

## Digger recounts brutal life in WWII prison camp

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Private Max 'Eddie' Gilbert (top right), shortly before the Japanese attack in Ambon. (*Australia War Memorial*)

This Anzac Day, World War II veteran and former prisoner of war Max "Eddie" Gilbert will be marching in Melbourne.

He is the last remaining veteran well enough to march behind his unit's banner, Gull Force, which comprised of 1,100 diggers sent to the island of Ambon, just north of Darwin, in December 1941.

Ambon was then part of the Dutch East Indies and the Australians were sent in to help reinforce the Dutch forces. But after heavy fighting they were quickly overrun by a Japanese invasion force and most were taken prisoner.

Three quarters of the Australians captured on Ambon died before war's end of overwork, malnutrition, disease and from the brutality of their Japanese captors.

Now, aged in his 90s, Mr Gilbert remembers they had not been on the island long before the invasion started in late January 1942.

"During that night and that morning, the actual invasion occurred. For us, the engagement lasted only three days, we were very quickly overwhelmed by far more soldiers, much better-equipped obviously," he told [Radio National's Breakfast program](#).

"Our officers decided it was a hopeless situation, and on February 3, 1942 we became prisoners of war."

Mr Gilbert says he always felt relieved that before that day he was never brought face to face with the enemy.

"I was part of my company's mortar detachment and miles away from where the fiercest of the fighting took place," he said.

"Most of my comrades were engaged in quite some bitter hand-to-hand fighting, whereas I was sending mortars to where we thought they would be doing the most damage.

"And so it was only on the day that I became a prisoner and we were starting to march back to the camp that I saw my first Japanese."

## **Brutal punishment**

Because the Australians had been told the Japanese never took prisoners, Mr Gilbert says the men were wondering what was going to happen to them.

"But we got a taste very early of what we might expect from our captors, because a couple of chaps managed to get out several months after captivity," he said.

"The Japs had said to us if anybody escaped, and we aren't able to capture them immediately, we will take somebody from the huts that they came from and take them away to be executed.

"Well we were sure that they weren't kidding, because a couple of chaps did get out. They lasted about two days out of the camp, they were brought back, paraded before us, they were taken away and we never saw them again.

Eventually 11 chaps were taken out of the camp and were strung up outside Japanese headquarters, and beaten for several days, and that's the last we heard of them.

"So that gave us a fair idea of how ruthless our captors could and had been."

Mr Gilbert says some of the POWs would even sneak out of the prisons during the evening to find extra food.

"A number of chaps had been getting out of the camp, under the wire at night time, getting down to the nearest local village to obtain food," he said.

"The Japanese realised and woke up to the fact that some were getting out, and they waited one night for them to come back and grabbed them.

"Eventually 11 chaps were taken out of the camp and were strung up outside Japanese headquarters and beaten for several days, and that's the last we heard of them.

"Eleven of them were buried in a mass grave some distance from the camp."

Mr Gilbert says it was not long until help arrived, and in February 1943, three American liberators arrived to bomb Ambon.

"The Japs insisted on unloading about 100 tonnes of aerial bombs into a hut inside the camp perimeter," he said.

"But stick bombs fell on the camp - fell near that bomb dump - and within minutes, the whole thing had exploded.

"The explosion destroyed a big part of that camp, killed about 10 or 11 of our fellows, including our doctor."



Private Leo Francis Ayers, a POW survivor from Ambon. (*Australia War Memorial*)

## **Surviving the odds**

Not surprisingly, Mr Gilbert says, the attitude and treatment from the Japanese worsened after that day.

Gradually, as the years progressed, the hard work intensified, the food rations were often reduced and disease started to take its toll.

Of all those 530 men who were kept prisoner in Ambon, Mr Gilbert says only 121 survived and were recovered in September, 1945.

After the war finished, he says two of those men were so emaciated that they died a week after being recovered.

I was lucky to have three wonderful mates for all my army life, until one by one they died at Ambon. We supported on another just by our very presence.

Only 119 of the men ever returned home. Mr Gilbert is often asked how he survived the ordeal when others did not.

"The way I put it, I must have chosen my parents wisely to start with - I had good genes," he said.

"A good immune system, I was very skinny, still am. I say that because from my recollection it was the big men who died first. They were needing more nutrition than I did.

"In January, 1945, there were three deaths in the camp... in July, 93 [men died]. One-hundred and twenty one of us survived, but how long did we have?"

## **Mateship**

Mr Gilbert says that if you had friends in the camp, you stood a much better chance.

"If you had a mate, or more than one mate, you were blessed in a way. You had moral and practical support throughout most of the years," he said.

"I was lucky to have three wonderful mates for all my army life, until one by one they died at Ambon.

"We supported on another just by our very presence. We shared any food that we could scrounge - and we did become expert scroungers I must say. So mateship was an important element in my survival I'm quite sure."

In 1946, the incidents which followed the fall of Ambon, including the massacre of more than 300 Australian and Dutch prisoners of war near Laha airfield, became the subject of one of the largest ever war crimes trials.

Ninety-three Japanese personnel were trialled by an Australian military tribunal near Ambon.

Mr Gilbert hopes his story helps keep the memory of the often-forgotten Ambon prisoners alive.

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A happy group of ex-POWs wait on the wharf at Ambon harbour to be collected by ship and transported to Morotai, September 1945. (*Australian War Memorial*)