South Australians at war – transcript
Anecdotes of a Japanese Translator, 1941-1945

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D. H. Laidlaw
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companionship of some people of comparable age and background. was one of few young servicemen in the Intelligence Corps and acquired the reputation of being a "loner" Fortunately two Sergeants a few years older befriended me. One was Charles Price, the elder brother of Ken Price, a contemporary at St Peters. Charles was shortsighted and, since he was precluded from more active service, he had joined the Intelligence Corps and was made responsible for suspect German sympathisers in South Australia. He later specialized in the migration of different nationalities to Australia and became a Professor at the Australian National University in Canberra. Vivienne and I came to know Charles and his wife, Elizabeth, when he was at Magdalen College, Oxford doing post-graduate studies in the early 1950s. The other Sergeant to befriend me was Ron Sedsman, the agricultural reporter at the Advertiser, who in later life became Director of the Agricultural & Horticultural Society and as such was responsible for staging the Annual Royal Show at Wayville.

My duties in the Intelligence Corps at Keswick and at East Terrace consisted of carrying files from office to office and then filing them. It was an incredibly dull existence and I wondered how to find a more worthwhile occupation. During this period the Japanese forces scored victory after victory as they came closer to northern Australia. In January 1942 they overwhelmed the Australian force which was stationed at Rabaul to defend the islands north of the New Guinea mainland and in that encounter 1100 Australian soldiers were taken prisoner. In the following month the Japanese Army, having already occupied the Malayan mainland, attacked Singapore. After a brief fight in which 1800 Australian soldiers were killed the Allies surrendered and 52000 British troops were taken prisoner including many Australians. This numerically was the largest loss ever suffered by the British Army and was made more humiliating because the Japanese force

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was only two thirds the size of the British force that surrendered. (1)

On February 19th, four days after the surrender of Singapore, planes of the Japanese Naval Air Corps bombed Darwin and this was the first hostile attack since white occupation upon the mainland of Australia. I should point out that the Japanese had no independent Air Force and that their Army and Navy each had its own flying Corps. That attack in which 240 civilians were killed, was the first of sixty four bombing raids carried out by the Japanese forces against Darwin. During the first six months of my Army career the one intellectual pursuit to overcome mental boredom was to study Japanese and this proved to be my saviour because, after six months as a filing clerk, Major Martin took compassion on me, had me promoted to Acting Lance Sergeant and transferred to the Loveday Internment Camp near Barmera on the River Murray as a Japanese Interpreter. The rank of Acting Lance Sergeant meant that I could with pride wear three stripes on my sleeve but was still paid only at the rate of a Private.

Having learned of my appointment I was then told that I should move immediately because 14C Internment Camp, which had been established a few months before and by now housed several hundred Japanese male civilian internees, had no Interpreter to help the Commandant and his staff relay instructions to the inmates. Speed suited me because I wanted to get away from Rymill House and its filing system so I bought a ticket on the Murray Valley bus which on its daily run would have got me to Barmera in about three hours. That was too simple for 4 RD. Transport Dept which decreed that I should wait and accompany some hundreds of Italian internees who were due to be shipped by train from Adelaide the following week. It was hard to fathom what assistance a Japanese interpreter could offer when moving a group of Italians but it did save the Army the cost of a busfare and I

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conformed without a murmur because after six months in the Army had learned that it moves in mysterious ways!

The troop train, which consisted of a group of dirty disused third class carriages, took us on a ten hour journey from Adelaide via ailem Bend through the Mallee to Renmark then back westwards along the Murray Valley to Barmera. Our train was frequently side-tracked to make way for regular services and it was 9 PM, pitch dark and raining in mid-winter when we finally reached the Internment Camp, hungry and wet, having been transported for the last few miles in an open truck. I then discovered that noone had advised 14C of my impending arrival but a Corporal issued me with some well used blankets and a hessian sack. and directed me to fill it from a pile of wet straw lying outside. This was my first experience of sleeping on the floor of a drafty hut on a wet palliasse in the middle of winter and it struck me that life at home in Tobe's care had not been so bad afterall.

By July 1942 four Internment Camps had been established at Loveday which was a settlement close to the River Murray some miles from Barmera. These Camps had grown like Topsy commencing with 14 A for German male suspects which was established shortly after the start of World War Two followed by 14B for Italian males which was constructed after Italy entered the War in June 1940. 14 C was built to house Japanese early in 1942 and by that time many more Italian males had been apprehended so the Army built a second camp for them which became 14D. Dobbing in a rival as a suspected enemy sympathiser became quite fashionable especially amongst Italians and, although many of the internees subsequently got released upon. appeal to a Court of Review because of lack of substantive evidence against them, the process took time and meanwhile the numbers of internees brought to Loveday increased dramatically.

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The choice of Loveday as a site for Internment Camps was sensible because there was plenty of open space on which to build each Camp and within the barbed wire fence and floodlit Guard Towers at each corner there was room to construct a playing field and vegetable and fruit gardens which were irrigated by water pumped from the nearby River Murray.

Barmera and the neighbouring districts of Waikerie, Berri and Loxton had grown up after World War One by the allotment to Returned Soldiers of land close to the River capable of being irrigated on which to grow citrus trees and vines for wine or dried fruit. It was from

these blocks that the Army attracted sufficient volunteers to guard the internees in the four Camps. Some were original settlers and middle aged and others were their sons. They were a pleasant group of people who were dedicated to most forms of sport especially football. They would bet on any contest but, since the TAB and licensed bookmakers did not exist, they had to rely upon illegal S.P. bookies, who operated in most hotel public bars, in order to make or lose their fortunes. Pleasant though they were these guards nevertheless had difficulty understanding why an eighteen year old Australian youth would want to learn Japanese. As one Sergeant from the district said within days of my arrival, 'It is bloody well hard enough learning to speak or to write English without worrying about a bloody foreign language where the bloody foreigners who speak it don't even know our alphabet."'

The 14 C Camp Commandant was Major Lott, a middle aged and rather austere officer from World War One who. like most other officers that I had served under since joining the Army, had remained in the Militia between the Wars. Prior to rejoining the Army he had been headmaster of Colonel Light Gardens State High School. He genuinely welcomed me into the Camp and provided me with a separate cubicle as an office so that I could study

Japanese for most of the day without being diverted by mundane Army chores.

Before my arrival he had no support when speaking to the internees and had to rely on those internees, who could speak English, to convey his instructions. Each morning I accompanied him on his tour of inspection of the Camp which would take an hour or so and, prior to setting forth, he would tell me of the matters that he intended to discuss with the Japanese Camp Committee. This gave me a little time to consult my dictionary and find some of the words likely to be used during the discussion. An insensitive C.O. could have made me look a fool in front of the six hundred Japanese internees as I discovered some months later when instructed to interpret at a Coronial Inquest.

Without any means of private transport I was confined initially to the surrounds of the Internment Camps and to an occasional trip into Barmera by bus to see a movie in the local picture theatre. We were allowed one day off duty each week but could accumulate

this leave entitlement. So, after a few weeks, I took the bus down to Adelaide. saw Lyn and Tobe who were relieved to know that "the little yellow devils" had not done me down, slept in my bed for a night, probably ate a huge roast dinner and then next morning returned to Barmera in my beloved M.G. which I parked for the rest of my stay at Loveday unobtrusively. under a willow tree near the river bank.

Meanwhile Inez Gemmell, my first cousin who lived near Strathalbyn and had become friendly through the Country Womens Association with a Mrs Sewell from Barmera, passed the word that I had arrived as an interpreter at Loveday and knew noone in the district. This was fortuitous because Mrs Sewell wanted to do something for the war effort and made contact with me at Camp 14C. The Sewell family owned a substantial orange orchard a few miles out of Barmera, had a grass tennis court which was well

maintained and a blonde daughter in her final year at school who took a liking to a young Interpreter with an M.G.

The six months which I spent at Loveday were during summer and the Sewells would invite friends to play tennis each Sunday. They asked me to join them and I did so whenever I could get leave. The standard of tennis was higher than 1 had encountered in mixed tennis back in Adelaide which was not surprising because of the dedication of these families to sport and their physical fitness because many of them worked out of doors.

The Sewells would invite me to stay for the night after tennis and it was a delight to escape from sleeping in a non-insulated steel shed in 14c in the middle of summer in the Riverland. At my first breakfast with the Sewells I was confronted with a jug of iced yellow liquid sitting on the table alongside the milk, stewed fruit and corn flakes. It turned out to be iced sweet sherry and Mr Sewell assured me that it was a regular "starter" in the Riverland and that on hot summer days one needed a little stimulant to get out to work in the orchard. I took a sip out of curiosity but I did not encounter alcohol being served at breakfast until many years later when Peg and I were in a five star hotel in Berlin and saw German men ~rig champagne and smoking cigars to finish their working-day breakfast.

The internees in 14 C were a mixed group of Japanese internees who had been apprehended around Australia since December 194 1. A few were educated businessmen who had been stationed in offices of Japanese trading companies, usually in Sydney or Melbourne, and could speak and write English with varying degrees of fluency. They formed the Camp Committee which controlled the way of life and living conditions in the Camp. However, the majority of internees were of much lower intellect and most of whom could barely read or write. They had been pearl divers located in or near Broome or itinerant fishermen who

worked on fishing trawlers in the seas off northern Australia and had been apprehended by our naval patrols. The internees had come from civilian occupations and, although they presumably owed allegiance to the Japanese Emperor and Japan, they were not violent people unlike some occupants of prisoner of war camps in other parts of Australia.

Among the internees were four Japanese trainees about the same age as 1 was who had been sent by Mitsui or C.Itoh to their branch offices in Sydney to improve their knowledge of English and to learn something of the Anglo-Saxon way of life and of doing business. They had been trapped in Sydney because of the sudden commencement of hostilities and now found themselves to their horror bereft in Loveday Internment Camp. I got to know them and, after accompanying Major Lott on his daily inspection, would remain behind in the Camp and talk with these boys. They, more than anyone else, helped me with my knowledge of speaking and writing Japanese. They came from the island of Honshu and spoke with a Tokyonese accent unlike many of the divers and fishermen who came from outlying islands and whose Japanese because of their coarse accent was almost unintelligible to the boys from Tokyo. These boys taught me to play a game called Go (pronounced Gaw) which is a game of establishing possession and is played on a board with marbles and is alike to draughts. After a few months my ability to converse in Japanese improved considerbly but I had a rude awakening.

A fisherman died unexpectedly and the Camp Management wondered whether he had been poisoned because of an intra-Camp dispute. A Coronial Inquest was arranged to be presided over by an officer from the Army Legal Corps in Adelaide, Major Leo von

Bertouch, a partner in the firm of Finlayson, Phillips, Astley & Hayward now known as Finlaysons. I was deputed to be the interpreter and 1 asked Major von Bertouch whether there were any

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matters of a technical nature involving words which I should look up in my dictionary beforehand.

He assured me that the Inquest would be quite general but, upon calling the first witness, another Japanese fisherman, the Major asked if he knew whether the deceased had suffered from Bright's disease. I had never heard of this disease which apparently causes inflammation of the kidneys and certainly did not know the Japanese words for such. 1 confessed my ignorance to the Major and asked how he may have heard that the deceased was suffering from Bright's disease. The Major took offence at my question, which admittedly was presumptious, and he declared that he would adjourn the Inquest until the Legal Office could find a competent interpreter as a result of which the N1aJor and his three assistants who comprised the Inquiry packed up and returned to Adelaide. Japanese Interpreters were scarce as hen's teeth and, since no replacement was available for a matter so mundane, the Inquest remained adjourned indefinitely. This was an example of pomposity at its worst.

By this time it was the end of 1942; 1 had turned nineteen and I had spent one year in the Army. Until then the Allies had suffered some staggering losses around the world but towards the end of the year the position had stabilized. In Russia the German Army had continued its march eastward until finally in September the Soviet Army stood firm at Stalingrad and fought a defensive battle for the next six months of enormous intensity which changed the tide of the war in Russia. In North Africa German armoured divisions with Italian support under General Rommel had driven across Libya and Egypt nearly as far as Cairo but there they halted and were finally defeated at the Battle of Alamein by the Allies under General Montgomery with a force that included the Australian 9th Division.

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In May 1942 on Corregidor Island in the Phillippines the last of the American forces had capitulated to the Japanese and two months prior to that General Douglas Macarthur and some of his closest staff had left the island and flownto Australia where Macarthur, with the agreement of the Australian Government, had assumed command of Allied Forces in the South West Pacific Area. (S.W.P.A.) In the same month a Japanese naval force with several battleships and aircraft carriers had sailed south around the eastern tip of New Guinea presumably intending to invade Port Moresby but was repulsed by an American force at the Battle of the Coral Sea. Shortly after that the Japanese navy fought a massive battle in the Central Pacific near the Midway Islands involving hundreds of carrier planes and was decisively beaten by the U. S. Navy. Then in June the Japanese, finding themselves unable to attack Port Moresby from the sea, decided to send infantry groups over the rugged Owen Stanley Range of New Guinesa to attack Port Moresby from its rear. There they were engaged by Australian infantry forces fighting in close contact for the next seven months until the Japanese troops were finally driven back to the northern coast of New Guinea.

After six months as an interpreter at 14C translating instructions to the internees for Major Lott and spending an hour or so each day talking to the four Japanese youths I felt sufficiently fluent in Japanese to handle interrogations of POWs nearer to the field of action. On one of my periodic trips home to Adelaide on leave I called at Rymill House and told Major Martin and Charles Price, now Lieutenant, that 1 wished to apply for active service. They mentioned that Major Mic Sandford, (26) originally from Adelaide, was building up a special Army Intelligence group attched to SWPA Headquarters in Brisbane and was in dire need of Japanese linguists. They suggested that I should apply through them and without even knowing what was entailed I did apply.

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To my astonishment within two weeks a message arrived at 14C instructing me to transfer to Central Bureau Intelligence Corps in Brisbane forthwith. No one asked to test my competence as a Japanese linguist which becomes understandable after 1 read recently in a book by Canon Hugh Melinsky (2) that in 1943 the British and United States armed forces could not find collectively more than forty competent Japanese linguists, who were

available and not already engaged on essential duties. So in early February 1943 1 packed my few belongings at Loveday Camp, said goodbye to Major Lott, the Sewells and the four young Japanese internees and set off at 2 AM one morning in my M.G. to drive home to Adelaide to embark by train for Brisbane. I had then only the vaguest idea that for the next two and a half years I would be helping to decode Japanese radio signals.

(1) 1 have referred to the Australian War Memorial, Canberra to verify dates of specific battles and other operations and the number of Allied and Australian servicemen killed or taken prisoners of war during 1941-194.2.

(2) Hugh Melinsky. "A code-breaker's tale." Larks Press 1997. After the War Hugh Melinsky was ordained in the Church of England and ultimately became Canon of Norwich Cathedral.

(26) Refer to photograph at end of Chapter 4.

reached national status as a bridge player in the United States. Myrtle said that this influx of outsiders did much to raise the standard of competitive bridge in Brisbane because the regulars did not know who might walk through the door and ask to compete. on any evening and, as a result it kept them on their toes.

The twelve English linguists who arrived at Central Bureau in March 1944 (17) to bolster the overworked Translation Branch were but the first of three batches of twelve who had passed through the military Japanese school in England and came to Central Bureau during the next twelve months. It did not matter that some were seconded from the British Army and others from the RAF because they had been professionally trained to prepare them for cryptographic work, an advantage that I did not receive having learned Japanese from being an interpreter in a civilian internment camp. With additional translating support Hugh Erskine was able to divide the H Branch into four teams.

First, there were the Scanners who scanned all messages as they came from the Decoding Section and sorted them into categories of Urgent, Priority and No Priority, depending on whether they contained future, current or past information. Secondly, there were the Translators who worked in teams of five each with a Team Leader. Thirdly, there were the Final Checkers who made a re-check of each message before editing because, when sending wireless messages using Kana syllables when each sound may have several meanings, errors frequently occurred. Fourthly, there were Recorders who filed copies of all messages to enable missing or delayed parts of a message to be matched up with the parent message.

I was made one of two, or sometimes three, Final Checkers which I found to be a soul destroying job because we spent much of our

working time correcting our colleagues' translations or their interpretations of partly decoded messages. Aged twenty one I was probably too young to be given such a job. Hugh Erskine likened it to being a company auditor and, although I told him ad nauseam that I had no desire to be an auditor in after life, my entreaties failed to impress. He pronounced firmly that a Final Checker needed to have had field experience and I unfortunately was one of only two in the H Branch staff to have had such.

Occasionally we Final Checkers did something constructive which inflated our egos. One Saturday evening in May 1944, 1 was working with a small group on night shift and being the only officer,, was the senior person on duty in H Branch. One of the English translators was trying to put together partly decoded messages into one coherent message when he came across two which attracted his attention because the Japanese operator had spelled Celebes and Halmahera, being two islands in the East Indies. in an unusual but identical. kana form in each message. If related the contents were of the utmost importance. Part One talked of meeting at Menado, a harbour port in the north of the Celebes now called Sulawesi, within the next few days whilst Part Two named five Marti, which were Japanese commercial vessels, and a group of landing barges.

Although it was nearly midnight on that Saturday evening I contacted the U. S. duty officer, a Major, at G 2, the Intelligence HQ at the AMP Building in Brisbane, and mentioned that if, our hunch was correct. we had some priority information which should not wait until morning. The U. S major instructed me to bring the messages to him immediately and not to delay whilst I alerted senior officers in Central Bureau. The unusual spelling of Celebes and Halmahera in both part decodes aroused his interest immediately. It was 1 A M. by this stage but the Major chose to

arouse Major General Akin, the Chief Signal Officer at SWPA who, having learned of the contents of the decodes, instructed him to bring me and the decodes to Lennons Hotel forthwith.

Ten minutes later, having my first audience with General Akin in his pyjamas, I told him of our hunch. The General pondered for a few moments and then said: ".Major, this maybe the remnants of Bamboo No 1 dispersing into landing barges. Ask Air Command to send a recce plane to Menado by first light"' The U. S forces had captured the island of Biak at the western end of New Guinea with its landing strips which was about 1500 km from Menado and presumably the recce plane would be sent from there. I had never heard of Bamboo No 1 but chose not to show my ignorance in front of the General in his pyjamas at 1 A.M. on this Sunday morning.

When I informed Hugh Erskine what dizzy heights I had reached during the previous night, he informed me that Bamboo No 1 was the code name given by U. S. Intelligence to the Take convoy (pronounced Tar-care) which H Branch had been following by reading messages sent in the Maru code. During 1943 cryptographers of the U S Navy in Hawaii and Central Bureau in Brisbane had been partially successful in breaking the Maru code which was used by Japanese merchant vessels such as tankers, freight carriers and troop transports but recently Central Bureau had found a current Maru codebook and presumably had passed it, or a copy, to the U S Navy in Hawaii because Central Bureau was not primarily involved with Navy codes. Perhaps it was one of the codebooks that Gordon Thompson had returned with from New Guinea when he came to Archerfield Airport with codebooks and soy sauce taken from a wrecked Japanese freighter!

It was accepted that by cryptanalysis it was feasible to find the

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meaning of up to one third of the groups in a code before the Japanese hierarchy chose to change it but only by seizing a current enemy code book could a translator read an entire message accurately. With that assistance our translators were able to trace the movements of Japanese troops around the East Indies to the extent that our wireless operators intercepted the critical messages.

When General MacArthur and his Army forces began hopping westward along the northern coast of New Guinea the Japanese High Command became alarmed that his immediate aim was to capture the oilfields on the west coast of Borneo around what is now Brunei,, the oil from which Japan heavily relied upon to maintain its war machine. A decision was made to reinforce Japanese forces in western New Guinea and Halmahera by moving troops of the 32nd and 35th Divisions from Manchuria and this became more urgent after the Allies captured Hollandia and then Biak. Ronald Lewin in "The other Ultra" (17) gives a graphic description derived from decoded messages of the movement of these two divisions which were brought initially from Manchuria to Shanghai. On April 17th 1944 the "Take" convoy departed from Shanghai enroute to New Guinea. It consisted of nine troop transports escorted by twelve warships of differing size under the command of Admiral Kajioka, who had been designated back in 1942 to lead the Japanese forces into Port Moresby. The convoy was carrying 12 874 men of the 32nd Division and 8 170 men of the 35th Division together with their equipment.

U S Navy Intelligence was able to identify and relay through G 2 to its navy submarines the position of the "Take" convoy at noon on each day of its voyage because it was a custom of the Japanese to broadcast precisely their forward positions day by day during a voyage. One of the troop transports, the "Yoshida Maru" carrying

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an entire infantry regiment, was torpedoed and sunk by a U. S Navy submarine north of the Philippines. After a stay of some days at Manila the convoy continued to sail

southwards until, in the Celebes, Sea to the south west of Mindariao the southernmost island of the Philippines, three more troop transports were torpedoed and stink and others were damaged.

Because of these heavy losses the Japanese High Command refused to permit any further convoying in vulnerable transport vessels and orderd that the remnants of these two divisions with their equipment should be taken to Menado, a harbour port in the northern Celebes, and there transhipped into landing barges. Our hunch that the two part decodes could be linked into one message proved to be correct regarding meeting point and meeting times but whereas submarines had destroyed the four troop transports. from Menado onwards it was more effective to attack the Japanese troops, crowded defenceless in open landing barges, by bombing from shore based planes based at Biak and at Bachelor in the Northern Territory.

I have described the dismemberment of the "Take" convoy in some detail because I played a part in its detection but there were many similar interceptions in the Pacific during 1943 and 1944 due to reading of Japanese messages. When Japan entered the War at the end of 1941 (18) it had six million tons of Maru shipping but by 1944 this had dropped to less than one million tons despite the efforts of the Japanese shipyards to replace the sunken tankers and freighters. Initially Japan allowed its Maru freighters and tankers to travel alone along the busiest sea routes between Japan, .Bangkok and Singapore and then return to Japan via Labuan in Borneo and Manila. For reasons of pride the Japanese Admirals wanted their warships to engage. in heroic pursuits fighting enemy warships and not spend time escorting Maru vessels around the

Pacific but from January to August 1944 388 Maru vessels were sunk mainly by submarine attacks. Because of these horrendous losses,, the Admirals by mid 1944 introduced a convoy system with warship escorts moving from Tokyo to Singapore and then returning via Borneo to take on oil, to Manila and back to Tokyo. This made the Maru transports even more vulnerable because henceforth the U S submarines could work in groups, if need be, and focus their efforts.

It was September 1944 and having been a Final Checker for more than six months felt that I deserved a change of occupation. I asked Hugh Erskine whether I could work as a cryptanalyst having dabbled in this work whilst at Coomalie Creek in 1943 and, as a result. was transferred to Professor Thomas Room (15) and his Meteorological Section which was housed in a Hut at the bottom of the fenced triangle in Ascot Park. I have mentioned Thomas Room previously. He was Professor of Mathematics at Sydney University and in 1941 had accepted an invitation from the Head of Australian Army Intelligence to join a small group of academics as a civilian to decipher Japanese Codes. When Central Bureau was formed in 1942 Thomas Room was transferred there and continued his cryptographic work still as a civilian.

Meteorological cryptography was an effective way to break into codes. Weather messages were easy to identify because they were sent from the large bases like Rabaul, Surabaya etc at fixed hours of the day and were usually quite brief. They contained such information as visibility, degrees of cloud cover, wind velocity and wind direction. weather temperature and likelihood of storms which were so prevalent near to the Equator where we operated. The Japanese radio operators often had to send the same message in out-dated and current versions of the same code depending upon