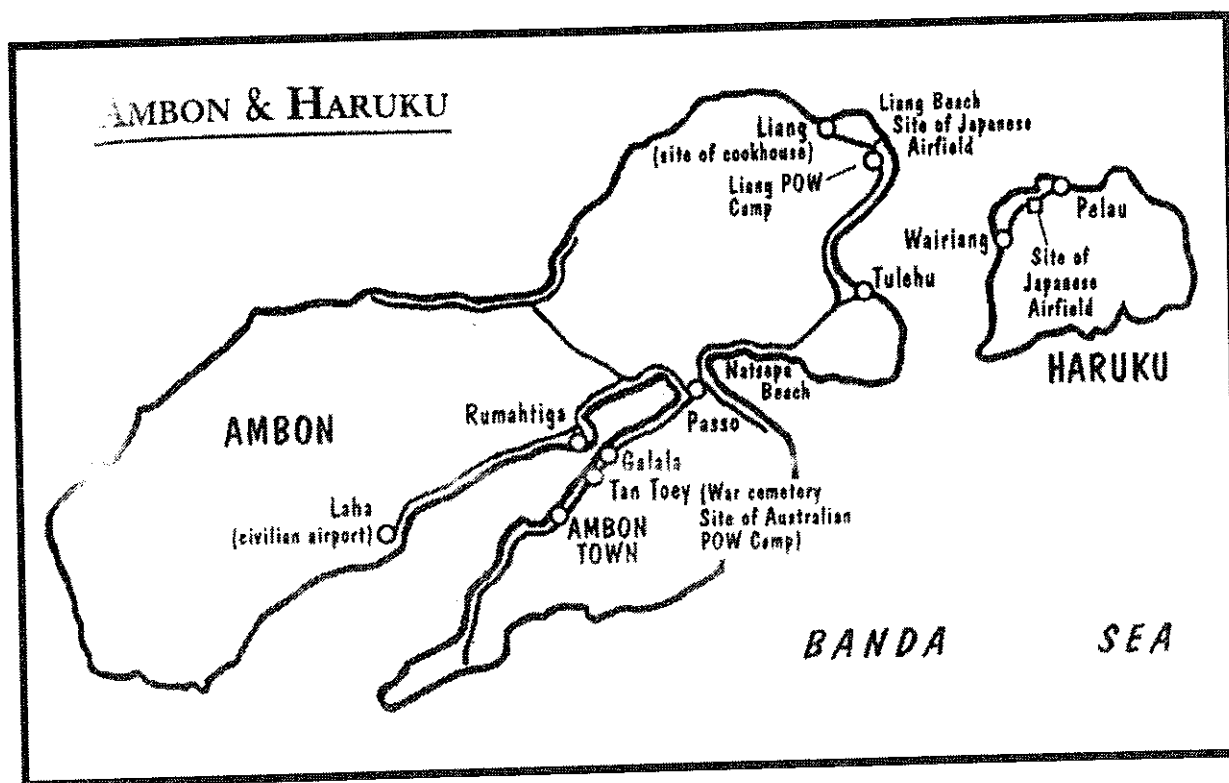


CHAPTER 12

AMBON

(20th September 1945 to 21st January 1946)

BOUND FOR "SPICE ISLANDS"



The unit was all packed up and waiting for transport back to Morotai. The *James J Corbett*, a Liberty ship, arrived on the 12th of September and carried about 1,300 troops including our unit, in very crowded conditions. The cooking facilities were two Wiles cookers on deck. Confusion and congestion reigned during meal times. There were only two meals per day but by the time the first meal was over it was almost time to line up for the next one. However the voyage was only three days and fortunately the sea was calm. On arrival we were quartered with the 63rd and 64th Infantry battalions who were to be part of "Amforce", the Ambon occupation force comprising the 33rd Brigade.

Known in earlier times as "The Spice Islands" Ambon and surrounding islands produced an abundance of these sought after spices which were traded with the Western world. Ambon in particular was renowned for its cloves. The island of Ambon is about 35 miles long by 10 miles wide, part of the former Dutch East Indies. The main town on the island is also called Ambon and has strategic importance because of its excellent deep sea harbour, commodious and well

protected, situated on the southern shore of a tongue of sea which almost bisects the southern and northern parts of the island. The island's airfield at Laha is on the northern section, separated from the town of Ambon by the Bay of Ambon.

JAPANESE INVASION AND OCCUPATION

Ambon was overrun by the Japanese at the end of January and beginning of February 1942. Most of the Australian troops sent to help the Dutch defend the island were taken prisoner. The story of the small Australian force called "Gull Force", together with a slightly larger Dutch force defending Ambon was almost a repeat of the experience of the "Lark Force" on New Britain just one week earlier. "Gull Force" had been held in Darwin for about nine months and were only despatched to Ambon in December 1941 after the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbour and Malaya.

The defenders were outnumbered, their equipment was inadequate and they had no air or naval support. In the two weeks prior to the invasion the Japanese had kept up an increasingly effective series of air raids resulting in destruction of some R.A.A.F and Dutch Air Force planes on the ground. The result was the remainder of the allied air forces left the island. The land forces were left with no air support and the Japanese had complete air supremacy during the short campaign. Japanese sea convoys conveying troops, escorted by their war ships, could do as they wished as there was no effective naval opposition.

The Australians comprising mainly the 2/21st Battalion and supporting troops numbering about 1,150 men were spread around the island, ostensibly protecting strategic points, but far too thinly spread to be an effective defence. Being part of the 8th Division these troops had not been in action before. The attacking Japanese on the other hand, buoyed by recent successes at Pearl Harbour, the sinking of the British battleships *Hood* and *Prince of Wales*, their land success in Malaya and Thailand, together with the meagre resistance which they had encountered so far in their push southwards, were full of confidence.

The battle lasted four days. The town of Ambon fell to the Japanese within 24 hours of them landing. They next attacked Paso and when it was apparent that this strategic town would also fall the Dutch commander surrendered. The Australians fought on at various points where they were in contact with the enemy for another two days but realizing they were fighting a losing battle and with rations and ammunition short their commander surrendered on the 2nd of February. The troops defending the airport at Laha also surrendered on the 2nd of February. Instead of taking all the surrendered troops at Laha as prisoners the Japanese are alleged to have beheaded a number and bayoneted others to death.

Care, Courage & Camaraderie

There were incidents of individual bravery and some platoons and their commanders fought gamely against great odds and distinguished themselves. As on New Britain, a number of Australian troops not wanting to spend the rest of the war as prisoners, made plans to escape. Some were successful, with



Ambonese girls at Dvr. Doolan's grave.

the co-operation of the local native Ambonese, who loaned them boats for their island hopping via Ceram across the Arafura Sea to Darwin or the west coast of Australia.

One incident of individual bravery concerns Driver Doolan who met a party of Japanese advancing in trucks on Ambon town. With his machine gun he inflicted severe losses on the advancing Japanese before he himself was gunned down. He is regarded as a hero and his story has become a legend amongst the local Ambonese. Arthur Bachelor in enclosing a photo of his grave remarks, *"They have a song about a Victorian, Driver Doolan whose exploits have become legendary with them, (alone he destroyed two truck loads of Japs). His grave is never without flowers"*. David James who returned to Ambon for the 1996 Anzac Day observance has kindly supplied the English translation of the words of Driver Doolan's song. A fuller version was found in "Ambon News" It was sung to the tune of "Rose in her Hair" They are:-

One Australian named Doolan had killed many men of Japan.
He did not run away or move back.
Until at last he was killed by the men of Japan.

An Australian named Doolan died by the side of the road.
His grave is under a Gandaria tree.
His mother and father, wife and children have not seen it.

The tale is told everywhere, an Australian named Doolan.
Died by the bullets from the men of Japan.
Calling his mother, father, wife and children, but they cannot hear him.

Doolan was known by his mates as "Give-me-a-yard-of-bicycle-chain-and-I'll do-'em-over Doolan".

The Japanese treatment of Australian prisoners on Ambon was no different to well recorded stories of Japanese prisoner of war camps in Burma, Thailand, and Changi.

The Japanese towards the end of the war had kept not only the P.O.W.'s short of food but the civil population. Many suffered from malnutrition with the result that when our unit arrived the locals were under nourished and hungry for food of any description especially meat.

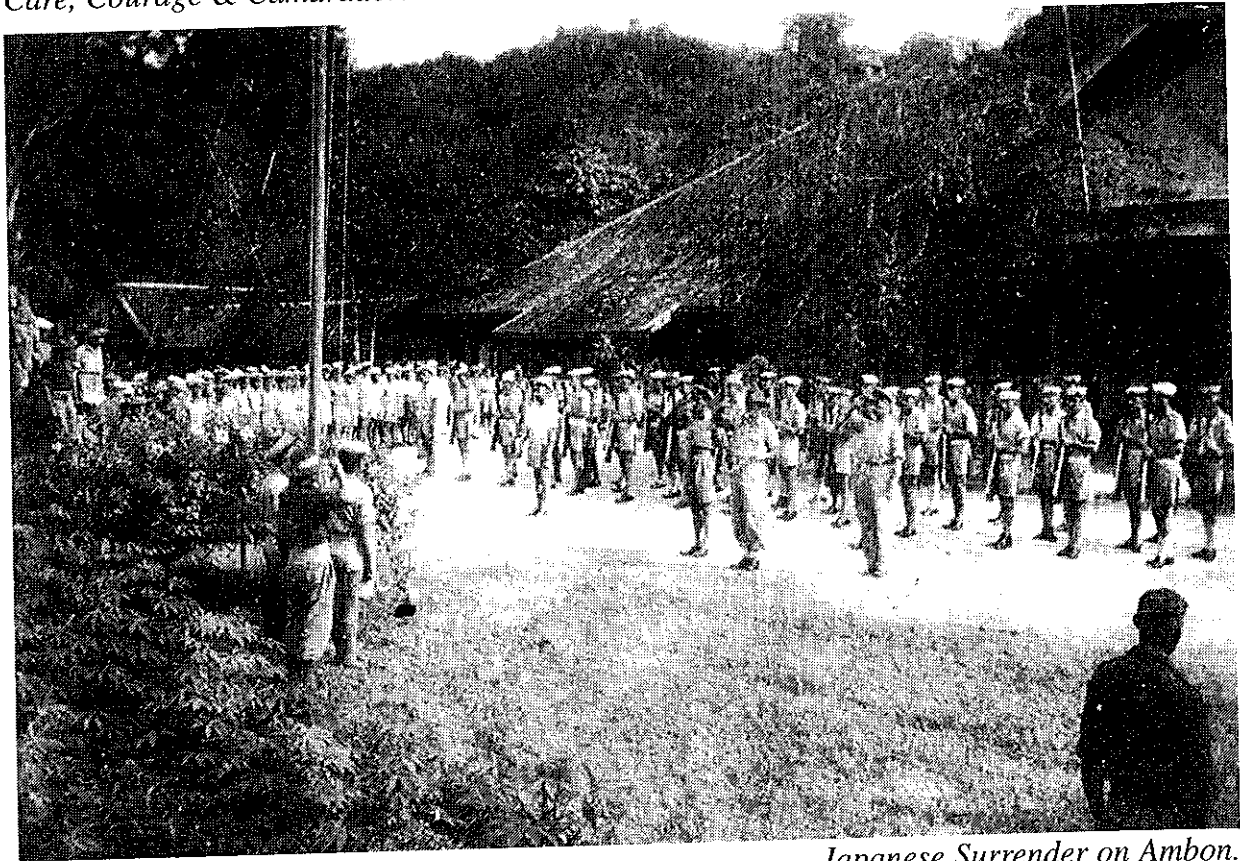
OUR TIME ON AMBON

On the 17th of September, 1945 a warning order was received to have a Company ready to proceed to Ambon as an advance party. "A" Company, with Major Marshall Gratton in charge, was chosen and preparations were quickly made. They embarked on various vessels, some on H.M.A.S. *Glenelg*, some on H.M.A.S. *Latrobe* on the 20th and 21st of September. The stores were loaded on four other vessels causing much confusion. The advance party arrived on Ambon on the 23rd of September. Their immediate task was to take over the former Dutch Army Hospital and establish an A.D.S. to service the infantry and other troops who formed the advance party.

Major Mick Dunn and Captain Bill Brand left the unit at Morotai and Captain Klein was appointed to fill one of the vacancies. The remainder of the unit



Japanese POW cranking truck.



Japanese Surrender on Ambon.

prepared to move and stores were loaded on to the *Westralia*. Personal clothing of all troops was treated with anti-mite fluid. Headquarters Company and "B" Company embarked on the *Westralia* on the 25th of September together with most of the unit stores and arrived at Ambon on the 27th. The voyage, the first on a troop ship with no blackout restrictions, was a pleasant one. Some stores, including cooking equipment and stationery, were omitted from the loading and caused temporary inconvenience until they arrived on a later shipment.

The whole unit was billeted at the Dutch Hospital. The hospital was very suitable for the establishment of an M.D.S. or a Camp Hospital. There were separate rooms for R.A.P., P.A.C., Pathology, Dispensary and stores as well as ample ward space with separate accommodation for officers. There was an excellent operating theatre and an old dismantled Siemens x-ray unit which Major Cliff Barrett succeeded in restoring to working order.

Our unit was present when the official surrender of the Japanese on the island took place. Brigadier A.Steele accepted the surrender from Lieut. Gen. Tesima, commander of the 5th Japanese Division and Vice Admiral Ichise, commander of the 25th Japanese Naval Base. The Japanese had left the hospital and surrounds in a filthy condition and after becoming prisoners they were set to work to do the cleaning up. After about ten days the area was in a reasonably clean condition. A native electrician soon had the electricity system working and the engineers cleared the blocked sewerage system.

Captain Alec Reith was detailed to go on board the Australian Corvette, H.M.A.S. *Broome* and go with a party of Australian and Dutch officers to accept the surrender of Japanese forces on the Banda and Kai Islands. Alec became friendly with the leader of the Dutch party, a Mr. Scheffer, who had been a prisoner of war in the Celebes. Alec recalls having Christmas dinner with Mr. Scheffer in 1945.

As soon as the hospital was fully operating inspections were made of all unit areas and native dwellings in the immediate surrounds. General hygiene of the army units left a lot to be desired and that of the native dwellings was deplorable. Recommendations were made to rectify this position and soon the standard improved vastly.

Two Dutch hospitals were also operating on the island. N.I.C.A. catering for the civilian population and R.N.I.A. catering for the Dutch armed forces. N.I.C.A. had no facilities for major surgery and a number of operations were done for them with post operative treatment being given by one of the Dutch hospitals. One of the original ambulance wagons belonging to the 2/12th Field Ambulance, captured when the Japanese invaded Ambon in February 1942, and used by the Japanese until their defeat, came into the possession of our unit and was handed to N.I.C.A. for their use.

There was a Japanese naval hospital at Batomerah and this was inspected by our officers and it was confirmed that they had sufficient medical supplies to



Food Queue outside hospital at meal time.

Care, Courage & Camaraderie

last for one year. This hospital was to cater for sick Japanese P.O.W.'s on the island. Many were suffering from amoebic dysentery, malaria, beri beri, worm infestations and venereal disease.

THE AMBONESE

David James remembers the daily parade of local Ambonese children and adults lined up, tallest to the shortest, outside our camp at mealtimes, with their containers, waiting for any left over food. Some came right into the mess hall begging food. It was impossible not to become friendly with these likeable yet needy people. Unfortunately many suffered malnutrition during the final months of the Japanese occupation.

Another recollection he had was of the first concert held in the Opera House when some 200 to 300 people crowded into the small hall to listen to the first performance by local artists since the Japanese defeat. The front portion of the Opera House and foyer were taken over by the Y.M.C.A. and the Army Canteen Service and turned into Club Rooms for use by the occupying force and all troops were invited to make the Club their own.

OUR WORK ON AMBON

On the 15th of December our Commanding Officer, Lieut. Col. E.C.Palmer left for reposting as Registrar of 113 (Concord) Military Hospital, Sydney. Capt.



Fraternizing. Jack Cox, Stan Murphy and Neville Stephens with Ambonese.

Alec Reith was called on to inspect Japanese prisoners in their compound some of whom were allegedly suffering from minor injuries as a result of beatings from their guards. Christmas Day was spent quietly. One of our members, possibly Johnny Osborne, a talented commercial artist, had designed a unit Christmas Card for members to send home to relatives and friends. The front of the card has been used for the cover to this history as it illustrates the work of the unit and the different methods of collecting and evacuating patients.

Our medical officers were called on to examine the exhumed remains of allied prisoners and to give opinions as to possible identification and cause of death. During November seventy Japanese war criminals were examined for infectious disease and identification marks.

Vern Laidlaw had an interesting job on Ambon. He was attached as medical orderly to a Sergeant from the Intelligence Branch who was interviewing local Ambonese for information regarding Japanese atrocities and the fate of and location of graves of missing Australians. He got to visit a lot of local Ambonese households and treated and dressed infected cuts etc. and treated other minor illnesses. Rather like a district nurse in today's context.

From the 20th of September until the 22nd of December there were 341 admissions to hospital. The most common diseases were :-

Skin diseases	60 cases
P.U.O.	40 cases
U.R.T.I.	30 cases
Venereal disease	28 cases
Diarrhoea	25 cases

The work, whilst not being over taxing was sufficient to keep the depleted numbers of our unit busy. We were instructed that the detachment of 15th A.M.C.U. which had been quartered with our unit was to be absorbed into the 10th Field Ambulance and this was accordingly done. Prior to leaving the island the anti malaria control unit trained local native technicians (Mantris) to continue the work of mosquito control. As can be seen from the above figures malaria and dengue were not a problem on Ambon.



Local Ambonese boys with Digger hats.

FINAL DAYS

Under the points system a number of married and long serving members now became eligible for discharge and during November sixty nine N.C.O.'s and Privates marched out to Morotai for movement back to Australia. There was a corresponding reduction in the infantry and other units on the island. A number of promotions were authorized so that the unit was still able to operate an efficient hospital service for the remaining troops.

On the 29th of December an order was received to prepare all members with over 125 points for discharge. There were another fifty five of our men in this category. New Year's Day also passed quietly with those fifty five personnel due for discharge preparing to leave.



Aussies and Ambonese.

On the 5th of January, 1946 the fifty five men for discharge embarked on the *Glengyle*. Capt. Alec Reith who was due to leave was detained pending the court martial of members of the guard platoon who had allegedly mistreated Japanese prisoners. Preparations were now being made for leaving Ambon. The handing over of all medical stores and certain medical equipment to R.N.I.A. was discussed with the D.D.M.S. Morotai Force, Colonel Barton and approved by him.

Captain Reith was allowed to leave on the 9th of January. He particularly remembers one Japanese Naval Officer at the War Crimes Trials who when asked to plead, replied in a firm voice, looking the senior advocate straight in

the eye and in broken English said, "*I am guilty, I gave them a soldier's death, not hung by the neck as the Australians would have done.*"

Arrangements were now made to hand over the hospital to the R.N.I.A. who requested that all equipment be left in situ so that they could commence work immediately. On the 12th of January the *Glengyle* returned and another fifty four personnel left for Australia. Orders were then received that the remainder of the 33rd Brigade, including the 10th Field Ambulance were to leave on the *Winchester Victory* due to leave on the 21st of January, 1946. On the 17th the hospital was handed over to the R.N.I.A. and remaining stores, mainly Red Cross supplies and stationery were packed for return to the mainland. When the *Winchester Victory* left on the 21st of January the local Ambonese population gave the departing Australian troops a marvellous farewell and expressed their gratitude for their help.

ARTHUR BACHELOR'S LETTER HOME, OCT 1945 (Abridged)

" You may be interested to learn more about Ambon and our activities here. It is a strange little corner of the earth. The island is approx. 35 miles by 10 and the town is on a narrow but deep inlet with hills at the back rising to about 1,000 feet. The main part of the town is in ruins, but the residential section, which is quite modern, is intact, though it has a neglected appearance as is usual in Jap occupied places. Our unit is in the old Dutch civil hospital. It is in a fair state of repair and provides luxurious quarters for us compared with the usual army camp. Electric light, showers, fans in the wards and one can walk from end to end along concrete covered ways. It covers 10 acres.

The Australians of the 8th Div greatly endeared themselves to the Ambonese, some of whom risked their lives and received severe punishment for helping them while in captivity. They have a song about a Victorian, Dvr. Doolan whose exploits became legendary with them, (alone he destroyed two truck loads of Japs). His grave always has fresh flowers.

It seems there was a division, generally speaking the Christians declined to co-operate with the Japs whilst the Mohommedans helped and so prospered. We attended a remarkable service last Sunday morning, the first time since the Jap occupation and about 500 were present. Two native pastors spoke, also a Dutch and Australian Chaplain. Though we could follow little of what was said it was most impressive. The women weeped profusely during prayers for the bereaved and there was a general gasp at the mention of 400 Australians dying there. There were two choirs, one sang native hymns in parts, and another of girls gave us 'Abide With Me'.

Care, Courage & Camaraderie

The singing was exquisite and far above average suburban choir.

We have Japs do all our heavy work. At first they work feverishly but that has worn off somewhat, though we still keep them at it from 8 am to 4 pm. It is like having robot men to work. They are inscrutable - there is little fear of fraternising with them. Relations are cold and formal. They salute 100 times a day and passing some along the hospital covered ways may mean a dozen, each of which has to be returned - we are still outnumbered about 10 to 1, and they are not yet fully disarmed. They lift colossal loads alone, but if feeling soft towards them, one needs to read the latest atrocity accounts, although there is evidence of that here in Borneo. The other day some were lifting a huge case of medical bottles.

When the bottom fell out and some were broken they looked around surreptitiously to see if I was looking, no doubt they expected to be kicked at least. One native friend says 'Australians are too gentle with Japs'. It will be harder for them later no doubt. Of course there must be some with finer feelings and we heard of one Q.M. who made a practice of leaving food where our men working would find it. There are some beautiful Jap staff cars about and we have a Buick 8. At first they were driven for us by Japs, saluting passengers in and out, but they have been sacked now for our own drivers.



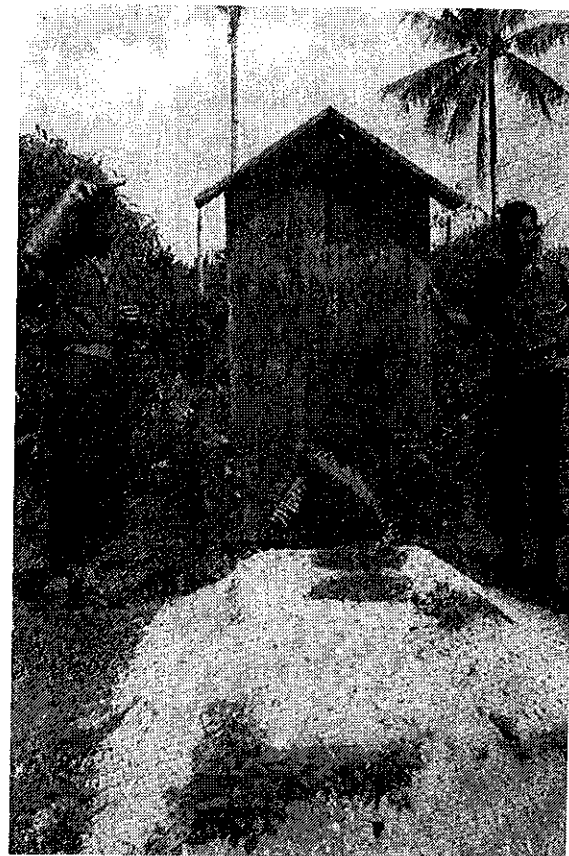
Inscrutable. Japanese POW on Ambon.

A special luxury in our "Q" quarters for three, is a house boy - 'Dete de Qualdue' - evidently he is of Portugese descent. He is extremely intelligent and keeps our room swept and clean, and makes morning and afternoon tea for us all. Another lad with a devastating smile is 'No Hendrick', we call him 'Noah'. He would like to come to Australia with us and I wish we could bring him back for you to fall in love with too. Have also made friends with some fine young chaps of early twenties, (most Ambonese look 10 years younger than their age). One types well, translating English into Malayan. Some can speak several languages - at first we were told they are an inferior race and were to be treated as such. We suspect this was Dutch inspired. This has gone overboard and Australians everywhere have shown great love for the children.

Perhaps the saddest feature is the emaciated appearance of many. All our left over food is brought outside where they queue up for it, from children just able to walk to adults. Some come inside and wait for the scraps from our plates. Most have plenty of money and want to buy food from us. Of course we don't take anything but give them what we can, sometimes in exchange for bananas. They are meat hungry and bully beef to them is a real delicacy ! Most are already showing some improvement though children are still to be seen with arms the thickness of one's thumb.

The women folk have excellent deportment, apparently caused by the habit of carrying all their goods for the market on large round trays on their heads. Their dresses are surprisingly good. Evidently many things were hidden from the Japs; the native orchestra has instruments including an electric guitar - and how they can play !

We have seen the Australian cemetery. It is on a hillside overlooking the sea with the prison camp below - an indescribably sad and depressing sight. We have taken photographs of some of the graves but many of the later ones have no identification, indicating the lowered condition of those surviving at the time.

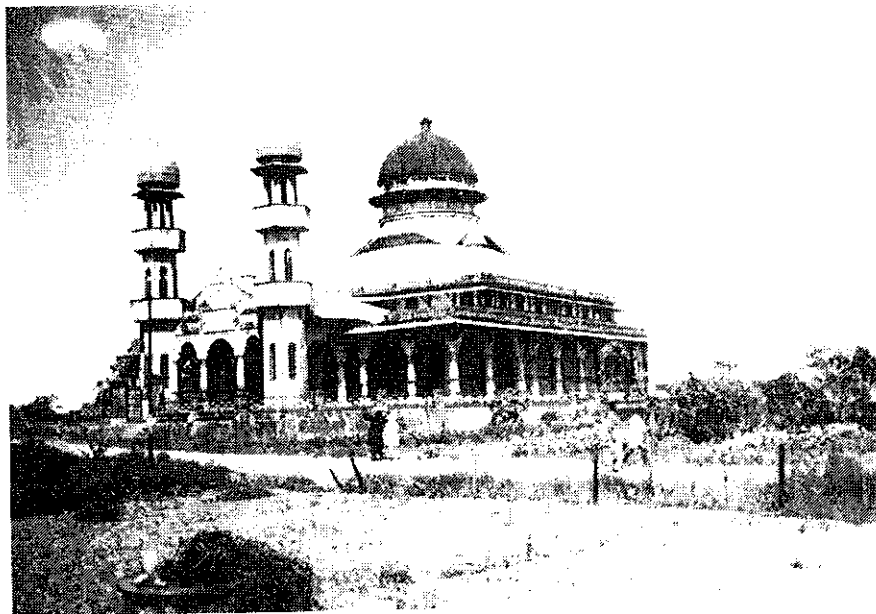


POW Cemetery, Ambon.

This seems to cover briefly some of the main points of interest so I will close with the local words of farewell, ' Salaam Martingle ':

The troops of the occupying force were warned against taking sides with either of the two main religions on the island. It was pointed out that this could only delay and hinder the task allotted the force, especially if either faction decided not to co-operate in assisting the Australians in obtaining information of missing P.O.W.'s or locating graves. This warning was issued in **AMBON NEWS** dated 16th of October, 1945. It read in part :-

There are two main religions in Ambon, Christian and Mohammedan. There has always been some friction between the two, and the Japanese occupation has intensified the feelings. Christians now accuse the Mohammedans of having helped the Japanese and vice versa. Men of both religions have helped Australians and often have suffered for doing so.



Mosque in Ambon.

When our job in Ambon is finished we are going home. One of the main tasks here is to trace the men who fought on Ambon in the black days of 1942. Many are still missing and the Japanese cannot supply records as to their whereabouts. To trace them, we need the assistance and co-operation of

every native of Ambon. Most of the information concerning missing P.O.W.'s and the location of graves comes from local people.

Until recently this invaluable help has been freely and willingly given by both Christians and Mohammedans; the people look on the Australians as liberators. Unfortunately recent reports have come in from Mohammedans indicating they feel that Australians are working against them.

The paper then gives two examples where bias against the Mohammedans had been reported. In one the Australian had been taught to say, 'Tida bagoes' meaning Mohammedan no good.

The article concludes with the following warning :-

To take sides would be disastrous policy. Many of the most willing and valuable helpers are Mohammedans. If their respect is lost and their willingness to assist withdrawn, the period of occupation will have to be extended.

HOMeward BOUND AND FINAL DISCHARGE

The *Winchester Victory* was well fitted out for the transport of troops. It sailed firstly to Morotai arriving there on the 23rd of January, 1946. W.O.1 Len Martin was appointed R.S.M. on board. The 10th Field Ambulance staffed the ship's sick bay and established an R.A.P. At Morotai personnel with insufficient points for discharge were disembarked. A number of Japanese war criminals were also disembarked at Morotai. The ship did not leave Morotai until the 27th of January but all troops were kept on board. On the 27th the ship left for Macassar to pick up the 21st Brigade. The 21st Brigade were not ready so the troops on board were allowed shore leave on Macassar. On the 3rd of

February we left Macassar and sailed for Brisbane via Torres Straits, where a pilot was taken on board and we then proceeded down the Queensland coast inside the reef to Brisbane, arriving there on the 13th of February.

Personnel for reposting or for discharge were sent to Yerongapilly. The unit cadre formed for disbanding the unit, comprising three Officers and nineteen Other Ranks, were sent to Chermside. The unit's stores were unloaded by the 16th of February and returned to their respective depots and acquittance received for all returned stores. The unit's records were handed in and the unit officially disbanded on the 20th February 1946.

AMBON REVISITED

At least three of our members have been back to Ambon since the war. In 1981 Jack "Horra" Cox and his wife Bet on a fly-cruise trip to South East Asia were on the second cruise ship to call at Ambon post war. He writes, *"The town is of course expanded but is pretty 'daggy' as are most of these Indonesian and Philippine set-ups. However up in the hills it was just like old Ambon and the old language is still there. We had one of those bamboo bands with us playing Western and Indonesian music etc. During a lull I took a chance that they looked mostly Ambonese rather than Indonesian and started to sing the old songs in Ambonese. You wouldn't believe the impact this made as it appears no one could recall any old Aussie getting back there before and they nearly fell apart. We and the couple with us really got the treatment and they 'threw away' their music and played the Ambonese songs I remembered - it was really very emotional."*

Jack and his wife then enquired about and found addresses of and visited a number of families whom he and others had known during their service on Ambon in 1945. One visit was to where Annie (used to be Ririmasse but now married) lived. Her father was a Methodist lay preacher killed during the Japanese invasion. Jack describes the meeting thus, *"I walked in and yelled out 'where's Annie' to seven great looking but astonished kids. She eventually walked in and when I mentioned my name she really fell apart. A photographer with us said he'd give a lot to have captured that moment. She grabbed hold of me and when she had recovered enough immediately said ' and that must be Betty' - how's that for 36 years !! You can imagine we found it all wonderfully worthwhile. She remembered the names of quite a few of the boys without prompting - of course she is now in her mid fiftieshard to believe isn't it?"*

Care, Courage & Camaraderie

A copy of **AMBON NEWS** which has survived has printed the following Ambonese song, which translated into English reads :-

THE CLOVE HARVEST

*Boys and girls come out to play
And gather cloves this sunny day.
Harvest cloves that smell of spice
A taste on earth of Paradise !
Pick the flowers and you must stay,
And live our happy island way,
Beat the drum, and come what may,
You will never go away.*

Vern Laidlaw was on business in Indonesia in 1983 when he had the opportunity to take a week end off and visit Ambon. He found the population of the town increased and the town itself rather unkempt and untidy. The central Government in Indonesia had tried to relieve the over crowding in cities like Jakarta by sending Javanese to areas such as Ambon. This also had the effect of increasing the proportion of Moslems to Christians and also decreasing the possibility of the Ambonese entertaining any thoughts of independence.

Vern visited two families with whom he had corresponded over the years, the Bahosan and the Ririmasse families and was greeted enthusiastically. The former were a Moslem family and the latter were Christians but the two families were good friends and lived close to each other. The Ririmasse family in 1946 had five daughters and this no doubt was why fellows like Vern, Kel White, Keith Davey and others were frequent visitors. Vern remembers the names of four of the daughters, Mem, Annie, Nancy and Ma and there was another. Kel was always welcome especially if he could be persuaded to play his recorder.

David James returned to Ambon in April 1996 with a group organized by R.S.L. Travel. This is now an annual event to commemorate Anzac Day. Ceremonies were held in three separate locations over three days. David gives the following report :-

Two days prior to Anzac Day a service was held at Laha. At this site, very soon after surrendering to the Japanese, about 150 Gull Force members were murdered and buried in a mass grave.

Then in the early morning of Anzac Day a service lasting about three quarters of an hour was held at the Commonwealth War Cemetery which has approximately 1,200 graves and which is on the site of the infamous P.O.W. Camp. All

branches of the services were represented and a R.A.A.F. Padre translated the ceremony which was in Indonesian. Heavy rain fell throughout.

This was followed later in the day by a service at the Australian memorial at Kudamati near the site of Bill Doolan's historic stand against the Japanese. We remember that the Ambonese composed a song telling of his bravery. This memorial is near the site of our hospital. Some of the notables who attended were the Australian Ambassador and the Mayor and Mayoress of Darwin, with which a twin city relationship exists. The police convoy provided for V.I.P.'s was especially welcome because of the continuing rain. The ceremonies officially concluded at 2.45 pm but the fraternisation continued for some time.