



AUSTRALIAN COMMANDO ASSOCIATION VICTORIA

AUSTRALIAN SPECIAL WARFARE ORAL HISTORIES

Interview Number 16. Lieutenant Lawrie Black MID - Operations DODO, STARFISH and DEMO.

Interviewed by Dave Sheehan.

Commentator: Lawrie Black enlisted in the Army in April 1942. Following training at the signal training battalion in Tamworth, he was posted to the 3rd Armoured Division headquarters signals as an instructor. He was recruited in June 1943 into Z Special Unit. Being already trained [01:14:00] as a wireless mechanic and operator, he underwent further signals training for Z at the Milton Tennis Courts in Brisbane.

General commando training at Fraser Island followed, and he was then posted to Group D of Z special in Darwin. Lawrie Black was commissioned in the field in November '44, but his rank of lieutenant was only confirmed in 1945 just prior to him deploying on Operation Starfish in the Lombok area the following March. He talks with Dave Sheehan.

Dave: Lawrie, could you start off by telling us your military background prior to being employed with SID?

Lawrie: Yes. I was in the Armoured Division and was trained as a signaller. As you know, the Armoured Division was probably the most well trained and most schooled army. I'd done the Marconi School whilst with the army as an operator. I also trained as a wireless mechanic, and I was instructing at the Headquarters signals of the Armoured Div. at Kingaroy to all the operators and the tanks and everything else.

I was doing a course down at the Sydney Technical School again on the insides and outs of wireless sets. One evening, coming back to the Randwick Racecourse where we were camped, I was told not to go nicking off home, which we Sydney fellows used to do because I had an appointment to see a character at 7:00 in the Adjutants' office.

It was just like those things you read about in the spy dramas. I walked in there and this character is sitting with the light in front of him, so I couldn't really see him. All I knew he had an army uniform on and a peaked cap. He told me I'd been selected to join a special unit. If I joined up, I'd be directly assisting on the war effort, he said, which I wasn't doing at the moment [01:16:00], which he was quite right.

When I asked him what it was all about, he said, "I'm sorry, I can't tell you until you sign the Official Secrets Act." I was like, that's a bit-- [01:16:15] happy way of going about things. Then he decided to tell me just what he knew about me. He knew everything about me. Where I went to school and what I'd done and everything else.

I said to him, "Well, you won't get me out of the Armoured Div because I'm not allowed to leave the Armoured Div." He said, "We can get anybody out of anywhere. Don't worry about that. You just sign the dotted line." Sure enough, that's what happened. I



AUSTRALIAN COMMANDO ASSOCIATION VICTORIA

was told that the unit, what it was, it was very small unit at the time. This was in mid '43.

They'd decided to expand their operations to have more parties in the field and needed 10 signalmen and were getting them from all over the place with the proper qualifications. With that, of course, I was shipped off up to the Milton Tennis Courts. On the way, of course, we got priority travel those days and when I went to the railway transport office, there was four of us at the time. They said, "What's this Z special unit?" We said it was a pox hospital," and they all believed it because anything special in those days were a special hospital. Anyhow, that was our cover. We got to Milton Tennis Courts, and we were trained in the particular wireless sets that the unit was using. That's where the Davis Cup is played [01:17:31] up there these days.

From then, they decided to open up Fraser Island as a training camp. We went up there to Fraser Island. We actually assisted to get the camp going. The first lot of troops marched in and they recruited from the battalions, the people who are going for guerrilla warfare, et cetera. We 10 were asked to volunteer to do a parachute course. Of course, we couldn't volunteer quick enough to get out of all of this work [01:18:00] at Fraser Island. The next thing we knew, we're down at Richmond, done a crash parachute course. We were the first in the unit to do this and from then on, that's how life went.

It was very interesting training. We went back to Fraser and we were doing instruction in Tetum Timorese [01:18:17] language and Malay, and demolition, everything which was quite irregular to anybody in the regular-- as far as the Army was concerned. It was all very exciting. When we did travel, we travelled first class. They looked after you very, very well. Getting up to now, I suppose you want to really know about the STARFISH Operation.

Dave: Just before we get onto that, you mentioned you were trained as an operator and as a mechanic on the radio sets. Was that the norm out of the 10 of you that were selected or you were the odd man out?

Lawrie: No. I'd say I'd be the odd man out because most of them came from-- I think Cottee was also a wireless operator if I remember rightly. He came from the same unit as myself, but the others all came from different signal units, where they were mostly just wireless operators. I just happened to be lucky that I was trained in both. That's all. The expertise was because we were wireless operators. That's why we were selected.

Dave: The STARFISH Operation, how did that come about?

Lawrie: STARFISH Operations was the fact that, as you know, we had to get to Lombok. Now, Lombok-- this is straits here. It's only very small between Bali and Lombok, but it's very, very important that the shipping goes up through here, the Philippines, and goes up here, to Hong Kong, to the China Sea, and onto Japan. It was just as important then as it is today.



AUSTRALIAN COMMANDO ASSOCIATION VICTORIA

Today, of course, early 1989, the Indonesian Army closed the straits for a week or so, which caused consternation in the [01:20:00] shipping world, but those days, the submarines used to go from Perth up to Exmouth Gulf, and then through-- they had to go to do all their operations in that China Sea area. It's very deep, and a very swift current goes through there. The submarines, if they were against the current, had to come up on top. They had some gunning placements here at the end of this little peninsula at Lombok, and they were worrying the submarine commanders.

The RAAF had a lot of bombing raids on there, on these guns. There was gunning placements there which they thought that they had destroyed. Our mission was to go in there and ascertain whether they had been successful in destroying them and, if not, to try and pinpoint them so they'd either be bombed again, or-- which we did not know. We weren't told that, also, it's necessary to bring in another party of demolition experts to demolish the gunners. We didn't know anything about that, of course, till we got home. Just in case we were caught, we'd give that party away.

We were trained up at Darwin. In all the operations, like this particular type of operation-- which is different altogether to guerrilla warfare, when you were a close-knit party, that party leader had the right to pick his own men so that they all got on very well together, and which I was fortunate enough to be chosen as the leader of the party.

The fellows I chose were all getting on very well. We had to have two signaller's and two officers and two natives. However, we couldn't get any natives that knew the particular area there, so we forgot that. Unfortunately, one of the signaller's, who was a sergeant, was taken out at the last minute to go on another operation. [01:22:00] You must The [01:22:01] realize at this stage he didn't know where he was going when he was being trained by us, but we weren't told till the last couple of weeks.

Soon, we were running out of time. I was given another chap, who was an Englishman who'd lived all his life in Malaya. He spoke perfect Malay, which was his best attribute, whereas we only spoke colloquial Malay. We'd done short courses in it, but enough to be understood. However, this chap, who was a little bit older than us-- He was probably about 27, whereas I was about 21. One of the other officers was about 23, and the sergeant, HOFFIE, was about 25, I suppose, at the time. That was the weakness in the fact that we didn't have the chance to get to know him that well. He was a nice chap, and all that, and he was a signaller as well, so it sounded like he was a great acquisition because he spoke perfect Malay, and also he was a signaller.

We got down to Perth, where we had done more training at Garden Island. There's a little camp called Rockingham out of Fremantle. Then we went over the plans for this one and we were told exactly where we were going and it looked a bit rugged to us, the fact that they had us-- Can I just go to this larger map here? As you'll see, this map is a very old map. It's just copied from a Dutch map, and dated 1927. It was quite out of date by the time we come to 1944, '45. We were supposed to land down here. This is Yanguntap [01:23:51], a little bay in here, and then we had to march all the way down here.



AUSTRALIAN COMMANDO ASSOCIATION VICTORIA

Dave: [01:24:00] What sort of distance are you looking at in that march?

Lawrie: Well, it's not so much the distance as the terrain, we found out. I forget what the scale is here now. It's about-

Dave: 1:200,000.

Lawrie: Yes. It would have been about 20 mile from there to there, where we had to go. This is where the guns were in place. Anyhow, we went aboard the submarine. The submarine commander was a full Commander of the navy, a permanent navy man, the class of '33. He said to us, "Why are we landing you down here when you've got to go there?" We said, well, the American fleet commander, Admiral Christie, said that he didn't want to risk a submarine up here landing because the tide was very strong in the-- here.

He turned around and said, "Well, look, I'm the [01:25:00] boss of this submarine," which he was, the boss of about five submarines in the pack. He said, "Well, we'll see what we can do for you guys." So we went up, boarded the sub. We went up to refuel at Exmouth Gulf, but on the way up there, some miles out to sea, we ran into a lifeboat with about 15 survivors on from a ship which was sunk near Ceylon in the Indian Ocean. They'd come 1,600 miles across, which was rather remarkable. They'd run out of food and all they had was malt and milk tablets and some water. That was an interesting experience because they all thought it was an enemy sub for a start when they saw the little stick sticking out there miles away.

Then, when we got up there, he said, "Now, how are you guys going to load your 10-man rubber dinghy off the sub?" We said we'd had a dummy where we practiced taking all these cans which were all numbered, where we knew what was in each can. [01:26:00] They were the old kerosene tin with painted khaki. They had a number or a letter on them so we knew which was which. The idea was, inflate the boat, put it down on the deck, and we had to cart this stuff down, which was very hazardous in a choppy sea. He said, "That's ridiculous."

He got us to get on top of the deck with our boat and he graciously took the sub down, which was a very hazardous deal. Anybody can do a crash dive, but to take it down slowly-- and he was the only one on deck, which he told the officers they'd better not let him swim. We practiced that a few times in the Exmouth Gulf. It was very good because we could float off, as long as you've remembered to undo the painter on the deck. We'd come back again, and we'd get on top, hold onto the thing and he'd bring the sub up again, which made life-

Dave: Much easier?

Lawrie: -much easier. When we got up here, he-- We came in here. During the daytime, he went right along the coast here, taking photographs of the coast through his periscope. This was a nice sandy beach in here, and we said, "That'll do us to land."



AUSTRALIAN COMMANDO ASSOCIATION VICTORIA

Next, we visited our escape route, by the way. We had an escape route, and a plan that if we got caught which-- I'll mention now the fact we were supposed to be meteorologists, and all this business out there to check on the-- It was nonsense, really. I doubt-- if we'd been caught, of course, we had explosives and that with us, demolition and stuff. I don't know how we were going to explain that, anyhow.

As this was our escape route, we decided to put about a third of our supplies in here where our original landing spot was going to be. By the way, we had about 2,600 lbs weight of-- You can work that in kilos for the interview. That night, he stopped a little off here. We'd arranged **[01:28:00]** to meet him off this point, about three mile off the point, in the morning. We left about eleven o'clock that night in the sub, went ashore. We had a little outboard motor. We stopped the outboard about here, rowed ashore. In the best-laid plans for the guys, the fellow grabbed the paint and pulled it up, and threw it into the sand, and then that fellow gets hold of his tins. Of course, what d'you do, trip over the painter? Bang went everything--

There was quite a bit of a sea running. While the chaps had to do the job of digging, finding a spot in the grass and digging and hiding all the stuff, unbeknownst to us at the time-- We found out when he got back on board again that the water, the waves would come over and put the outboard motor out of service, and also our little radio pack we had. We had no communication, and we were left to get out here, three mile off this spot. All we had with us at this stage were those compasses.

Away we went, rowing out. We'd no sooner had got down here-- We knew where we were as far as that was concerned, we thought anyhow, from a compass reading, but a mist came in, a real sea mist and we couldn't see a thing, so we thought, "Well, we'll stay here till three o'clock." That's what we told them. If we weren't out at 3:00, leave us, we'd get back. Something must have happened.

We were just about thinking of going back, and out of the mist came this-- it looked like a PT boat, but it was a submarine half-submerged. The only way he found us was the fact that the radar operator had pinged on our little outboard motor, which was a weird, little fellah **[01:29:45]**.

There again, we got on board, and he boarded up and chuffed down south. Against all American submarine rules, he went to his ward room, which was about 2' by 2', and he clacked a bottle of whiskey, which was quite **[01:30:00]** good. Then we rested that day, and then that next evening, we went down to the spot, and again we'd done the same exercise to land. The current here is very, very strong. Instead of landing in here, we finished up landing around here in a very rocky fill of about 800 feet, we found out later. I jumped to shore. I thought, "There's the rocks just there." They'll grab a rock and I went down about 20 feet as that's how steep it was. It was pretty rough with all this water bouncing on the shore. We eventually got ashore there and we found a ledge, up there was a cave where we managed to get the stuff up into the cave and put the boat in there. Then we were told when we landed there we had to destroy the boats so there was no evidence. Well, we had disobeyed orders for the second time.



AUSTRALIAN COMMANDO ASSOCIATION VICTORIA

We disobeyed orders from not landing where we were supposed to land and we disobeyed orders by keeping the boat and the container of petrol.

Now, what I forgot to tell you b Before we got aboard the sub, we got a mosquito to take aerial photographs of this area. So we had a day that we found that from here, down in here at a place called Blongus **[01:31:28]** there is a valley in between these mountains. The whole valley there was just as heavily populated as that as far as people were concerned. From there on, it was like the Blue Mountains west of Sydney. It was as rugged as can be and we would've had no chance of getting over there.

The next morning, we got the stuff. We found a ledge further up about 50 feet up. The boys said look, we'll start taking the **[01:32:00]** supplies up there and you do a reccy. I said, "This is about 800 feet high and ." Here you can see there's 476 there in meters, and we were down here. I went up hands over fist because that's how steep it was. It was just pretty very heavily timbered. For the first time, I froze. It was terror because I saw about 20 figures in the peripheral of my eyes. They went to the deck and, "Oh my God, the bastards saw the sub or something," but I beat them. They rose first and it was a tribe of monkeys. So that was the first bit of excitement.

Anyhow, to cut a long story, it took us about two or three days to get this stuff up on this hill. We found a nice spot there, which was very good because down here is Bali where Denpasar Airbase was. One of our jobs was also report any aircraft movements. We could see the coast here where they were coming. We'd made a nice little spot there. Then we decided, well, how far can we go here? Well, we found out by getting through here that the Japs were definitely along here. Right in this Pelangang area. Down in valleys here, there was Japs. They were woodcutters. There was quite of a few of them around. We knew to keep away from there.

So we found a route up here to this tree point and we're just going along on the jungle slashing with machetes with plenty of tree snakes, by the way. Nothing worse than those things. In the middle of the jungle and the top of this ridge was this old concrete tree point, which the Dutch had put in 100 years before. Then we decide to come down this way. Last we found all these in here little valleys running from the southwest to northeast all around that way. We got in here. We found one with **[01:34:00]** a road with a clearing and a creek there. It was a lot of water. We said, "We'll make that a forward spot." Then we spent some days taking a big lot of supplies up to there and then down these ridges. It used to take us four hours to do this trip.

After getting the stuff down there, we started then as either the other officers and myself or Hoffie **[01:34:29]** the sergeant and this other officer. The three of us in pairs because we found out that this chap, who was the English gentleman, I'm not saying just because he's English, but he was used to having a native look after him over there in Malaya. When we started bringing stuff up the mountain here, that's when he first reneged **[01:34:48]** about this work business and he just wouldn't-- He didn't do his fair share. We decided to leave him be because we thought that he reckoned he knew everything about everything, and he really didn't. We left him at the base doing the signal business and all this thing and we had done all these surveys around here. We



AUSTRALIAN COMMANDO ASSOCIATION VICTORIA

surveyed the beach and that because those days they thought that-- Mountbatten had the idea of landing in Java and all this business. They wanted reccies for this. Another interesting point, there doing a reccy was Alec Hoffy and I happened to be the last one to go towards this beach. You give it a good deal. It was that grass you get near the beach is very high grass. I get down to best commando fashion and part the grass very slowly so the top doesn't move and pull yourself forward a bit 6 inches at a time. It took me about half an hour while Hoffy's covering me. About the last day then, he said, "Well, I made it so far. Nothing happened, so I'll make a one big last effort." I put my hands right through, parted the grass and a bloody dog barked at me. Something was trumps again.

We reconned the whole area and [01:36:00] said, "Okay." We knew where the Japs were. This was our main mission here. Eventually, it was very thick. The whole area was very thick along here and we eventually got right down to here and right up to there. There's supposed to be a gun here and there's supposed to be three guns here, which the air force I reckoned they'd blown to pieces [01:36:25]. Well, Alec and I had done all this area down here. It would only be out for about three days because it was hard going making tracks of it. We had to be very careful, too, because you couldn't carry too many rations and that. To cut a long story short, we couldn't find any guns there.

While we were away-- remember we'd been there since we'd left Fremantle on 7th of March. We were landing up there about the 12th, I suppose and now, we're now April. about the 22nd of April and while Alec and I were doing another reccy up in here, these two other characters decide that they had to come back down. From up here they had to come down here to get some supplies. Now, in the meantime, our wireless pack had blown up. That's where my expertise did come in because I repaired in as much as I could get a weak signal back to Darwin. Although we had another set we left here. We just couldn't get at it.

Dave: It's too far away.

Lawrie: We asked for a drop. They said, "Well, what supplies do you want at the same time because we can't send you two drops. It's too much for the Liberators-- it'll give you away." We gave a list of supplies. I very facetiously put in that the signals and a dozen bottles of beer never expecting to get it. [01:38:00] They used to tell us by signal they were going to. A Liberator had come in here where we told them to come in, and they could drop this while the other Liberators were bombing Matahran. That diversionary tactic.

Well, that's when they dropped the supplies. It was a fantastic job this liberator pilot done, by the way, because he'd come up the wrong valley, and he saw the two smoke signals. He'd done just like a spitfire. He turned around like that because he can only have one run, and he dropped them between about 100 yards in this little valley square, and we got the lot. We ran into, for the first time, we'd been there a couple months, we ran into these two natives, fishermen who'd come from up here around here to fish around here. They were of great assistance.



AUSTRALIAN COMMANDO ASSOCIATION VICTORIA

They told us all about where the Japs were. They told us they had nothing about any guns up there at all. All this business. We now knew that if anything happened to any of us, the Japs would get on the natives. They weren't a very good type of native, by the way, in that area. Pretty skinny characters. Not very well-educated. Anyhow, getting back to this, when Alec and I are doing this deal, these two fellows went back here to get some supplies and when they got up here, this tree point, we knew we had to go this way. The English fellow argued with this other chap, "No, you're on the wrong track. You got to go North."

So what happened, instead of sticking together, the silly buggers parted because the English character went straight into the Japanese. Simple as that. Everything had, as I say, hit the fan. When Alec and I got back there, the other chap told us what happened, so we immediately set straight off went and retraced his steps and went right back to the other camp in case he'd got back there. We had our track pretty well-established. We knew where we were going. Anyhow, he wasn't there.

We knew that if he'd gone where this other [01:40:00] chap had told him where he headed for there isn't no chance for him. We went back to camp, and we got on the wireless that night and said that he was missing, believed, thought and we were in a bit of trouble. They said, "Well, get on the sched next morning at nine o'clock and we'll get instructions from Melbourne, because the staff officer down at Domain Road which is Airlie was and is now [01:40:24] police headquarters were probably out having a cocktail party.

Next morning, we're cleaning our equipment. I had a 45. I was cleaning that and no shirt on. Just a pair of trousers. I had my belt on and cleaning the 45 and unfortunately, I had about 80 gold sovereigns for trade but I'd put those down there. This is my story and I'm sticking to it but the English finance officer didn't believe me. The other officer was cleaning his pistol and Alec, whose turn it was to clean the Dixies-- was coming from the creek with the Dixies in hand and we had a great, big, fat rock where we used to use that to dish out the stuff and as he'd come with all those Dixies, now you got three Dixies. It's the first time I reckoned the four-letter word saved their lives.

He said, "Fucking Japs." and he dropped the Dixie. Up there, we looked up and there was all these bloody Japs coming up the valley and that frightened the shit out of them, I tell you that. They all got to their knees trying to take aim and we raced straight up the mountain. It took me an hour and 25 minutes to do that bloody [01:41:45] trip. Alec arrived five minutes after me. I was very careful that I didn't-- I thought the cap might have been blown on it with the other fellow being caught, but there's no Japs there. [01:42:00] Alec arrived about five minutes later. The first thing he said, "Give us a pair of new trousers." And he wasn't joking. We went down to the cliff and he washed himself. Anyhow, we waited there all day thinking this other chap might have got back, but he didn't make it. We left a note for him saying we're on our escape route. Which he would've known meant back this way.

Dave: Back to the first camp.



AUSTRALIAN COMMANDO ASSOCIATION VICTORIA

Lawrie: That night about midnight, we got in our cave and we got our 10-man rubber boat out which we had disobeyed orders, and when it's empty, of course there's like fluff like this and nothing in it and we had this little can of fuel, no funnel. We set off down here. Now, we knew down here, this Blongas Bay [01:42:48] bay in here that is a pretty busy spot. So we come out and camp right down here. It was very, very rough. I'm a great sailor except when we drift and every time the thing would stop because we ran out of fuel, Alec would say, "Hey. Come on."

I'd have to put my hands over like this to be a funnel. The thing was going up and down like that and I was going [unintelligible 01:43:10]. Anyhow, we eventually got right back here. There's a reef out here about 200 yards and we got right to the reef and made a stop for the last time. We went ashore and by this time, it was about four o'clock in the morning. We've slashed the boat by the way on the reef and got rid of the boat [01:43:31] so that sank outside the reef. We went ashore. We got nothing at all. Wet through and not very happy with ourselves.

We knew we had at least for the Japs up here to get around and come down these tracks it'd take them four days. We knew we had four days on them. We thought we did anyhow. But we were woken up at first light about quarter to six with a lot of these jabbering voices and looked up in the gloom. There was about 20 or 30 figures standing around us. [01:44:00] They were all natives. Why they found us, of course, around their clearing, it was their path going down to fishing. Anyhow, they were very - much more intelligent people.

After convincing them that we weren't Japanese, which if they had any sense they realized that. We didn't know what their level of education was. We told them we weren't Englishmen. We weren't Dutchmen. They were very happy about that. Then we tell them we're not Englishmen. We're Australians and when we said, "I know Australia." They did. It was fantastic. They really knew about Australia in those days. They said there was some Japanese in the village down there getting rice and recruiting labour. They went and hid us in a little kampong like a little village they had. Nobody lived there. They only used it for cultivation of their rice.

They had lean-tos there. We stayed there. To cut a long story short, they came back at night time and the whole bloody village came back. The kids were fantastic. The good type of people and they brought back old willow pattern crockery, which was crazed. And they bought us eggs and bloody salt, which is rock salt. Very strong. They gave us a decent feed. We said to them, "Now, look, we've got some supplies up in the beach along here. Take your line off the point. I know where it is." They said, "Oh, we know where it is."

I said, "Why didn't you touch it?" They said, "Oh, we thought it was the Japanese." The Japanese, they would've cut their heads off. So we got our wireless set. While they wanted us to stay in the village, we thought we don't want to risk. Could have one of the chaps there paid by the Japanese or something. We said, "No. We'll go to the other little camp." From there, we decided to go up in the hills behind there and try and get [01:46:00] a spot to get the wireless up. That evening, it was very funny inasmuch



AUSTRALIAN COMMANDO ASSOCIATION VICTORIA

as they'd never seen a wireless in their lives. We were able to tune in to some station that had bloody music playing, they thought it was fantastic. The gods had arrived or something. We even had to sing a song that night. They sang their native songs to us. We even taught them to sing *Waltzing Matilda*. Of course, we knew the Japs had gone. We knew that.

Anyhow, we went up in the hills and we eventually made contact with Darwin and told them where we were. We got ambushed on the 24th of April, it was. Morning of the 24th of April. We told them we wanted to be picked up in this area here down here a bit. It's a very big bay, you can see it is. Down the end of it here, there's a big mountain here. We didn't want to start going through here because you can see they've got **[unintelligible 01:47:06]**. They said, "Tune in tomorrow morning, and then we'll give you all instructions." Now, the next morning, we went down to this little village where we used to get the water from and there was nobody there and they used to be working the fields. There was nobody there. I said, "This is rather strange." We're just getting some water for ourselves and a very old man came up to us and said that the Japanese had arrived in the village. Now, that's the four days exactly that we thought they'd arrive. A very big patrol of them and they were looking for two Australians. I knew straightaway they're looking for two, they must have two. Therefore our whole escape route had been if they started torturing and that. By the way, we were given cyanide tablets in case you were caught. The first thing we had done with those is toss them away while there's life there's hope **[01:47:54]**. I think everybody in the unit used to do the same. **[01:48:00]**

The old chap said, "Now look, you'd better go because what they're doing, they're getting the young married men and they're asking if they've seen the Australians, and when they say no, they're cutting their heads off. So far they cut eight of their heads off. In a minute, one of the wives will know and she'll blow the whole story." I said, "Well, you tell everyone in the village we're making down here an escape route." That would've gone well if these fellows were being tortured. What we done, of course, we went up the hill. We got on this wireless set and we said and "We want to be picked up here." They come back with this message this morning that said, "Make a triangle far off this point just in here. A triangle far up the beach, and the Catalina will come and pick you up outside the reef." On the morning of the 2nd of May, now, this is about the 30th of April, this is. They had done this because of the tides and all this business. Which means we had to spend this couple of days.

So seeing we told these fellows we'd go on that way, we decided to go around ever decreasing circles around that area. We didn't want to stay in the one spot and as we're deciding this, we were laying there, and we were so bloody quiet, just the two of us laying there, and all we had was two hand grenades each we'd got out away with. and we might've picked them up from our cache, I forget now. I had a pistol. Alec didn't have anything. Only the two hand grenades and while we're lying there, two little deer came through. They really sniffed all around us in the jungle.

The next minute, I looked up, and I see this bloody oriental face looking at me through the jungle. I said to old Hoffy, "Listen, fellow **[01:50:00]** just don't make out you've



AUSTRALIAN COMMANDO ASSOCIATION VICTORIA

seen anything, because there's a little bastard watching us over there, and you get your hand grenades ready," so I say, "I'll start firing and you--" I looked up again, he'd gone. There were two of them, and I thought, "That's rather strange and they probably want to take us alive, get help," so we thought we wouldn't give them the chance, so I got on the wireless and in plain language I said, "Act on our last message. Japs on to us," or something, and we threw the crystal of the wireless set in the jungle and smashed the wireless set, and then we decided to do ever decreasing circles.

Now what I forgot to tell you, that for some unexplicable bloody reason, this signalman up here, when he went on this trip he had our codes with him, so the codes had gone into Japanese hands, and what the code we used there was purely one of those, "Mary had a little lamb," emergency code, so now I'm in the plain language. Of course, you imagine back in the day when they said, "What the hell's going on here?" They thought it might've been the Japs using it where they get somebody in there.

So we went round decreasing circles, and eventually on the night of the 1st of May we got down in here, and it's very steep, and we're up here like this about 5 o'clock in the afternoon holding ourselves against the trees there, and sure enough a patrol of Japanese started coming from the east along, so obviously he's taken notice of natives, that they're looking for us. That night we went down there, and I tell you what, that whole bay was lit up with fires. Every native around the area must've used that as his fishing spot, their fires so that they come back to it and we spent the night trying to look for driftwood and it's very difficult.

Now for some reason I'd also kept from the wireless set a little Singer sewing machine and a tin of wax matches which we used to carry with us. We eventually finished making **[01:52:00]** these triangle fires for the Catalina to land, and in the first light at 5:45 am we heard this noise coming through this mountain here, and we looked across, you can see this great big shape of this Catalina, and he came along like this, and he came out here, and all of a sudden he saw our fires he told us afterward, we thought, "He won't see this far," but he saw the three fires go up, and he swung across over to come to us like this, and in the middle of this bay down about 500ft there's a great big bank of clouds. It had been raining every night and this is the first night it hadn't actually been raining at that time. Big, black cloud, and he's heading for this big, black cloud coming down, and all of a sudden from round here, down Denpasar way, we look up and here's a plane about a 1000ft with navigation lights on, and, of course, it's dark we couldn't see what it was, and he said, "Well it's a Japanese fighter from Denpasar **[01:53:02]** out with the fires," so we outed the fires, and these two fellows crossed over here. It's this fellow like that, and how they missed one another, this cloud, they both went in the cloud.

When they came out of the cloud, we see the Catalina still coming, so he said, "Light the fires," so here we are lighting the fires, and we got them going for the second time. Then the Catalina went up here, it'd come back to make his run to land, and unbeknownst to us he'd dropped supplies to us, but we'd never saw them, which was a 10 man rubber boat and all this business.



AUSTRALIAN COMMANDO ASSOCIATION VICTORIA

Now he goes that way, and this fellow here, he turned round, and he's coming back at about 200ft above the water, and he said, "Well, he's going to strafe us and out with the fires again," so out with the fires again, behind the rocks, and as he swooped over us and done a bank [01:54:00] it was a damn Liberator, and unbeknownst to us the signal they wanted us to wait for saying they had a Liberator as top cover for the Catalina. Anyhow, in that course we hear the drone, look up, and here's the old Cat coming over the hill, so I light the fires again and we want to make sure he knew where to land.

We got two fires going but in desperation the pivot fire [01:54:20] there with a wax match, it's all under control. Anyhow, to cut a long story, he landed the other side of the reef, which was very, very, very rough sea out there, but we swam out to the reef and waited for the fellows to come ashore. They sent three fellows ashore from the unit three officers, who had photographs of us, because they thought that the Japanese might've been trying to get them and we might've been Japs [unintelligible 01:54:47] nearly because we had beards on for a couple of months.

The waves were very, very high, like Maroubra [01:54:54] or Malibah Beach, [unintelligible 01:54:56] out there 20ft, and we're trying to tell them to go back. We're on the reef, holding on this reef, and trying to tell them to go back, waves are smashing down, and sure enough they're so concerned who we are that boat got tipped over, and we literally rescued the rescuers. When we got aboard the boat, Allie HOFFIE by the way, had been suffering very severely from Blackwater Fever, which is very bad malaria. His legs were up like this, the poor bugger, the generator, he could hardly use the generator, and at night time, so it rained every night, we had no cover, and I used to get a hold of him and stop him from shivering. He was just shivering, very bad state, but he gets aboard this rubber boat, which we went and tossed out the sea, dragged these fellows in, and he got renewed courage. He was a real tough pioneer sergeant originally, and he said, "You bloody idiots, sent out there to do a man's job. Guys give us those bloody oars."

We get out over the reef [01:56:00] where it's a bit calmer, and he said, "Give us that water bottle," and the fellow said, "You can't drink. That'll make you sick." We eventually got aboard this thing, and this fellow's done a great job taking it off. He took it off, if you read the logbook of these, he took off at the top of the wave. Anyhow, we get back to Darwin about nine hours later, and first thing we got aboard the Cat when we took off, the little fellow, I'll never forget his name, Shorty Hughes, it was one of the airgunners and the cook, gave us steak and eggs, which was fantastic, in this Catalina they got galley there and everything else, because they fly for nearly 24 hours these things.

We went to sleep in the blister, Alec and I, and they wake us up about an hour out of Darwin, and they said, "Come on, you fellows, get dressed." They'd put our clothes in the blister to get dry, and poor old Alec says, "Jesus Blackie, I'm in trouble," "What's wrong?" He says, "Look at this, a bloody cap and two ludes and I'm totally stuffed." Anyhow we got back and we both went to Darwin hospital, where old Alec was a man of indomitable spirit. He's alive today but he's not the best, but I was asked to go



AUSTRALIAN COMMANDO ASSOCIATION VICTORIA

around and see him, and that's the terrible thing. You work together, there's no rank in the unit really, and we got back to civilization and he's got to go the Sergeant's ward and I've got to go to the Officer's ward, but I was asked to go round and see him by-- One of the specialists said, "He's not too good, he mightn't last a day out." I went round there, and he's got just his pyjama coat on, and there's just a sheet over it, and I said, "What's the matter, Alec?" He said, "Look at this, they're worried about this," and his legs were like that, and you'd stick your finger in and the indentation would stay there and just slowly come out, see.

He said, "What's got these bloody sisters worried," he said, "It's this," **[unintelligible 01:57:48]** like this too, "It's what they're worried," he says, "The bloody thing won't go hard," and that was his spirit, and they flew him down to Greenslopes where he survived. He was in a hospital there for six months. He's lucky to be alive. **[01:58:00]** Well, that's about the story of that operation. A few things come out of that, of course, which first of all the six bottles of beer that landed I never expected to get. When I got back I said to the CO, he was an Englishman by the way from SOE, I said, "I didn't expect to get that beer," he said, "Well," he said, "I knew you were only joking," but he said, "When Melbourne rang me and told me that doesn't Black know there's a war on?" He said, "I thought you should get it." There's these fellows down there at the Domain road.

Dave: [crosstalk]

Lawrie: Yes, but the thing is on that operation I think it's proved that the fact the party must have the right to change the orders depending on what the situation is like, like when we saw those aerial photographs were just bloody ridiculous, we kept the boat, which we would never have been saved for the boat. Today, anybody does an exercise like we done and expect to get picked up 45 years later than what we were there, got no chance. They've haven't advanced 45 years at all because there's no Catalinas anymore.

Probably the Russians, they launched one the other day a turbo prop **[01:59:11]** you might be able to buy some from him, but there's no seaplanes could do that range anymore. There's no use sending helicopters, they can't do it, all you'll have to rely on will be your submarine.

Dave: Submarines.

Lawrie: But they did have a submarine waiting for us by the way, in that signal we didn't know nothing about here, but we didn't have a boat to get out there anyhow, because the boat that they dropped, we didn't even see it. You must speak the language, and you must be nice to the people. Now that was proved with these people down here, how they looked after us, and another thing I think that we could smell the natives and their smoking. Nobody should smoke. You could smell smoke a long way. That's about it. Any questions?



AUSTRALIAN COMMANDO ASSOCIATION VICTORIA

Dave: You mentioned earlier on once the Englishman had gone with your codes you used Mary had a little lamb as a code.

Lawrie: Oh no, something like that.

Dave: Something like that was that something you had as a patrol, an emergency code as a patrol or did each individually man have a--

Lawrie: No, we had as a patrol.

Dave: That's very interesting. Your opinion, as a patrol commander, was that you should have sole selection of the men involved as far as possible.

Lawrie: As far as possible because each one's got to get on with one another, that's the beauty and they got to know the chaps. The three chaps that I picked originally, we all got on very well together. We'd been together before. That just proves the point how wrong it is because when you're on your own, you get little things upset people. Might be the way he does his hair, it might be the way he uses one word, all of a sudden it gets on your--

I was up in New Guinea with a crowd and we're coming back. We've been together for some time, we're coming back and we had to wait, it was the big push up to Hollandia and that and we were coming back when everybody was going forward. We're waiting for a plane at Moresby and one of these chaps [02:01:10] but now there's six of us, we organized very well together, but this fellow wouldn't swear and

He was saying some words like blimey or something, instead of oh, dammit or something. Honestly, this big fellow is with us, he's just had him, the last week. He goes, "For Christ's sake, why did I just--?" That's the things that you have to be very careful of. When you're away on your own like that, there's nobody you can go home to mother and talk about it. I tell you that for sure, it's a long way from home. The post-script on that by the way, is the fact that those two chaps were beheaded up here.

The Japs like to say they were shot fighting, that's all phooey because you don't take bodies over mountains up to here and bury them up there. They are buried in Ambon in the Australian War Cemetery. [02:02:00]

Dave: Okay, that's fine. Thank you very much, Lawrie.

Lawrie: It's a pleasure.

**Transcription funded by Victorian Veterans Council - Victoria Remembers
Minor Grant 2020**

