

# Death Railway

## T O U R S

### **Alex. 'Lofty' Croft – 4<sup>th</sup> Anti-Tank** **'The Big Tough Young Victorian'**

Uncle Lofty as I knew him was big; he was huge when you are six or seven years old; even his war time mates thought him a big bloke hence the nickname. When dad died in 1977 Uncle Lofty would later periodically visit and teach me how to play Chess; we would walk to the 'Lolly' Shop and I could choose any three things at the lolly counter. Gee I loved him coming over not just because of the lollies, even though they were enjoyable; he was a great connection to my dad.

I saw Uncle Lofty again in my late teens and then I hadn't seen him for some time. I joined the RAAF Police and after work went to visit him – it was a parade day at work so I was in full uniform. I knocked at the door however he wasn't home; I left a business card at this door knowing he would see what I had become. I think he would have laughed that I ended up a military Copper.

I don't know if Uncle Lofty was in the famous tank smashing in Malaya at Gemas of the Japanese 'Hago' Tanks – I hope he was – I would have thought as a kid he could pick one up himself he was that huge. Anti-tank, I used to think – gee he could smash em himself.

Uncle Lofty and my dad went with J Force from Changi Prison to Kobe Japan on the Hellship 'Wales' Maru, living in a prison camp aptly known as 'Kobe House'. Dad and Lofty became good friends, I'm not sure if that friendship started in Changi, in the stinking holds of the Wales Maru or at Kobe. One story of them both together in that prison camp pits them together, against a Japanese Sergeant Major (SGT MAJ) and a Kempeitai Japanese Military Policeman. This brief story is sourced from 'The Story of J Force' edited by Alex Dandie 1986:

"One of the boys discovered a large bale of Army socks. By this time we were all expert pilferers, scroungers, and just plain thieves. It was all tied up with survival; we helped ourselves to about three pairs each, not worrying about the inevitable consequences of this rater stupid act.

It was discovered, of course and all that the job Hanchos had to do was check, who was working on the job and then go through our belongs in the camp. We were identified by our numbers and then it was on. We were told that we were being tried for sabotaging Japanese Army Stores during war time, which carried the death penalty in every Army in the world.

We were interrogated by a Kempei Tai Officer, one who could speak English. Standing alongside us as we stood to attention was SGT MAJ Marita, from 'Kobe House'. He was as scared as we were. He knew that

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he could get the big 'chop' also for any lack of discipline in the camp. It would all be sheeted home to him. It was here that the Japs made their first monumental blunder; we were not interrogated on our own. We were all thrown in the one room.

Poor 'Bluey' Hansen was first. He was asked, if we were searched every night, when we came back to camp, regardless of what job we had been working on. Bluey said that we were not searched all the time.

Straightaway he was the recipient of a sizzling left hook to the mouth by Marita. That addled his brains a bit. He became very confused, and finished up an unconscious wreck at the hands of Marita.

Bluey Hansen never fully recovered from this beating. Previously he was a rather shy but friendly fellow; afterwards he became extremely depressed, nervous and inhibited. His health deteriorated to the extent that only our relief saved him.

Incidentally this Marita hurt his wrist once in camp hitting an Australian. The Pommy Cooks, who had the best job in the camp obviously, showed Marita how to throw a punch properly. From then on he laid out dozens of us, including the dim-wit Pommy who showed him how to do it in the first place.



SGT MAJ Marita

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The next one for questioning was Alex. 'Lofty' Croft, a big tough young Victorian, who made a few mistakes, but Marita never worried him. He knew how to ride Marita's haymakers and he had a reputation in the camp as a scrounger. But they got nothing out of him in relation to the socks.'

Prior to this effort, Lofty my dad and others had fashioned a key from soap and had it made in a nearby factory; they had their own key to a storeroom where they had to lock themselves in to 'shop'. The hard part was bringing back the goods to camp – where the chance of being searched was high and consequences even higher.

Uncle Lofty of the 4<sup>th</sup> Anti-Tank and dad were mates for life right up until my dad died. I always looked forward to seeing good old Uncle Loft.

Andrew Mason. For tours of the Thai-Burma Railway twice a year; please visit [www.deathrailwaytours.com.au](http://www.deathrailwaytours.com.au) for further information.



Im the small guy – 6 years old. Behind me in the brown jumper is Uncle Lofty. Back right is Uncle Ernie. Im holding Dad's hand and next to dad is a POW mate. All are WW2 veterans in the pic (except of course the small dude). You can see why I thought Uncle Lofty could lift a tank on his own – he's massive.