

# FIRST STORY OF POW'S FROM RABAUL

## No Clue to the Whereabouts of Many Australians Captured There

From ERIC THORNTON

JACQUINOT BAY (NEW BRITAIN)

For three years and eight months Rabaul has been a place of mystery. Intelligence reports filtering back gave only a sketchy idea of Japanese activities, and, unlike other Japanese-held areas, almost nothing was known of the fate of POW's there. None escaped from Rabaul to tell the tale, and so the worst was feared.

Now part of the story is out, carried by the 28 survivors liberated on Friday by the destroyer HMAS Vendetta. They are the remnant of an unknown number of white POW's originally held at Rabaul by the Japanese, but certainly numbering many hundreds, and the story they tell is one of mental and bodily torture and extreme privation.

For Australians perhaps the most tragic feature is that of the many Australians captured by the Japanese in this area only one so far has been recovered. None of the survivors knows what happened to the Australians, but they do know that in November, 1942, hundreds of white prisoners were shipped away to an unknown destination. The 28 survivors know they are lucky to be alive, and the 18 British soldiers among them can thank the fact that they were too ill to be of use to the Japanese when their comrades were taken away three years ago. They are all still weak from disease and

are all still weak from disease and privation.

The Australian is Captain V. J. Murphy, of Toowong, Brisbane, whose wife is living with her parents, Mr and Mrs W. Ward, Wandin rd, East Camberwell, Melbourne. Murphy, who was formerly a patrol officer in New Britain, was on a special mission on the south coast of New Britain, sending out information and helping the evacuation of airmen, when he was captured on November 1, 1943. The full story of his exploits is still a military secret, but after his disappearance Tokyo Radio broadcast news of him, and he was the only prisoner known to be held at Rabaul.

Until March he was held with others in a barred prison, formerly a Chinese tailor's shop, at Rabaul, and Japanese guards never took their eyes off them day and night.

#### **HERDED IN CAVE**

In March, 1944, they were bombed out of Rabaul, and the Japanese put them into a cave 30ft long, 5ft wide, and 7ft high. In this hole were jammed 56 whites and seven natives, handcuffed in pairs, the last batch being drawn in with ropes. The entrance was boarded up, and the prisoners could not find room to sit down. Two days later 21 were taken away. A number of shots were heard and the prisoners did not return. The same thing happened next day, when 19 were taken away, and the pris-

19 were taken away, and the prisoners remaining began to wonder when their turn would come. No more were taken out, however, although shots were heard in the same direction on the third day.

The Japanese later reported to Murphy, as senior officer among the POW's, that of the 40 taken away 39 had been killed by Allied bombing while being taken to Watom Island, five miles from Rabaul. Murphy's party soon afterwards were given better quarters.

### **"TESTS" ON PRISONERS**

Just before the surrender a Japanese doctor began to carry out malaria tests on white prisoners. After a week he reported to Murphy that six showed no positive signs of malaria, and believed they must have developed immunity. To prove this he wished to give them injections of blood from "healthy" Japanese. On July 29 two of these men died, but the doctor claimed that death was not due to the injections but because they previously had malignant malaria.

During the last few months of captivity, Murphy said, their ration was four ounces of rice daily, but after the surrender they were given much better treatment.

Another survivor, WO Ronald Charles Warren, RNZAF, of Christchurch, NZ, was pilot of a Corsair shot down off Duke of York Island in 1944. The Japanese put rough splints on his broken leg, but he received no further medical attention. Later he was taken to Rabaul and kept in a boarded-up cave 15ft long. Warren was unable to communicate with his relatives, and has since learned that they were informed he was missing, believed killed.

### **BROUGHT FROM SINGAPORE**

The 18 rescued British POW's were originally taken to Singapore

THE 18 rescued British POW's were originally in a party of 600 British soldiers brought from Singapore to Rabaul in November, 1942, in a vessel compared with which, Gnr Gordon Moore, of Aberdare, said, the hellship *Altmark* was a luxury liner. At Rabaul they were set to work unloading ships, although many were suffering from dysentery, malaria, and beri beri. Soon after 82 of the weakest men, among whom were these 18 survivors, were taken from the main party and 517 were sent away in a ship.

On November 28, 1942, the first death occurred among the party left behind, and from then until June 23 this year 64 died, mostly from dysentery, diphtheria, and malaria, leaving 18, who, after going to various parts of the Gazelle Peninsula, had spent 19 months on Watom Island before being rescued.

Throughout this time they were constantly ill-treated by the Japanese, who frequently beat them unmercifully with bamboo rods for anything that displeased them. Two

men suffering from malaria were detailed to fill a drum with water, using 10-gallon containers, but they were so weak that they were unable to stop the containers striking the side of the drum and damaging it. A Japanese soldier thereupon beat them about the heads with a bamboo rod, knocking one man's eye out. He died a fortnight later.

When trying to remember dates during the interview, Bdr W. Murphy, of Port Glasgow, kept referring to a list of dead comrades he had kept secretly throughout captivity, showing names, dates, and causes of death.

Rations were lowest in March and April this year, when the rice ration was cut to 12oz daily. The Japanese would eat any animals killed by strafing. Once they dug up a horse

strafing. Once they dug up a horse after it had been buried 12 hours and ate it.

Sgt P. Nolan, of County Wexford, Ireland, said three British soldiers died on Watom Island as a result of starvation and mental and physical torture. Five days before one died he was beaten unmercifully with bamboos across a huge ulcer covering the lower leg.

A great change took place after atomic bombs were dropped and Tokyo made surrender moves. "They couldn't do enough for us then," said Nolan. "They opened their stores to us and fed us up with their best chicken."

Nolan said he was a regular soldier like others, and he intended to soldier on.

"It's good to see the Navy," was the first fervent exclamation from one of the party of seven Americans, a New Zealander, an Australian, and a Dutchman waiting on the jetty at Rabaul when Captain F. Bryce Morris, RAN, naval commander in NG, went ashore unarmed with a small party from the *Vendetta* to rescue 28 white POW's three days ahead of schedule.

After covering minesweeping by four Australian corvettes in Simpson Harbour on Thursday *Vendetta* anchored in the harbour, and Captain Morris ordered two Japanese officers out to the ship and told them he wanted the prisoners to be ready at Rabaul next morning. The Japanese explained they were on Watom Island.

### **BLUNT WORDS TO JAPS**

Next morning Captain Morris and Lieut Handcock went ashore—the first unarmed white men voluntarily to enter Rabaul in three and a half years. The Japanese objected to Captain Morris approaching the POW's who were seen behind



Captain Morris approaching the POW's, who were seen behind some soldiers, but, telling them: "I am giving orders here, and I want no nonsense," Captain Morris swept them aside.

The POW's went into raptures over their first cigarettes and bread and butter and bully beef. Captain Murphy, the Australian, said he would henceforth keep a tin of bully on his mantelpiece, with a candle burning at each side.

While the POW's, including the 18 British POW's, were being taken aboard *Vendetta*, Captain Morris and Lieut Handcock went on a tour of Rabaul in a Japanese car. Captain Morris said later: "Rabaul just doesn't exist. Not a building of it is intact. The town is overgrown with a 20ft-high jungle and the foreshore is littered with wrecks."