

## 5. 'I Don't Think I Deserve a Pension – We Didn't Do Much Fighting': Interviewing Australian Prisoners of War of the Japanese, 1942–1945

Tim Bowden

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'Talk about your experience of working with ex-POWs when you and Hank Nelson recorded your series', Joan Beaumont said to me. 'I think our audience would be fascinated to hear your reflections on this process and your thoughts now on how POWs remember their captivity and any other insights you might want to provide'. I will do my best; how good it would have been to have Hank here. His untimely death early last year robbed us of a great historian, and for me a valued mentor and close friend.

It was Hank who rang me early in 1982, just as *Taim Bilong Masta: The Australian Involvement with Papua New Guinea* went to air. I was exhausted. This project had taken two-and-a-half years, involving the recording of more than 300 hours of original oral history testimony. I even had RSI from the manual labour of cutting and splicing the quarter-inch tapes and typing out summaries and scripts on chaffcutter typewriters well before the computer era. Hank agreed to be a historical advisor on the *Taim Bilong Masta* project and also provide on-air editorial commentary in each episode. The deal was that I would produce the radio programs, and he would write a book on the series drawing on his own research. From my point of view it was one of the great partnerships and, indeed, a professionally life-changing experience for me.

One day Hank rang me about another proposal he had in mind. He came straight to the point. 'Listen, Digger; you and I have got to do the Australian prisoners of war of the Japanese in Asia. They have never really talked about their experiences, and they are now in their mid-60s, and nearly 40 years on they probably will'.

I can't quite remember what I said, but effectively it was, 'Yes'. Thanks to a benevolent boss in the Radio Drama and Features Department of the ABC, where

I then worked, I was given the go-ahead for another two-year-plus project that would spawn another 300 hours and more of tape and unlock much unique, moving and powerful testimony. This, you see, was Hank's genius. He was not interested in working on any topic that did not produce new material. And this was certainly the case with the Australian 8th Division experience.

This time, Hank would do some interviewing on his own, but despite my best effort to teach him the tricks of the trade, his first effort with a tape recorder and microphone was not a huge success, particularly with sound quality – an important element for a radio project. I recall (as indeed he often reminded me) saying to him after listening to this first effort, 'Hank, this is truly remarkable. You are the first interviewer ever to have apparently recorded your subject under water'. But he was a forgiving soul, and his radio techniques were soon firing on all cylinders.

It is worth noting that in the early 1980s the experiences of Australian POWs of the Japanese were not widely known. Military historians tend to concentrate on campaigns and battles, and not the experiences of prisoners of war – even though for three-and-a-half years 22,000 Australians were thrown into a battle for survival that would eclipse the hardships and danger of any similar period of active service. I tried to describe our approach in a talk I gave at the Australian War Memorial in February 1984:

*There are compelling reasons for doing an oral history project on Australian prisoners of war of the Japanese at this time. It is more than 40 years since Singapore fell to General Yamashita's 25th Army, and including our men in places like Timor, Ambon, New Guinea, Sumatra and Java, some 22,000 Australians became prisoners of war of the Japanese. Three-and-a-half years later, 14,000 would survive after varying experiences at the hands of the Asian captors – forced labour, starvation and even death marches at one end of the scale, to humane and considerate treatment complete with Red Cross parcels and prison-baked bread at the other. Those Australian servicemen – and women – who survived their prisoner of war experiences are no longer young, and most are in poor health because of the nature of their imprisonment.*

*Few diaries were kept, and those that were hidden at great risk were necessarily brief. Consequently personal recollection of events in remote locations not touched on by official chroniclers of POW history remains a rich field for the oral historian. Further, official reports were compiled predominantly from the testimony of officers. The experiences of NCOs and other ranks must be given greater consideration in any realistic survey of Australians as prisoners of war of the Japanese.*

I'll return to some of those flagged aims in a moment. But what was quite staggering to us at the time was the growing realisation that most of the ex-POWs played down what had happened to them, that their experiences weren't as important as serving soldiers' because they had spent so much time as prisoners of war and therefore were not worth talking much about.

This attitude was well summed up by one of the POW doctors, Ian Duncan, recalling the situation where he was in Japan, where former slave labourers from the Thai–Burma Railway construction had been taken in tramp ships to work in coal and iron ore mines in the freezing temperatures of a Japanese winter. Duncan:

*At the end of the war I interviewed every Australian and English soldier in my camp – I was the only medical officer in the camp. And I thought it was my duty to record their disabilities. And you'd say to them, what diseases did you have as a prisoner of war? Nothing much, Doc, nothing much at all. Did you have malaria? Oh yes, I had malaria. Did you have dysentery? Oh yes, I had dysentery. Did you have beriberi? Yes, I had beriberi. Did you have pellagra? Yes, I had pellagra – but nothing very much. These are lethal diseases. But that was the norm, you see, everyone had them. Therefore they accepted them as normal.*

And again, here is Ian Duncan on his experience of the longer term, when returned POWs who had wanted to shrug off their experiences and return to normal life found to their cost that they were profoundly affected by what had happened to them. We spoke in the early 1980s, more than 40 years after they had become POWs:

*I would say most of them, at least 50 per cent of them, have some form of nervous trouble. A lot of them have stomach trouble, a lot have gastric and duodenal ulcers, a lot still have chronic diarrhoea. But everyone who worked, certainly on the railway and in the mines in Japan, has some form of arthritic degeneration caused by the conditions under which they worked. I've seen X-rays of the spines of some of these men, and they are really shocking – how they get around I don't know. But they do and they make light of it. The men almost invariably come in and say, 'Well, I don't want to seem to be a bludger, but I've got this trouble', or, 'I thought I'd come along and see you. I don't think I deserve any pension; we didn't do much fighting'. And this is their attitude. They actually believe that they are not entitled to a lot of the benefits of ex-servicemen. But they are. They fought a pretty hard war. As POWs.*

Hank and I found it incredible that those who had gone through so much had reservations about being prisoners of war as though they were not proper

soldiers. After our 16-part series went to air, the experiences of Australian POWs in Asia became something of a growth industry, with more personal memoirs being written, documentary films made, and even a television drama series produced by John Doyle for ABC-TV, titled *Changi*. It is difficult to imagine an Australian prime minister celebrating Anzac Day at Hellfire Pass on the Thai–Burma Railway – as John Howard did in 1998 – before *P.O.W.: Australians under Nippon* went to air in 1984. But I am jumping ahead. I should say something about our planning for the series.

The word *Changi* has come to mean all that was extreme and frightful about the prisoner of war experience. But as Hank and I were to find out, for those in the slave labour work camps on the Thai–Burma Railway, in Sandakan and before the death matches, the main POW base, Changi, seemed like heaven to those sent away from it. But there were POW camps in Timor, Java, Sumatra, New Guinea, Ambon, Hainan, Borneo, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Burma, Manchuria and Japan. Australian POWs also turned up briefly in unlikely places like Phnom Penh and Saigon.

Back in 1982 we drew up a list of the topics we hoped to explore in the prisoner of war series:

- Preconceptions of Asia and the Japanese.
- What did the experience teach about being an Australian? In what ways were Australians different from other prisoners?
- The mechanics of personal survival.
- Perceptions of Japanese and Korean guards, and attempts to understand their motivations and attitudes in the interest of survival.
- What did the experience teach men about themselves and about others?
- Had attitudes changed in the years since the war. What did they think now about the Japanese?
- Did prisoners' personalities and patterns of behaviour change under the stress of imprisonment?
- What did horrific experiences do to people?
- What were people's attitude to them when they got home?
- How had the prisoner of war experience affected their lives?

Broadly the interviews we were about to record aimed to cover three basic areas:

1. What happened – the varied experiences?
2. The context in which it happened – as a part of Australian history and our relationship with Asia.
3. The effects on the lives of prisoners of war since.

To prepare for the interviews, Hank and I began to read as widely as we could, beginning with books written by former prisoners of war such as Rohan Rivett's *Behind Bamboo*, Russell Braddon's *The Naked Island*, Betty Jeffery's *White Coolies* and more recent additions to the literature like Stan Arneil's excellent *One Man's War*. More personal research began in October 1981 when several thousand ex-prisoners of war gathered in Sydney for an ex-POW reunion, and Hank and I submerged ourselves in as many of the activities as possible, scribbling down names and addresses – particularly of people from areas of imprisonment where there were few survivors. Useful contacts were made with several men who had survived the awfulness of Outram Road Gaol in Singapore – the Japanese military prison specialising in solitary confinement on six ounces of rice a day. We couldn't do any interviews at the time because useful recording sessions usually take a minimum of three hours, and those at the reunion had a busy program. I did though make a point of interviewing Ross Glover, of Arkansas, a survivor of the USS *Houston*, which went down with HMAS *Perth* in Sunda Strait. He shared POW experiences with Australians in Java and Singapore and on the Burma railway, and he came to Sydney especially for the reunion.

One extremely valuable exercise happened in February 1982 when Hank and I were permitted to accompany a group of 70 ex-prisoners of war and their wives on a three-week tour to Thailand, Malaya and Singapore – culminating in a dinner to mark the 40th anniversary of the fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942. The tour included visits to the Thai–Burma Railway area at Kanchanaburi (generally called Kanburi by the survivors) and areas around some of the old Kwai River camps, formerly Tarsau and Konyu. While there were obvious advantages for me, recording the impressions of men actually standing on the River Kwai bridge or on the neglected, jungle-reclaimed bed of the railway as they hunted for bits of sleeper and steel dog spikes as souvenirs, the real benefits were to come later.

Hank and I flew with the Bamboo Tour veterans to Thailand through Singapore's Changi Airport, which several men said wryly they had helped to build. Many had not travelled overseas since their POW days and quickly cottoned on to the fact that drinks were free on the flight. They arrived in very good form, having drunk the plane dry of beer.

The most instructive thing to me about the ex-POWs was how they reacted to a tragedy before the tour had really begun. Lieutenant John Windsor, formerly of the 2/20th Battalion and a survivor of the Thai–Burma Railway, had a heart attack and died suddenly between immigration and customs in Bangkok airport. At first I thought that the Bamboo Tour might have to be called off, but that showed how little I knew. These men were accustomed to death and the loss of their comrades, and they immediately went into quick and positive action, alerting the Australian Embassy to prepare to have Windsor's body returned to

Australia. In the meantime they comforted Windsor's wife and included her in the daily bus tours to Bangkok temples and the famous canals over the next few days until she left for Australia.

One former POW said to me, quite seriously, 'You know, John always wanted to come back to Thailand'. I nodded, but thought to myself that he might have appreciated at least getting out of the airport before making his exit. I don't want to give the impression that they made light of John Windsor's death – far from it. They just took it on board and cheerfully did what had to be done and got on with the job – as they certainly did when their comrades died building the railway.

In October 1983 Hank wrote a long article for the *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, titled 'Travelling in Memories', which I commend to you. A couple of vignettes:

*On the tour bus a Thai guide said that it must have been the pleasure of their first visit that had persuaded so many of the men to return. A couple of the diggers laughed and said, 'Turn it up!' Most made no response – they were accustomed to greater misunderstandings. At the end of the bus trip the ex-servicemen passed around the hat and gave generously of their baht. As the contents were handed to the two guides the men and their wives burst into For they are jolly good fellows. They sang strongly and spontaneously. The guides could not know that they had heard the last generation of Australians who will so easily sing that community salute.*

Here's Hank again, during the last leg of the journey in Malaysia:

*Having disposed the last of their Thai baht on the airport tax, the members of the tour party flew to Kuala Lumpur. (Pronounced 'Koala Lumpa' by one ex-infantryman, it lost all association with the Orient, or with anywhere east of the Great Dividing Range. It sounded like one of those places on the ABC Country Hour litany of names and river heights. 'Koala Lumpa' is probably out near Waterbag or Beefwood Tank, just out of Wilcannia.) On the way from the airport to the Holiday Inn the Malay Chinese guide lounged at the front of the bus and went through his well-practised patter on the constitutional and demographic facts of Malaysia. Having told us that the nine heads of the Malay state selected one of themselves to be the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, the Supreme Head of the Federation, he made his standard pause and asked, 'Are there any questions to this point?' Before he could continue, Wizza said from down the back of the bus, 'Yeah, how much is a beer?' The guide did not quite hear. Wizza spoke more clearly and loudly. 'What's the price of a beer?' Had anyone else asked the same*

*question they might have been playing for a laugh – Wizza simply wanted information. The guide hesitated, gave a straight answer, and returned to his description of the bicameral legislature.*

And so we began to record the POWs – trying to make sure that we selected some from every camp, from Timor to Manchuria. Even though the death toll had been high, one in three men on certain sections of the Thai–Burma Railway, there was no shortage of people still around to talk about it. Not so Sandakan, in Borneo, where in round figures, 2,000 Australians were sent on the infamous death marches early in 1945, and only six escaped to survive. Four of those six were still alive in the early 1980s, and I interviewed them all, as well as some of the officers whom the Japanese sent to Kuching after the underground network was discovered in July 1943. Only one Australian, John Murphy, was in the Japanese POW camp in Rabaul, and he was an excellent interviewee.

On the theme of how even a little homework yields great benefits, I quickly detected a change of attitude in my interviewees when I asked them, for example, which side of the railway they were on, in Burma or in Thailand, and whether they were in the most challenging work parties in the mountains, A Force on the Burmese side, and H and F Forces in Thailand. 'Oh you know about the different forces, do you', said one former POW, and he immediately began to talk to me as though I was an insider. I continued to be amazed about the frankness of people's testimonies, telling stories for the first time that had often not even been told to their own families.

Both Hank and I were keen to make sure that the surviving army nurses told their stories. They were evacuated from Singapore in the closing stages of the battle there, on a ship, *Vyner Brooke*, which was unfortunately bombed and sunk soon after leaving Singapore Harbour, leaving the surviving passengers and 65 Australian nurses struggling in the water, hanging on to any debris they could find. Separated by the currents, Sister Vivien Bullwinkel was one of 22 Australian nurses who were washed ashore on Radji Beach, Bangka Island, off the coast of Sumatra. There they were discovered by Japanese soldiers, who marched them into the water and opened fire with a machine gun. Although shot twice, Vivien Bullwinkel survived, after playing dead; concealing her wounds, she managed to join up with another group of nurses, who were put into a POW camp. The Japanese never realised that she had survived a massacre, or she certainly would have been killed.

By the end of the war only 24 of the 65 nurses who had boarded the *Vyner Brooke* were still alive. I interviewed five: Betty Jeffery (who wrote a book on her experiences after the war), Sylvia Muir, Mickey Syer, Beryl Woodbridge and Iole Harper. Only then did I approach Vivian Bullwinkel, then Vivian Statham, in Perth. I was well aware that her story had been so astonishing that

it had eclipsed those of the other nurses over the years. Our interview was, in my terms, sensational. Vivian later told me she had given me the fullest account to date of her remarkable survival. I asked her why? She said, 'Well, I heard you had been interviewing the other girls, and I am always conscious that my story seems to get all the publicity. So I decided to give you a good interview'.

I remained amazed how much, and how frankly, the ex-POWs would speak of their experiences in one-, two- or three-hour sessions. However, I had a salutary experience during an interview with Sergeant Jack Sloane in Brisbane. My ABC-issue tape recorder broke down in midstream, and I had to apologise to Jack and ask him if I could come back the following morning. He agreed, but when he opened the front door, he said, 'You bastard! I didn't sleep a wink last night with all this stuff running around in my head that I hadn't thought of for years! But OK, let's get on with it and get it finished'. This worried me, and I sought advice from a clinical psychologist, who told me that it was almost surely beneficial for men to recall these traumatic events. I hope he was right. Certainly what psychological counselling there was at the time, after the war – and that was practically zilch – was to tell the ex-POWs to try to forget what had happened to them and not to talk about it, especially with their families!

An Outram Road Gaol survivor, Chris Neilson, whose bullshit detector was always well honed, reacted characteristically when a psychologist said to him, 'You've got to forget about it completely'. 'I said, "You stupid bastard, if you were there for five bloody minutes, you'd never forget it all your bloody life"'. I was certainly made aware that trawling through those traumatic experiences was an emotional overload for some. I would often have to stop and turn off the tape recorder and wait for interviewees to get control of themselves again. I'll never forget the first time this happened. I was in Perth, interviewing Arthur 'Blood' Bancroft, who was an able seaman on HMAS *Perth* when it was sunk in Sunda Strait with USS *Houston*. He began his life as a POW stark naked and covered in fuel oil on a West Java beach. He joined Weary Dunlop's Java Rabble – a label given to them by Colonel 'Black Jack' Galleghan when they passed through Changi (the major POW base camp in Southeast Asia), which they wore with pride.

After spending a year building the Thai–Burma Railway, Bancroft returned to Changi only to be put on one of the tramp ships in company with thousands of other Australians, to be sent to Japan in early 1944 to work in coal mines there. Arthur never made it. His ship was sunk by an American submarine, unaware that there were Allied POWs on board. He spent six days and six nights in the water, clinging to flotsam before being picked up by an American submarine – narrowly escaping being machine-gunned in the water when they were first thought to be Japanese.

I had reached this point in the narrative, as Arthur described being helped onto the deck of the submarine. Being a sailor himself, despite his debilitated state, he observed protocol, stood to attention as straight as he could and saluted the bridge. I said, as I looked down to check that my recorder spools were still turning, 'That must have been quite a moment'. To my utter surprise, Arthur suddenly broke into explosive sobbing. Naturally I switched off until he felt ready to go on.

This reminds me of another painful experience of my own, during the last time I spoke on these matters in this building in 1984. As part of my presentation, I played a confronting segment of tape that clearly had an impact. At morning tea I was hugely savaged by people who came up to me to say how appalling it was of me to expose the emotions of this man in that way – it was the kind of sensationalist behaviour they expected of journalists, and how dare I exploit these people in such a shocking way! I said, 'Hold on, this *hasn't* gone to air, and it won't'. But I don't think my critics believed me. In fact how I did handle this situation – because it was obvious *something* had happened – was to select a deep anguished breath just after his breakdown, to bridge the moment and rightly suggest emotional stress, and then Arthur carried on with his narrative. There is no way I was going to play it again this time, although I don't have the original tapes anymore. Happily they are now safe in the AWM collection.

One of the known facts about the Australians who worked on the Thai–Burma Railway was that they survived better than any other nationality – measured against the Dutch, the British and of course the poor unfortunate Asian labourers who had no organisation at all and died in their hundreds, some say thousands, buried in unmarked mass graves. Although the Australian officers had privileges that the ORs (other ranks) didn't have – and importantly for their own survival did not have to do the harsh, backbreaking work that killed so many men – their relations with their men were better than those of the British, whose class system insulated officers from their troops. Also many of the British soldiers had been recruited from the slums of London or provincial cities like Liverpool and Glasgow and given rudimentary training before being rushed to Malaya just before the Japanese invasion began. They were not in good physical shape when they arrived, and with the comparative lack of organisation the onset of tropical diseases and also the vitamin deficiency diseases like beriberi and pellagra – as well as the universal dysentery – put them at a disadvantage compared with the Australians who were mostly country boys, super fit when they arrived, and handy. They had bush skills and a great ability to scrounge or steal what could be had under the circumstances.

Lloyd Cahill, one of the doctors on the railway – who by the way only died a few months ago at 98 years of age – summed it up well, I thought, in this excerpt from my interview with him back in the early 1980s:

*I always remember one fellow, 'Ringer' Edwards, who appeared in A Town Like Alice. Now 'The Ringer' was on my crowd that went up on the railway. He was one of the most amazing men I've ever met. We'd be marching up at night, and fellows would be falling over and breaking their arms in the pouring monsoon. We'd stop, and 'The Ringer' would have a little fire going within about five minutes, and how he did it in the wet jungle I don't know. But he was a tower of strength there. If you got a bunch of fellows like that around you, it doesn't matter what conditions you are living in, in the bush – you'll be okay. The poor Brits had a tough time; they did it the hard way. They had no idea how to set up a kitchen or set up latrines. Even when they were cremating people, they had no idea what to do. If you were lucky enough to be with a good bunch of Australians, you could see most of it through.*

Kevin Fagan, another legendary doctor on the line, put it this way:

*I felt that the Australian other ranks had a greater sense of group loyalty than the British. There was this terrible class thing in the British mind. It's horrible. I've seen British officers at the end of a long day's march, as soon as they arrived at the camp, just flop down on the ground. Someone would say, 'What about the men?' 'Oh so-and-so the men. I can't do any more'. Whereas a fellow like Reggie Newton would be scrounging around trying to buy a few eggs for the sick, trying to organise the men to be together, finding out where everyone was and whether anyone needed a doctor – and all this before he even thought of eating or sitting down.*

Still on this point of the survival skills of Australians, I'd also like to quote from the interview that Hank did with ex-POW Hughie Clark:

*If one of our blokes was crook, someone always took him food. I was taking an egg down to a mate in hospital when this raspy-voiced Englishman said, 'There's no doubt about it. You always stick together'.*

*Australians didn't die alone. I saw plenty of Englishmen and Dutchmen dying on their own – but not Australians.*

*I can explain it by comparing the way people behave in a city with those in a country town. In a country town the people might not like each other, but they know one another, and when something goes wrong, they rally around. In a suburb people don't know other people and don't feel responsible. Our army was like a country town – other soldiers might well have been in the city.*

For as yet unexplained reasons, the white Dutch were not popular with the Australians on the railway. I asked Ray Parkin, a survivor from HMAS *Perth*, why this was so. Even this talented wordsmith found it difficult to explain. 'I

don't know', he said. 'It's just that they *knew* everything', and wanted to talk about it whether the listener wanted to hear or not. Lloyd Cahill told me that when they all got back to Changi after the railway was finished at the end of 1943, he saw a large hand-printed sign in the Dutch camp: 'We are your loyal allies, and not those fucking Dutch'. I never did track down what all that was about. Certainly Australian relations with the British and the few Americans on the line were much more cordial. Whether the almost universal Australian distaste for the Dutch helped survival, I can't say.

I mentioned that the relations between Australian officers and their troops were better than in the British army, and this was generally so. But in the Asian prisoner of war situation, the Australian officers found themselves – as did the British officers – in a privileged position. They were accorded status by the Japanese and paid a little more, but importantly they did not have to do the hard, back-breaking work that killed so many Australian and British troops on the railway.

In battle, officers die in numbers out of proportion to their men. But in the Asian POW situation, being an officer was like being issued with a ticket to go home. Hank, with his usual thoroughness, researched this assertion:

*The statistics confirm the claim by the other ranks that as prisoners they did the dying. The 2/29th Battalion lost 12 officers and 58 other ranks killed in action. Even when it is taken into account that many other ranks were classified as missing believed killed, the officers died in battle out of proportion to their numbers. But as prisoners, two officers and 381 other ranks died. In H Force, the death rate for British and Australian officers was 6 per cent – for the men, it was over thirty per cent. Among the Australians in F Force, three officers died in comparison with 1065 other ranks. On the Perth 18 officers were killed in action or were drowned, but none died as prisoners of war – 331 ratings were killed or drowned and 104 died while prisoners. The battle conditions which made junior officers vulnerable were reversed when the Allies surrendered.*

Not all the Australian officers behaved well, although most did. The doctors are remembered as heroes by the ex-POWs. Major 'Roaring Reggie' Newton of the 2/19th Battalion was outstanding in his unceasing abilities to stand up to the Japanese to get a better deal for his men and was often beaten and humiliated for his efforts but just kept going – continuing his pastoral care of the men of his beloved 2/19th even after the war was over until the day he died.

Some officers began their imprisonment by interceding on behalf of their men but could not take the bashing and stress and decided that they wanted to get home; these tended to take a back seat to avoid the unceasing confrontation.

A few were legendary for the wrong reasons and could never attend any unit reunion after the war because of their shameful conduct. Lieutenant Colonel Gus Kappe came back to Changi from the Thai–Burma railway fat, in marked contrast to his skeletal men. As well as feathering his own nest with extra food from his officer's allowance – some officers pooled their extra pay and did share with their men – Kappe even turned over his own men to the Japanese for punishment.

George Aspinall, who did not name Kappe to me at the time, told me of his experience with him on F Force:

*There was one particular officer who was renowned for laying back all day doing nothing, issuing orders and making life very hard for the rest of the men that were working. To some extent he was cooperating with the Japanese to their detriment. The men detested this particular person. Even today they don't talk about such things publicly; they prefer to let bygones be bygones. But when a group is talking privately, some of these names come, and there's a real hate session. It did anger people. But we were supposed to be soldiers; we were supposed to take orders from our superior officers. We perhaps tried to live up to a code, something set by our forefathers in World War I.*

Don Moore speaks of another case:

*There was one officer known as the White Jap. He was entirely dedicated to his own self-preservation. He was affluent by POW standards. He had money that he could lend where he would be paid back three times the price in English currency when he came back.*

*This money had come from the proceeds of a canteen which he ran at a camp of which he was the commander. In this case it was private enterprise purely and simply for himself. This fellow I speak of has never been back to any reunion that I know of.*

To add insult to injury as far as his hard-done-by soldiers in F Force were concerned, Colonel Kappe was awarded an Order of the British Empire (OBE) for his war service.

It was all very well, Hank and I recording all these extraordinary stories, but were they all true? This is a question that all historians must constantly ask, and those collecting oral testimonies must be similarly on guard. I once facetiously named that formidable raconteur and author Samuel Langhorne Clemens, better known as Mark Twain, as the patron saint of oral history. Twain once said words to this effect: 'The further I go back, the better I remember things – whether they happened or not'.

Most practitioners of the noble art of oral history are aware of the cautionary tale of a wonderful little old lady in Melbourne who gave fascinating anecdotes and detail of life in the suburb of Collingwood in the 1930s – when someone realised she was running about one episode behind the ABC's period drama *Power without Glory*. This is where Hank Nelson performed a sterling role in keeping me, the journalist, as honest as could be with the *Australians under Nippon* radio series.

Sometimes when more than one person was interviewed about the same incident, an event could be verified by more than one source with crosscutting between the speakers. Coverage of the ship nicknamed the *Byoki Maru* (sick ship) from Singapore to Japan is an example. A description of the AIF (Australian Imperial Force) men enlarging a leak below the ship's waterline so they could take a shower is counterpointed with wonderment by former sailors from the HMAS *Perth*, who also recalled the same incident.

Here's a more tricky problem, resolved by paperwork at the AWM. Hank Nelson:

*We often found that our informants made factual errors in dates and numbers – but we came to have increasing confidence in their personal narratives and judgements. At one stage Tim Bowden interviewed Chris Neilson, a survivor of Outram Road Gaol, the place of secondary punishment and also the prison in Singapore for those who had offended against the Japanese. Neilson said that he had attempted to escape from a work camp on Singapore island. But when one of the party of five became intensely ill they brought him back to camp, and intended to try again the next night. As they rested during the day they were suddenly awakened with a boot in the ribs – the Japanese arrested them for attempting to escape. Neilson said that the senior Australian officer in the camp, Lieutenant-Colonel RF Oakes, had informed the Japanese, presumably because he thought that the escape would bring reprisals on him and the remaining prisoners. This was in spite of the fact that it was the duty of all captured soldiers to attempt to escape. At this stage I told Tim that we could not publish the Neilson story without confirmation.*

*Now one of the great advantages of working with the memories of prisoners of war is that prisoners were rarely involved in significant events when alone. There were nearly always witnesses, and through the ex-unit associations those witnesses can be found. Neilson named a junior officer who was present and who kept a brief diary. He had notes about Neilson's arrest, but could not confirm that the senior Australian officer had informed the Japanese. I then started going through the statements made by the prisoners at the end of the war. Without great difficulty I found the sworn statement of another escapee, Driver Reg Morris.*

He had details of the escape attempt, gave all the names of those involved and the dates, and said that on the escapees' return with their sick mate, Oakes 'saw fit to hand us over to the Japanese'. We let Neilson's words go to air.

Sometimes the discrepancies between the oral and written record could be checked back with the interviewee. This happened in the case of Lieutenant Rod Wells, who had been arrested in connection with the secret underground movement at the Sandakan camp in Borneo in 1943. Wells, among other things, had helped in the construction of a clandestine radio. One detail concerned a permanent injury to Wells's left ear during a *Kempeitai* (Military Police Corps) torture session. In my interview, Wells said he was made permanently deaf when his torturer hammered a wooden skewer into his left ear and perforated his eardrum. In his 1945 deposition, read by Hank Nelson, he attributed his deafness to being hit over the ear with a billet of wood. When queried on this on Hank's behalf, Wells said that when he made the original deposition, he believed that the blow with the billet of wood had caused his deafness. But some years later his doctor told him it was definitely the skewer that had done the permanent damage. There was in fact no inconsistency. Wells had what he thought was better information by the time I interviewed him. But enough of keeping journalists honest.

Radio cassettes had just started to be produced and sold by the ABC, and several thousand sets of tapes were snapped up by our listeners, extending and continuing the reach of *P.O.W.: Australians under Nippon*. In order to highlight some of the individual stories not able to be pursued in the 16-part series, I produced a further ten half-hour programs titled *Survival*, featuring the experiences of eight prisoners of war, including Chris Neilson and the remarkable Vivian Bullwinkel. Hank published a book on the series with the same title, a chapter for each program. I also wrote a book (my first), *Changi Photographer – George Aspinall's Record of Captivity*, based on extended interviews with George, and which published many of his photographs for the first time.

So Hank Nelson's phone call in 1982 triggered an immersion exercise in prisoner of war experiences that has been a considerable part of my professional life. Working with Hank for all those years was simply wonderful, and I cannot believe that he is no longer here. The urge to ring him about something still occurs daily. But he neglected to leave his telephone number – how very inconsiderate of him.

This text taken from *The Boy from Boort: Remembering Hank Nelson*, Edited by Bill Gammage, Brij V. Lal, Gavan Daws, published 2014 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.