

He and his comrades were forgotten soldiers of the AIF. But today, embattled jungle warriors sing the praises of

BILL DOOLAN ... WHO DIED GAME

The island of Ambon is in the South Moluccas. It is 580 miles from Darwin. Today, its hills echo to the rattle of small-arms fire as the Ambonese, small dark warriors, many of whom are Christians, fight back against the troops of the Republic of Indonesia. The Ambonese say South Molucca is a republic, too, and they refuse to yield to the rule of Soekarno's government. Australians should watch this Ambonese resistance. Should the

communist penetration of Indonesia continue, the South Moluccas will be of more than ordinary strategic importance to the Commonwealth. As they wage their guerilla warfare, the Ambonese sing a song. It's about an Australian soldier whom they knew, a mighty warrior called Bill Doolan, an 8th Division hero of Gull Force — unit of heroes — whose story Australians, having read it here, should never forget.

By **SHAUN McILRAITH**

THERE is in Australia a small band of unsung war heroes. They went through torments for their country and most still bear, on their bodies and in their minds, the scars of the sufferings they endured. Theirs was one of the most gallant and tragic actions in the annals of Australian arms. These forgotten men are the survivors of the Australian garrison which defended Ambon Island in the South Moluccas against overwhelmingly superior enemy forces in the opening phase of the war against Japan. More than 13 years have passed but their story has never been fully told.

The story is a glorious one, worthy to rank beside that of Gallipoli and Tobruk. But it is also, the forgotten men say, one of political ineptitude and fuzzy strategical planning. The force sent to defend Ambon was hopelessly inadequate. No provision was made to reinforce or evacuate it, and, when the fighting started, it was left to its fate. The Ambon garrison consisted of a single battalion, plus ancillary troops, a total of



Gull Force made its heroic stand in jungle country like this (which is on a neighboring island). They had no time for taking pictures.



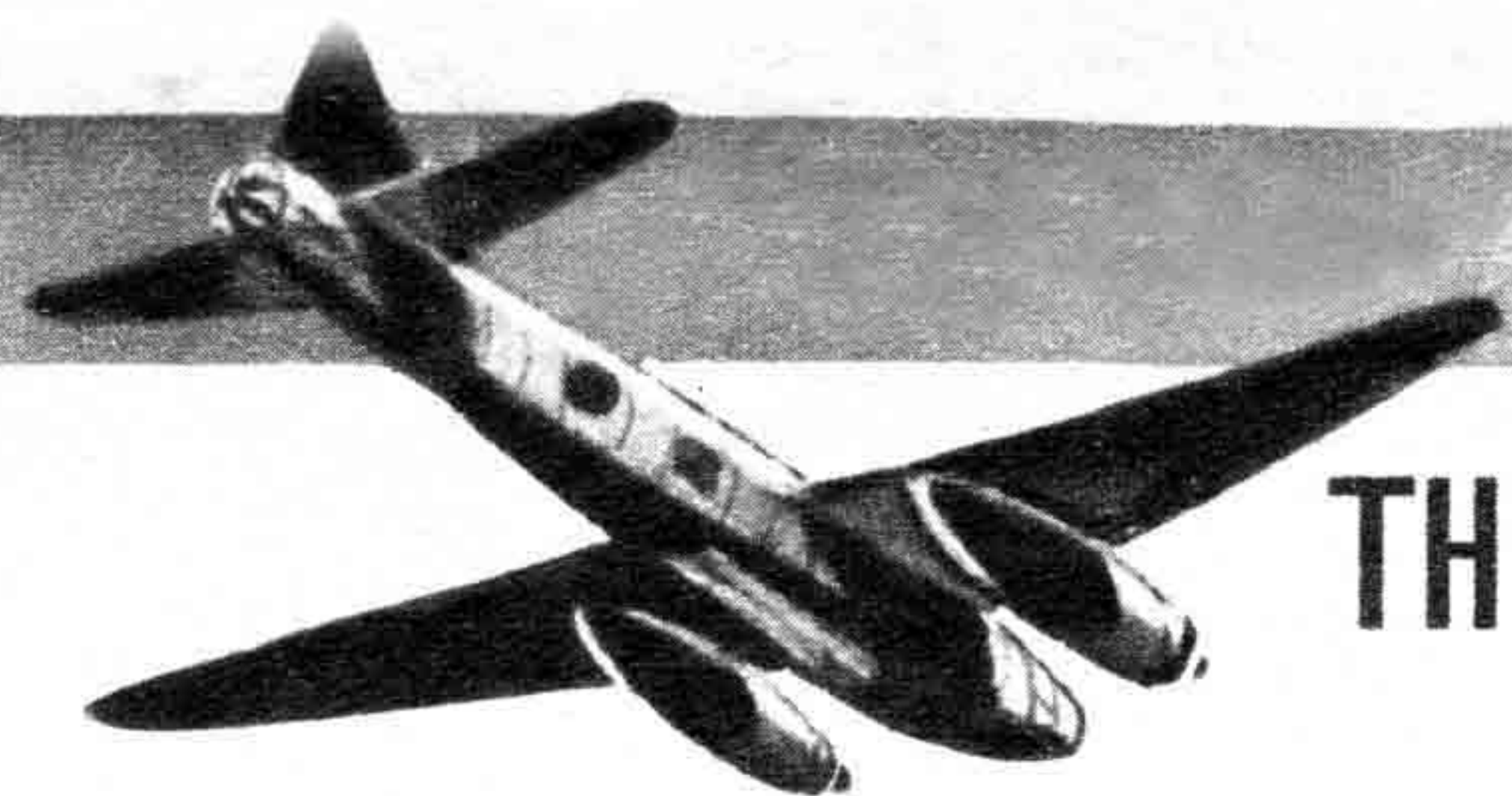
Long rows of crosses in the war cemetery beside the Ambon harbor mark the graves of hundreds of Australians who died on the island.



Not a man of 13 Platoon, C Coy. (pictured) lived to describe how they fought for Laha airfield. Centre (with hat) is Miskin's brother.



In this "hospital" at the Hainan prison camp off the coast of China Australians from Ambon cared for their desperately sick comrades.



THE AMBON BATTLE

1396 men. It was attacked by a Japanese division numbering some 27,000 men. Taking into account the soldiers held in reserve aboard the Jap transports and the sailors and seamen who manned the invasion fleet, the odds against the Australians were about 80 to 1. Yet the Australians, armed with World War I weapons, managed to hold out for five days before being borne down by weight of numbers.

Of the 1396 men who fought on Ambon only 305 lived to return to Australia. That is one of the highest casualty rates in military history, 20 pc higher than that suffered by the Light Brigade in its famous charge. Although there is no definite record of the Ambon casualties, about 600 men are believed to have been killed in the fighting. Nearly 500 more died in hell-hole prison camps on Ambon and Hainan Island, off the south coast of China. After the war evidence was given that 68 Australians, captured during the fighting, had been butchered on the spot by the Japanese.

Although the Ambon defenders have never received from their country proper acknowledgment of their heroism on Ambon they are not forgotten. The Ambonese, good fighters themselves, still honor their valiant stand in a national war chant about an AIF transport driver named William Thomas Doolan. Bill Doolan's body was found during the battle in the centre of a double ring of Japanese dead, whom he had slain single-handed. The Ambonese ever since have regarded Doolan in particular and the Australians in general as the embodiment of military virtue.

He inspired a war chant

Today, when they go into battle, the Ambonese sing a war chant inspired by his exploits. They sing it to the tune of *The Rose In Her Hair*, a popular ballad among the Australians who fought on Ambon. The song runs in part:

*Caught by the great guns, machine guns and rifles
Of the Australians on Ambon,
Thousands of Japanese lay dead and wounded.
From his tree the Australian Doolan killed many men of Japan.
He did not run away or move back.
Until at last he was killed by the men of Japan.*

*The tale is told everywhere.
The Australian soldier Doolan killed many Japanese
Then died by the bullets of the men of Japan.
Calling his mother, father, wife and children,
But they did not hear him.*

The story of the men of Ambon begins in December, 1941. In that month the American-British-Dutch-Australian unified command, set up after the outbreak of

war with Japan, decided to send small Australian forces to defend Ambon, Timor and Rabaul. The task of defending Ambon fell to the 2/21st Battalion. The battalion and its ancillary forces was named *Gull Force*. Two sister battalions, which with the 21st formed the 23rd Brigade, 8th Division, were sent to Timor and Rabaul. These, too, were destined to be swamped by vastly bigger Japanese forces.

Gull Force left Darwin for Ambon a week after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour on December 8. The 21st, a Victorian battalion, was commanded by Lieut-Colonel L. M. Roach MC. Soon after its arrival at Ambon on December 17 Colonel Roach was replaced by Lieut-Colonel W. R. J. Scott, DSO, a World War I veteran flew into Ambon.

Best fighters in islands

Ambon, then part of the Netherlands East Indies and a Dutch naval base, is in the Ceram Sea off the western tip of Dutch New Guinea, about 580 miles north of Darwin. It is about 266 square miles in area and has a fine harbor, 14 miles long and three to six miles wide, which almost cuts the island in two. Its native inhabitants are renowned as the best fighters in the Indonesian archipelago. For the past four years they have been the spearhead of the South Moluccan revolt against the Indonesian public.

Among the men who took part in the defence of Ambon was Sydney caterer Philip Miskin, a 43-year-old Welshman who migrated to Australia in 1936 and enlisted in the AIF at the outbreak of World War II. Miskin, a former secretary and vice-president of the 8th Division Association Council, gathered much of the Ambon story at first hand and filled in other details after the war. He does not seek personal publicity but gives his account in the hope that it will bring to the public attention the service rendered to Australia by hisrades, living and dead.

Miskin went to Ambon captain in the 21st Battalion. On the island he was given charge of B Echelon, Battalion HQ, a collection of transport drivers, HQ staff, signallers and others generally regarded as the odds and ends of the battalion.

Force was poorly armed

He says that *Gull Force* was excellently trained but poorly armed. It had no artillery support and there were only about 20 automatic weapons for the 1396 men. The weapons, with the exception of between 200 and 300 rifles and a few Vickers machine-guns, were of World War I vintage.

The battalion got a slight, but welcome addition to its armament from an unexpected source.

A battalion fought a whole division. Only 305 survived.

American airmen fleeing from the Philippines stripped the air-cooled Browning machine-guns from their planes before leaving Ambon for Australia and the Australians eagerly seized the discarded weapons.

Requests for reinforcements drew little response from a Higher Command, troubled by its commitments in other areas. A few days before the Jap invasion the transport *Kanimbla* berthed at Ambon with a draft of 30 raw recruits. Some of them didn't even know how to load a rifle. A Jap air raid started as they were about to disembark.

The Japs began to raid Ambon early in January, 1940. The invasion was heralded by 10 days of intensive bombing. Each day the Japs launched 70-plane raids in an attempt to "soften up" the island's defences. The Australians, however, were well dug in and suffering surprisingly few casualties.

First news of the approach of the Jap armada was received on January 28, two days before the actual invasion. RAAF reconnaissance planes spotted the fleet heading south from Menado, southern Philippines. This was the last service rendered by the RAAF Hudson bomber squadron stationed on Ambon. The squadron had harassed Jap shipping converging on the NEI, but the Japs had destroyed many of its planes during a raid on the Ambon aerodrome at Laha. As soon as the Jap invasion fleet was sighted the squadron was ordered back to Australia. "The dirtiest trick ever played on white men," was one RAAF officer's comment on the withdrawal.

The first kamikaze

But one pilot refused to desert his army cobbles. He lingered behind on Ambon and, when the Jap task force appeared, made a lone attack. Miskin saw him plunge into the middle of the Jap fleet. According to one report the plane crashed on to a Jap transport and sank it. "That," says Miskin, "seems to have been the first kamikaze action of the Pacific War."

The Jap invasion fleet consisted of 23 warships, including three cruisers and five destroyers, and 28 transports. It carried 32,000 troops, 27,000 of whom were used in the Ambon fighting. The assault on Ambon began on the night of January 30. Had the Australians been able to keep to their original plan of defence, the Japs might have been held off much longer.

The key to the defence of Ambon was the harbor, which thrusts like a knife into the heart of the island. It was obvious that an enemy in control of this water could deal the defenders a death blow. So the harbor was mined and a Dutch battery posted on the shore to prevent the entry of Jap mine sweepers.

These measures could have

made the harbor impregnable. The Australians assumed that they had, and concentrated on the defence of the aerodrome at Laha, on the northern side of the harbor, and the most likely lines of attack around the island perimeter. B and C companies and a detachment of HQ company were set to guard the aerodrome. The rest of the battalion was scattered on the southern side of the harbor. A company was stationed at Latahalot near the mouth of the harbor. A detachment of pioneers was posted on Mount Nona, highest point on the island. Don company, Battalion HQ and B Echelon were strung out below Mount Nona on the harbor side. B Echelon entrenched itself in a coconut grove on top of Koedamati Hill, which overlooks the harbor and the town of Ambon.

Tombstone camouflage

On the hillside immediately below B Echelon was a Christian, Moslem and Chinese cemetery. The dead were to help the living in the battle for Ambon. Miskin safeguarded his ammunition from air attack by white-washing the ammunition cases and laying them along the graves in the cemetery. From the air they looked like tombstones and the Jap pilots passed over without giving them a second glance.

No such success attended the general strategy of the Australians. Within two days the Japs had thrown the whole defence system out of gear. They attacked along supposedly "impossible" approaches, and worst of all, they broke into the harbor.

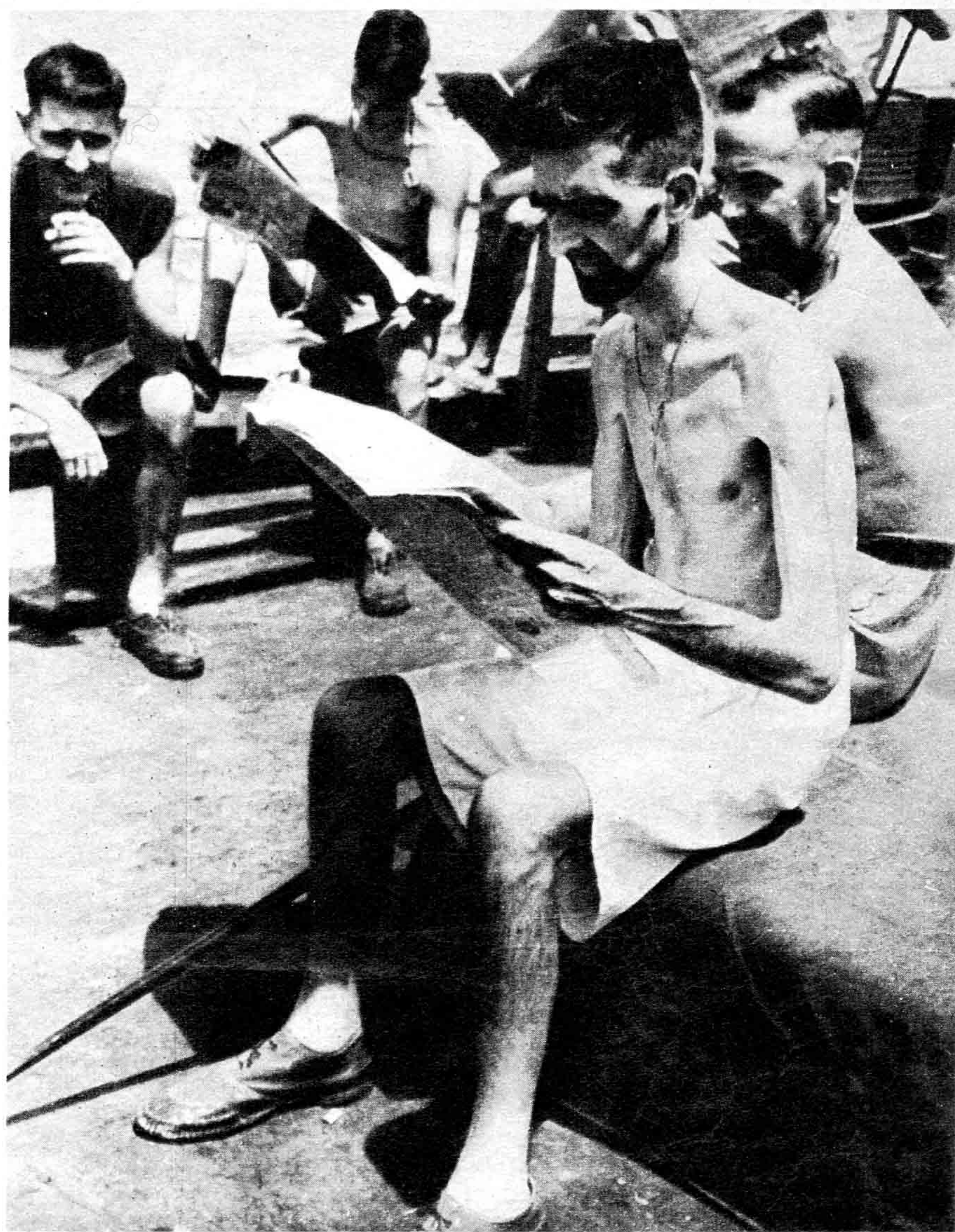
Blame for this set-back rests with the Dutch gunners assigned to cover the harbor minefield, says Miskin. At the first appearance of the fleet they spiked their guns and fled, allowing the Jap mine-sweepers to enter the heads unmolested and to clear away the mines.

That afternoon the Jap warships, followed by the transports, swept into the harbor and began to bombard the Australian defences at pointblank range. B Echelon, normally in the rear of the battalion, found itself in front as a result of this unexpected attack. Miskin's position was only 500yds from the belching muzzles of the Jap naval guns. Miskin says the first Japanese writing he ever saw was inscriptions on the guns which shelled him.

Odds were too heavy

The odds and ends of B Echelon fought back magnificently under the terrible pounding of the naval barrage. They swept the decks of the warships with rifle, machine-gun and mortar fire. But the exchange was unequal. In return for .303 and .5 inch bullets and 3-inch mortar bombs they got 4 and 6in shells.

Nevertheless fire from a Browning, manned by a Corporal



Survivors of Gull Force who were kept in Ambon were years behind with the news when they boarded a hospital ship to return home.

Hawkins, made things so hot for one Japanese destroyer that it retreated crab-wise into the stream. It was the first sizeable warship to fall victim to a medium machine-gun. As it squirmed out it ran into the only mine overlooked by the minesweepers and blew up. A column of smoke, flame and debris shot 1200 feet into the air. Hawkins claimed the destroyer as a "kill." Miskin told him to chalk it up and promised that after the war he'd give him the Browning as a prize. But Hawkins did not live to collect his trophy. He died in a prison camp.

The destroyer was sunk on the third day of the invasion. On the first day the Japs had infiltrated between the Australian positions, isolating the different units. By the end of the day most of the 100 men in B Echelon had either been wounded, battered by shell blast or grazed by shrapnel and spattering coral. The sky was red with the glow from oil storage tanks near the town, exploded by Dutch and Australian engineers. The town itself had been set afire by a Jap column which had penetrated from the coast. B Echelon, looking down on the smoke and flames, heard the screams of the inhabitants as the Japs marched through the streets, killing, raping and pillaging.

The Japs, convinced that their shelling from the harbor had wiped out all opposition, began to land in strength on the second day. A whole battalion swarmed ashore on the harbor edge below B Echelon. Miskin ordered his men to hold their fire. The Japs loosed a few rounds in the direction of the Australian positions and, drawing no reply, slung their

arms and began to march up the hill in column of route.

Miskin let them get within pointblank range then gave the order to fire. The sudden hail of bullets and mortar bombs caught the Japs by surprise. They ran like rabbits back to the boats. About 200 were killed or mortally wounded.

That same day B Echelon repelled another attack from the east. A Jap contingent, which landed in the perimeter of the island, occupied the Dutch sanatorium, which stands on a hill dominating Koedamati. From here they were able to fire down into the Australian slit trenches. At the height of the duel between the two groups an ambulance with a large red cross on its side drove up from the town of Ambon towards the Japanese position.

Ceasefire for ambulance

Miskin, obeying the articles of war, ordered a ceasefire while the ambulance climbed to the enemy strongpoint. A moment later a rain of mortar bombs from behind the ambulance made him regret his scrupulous observance of the rules. The Japs had brought up the mortar under cover of the Red Cross.

But the Australians had their revenge. A fighting patrol, led by an engineer lieutenant named Campbell, set out to "get" the mortar, which was seriously menacing the Australian defences. It lay for a whole day within attacking range of the enemy position. After nightfall the Australians pounced on the unwary Japs, killing the mortar crew and destroying the mortar.



The defenders had rifles, but their only automatic weapons were a few Vickers machine-guns like this. They made good use of some Brownings stripped from their planes by US airmen from the Philippines.

Jap dead lay all around

On the second day of fighting a Japanese party, which had advanced along a supposedly impossible route over spiny coral on the south side of the island, engaged the pioneer detachment on Mount Mona. The 18 pioneers, under Lieutenant Bill Jenkins, fought back with the ferocity of mountain lions. Miskin, busy on his own front, listened tensely to a grenade by grenade description of the clash, given over the unit wireless by a pioneer signaller. "It was the most dramatic running commentary I've ever heard," he says. The 18 pioneers held the Japs for four hours. Then their ammunition ran out and they fell back on Don Company.

Fierce fight for airfield

Meanwhile a fierce battle was raging for Laha aerodrome. From his position on Koedamati Hill Miskin could see the drome across the harbor. His brother was the lieutenant in command of 13 Platoon, C Company, one of the two companies defending the aerodrome.

The Japs had sent a whole brigade to take the aerodrome from the two Australian companies. They treated the attack as a brigade exercise. Miskin, racked by anxiety for his brother's safety, saw them throw one battalion into action, then withdraw it and send in a second fresh battalion, which in turn was rested and replaced by a third. The Australians, despite the odds against them, repelled the enemy time and time again. At night Miskin could see the red-hot barrels of their mortars glowing in the jungle around the edge of the airstrip.

For three days the two companies defied every attempt of the Japanese to drive them from their positions. Then suddenly silence fell on the arena and Miskin knew the battle was over. He never saw his brother again. Not one of the Australians on the drome lived to tell of their brave resistance. Years later, at the end of the war, grim evidence of the brutality of the Jap conquerors was unearthed. The skulls of 68 skeletons dug up near the battlefield were found to be severed from the spines. Around the wrists of each skeleton was a loop of wire. It was evident from these signs that 68 Australians had survived the battle but had been beheaded by their captors.

The first few days of the Ambon saga were packed with acts of individual heroism. But none equalled that of the transport driver Doolan, whose name is now legend on Ambon. Doolan, who belonged to B Echelon, was typical of the tough, resourceful breed of Australian. During the Ambon fighting he was often heard to exclaim, "Give me a yard of bike chain and I'll do the —'s over." There is no exact account of his activities, however, because the details were lost in the heat of battle. Some say he killed and wounded 80 Japanese with a machine-gun, while perched in a tree.

But his Ambonese wash-boy told Miskin a different story. He said Doolan was a member of a Headquarters fighting patrol which attacked Japanese headquarters in Ambon town on the third day of the invasion. The attack was daring in concept and execution.

The Australians drove into the town in a truck, waving gaily to the inhabitants and the Japanese invaders. The effrontery of their tactics got them through. The Japanese assumed the truck was one of their own and let it pass. After grenading the enemy headquarters, the Australians abandoned the vehicle and fought their way out of the town, on foot.

Doolan, according to his wash-boy, made his last, magnificent stand in a clump of jungle half way between the town and the B Echelon position. He turned on his pursuers and with rifle, bayonet and grenade strewn the earth around him with two rings of Japanese dead, before falling dead himself.

As the fighting for the island progressed the plight of the Australians became more and more extreme. Their only food was bully beef and, by the fourth day, they had no water to wash it down.

The inevitable surrender

And, by this time, the Australians on the southern half of the island, with the exception of B Echelon, had been driven back towards the tip of the peninsula on the south of the harbor. This meant that Miskin's rear-guard was now several miles in front of the forward rifle company. Miskin didn't retreat because he was well dug in and had been given a "hold or die" order.

But bravery alone could not withstand the crushing weight of the Japanese attack. On the fifth day came the inevitable surrender. B Echelon, still entrenched and undefeated on Koedamati Hill, obtained two hours' grace during

DAILY MASS AIR RAIDS

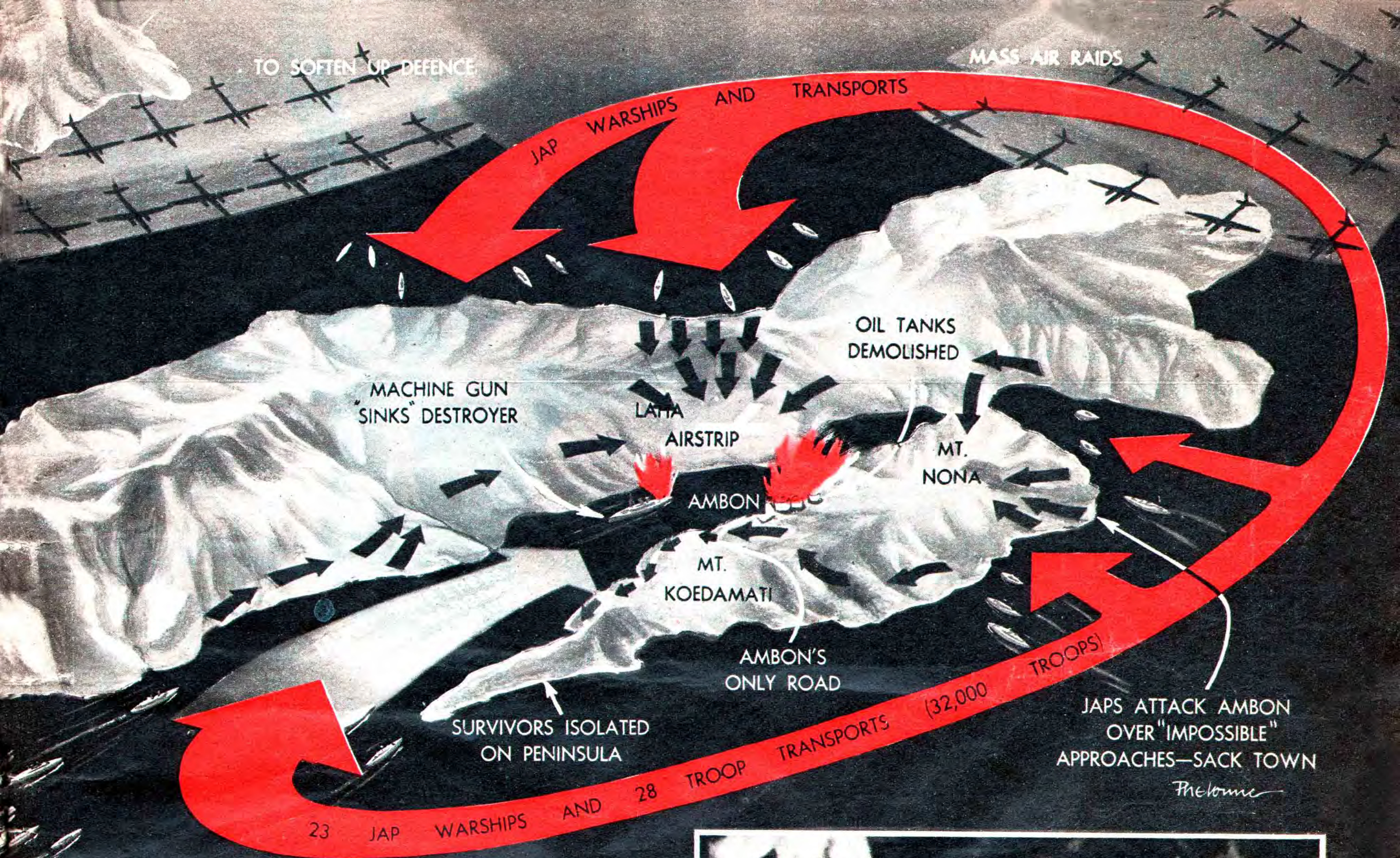


SUICIDE ATTACK
BY R.A.A.F. PILOT

which it destroyed its arms and ammunition. The men were prepared to fight on, even though their strength was nearly exhausted after five sleepless nights and tongues were black and swollen from lack of water. The coconut grove in which they had dug their trenches was a bristle of tree stumps when the fighting ended.

The lowest estimate of Japanese killed on Ambon exceeds 2000—nearly two Japanese dead for every Australian in action. Although the Australian stand lasted only five days it may have been vital to the defence of Australia. Miskin says the Japs had intended to take Ambon in 24 hours then press on to Australia. Because of the stand on Ambon it was 14 days before the Japanese were able to refuel their ships. By that time there had been a change in the strategy of the Japanese high command.

The sufferings of the Australians increased with the surrender. The Ambon prisoners were treated as brutally by the Japanese as their 8th Division comrades, captured in Malaya. They were fed on putrid scraps and beaten constantly with rifle butts, iron bars and even baseball bats. Their MO, Dr. Bill Aitken, was beaten for refusing to certify as suicides men who were actually bashed to death.



AMBON INVASION:

A 10-day mass air attack and a heavy bombardment softened up the defenses. Ground forces (black arrows) then attacked the perimeter, closed on town and airport. The harbor was swept of mines to allow the invaders to overwhelm the outnumbered defenders.

But no amount of persecution could crack the Australians' morale. Within a few weeks of the surrender a daring escape plan was hatched. First several prisoners were chosen for a pre-escape party. While their mates covered up for them in camp these men sneaked out and laid food dumps along an escape route across the island. They even crossed to the neighboring island of Ceram and placed one there. Then they rejoined their comrades in prison camp.

The escape party consisted of three officers and eight other ranks. To conceal the disappearance of the three officers, three Australian privates were "commissioned" to take their places. The officers handed them their badges of rank as they were leaving.

Jap had a "sticky" end

Using native boats they crossed to Serang, then to New Guinea and Thursday Island. Six weeks after the break-out they were back in Australia. The three bogus officers left behind on Ambon were never unmasked. One died, but the other two hoaxed the Japanese throughout their years of imprisonment.

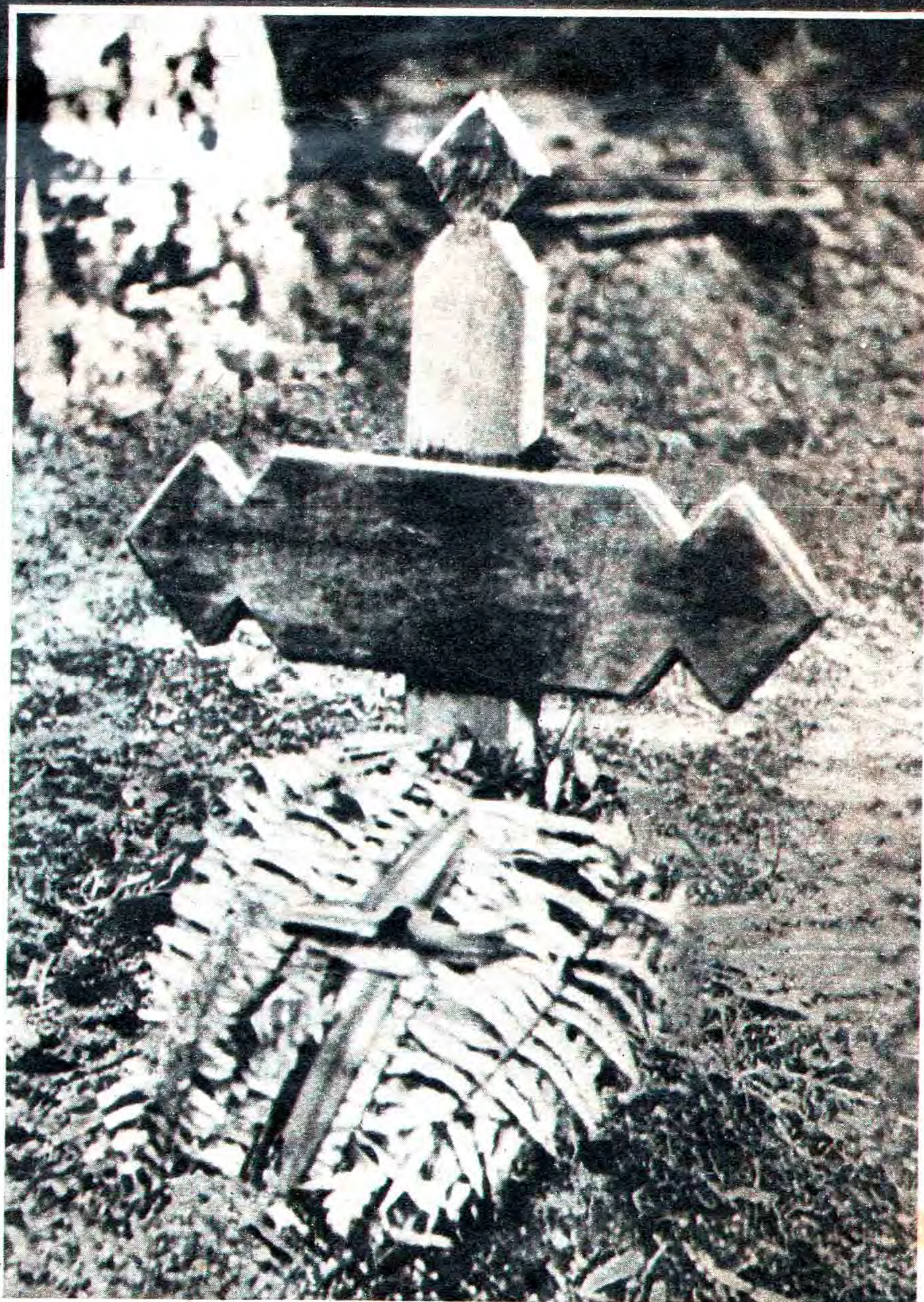
A few months after the escape about 350 Australian prisoners were sent to Hainan. As they em-

barked at Ambon, the Japanese commanding officer, Colonel Ando, himself beat each man with a club. Miskin and other ex-prisoners inquired about prosecuting Ando as a war criminal, after the war, but were told he had come to a "sticky" end in New Guinea.

The Hainan draft was batted down in the stinking hold of the *Tokio Maru*, a former tanker. About 90 of the Australians were stretcher cases. Their quarters were so congested that the men had to take it in turns to lie down to sleep.

They had been told they were going to a convalescent camp. When they arrived at Hainan they found they were destined for a labor camp. For the next three years they were worked seven days a week. Hundreds died from starvation, malaria and maltreatment. The prisoners on Ambon fared no better.

Most of the men who came back from Hainan and Ambon will bear to their graves the memory and the physical effects of their prison camp ordeal. Phil Miskin himself has had a permanent headache since a severe beating on Hainan. He and his 304 comrades are never likely to drive from their minds the tragic story of Ambon. They are the forgotten men who do not forget. #



Ambonese buried Doolan's body where he fell, in a rough grave like this. Later it was removed to Ambon cemetery with 800 others.