Name: John Roy Thorpe
Army Number: WX10477, Sergeant
Date of Birth: 9th November 1921
Place of Birth: Claremont, Western Australia

My name is Jack Thorpe and I am a linear descendant of original settlers of the Swan River Valley, who arrived on the sailing ship 'Eliza' on 5th March 1830.

I had very little education. My parents separated when I was very young and I attended seven different schools: Jarrahdale, Armadale, Rockingham, Mt Hawthorn, Leederville, North Perth, and Christian Brothers College in Perth. In those days you often went back a class when you attended a new school, so even though all four of us children were able to demonstrate as adults that we had quite good intelligence, for some years we had difficulty progressing through school.

After leaving school I joined Metro Buses as an apprentice Diesel Engineer, but left soon after I turned eighteen to enlist in the Army on 20th December 1940. I had to forge my Dad's signature because in those days eighteen was still under age.

I was eager to enlist because Australia was at war and I thought it was the only right thing to do. I did my basic training at Northam Camp in Western Australia. Then I went to Puckapunyal in Victoria to do specialised training on tanks and Bren gun carriers.

I was impatient to get overseas and be doing something for the war effort so I volunteered to go wherever the Army wanted to send me. My number finally came up in September 1941. I ended up being away for just over four years, as I didn't get back until October 1945. During that time I served in Palestine, Egypt and Java, before becoming a Prisoner of War and a slave of the Japanese in Burma, French Indo-China, Thailand, Singapore and Japan.

On my return I went to Metro to discuss my return to work. Before my enlistment, the Bus Company, the unions and the government had all made statements guaranteeing that enlisted men would be able to return to their old jobs once the war was over. However once the war *was* over – thanks to the contributions of those enlisted men – they didn't see a need to keep their promises and the unions went back on their word.

I hadn't yet been discharged from the Army. I had a bad back from working in the coalmines near Nagasaki but the Army would not give me a pension, so I volunteered to return to Japan in the Occupation Force. I spent 20 months there, on the outskirts of Hiroshima. This took my total time overseas to almost six years.

The memories of many of my war experiences are still fresh after all these years but it is probably my time as a Prisoner of War that is of most interest to others. We never knew where the Army was sending us and after leaving the Middle East on the 'Orcades', which was just one of many ships in our convoy, we appeared to be nearing Fremantle. Then the 'Orcades' turned around and left the rest of the convoy and began heading north to north-west. After a couple of days we anchored at a place called Oosthaven in Sumatra.

We had no firearms as they had all been on another ship in the convoy, but we were told we had to land there and make our way inland.

As it happened, our Commanding Officer, Brigadier Blackburn, detected that some men wearing British Naval uniforms on shore were actually Japanese. We heard the ship's engine's start up and away we went. (Just another blood bath avoided!) Our next port of call was Batavia (Jakarta), Java, where we pulled alongside the wharf and disembarked. By this time Batavia was under constant bombing and we had to load as many women and children as we could get onto the 'Orcades'. This was a hell of a job as everyone, women and children, was crying. After a couple of days the ship was full and away she went. I presume the 'Orcades' made it to safety with her refugees as she returned to her life as a cruise ship after the war.

We spent several days unloading war materials from other ships in the harbour. One of my jobs was to then remove the Bren gun carriers from the wharf to a rubber plantation not far away. I nearly got caught twice while the Japs were strafing but I managed to get out and hide behind the carrier. The Dutch had no aircraft there and the Japs in their fighter aircraft were doing what they liked – flying up and down the streets strafing anything that moved. One day I saw a Zero turning to make a run towards me. I was right near a canal that had a concrete bridge over it so I jumped out of the carrier, into the water and under the bridge. When I was under the bridge I found that there was only a foot separating the water and the concrete and that I had all this human excreta flowing just past my mouth. Not a pleasant experience at all!

One day when I was walking back to get another carrier I saw the Cruiser HMAS Perth, which was tied up at the wharf, open up with all guns on a flight of Japanese bombers. They were flying just above sea level and heading straight towards us – a bit of a shock when you're not expecting it! Whether some did get shot down or they all managed to take evasive action I don't know; but none of them made it to the wharf.

From our work on the wharf we moved to the main Batavia Airport, where our job was to combat attempts by paratroopers to take the aerodrome. It was a bit hairy out there for a while. Then word came that the Japs had got as far inland as Butenzorg, where they were engaged in battle with the Dutch. We were sent there to be the second line of defence. We had only been there a couple of days when the Dutch capitulated to the Japanese on 9th March 1942. There were only 2,000 fighting men amongst us Australians while there were reputed to be 20,000 Japanese on this particular front. There was only one narrow road into the area, so even if we'd wanted to get out we wouldn't have been able to, as the road was blocked with thousands of Dutch troops and their equipment. We also knew that when the last Dutchmen passed over the nearby bridge, the Japs would be right behind them.

This turned out to be the case. We held them at the river for about four days but they were continually outflanking us and we eventually had to pull out. However during the time we had contact with them we gave them the most horrible beating. Later, when we were taken POW they were constantly interrogating us about the whereabouts of the 'rest of the division'. They did not believe that there were only 2,000 men there. Those 2,000 men were seasoned fighters of the 2/2 Pioneers and 2/3 Machine Gunners who had only recently been victorious over the Vichy French in Syria.

One of the most heart-wrenching incidents of my six years overseas took place after we pulled out of Butenzorg. We headed for the inland city of Bandung, and arrived when the night was pitch black to find all the Dutch women and children lining the streets with hot coffee and cakes for us. All of them were crying and trying to get on our vehicles. They knew that the Japs were right behind us. I asked them where their menfolk were but they had no idea. I don't know exactly what happened to these poor women and children afterwards but, from what we learned after the war about Japanese treatment of civilians, it would have been pretty terrible.

We didn't stay long in Bandung before continuing on to the coast. When we reached it, our first priority was to get some sleep. We had no food and no means of getting any, as where we were there was just jungle, with no villages at all. Commander Blackburn spent our few days on the coast trying to negotiate a conditional surrender with the Japanese Army Commander – with no success. By this time all resistance had on Java had ceased and the Japs could have wiped us out in about ten minutes if we had kept fighting. So we had no choice but to surrender unconditionally and become prisoners of war of the cruellest and most depraved army in the world, the Japanese.

We stayed on Java for a couple of months, shifting from central Java to the capital, Batavia, where we gained plenty of first hand experience of how cruel the Japanese soldiers could be. A couple of examples will show you what I mean. One morning on our way to work we came upon an old Dutch woman walking on the footpath in the direction we were going. When she heard the sound of marching men she turned around, saw who we were, and stopped to wave to us. Immediately two Japanese guards rushed over to her with their rifles butts at the ready. They used these to bash her unmercifully until she fell over, whereupon they kicked her and jumped on her. Two of the marching men broke ranks to go to her assistance and were also beaten with rifle butts. They were a hell of a mess about the head and upper body when the Japs had finished with them.

It wasn't only the Europeans who suffered either. We were working at the Shell Oil Company depot at that time and they had a Javanese man tied up at the entrance to the depot, at the spot where cigarettes had to be extinguished before going inside. Well, there were hundreds of Japs coming and going during the day, and each one went up to this poor man and butted their cigarettes out on his face and body – mainly his face. We could hear his cries of pain all over the depot. He was there for several days until one morning we arrived to find him gone. We presumed he had died during the night and were thankful his pain had finally come to an end.

After several months in a prison camp in Batavia called 'The Bicycle Camp', they packed us aboard a rusty hell ship and took us to Singapore. From there we went to Changi POW where we spent a couple of days before being loaded onto yet another hell ship. The ship stayed in harbour for about four days, with us locked down below. The heat was unbearable and I thought we were all going to die down there. Water was the main problem, with a ration of only one mug a day. Eventually the boat started moving and conditions improved slightly. We had no idea where we were being taken and when, after about ten days, the ship pulled into a wharf one evening and started unloading immediately, we were still none the wiser. Then someone

on board recognised the language being used on the wharf. It was Burmese. We were in Rangoon. No sooner was the unloading completed than an air raid began. It's a great feeling being locked in the bowels of a ship with bombs being dropped from the sky over your head – even if it's your side doing the bombing.

Anyway, we survived the night and the next day the ship started moving again, back in the direction we'd come from. The following day one of the blokes, who'd been up on deck to use the toilet, said the sea was all muddy outside. We guessed that we must have been nearing one of the great rivers of Burma, either the Salween or the Irrawaddy. Late in the afternoon we pulled into a wharf and began to disembark. The Japs lined us all up and took our shaving gear from us, as well as our knives, forks, pocket-knives, watches and wallets. The only form of identification we were left with were the disks around our necks. The dark-skinned people on the wharf spoke English and we soon found out that the port was Moulmein. We could see the huge golden pagoda that Rudyard Kipling wrote about in *The Road to Mandalay*.

The Japs took us to a compound that the Burmese said was used for imprisoning lepers. They didn't know what had happened to the inmates, but suspected they'd been shot by the Japanese. The next morning we were loaded onto a train and travelled about thirty miles, to a place called Thanbyuzayat, to what was to be the start of the Burma Death Railway. We were designated 'A Force' – the first prisoners of war to start the building of the railway to Thailand.

Before we began, however, we were told that the next day we were to have a visit from Colonel Nagatomo, the Japanese Officer in charge of the building of the railway. The next day he arrived with about twenty staff. The great Colonel Nagatomo turned out to be terribly fat and ugly, as well as very short, and his pants had patches on them of different coloured fabric. He began by telling us that he was a very proud man because the Emperor had selected him to be in charge of building the railway. All the POWs that Japan had taken had been put at his disposal and he had twelve months to complete the job. He said that he would complete the railway on time for the Emperor even if every sleeper represented a dead POW – and if there were enough dead left over, he would fill the gullies with us. All the time this mad killer was talking he glared at us, screaming and waving his arms around. Nagatomo nearly achieved his objective; the estimated POW death toll was 105, 000. He richly deserved his eventual fate, which was to be hung as a war criminal.

Before we could begin work on a railroad, however, we had to get to work burying the dead Asians whose bodies lay all around the camp area. We didn't know what they had died of, and couldn't find out, but they had no cuts or abrasions on their bodies, so we suspected it must have been cholera. There was a nice little stream running right alongside the camp, but Lieutenant Colonel Claude Anderson, a doctor from Perth, warned us not to drink any above ground water because it was all infected with cholera, black water fever, and so on. Accordingly our first job was to dig a well for our water needs, and this was completed in a couple of hours. We also dug a long trench for the latrines.

That first well came to a sad end a couple of weeks later when British bombers dropped a bomb right down the middle of it. There were railway

marshalling yards near the camp and these attracted a lot of raids. In fact they were so frequent by this stage that the Japanese made us shift camp about ten kilometres further into the jungle, to what became known as ten kilo camp.

Our stay in Burma building the Death Railway lasted about fifteen months and was a terrible experience. I could never understand how a fellow man could stand by and gain so much humour and enjoyment, as the Japanese did, from watching a POW cry out in pain while being tortured. For instance, one day I saw a group of half a dozen or so Japs clustered around a POW they had tied down on top of an ant nest. They were laughing their sides out at the antics of the poor man as the ants got in his ears and up his nose. I believe he lost his mind completely before he died, still staked out on top of the ant nest.

It was not uncommon to arrive back at camp in the evening to see many men with four-gallon buckets filled with rocks hanging from their necks, tied to trees around the Japanese quarters. It was one of the Japs' routine tortures, and it was a terrible one. The weight hanging from the handle of the bucket would cut off the circulation of blood to the head and the poor fellows would just about be in a mental state by the time they were untied.

Torture aside, everyday life as a prisoner of the Japanese was quite enough to make a person unstable. We endured daily beatings as a matter of course, and did hard physical work for long hours in terrible conditions, all on a starvation diet consisting of little else but rice. Some of us, myself included, did it for nearly four years. During that time our clothes and boots disintegrated and were not replaced. Instead we were given what we called g-string. It was a length of cloth about eight inches wide and three feet long, which we tied around our waists and fastened at the back. The rest of the fabric was then pulled through our legs and over the string in front to form our only covering. When our boots wore out some fellas made sandals out of wood that we called 'go-aheads'. They were okay when you were walking forward, but it was impossible to walk sideways or backwards - hence their name. It was better to go barefoot because the Japanese would not tolerate you stopping work to retrieve your 'go-aheads', plus you would get a decent wack in the ribs to be going on with.

We were completely isolated from the outside world in our jungle camps and as one horrible day followed another most of us soon lost track of what day, or even, what month it actually was. One day I was with hundreds of others carting earth in bamboo baskets to build an embankment for the line. The man filling the baskets asked me, 'What day is it, Thorpie?'

'I wouldn't have a clue,' I replied.

Some time later I was having my basket filled when the same man said to me, 'I don't know what day of the week it is, Thorpie, but I found out the month and the date. It's the ninth of November.'

I dropped my basket and said to him, 'If that's the case, I'm twenty-one years old today!' With that I got a walloping from a guard for talking and dropping my basket of earth.

When the railway was finally completed, the fittest of us were put in a group that was sent to Saigon in what was then known as French Indo-China. Our job there was to clear the jungle and extend the main runway of the Saigon International Airport. When we'd done that the Japs decided to send

us to Japan via sea from Saigon. The first time they tried to get us onto a ship, RAF bombers came over and gave the shipping in the harbour a bit of a touch up, fortunately missing the barge we were on.

The second time, the barge had just tied up to the ship's side when the air-raid sirens sounded in Saigon. The person in charge of the barge was a very old Vietnamese woman. She started screaming at the guards to let her untie the ropes and free the barge because the raiding aircraft were only after large cargo vessels. The Japs refused to let her, even though by this time we could hear the approaching aircraft. The old lady went to a locker at the end of the barge and produced a very large parang with about a two-foot blade. The Japanese approached to take it off her and she was going to have them, too. She cut the ropes at the end where she was with the parang, then rushed past everybody down to the other end and cut the ropes there. There were only two armed Japanese on board, it was dark and we could not see. The roar of the approaching aircraft was getting louder and we were just floating around in Saigon harbour.

The aircraft spent about fifteen minutes bombing the harbour and surrounds and then left. Saigon is on the mouth of the Mekong River and that night we were very lucky that it was an incoming tide. If it had been an out-going tide we'd probably still be out there. The Japanese were telling the old lady to go here and there with the barge, while she was trying to tell them that she had no steerage and could only drift.

Somehow the Japanese on land got to know we were moving up the mighty Mekong and we could see rifle shots going off on the banks. We never heard any slugs go by, so maybe they weren't actually firing *at* us. We eventually made the banks of the river and it wasn't long before plenty of Japanese were there. We climbed on trucks to be taken back to our quarters on the wharf. They gave away the idea of getting us to Japan from Saigon, and in a few days we were heading up the Mekong to Cambodia, where we climbed onto cattle trucks and headed for Singapore.

That was a terrible trip. The train only stopped once a day to take on coal and water and to feed us. There were plenty of men suffering from dysentery and you can imagine the predicament they were in, trying to relieve themselves while the train was moving. To make matters worse, the driver must have been a kamikaze pilot; once he got going it was full throttle up hill and down. I was absolutely terrified all the time I was on that train and I think the trip to Singapore took four or five days.

On arriving in Singapore we were taken to a camp called 'River Valley', where we immediately started work on the wharves, loading rubber and tin. This would have been in the latter half of 1944. One night we were woken up by loud explosions, which was not uncommon, but these explosions sounded different. Morning came and we lined up for work. The Jap in charge, who could speak a bit of English, told us he was going to take us and show us what would happen to us if we did not work harder for the Emperor. We climbed up on the trucks and they drove us right through the centre of Singapore's Chinatown, where we saw the heads of Chinese men on stakes which had been hammered into the ground on either side of the main street.

When we arrived at the wharf some Chinese workers there told us that four warships had been blown up during the night and that the Japanese had

blamed the Chinese shipwrights. The Japs had immediately gone into Chinatown, gathered up any Chinese men they could get hold of and chopped their heads off as a warning to others. The sequel to this is that they found out a few days after they'd executed the Chinese that it hadn't been the Chinese shipwrights after all, but those bloody Australian Z force Commandos.

We'd only been at River Valley a few weeks when they lined us up one morning and a Jap went along the lines picking out different men to go to Japan. Well, I missed out and I was naturally very pleased, especially since the Chinese had told us that, in the last eighteen months, no convoy had got through to Japan complete. That day they selected about six hundred men, and the following day they took them away. After they had been gone about six days the Japs told us that the ships had been sunk by American submarines and all the men were dead.

About four days after we'd heard this bad news they lined us up for another selection and this time I was amongst the five-hundred or so men chosen. My thoughts were the same as many others who had been picked: if we were to make a break for it in Singapore, they would soon round us up, torture and execute us. If we went with them to Japan there was a slight chance we might get through, so we all agreed to stay together and go.

We sailed for Japan on the hell ship 'Awa Maru' some time in December 1944, literally packed in like sardines. All we POWs were in one hold, where they'd put in six floors, each about three feet high. The heat was terrible and I thought we would all die down there. If you happened to have a spot near the hull and you had to go to the toilet, you had to crawl over this maze of men. Dysentery was rife and the poor blokes trying to get to the toilet while crawling over other men often did not make it. Tempers were frayed.

After a month's sailing and spending every night in fear of a torpedo hitting the side of the ship and often hearing the big guns of the convoy blasting away and thinking, well, this is it, we anchored in the harbour of Moji on the island of Kyushu. It had been snowing for the last couple of days at sea, and terribly cold. It was night as we pulled up alongside the wharf and there was a total blackout – you couldn't see the man alongside of you - nevertheless we were told to disembark. The snow was about eight inches thick on the wharf. Some men had no boots and lost toes through frostbite. We'd all been given Japanese army clothing before leaving Singapore and the short men were reasonably clothed but the rest of us had bare flesh showing where the clothes didn't fit.

After the Japs had counted us for a couple of hours, they marched us to a train station where we were put into passenger cars – by now a novelty for us. However there were no lights and the windows were sealed and painted over. We travelled for a couple of hours before the train stopped and we disembarked at a little station. From there we had to form into single file and just follow the leader. We couldn't see where we were going – at one time it was along a hillside and everyone was losing his footing. We arrived in camp and were shown to our sleeping quarters before being left alone for what was left of the night.

In the morning we discovered that we were in a Japanese Army camp with an electric fence around it. It was obviously a coal mining area because everywhere there were huge mullock heaps reaching up to the clouds.

We worked in the coalmines for the whole time we were in Japan, which was about eight months until the end of the war. During the whole of that time we never once saw daylight. We used to leave the camp to walk to the mine in the pitch black, and it was dark again when we returned. Our shifts were between fifteen and eighteen hours and we were still on starvation rations. Thank God the war finished when it did, because we would all have died if it had lasted much longer.

One morning we were woken in the darkness as usual and moved out onto the parade ground where we found the Japanese arguing fiercely amongst themselves. At one stage they told us to go back to our huts, only to call us back to the parade ground half an hour later. We were lined up there as dawn began to break, by which time we could see other Japs sitting behind machine guns out near the boundary fence and so were able to form some idea about what was probably in store for us. However, the Japs were still arguing, and at last the boss fella told us to go back to our huts.

We stayed there, feeling somewhat anxious, until one of the blokes walking past our door told us that there were no Japs around any more. Incredibly, this turned out to be true; and that's how we found out that the war had ended and that in spite of this, we were going to be allowed to live. Apparently the Emperor had issued orders that all POWs were to be shot and it was this instruction that the guards had been arguing about.

After a couple of days of freedom I went out and commandeered a Jap Army truck for the purpose of seeing if I could get us a bit more food, as we were very hungry. Alas we could find no cattle at all; in fact, the Japanese locals told us that the island of Kyushu had virtually none at all.

Captain Moore, our Camp Commander, (his nickname was Maggie Moore) came to me one day and asked me if to take a drive to the south of the island and see if there were any Americans there. Two other men came with me, one of them being, I think, Lieutenant Flynn. We set off and after several hours came to a city that looked as if a thousand bombers had hit it. There were thousands of dead lying around, and hundreds of trucks carting the dead away, while many more hundreds of Japanese were clearing the roadways so that the trucks could get through to pick up the dead. These Japanese were telling us to get out because we would get 'tuxan beoki', very sick, if we stayed there. We learned that the city was called Nagasaki.

Even though it was about a mile away, we could see the wharf from where we stopped, because all the multi-storied buildings between us and the wharf were rubble on the ground. There was no shipping tied up there.

We returned home to our camp and told Maggie what we had seen. We all agreed that the devastation must have been the result of a truly massive bombing raid.

Some days later a huge American bomber flew over our camp, dropping leaflets that instructed us that POWs should mark their living quarters with the letters 'PW'. We were also to mark a cleared area with a white dot, so they could drop us food in a few days' time. This was duly done, using a bag of lime and a broom from the Japanese Officers' quarters

The food drops soon arrived, with the first ones including cigarettes and matches. And so what did a man do? He got hold of a packet of

cigarettes and a box of matches and promptly started smoking again, after not having been near a cigarette for three years!

One day a parachutist landed in camp. He told us how to get to the railway station and said that at 10.30am in two day's time there would be a train waiting to take the hundred men in our camp from Isuka to Nagasaki. A troopship would take us from there to Manila. We were instructed to leave behind everything else but the clothes we were wearing. This was a bit of a joke because we only had one set of clothing.

He also told us about a new bomb, called an Atom Bomb, which had been used on Nagasaki. He explained that the reason they had not been here earlier was that they'd had to wait until the area was clean before they brought any ships into the harbour. We found it difficult to believe that all the destruction we had seen had been caused by only one bomb and decided that the Yank was having us on.

We arrived in Nagasaki in the early afternoon and had to line up in single file on the wharf. From there we entered a series of small rooms. In the first one we had to strip off and drop our clothes into a chute. Next came the decontamination procedure. We were checked for radiation in the second room, before moving on into yet another room where we had long, hot showers. Something we hadn't been able to experience since leaving home years before. Last stop was the Quartermaster's Store where we were fitted out in brand new US Army uniforms. We went from there directly onto the troopship and then straight down below. They didn't want to risk us picking up any more radiation after we had just been decontaminated.

We arrived in Manila after having first spent a couple of days on Okinawa. We were taken to a tent city just on the outskirts of Manila where we underwent medical and dental checks and initial treatment. During one of those checks a doctor told me that the average weight of a POW from Camp 22 at Isuka was 100lb.

We must have spent about a fortnight in Manila, waiting for a ship to take us home. That day eventually arrived and we boarded the British Escort Carrier (aircraft) HMAS Speaker. Our fist port of call was Guam, which had been a great naval base during the war. However, we anchored a long way from the island, so far that we couldn't even see any activity on it. We learned that the ship had stopped there to be repainted and that this would take about a week. Well, you can guess how a shipload of diggers felt when they were told that. Some had been overseas for nearly five years. Later I found out that this delay in the journey was to give us a chance to put on a bit more weight before we arrived home. We still looked like walking skeletons – too shocking a sight for people back home.

Our next port of call was Dreger Harbour in New Guinea and nobody could tell us why. There wasn't a thing there, not even a native hut. However we only stayed there a day before we were on our way again and this time we were going straight home.

Many days later we could see Sydney Heads in the distance. There were hundreds of sea craft coming out to greet us, many of them with welcome home notices painted on their sides. When the ship pulled alongside the wharf there were many buses waiting for us, with the words 'Returning Jap Prisoners of War' emblazoned on their sides. We boarded these and

headed into Sydney Town where the streets were crowded with hundreds of thousands of people. The huge mass of people eventually halted the convoy of about a dozen buses, and those that could pushed their way inside. We were bombarded with kisses, and cakes and scones. Stuff we hadn't eaten in years. After about half an hour the convoy finally started moving again and we were taken to our quarters at the Sydney Showground.

There were only about twelve men from Western Australia. All the others were from New South Wales and were given a leave pass so they could go home. We Sandgropers were allowed a day's' leave, which we took, but it was very lonely in the city and none of us knew our way around. When you were in Sydney you were just another one of those soldiers who were everywhere.

Four days' later we boarded a troopship for home and found that we were joining hundreds of other Western Australians returning home after the war, many of them old mates we hadn't seen in years. The journey took about a week and then we were in Fremantle, where my family and some of my friends were waiting to greet me. After that we journeyed to our barracks at Karrakatta, where we were issued with a leave pass and what money we needed. I think the leave pass was either ten or fourteen days.

When our leave was complete we all had a medical examination. Some were sent to Hollywood hospital for further checks and treatment, while some took their discharge. I went to Hollywood because I had hookworms, a very low blood count, and a very bad back from working in such cramped conditions in the coalmine at Isuka.

When I was released from Hollywood, I went to see Mr Ted Adams, the manager of Metro Bus Company, to get my old job back, as had been promised all soldiers when we enlisted. He told me that the union that had promised we could return to our old jobs or apprenticeships had changed their minds and that Metro was not allowed to sack one person, to replace him by another, returned soldier or not. I asked about seeing the Minister for Employment and Adams made me an appointment.

When I saw the Minister a few day's later he told me that if I had worked on diesel motors while a prisoner, he might have been able to help me. As it was, he thought I had been away from engines too long.

I told him his words were shocking. If I had been a traitor to my country and collaborated with the Japanese, I could have had my old job back.

He said that seeing I had worked in the coalmines in Japan, he could get me a job in the Collie coalmines.

I just called him a bastard, and left, slamming the door behind me.

The Army had me billeted at Point Walter Camp. I was trying to get a pension from them because my back was still very painful and I was afraid of going out into the work force unable to do my job. One morning I was called to the Orderly Room, where the Commanding Officer said he'd received a memo about me. I was either to take my discharge or join an active unit.

I asked for a list of active units and he told me that the 66th Battalion was over in Bathurst and would be leaving for Japan in fourteen days.

When I told him that would do, the CO rang up right away and was told they wanted me. He wrote out my rail ticket to Bathurst and I was on my way there within a couple of days.

Despite what the CO had said, I think we were in Bathurst about three weeks before we before we finally left for Japan. We arrived in Kuri some time in January and our first camp, which looked like it had been a Japanese Army camp, was in a town called Kaitiachi. It was just on the outskirts of Hiroshima, the other atom bomb city of Japan. We were there for about six months before moving on to a new camp which had been built for us at a place called Hiro, up the coast to the north of Kure. When we moved to Hiro I joined the Transport Platoon of the 66th Btn, but I was also called upon to do various other jobs, because I spoke a bit of Japanese, picked up during my years as a POW. There was always something to negotiate or fix up between the soldiers and the Japanese. On occasions I even had to do a bit of sorting out for the boss, Colonel Colvin.

I enjoyed my stay in Japan. While there I had one annual leave, which I took in the country. I was almost due another one when the Transport Officer called me into his office and told me what was happening with BCOF. Firstly, I was carrying the regimental number that had been issued to me in 1940 as a member of the AIF (Australian Imperial Forces), which was going to be disbanded. If I wanted to stay in the Army I had to sign up for the Permanent Army. He gave me several days to make up my mind. I thought about the fact that I did not have a trade or profession and that I really liked the Army, and I decided to stay. I was a Sergeant, but the Transport Officer told me that when I came back from leave they wanted to make me an Officer. He'd been looking at my file recently and seen where I'd got top marks at NCO Training School in Jerusalem in 1942.

This time I was able to go home to Western Australia for my leave. When I arrived in Perth, I rang my father in Three Springs. My father had owned the Armadale Bus Service until he sold it to Metro Bus Company in 1938 and bought the Commercial Hotel in Three Springs. He'd been one of Western Australia's pioneer aviators, and one of six Perth pilots who'd joined the RAAF as flying instructors the day after war was declared. He'd also seen service in the Army in WWI and been sent home, wounded, and discharged as unfit for any further service. However, six months later he'd managed to re-enlist and get shot up again, this time at Pozieres.

My father said he wasn't well, and asked me to catch the next train to Three Springs. When I arrived there I saw that indeed he was not well, far from it. His time under bombardment in the trenches in WWI had left him with permanent heart damage, while the stress of eighteen-hour days in the RAAF during WWII meant that now, at little over fifty, he had dangerously high blood pressure.

He started telling me what jobs I could do for him and when I said that I only had fourteen days in WA and that three had already gone, he looked at me wide eyed and said that he thought I'd come home for good. I told him no, I'd joined the Permanent Army. In the discussion that followed he told me that he wanted me to take over the hotel. He said that he was still on the Reserve list with the RAAF and that he'd try to get me a compassionate discharge from the Army. (He had the rank of Squadron Leader.) It was not long before I was called to Perth to take my discharge. My discharge papers show that I spent 2,463 days in the Army and that 2,108 of those days were spent overseas on active service.

I stayed in the hotel for six years. During that time I married a local girl, Elizabeth Fitzgerald, and we had a son, Peter. Eight years later our daughter, Jo-anne, was born, by which time I'd taken up farming. I didn't like hotel life. We carried a lot of staff at that time, nearly all of them European refugees, who had bought their hostilities from their war against the Germans, or the Russians, etc. with them, so there was always some bitterness brewing somewhere.

My Dad at this time was spending most of his retirement at Flinder's Bay, on the far south coast, and only came up to the hotel on odd occasions. At one of these times he mentioned that a local farmer wanted to buy the hotel and he asked me if I wanted to stay in it. I told him, no, I'd had enough. He said, right, he'd sell it. He had a small farm about seven miles out of town and he asked me if I'd like to take it over. I said that I would, and so I became a farmer for the rest of my working life until I retired twenty-five years ago and built a house in Three Springs.

Since I left the Army and moved to Three Springs, I've been heavily involved in the town's activities. I was President of the RSL for forty years and Chief Fire Control Officer for twenty years. I was Controller of the Civil Defence and Emergency Services for ten years and was on the first committee to set up a St John's Ambulance Service in the area. For the last ten years I've been involved in organising and fundraising so that every year Three Springs High School Students can travel to Thailand as a contingent of the Quiet Lion Tour. Highlights of this tour include visits to a section of the Burma Death Railway and the River Kwai Bridge. In 2002 the Shire Council submitted my name to the Federal Government and I was granted the Order of Australia Medal in the Queen's honours List for that year.

Accompanied by my son, I recently went on a trip back to Japan – I wanted to see if they'd been looking after the place since I'd left it all those years ago. Not really, of course, but I did want to see the coalmine I'd worked in as a POW and the camp - if it was still there. The area has changed a lot. Where once there had been mines everywhere, now there are none. And the landscape has changed completely, though the mullock heaps are still there, they are covered with pine trees to the very top. I asked someone why they hadn't flattened the heaps before they planted the trees, and he gave me a very odd look and said, 'You get more trees on the dumps if they stay high.' Of course! Japan is very short of land and anywhere they can grow a tree or a bit of rice, that's what they do.

When we returned to our hotel in Fukuoka after our visit to the coalfields, we received an unexpected phone call. It was from an English-speaking Japanese who said he was a member of the Joetsu Australia Society. They'd heard I was in Japan and they wanted us to be their guests in Joetsu. They asked if I would meet and shake hands with twelve Japanese veterans while I was there. I agreed and told him we were leaving next day for Yokohama. When we got there we found half a dozen Japanese men and women waiting for us at the station. They rushed towards us, hands extended and bowing. They told us that they'd made all the arrangements for us to go to Joetsu the following day. We had planned to spend a couple of days in Yokohama but in their eagerness to show us hospitality, they just took over. They even insisted on paying our hotel expenses for our time in Joetsu.

Much to my surprise, the Japanese veterans I met at Joetsu seemed very nice people. Of course the war is long over now, and I suppose much has changed in Japanese society since those days. The president of the Joetsu Australia Society had been a POW at Cowra Prison Camp. I think the treatment there must have been quite a bit better than that in the Japanese camps, or he wouldn't have had such friendly feelings towards Australians. He and the other members of the society couldn't do enough for us during our sixteen days in Japan.

While the Joetsu veterans had been regular soldiers, like me, Japanese soldiers who worked as guards in POW camps were quite another matter, in my opinion, and I did spend nearly four years as a POW. I don't think there is a human being on this earth as cruel and sadistic as those guards were at that time. They had complete contempt for those of other races and an absolute hatred of the European. In fact, they would do anything to torture, maim, and destroy us and derive much enjoyment from it. What hurts me is that so few of these monsters received any punishment all after the war. There must be thousands of them still walking the streets of Japan today who have never been called to account for what they did.

When we farewelled our hosts in Joetsu, we invited them to visit us in Western Australia. Two months after we arrived back home we received a letter telling us that five of them, three men and two women, were coming to visit us for four days. As they'd lose two of those four days travelling to and from Three Springs, we decided their time would be better spent in and around Perth. So we took them all around the city and up into the hills. They particularly wanted to visit the war memorials and museums, and found the Fremantle Army Museum's tableaux of life in a POW camp on the Burma line a revelation. Up in the hills, the kangaroos turned on a display for them by standing in the middle of the road to have their photos taken, I think our Japanese visitors really enjoyed themselves.

I hope this report has been interesting. I am in the process of writing a much more detailed account, to be published in early 2006.

Jack Thorpe OAM