, didn't quite go that far.

Well, we, there was nothing to inform about. You see, we were all locked in our cells at night and taken out for a bit of a wash and that sort of thing and back in again and, er, well, he was there and helping to serve out the food and that, and what he done in the daytime and that, I know he had a cell there, but whether he was locked up or not I don't know, or, or what happened. Certainly he was, he was living pretty well. Apart from that, I didn't see him ever getting knocked about or anything like that. And he used to run around there and he'd talk to the Japs and so forth, so I could never fathom out just where he fitted in at all.

What about news, Herb? Did you ever hear any news at all, any -

No. Absolutely nothing.

But you must have brought some back when you went into Changi and - because they had a radio and knew how the war was going and did you, can you remember bringing any news back into the gaol?

Well, they had a radio and that, but as far as, it never, nothing ever leaked up to us, only rumours.

You didn't ever know how the war was going?

Not really, no. No. The only time that I knew how the war was going, we were working out on this, these tunnels, and I was sitting on the line driving stakes, spikes in, you know, to this line, and there was a big air raid over Singapore with the, er, the big American bombers, and they were bombing the, the wharf and the planes was coming over, big super phoo, and of course the Japs with us, they were sort of panic stricken, and of course we're looking up, cheering and laughing

and going on and, er, anyhow, this Jap guard came over, and I'm sitting on the line and he gets me by the back of the head and he's trying to belt me brains out on the line. And there was this Englishman, he hadn't been in Outram Road very long, big blondy headed fellow. And he had a hammer too, and he comes over to the Jap and spins him round and he holds his hammer up and he said "If you do that again I'll bloody knock your brains out" to this --

END OF SIDE 4.

HERB TRACKSON - SIDE 5

And he holds his hammer up and he said "If you do that again I'll bloody knock your brains out" to this Jap guard. So the Jap was so stunned with what was going on up there, and this bloke blooming attacking him, he didn't know what to do. And I thought that straight away he'd be calling some of the other guards and this bloke, that'd be it, they'd kill him right there and then. But they were in such a stupor with what's going on that nothing ever happened about it. Now if you, even if you told a POW that you'd seen a bloke go over and raise a hammer to a Jap guard and tell him you were going to belt his brains out, no one would ever believe it. But this fellow was an English, permanent army English bloke, but he must have been one tough cookie.

Tape 3 of Herb Trackson. One thing that I meant to ask you about and didn't on the way through was, you mentioned that one of the few things that you had in the cell was the latrine bucket, but was this used very much?

Well, er, water wise, once a day.

Sorry - but you might just start off by saying, commenting on the latrine bucket.

Well, this latrine bucket that was in the corner, er, was, er, well nearly may as well not been there, because you would urinate once a day, which wasn't very much, because you wasn't getting much to drink and then the water out of the rice. But as far as anything else goes you could go for a month, or two months without going to the toilet. And if you, when you did go to the toilet, it was some operation. Because the, your motion would be as thick as your wrist and as hard as a piece of board, it'd be accumulated in there anything up to two months, so the passes was just, just out of this world, bring tears to your eyes, but that, that was the only time you ever used it, unless, fellows that had dysentery in

there and that sort of thing, well, while they were, using it a lot, they were only passing blood and mucus, and most of the, the buckets when you came out to empty them, would have nothing , next to nothing in them. But that was the routine, you'd take it up and empty it and throw a bucket of water in it and, and that was it, sort of thing.

Well now, getting back to the end of the war and they, they put you blokes on a - did you say a flying boat?

The New Zealanders were flying these Catalinas. And, er, they put us on a flying boat, and I think it was Labuan they took us to. They put me in and they gave me a seat in the gun turret, well, the gun had been removed, **in** the blister at the side. And they flew us round, over, er, the oil wells up there that were still burning, in North Borneo, and landed us at Labuan, and they landed on the water, and - when they first told us we were going by plane from the airport. They took us out to the airport, they said we were going by flying boat. So we couldn't make this out. When we get out to the airport we see this thing sitting there with floats and wheels. So we get up in the air and away we go and when, and the New Zealand crew, and they flew us there, and when we landed at Labuan, it landed on the water and, well, hell, how do we get to shore in this? Next minute this blooming thing comes down the beach with wheels on and takes straight to the water and comes out to get us. And we'd never seen anything like this before. And, er, picks us up and takes us up to the hospital. And then I was in the hospital there for, er, I think between a week and a fortnight, the first night I nearly died there. But then I started to recover after that, and then the hospital ship, the Morotai, came and picked us up and took us - not the Morotai the, er, I can't think of the name of it. And took us down to -

Just say, the hospital ship.

The hospital ship took us to Morotai. And put us ashore in the hospital at

came back again and picked us up again at Morotai and brought us around to Brisbane.

Well, tell me about that, you know, I mean, arriving in Brisbane. How did you arrive, what time of day, what happened, you know - just tell me about arriving back in Australia.

Well, I was in the, **in** the hospital part of the ship, I was supposed to be a bed patient, and, and, er, we arrived in, in Brisbane, and they came down, they said we'd docked and we're going to take you off and, er, I said, oh, well, I'll get up and - and they said no, you're a stretcher patient, you'll have to come off in a stretcher. I said, like bloody hell. So I got up and I walked off. And, er, then they put us in ambulances and took us to, er, Greenslopes Hospital. And when I got to Greenslopes Hospital my father was there, Frances was there. And I was in hospital for a while and then, when we were fit enough, they let us go on 28 days' leave. I went home for 28 days and came back again. And when we got back to Brisbane, then they, er sent us to convalesce in camp, 28 days in Burleigh Heads. And we were there 28 days and then we came back to Brisbane and, er, we were discharged then. And I got discharged and I went back up north, started work straight away. And then, er, I was coming back down to Brisbane, the Army got in touch with me, they wanted all this evidence for the, er, war crimes. So when I was down in Brisbane I got married, was, I was going on my honeymoon up to Noosa, and, er, the Army came and got me and took me to, er, Victoria Barracks, and I was going through all this interrogation and, and I said, well, I've got to catch a train at five o'clock because I'm on my honeymoon, I'm going to Noosa. Don't worry about it, they said, and where's your wife, and I told her, and anyhow she went to the station and they kept me there, and I don't know whether they held the train back till they'd finished, and they put me in a car and took me down to the station and put me on the train, that was it.

Tell me, with these early days, you know, when you were back, what was Australia like, I mean all kinds of things had happened while you'd been away, there must have been things, technological developments for instance that would have surprised you, can you remember some of the things that did surprise you?

Well, the main thing was the gear the Army had, and when we came to Morotai, there was miles and miles of these fighter planes, lined up, and I can see them, thousands of them, you know, they were finished and they had them all lined up there, they weren't being used. And I thought, my God, if we only had a few of them before. And, er, when I came back to civilian life, I was very much, er, frightened, frightened of everything. You know, there was trams here in those days and that and I was frightened to get on a tram, I was frightened of people. And I was clumsy, you know, back in boots again, my feet didn't sort of work properly. But it, I soon got over it. Like, well I mean, that was for the first couple of weeks, and after that, well, by the time I went up on 28 days leave, still a bit clumsy then, but, er, when I got back here I was still -

Just a second - Yes, Herb, we were talking about the things that had changed in Australia when you got back and how you were reacting to, to Australia.

Well as I say, I didn't notice so much about, as change, but, er, as far as myself goes, it took a lot of getting used to, being back with people, you always seemed to be, to be frightened of something. You know, it was - I suppose it was a nervous state, but, er, er, you, er, no matter what you done, you thought about it twice and thought about, you know, what could happen and so forth, but, r, the best thing that I ever done was, well, got straight out of hospital, got out of camp, of course that done a world of good, the camp at Burleigh Heads, but after I got back to work and I was working for a few weeks, well, it was just a matter of back in step again, apart from - there were certain times of great depression, and, and, er, for quite a period, and, and while it did happen off and on and nerves and so forth until now, after all these years, I would say that

I'm pretty well over it unless something brings it back to -

What - probably like me talking to you like this. But what sort of form do some of these phobias take? I mean, I think you were talking over lunch about not, not being able to come home to an empty house and that sort of thing.

Well, one thing, I couldn't, as far as my case goes, I could not bear to be on my own. I had to have someone with me or someone around me or even if it was strangers, that, but to be in a room by myself was, was just, just impossible, I'd have to get out and go and see someone or make an excuse to go and see someone. And, er, er, nervous phobias like, er, I suppose - well, it wasn't all the time, it was only happen occasionally, although when I was in Beaudesert I had a, a bad spell of nerves there that -

Could you say when you were -

In Beaudesert.

What -

In Beaudesert, the town, Beaudesert. And, er, it was so bad at that stage that I couldn't stand the clock ticking, I couldn't read a book that had a murder in it, I couldn't put my son, which was six months old, in the car and take him out on the road, I was just frightened. And while I was in Beaudesert, the doctor in there sent me up to Greenslopes, and I was in Greenslopes, they kept me there a fortnight for observation. And during the time that I was there they had this nerve ward at that time with insulin injections and then they'd give them, keep them knocked out for 48 hours and then give them sugar to bring them round again and they put the barrier up across so that no one could get near them and, er, I was in the ward just beside this and you could hear the racket and at times they're throwing their food around. This was, all sorts of troops were there, wasn't POWs, really. Suppose there might have been one or two there but - and when I

was in Greenslopes there for about two weeks, and, er, I said to myself, and seeing this sort of thing going on, I thought, this is not for me. You know, you, you can't be that bad. And I sort of, er, mentally overcome it. Mainly, that was the turning point, I mainly mentally overcome it at that stage, that I never ever got that sort of fits of depression afterwards.

What was the work that you threw yourself back into?

I was a butcher. Butchering. And, er, it was a big shop, up north there, and the work was hard and it was very hot and, and, er, well, you know, I had a good boss and that. But I used to work real hard we'd do about seven bodies a week, well, I'd do the whole lot on my own sort of thing, you know, and - because I was just, well I suppose it was nervous tension that I had to go like hell, and you know, really get into it, and I think I more or less worked it out of my system to an extent.

What about dreams, did you have, were you troubled by dreams?

Oh yes, yes, off and on, yes, I'd wake up in the night or the wife would wake me up, I'd be screaming and yelling and belting the wall and cons.. and going on, but, er, that's past. I do have occasional dream about it, but no nightmares. They were nightmares.

When you first came back, did you feel the need to talk to other ex-POWs, did you find that - or did you talk about it at all?

No. No, I didn't then and I don't now, really. I, I haven't talked much, POWs, where were you and so forth maybe yes , but as far as *my* own personal experiences, I don't think I have ever related it, not even to my own son, I don't think, that, that Frances is writing out there, she don't know half that's in that. I have never discussed it. But - well, I don't know whether it was because I didn't

want to, but, or whether it's because that I had the feeling that no one would believe it no one would be interested, but if they were interested they wouldn't believe it, and consequently, and it upset me to a certain degree to talk about it, so - it's gone.

Tell me, long term things - for instance, like leaving things on your plate or, do you have to eat, do you find food waste sort of worries you or anything like that?

No, I never had any, any, not finickety about food or, or anything like that. And some of them say they can never eat rice again and, and all this, I like rice. And I think, all in all, that I have recovered pretty well, or as much as possible to recover, but I don't - if you want to get on to the Jap situation, I, I don't hold any animosity to the , to the Japanese themselves. Er, perhaps the older ones I might have, but it's, it's a whole new ball game. And er, er, fellows say, oh, if we run into a Jap somewhere, we'll do this and we'll do that, but I was on a trip to, a couple of years ago, up to Barron Falls up there and there was a whole team of Japanese on there and one of them could talk English and I was quite happy to talk to him and that, I didn't see any, anything that I want to punch him in the nose or anything like that. No, I don't hold any grudges now, because I think that if you do hold grudges you sort of hold them against yourself more than anything.

How do you feel the experience changed you, as a person, or did it?

Well, I think that the experience made me a hell of a lot more worldly wise than I would have been otherwise and it gave me an independent outlook on life. It, er, this is mental wise, it's left me a certain amount of nervous upsets and that, but I suppose there's plenty of people with nervous upsets. But I'm not a nervous wreck or anything like that, it's not detrimental to me or any way. And, er, I can take things as they come and not get all upset about it. Er, up until - this is, I'm talking about the last ten years. But up until that time I must have been a terrible person to live with and I was a terrible person to work for, when

I look back on it -

Temper and --

Well yes, that sort of thing; the least little thing would upset me and I'd, I'd really go off, you know. And, er - but now I don't think there's anything upsets me, I never do my block or, or, **in** fact, I would say that, as far as, well, I'm reasonably healthy, I have my little things that's wrong with me, certainly, but, er, but, er, nowhere near as bad as lots of other people that never were POWs.

Herb, what was it, do you think that, through this - and you had one of the worst experiences, I mean, there are very few POW experiences I've heard that have been worse than yours - what do you think got you through?

Well, for one thing I think that, er, my, when I was taken POW I was an absolutely perfect specimen of physical fitness. And, er, I was, no hereditary troubles, because with eight kids in the family, we were a healthy family, while we were a poor family, we ate well and we had a good home life. And, er, I, I like to work and, er, general outlook on life, I wasn't over ambitious, if things didn't go my way I, I don't think it ever caused me any real great concern. And, er, I always did like a battle - not a punch-up sort of thing, but, er, competitive battle with life itself - if you know what I mean, you know, a, I'm never happier when, than I've got some sort of troubles - I don't mean house trouble, I've got no family troubles or wife troubles or anything like that, but, er - well, I've got none at all now, but when I was in business and that, well, I found that, when I had troubles or worries, I was better then than I was without them.

Challenge --

Well, that's it. And, er, I was more happier with a challenge in front of me than what I would have been otherwise.

Now just getting back to *my* question, though, you've made a point that you started out being pretty fit, right, but by the time you left Borneo you weren't fit. I mean, you started Outram Road well behind the eight ball. What do you think - what do you think it was that made you cling on the way you did?

Well, that's a very very hard question. After all these years, but as far as I can remember is, er, not, er - well, you worried certainly, but - well, I can't really explain it. The only thing I can say is that I got so far down that, er, if I didn't get up or I died, that it didn't matter, and I just carried on, just sort of, er, I wouldn't mentally think that there was any great ambition or fight for life, I can't remember saying that I'm just not going to die and all this sort of thing, it just sort of carried on from there in a sort of a mental blackout for - for years.

Did you sort of take each day as it came?

Well, that, that would be it, what, well, each minute as it came sort of thing, you know, but, like, virtually, I suppose I should have been dead half a dozen times. Apart from the sickness, but, when, there's very few escaped POWs that survived, they generally cut their heads off straight away. There was only a few of us survived that, because there was a lot escaped and they caught them again and executed them straight away.

Why they didn't do that?

I don't know. Then again, when they told us they were going to execute us for pinching this rice, well, that was on, because we were in gaol, we were prisoners - gaol prisoners, not POWs, at that stage. Why, I don't know. Then there was, er, twice in Borneo, Sandakan, Kuching, when I should have been dead, but, but I managed to survive. But, er, not through any - I can't remember any great determination, but maybe it was there, but not that I know of. It just sort of -

well, I just sort of went into a mental coma sort of thing and sort of carried on. It was, it was a thing that was hard to explain, that's what I say.

I don't want to put words into your mouth, but when I said to you about how did it feel to go those two days without food and water, you said it takes a lot to kill a man, I think, or something.

Oh yes. Well, well that's one thing, and as I say I've been in, on death's bed so many times that, er, er, it, you really realise that you've got to be really sick to die, but how sick I don't know, because as I say, I've been virtually dead, though I didn't know it. But, er, and came back out of it. But I don't think from any mental determination from myself, you know.

Would you just say - if I'm not putting words in your mouth - that it takes a lot to kill a man?

Well, when, when you've been so sick and virtually dead so many times and been through all that, you wonder how you stay alive and then you see fellows that are still alive that are virtually dead, it makes you wonder how really sick you have to be to die.

Identification: this is an interview with Frances Trackson recorded in Brisbane on 21st February 1983 -

Frances, did you know Herb before the war?

Yes, I knew him for nine, ten months.

And when he was captured, er, what, what did you hear - you wouldn't have heard anything from him from that moment?

I got the one card. About '43 I think it was. 1943.

-- can't quite reach you with this dreaded machine. And, er, so you knew him, you'd, what, gone out a couple of times, something like that **or -**

Oh yes, yes.

And what did you think happened, through the war?

Oh well, different information filtered through, you know, that they were prisoners, but that was all.

Did you feel that he was alive - or just hoped?

Oh, I thought he'd be alive.

And what was the first that you heard of him to confirm that he was alive?

When they were giving the names on the wireless. I was sitting down writing a letter in the rec room at Sandgate and, er, they, er, came over the wireless.

Quite a moment.

And then I rang up his mother - my mother, and then his mother, or - sent a telegram to his mother the next morning.

And when did you first see him?

When he came off the Wanganella, at Hamilton Wharf. Oh, about a month later, I think.

And what did he look like then?

Much the same as he did when he went away. You know, except that he had more puffy, with the food.

He'd put on weight by that time.

Oh yes, yes.

And then - you picked up where you left off?

More or less. We were married within six months. He went home first and then he came back down and, er, we got married here in Brisbane.

Now in those early, early days of your marriage, did you feel that the imprisonment experience - what effect did you feel the imprisonment experience had had on him, how had that manifested itself.

Well, we argued a lot. Oh boy, did we argue. But I don't know that that was the prison experience either. I think it was just normal, getting married. One min.. both independent people getting married, you know.

What about dreams, perhaps waking up in the night, things like that?

Oh yes, he used to a lot of times.

???

Well, he - ??if he kept on waking. I'd sleep here on the bed and he'd sleep there and the next minute he'd, he'd be dragging like mad, he'd feel he was lonely. And of course I'd wake up fighting mad, I hate being wakened up **in** the middle of the night.

Fighting mad?

Yes. Because he'd woken me up. That was about all. Oh, now and again he'd be groaning and moaning. But you daren't put a hand on him. Because he'd lash out and hit you a wallop. See, you'd got to keep at him, er, Herb, Herb, until he wakes up. And even if he's lying there, asleep in front of the TV, there's no touching him. You've got to keep calling until you've got him awake.

Even now?

Even now.

Sorry, just - I'd like to go over that a bit more, I'm not sure I fully got it. Things that sort of, er - what things last through to the present day?

I still maintain he doesn't like being on his own. He says he's over it, but I don't think he is. Because if he goes out and I'm left here and I go down the yard and I'm talking to somebody down the bottom of the yard, he's round looking for me before he'll settle down to anything.

What was the situation regarding that earlier in the marriage?

Oh, he wouldn't come into the empty house. Not at all. He didn't like that at all.

Didn't like -

So - do you mind just I cut --

But he still doesn't like coming home to an empty house. And when we were in the shops, we'd start early on a Saturday morning, well, then I'd do the money and the bills here, and when I got sleepy I'd go around the yard and he, if he was sleeping, he'd wake up immediately and come down looking for me. And that went on for at least 20 years, didn't it.

If you wouldn't mind just putting, again without me asking the question, about him not liking -- to come to an empty house --

Well, he doesn't like coming to an empty house. He doesn't like the feeling of being alone, And I think that's why he always - he felt happier in a shop with a lot of people coming in and out all of the time, somebody to talk to. And I don't think he would have done any good on, in a job where he'd be on his own.

What about food and sort of leaving - I mean, does he always finish the food that -

Well, when he come back he said, don't ever give me rice. And I said, well, I like rice and I'll have it. So I made the first rice pudding for myself, but he said, Oh, I don't think I'd mind that. But when he came back first he said it wasn't the quantity of rice they got, but it was the monotony of it all the time. But now - well, he doesn't bother with any sort of food. I'm no great shakes as a cook, but, er, he eats everything I put **in** front of him.