

# Death Railway

## T O U R S

### A 'Typo' Saved Rod Wells' life of the 8<sup>th</sup> Division Signals

**(He was destined to be executed with Captain Lionel Matthews).**

One of my dad's officers – Lieutenant (LT) Rod Wells was destined to be executed along with Captain Lionel Matthews GC MC by the Japanese. A bureaucratic stuff up by the Japanese saved his life – or he would have been executed like Captain Matthews.

Wells joined the Army in 1940 and in particular the Signals corps; he was commissioned on the 1<sup>st</sup> of November 1940. He was posted to Malaya where his first duties were associated with high frequency (HF) radio sets; that were fitted to Army vehicles. Later during the campaign he was involved in searching for radios hidden by locals etc and being secretly used to communicate to the Japanese. He was later attached to Malaya Command as Posts and Telecommunications Liaison Officer.

***LT Wells was nailed into a crate, loaded into the hold of a ship and transferred back to Singapore to the infamous Outram Road Jail.***

The fall of Singapore. He spent the first few months as a POW with the rest of the Aussies in Selerang Barracks (Changi) and on 7 July 1942 went with 1,494 other POWs with B Force. He left Singapore harbor aboard the tramp ship 'Ubi Maru' and arrived in Sandakan Harbour 11 days later on 18 July 1942.



Left: Captain Lionel Matthews and right LT Rod Wells. (AWM 059358 & PO3863.001)

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After arriving at Sandakan; LT Wells became active in the secret underground network with other officers including Captain Lionel Matthews (one of my dad's Commanding Officers) who was also appointed Intelligence Officer.

Matthews rapidly extended the underground organization. Some of Matthews and Wells' activities with the underground included intel gathering, country data for use in possibly future escape plans, the production of a weekly letter service to and from the governor (imprisoned nearby); the acquisition of an armoury and the collections of parts to build a secret radio.

Captain Matthews also arranged for the smuggling of medical supplies, food and money. When the Governor was transferred to Kuching; he inherited the title: 'British North Borneo Armed Constabulary'; at great personal risk he began preparing for an uprising against the Japanese and began mobilizing the local population for the same purpose.

With contacts made in the local Chinese community; the group managed to acquire enough parts for Wells to build a radio receiver and then later a transmitter.

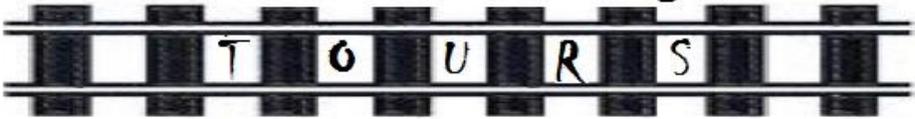
Unfortunately there were collaborators among the Chinese helpers (an Indian) and therefore the Japanese Kempetai received information about the radio. The latter conducted a major search of the camp and found a 'radio parts list' – incriminating evidence there was radio activity underway against express orders. The raid found maps, diaries and the radio parts.



This pic was taken in 1950 of Mr Dick Majinal – one of the first civilians to approach Captain Matthews for the underground movement. (AWM 2494.038)

The radio parts list was linked to LT Wells and was confronted by Captain Hoshijima; who after some brutal interviewing; led the Kempeitai party to the transmitter; leaving the receiver in its hiding place. LT Wells was immediately arrested and paraded before

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the entire camp; he was transported to the Kempri HQ and eventually to Kuching where he was joined by many others who formed part(s) of the Sandakan underground.

LT Wells was brutally tortured as the Japanese unsuccessfully tried to extract info from him. In February 1944 all the accused personnel were tried and found guilty at a Japanese Court Martial. On 28<sup>th</sup> of February 1944; LT Wells and Captain Matthews were both sentenced to death.

The Japanese HQ in Kuching sent a signal to Japanese Command in Saigon requesting permission to execute the two Aussie Officers. The reply from Japanese Command in Vietnam only authorized one execution. Later after the war it was discovered this was a typo error and Wells therefore was not executed.

Both men were brought before the Japanese (Kangaroo) court once more on 29 February 1944; the sentence of death was confirmed and Captain Matthews was shot on 2 March 1944. As the court did not have the authority to execute LT Wells; the court sentenced him to 12 years penal servitude in solitary confinement. Lionel Matthews was posthumously awarded the George Cross and the Military Medal for actions in Singapore. At the time he was the highest decorated soldier in the Army Signals Corps. He received his Military Cross ribbon whilst in Changi Prison by the British Commander in Chief: LTGEN Percival.

LT Wells was nailed into a crate, loaded into the hold of a ship and transferred back to Singapore to the infamous Outram Road Jail. He was finally released in August 1945 having endured 21 long months from the Kempeitai's jailers; surviving what was probably the longest period of solitary confinement in the Pacific War.

LT Wells was one of only a few men to survive the Sandakan POW Camp; some officers were transferred to Kuching; however only six POWs survived (after escaping). The remaining POWs died, many during the infamous Sandakan to Ranau death marches.

The Japanese offered Captain Matthews the choice of death by firing squad or by Samurai Sword. He chose the firing squad and died facing his foes; he was buried at Kuching but his remains were later re-interred at Labaun after the war.

After the war LT Wells studied at Melbourne Uni; graduating with a Bachelor of Science and Dip Ed. In 1951 he was again commissioned into the Army; raising to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel; before resigning his commission in 1960. He continued his distinguished career in communications and engineering in the Public Service.

Captain Matthews' parting words to Lt Wells was:

"Rod, you'll get home. Give my love to Lorna and to my son."

I had the honour to attend the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Captain Matthews' execution at Army Signals Barracks (Watsonia – Simpson Barracks) on 2<sup>nd</sup> of March 1994; LTCOL Rod Wells was there and I got to meet him; he gave the tribute to Captain Matthews.

A portrait was unveiled on that day that stands in the Signals School for all staff and students to see.

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## The Military Cross Citation for Captain Matthews:

During operations at Gemas, this officer succeeded in maintaining cable communications between his brigade headquarters and units under heavy artillery and mortar fire and aerial bombardment displaying a high standard of courage, energy and ability in doing so. Later, during the operations on Singapore Island, Captain Matthews succeeded in laying cable over ground strongly patrolled by the enemy thus restoring communication between his divisional headquarters and the headquarters of a brigade at a critical period.

Source: The Australian, AWM and 50<sup>h</sup> Memorial Service program.