

THE FORGOTTEN HIGHLANDER

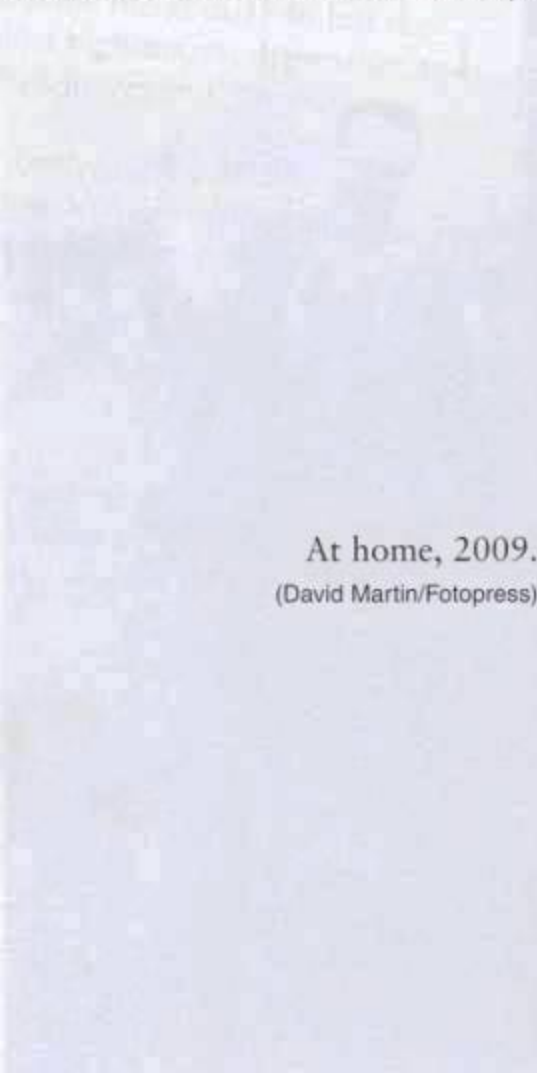
**MY INCREDIBLE STORY OF SURVIVAL
DURING THE WAR IN THE FAR EAST**



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Meeting veterans on my emotional 2008 trip to visit the USS *Pampanito*, the submarine that sank me in 1944. (Urquhart Family)



At home, 2009.
(David Martin/Fotopress)



Oil-covered survivors from the sinking of the hellships *Kachidoki Maru* and *Rakuyo Maru* are rescued by sailors from the USS *Sealion II*. (Bates Family)



Stunned by our ordeal, we clung for days to flimsy rafts and wreckage. The lucky ones, around 150, were rescued and the world learned for the first time of the horrors of the Death Railway. (Bates Family)

guarding the stairways from the holds. Some voyages took weeks with only a handful of prisoners surviving. Men drank their own urine. Sick prisoners were trampled to death or suffocated. The sane murdered the insane and wondered when it would be their turn to go mad. Cannibalism as well as vampirism was not unknown and even Japanese medics were shocked by what they found when the holds were finally opened. In the case of the *Oryoku Maru*, where insane prisoners killed fellow men for their blood, only 271 men survived out of 1619. The experience of one Dutch group was fairly typical: of 1500 men shipped from Java to Rangoon to work on the Death Railway, 200 died and 450 were unable to walk on arrival in Burma. Nineteen of the fifty-six hellships were sunk by submarines and aircraft and a total of 22,000 allied prisoners died during agonising voyages to the slave camps in Japan and Taiwan.

Down in the sweltering bowels of that ship we suffered for thirty-six hours before we got underway. The Japanese had been assembling HI-72, a tightly packed convoy of around a dozen ships with destroyer protection for the voyage to Japan. Unknown to us there was a second hellship in our convoy: the *Rakuyo Maru*, carrying around 1317 British and Australian prisoners.

There must have been at least one officer, a warrant officer or a sergeant major somewhere in the hold. But they certainly didn't make themselves known. Discipline had gone. Everyone, whatever their rank, was in the same situation. All of us just wanted to survive and were prepared to do anything to ensure that happened. It would have taken

As we sailed out of Singapore harbour on 6 September, in Hawaii signals officers of the US Navy's Fleet Radio Unit Pacific were listening in to Japanese radio traffic and intercepted messages relating to our convoy and its course. On 9 September orders were issued to three US submarines. Two days later on the night of 11 September, in the shipping lane known to American crews as 'Convoy College', the USS *Growler* broke the calm surface of the South China Sea, south of Hainan Island. As the crew of the *Growler* checked out the overcast skies that threatened rain on the horizon, the bow of the USS *Sealion II* was the next to emerge from the depths and sidle alongside the *Growler*. One and a half hours later the USS *Pampanito* joined the compact. The wolf pack was formed. The submarines were so close together, around a hundred metres apart, that the captains were able to shout to each other and forge their attack plans. As they separated to take up their positions in a stretch of water out of range of Japanese aircraft, the captains wished each other happy hunting and dived. They were in high spirits and had nicknamed their wolf pack 'Ben's Busters', after the *Growler's* audacious skipper, Commander Ben Oakley. They knew each other well and had spent the previous month harassing Japanese convoys and sinking freighters in the South China Sea.

In the hold of the *Kachidoki Maru* the torment went on. The noise was constant and deafening, an awful cacophony of throbbing engines, moaning, coughing and occasional panic-stricken screaming the background music for this latest torture. The chilling screams of the

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Next the *Pampanito* and the *Sealion II* moved in for the kill. On board the *Pampanito* Lieutenant Commander Paul Summers had just taken up a perfect position to attack the scattered convoy when several large explosions unexpectedly rocked his vessel. To the west of Summers the *Sealion II* had fired two salvos of three torpedoes each at the frantically zig-zagging convoy – and met with spectacular success. Three torpedoes smashed into a large oil tanker that exploded into flames, lighting up the sea like a giant flare. Out of control the burning tanker collided with the *Kachidoki Maru*. We had an amazingly close escape as it screeched along the side of our hull. When the *Kachidoki Maru* suddenly listed dramatically, pandemonium broke out afresh as men screamed in terror and begged to be let up on deck. It was terrifying; we expected to be torpedoed at any moment and drowned like rats in those stinking holds. We all fixed our eyes on the narrow stairwell to the decks, wondering how the hell we would ever get out.

But the burning tanker had illuminated a second target, the *Rakuyo Maru*. The poor prisoners in the holds knew what was coming and braced themselves for the inevitable. At 5.25 a.m. Lieutenant Commander Eli Reich steadied the *Sealion II*, a modern Balao-class submarine that had been commissioned just six months earlier, and fixed the *Rakuyo Maru* in the sights of his periscope. The thirty-one-year-old skipper took careful aim at the 9500-tonne vessel silhouetted against the night sky by the burning tanker. He was not going to miss. Earlier in the attack he had fired in support of the *Growler* and missed

and been forced to flee Japanese escorts. And he had a personal score to settle: the first USS *Sealion* had been sunk in a Japanese bombing raid on the Philippines at the outbreak of war and Reich had lost four of his crew. There would be no mistake. As he gave the order to fire three steam torpedoes at ten-second intervals, the young New Yorker had no idea of the carnage he was about to cause. All three tin fish hit the *Rakuyo Maru*. The first struck the engine room, another hit amidships and the third torpedo hit the 477-foot ship in the bow area. Amazingly none of the 1317 prisoners were killed by the explosion. The ship started to list and the Japanese guards and sailors immediately deserted the sinking ship in ten of twelve available lifeboats, leaving the prisoners to fashion makeshift rafts and take to the water with what little food and water they could find on board.

Tragically 1159 men, survivors of the Death Railway and all of its hardships, either drowned or died of exposure after days floating in the sea. It was a colossal loss of life and as the *Sealion II* dived to avoid depth charges the young sailors who celebrated their kill had no idea of the catastrophe unfolding above them.

While the *Sealion II* dived to safety, the *Growler* and the *Pampanito* set off after the convoy, and when Commander Oakley caught up with it the survivors in the water found themselves in the middle of a fierce naval battle. The *Growler* fired its torpedoes on the Japanese frigate *Hirado* and scored a direct hit. Some men in the water cheered while others saw all chance of rescue disappear. The shockwaves from the *Hirado* explosion killed

some prisoners, others died when the Japanese retaliated with depth charges or were killed by the propellers. The *Growler* got away unscathed. (It was Oakley's last major triumph, two months later he and his crew were killed when the *Growler* succumbed to Japanese depth-charging.)

Darkness had once again fallen and the *Kachidoki Maru* steamed north towards Taiwan, making a dash for protective air cover. But by eleven o'clock that night the *Pampanito* caught up with us and thirty-one-year-old skipper Paul Summers was planning a very special celebration of his birthday, which had taken place just a few days before on the day we sailed from Singapore.

Any hopes we had that we had outrun the wolf pack or that the attack was over were about to be dashed. Summers prepared to mount a surface attack on the *Kachidoki Maru* but had to abandon it because of technical difficulties. His crew worked feverishly to fix the problem and Summers resumed the attack. We were the biggest vessel among the group of small ships and made a juicy target. As the *Kachidoki Maru* steamed into the crosshairs of *Pampanito*'s periscope, Summers gave the fateful order to fire. Four minutes later we suddenly felt a tremendous blast and an explosion tore through the hold. The whole structure shuddered and water flooded in from above. I knew then as the water crashed on top of me that my worst fears had been realised. We had been hit and I knew that the torpedo had struck very close to us. It was in fact the first of two torpedoes that would send the hellship to the bottom within fifteen minutes.

The ship tilted. We were going down. Up above the Japanese began shooting their wounded men in the sick bay in mercy killings. Down below men shouted and panicked and scrambled madly for the single ladder up on to the deck. The noise was horrendous. But the pressure of the water must have pushed the hatches wide open. Either that or someone on deck, whether one of the stowaways or one of the POWs up there at the time we were hit, gave us a chance. Water rushed into the hold straight away with incredible pressure. It pushed me up as the ship continued to tip over. The hatches became parallel with the sea now and by some miracle the water washed me out of the hatch, and I floundered into a stream or strong current that rushed me out into the sea. It all seemed to happen at once. I popped out of the ship like a cork out of a champagne bottle.

After the extreme heat of the hold the water felt very cold. The sea was just a mass of thick oil as a total of twelve ships in our convoy were sunk that night. I knew I had to get as far away from the ship as possible as soon as I could, to avoid being dragged under with it, but it was like swimming through treacle. Those of us who could swim were the only ones who had a chance. I knew from my Boy Scout training that I had to swim away to avoid getting pulled down by the suction.

I swam for my life, as hard as I could, away from the waves created by the pull of the ship going down. I put my head down and powered with desperate overarm strokes, dodging debris as I went, all the time gulping down oil. It was like drinking fire and burned all

faced amid the debris and wreckage of the *Rakuyo Maru*, the crew saw survivors who had been in the water for three days and were horrified when weak voices started shouting. At first the young Americans could not understand the British and Australian accents, until one of the sailors made out the words 'pick us up, please!' Then the awful reality dawned. These oil-covered survivors were not Japanese but English, Scottish and Australian. The wolf pack had sunk two hellships packed with prisoners of war. One thousand four hundred and three allied servicemen had died as a result of the failure of the Japanese to observe the Geneva Convention and apply red crosses to our hellships.

Pampanito promptly radioed for assistance, and the *Sealion II* and two other American submarines returned to the scene. With survivors too weak to clamber aboard the subs, American sailors dived into the sea to pull men out, rescuing a total of 159 men. A handful died on board and the Americans were horrified at the condition of the survivors and to hear about the Death Railway and the privations we had endured. Incredibly the evidence gleaned from these survivors allowed the allies to discover for the first time the true extent of the horrors on the Death Railway and simultaneous announcements were subsequently made to stunned Houses of Parliament in both London and Canberra.

The men picked up by the subs were the lucky ones. Joe Bates, communications officer on the *Sealion II*, later told how his captain angered the crew by ordering the submarine to dive after rescuing just fifty survivors, leaving behind dozens of others frantically calling out, 'Over here!

Over here!' It was a heartbreaking decision but Lieutenant Commander Eli Reich feared for the safety of his vessel. The cries of the men left behind haunted Joe Bates and his shipmates for decades.

I was still drifting alone. By the time the sun came up on the fifth day I could no longer see; my eyes had been seared by the dazzling sun and sparkling sea. I had no eyebrows or hair on my head; I think the sheer shock of what was happening to me had caused my hair to fall out. I kept moving around in my tiny raft the best I could and prayed for rain. I sang to myself and vainly tried to croak out loud, urging myself: 'Hang on in there until you can't hang on any longer.'

Badly burned by the sun, my tongue swollen, gripped by a maddening thirst, effectively blind and completely hairless, I fell into a trance-like state. I was on the very edge of death. At some point on that fifth day there came a lot of shouting around me. I was lifted into a small boat and then on to a Japanese whaling ship. I must have been left on deck but from there on I have no real recollection. I don't know what the Japanese on board that ship did for me. As far as I was concerned they just left me alone but they must have at least given me some water. I was as close to death as I had ever been.

The next thing I knew I was being dropped off at a port, which I later learned was on Hainan Island. Congregated there were other shipwrecked POW survivors. As a punishment we were paraded through the village stark naked. One man shouted out, 'If we work like horses, we may as well look like them.'