

## THE SEARCH FOR PRIVATE JACK DELLAR

*Extract from 'The Phoenix Rises Eternal', an unpublished memoir by Haldane Sinclair Holman OAM*



**On 8 January 1943, Corporal Hal Holman was one of a group of 13 Australian troops who volunteered for a long patrol in the central highlands of PNG. The highlands were strategically vital to establishing a strong defensive position against the invading Japanese forces.**

At Bundi I had been alerted to try to locate Jack Dellar. He had been recalled from the Ramu River crossing watch post at Sepu. In endeavoring to escape the Japanese he had been cut off by floodwaters while making for the headwaters of the Marum river. A food dump there was his aim. He hadn't made it and was posted as missing for a period of eight days.

The very next day after being notified I set out with a cargo line of Bundi Mission villagers on a jungle track that followed a jagged course upriver. It was a source tributary of the Ramu River. From the Mission's lofty perch overlooking a vast panorama including my chosen patrol route, I knew that the trek was not a pushover. In the distance I could see the next village in the mountain saddle of our first destination. Without binoculars it seemed fairly close. It would take two days to get there!

The carriers had the worst end of the stick (literally). The cargo swinging on a pole between two men was difficult enough to manage through reasonably flat country but in this jagged terrain it was hell. It still amazes me that the line remained in high spirits; indeed, they sang songs and frequently burst out laughing over some joke or comment. They were delighted when, on the third day out, after previously listening carefully to one of their favorite, simple chants, I joined in the chorus. "*Aye loelo ai loyelo, ui, uia, ai loelo ai loelo, u,i ua. Dengidornambror, tamandomambror, ui, ua. i fuai ior, ifuai ior, ui, ua*". I asked the meaning of the words and was told that it meant "We are working and we are happy. We carry the cargo and we are strong".



Over the rest of the trail I added two more of their cargo songs to my repertoire. That won them over completely. They let out an almighty whoop of glee.

When you take into account the precipitous climb down to the river from the Mission, then the many crossings on cane bridges and mere logs it was a hair-raising journey. It was all up hill after this through volcano-shattered rocks and river-eroded terrain. We were heading upstream toward the source of the river. Cuts, bruises and abrasions were inevitable. The medical side of our campaign seemed sometimes to be more important than firepower.

Having a training of first-aid, I tended carriers' wounds and dosed them as and when required within my limited capabilities and the medications in my first aid kit that I brought along on this patrol. At this stage in the war the 'sulpha' drugs were the best antiseptics we had. They were a boon nonetheless, the range of sulphaguanadine, sulphanilimide and sulphadiazine were useful in the fight against tropical ulcers through to diarrhoea and dysentery. We also had the advantage during the period of several antiseptics, two being Eusol and Iodine. Normally we had a first-aid man in our group, but owing to the frequent patrols, we sometimes worked in pairs, remaining separated from the platoon for lengthy periods. This meant carrying some medicines and bandages etc. to treat our cargo line of men and ourselves.

Most important were the anti-malarial drugs. Quinine was effective as treatment. It was followed later by atebrine, a drug that changed our skin colour to a yellow tone. These were effective in disrupting the parasitic cycle of mosquitoes within one's bloodstream.

There were other dangers such as Scrub Typhus which resulted from tick bites. There were hundreds of these contacted by us in a single hour of patrol through tall Kunai grass river flats, though fortunately not all of these carried disease. These tiny ticks would drop off their place on the tip of each blade of grass and find

anchorage on our anatomy as we passed. Some found a way into our clothing and lodged in our pubic area. Some were only the size of a pin-head - they were a pale yellowish colour, yet when they had been feasting on us they were much larger and appeared to us as being a tiny drop of blood on the surface of our skins. It turned out to be the transparent, blood-inflated abdomen of the parasite. Because of the inevitable itch one had only to scratch oneself, and infection was bound to follow with the parasite's remaining head still buried in your skin.

Much later when attached to the American Marines I was better equipped; my first-aid kit was well stocked by the Americans. Their supplies to me included such things as hypodermic syringes of Morphine. There was also a kit for sutures to stitch wounds (their liberal allowance was only due to my being without a trained first aid soldier with me).

Crossing the first cane bridge was a fearful task. Although there was little chance of falling off because the web of vines was like a fence on both sides, the footing was only one round bamboo from one bank to the other. The two sides tapered down to form a V. One walked inside the point of the V.

Less than three metres below us the river thundered and completely blotted out all conversation-even shouts. The torrent boiled and raged around massive boulders. Huge jets of spray and mist engulfed us. We were drenched and almost swamped before we were half way across. Bare feet are ideal to walk the bamboo pole. Army boots were a hazard due to slippery soles. It was on occasions like that I thanked my lucky stars in that my personal load was only a haversack, webbing ammunition pouches, and my sub-machine gun (a Thompson gun at that time). My big pack was with the cargo on a pole. I was travelling light for a change. Some of my stuff was stored at Bundi Mission, like my acquired .44 calibre rifle.

This task was truly an obstacle course. One particular section of the track had suffered a couple of major landslides where the only way was over the middle of the loose rubble of the steep wake. We nearly lost four men when their crossing started a new slide. Luckily it petered out in seconds so the four men, still clutching their poles, finished their journey across, ten metres further down the slope.

Further upstream, while negotiating a fallen log over the river, I slipped dangerously on the mossy bole. I had reflexes enough to throw myself over the huge log, with my chest and gun on one side and my legs on the other. I lay on my belly to gather my wits then my carriers retrieved me. On the second day we had progressed far enough up past a fork in the river to be able to ford a small tributary. The other branch in the river was the one that carried the torrent from the Mount Wilhelm cordillera. Our chosen branch was almost idyllic yet still strong enough and treacherous to make fording perilous. It was advisable to keep one's weapon above water, although most ammunition is fairly water-resistant. It was quite an ordeal for the carriers, for their load could not stand dunking. They had to stretch their arms straight above their shoulders to save the loads.

Late afternoon found us still at a cool altitude so we camped in the edge of the jungle on one side of the track. I slept on my ground sheet in my tiny tent. The carriers were further down the track and had lit a fire inside the forest so it could not be seen. I assumed we were at a safe distance from any Japanese patrols yet

lighting a fire or even a cigarette can be observed for vast distances in the right (or wrong) conditions. With a little care in the selection of the ground, the unpadded groundsheet was less rough going if the bed area were sand or soft soil: difficult to find, as campers will agree. It would seem that in PNG there are possibly more living creatures per cubic metre than elsewhere. Waking up in the morning and surreptitiously easing oneself from the tent, then to lift the groundsheet and discover that underneath were often centipedes, scorpions and sundry other invertebrates, was quite startling. Moreover it often astounds and annoys me that in spite of the closely-woven mosquito net, many parasites managed to invade the interior then were trapped inside because part of me was inside them and they were bigger than when they entered! This included leeches. They can extend themselves into almost threads then contract to their tapering cone shape. When engorged they are about the size of a Brazil nut kernel. These leeches are normally still attached to the host when discovered and are satiated with blood.

'Sleeping in' is only for the deaf in the PNG jungle. Because we were at a high altitude the bulk of the forest canopy was below us. Most of the vertebrates live in the canopy. There are a few mute marsupials and reptiles, the rest are the birds who greet the dawn with shrieks, trumpets, squawks, cheeps, honks, quacks, twitters, clucks, whistles and melodic choruses. The sheer multiplicity of these creatures produces a cacophony of billions of decibels. Or so it seemed at dawn! Most of the creatures live in the canopy of these arboreal giants that are hosts to rare and unknown orchids, ferns, lichen, and as yet, millions of unidentified symbiotic plants, fungus and fauna.

For breakfast I usually ate from a can of bully beef with several dog biscuits. There were other choices available but I must admit that even now I like both of them. None of us soldiers would still be here without them. This time the morning meal was pleasantly different. The boss boy came up to my tent bearing two short lengths of rather large diameter, freshly cut green bamboo. One end was closed (natural) and the other end was open. "*Sapos yu laik kukirn kai kai, sutim igo long dispela rnambu nau mipela kukim long paia istap daunbilo. Tasol kapsetirn wara wantaim abus nau biskit. Bai rni pasim ei bilong em, nau sanapim long paia. Bai em I kuk pinis.*"

Translated he said: "Supposing that you would like to cook your food, put it into this bamboo and we will cook it on the fire down below. Pour in some water with the meat and the biscuits. Then I will seal the top and stand the bamboo up in the fire until cooked." I hastened to point out that the bamboo would bum. He was quick to reply that the water inside would prevent that. He was absolutely right and the result was delicious!

We set out again after the embers were extinguished. I was behind the first two carriers, they being the pacesetters and pathfinders who had traversed the route many times in their village life. On this morning we were close to a point where we were about to descend to the lowlands. After an hour we arrived at a knoll on a spur where we were peering down a widening valley to a vast jungle flat at least a thousand metres below.

Far up on our left Mount Wilhelm towered and, it seemed, to glower at our passing. To our right was the immense Ramu River meandering through countless square

kilometres in its self-made incredible river flats that it had scoured, gouged and sluiced for billions of years. Beyond reared the Finnisteres. They appeared to vanish into oblivion to the northwest as well as to the southeast. Immediately below us in the distant jungle flat flowed the Marum River. On viewing first hand the panorama spread before us, I could see on the side of Mount Wilhelm the only sensible goal to head for. If Jack were still alive, that was what he would aim for.

With my oil compass I could pinpoint the Sepu crossing, one of only a few places where the river could be forded on this section of the Ramu Valley. As I explained he was stationed there and had vacated it when instructed to head for a food dump at the headwaters of the Marum. This meant that directly west of my lookout, somewhere down there he would have to pass. By the way an oil compass is the same as any other compass except that the needle is immersed in oil to prevent the needle from flickering too much.

The incredible view featured four strange pinnacles projecting up through the jungle. They were like blunt, inverted ice-cream cones yet well clad with trees. Conveniently they straddled the surmised route, with possibly three kilometers between each. I pondered, and then suddenly I was galvanized into action.

With that I called "*Bosboi ikam!*" – "Boss boy, come!" He was facing me in mere seconds. I led him to the edge of the spur, pointed to the distant peaks and asked him if it was possible to climb to the top of them, and light signal fires. "This is a mere nothing master, we are fit enough to climb them. A short while ago we have climbed to the top."

So I outlined my plan. "We will leave two of your men here and I will write their names and villages down, in case they defect. Make sure they are men you know and trust. If we don't come back and the fires go out, they will wait one day and one night then go back to Bundi with the news. Leave them enough food for five days. The rest of us will climb down to the bottom and from there we will send two of your men to each of the four small peaks. As soon as they arrive there they will each light a fire and keep it burning for two days if needed. They will use a lot of green leaves to make smoke all the time. The rest of us will spread out and head due west looking for signs of Jack's tracks. If he has passed we must cross over his footprints if he came that way. If he has left footprints we can catch up with him. If he hasn't reached our area we can later spread out again and comb to the north until we are close to the Sepu crossing. If we haven't found him then we can only assume he is lost or has taken another trail. The idea of the smoke signal fires is to guide him into our small search area. When we get to about the middle of the four peaks I will fire five shots. If he is close and has a gun he will probably answer our shots. I will repeat the shots later if needed. So let's organize it."

Descending in this terrain was as equally dangerous and difficult as climbing up but less exhausting. Any slippery slide error might be a joy-ride to doom. We made it without casualties. There were cuts and abrasions obviously, but they were minimal thank goodness. Providence was on our side. The final approach well above the river flats was thankfully gently sloping and without obstructions. This time we travelled in silence on my instructions for fear of unexpected Japanese patrols.

When we entered the jungle the vegetation we had just ventured through was astounding. We forged ahead from savannah growth into the awe-inspiring precinct of mighty trees that probably were around when the first humans set foot on this primordial island.

Without a single leaf to bless them selves with, until they reached the all-enveloping canopy, gigantic tree trunks soared bolt upright to the sky. What use is a light-processing leaf in the gloom of the jungle? The visual effect of the forest reminded one of cathedral columns and the echoes added to the sepulchral effect. Some small seedlings thrust adventurous tendrils upward toward infinity. One could only wish them well against past millennia of established growth.

All life forms have evolved a structural design to suit their ways of life. These massive perpendicular living things, while aspiring to incredible altitudes had evolved wide, flaring buttress roots for support against cyclones and storms. Beneath the detritus and leaf mould, each tree sends out a wide disc of surface roots ensuring that they are stable in a gale. Their roots interlace with those of their neighbours forming a powerful reinforcing mesh. Together with the buttresses and their closely packed neighbours they are as safe as possible. Considering their size and obvious vintage their design is a great success.

Although the closely stationed tree trunks with the flaring buttresses were great protection in case of enemy fire, the very fact that undergrowth was non-existent between them made it hazardous to dash from one to the other under fire. Only at the perimeter edge of the jungle, verging on clearings, was good coverage, but it was almost impenetrable.

We were fairly confident, being this far south of the Ramu River that the chance of Japs was remote. In view of this when we flushed a small flock of Gouria pigeons, I fired a short machine gun burst and bagged six plump fowls. In a protein-starved land this was a scoop. To the carriers it was incredible that I could fell so many in seconds. They looked in awe at my weapon. The Gouria pigeon's beautiful crest was akin to a peacock's fantail, although far smaller and of subtle tones of delicate bluish gray. That night we enjoyed a delightful addition to our mundane menu.

"Now you have seen that my gun is ideal to banish and kill the Japanese who want to take over your country and mine, but it is also great for shooting food." I then told them that they could have five of the birds and all the feathers, together with the wonderful crest feathers. I warned that there should be no arguments about shares. The boss boy would draw straws. I showed them how. My plucked bird was for my "table". This pigeon weighed about four kilograms and was equally palatable as turkey. A small fire in the cover of the forest was allowed that evening so that the birds could be cooked. It was immediately doused as soon as the meal was finished. Then we bedded down in silence.

Next morning when we were several hundred metres into the forest I called a halt while rations were split for the pairs of fire-lighters: enough for three days. This would be replenished if needed for a longer stay by sending them fresh supplies. They were sent on their mission and told not to tarry along the way. The rest of us camped where we were, to give the others a chance to scale the peaks and make their smoke signals. All conversation was in muted tones for the forest seemed to

magnify every tiny sound. I decided to start combing the jungle at around three in the afternoon. I reckoned that would give the smoke signalers time to light their fires.

Shortly after we moved off, one of our agile native team shinnied up a slanted tree that had tilted for some reason and made climbing a little easier. He called down from his lofty perch to say that he could see two fires sending up straight columns of smoke. We fanned out in a line abreast and moved slowly forward to the west. Every man could see a man on either side- but only just. All eyes were glued to the jungle floor searching for signs of any passage left by Jack. We spent another day repeating the performance. This brought us to the half-way mark between the peaks. It was then that I decided that it was time to fire off five rounds. The shots rang out shattering the silence. All hell broke loose in the canopy. An invisible and deafening horde of birds screeched in an incredible uproar and wild confusion. Then nothing! Not even a sound came from the birds. We were quite disillusioned and downcast. The reason for the five shots at measured intervals was that if the identical pattern was repeated later, it might be obvious that they were not the sound of an aggressive gunfight in progress.



There was a dangerous risk if there were any enemy patrols in the area; if there were, then I could only hope that we would have salvaged Jack and skedaddled out of there by the time they had homed in on our ruckus.

In daytime there is a singular absence of animal life; it is there, of course, but it prefers the protective cloak of darkness. The occasional displacement of a rotting log spawns forth almost unbelievable awakened creatures. It is not unusual

to arouse frogs, scorpions, large centipedes, and beetles of incredible size bearing frightening sharp pincers and horns: and yes! Pythons and death adders are there too.

Fortunately in elevated mountains mosquitoes are minimal as are the other stinging insects. Occasionally one falls foul of a nest of hornets or wasps: yet again this is far less often than one would find in the river flats.

We did notice, however, that when we dropped down to a lower level, although it was still well above river-bed height, the bloodsuckers were prevalent. Sad to say, this included the eternal leeches, ticks and mites.

We spread out again until I began to doubt that Jack would tend toward the furthestmost signal fires. From earlier conversations I knew that he would head for the saddle on the eastern side of Mount Wilhelm. That would keep him more toward the two fires we had passed. In view of this I also surmised that Jack might have treated the five shots as a Japanese ploy. I also realized it was possible that he might be dead.

My gut feeling was that a repeat volley of five shots was needed to affirm that there was someone here who was not afraid of being heard. So I fired another five rounds at measured intervals. The echoes seemed to go on and on.

A great hush fell on the carriers. Then a shot rang out within a reasonable distance!

The team had been ordered to remain silent in such an event and they all converged on me to seek my instructions. I addressed them when all were accounted for. In subdued tones I instructed them about the folly of rushing to the origin of the shot in case it came from the Japanese. I took two carriers with me and we approached the site with stealth. If it were Jack I would let the carriers know. With that I left with two men; the others were to hide in the bush to await our return.

After a mile of furtive progress we paused to scan the forest when miraculously from behind the tree trunks came two men carrying a body swinging on a pole like a pig. It was Jack Dellar! He was still alive but seriously ill with dysentery and malaria. The two PNG men were Faiya who was a native policeman, and the other noble fellow's name was Lakuana. They had refused to abandon Jack.

Four runners were sent out to the signalers who rejoined us after several hours. Meanwhile I tended to Jack's infected cuts and ulcerated legs. I dosed him with quinine and sulphadiazine then fed him a small serving of soup made with canned meat and vegetables. Faiya and Lakuana were able to eat a good meal. They had no abrasions or sickness, however I examined them carefully. All I had for a reward for them both was bully beef and biscuits. Within another hour we were on our way up out of the forest and made camp just before the landslide area. Jack was released from his pole and laid on a comfortable pad where he slept soundly.

Early the next morning work began in earnest. I urged the team to build a chair between two poles. Four men would be needed to carry Jack back to Bundi. He had revived enough to sit up and I felt that psychologically the chair would help him recover. On the way back to Bundi he leaned over and grasped my hand with what I can only describe as extreme fervor. I was elated and overjoyed that my dear friend was still alive; I would have been devastated if he had perished.

Before we made the perilous re-crossing of the landslide patch I called out to the boss boy to have two extra men on Jackie's chair. "First you must tell the four men to go into the bush and cut several lengths of wood to make imitation spears. These you must sharpen like really strong spears, but they are something to use if the land starts to slide and carry you all to the bottom with the rocks. You will spear them into the mountainside to stop you from sliding." They were needed, and did in fact save the day when four of the men bringing up the rear gave a yell as they began to accidentally reactivate the landslide. All four of them moved as one to thrust their spears deep into the rubble. The runaway gravel slowed to a trickle

before the men gingerly proceeded across the treacherous area, using their spears as stakes.

Our return to the Mission was a tumultuous event. The Bundi population set up a resounding victorious chanting, and deafening cheers as we reached this lofty eyrie. After suffering ten days of hell Jack Dellar was safe - we salvaged him in four days. It was fitting therefore that a celebration feast was staged with barbequed pigs and loads of exotic foods. The entire crowd was totally satiated. Both Faiya and Lakuana were cheered and feted and much admired by the villagers and our guests.

It wasn't more than a week or so that Jack was well enough to wend his own way back at his own pace to Dengeragu with two attendant carriers. We shook hands, gave a brotherly hug and then, regrettably, he had to leave.

