

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

I have been accorded the privilege of today addressing you at this hallowed Shrine, in a tribute to the memory of our friends and comrades who paid the ultimate sacrifice for the cause of our freedom, and the survival of Australia as a nation.

Today I will tell you of the euphoria of the ending of our almost unbelievable experience of captivity in the hands of the Japanese, and the joy, relief, and poignancy (even sadness, on reflection) evoked by the sudden and totally unexpected ending of hostilities.

In 1941 I was drafted into the 2/21 Bn, the core battalion of the Gull Force; part of the 23rd Brigade, 8th Division of the 2nd AIF. After basic training, the force was transferred to a camp called Winnellie, seven miles out of Darwin, city with two other battalions, for ostensibly the defence of the Northern Territory, in view of the latent possibility of a threat by a truculent Japanese nation

When Japan finally set about the SW-Pacific War, the 23rd Brigade was divided up into three components; The 2/40 Bn "Sparrow Force" was transported to Koepang, Dutch Timor. The 2/22 Bn "Lark force" was sent to Rabaul to protect Papua-New Guinea, and our battalion "Gull Force" was allocated the task of defending Ambon in the Netherlands East Indies.

Thus, with the scattering of the 23rd Brigade over thousands of miles of the SW Pacific, disaster became inevitable! All three battalions; Sparrow, Lark and Gull, fell to the Japanese onslaught by overwhelming air, naval and land forces within a matter of days. The survivors were cast into POW Camps, to experience the horror and degradation inseparable from such a fate, with lack

of medical care, starvation rations and the 'gloating' over the beaten Australian forces by some of our captors.

Gull Force occupied Tan Toey camp on Ambon, and on the day we were captured, we became prisoners of war, confined to the space that had previously been our barracks. Today it stands as the resting place of our fallen comrades in an Imperial War Graves cemetery.

Scarcely a day had passed without multiple deaths in the camp and those who died had to be sewn up in their "Army issue" grey blanket and carried on stretchers to the camp cemetery just outside the barbed wire perimeter of the camp. They were buried in shallow graves, hastily and painfully dug into the coral substrata by survivors, at the end of an already hard day of toil for the Japanese. We knew also that this could be our own fate, within days or weeks or months at most. That anybody did survive was almost a miracle. The monthly death rates in the camp told a sad story; In January 1945 – 3 men died, in February – 10 men died, in March – 15 men, in April – 24, in May – 47, June – 71, July – 93, and to the 6th of August – 29; a total of 292 deaths leaving only 121 survivors.

In point of fact, more men died during July and the first week of August 1945 than were freed from the camp by Australian forces, in 4 RAN Corvettes, on the 10th September 1945.

Added to our concerns was the ever-present fact that we were no longer a viable work-force for the Imperial Japanese Navy, and very probably would have been despatched by command of the Admirals in charge of the defence of the island.

When the end did come, it was clandestinely announced to me by 1st class Petty Officer Dotai Kiyoshi at Tan Toey camp headquarters, where I had gained the trust of some of the Japanese marines, and learned their language. Dotai cited the Imperial Rescript by the (late) Emperor Hirohito ordering all the Japanese Armed Forces to lay down their arms unconditionally and "surrender". For me, this was quite unbelievable, allied to the fact that neither the Japanese Commandant, nor the two Japanese interpreters, Ikeuchi Masakiyo and Aoki, had given any indication that this incredible change in our lives was being enacted.

Next day Dotai gave me a copy of the Imperial Rescript printed out in the Japanese Navy newspaper of the Moluccan area. While I was completely proficient in reading "everyday" Kanji writing, I had difficulty with the archaic style of the Emperor's writing, however, I was able to work out that the Emperor's message was an order by the Mikado to end hostilities forthwith! Michael Maslak, (an American who had studied Japanese with me) confirmed that my translation was correct (also to his utter amazement and delight, as well as doubt)

Then P/O Dotai dampened my hopes by confiding that the Admirals and Generals responsible for the Japanese defence of our region had refused to comply with the Imperial Rescript and intended to "fight on".

Emperor Hirohito despatched his eldest son, Crown Prince Akihito (the current Emperor of Japan), in person, to Ambon in a Kawanishi flying-boat (painted all over-white, with insignia of green crosses) to personally convince his recalcitrant Admirals to comply, or die at the hands of loyal forces of the Emperor.

Fortunately for all concerned they obeyed (but I believe with bad grace) and our survival chances went up another notch! But I never did really feel safe until I stepped ashore from the hospital ship "Wanganella" in Darling Harbour, Sydney, on October 12th 1945, and returned by train to Melbourne on the 13th October 1945.

I will forever be an "ex-POW Japanese", such was the effect on my psyche, but I bear no grudges over the whole experience, one which truly altered my very existence, possibly for the better.

Thank you for listening.

Walter Hicks.
15th February 2012