

## **Ambon and Hainan**

Unknown to the Allies, prisoners were held at isolated camps on Ambon, in Indonesia, and Hainan, an island off the south coast of China.

Just over a thousand Australians, members of Gull Force, had been forced to surrender on Ambon in February 1942. By war's end more than two-thirds of them were dead. At first, conditions were reasonable; later, treatment in Tantui camp deteriorated. Starvation and brutality prevailed. Some prisoners died in Allied raids on a Japanese bomb dump located next to the camp and others in medical "experiments". A survivor described their hopelessness toward the end: "The men knew they were dying".

Some of the Ambon prisoners were transported to Hainan. There they were forced to work like slaves. Many died of hunger, disease and beatings. On Hainan the prisoners' discipline came close to collapse.

Their ordeal, often overlooked, was second only to Sandakan, the worst of all camps.

### **"We all wished to God it had never happened"**

Captive officers had little but the power of their personality to enforce the discipline prisoners needed to survive. The Japanese sought to diminish the officers' authority by humiliating them. On Hainan, Lieutenant Colonel William Scott sought to maintain discipline by sending prisoners who broke Australian military law to be punished by Japanese guards.

Some were badly beaten. The practice embittered relations between officers and men, turning prisoner against prisoner for decades after. Reflecting on the consequences, one officer said, "we all wished to God it had never happened".