

RISKED LIVES TO HELP SICK MATES

Cobber Spirit of Australian P O W's

By **ROHAN D. RIVETT**, formerly of **THE ARGUS**, who was sole British war correspondent among the prisoners in Burma and Siam, and who has returned after three and a half years in Japanese hands.

THE Japanese could never understand the way their prisoners kept their pride whatever was done to humiliate them. They believed we should be ashamed to be prisoners, ignoring the fact that most of the men in these camps had had capitulation enforced on them by the Allied commanders in both Singapore and Java for the sake of the civilian population, which was facing massacre.

The truth was that from first to last the Australians never really succeeded in concealing their contempt for their captors. It was not overt, but it was there.

The Japanese thought that by ceremonies and parades they could induce respect and humility among their prisoners. The effect was exactly reversed. On April 29, 1942, the Emperor's birthday, the entire 4,000 prisoners were turned out on to the road and at 11am had to face towards Tokyo and "send salutations and respectful greetings to His Imperial Majesty." We stood at attention all right, and most of us spent the two minutes thinking of home. Those of us who thought of Hirohito, as far as I could check up, all sent the identical message—just four words—"— the — Emperor" and that was that.

LOOKING through sections of my diary which I managed to bring home, I see entries which offer a sidelight on the way we lived and helped each other along the line.

These are from the last half of 1943—the grimmest period of all in the Burma jungle.

the Burma jungle.

July 20: The worst bunch I have yet seen came in today from the jungle where they have been working with the mobile force. Many of them are boys from *HMAS Perth* and members of the 22nd Pioneers whom I haven't seen since we were together in Moulmein gaol after the hell-ship journey. Eight months in the jungle has changed some of them beyond recognition. J— and L— are cadaverous wrecks, their legs rotted with ulcers. Some of the lads have faces so swollen with beriberi that their features are like some cartoonist's nightmare. Thank God some eggs came in yesterday for the first time, and we managed to get up to a dozen each to distribute among the worst cases. F— (chief MO at this hospital camp) expects 20 of them to be dead in the next few days, but this is probably a most optimistic estimate. The boys have been literally starved for weeks on end, working all day and sometimes right through the night in almost continuous rainstorms under one of the worst gangs of guards we've yet struck.

July 29: Had a long yarn with B— (Military Medallist from Syria) today. He must know now that his lungs are rotten and that he hasn't one chance in a hundred of getting home alive. But his spirit is magnificent. He's quite sure that Montgomery will be in Rome any time in the next month. About six of us are keeping B— financed from our own pitiful cash, and I think he's probably living as well as any prisoner along the line—which means he's getting about 10% of the proteins and vitamins they'd be giving him at home.

September 30 (105 Kilo Camp, deep in jungle near Burma-Thai border): Was talking to Johnnie . . . when his cobber Bert came in with four eggs for him. Johnnie didn't want to take them, but finally gave in when Bert said he had four more for himself. Later, walking round the lines I struck Bert eating his rice. No sign of eggs. When questioned he said, "No, I only got two bucks pay for last month because I was down with fever most of the time. The b— boong (native) would only give me four for that." I said, "When did you last have an egg yourself?" Bert: "Oh, a couple of months ago that day we all got two." I went

Bert: "Oh, a couple of months ago—that day we all got two." I wonder if anybody home could ever appreciate what it costs a man who's craving for food of any kind to give his all as Bert did tonight.

Of course there were men with money who were selfish and looked after themselves only, but when you remember that every man was engaged in a life-and-death struggle for self-preservation the amazing thing was that so many fellows looked after their cobbles before they thought of themselves. I myself know dozens of officers and men who regularly gave away more than half their monthly pay—a trivial sum at the best of times—to sick friends and men of their own unit without a cent.

THE "traders" who went out "over the wire" at night to sell clothing and other gear to the natives for money to buy food usually took their lives in their hands, for in most camps the penalty for being caught beyond the fence was death. Prices on the black market outside were high, and it was no unusual thing for a trader to get a thousand dollars or more for the clothes he carried out. The trouble was, of course, that starving men will sell their only shirt and even their only shorts to get food, so when the cold nights came with the monsoon hundreds of the boys had nothing to keep them warm and had to sit up all night around any scrap of fire that they could get together.

But many of the "traders" gave away more than half the money for which they risked their lives to boys who were dying from dysentery or malnutrition. When the money was gone the only thing to do was to take the same gamble again. Considering the many "traders" operating in most camps and the hundreds of forays they made it was a tribute to Australian bushmanship and ingenuity that so very few were ever caught.