

‘Rakuyo’ Maru survivors bring their story to Australia & news of Japanese POW Camp conditions

JAPANESE HORRORS

Australian and British War
Prisoners

MANY DEATHS IN CAMPS

Stark Story of Survivors of
Sunken Transport

CANBERRA, Nov 17.—An early estimate places the death roll of Australian prisoners of war in Japanese prison camps in Burma and Siam near 2,000 out of about 10,000.

The first complete story of the inhuman conditions suffered by Australian and Allied soldiers in these camps was given by the Acting Prime Minister (Mr Forde) in the House of Representatives today when reporting on the torpedoing on September 12 last of a Japanese transport carrying 700 Australian and 600 British prisoners. Mr Forde said that the main causes were malnutrition, dysentery, malaria and exhaustion, and in some places cholera.

Survivors from the transport told a stark story of men stricken with fever forced to work on a railway constructed through virgin forest, of men brutally bashed by their goolers and of Allied surgeons using mainly improvised instruments.

Members listened silent and appalled as Mr Forde made the announcement. Many were obviously affected as Mr Forde delivered his statement in a quiet, dignified voice. Only 11 members of the public were in the galleries.

Mr Forde said that 92 of the 700 Australian and 60 of the 600 British prisoners were rescued six days after

prisoners were rescued six days after the transport was sunk in the Western Pacific on its way to Japan. It would appear that the chance of survival of the remaining 600 Australians would depend upon their being able to reach land. That chance was very slender, but it was just possible that some might be alive. Only time could prove the answer.

Sir William Webb, the Government's commissioner for the investigation of Japanese atrocities, he said, had concluded after questioning survivors that the Japanese almost entirely disregarded the rules of warfare concerning prisoners of war, but there were times when Australians came under the control of humane Japanese commanders and had relatively decent conditions.

The principal passages in Mr Forde's statement were as follows:

"The House will be aware that 92 Australian and 60 British prisoners of war were rescued by US submarines from a Japanese transport

which was torpedoed on September 12 in the western Pacific. All but one of the Australian survivors has now arrived in Australia. As the result of the skilled attention given them overseas after their rescue and immediately on their arrival in Australia the men generally are in good condition and with few exceptions are now on leave.

"These men were among about 700 Australians who with about 600 British prisoners of war had been embarked in a Japanese ship at Singapore on September 4, 1944, for transfer to Japan.

Cramped Accommodation.

"The accommodation provided for the 1,300 men consisted of a space in the ship's second hold. This space, which carried a sign reading 'Accommodation for 187 steerage passengers,' had been horizontally subdivided by a false floor. Thus the Japanese created two decks, neither of which had a ceiling height in

of which had a ceiling height in excess of 4ft. The Japanese orders were that all prisoners of war should be confined below deck, and this meant that in the subdivided hold each man was allotted a space of only 2 sq ft. The men had just enough room to sit up. When they wanted to sleep they had to rest on one another. Their bedding was their own personal clothing and one blanket, usually of poor cotton material. Their air below was fetid and stifling hot as the port holes were sealed and the only ventilation was through the hatch. The Japanese commander refused to permit the erection of wind sails, which were found in the hold and which would have provided some slight relief for the men below.

"Because of the physical impossibility of cramming all the 1,300 men into the hold the Japanese commander was forced to agree to several hundred men sleeping and living on the deck together with the sick men, who had to be brought up for air and treatment by the two Australian doctors who accompanied them. As many as 100 men at a time were ill, and, as the price they paid for fresh air, they had to remain exposed through the day to the tropical sun and at night slept on the bare deck with only one thin blanket for covering.

Pangs of Thirst.

"The sufferings of the men were intensified by a shortage of drinking water. The rice ration, and often the stew, was cooked with salt water, and this made the prisoners even thirstier. Despite the shortage the Japanese guards freely used fresh water to wash themselves and did so in view of the prisoners. The food ration for each man consisted of three-quarters of a pannikin of rice three times a day, an added spoonful of sugar in the morning and a small tin of watery fish stew at night.

"While in an escorted convoy the ship, with other Japanese vessels, was

torpedoed about 5.30 am on September 12, 1944, in a calm sea. The

Japanese panicked. Most of them hurriedly left in the ships lifeboats, but others jumped overboard. None displayed the slightest interest in the fate of the prisoners of war. In the darkness the Australians and the British, under the direction of their officers, effected an orderly evacuation of the ship. They went overboard progressively after they had thrown into the sea all the rafts and wooden articles that would float. About 75 per cent of the men had lifebelts. The Japanese had also issued each of the prisoners a block of crude rubber for use as a life-buoy. It was found that these blocks were useless.

Depth Charges Affect Men.

"The men had been in the sea only a short time when the Japanese destroyer escort dropped depth charges in a counter-attack against the US submarine. Unfortunately the explosion of the depth charges affected many of the men in the sea, greatly reducing their chances of survival. The Japanese destroyer then put out boats to rescue any Japanese on rafts, but they refused to pick up any prisoners of war. The Japanese after rescuing their own nationals waved derisively at the Australians. The latter, who had been in the water for some hours, showed their magnificent spirit by singing 'Rule, Britannia.' The evidence given by the rescued men makes it clear beyond all doubt that the Japanese intended to leave all prisoners of war to drown.

"During the first day there were repeated attempts to organise rafts into groups," Mr Forde continued. "Men swam from one raft to another, seeking friends. Groups of Australians gathered together for mutual assistance. In the first night the men were mainly in large parties. On the second, third and fourth days many men, including those affected by the depth charges, were lost from the rafts, most of which were very slippery owing to becoming coated with oil from a sunken Japanese tanker.

Rescue by Americans.

"Between the afternoon of the fourth day and the evening of the sixth day the survivors were rescued by American submarines, the commanding officers and crews of which showed great skill and courage in their conduct of the rescue operations. The Australians who were rescued felt that they could never praise too highly the treatment which they had received aboard the United States submarines after they were rescued. They were then in an emaciated and often semi-delirious condition, having spent days in the sea without food, water and in many cases without clothing.

"At an advanced island base at Guadalcanal and on US ships which brought the Australians home the utmost attention and kindness was bestowed on the survivors.

"After the men had been accommodated at a convalescent home in Australia opportunity was taken to have them compile lists of their comrades who had been on board the sunken transport and also to obtain a first-hand story of how the Japanese have treated Allied prisoners of war in Burma and Siam.

"The rescued men were part of a force of Australian prisoners of war transported in May, 1942, from Singapore and Java to various parts of Burma under the same conditions as existed on the transport which was sunk. After employment in Burma, mainly on aerodrome construction, the Australians were transferred to a camp at Thanbyuazat, at the northern end of the projected Burma railway.

Work in Jungle.

"By October, 1942, thousands of Australians and other Allied prisoners of war were at work in the jungle. At intervals of several months they were transferred to camps deeper into the jungle as the railway progressed. The men in the jungle camps lived in bamboo huts thatched with palm leaves. Many

thatched with palm leaves. Many slept on bamboo tier floors, but in some camps where there were no floors the men improvised beds out of bags and bamboo poles to keep away from lice and bugs. Each man had only one flimsy blanket. From April to October, 1942, tropical rains penetrated the roofs and turned the camps and the hut floors into a sea of mud. Clothing deteriorated, no issues being made by the Japanese, and many of the men wore only a loin cloth, sometimes with one other garment. Boots were worn out and not replaced. Many lived and worked without boots for months. Food consisted of a panikin of rice and about half a pint of watery stew three times a day. Endeavours were made to supplement the ration with native foods and edible roots. The issue of soap was one small piece about every six months.

"Each day there was usually a sick parade held by an Australian medical officer, but, if it resulted in an insufficient number of men for the work, a Japanese doctor would make a casual inspection of the sick and order to work all men who had no visible disease. Often men with very high temperatures would be forced to work. Australian doctors did their utmost for the sick men, but, owing to absence of drugs and facilities, sickness and deaths were inevitable. The main causes of death were malnutrition, dysentery, malaria, exhaustion and, in some places, cholera.

Hospital Cases.

"Hospital cases had to be accommodated at each camp until, after lengthy delays, they were evacuated to a base camp at Thanbyuazai. The hospital was similar to the work camps, but more strongly constructed. Rations were somewhat better because native supplies were obtained. Allied surgeons used mainly improvised instruments. Only local anaesthetics were available, even for the removal of limbs. Large numbers of the patients had tropical ulcers, often from the knee to the foot. Many such

from the knee to the foot. Many such cases had a leg removed, and a large percentage died. The skill and devotion shown by the Australian medical officers in these circumstances have been magnificent.

"Work on the railways consisted of cutting through virgin forest to lay a track, making embankments and cuttings, building bridges and trestles, laying and ballasting the track. Prisoners of war were used everywhere in the ballast gangs. All the time we were in the jungle, tracks and trestles were being built. As the camp strength diminished owing

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to deaths and illness the remaining men had to work longer hours. Shifts thus increased from 12 to 18 hours a day, sometimes exceeding 24 hours of continuous work. Work through the night was done by the light of lamps and torches. Meals were brought out by semi-fit men. Work continued in all weather. Each camp had a Japanese officer or sergeant in charge with about 30 guards who supervised the work.

Maltreatment of Prisoners.

"The guards maltreated the prisoners of war at the slightest pretext. Bashings usually were heavy blows on the head sufficient to knock the prisoners of war over. Another punishment was to make a prisoner of war stand holding a heavy piece of wood above his head for two to five hours. Sometimes the prisoners of war were made to stand to attention for several days. The guards, who were Koreans, almost invariably behaved with the utmost brutality, having learnt their lesson from the way that the Japanese had treated them.

"When the line was completed in

October, 1943, the prisoners of war who had constructed it were withdrawn through its southern terminus and were accommodated in Siam. Some were transferred to Indo-China. It was from one party of these that a selection was made of the fittest for transfer to Japan. The men recently rescued belonged to this group.

"By their dauntless courage and amazing endurance the survivors from the Japanese transport have performed a great service. They have given an eye-witness account of the manner in which the Japanese treat their prisoners of war. They have managed to compile an almost complete list of their comrades who were shipped with them and they have furnished long lists of names of Australians who have died, mainly in Burma and Siam, and of whose deaths the Japanese Government has not notified the Commonwealth.

The Deathroll.

"It is deeply regretted that at this stage it cannot be stated how many Australians have died. An early estimate places the deathroll in Burma and Siam near 2,000 out of about 10,000 Australians. It is hoped that this estimate will prove too high, but unfortunately it may ultimately prove to be an understatement.

"The careful collation and checking of all this vast amount of information will take a considerable time, but all next-of-kin of men identified as casualties will be notified as soon as possible. Priority has been given to the preparation of the list of men not rescued from the sunken transport so that their next-of-kin may be informed. As to the fate of the 600 Australians not known to be rescued from the Japanese transport it would appear that the chance of survival of any of them would depend upon their reaching land. That chance was very slender, but it is just possible that some may be alive. Only time can provide the answer.

"While all this work is receiving attention relatives of Australian

to refrain from making any effort to make contact with or question the rescued men who have been returned to their homes. These men have been through harrowing experiences, have splendidly cooperated with service authorities during a lengthy interrogation, and now richly deserve a peaceful and uninterrupted reunion with their families.

Improved Conditions.

"It is felt that this information should be given to the public even though the Government is profoundly aware of the anguish it will cause to the families of all Australians captured by the Japanese. It was considered that next-of-kin would wish to receive an authoritative statement of the facts. It should be understood that the foregoing description relates particularly to accommodation and conditions under which prisoners were worked in Burma and Siam. When the men were withdrawn from the construction of the railway their conditions were somewhat improved. The description moreover has no reference to camps in Hong Kong, Formosa, occupied China, Korea and Japan, where it is believed present conditions may be relatively better, although still far below the standards that we would desire.

"Sir William Webb, who is the Australian Government's Commissioner for the investigation of Japanese atrocities and breaches of the rules of warfare, has obtained evidence from a number of the Australian survivors. His conclusion is that the Japanese almost entirely disregarded the rules of warfare concerning prisoners of war, but he also expressed the view that it was only fair to state that there were times, mostly on work other than railway construction, when the Australians came under the control of humane Japanese commanders and had relatively decent conditions. Sir William Webb is continuing his investigations. A statement will be

made later by the Minister for External Affairs in relation to the war crimes aspect.

Japanese Responsibility.

"I know that I speak for the people of Australia when I say that they share fully the sorrow and pride of their kith and kin throughout the British Commonwealth, who are grieved by these sad events. The Government regrets that these disclosures have to be made, but it is convinced that it is necessary that the Japanese Government should know that we are in possession of the facts and will hold them responsible.

"All the rescued men speak of the high courage shown by their comrades. Everywhere and in all circumstances the Australians have maintained matchless morale. They have shown themselves undaunted in the face of death. The many who have survived privations and disease in the jungle have developed spiritual and physical powers to triumph over adversity and over their captors. Let us look forward to the day of their release."

Wing-Commander White (UAP, V) said that this heartrending story should shock members into putting aside the little things which were discussed in Parliament and into concentration upon the great matters which would assist in bringing about the liberation of our prisoners from Japanese hands. He questioned the wisdom of announcing the details of the atrocities until it was in possession of the names of all the casualties. The statement, he said, would harrow the feelings of great numbers of Australian families whose members were amongst Japanese prisoners of war. He asked the Government to launch a protest in the strongest terms to the Japanese against this barbarity.

Grievous and Shocking.

Mr Barnard (Lab, T) also questioned the wisdom of the Government in making the announcement

at this stage. He said it was a grievous and shocking disclosure, but it might shock us out of our war weariness, which had been commented on in America.

Major Cameron (UAP, SA) said that it was useless to deceive ourselves that we would be able to punish the Japanese responsible for the atrocities. "It is all very well to threaten the Japanese about what we will do to them after the war," he said, "but no Japanese will ever grace a British Court, so don't let us deceive ourselves that we will be able to square accounts. Every Japanese taken prisoner, even though he be taken unconscious, commits treason by falling into enemy hands."

Mr Forde said that this was the hardest statement he had ever had to make in the House. It had been done only after the Government had given it the fullest consideration. The whole matter had been before the Advisory War Council.

The Leader of the Opposition (Mr Menzies) commented tonight: "I hope that anyone who is tempted to believe that the war effort may be relaxed now appreciates what each day's imprisonment means to the thousands of Australians still in Japanese hands and to their families in Australia who have lived in such anxiety about them."