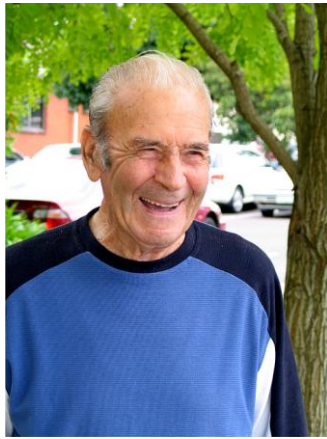


FRED KOLLMORGEN – MORE THAN A SURVIVOR

12.6.1917 – 24.7.2011



Fred – in 2006



Fred – during the war

Fred is a survivor of the 2/22nd Band. This was a military band which was largely composed of bandsmen from the Brunswick Salvation Army but also included members from Springvale, Moreland and Hawthorn. They were led by Bandmaster Arthur Gullidge who was the Bandmaster of Brunswick and is well-known for the inspirational music he composed.

The majority of the bandsmen perished when, as prisoners of war being transported to Japan, the ship they were travelling on was torpedoed by the US, who didn't realise that it contained prisoners of war. It was a tragedy that had far-reaching implications for many years and this is the story of how Fred Kollmorgen managed to reach home despite facing hardship and deprivation.

When speaking to Fred, the first thing he insists on is that he is no hero – he is just a survivor. Might I say that this depends on the definition of those two words. When Fred reached home, it was an unfortunate fact of life in war-time Australia, that there were some people totally lacking in any form of understanding of what had taken place. It was a journey that had to be experienced to be understood. We are fortunate indeed that Fred had “what it took” in his makeup to be able to make it home.

This is an attempt to put that journey into some perspective.

Fred was born in 1917 to Albert Edgar and Ruby Rebecca (Nelson) Kollmorgen when the family lived in Clayton. When he was in Grade 3, his parents moved to a property in Westall Road, Springvale where they grew vegetables which were taken to market in Melbourne – on the site of the old Melbourne Cemetery.

Two years later, the family moved again, this time to Heatherton Road, Narre Warren North opposite his uncle's dairy farm. Fred attended Narre Warren North School where he gained his Merit Certificate which was all that was available at that time. The children grew up in the fresh air, spending many hours catching rabbits and eels. Following school, Fred went to work on a neighbour's property as there was not enough work available on the family farm.

Fred was born and bred in The Salvation Army. His parents were both uniformed Salvationists and Fred has memories of his mother walking miles to get to the Open Air.

Five years later, the family moved back to the Westall Road property in Springvale and again attended the Springvale Corps. At this stage, Fred was working for his father but he was fed-up with the life and found a job with T & G Insurance where he could remain clean and tidy all day, collecting premiums. One Friday night on his way home from work, he had the wireless on in the car and heard that Hitler was moving.

As things deteriorated overseas, the advancing German armies moved into Belgium and Holland, and in Fred's own words, 'that sort of did something to me. I felt well, we've just got to get into this. We've got to volunteer and see if we can do something to stop him rampaging.'

Once home, he told his parents of his decision and his mother's response was, 'If I were a man I'd go too.' His father added a note of caution.

The next day, Fred went to the local drill hall in Princes Highway, Dandenong and enlisted in the armed forces. Almost immediately he was sent to Caulfield, which was a sort of staging camp, and then to the showgrounds at Bendigo. The camp wasn't even finished as far as its alteration from a showground to housing troops and there were many inconveniences to put up with. One was that there were no beds and another was the fact that there were no chairs to sit on at mealtimes. Meals were eaten standing up. However, the men knew that it had to be endured, and that eventually it would sort itself out.

From here, Fred was sent across to the Ballarat racecourse where intensive infantry training was given. This was known as the 'bull-ring' exercises, day after day, day after day, doing the same things. The men were well-trained but as the unit appeared to be going nowhere, Fred applied to transfer to the 2/14 Battalion but received a courteous note back, saying they were on the move. Men from Fred's unit were being used as replacements for other units, either those who had been in action, or were going into action. This resulted in a lowering of morale and the men started to apply for transfers to other units of their choice.

Fred had read in one of the papers about some Salvation Army chaps that had all joined up together. Though he didn't know any of them, he figured that as he could play an instrument, maybe he could get to join them. However, a dental inspection meant he had to have three extractions and he was in a bad way for a while, and couldn't play an instrument for three or four weeks. However, Bandmaster Arthur Gullidge told Fred not to worry about it, but to join them when he could. Fred holds Bandmaster Gullidge in great esteem for the way he took care of his men and became an advocate on their behalf.

During this time, he went along to The Salvation Army whenever possible and on his last Sunday at Bendigo, he remembers the old hymn, "God Be With You 'Til We Meet Again" being sung. For the rest of the time he was away, Fred kept remembering the words of that song.

Finally Fred's transfer came through and he was sent to Bonegilla Military Training Camp where musical training was added to further military training.

During his final leave of 8-10 days in Melbourne, Fred and May decided to get married. A couple of weeks later he boarded the "Zeelandia" in Sydney. Half of the battalion and half of the band had already gone on ahead. Bandmaster Gullidge sailed with the final group of 600 men on the "Zeelandia". When the ship left Sydney, the destination was unknown to the men. It was just a guess. However, in Fred's words, it became apparent

when we knew the boat was heading this-a-way instead of that-a-way. Soon we realised that we were heading for the islands. A lot of the fellas were a bit upset about it because they wanted to get up where the action was as that was what they had joined up for. Added to this was the initial sea-sickness and constant blackouts.

On Anzac day 1941, following 7 days non-stop sailing, the ship anchored in Rabaul Harbour which was indeed a beautiful place with the edge of the jungle being lit at night. It was possible to see vehicles moving amongst the trees.

A Japanese boat followed them in. Nobody realised then what would happen later. The next morning the troops were unloaded and joined the rest of the band. On one side of the harbour was a mountain called Vulcan, that came up out of the sea in 1937. However it was bare, with no growth on it at all.

On the other side was Matapi, which was a more active volcano that had erupted in 1937, killing a number of the native people. On our arrival in 1941, it was just smouldering but before long it erupted again. Although red hot rocks were seen coming out of the crater and rolling down the sides, nothing more serious occurred but the native people that lived close to it were scared for their lives, because they thought everything would happen exactly as it did in 1937.

Fred takes up the story. "We had quite a few native men working in the camp because it wasn't quite completed. It was about four or five miles away from the volcano. Well the native workmen in the camp, they dropped tools and off but they only went a short distance this time, not like in 1937 and came back when they saw that the soldiers didn't run. We were just too amazed. So they came back and carried on with their work. It caused a lot of discomfort to both locals and troops, because of the dust in the air (pumice dust). Whatever you did, you would get a smear of this jolly pumice dust on you. It was bad. Well I think it was that, that caused the seat of government to move the HQ from Rabaul to Lae (on the PNG mainland). They had mostly moved over to Lae before the Japanese came to Rabaul."

During this period, Fred got to know Arthur Gullidge and describes him as "a gentleman, musician and soldier with whom everything was 'above board'. He was stern when required for the larrikins in the group but very fair and took care to encourage everyone."

It appeared that there was no thought of war in this place and Fred and his mates wondered why they were there. Some of the men became a little rebellious as they weren't there for a holiday. They had come to fight! To add insult to injury, one member of the 2/22nd opened a letter and found a white feather in it, reflecting the view back home that the men were enjoying a "holiday camp" while others were off fighting the enemy. (It would appear that they had forgotten one important point – the troops went where they were sent – they didn't choose their destination.)

Fred takes up the tale again:

"For some time after our arrival, Rabaul was a beautiful, peaceful place. Even the bigger ships that came while it was still peaceful - bringing in cargo - could come right in and throw a rope onto the shore. It was that deep right at the edge of the beach. A remarkable place!

The playing of the band was very well received. Some of the latest hits would be adapted for brass bands. Mrs Gullidge, (the bandmaster's wife back in Melbourne,) forwarded the latest material up to be quickly transposed by Arthur and others in the band. He could write music quicker than I could write a letter.

We played for the changing of the guard ceremonies and things like that. They did have a little brass band there run by the police but their performance was not of a very high quality. Some of the bandsmen would go to the native band practice and try and help them along. They came back one night and we were still sitting around and they said, 'You know what the native bandsmen say about the trombones?' and we said, 'No, we don't know.' and they said 'Push-em he go, pull-em he come.'

I remember too on occasions when the band was marching back to our huts for the changing of the guard, Arthur Gullidge deliberately marched us near to where some of the troops would be in bed resting, or inside their huts and we played some of the old hymns. I think that had a pretty good effect on some because a lot of them had never been away from home and they could be a bit homesick.

One day Arthur Gullidge was with the Colonel of the 2/22nd Battalion and asked for a little bit more time for the band to practice. He said to the Colonel that the men were losing their embouchures. That is, the formation of the mouth onto the mouthpiece to form tone. The Colonel, as ignorant as a lot of other people said, 'Can't they get new ones at the Quarter Masters' store?' That was a joke for a long time.

We used to give concerts to the men. Even though some of them would be away from camp, there would always be two or three hundred come along to a concert. I remember one night, two of the trombone players attached boxing gloves to their slides. Then they stood facing each other while the band struck up a pretty good number. It brought the house down.'

Water Trucks

During this time I noticed that many of my old mates from Ballarat had arrived in Rabaul, forty or more of them, fellas that I'd trained with for several months back in Ballarat. I had a great urge to be with them again. I approached the Major in charge, who was actually the Medical Officer for the whole battalion. He had charge of most of the band, because the band would end up as stretcher bearers. I met him on the parade ground one day and he said 'No Way!' when I asked for a transfer. A few days later he asked me if a job driving would suit me, as he had a vacancy on one of the two water trucks he controlled. They had to get fresh water to the troops wherever they were. In the early days, they were located within 10 miles of the centre of Rabaul and operated with hand pumps. Our truck contained the good water (not second-rate water for washing etc.) This had to be taken out to wherever the troops were, or wherever the road went. There were only twenty miles of road out of Rabaul, after that it was simply bush. Any rate, I agreed. I said 'That suits me!' I already had a military driving licence.

There were two of us, myself and another chap on this water truck and two natives to man the pump. Laurie and I got on very well. An advantage of that job was that if you knew where a native "sing sing", (where the natives get into huddles and sing and dance) was going to be held, you could "accidentally" be there. At these, there would often be someone selling watermelon, because they grew them up there quite a bit. It was fun, and we would go out of our way to get to them!

Another thing of importance perhaps to some, was the making of fire out of two pieces of wood. Some of the natives could do that, although others didn't have the patience to do it - but it was really marvellous to see them get a fire going that way.

On another occasion, we were in a very rugged area of mountains and dense bush with a native guide. One of the fellows complained in no uncertain terms, that he was dry. Very, very dry. The native that was leading us through, stopped, went up to a bush on

the side of the mountain and put a long stick into it. After a short while, as we just stood in amazement, out along that stick came of a trickle of water! We all had a drink.

The only person who knew where we should be at any given time was the Medical Officer. No other officer or soldier could question us because we had liberty; we had to supply the water. Occasionally the transport crowd would ask me, especially on the weekend, if I would do something with a truck. I remember one day they wanted some drums of petrol taken down the road, only about 15 miles, but the thing was, they were expecting a Jap air attack, and I was jolly glad to get down there and unload it! Makes you pull up your socks sometimes!

There was a mountain range immediately behind our camp. It seemed to be one large mountain, but stretched for probably 3/4 of a mile. It was so steep that it was impossible to scale.

I was called to help after we had been in Rabaul for a short time. It was Anzac Day when we arrived there but it was the end of the year before the Japs became a serious threat. I was called to go with a party of men to a very remote place. It might have only been 10 or 12 miles away, but it was necessary to go up and over a ridge. That ridge was something that seemed to join two or three mountains to each other and it was extremely difficult. Any rate, I was told I had to report to do that, and so with approximately 15 others, we got up over this barrier and down the other side. There we found a beautiful little bay.

At the time, the thinking was conditioned to First World War conditions so it was naturally assumed that the enemy would come up there, ground their boats and rush ashore. We didn't have any automatic guns. When the Japs came, they had Tommy guns, spitting out bullets by the dozen. We only had the old .303s!

It was a very remote spot, and from memory, we had to walk there. On arrival, the officer in charge said, 'We've got to make a trench. We think that the Japanese will come this way'. Well he didn't say the Japanese, he just said "the enemy" because Japan wasn't fighting us then. Then he said, 'We've got to make a trench right along here.' That was also First World War thinking. However, we brought some tools and started off making a trench and it had to be wide and deep - five or six feet deep so that you could just about stand up. Well that was the old idea you see, if you had your head stuck up too high you'd get it blown off. We were making this trench and somebody yelled that there was a huge rock there that they couldn't seem to move. And it was in the direct line of the trench.

We thought about it. Should we go around it that way or this way, or leave it there and if troops needed to run from one part of the trench to the other, they'd have to get up and over and down again. That didn't appeal to anybody. So I suggested dropping the rock down by getting underneath it and making a hole. Everybody thought that was a pretty good idea.

So we started. Several of the fellows had their turn to get around under it with a pick or a shovel. It would have been two or three tonne. At any rate, the fellow before me thought it should be about ready to fall down. We'd dug under it so that when it fell, the top of it would be the same level as the rest of the trench. My turn came. We were all standing around watching. The fellow before poked it and pushed it with no sign of it moving. It was just stuck there. He hopped out and it was my turn to hop in. Well, I wasn't afraid because I saw what he was doing but I only made one whack with the pick and I noticed that there was something moving so I shot out of there like a rabbit out of a burrow. The

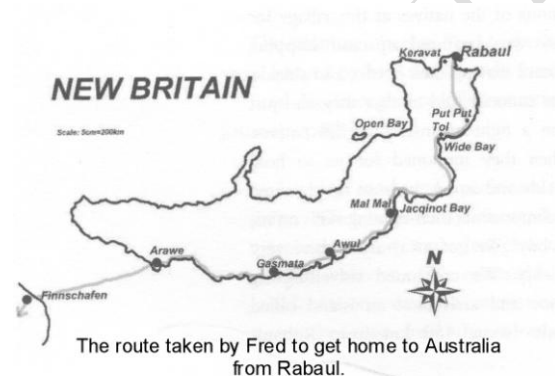
fellows said they'd never seen anything move so fast. Oh boy, if I hadn't been quick, I'd still be there. It would've pinned me down!

Another thing they had us doing, it was almost a bit childish in a way, but it's a great place for mosquitoes up there. Oh, they're shockers. And the local population were putting up with them and not doing anything to reduce the numbers. For example, they would leave half coconut shells, or anything at all that would hold water. At certain times of the year they get a lot of rain up there, so there were little containers with water in them here, there and everywhere. And so, quite a crew of us were called one day to form up and at about five or six feet intervals, we had to walk right through the town to the outskirts, upsetting any water. They said it made quite a difference for the next few months. But of course, once the Japs came, nobody thought about mosquitoes.

We were asked us to do something for our own good and this was to pay a visit to the local native hospital. It gave us a chance to learn rudimentary treatments. It wasn't very far, only 2 or 3 miles away. I went, and had never seen anything so crude in all my life. People suffered with ulcers and they wouldn't get them treated in the early stages. The result was that they would lose not only a finger, but also a hand or leg. You may think I'm stretching this, but I am not.

There were beds in formation but as the surgeon moved amongst them, he also moved his rubbish bucket along, and when he took off a toe or a finger, he just put it in. One of our blokes couldn't take it and just flaked out.

While we were escaping, I developed an ulcer and I knew I'd have to do something or it would ruin my chance of a successful escape. Even though I was a long way from Rabaul, I still had my steel hat. As most of our escape route was along the coast, come evening, I would get my tin hat, boil some water and bathe the ulcer. Eventually, as a result of this treatment, it healed. It had been worth my while to observe in the hospital as I gathered necessary information for treating myself when necessary in the future.



Another day, they called a batch of us together, and we had to take barbed wire down to what you might call the top side. There was a little bay there which would lend itself to an enemy landing. We had to go down and make barbed-wire fences on the water and below the water. But they never used it. When the Japs came, they just sailed up the main harbour. It was impossible to stop them. 27 ships came in, and an estimated 17,000 men. We only had approximately 1,000 men. They also had the latest equipment which we didn't.

A decision was made to set up a regimental aid post away from the main camp. There'd always been a building there for fellas who weren't well or had hurt themselves, but it had been decided that as action was looming, to set this up away from the main camp

area. There was also a large storage of petrol drums. (This was ignited before the Japs took over.)

We had taken 3 ack-ack guns (anti aircraft guns), and they must have somehow taken them and set them up high above the camp. That was fine, except that they had no range finders and no instruments to tell the crew how to set the fuse for the explosive that they carried. So an officer had to stand out in front and guess what the height of an enemy plane might be.

In this particular case, I saw the first shots fired from those 2 or 3 guns there. Three Jap planes came in and would have been 18-20,000 feet high. The first couple of shots exploded when they were about half way up.

Eventually, the officer must have rethought his distance and after a while, he got a shot right on one. And down it came. It did a great big circle and crashed into a smaller mountain (called the South Daughter) there. When we went back in 1960, I was going to climb that mountain and see this because the natives said it was still there as it was too hard for them to extract it. I got very close to it but not near enough. It was a bit of fun anyway.

We also had long-barrelled six inch guns that we carried on board our ship. They were about 25 feet long and had been set up at Parade Point to guard Rabaul Harbour - at the right hand side of the entrance to Rabaul. They were destroyed by the Japs prior to the invasion. They concentrated their bombing on these guns and killed 5 or 6 of our fellows.

Gradually then, things deteriorated. The Japanese were now in the war. It just didn't seem long before we knew that a group, a convoy of Japanese ships, was heading towards Rabaul.

Our time was now really beginning to run out. The band instruments had been packed away, the water trucks ceased to operate and I was back with a rifle company. The Sunday before the invasion I, with several other men, was sent to a very high point overlooking the wharf area to keep watch for enemy planes. With about 15 or 16 others who had been on other jobs around the camp, we were very quickly formed into an additional rifle company.

White women and children were loaded in an attempt to get them back to Australia. Fortunately that day, the area was blanketed in a heavy mist, which was unusual for that area. It meant that the enemy pilots wouldn't have seen the women boarding the ships. However, we didn't see or hear any of them.

Escape from Rabaul

The day after we were told the Americans would be with us, some 90 planes came directly over us. Imagine that - 90 planes directly over like a flock of birds. We thought at first that they were American planes. The chaps waved at them, until we saw that they were Japs. Luckily for us, they did not drop any bombs on us but kept them for a large ship that was in the harbour. It presented a spectacular site that night as it drifted across the harbour, blazing from stem to stern. It was still burning 2 or 3 days afterwards. Now the Jap invasion force was about to come up the harbour in the early hours of the next morning. This force consisted of 20 ships, 17,000 to 20,000 men and the planes seemed to be too many to count or estimate.

We had almost no fortifications. Two big six-inch guns were mounted at the entrance to the harbour at a place called Praed Point but these had been rendered useless by the bombing of the Japanese just a few days prior to the landing. We had six or eight

Wirraway planes but the capability of these planes was not great, as they were only about a third of the speed of the Japanese Zeros that they brought with them. It was hopeless from the beginning.

Nevertheless, the men weren't demoralised. They were still ready, willing and happy to "have a go". That evening the Japanese ships sailed into the harbour and they began unloading. As darkness fell we couldn't see what they were about. Gradually, it became obvious that they were manning landing craft and small boats and that they were going to come ashore. This they did but met stiff resistance from our fellows and hundreds paid the price.

I, with others, moved out to an area called Noak's mission where a Catholic church stood. As the morning dawned, we were subjected to bombing and strafing from the air. They came over so low we could see the pilots' faces as they "gave us the works".

There was nothing there but one big building with a concrete floor. We had to sleep on that floor the first night. The next day, Austin Creed, one of the bandsmen from the 2/22nd, rode up on a motorbike to pass the word that the order "Every man for himself!" had been given. We had nothing but our .303 rifles.

Well, once that command had been given, confusion reigned. It wasn't possible to tell whether your mates were still fighting to the left of you or to the right. There was a lot of noise and a lot of machine gunning going on. Under those conditions, nothing else could be done but to back off.

We were bewildered but decided to retreat into the bush. We hitched a ride on a truck. We would hop on the truck, it would go a few yards, then a plane would swing down to have a go at us and we would hop off and run to the nearest tree or big bush to hide. As soon as he'd swooped away, you'd know he'd unloaded a few bullets. Fortunately nobody was hit there and then. Then we would hop back on the truck and go another 50 yards or so. And so the pattern was repeated. It was very nerve-wracking.

The only food that had been provided for us were big cans of fruit. Big five-pound or more cans of fruit, several of them. But when you go into the bush, you can't carry them, no way! So we just filled our innards and left them there. Of course, other fellas were still coming from the front and some of it would get eaten. But a few biscuits or slices of bread would have been much better.

Very soon we had to leave that truck because there was a river with no bridge. From then on, we walked. Any time we came to an opening, or tried to cross a creek or stream, the Japanese pilots would see us and come screaming down and "give us the works".

Ten or fifteen miles out, we crossed the river. We had a bit of fun doing that because each time, although there wasn't a bridge, there was a big tree that had been cut down and was being used as the bridge. You had to be pretty good to get across. But any rate, several managed to get across, then it was my turn. I got halfway and they said 'lookout, lookout, there's a plane over ya!' The plane did a half circle, which meant he would come around and again "give us the works".

I tried to turn around and get back because I thought that was nearer than going forward. However, I lost my balance and dropped my bag into the water. It contained a few odds and ends - a camera, eating utensils, shirt, pullover etc. However, that didn't matter. I managed to get back to where the others were waiting. Fortunately, I still had my rifle

and tin hat. When it seemed quiet again, with three or four others, I finally crossed the river.

If it hadn't hit us before, it was certainly coming to us now - the grim situation that we were in - with no maps, no guides, no food and no news.

I was told there was a track leading to a Catholic mission (mission on top - Aplingey) - some 60 odd miles of very steep climbing. To make matters worse, it was raining solidly. We saw other troops from time to time but no other food was available. Together with a couple of others, I walked those 60 odd miles and we had some experiences on the way.

We hadn't got very far- it was nearly evening, and some of our fellows had come over the river, when their officer told them to stop. They took up positions on either side of this little track in the bush. If the Japs had been following any of us, we would have been in trouble! I remember seeing this group as I walked past - their guns pointing down the track. They were itching to "have a go" but I don't know that it happened. I have never heard.

A bit further along, some of our chaps had set up a tent. It was only a small one, full of fellows - and one particular fellow could only fit in his head! His entire body was outside and it was raining! We just laughed and kept going in the rain and the dark. We were hoping to get some advice in regards to directions and food.

Mission on Top

We got very near to this mission, "mission on top", the natives called it because it was way, way up. We were almost there, me and two other fellows. It had been thought some of the fellows up ahead of us were getting a bit of food at the mission. Unfortunately, ten miles short of it, a native was sent down to tell any troops that were still coming, not to come any further because they couldn't accommodate any more of them. They were short of food and all they could give us was some tea leaves.

We were told that we could go to the north or south coast. People who are not experienced with the native undergrowth and jungle might say 'That's easy. We could have kept going'. But believe you me, some parts of the jungle there are so thick that you could not, unless you hacked your way (and you don't get very far hacking your way through). So that was good advice.

We summed it up and thought we had more chance of being picked up or taken off New Britain by going south, as we thought there would be more troops there as it was nearer to Australia. We thought there was a possibility that flying boats or whatever might be sent to get us off, so we would have more hope down there. Down we went (some 40 miles). There were still two others and myself and we went quite a few miles.

Then we had a difference of opinion as to which way to go. I was so sure I was right. They said 'all right, you go down there, and we'll go our way.' I went my way for several miles on my own. Then I began to wake up that maybe I was wrong. I should have stuck with them, so I had to retrace my steps and eventually caught up to them.

We still had a fair way to go, another forty or fifty miles down to the south coast. When we got close, we knew something was amiss. I don't know if we met up with Chinese or natives but as we came out on to the coast, one of the first things we saw were white flags flying on the sea-shore at a place called Sum Sum. We went down a bit closer - we needed food because we hadn't had a feed since we left Rabaul, a long way back. We noticed that there were a number of Chinese there – called "kong kong's" by the natives. We asked about the chooks that we had seen in the trees. We wanted to buy a chook or

two from them. 'No no - if you catch, you have' they said. However, the chooks had been chased before - you've got no idea. Three of us tried to catch these chooks! Eventually we did get one.

Arriving at the south coast, we found that the Japs had been there and had erected a white flag because they wanted the Chinese, together with the Australian troops, to surrender, to just sit there. We didn't know what to do. There were no Japanese there, just a few Chinese and maybe eight or ten of our troops, older blokes who were going to "toss it in". They weren't going to try and walk it out. They reckoned that the war would only last a couple of years and they'd go home after the war finished. They never thought for a moment that we could lose the war. In the meantime, the Japs in the aeroplanes had dropped a lot of white leaflets. 'Australian Soldiers, surrender or you will be killed!' So, one and all, we were watching out to sea, because we knew they would come that way.

So there we were, on the south coast with quite a number of fellows who were keen to give in. But some of us, well, no way were we going to give in to them. So we set off down the coast, and somehow or other I must have changed groups – these other two fellas apparently met up with some others that they knew better than me, so they said they would go with them. That left me a bit stranded. But any rate, there were some engineers there and I went with them. I got on very well with them and stayed with them for three or four days or more. I had the chook - I can't remember how that came about.

We'd only come a mile or so down the coast when we were that jolly hungry we thought we'd light a fire and cook our chook, which we did, but we didn't wait till it was cooked. As soon as it had a burnt smell, we ate it! There did not seem to be too many natives or villages in this area.

One problem we had later on, was that if the sun did not shine, with the foliage being so dense, we lost direction all together – no-one had a map or a compass. You didn't know if you were going north, south, east or west. You just couldn't see the sun. Sometimes, even when we were a hundred miles out of Rabaul, a dogfight could be heard up in the air but we couldn't see it. There was too much foliage.

Tol

The engineers were very good and I appreciated the time I was with them. We moved steadily down to the Tol (copra) plantation. We arrived there three or four days later and from time to time, we could see Japanese planes overhead. Generally, if we suspected a plane was going to come over, we would either stand still, or very smartly get under a tree or a bush so they couldn't calculate how many there were of us, or shoot at us. We did that as a precaution. This went on for about three days.

Then we arrived at Tol. It was right on the edge of the ocean. The plantation went a couple of miles inland, coconut trees everywhere - the natives kept the grass and bushes down so that when harvest time came, they could go through and find the nuts easily. Any rate, just before we got there, a little Japanese plane came over us. The others didn't take much notice of it, but I said to them, 'That's a reconnaissance plane'. The chaps that had got there before us were all stretched out trying to get some sleep. They were hungry and hadn't had much to eat since they left Sum Sum. There were about 100 of them. 100 men all stretched out under the copra trees made quite a sight!

We needed to have a rest too. The thinking was that if everyone stayed together and any effort was made by Australia to get us off, it would be easier to find us. We thought it would be better to be in an area where they might, or could, come in. We hoped that at

least that the government would send us in food. However, this light plane was zooming around and I thought to myself, 'He's looking to see what troops are here'.

We stretched out and shortly after, a chap I knew who had been there for a few hours already, came over to me. He said 'Fred, I hear a rumour that just down the coast a little further, is a boat that can be made seaworthy'. It was put out of action so the Japs couldn't just hop into it and use it. He said that from what he'd heard, there was a good chance that we could get it seaworthy. After walking so far, when we came out to the sea at Sum Sum, we wished we had a boat. We looked at the water and it wasn't rough most of the time. If we could just get into a boat and open the throttle, we were gone!

When I heard about this boat, I thought it might be something. I said to this chappy (his name was Fred too), 'I don't know anything about boats. However, I'm travelling with three or four fellows at the moment and they're engineers. What if I go and ask them if they're interested?' That would only make five in the party and we could have got into the boat and gone. Even if we'd only gotten 100 miles down the coast, that would have been something in the right direction. I went over, and they ummed and ahed a little bit and then they said, 'Well, it's too good to pass up'.

We decided that we would stay there at Tol that night, but that as early as possible the next morning, we would move down the coast to where this boat was supposed to be. To get away from Tol, within about half a mile, there were two pretty big rivers and they had crocodiles in them, so you had to be very careful. The natives knew how to go about it but often native territory would end at a certain spot and if it ended at this side of the bank of the river, then they would have to try and attract natives from the other side. If the river was in the other side's territory, these would then have to wait until the others came and took them across in their canoe. We had to resort to that, and they yelled and we yelled. But being very early in the morning, it took a bit to get their attention. Eventually they did come. We crossed the first river and then the second river. But of course, the day was getting a bit done.



Once we crossed the two rivers, we found a Filipino family who lived close by. We had heard nothing about them. They had a sort of a mixed garden. Night was falling again and the Filipino said, 'Look, I can't put you all up' (There were 6 of us) 'However, I can put up two of you'. That left four of us that he couldn't accommodate overnight. His man took us down to where he had made a little hideout in a clump of trees. He'd put some corrugated iron around a little clump of whatever was growing. On the ground he'd spread a bale of straw and he had a sort of roof on it. It was dry and we thought to ourselves, 'Isn't this lovely, we won't be affected by anybody tonight; we'll have a jolly good sleep.' We settled in saying how fortunate we were to have such comfort. We were very hungry, but thought we'd just settle down.

At about 8 o'clock, we heard a noise; somebody was coming. We didn't know what to do, prepare for a fight or what. My hand tightened on my rifle. Luckily it was just this native

man; the Filipino had sent him down with a roast duck for us. A beautiful roast duck! That was the best feed we'd had for days and days. It was so good, we filled ourselves, threw the bones away and then settled down. All was peaceful, no rain had come in because of the corrugated iron walls. We went to sleep on the straw.

In the morning, we had arranged with the fellows back at the Filipino's that we would go back and meet them half way. Then we were going to discuss how to go about getting the boat. At about 8am we were walking back to the others and we had got about halfway when we heard gunfire, bombs and hand grenades, all going off together.

We suspected what had happened. The chaps from the Filipino's were on the run towards us. When they got near they shouted 'Get over to the coast, to the beach, and go on - get away.' We did that, we got away. Our fellows who had stayed at Tol, about 150 of them, were taken by the Japs and the majority of them were slaughtered on the spot. Two or three of the band chaps were amongst them (although I didn't know that at the time). The boat had gotten our attention. Just as well, because if we had stayed at Tol, I wouldn't be telling this story now! It wasn't until some years later that we learned the full story. Those croc-infested rivers would have prevented their escape. They were jammed in against those two big rivers. Some fellows did miraculously escape - some went further inland a bit. I remember one fella saying that he and a mate got into the river on an island, and from there, as the day became lighter, they saw everything that went on in Tol. And they got home - didn't get caught up in what was happening. And of course, we were past those two rivers.

Rabaul was terrible, but Tol was worse. Troops were bayoneted, slashed and killed. One or two feigned death and survived that way.

Then we made our way down to the beach. One or two had decided to give themselves up and waited for the enemy to pick them up. One chap that comes to mind said he had had enough. We left him behind after attempting to persuade him. I did my best to talk him out of staying there and giving himself up. He was a big fella but had just lost heart and decided to give up. We said goodbye but when we got on a mile or two, it worried me so much that I said to the others, 'I'm going back to see if I can't do something'. Well at first he wouldn't listen to me, but eventually I got around him, and by carrying half his gear, I got him going again. He finished up getting home.

And so we journeyed on down the coast, dodging enemy planes, with the natives warning us with cries with 'bayloose he come, lookim!' As we travelled down the island, we learned the natives had boundaries. Though there were no signs, they seemed to know exactly where they were.

Not long after Tol, we arrived at a very friendly village of natives in the evening. They gave us beds made of stick mattresses, which was better than bare ground. Later that first night - about midnight - the men of the village woke us saying 'master look-em, master look-em'. We climbed off our wooden mattresses to see what was causing the consternation.

Offshore, about a mile or so, there must have been several enemy war ships trying out search lights. Several of these together made a spectacular sight.

In another village, I was asked to attend a meeting, with their elders. Everyone squatted around a fire in a hut. They spoke in turns, in their own language. There was silence for three to five minutes. No interjecting. That was very, very interesting to attend and was quite a privilege. I had quite a beard in those days, so they'd asked me if I cared to go into that meeting with them. They squatted around - 8 or 10 of them. One would speak -

only for a minute or so, and then he would sit down and another one would speak. Every now and then, one would spit into the fire. It went on for a while – I wasn't invited to speak! I was there as a guest.

Father Harris

We were now approaching a Father Harris and his mission area. He was a Catholic missionary. There was also a lady who had not left her plantation. Some had the opportunity to leave and go back to Australia, but they wouldn't leave a business. This lady was very kind to the troops - she gave us something to eat - a scone if I remember right.

Another group came along at that time. They had secured a pig, which they possibly had bought off the natives. They did not want to share it with us but they didn't want to stop and cook it either, because they didn't want us to beat them to Father Harris, as they wanted the pig **and** whatever Father Harris would give them as well! So, they followed us.

We arrived at the mission and had cups of tea and some bud, which the lady had made. The others arrived a little later and Father Harris relieved them of the pig. He just took it and handed it over to his cook boy who proceeded to butcher and cook it. A wonderful meal was shared by all! Yeah, Father Harris took control of it, and doled it out. There would have been 15 - 18 troops there by then!

After that meal, we prepared to move on. He gave us good advice and also told us about the next village we would pass through which had a serious out-break of "Elephantitus" (where the legs swell up). We stayed in that place just one night but they were very friendly. (Father Harris was an Australian priest and was killed by the Japs later on for helping escaping soldiers.)

Moving on down the coast we met up with other troops. One day, I saw a senior officer with only his shirt on his body! Poor fellow!

There were some other missionaries along the coast, but they would not help us because they didn't want to take sides and attract attention from the Japs. Father Harris however, was very good to us.

A little further on and we were right on the coast again. From out of somewhere, a small boat appeared. It had been patched up and made seaworthy. We were trying to get down the coast, not necessarily to PNG, but just to get further down the New Britain coast. Of course, the "not so well" and older troops were given preference. I missed out, being classed as being very fit!

One of these men wrote a letter to my wife May, when he returned to Australia. It informed her of my location and told her that I had a good chance of survival.

A small slice of bread was given to us at this point! I don't know where it came from but I decided to keep it - it was almost sacred! So I put my bread in my pocket. I was on my own for a little while now, because some of the chaps I'd been travelling with went on the boat. There came another river to cross but I reckoned it was better to wade into the sea where there was a sandbar, because the rivers were crocodile infested.

The water came up quite high and I'd forgotten about my piece of bread! So it got wet and ruined. At any rate, I was coming around and would you believe it, what did I see but a whopping big crocodile! I was petrified. Gradually I relaxed a bit and got a bit closer. It was just a log of wood! So I got around onto firm land again.

Dick Hamill

I hadn't gotten much further when I came to another river. I didn't mind being by myself as I knew there were others behind me. I had a few things in my bag over my shoulder. The river was running quite fast, which made it safer from crocs. I only got halfway and my bag was catching the water. So I had to stop still just to keep my balance.

Any rate, there was a chap on the other side of the river who he saw me and yelled out 'hang on' and he got into the river (4 or 5 feet deep). He came and helped me get to the other side. That chap was Dick Hamill and we came all the way home together from then and became good friends and mates.

Sometime after our first meeting, we had a hair-raising experience. By now, there was no track to follow and some natives offered to take us further on by canoe. Just before this, a big crocodile was in the water, just a few feet from where we were! We boarded the catamaran which had decking between the hulls and a sail. There were six of us and four native boys. It was a beautiful day and we just lounged on the decking. The boys were singing away to their hearts' content. The sun was shining and by now, we were several miles out on the water. All of a sudden, the boys yelled 'bayloose he come', and way, way off, coming towards us, were two aeroplanes - heading straight for us!

As they passed over, we could see that the first one was Japanese and the second was one of ours. They roared over at a couple of hundred feet up and kept going. You'd think they were coming to do us! However, they disappeared from sight, leaving us unharmed. The boys climbed back in the boat, and we finished our lovely cruise.

Gasmata

We were now approaching Gasmata. That was where boats came in to pick up copra. We didn't know how to get past it because the Japs had already taken it. We knew we would have to go right around inland, perhaps five or six miles in, because if they heard we were doing that, they would have set a trap for us.

The natives told us there was a white man in a house before you got to that area - at the Lindenhaven plantation. We knew the Japs were within three or four miles but we didn't think they would be in this house. We hoped that the owner, if he was living there, could advise us how to go around Gasmata. So we travelled down and stopped on the edge of the Lindenhaven plantation, a couple of miles from this house.

And the fellas sorted it out that Dick and I, being the fittest, were to go down and see the white fellow. Dick and I thought there was no danger there and a young local offered to guide us to the house. So we set off through the very thick plantation and undergrowth.

We got nearly there before we noticed that the young guide had left us! At any rate, we kept going but when we got within one hundred yards of the house, we noticed that Japanese flags were flying above it. We realised that if the Japs were in the house and we turned and ran now, well, they'd shoot us down. So we thought we'd put on a brave face and go and knock on the door. So we arrived at the door and found that this white fellow and the Chinese were there, but no Japanese. The Japs had them interned there, under threat that if they tried to escape, they'd be killed.

The white fellow -, his nerve gone, was chattering his teeth, not making much sense. He told us that there was nothing else we could do. 'Give yourselves up, you've got no hope of getting past here'. We were fortunate there were no Japs there at this time, as they came once or twice a day to check on them.

We got away from the door as fast as we could and ran back to the other fellows, told them to get their gear and get back into the bush. We tore back into the jungle proper. Then we had a bit of a talk; we didn't know what to do really.

We knew the nature of the bush; it was going to be terribly hard. Direction was another thing, because we would have to go right around Gasmata. We had to give it a wide berth and hopefully come out again on the beach down further. At any rate, it was so hard we were just about to give up in despair when we came to a river. There were sandbars in the riverbed and you could see where the crocs had been dragging themselves.

We walked along the sand at the bottom of that river for two or three days. We never saw a native and we couldn't pick up our directions - we were in despair, we couldn't do anything. Then we spotted a little group of natives. Oh, we thought, this is good. Now we can find out where we are and how to go!

Unfortunately, their pidgin English was not the same as our pidgin so we couldn't communicate. At any rate, after a bit of thinking, we thought of the word soda-water, which means ocean in Rabaul. So we said to them 'Soda water, he stop where?' At this the native boy's eyes lit up, and he pointed. So we went over with them in that direction.

After a while, he told us to sit down. There were six of us and we were tired enough to sit down. An hour passed, and then a bit more. We were getting suspicious that he'd told the Japs. We were getting edgy and were just about to move off ourselves when he came back carrying a lot of native food. Boy, were we pleased to see him - and the food.

When we got nearly to the coast, we saw lots of other natives. However, they would have nothing to do with us and we couldn't understand why. When we got within a stone's throw of the ocean we met a boy who had been involved in a mission there some years before. We asked him about the natives who had moved away and wouldn't speak to us. He told us that yesterday, some aeroplanes came to Gasmata to bomb Jap ships. They were shot down but one pilot parachuted out. When he hit the ground, he threw his parachute off quick, and hurried down the coast.

The Japs knew he had parachuted and sent a boat down and landed some men to pick him up. However, he had already made his way past the point where they landed but the Japs were still coming back towards us. (Fortunately, we were about half a mile short of the coast.) They had threatened the natives that if they helped any Australian soldiers, they'd kill them so they were dead scared.

The boy took us to what had been a church but it was in decay. You could hardly walk on the floor without going through it. He said to us, 'You stay here tonight, and tomorrow morning I will come and take you to where the track goes on down the coast'.

Around two or three o'clock in the morning, we became suspicious again. We thought we couldn't even be sure of him. He might be going to bring the Japs. So our nerves got the better of us and we got up, even though it wasn't really light. Fortunately, we found the track.

There was a bit of rough track for a while and along there we picked up a wallet. It belonged to the airman who had been shot down. I handed that in when we eventually got back to Melbourne.

One of our fellows called to me one day. He wasn't actually in our party, but he was resting. He said that he had ulcers on his legs and couldn't proceed. He would have to

go back and give himself up. Seeing that I knew him a little, he called me aside and said 'Fred, I have a tiny, 22 calibre revolver. I don't want to take it back with me because I don't want the Japs to get it. Will you take it?' And I said 'Yes Ron, of course I'll take it'. We had nothing at that stage and even though I never used it, the fact that I had it was significant to the natives.

I had already discarded my rifle at that stage. We had argued about the rifles. They were difficult to carry, and would keep catching on the vines in the jungle and that. But also, one or two of chaps said 'If you carry a rifle and if you're confronted somewhere by the Japanese, then because you are armed, they'll shoot you down before they ask any questions!' I didn't want to part with my rifle, but in the finish, I had to do it. They didn't want me to be armed and be the cause of everybody being shot.

Incidentally, that man, Ron Brown, made it out too. He didn't get picked up by the Japanese and I met him again in Melbourne and reminded him about the gun. I said, I still have it, I brought it all the way home Ron! So I was able to give it back to him.

Food

We were so hungry and strung out as we moved along the coast. I spotted a nut tree, very much like almonds. I tasted one - then had a few. That was good I thought. But, an hour or two later, I was in trouble. Just imagine taking seven or eight Ford pills! Oh it was shocking. I didn't think I would get away from that deserted house.

I remember one time sweeping up some grain in a shed. There had been a large number of native labourers that were travelling down the coast ahead of us. They had taken all the food, such as there might have been. There was some grain left on the floor, which we tried to scoop up and make into a sort of porridge – not very palatable.

At one stage, we did manage to catch a few small fish. We had a hook, and some line but they wouldn't take the bait. Dick, who caught trout back in Australia, told us to keep back so they couldn't see us. So we went behind a bush and threw our lines in and caught 4 or 5 there. They weren't very big fish, but we ate every part of them.

One other source of food was a bullimacow - a bullock. It had been killed back in the bush a little bit and if you wanted a chunk of it, you had to go and get it! Well, it was good to have that information passed on. And we were going to be in on that. It wasn't very far - perhaps about half a mile or so inland, away from where we were going. We found the beast - he'd been well hacked and the good joints and pieces had been taken already but we got a front leg joint. It was a pretty hefty piece of meat, as much as we would want to carry. We went back to the track, but we didn't dare light a fire. So the only place we could think of was in the copra house, where they dry or smoke the copra. It is a place with no windows, no air ventilation. But in there you could light a fire, which we did. (We couldn't light a fire outside because the Japs were close.) But boy, as soon as it smelt like a bit of meat, we tore into it! We were so hungry. One feed and it became putrid – we threw it away to the delight of the natives.

And so the days and miles went on. We had had no news, only the occasional dog fight above us but we could not see for the foliage above us. Our escape route would now be some hundreds of miles. There was excitement one night when we were levelling the ground to sleep on, when I unearthed a snake!

At about that time, a native boy was leading us along a very precarious track in the dark up a very steep side of a mountain. He told us to be very, very careful getting up the side of the mountain. Two or three of his own tribe had stumbled to their deaths at that point.

One night a hair-raising thing happened. We came into a small village where we were given a large hut to ourselves. Sometime about midnight, there was an horrific sound. We thought this was the end. Some natives came running to us. Out of kindness they had gone to a gully and got us a supply of water in bamboo canes. These canes were freshly cut and were feed the pigs loved. Imagine 20 or so pigs, snorting with delight! It was funny looking back but at the time, we thought it was the end!

We lost the water and the pigs got the bamboo! The sound of 20 or 30 pigs all squealing their delight was something to remember.

We were relieved that my tropical ulcer was healing with the constant bathing of sea water. Malaria was beginning to plague us and we were travelling by canoe again, in very poor shape, owing to a lack of suitable food.

One time the native boys said 'you have to go in here, into the village'. Well, that was alright, we could trust them. But we sensed something was a little bit odd there too. We didn't know until a little bit later that they had been fighting with the natives from the inland. I think that every now and then they would have these fights and they were quite serious - they would kill people. But anyway, they said that they had had a victory. Then they produced big shields, like you see in pictures sometimes, and spears, and we had to hold the shields, they said, while they tried to show us how the battle had gone! After a few jabs of the spear on the shield we packed that in! We said, 'we've got to go now!'

We were glad to get back onto that canoe! There was a mission down there. Another Roman Catholic mission, I think that was Father Durkin. He was very hospitable. He gave us food and advice, but said that he couldn't do any more than that as he was strictly neutral. I can remember the breakfast that he turned on there for us. Again, we were ever so hungry and I remember watching as the native boy brought the porridge out on a plate, wondering which plate I would get! If one had a little bit more than the other. . . . Oh, we were so hungry!

There was no beach track, as you might call it, for a considerable way. So when we left Father Durkin, it was, of course, by canoe again. We travelled a considerable distance, before the natives told us that we would come to an island off shore called Pilelo, and that there was a Roman Catholic priest there, Mr O'Connell.

Pilelo

We arrived there in due course but it was to find things very disorderly there. The indentured labour that had been travelling down the coast ahead of us all the time had arrived on Pilelo well ahead of us. They were upsetting the mission boys terribly. Mr O'Connell, big man physically though he was, and experienced, was having great difficulty in controlling the natives. They were even prepared to hurt him physically, that is how bad it was.

He told us about a Mr Moore, an Anglican man on New Britain, further down. We crossed back to there but he had already loaned his boat to an airman who had been shot down at Gasmata to get across to Finschhafen on the Papua New Guinea mainland.

We said farewell to Mr O'Connell, though we did not like leaving him in the situation he was in. When we actually left New Britain, we went back past Pilelo to say farewell to him and he was having a fight with one of the local natives. We were ready to jump off the boat and help him but he said 'No, I'm alright.' He was a pretty big burly priest, and he just waved us on. Go on, get going, sort thing. Although we did not like leaving him, we felt it was our duty to get back to Australia, if that were possible.

[Mr O'Connell wrote Fred a letter four years after they met on Pilelo. It outlines how Mr O'Connell was later captured by the Japanese but released after spending 6 months in captivity at Rabaul.]

Mr Moore

Mr Moore, like Mr O'Connell, was kindness itself for the short time we spent with him. Although Mr Moore had loaned his boat to the airman, he was optimistic that the natives with the airman would bring the boat back. Meanwhile, we were hoping and waiting.

It was a 60 mile plus gap between Papua New Guinea and New Britain. The boat did come back within a couple of days. Mr Moore said 'Here, it's yours to use.' We looked at each other - we had no skill with boats and the crossing of some 60 odd miles had to be done at night, due to enemy planes. Seeing our dilemma, he immediately said 'Don't worry, I'll take you over myself'. That was a big thing for a man in his situation. His mission was being threatened by unruly natives stirring up his own people and they were really threatening to harm him as well.

When the natives around heard about it, they indicated that they would not let the boat go. These were the native men who lived back on the PNG mainland and as part of their contract working in Rabaul, they would be transported back their villages. So you can sympathise with them too. When they saw that the priest was going to use the boat to take us across, they saw their only hope of getting home themselves fast slipping away.

Mr Moore handled the situation very diplomatically. He said he would take six of the natives in the boat himself, plus the six of us, plus a couple of his natives in case of trouble, as well as to bring back the boat again. There would be room for only six natives. I can see it now, he had the boat and there were the six of us together with Mr Moore, and a whole lot of natives screaming to get in the boat.

Six of the biggest stepped forward and said 'we're the 6 that are going with you', and they in turn pushed the others back, because they would have overrun us. I couldn't blame them.

Finschafen, PNG

We pushed out into deep water. There was just one little mishap. Although the water was very calm and it was a beautiful night to go across, one of the native boys that was on board had been given the job of holding the right course. About midnight he must have dozed a little and when Mr Moore woke, he detected straight away that we were a degree or two off course. If you travel several miles, that can be considerable. He rectified that, and though we arrived a little later than we had hoped (we wanted to be over to Finschafen before daylight to avoid detection), we arrived in Finschafen at 6 am the following morning.

The six natives made off into the bush - as soon as we got there, they were off. We met up with the Kiap (man in charge of a group of natives in PNG). The place was deserted, including the big Lutheran mission located there, which was pretty much all that Finschafen consisted of. They had a trade store there, which had a lot of stuff to sell to the natives.

With Mr Moore taking us over, we did our best to persuade him to come on with us. We could see no future for him going back. But he said that he'd had no instructions and that he must stay there. He was happy. I don't think he saw our future as being too bright.

[Mr Moore is referred to in Mr O'Connell's letter and indicated he died a short time afterwards, in suspicious circumstances.]

We thought now that this nightmare journey was over! We thought arriving in PNG was just a matter of time and they would come looking for us with a plane or boat, or just walk halfway. How wrong this proved to be.

We had heard distant bombing a couple of days back but did not know where or what that was about. Now we were at Finschafen, there was some food to eat and a bed to sleep on. All would be good for us now. The Finschafen mission was a big place, stacked with trade stuff to be given or sold to the natives of that area. The white mission staff had been transferred to Australia.

The kiap in charge of the area had 3 or 4 police boys with him to keep control. Later that day, a small boat came tearing into the little wharf. The natives shouted 'lookim, lookim master'. Up the coast there was a speck coming our way. There was divided opinion as to whether it was Japanese or not. At any rate, this fellow who just arrived in the small boat, said 'Right, I want four of you to come with me,' and handed us rifles. He had come over on a mission to go to the north side of the island of New Britain.

We knew that there were some of our troops coming down that side of the coast and he was going to see if he could pick them up or help. I think he had some success. He didn't die at that time and he did a good work. I think he lived through it all. We tore up the coast but before we got near them, he said, 'No, it's only this white family that have been living in PNG until now, and they're trying to get away from here.'

Searching through the merchandise at the trade store, I found a 32 calibre rifle. We thought this is good, a good find, but no bullets. So we decided between ourselves that we would look again and whoever found the bullets could keep the rifle. I was fortunate again, so the rifle and bullets were mine to keep. I kept that rifle right until we boarded a plane at a later stage, as no firearms were to be taken on those planes. However I only had 3 shots out of that rifle.

We learned too that the township of Lae, some distance along the coast, had fallen to the enemy. That was a blow because this town was between us and Port Moresby, our destination.

Within a day, the man who had arrived at Finschafen in the boat took off, heading for the north coast of New Britain to look for stragglers like us. The mission people there had been taken back to Australia, being Lutheran Germans.

So we asked the man in charge, the Kiap, to let us open one box. However, he didn't want us or anybody to go through the belongings of the mission people, so he resisted us for a day or so, until we got desperate because our clothes didn't amount to much and were nearly falling off us. We told him, 'Look, whether you agree to it or not, we're going to open a box.' So he let us open one box and you should have seen the type of clothes, it was almost sports gear! I got a pair of cream pants and one or two of the others got straw hats. We must have looked unbelievable. The Kiap stood over us, making sure we only opened one box to refit ourselves. The gear was unusual but at least it helped to keep off the mosquitoes.

One morning our Kiap friend was talking to a man at Lae (where the bombing sounds we heard just before we got to Finschafen were from). There was a white fellow there with a wireless and he was coast watching. He was talking in code to our Kiap. On this morning

he said, 'This is the last you'll hear of me, the Japs are landing here at Lae [40 miles down the coast], so I will go into the bush and destroy the wireless very soon.'

We knew we would have to take to the bush again. It didn't take too much to work out that they would continue down the coast to us. So he said he'd give us some natives to carry for us. We selected a little bit of food which would have kept us going for a week or so perhaps. There was a boat which wasn't a particularly good boat, but he said 'Four of you had better go on - and two stay here until we see the Japs coming. Then we'll come and meet you.' Well, we didn't think we'd be meeting up the first night or morning.

With the fall of Lae, our position really became difficult, as Lae was between us and Port Moresby. Preparation was hurriedly made for the evacuation of Finschafen, as that would be the next place to go. The Kiap and native policemen helped us load our gear onto a small boat. Our gear included whatever coins we could find in the trade store, a bag of salt, which seemed to be of great value to the natives, and of course, my recently acquired rifle.

On our way, we came to a point that was dangerous. The water was very rough and rocks were protruding out of the water. Our boat had a particularly unusual throttle and as we came around the point, we wanted a little bit more throttle to keep off the rocks. Unfortunately the throttle was such that we couldn't tell whether you moved the level either way so we just sort of limped around. That was as close as we came - we could easily have foundered on the rocks. However we got around that little point and there was a creek running inland, so we ran the boat into there. We were to hide it, if we could, from Japanese eyes.

When the natives found out that we had that rifle, they wanted me to use it, to have a shot. Now they might not have hurt us, but we just didn't know. They were good with a bow and arrow. Boy, they wouldn't miss. They used to practice on the stump of a banana tree - probably be about a foot round. They were very good. They showed us several times how good they were and they wouldn't miss.

We immediately reckoned that the banana tree represented a man! They wanted me to have a shot out of the gun - I didn't want to, because if I missed, we would have come down in their estimation. But in the finish, I couldn't say no any longer. I said 'All right, put up a paper or something (60 or 70 yards)'. I got right down flat on the ground and managed to knock it over. 'Oooh, masta, you number 1!' It achieved a good purpose!

We then moved inland a few miles while it was light and settled down in a native village.

We didn't expect to hear from our other fellows that night, but we had just settled down when the natives began shouting 'Kiap he come'. So we stayed where we were that night. The next morning, there were the six of us with the Kiap and three or four police boys as well. He said, 'We've got to go inland, it will be dangerous on the coast, and we don't know where they will land.' We would have normally taken to a track along the coast line but we didn't. We bought into a lot of trouble with the terrain, but not at first, not for the first three or four miles along the track.

We then had quite a discussion as to what to do. The Kiap wanted to head further on into the bush. Dick and I wanted to head more directly towards Port Moresby. Though, that was probably three or four hundred miles or more, it was the way we would have to go.

We pushed on a little further inland, had another discussion and decided to split up. The Kiap, his native police boys and two of our chaps headed off further inland. They said, if

necessary, they would live off the native tribes. Natives said that the Japanese had left Finschafen. They only stayed there 24 hours or more and then moved on. Two fellas from our party said they would go back and use the boat that we had hidden. They went all the way back but the boat had disappeared. This left Dick and I to push off in the direction of Port Moresby - roughly 300 miles. We had a problem dividing out some of the food we still had. The argument from the Kiap was that if Port Moresby were to fall, they would live along with the natives and have a better chance of survival. So with a little food, some coins and my rifle, Dick and I set off in the direction of Port Moresby on the difficult detour to bypass Lae. We were twenty or thirty miles directly inland at that time - so we had to cut across.

Suffering now from Malaria, there did not seem to be anything at all in the way of paths and tracks. No so difficult when we got back near the coast but we couldn't stay along the coast for long because we'd soon come to Lae, which the Japs had just taken. No telling if Port Moresby had been taken or not. There was a little activity in the air. This spurred us on because we reckoned those odd planes had to come from somewhere. We never really found out where the planes we saw fighting in the air came from. If we had known for certain they'd come from Port Moresby we would have been relieved!

Something happened again along there. The natives had a problem - they always had a problem. There was a small bird way up in a tree. They said they could not hit it with an arrow. It was only as big as a starling but they wanted it for food. I was very reluctant to use the rifle but I took aim and fired. The bird came tumbling down and we found that the bullet had taken out one eye. They could have crowned me king there and then!

We pushed on along the coast but knew it would be dangerous to go on much further. Natives had told us there would be other natives in the high country to the right but they were few and far between. We veered off and began to climb and was it hard going. Not only was it wet and cold but we soon learned that the higher you go, the worse the leaches became. We could scrape them off our arms and feet - they were even between our toes.

This mountain range was ten to twelve thousand feet high and heavy fighting took place here later on. It was quite a climb with no proper track but eventually we came to the top. Native life was very scarce. We came to a tribal area, though apparently the men were mostly absent - they used to fight between themselves a bit. There were a number of the women folk and kids and those at home were most cordial.

After three days of cold, wet, trackless bush, we came down to Zummerzing, a native village, and there heard of white men in the Markham Valley. Cheering news, but still a long way off.

On April 8 we reached another large mission village called Boana. Thinking this would be a good place to rest awhile, we proceeded to make ourselves comfortable. We also bargained with the natives for some chooks.

Towards nightfall, some of the men came to us and said 'man bilong Japan, he come soon'. They wanted us to move on quickly. We suspected this was a yam to get rid of us but couldn't afford at that stage to wait and see. We understood their position and got going.

It was terribly cold. The few natives about wanted to help us - or move us on, I don't know which.

We needed help - our last lot of boys wouldn't come with us any further. They took us close to a little village and let us go from there by ourselves. We went on to the village where they listened to us and said they wished they could help us but unfortunately they were a very small village - perhaps only a dozen or so men plus some women and children. This meant we had to go over another mountain and boy, was it cold!

Well, the villagers came to us and said 'We will all go'. So the whole little village - men, women and kids all came along with us for two or three days. It was funny. When we got to the top, it was so cold, terribly cold, and it was raining. We didn't know where we were going to spend the night. They didn't know either, because it was territory they had never been into.

We came to a couple of old huts. One was useless, so we went into the other. There was a mad rush to get under some sort of cover. There was not enough ground space and I ended up sleeping half across a native man. Water was dribbling through the hut. Dick did not fair much better.

Next morning, the natives set off back to their village. They gave us some directions and Dick and I went off, mostly downhill. We would have been past Lae by this stage. We didn't come straight down but more on a slant which took us past Lae. Soon we came to a difficult situation. Apparently there had been a track many years before but it led to a kind of hanging bridge with a deep drop down below to a gully. It was made of jungle vines and tree trunks and swayed when you walked on it. It was 40-50 feet down but we went across one at a time and made it over. We had no option but to use it. The nearest natives now would have to be 20 or 30 miles away. I would have loved a picture of it.

We moved on downwards towards the coast then struck something we had not come across before. We had just one or two natives with us and they warned us to be very careful and watch out for falling rocks. The slope was cleared of all timber; nothing left on it. Down at the bottom there were a whole lot of large boulders. The natives had told us to be careful because every so often, a boulder would come rolling down and it would kill you if it hit you.

We negotiated that without trouble but you could see boulders coming down at intervals. Then we found ourselves down in more level country with a lake. We had two or three native boys with us at that time and they said 'Lookim, lookim', and out on the lake we saw some ducks. They wanted me to have a shot but I put it off. However, they kept insisting. I had to have a shot and would you believe it, I put a shot through the neck of one of the ducks!

We told them to go and get it so they looked around for an old bit of wood. Then two of them, with one arm each over the log, went right out, got the duck and brought it back. We carried it along because we knew it would be good to eat but the natives didn't want to stop just yet. They took us to what had been a hut but which was now in disrepair. They said they would get the fire going, pluck the duck and we would have that for dinner. Soon the duck was burning and we could barely wait for our share.

The mosquitoes were shocking as we sat back and ate the burnt duck. There was an old tree trunk in the middle of the hut, with a little ramp about eight or ten feet high in the centre of the building. Dick was enjoying the smoke, which kept the mosquitoes off, so decided to climb up above the fire where the smoke was. No sooner had he got up there than the whole thing collapsed! He was lucky not to land in the fire. We came out of there still laughing our heads off.

We were swinging a little bit to the right - because if we kept going straight, we would have been going along the coast and that could have been a bit dangerous.

At this point, malaria got the better of Dick. He couldn't walk. More than once the natives improvised a stretcher to carry him on. We used it a bit - I had to be carried two or three times, but Dick was worse than me.

I must say, without native help, we would not have made it out. It was almost uncanny how they would improvise a stretcher as we moved along without knowing at times if we were even heading in the right direction.

As we walked through the scrub we suddenly heard a noise, not music or singing, but sort of like that. We asked the natives what it was and they said 'somebody has died'. They wailed for the best part of a day and the sound carried up the gully a long way. When we reached the village, I asked Dick (who was still being carried) if he wanted to stay there for the night. He said 'No, no, no, get me out of here.' He didn't want them singing over him! So we moved on.

Dick and I arrived at a very small village where there was sickness. One small boy in particular was badly affected. A lady begged us to do something. I remembered that I had a tiny bottle of disinfectant that I had picked up somewhere along the track, probably at a deserted plantation house way back in New Britain. We gave him one or two doses which seemed to do him a lot of good. However, they then indicated that he was mine. They expected us to take him on with us. We had a difficult time getting away from them without taking him as well. I sometimes wonder if he lived.

Later on, when there were only two of us travelling together again, we were going up a little track which rounded a mountain. It was quite a steep track and as we turned a corner we came face to face with a native on the bend with a bow drawn. If I'd been Japanese or even looked like one, I would have got it!

Later, another incident occurred, while we were walking with some natives. We came to a gorge where a tree trunk formed a bridge which was 20 or 30 feet across. When we came to it, the young blokes with us just ran across. There was about a 40 feet drop down into the gorge! Then it was our turn. They thought it was very funny when we got down on our backsides and inched our way across.

Markham River

We kept moving on quite slowly now, apparently a long way from the coastline and Lae. One or two natives started to say 'white man, all the same u fella, he stop long bush'. This went on for a long time. But we did not come any closer to where they said he might be. Then we came to the Markham River which is a very big river in that area in Papua New Guinea.

They indicated that they were on the other side of the river. We were so anxious to cross over to the other side as the natives said the village was virtually on the river bank. They told us to wait a while. We, being so anxious to get across, used my rifle to demand that they take us over immediately. They had a very nice double-hulled catamaran tied up to the bank, so we climbed aboard. However, because the wind was wrong and the tide unfavourable, we got no more than fifty yards out when the natives lost control. The canoe spun around and we started to sink. We all found ourselves in the water and only by their skill and determination did we all get back to our original starting place. We had to say sorry for our stupidity. We then waited till later - until they indicated when it was safe for us to go.

The tide apparently played a big part, combined with strong winds. Eventually we found ourselves on the other side. The mosquitoes were the worst I believe we had encountered. As yet we had not met up with any white man - but this was soon to change. We had hardly moved away from the river when a man on horseback appeared. He said afterwards, he nearly fell off his horse with shock! We were still wearing some of the clothes we had been wearing from Finschafen (a couple of hundred miles or so before). What a sight we must have been. This man, as I remember, was a major in the PNG voluntary rifles. He told us there had been a company of these troops where we had met him - but they had left to get to the other side of the Markham River, just a few miles from where we had crossed. This was the rumour we had been hearing from the natives some miles back about white men.

This man, because of his age, had been left behind to look after a food dump in a village close by. He also had several native police boys. They were equipped with mosquito nets. Something I regret to this day is that he ordered two of their number to give us their nets. They did, and I can still hear them bashing at the mozzies all that night while we rested in peace.

Within a day or so he had arranged for us to move on towards where goldfields had been prior to the war. These were now, as we were to find out, completely deserted.

Fred concludes his story:

At the goldfields we found 20-30 solid wooden homes. The whites had all gone. We were met by a man who introduced himself as Lt Nyal. He arranged some uniforms for us and allotted a house for our use. His job was to stop looters. There were bags of pay dirt from the mines – they had to be washed to retrieve the gold. We, however, had no interest in them. It was just nice to have shelter and be in no danger for once. We were there for 7-10 days. The only way out was to walk to Pt Moresby (approx 150 miles). We didn't relish that idea but Lt Nyal said it would be easy as he had food and natives to help to do everything. All we had to do was walk. Lt Nyal also had a wireless and was in touch with Pt Moresby. The authorities had just got the natives to put 44 gallon drums over the aerodrome so that the Japanese couldn't land. At this stage, they were only 20-30 miles away at Lae. The natives thought they could hear planes but nothing eventuated. The drums couldn't be removed until the identity of the planes was certain. Lt Nyal was told not to let us walk out and after several days the natives again yelled that planes were coming. This time they did and were identified as ours.

After an American fighter plane landed, I was able to speak to the pilot in his cockpit. He only had a very limited time on the ground before he needed to be airborne again – to prevent attack from the Japanese. He said that they had experienced difficulty in locating the airstrip. They had been over it twice but couldn't recognise it in the fog. Now, they would be able to bring all the planes in. The plane took off almost vertically.

A couple of days later we were told to be on the airstrip ready to board a transport plane. We only had a few minutes to do this and didn't know where on the airstrip to wait. The planes were landing troops – hundreds of Aussies – who took up positions on the edge of the airstrip with guns. We were in the wrong place and didn't have time to get on after the troops had got off so the plane took off without us. We felt terrible. The troops told us not to worry, they would be back again with more troops. During this time one of the soldiers fell over and shot himself in the stomach with his own rifle. We looked after him and got him on the next plane to land. This time we were in the right place! We got on and got him on but got told off for our trouble as the slight delay in loading the wounded soldier meant that the pilot lost his place in the take off queue. When we were in the air we were told that above us (too high for us to see) were Cobras (American) – watching over us. We were also told that landing at Pt Moresby was going to be risky as the

Japanese were attacking the runway all the time. The Flying Fortresses had been bombed by the Japanese on the previous run.

During the one hour flight, we saw a speck from our plane. The crew checked it out by telescope and fortunately it turned out to be one of ours. We landed safely in Pt Moresby. There were numerous strips with empty planes landing to reload and go again. A huge American plane was ablaze – the Japanese had caught it on the ground the day before and it was still burning.

We were starving so the Americans told us where we could get food – from their mobile food café which supplied great food. This was one of the best meals we had had the whole time we were away.

A vehicle came out to us and no sooner had we arrived than huge sheets of paper were brought out which listed the names of the soldiers in the 2/22nd. 1,000 men were noted. We had to tell them if we knew anything about any of the men and we also had the pleasure of crossing our own names off the list of those missing. I took great pleasure in putting a line through "Fred Kollmorgen". Then we were taken for interrogation – we had to give information about our trip out. Little things in our pockets were handed over in case they provided clues. After the evening session we were told we would be brought back the next morning. Therefore all our things were left in the office. Unfortunately we never got back there. We were given a tent and we stretched out feeling comparatively safe. Then at 11.30 pm, a ute pulled up and we were told, 'Sorry fellas, you are flying out to Townsville at daylight.' That meant we lost all our odds and ends. They didn't hold any great value but they were a connection with the trip out. One had a diary and we'd all contributed what we had.

Before daylight we were all put in the ute. When we got out about 3 miles, it was a hive of activity with planes revving and manoeuvring. It was dark and the noise was severe - quite something to witness. The driver couldn't find the plane because there were too many of them. Eventually however, we found it, boarded and took off before daylight for Townsville. We were sitting on seats around the sides of the plane. It was a transport plane and everything else had been cleared out. I don't remember any seatbelts. We flew at a great height – probably for safety. Suddenly, without warning, the plane dived to about 200 feet above the ocean. Cutlery etc bounced around and some things smashed. We were starting to think this was the end and then the plane levelled out. We never found out why we dived. Later, over the Great Barrier Reef, off the coast of Townsville, the attendant pointed out a cemetery and told us we were going to land there. We were thinking that it was a strange place to land until he added, 'That's not a cemetery, it's only camouflage for the benefit of the Japanese'. We came down beautifully and were hustled away by authorities.

When they were through with us, we were left to roam the town. We were hungry, to put it mildly. Stores and cafes were everywhere and American troops were there by the thousands. I remember we split up at this point in time, each going where he thought there was a good café or eating place. I fronted up to one place where a girl at a window was taking orders. I said, 'Sausages and eggs please' and she replied, 'One egg. Don't you know there's a war on?' We laughed over this for quite a while. We were told to report to the station and soon we were in a train bound for Brisbane. Our train was virtually empty but the trains coming up were full of troops. Therefore our train had to keep waiting for the north-bound trains to pass. The delays seemed endless when we were so desperate to get home. Following a short delay in Brisbane, we were headed for Sydney.

A really funny thing happened on that section of the ride home. One of our chaps, quite youngish, had made it clear that he was missing the girls in his military life, especially over the last 12 months or so. A civilian in the compartment said, 'Do you see that hill country over there, well, there are lots of girls there, of different ages too!' Our soldier mate looked like he would get off at the next stop, until the man said, 'Yes, it is quite a big cemetery!'

Then it became my turn to look a bit sheepish. A young, blonde lady took the seat beside me and before long, I was asleep on her shoulder! When I awoke sometime later, I of course apologised, but she said 'I don't mind at all' Very patriotic, wasn't she!

Sydney

When we arrived in Sydney we strolled around wasting time until we came to a shooting gallery that offered a good prize to anyone who could completely take out the bullseye. We each had a go, then Dick (a farmer's son from Colac) took up the rifle and did the almost impossible. We clapped him, but the man in charge was not impressed! However, two or three other chaps who worked around there came over and had a look and they told him to pay up! The prize, as I remember, was five pounds. What a windfall!

Spencer Street

At Spencer Street Station, quite a group met us. Officially, May had only been notified that I was not missing. We must have got word to her somehow though because she was waiting for us with her father, my mum and dad, older sister etc etc, and of course all the folks that belonged to the other fellas too. After the welcome home had eased a bit, I was getting anxious to get home and said, 'Let's go home!' 'Oh no,' an official said, 'you're going to Heidelberg Hospital! And that for a fortnight at least!' From there, they sent me to Ballarat, in and out for some months. Seemingly, the malaria had a grip on me. The others did not seem to have it quite so badly. I was classed 'C - Unfit for duty' and was shuttled back and forth between Heidelberg and Ballarat, (between hospital and rehabilitation) several times with malaria. Once they sent me out to Puckapunyal. Of course I'd already had some treatment up in Papua New Guinea. I ended up having seven or eight courses of treatment for malaria over a two year period. It took three more years before the disease finally left me.

Ballarat

There were a lot of Americans convalescing at Ballarat at that time and they were encouraged to make toys or wallets to fill in time. The Americans wouldn't make their own, but wanted to buy ours, which they did. I sold them a couple! One day an American soldier came to the tent where I lived. I had met him before and I'd spoken with him once or twice before. He'd nod and say G'day and then we'd part. But at any rate, he came to where I lived and slept, but he couldn't believe it when he saw we slept on the ground. One day he said to me 'We'll fix this', and he took me over to their lines, which were adjacent to ours. He came over in a commercial type of truck. He told me to hop in and then drove around to the American lines till he found a bed that wasn't being used. He said 'This will do' and before long he'd loaded it on, taken it back and erected it in my tent. I was the only one in that area that had a bed! Everyone else was on the ground or a straw mat type of thing.

Ballarat was a cold place. I had seven blankets most of the time. There were, at these places, quite a few chaps with malaria who were undergoing treatment. The ones that had malaria (15 or 20) were called out onto the parade ground. An orderly would come along with yellow tablets. We'd only had quinine tablets before this. The authorities knew very well that quite a lot of the fellas would not swallow the tablets. We were on a parade ground with no grass or cover of any sort. The orderly would come along with his tray of tablets and he would tell you to open your mouth and would then put it under your

tongue which made it difficult to swallow easily. I took mine every time but I would say that most of the fellas did not. They reckoned that eventually it was going to be harmful to you, or that your hair would go grey or white - different arguments they would have.

Therefore, the orderly would stay there for a couple of seconds till you'd swallowed it. However, the soldiers got cunning, and once they'd been given the tablet, they'd push it under their tongue. Once the orderly had moved on, they'd just drop them down in the dirt and shuffle a bit of dirt over them. Well, that was pretty good but on one occasion, a day or two after the tablets had been given out, we had some rain! So on the parade ground, here and there, with just a few misses, were these yellow spots! Oh it was funny.

One day, a man walked into our tent. I had met him back in Papua New Guinea, a civilian who, prior to the war, used to travel to outback areas, buying or getting gold from the natives. It was quite a lucrative business. Apparently, he was now a Voluntary Rifleman in Papua New Guinea. I was never to hear of him again, except to see his name on a monument at a much later date at Madang.

The time came for the lights of the city to be turned on. That was a moment I would have hated to not see. Outside lights had been prohibited when the war got serious.

A number of my mates etc had already gone back to Papua New Guinea. Dick got as far as Queensland but I got no further than Ballarat and Melbourne. I was still classed 'C grade - unfit for duty'. They put me through an engineering course, which apparently I passed, then one day I was told I would be going to Alice Springs which would mean no more part in the war. This upset me quite a bit as I wanted action or nothing! In the meantime, a man I had worked for applied for my release to work for him in his market garden as his marketing manager, which sounded good to me. One day, I was 'C class' medically, then the next day, because they were letting me go, I was promoted to 'A - Class' medically! Of course, this was a very necessary industry, a vegetable farm. I stayed with this man for five years. Then I started thinking that if I didn't get out of this job soon, I'd be there forever. My Dad had advised me that there were opportunities where he was in Bairnsdale, so with May, my wife and our two young boys, we moved there and we remained in Bairnsdale for 55 years.

Back to Rabaul, 1960

In 1960, May and I were invited to return to Rabaul by a friend who was working there as the manager of the Copra Marketing Board at that time. I was taken to see some interesting spots, many of which I was not familiar with from my first visit, all those years before. The Japanese had built all manner of tunnels and caves and things. We saw a place where, on a high tide, they could even bring submarines into a great big cave where the necessary repairs would be carried out between the tides. Then on another high tide, the submarine would be shot out again. To do that with a submarine was a pretty big engineering feat I reckon!

When we had arrived in Pt Moresby the area was much quieter than the last time I was there. We went on to Madang and while there, I got talking to a local, I told him about some of our experiences in Madang. He said had we been a little higher up, we may have met the kooka kooka tribe, I was glad we didn't, because they used to have "meat" on the menu!

There too, we saw a newly-erected monument for the coast watchers. I saw to my surprise, the name of the man I had last seen in Ballarat and was told the story of how he and some others were landed at night further up the coast. Something went wrong - apparently the Japanese knew that they were landing, and he was killed with others.

Going back to Rabaul Harbour, the first thing that took my notice was Vulcan, a mountain that was pushed up out of the sea in 1937 when Matupi had erupted, killing a number of natives. In 1942 it was bare - there was nothing on it. When we went back in 1960, there were shrubs and trees, 15-20 feet high and it looked so different! I saw again many of the places I had known, plus other tunnels and workplaces underground that the Japanese had built. I also saw the barrels of the big guns we had brought in on our troop ship in 1941. They were totally destroyed by the enemy, prior to their landing.

It was good to go to the Methodist Church, now rebuilt and on a different block. This was where the 2/22nd Band sang in the services. During our visit, something occurred that I had never seen before. The choir entered the church in single file, singing as they came. It will stay in my memory. I also saw the final place of execution of some, which brought much sorrow.

My six mates of that epic journey have now all passed away.”



Photo of Fred taken before his escape.

Conservative estimates for the distances covered by Fred and his mates during the journey are:

Walking:	700 miles
Canoeing:	60 miles
Wading:	25 miles
Boating:	80 miles
Aeroplane:	600 miles
Train:	1,000 miles

The physical condition of the soldiers on their arrival in Australia was described as “gaunt and haggard” and “indicative of the acute starvation and illness experienced by most of the escaped Australians”. (Darkest Hour by Bruce Gamble.)

Addendum:

Well, that’s the end of Fred’s story. I would just like to add a little to it. When I first interviewed Fred and gained his permission to print this, he made it perfectly clear that it was only on condition that he was not made out to be a hero. In his words, he was “just a survivor”. As you’ve read the story, I hope that you have become aware that

although Fred was indeed “a survivor”, he was much more than that. 1,400 Australian soldiers attempted to escape the 20,000 Japanese who were trying to capture them. 1,078 of the Australians died. Fred successfully made his way home to Australia through the jungle of New Britain, the only band member to make it back to Australia alive. That is a huge achievement!

I asked Fred what had kept him going when times were tough. His reply was that he wanted to get home to his wife and his family. When questioned on how he maintained his faith while he was away, he said that he was no “spruiker”, he just lived his life the way he thought God wanted him to, staying away from anything that would be contrary to the way God would expect him to live. Before leaving, the hymn “God be with you till we meet again” was sung. That held Fred together while he was away. There was a lot of behaviour that was difficult to live with. However God was with him and helped him through. Fred also mentioned one occasion where he had to decide which way to go when he was making his way through the jungle and didn’t have enough information to make a sound decision so he asked God to lead him and He did. That’s really faith in action! Fred said ‘I didn’t preach to the fellas – I just lived the best way I could.’

At first Fred didn’t have a Bible, but during his escape, saw an old booklet on the ground, picked it up and brushed it off to find that it was a New Testament in ‘pidgin’ English. Fred was unable to read it fluently but kept it with him and drew comfort from it. It felt as though he had something of God in his pocket. He carried that all the way home (together with his photo of May which had travelled all the way with him, including a few dips under the water.)



Photo of May that Fred carried throughout the war.

At times it is difficult for us to see in ourselves the qualities that others can see in us and I think Fred illustrates this completely. To manage to get all the way home under those conditions shows that Fred possesses courage and tenacity. Had he really been “just a survivor”, he would have been more interested in saving his own skin than anything else. However, the facts contradict this. I was privileged to read a letter sent to Fred’s mother from a soldier who only made it home as a result of meeting Fred and being encouraged by him to keep going. This soldier was ready to give up, to just sit down on the side of the track and wait for the Japanese to come and capture him. As a result of a “chat” with Fred, he found fresh courage and started off once again, successfully making his way back to Australia.

The following is a direct quote from his letter:

“After a nightmare trip with a few narrow escapes from capture and from death, we eventually arrived at a point where we were seen and picked up by a flying boat of the RAAF.

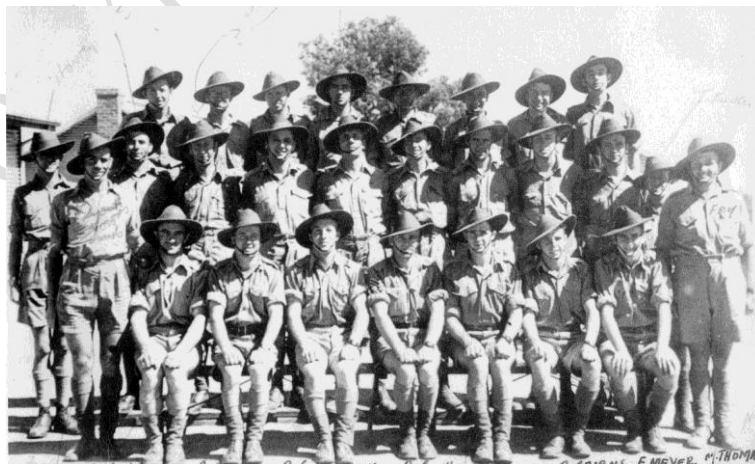
Almost a week ago, a message came through to say that Fred’s party had managed to get away from New Britain across to the mainland of New Guinea. About that time the Japs were very active along the northern coast of New Guinea but I think that with the exercise of a little caution they should be able to avoid capture. At any rate, I am hoping soon to see Fred again.

I’d like to pay a tribute to Fred’s courage, cheerfulness and faith. At times I felt particularly despondent, but after a talk with Fred, whose faith in God never wavered, things seemed much better.”

That, I think sums up the situation. Fred had stayed faithful to God and so God was able to use him to help other people, even in the middle of the devastation of war. Fred may have been a survivor but I don’t think it is true to say he was “just a survivor”. A more apt expression would be “Much more than a survivor!”



Fred & May after the war.



2/22nd Band – Fred is second from left, second row from the back.