

## *'In the Fight'* Conference **POW in the RANGOON JAIL**

**11.1** Private Victor Hudson is pictured with his family after his return to Australia in June 1945. (Australian War Memorial 110131)

1 Many thousands of Australians were held as POW in South-East Asia and specifically in Burma working on the Thai-Burma railway. But often overlooked in these stories are those of 3 AIF soldiers and 13 RAAF members who were held in Rangoon Jail in Burma between 1942 and 1945. AIF Sergeant Douglas P. Eastgate and Privates Kenneth R. Bryson and Victor P. Hudson became Japanese prisoners in unfortunate circumstances. Douglas Eastgate was a member of the AIF's 2nd/10th Ordinance Field Workshops in Singapore and was evacuated by a Royal Navy ship after Singapore fell. The ship was sunk by enemy action during the voyage, however the wounded Eastgate was taken by a rescue launch to a hospital in Sumatra for treatment. Upon recovering, he joined a party of ten others who bought a local sampan in which they escaped from Padang in Sumatra on 17 March 1942, intending to sail for India. However, after 68 days at sea, a storm blew the craft onto Moulmein beach on the south coast of Burma and the survivors, including Eastgate, were captured and taken to Rangoon Jail.<sup>1</sup> Victor Hudson, **(pictured)** of 22nd Brigade Headquarters, 8th Division AIF escaped from Singapore on a Chinese junk headed for Sumatra one hour before the capitulation. His escape party missed the organised evacuation of escapees from the south coast of Sumatra, so with others they bought a boat and set sail for India. As in the case of Eastgate before him, his craft was also blown off course by a storm and landed in Burma, where they were all captured.<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Bryson was a member of the Military Mission 204 (Tulip Force), which comprised about three hundred British and 40 Australian troops. They had arrived in northern Burma in August 1941 to train as Commandos at the Bush Warfare School at Maymyo. After initial training, the selected men travelled along the Burma Road into China in January 1942, to help advise and train Chinese soldiers to fight as guerillas against the Japanese.<sup>3</sup> Three Australians, however, had been left behind in Maymo due to illness and subsequently two of these soldiers were killed in action against the Japanese in Burma. Bryson was eventually captured in April 1942 and, to hide his real reason for being in Burma, he told his captors that he had escaped from Malaya. It would not be long before more Australians from the RAAF were soon to join them in Rangoon Jail.

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**11.2** John Reid doing a ‘stall turn cum wingover,’ gaining height until almost stalled and then turning to make for the sea to get low, etc, etc. (Imperial War Museum CF52)

Five main causes led to the capture of the 12 RAAF men. **Aircraft mechanical failure or misadventure** resulted in five RAAF POWs. The first Australian airman to be captured in the Burma theatre was Warrant Officer James B. Coppin (wireless operator/air gunner), of 60 Squadron on 23 June 1942, whose Blenheim was low level bombing over the coastal town of Akyab in western Burma. The second bomb they dropped exploded prematurely, the plane was hit by the resultant shrapnel, caught fire, and crashed onto the aerodrome, killing two of the crew. The injured Coppin was pulled from the wreckage and immediately beaten and interrogated by the Japanese. Four RAAF aircrew POW resulted from **enemy action** either from anti-aircraft ground fire or aerial combat. Flight Sergeant John P. F. Reid (pilot), and Sergeant Peter K. Wilson (observer) were crew members of a Blenheim bomber of 113 Squadron which was hit by flak and fighter fire during a low-level raid on shipping at the coastal town of Akyab in the Arakan region of Burma on 9 September 1942. **(pictured)** Reid’s aircraft was one of the last to attack and received ‘some strong ack-ack fire.’ Mortally damaged, it ditched close to the shore with all crew safe, but they were soon captured.<sup>4</sup> Also shot down and captured on the same raid was 62 Squadron Hudson RAAF bomber pilot, Flying Officer Kenneth M. White. An unfortunate **mid-air collision** on 5 April 1943 ended in the capture of two RAAF pilots of Blenheim bombers of 11 Squadron. Warrant Officer Harvey Besley and Squadron Leader William D. Matheson both pilots, parachuted to safety; the remaining crew were killed. <sup>5</sup> In a twist of cruel fate, Beaufighter pilot, Flying Officer Ernest W. M. Trigwell, a pilot of 27 Squadron, was downed on 16 November 1944 by **‘friendly fire’** when he and his accompanying Beaufighter were shot down in error by two United States P-38 Lightning fighters that had mistaken them for Japanese aircraft. Inevitably, in the stressful combat environment of high-speed operational flying, **pilot error** could sometimes be catastrophic. On 19 December 1944, Wing Commander Lionel V. ‘Bill’ Hudson, in command of 82 Squadron, flew too low to the Irrawaddy River, hit the water, and was forced to crash-land his severely damaged, but newly arrived Mosquito aircraft. Wing Commander Bill Hudson became the last RAAF member to be captured in the Burma Campaign.<sup>6</sup>

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**11.4.** Former Rangoon Jail POWs, (left to right) RAAF Warrant Officers James **Coppin**, Malcolm Woods, and John **Reid** on the deck of a hospital ship after their release and arrival in Calcutta. Woods is holding a golf club used by the Japanese prison guards to deliver punishment to them in solitary confinement. (Australian War Memorial PO4552.001)

The Thai-Burma railway has come to symbolise the Australian POW experience. Historian Paul Ham wrote about the way in which the Japanese Army maintained complete power over its own soldiers: 'They (the Japanese soldiers) were slapped or beaten routinely for any lapse in discipline – an extension of the ferocious corporal punishment that applied in Japanese boys' schools of the day and which treated grown men like animals who must be taught a lesson.'<sup>7</sup> As the Allied prisoners in Rangoon Jail discovered, their treatment at the hands of their captors reflected these aspects of Japanese culture. The Japanese did not publish the names of the POW or allow letters to be received or written. Many families in Australia did not know for years if their RAAF loved one designated as 'Missing' was alive or not. Regardless of wounds and injuries, almost immediately after capture, the cruel punishments and interrogations of the POW began and name, rank and serial number were not enough to satisfy their Japanese captors. Solitary confinement and food deprivation in Rangoon Jail was used to further humiliate the British, Indian, US and other allied POW. So strict were the solitary confinement conditions that RAAF aircrew didn't know that other Australians were also being held there. No bedding was provided, no extra clothing was issued, and food was scant and undernourishing. The usual ration that prisoners would receive in two of their daily meals was just rice and a third meal which consisted of egg fruit, marrow, and a little grain, which was also used to feed mules and was barely palatable. Continual beatings by guards took place and at times the prisoners were made to beat each other and severely punished if they 'underperformed.' All the Allied officers and NCOs were given a screed from which they had to familiarise themselves with the different phrases and orders for Japanese drill. The prisoners also soon learned not to miss bowing to the sentries and guards, because the penalty for omission was to be taken out and given a thorough hiding. The war was ever present and on the night of 28/29 November 1942, RAAF Sergeant Ken White was killed during an Allied bombing raid of Rangoon. In mid-1944 the Japanese treatment of captured aircrew became harsher as the Japanese tried to compensate for the 'loss of face' at the inadequacy of their own air forces.

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**11.3.** Aerial view in late April 1945 of Rangoon Jail with sign painted on the roof to alert Allied aircrew that the Japanese had evacuated Rangoon. (Australian War Memorial SUK14339)

4 Eventually in 1945, as the British 14<sup>th</sup> Army forces steadily made their way towards Rangoon, on 25 April, the Japanese asked for the names of all those in the compound who could walk as they were planning to march them north and away from Rangoon. Five RAAF POWs and two AIF soldiers with a total of four hundred other 'fit' Allied POW, walked out of the jail that same afternoon. The remaining RAAF POW and one soldier stayed behind as they were considered too unfit to leave. This meant that the RAAF's Wing Commander Bill Hudson was now the senior officer in the jail. On the night of 29 April, the Japanese guards sneaked off without warning, leaving a note to say that all prisoners were free to go as they pleased and telling Hudson where they had placed the keys to the jail. By exceptional circumstances, Bill Hudson now became the most senior Allied officer in the Rangoon jail and by default, the entire city itself. In the days that followed until the British arrived, Hudson immediately ordered that the prison be locked up to secure the safety of the prisoners. He mustered his senior officers and organised for urgent medical aid and provisions be supplied to the sick and gravely ill prisoners. He arranged for large signs to be painted on the roof of the Jail saying, 'JAPS GONE' and 'BRITISH HERE' to advise RAF and USAAF aircrew of their presence and the changed situation. An RAF Beaufighter bombed much too close to the jail, so Hudson had the two words, 'EXTRACT DIGIT' painted on the roof. As the 'King of Rangoon' Hudson bluffed his way into securing the co-operation of the Indian National Army and the Burma Defence Army and incredibly, even arranged for the POW to get arms and ammunition 'for self-protection.' Amid the chaos, two RAF officers suddenly appeared at the jail who in turn negotiated a halt with the Royal Navy who were about to bombard Rangoon. The jail and the city of Rangoon was liberated on 5 May 1945 and the prisoners taken by ship to Calcutta and Bombay, prior to being repatriated to Australia. Others remained in hospital in India for urgently needed treatment. Those men that had embarked on the march under the direction of the Japanese, had eventually escaped from the main party and were reunited with Allied forces, where they also received much needed medical treatment. In time, all former Rangoon Jail inmates returned to Australia and after years without news, their families at last received the joyful message, 'Missing, now Recovered as POW.'

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- <sup>1</sup> NAA B883, VX65572.
  - <sup>2</sup> Moremon, J. and Reid, R., *A Bitter Fate – Australians in Malaya and Singapore*, DVA 2002, p137 and NAA B883, NX20516. Hudson was the first member of the 8th Division AIF to be freed by the 14th Army.
  - <sup>3</sup> The Australian contingent of about 50 men were recruited from the AIF in Malaya – they were known as 'Tulip Force'. Military Mission 204 was eventually withdrawn from China to India in late 1942 – the Australian contingent returned to Australia.
  - <sup>4</sup> NAA A705, 163/156/175. P.K. Wilson was an Australian serving in the RAF (no relation to J.J. Wilson). The third crew member was RAF.
  - <sup>5</sup> TNA AIR 27/157/44.
  - <sup>6</sup> TNA AIR 27683/11. Hudson was the first Australian Empire Air Training Scheme (EATS) graduate to command a Mosquito squadron in South-East Asia. It was the first day of flying for the squadron with four new Mosquitoes after an absence of six months.
  - <sup>7</sup> Ham, P., *Sandakan – The Untold stories of the Sandakan Death Marches*, Heinemann, 2012, p79.