CHAPTER ONE

Last Hope, Last Bastion

It was mid-afternoon. The bombardment which had begun at dawn had not let up and, to make matters worse, it was still raining heavily. Crouched in their flooded slit trenches, or behind totally inadequate breast works dug among mangroves and rubber trees, the Australians watched and waited, eyes red-rimmed and bloodshot from lack of sleep, watering with the strain of peering through the driving rain. The enemy too was watching and waiting, all 20 000 of them, on the other side of the narrow Straits of Johore. Described by military boffins in England as a splendid moat, this waterway was, in reality, a hopelessly inadequate barrier. The Australians were well aware, however, that it was the only thing separating them, and Singapore Island, from Japanese-occupied Malaya.

All, from the Australian Imperial Forces' (AIF) rawest recruit to the most battle-hardened soldier, knew this would be the decisive battle. The Japanese had steam-rollered their way down Malaya in a matter of weeks, overrunning battalions of poorly-trained British and Indian troops, some of whom had offered little or no resistance. Finally, after cutting a swathe through their opposing ranks with alarming speed, the invaders had come face to face with the Australians. Although the AIF, well-trained in jungle warfare, had put up a fierce and determined attack, stopping the enemy in its tracks, it had proved ultimately to be a lopsided contest. After days of nonstop bitter fighting the Japanese, in total command of the air and the sea, emerged victorious. Battered and bleeding, but nevertheless uncowed, the AIF had joined the exodus to the south.

On the last day of January 1942, only seven weeks after the initial landings hundreds of kilometres to the north, Japanese domination of Malaya was complete. The Allied armies could retreat no more. Protected by a rear guard composed of the Australians and what remained of a battalion of jungle-toughened Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, they had trudged across the causeway linking the Malay peninsula to Singapore Island, their last hope, and the British Empire's last bastion.

The Australians, spread thinly across almost 20 kilometres of coastal terrain on the western side of the island, harboured no illusions about the job they now faced. The area assigned to them was a defensive nightmare — a mixture of tidal mud flats, swampy marshes, rubber

plantations and heavily-vegetated hillocks — all fragmented and dissected by countless streams and inlets. Although they had been given the most difficult sector, it would not have been so daunting had there been proper coastal and beachhead defences. The Australians, who had heard about the invincibility of Singapore, had eagerly reconnoitred their positions on arrival, expecting to see massive concrete fortifications, anti-tank traps, weapons' pits, pill boxes and all the other paraphernalia so essential to defence. To their horror they found nothing — not even a strand of barbed wire.

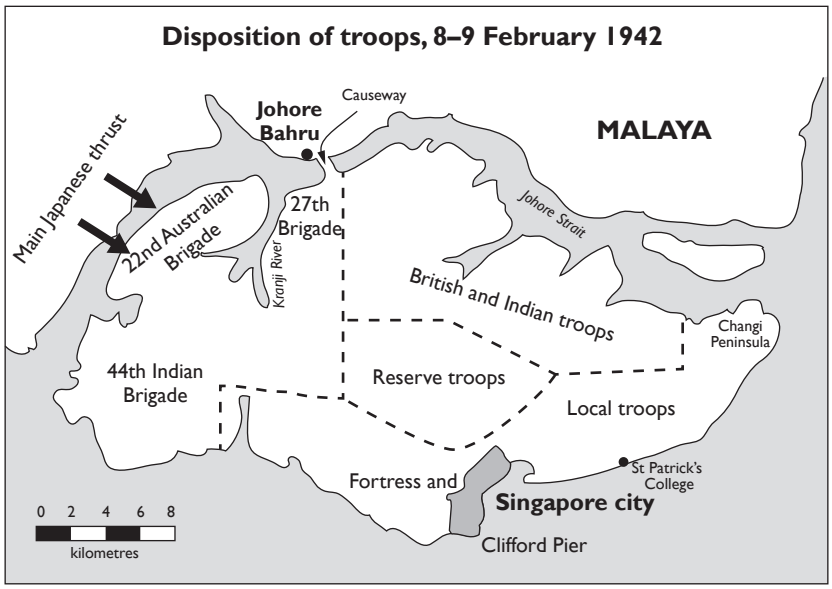
The British military hierarchy and the inept local civil administration had ignored all evidence to the contrary, and clung, ostrich-like, to the fantastic myth that any assault on Singapore must come from the sea. With the island protected by an impressive array of gigantic guns ranged along the southern shoreline, and the mighty British navy standing by to sail to their assistance, Singapore was deemed impregnable to attack.

The destruction, by enemy aircraft, of the two great British naval ships, *Repulse* and *Prince ofWale*s, off the coast of Malaya in early December, showed the fallacy of that theory. So too had the lightning-fast, land-born invasion by the Japanese over mountainous, jungle-clad terrain in the height of the rainy season — a time of year when such an attack was considered out of the question.

All but the most obtuse realised by early February that the enemy, having achieved the seemingly impossible, was in a winning position. Not only did the Japanese have vastly superior numbers of well-trained men, absolute control of Malaya, its airfields, its waterways, its resources and its people, they also controlled Singapore's water supply, piped across the causeway from Johore Bahru. Although there was a supply of fresh water stored at three reservoirs in the centre of the island, it would not last for long, even with careful rationing. Singapore's already substantial indigenous population was now well over 1 000 000, swelled by the hordes of homeless Indian, Malay and Chinese refugees who had streamed across the causeway, barely one step ahead of the rapidly-advancing Japanese. Frightened and bewildered, they now cowered in Singapore city, seeking shelter in bombed-out buildings, in the flimsy shanties of Chinatown or, for a lucky few, in bungalows hastily vacated by fleeing British residents.

It was now the eighth day of February. Scattered throughout the mangroves on the north-west tip of the island, 23 kilometres away from the relative safety of Singapore city, 35-year-old Tom Burns and the rest of his 2/20th Battalion were dug in as best the swampy conditions would allow. So too were the 22nd Brigade's other battalions, the 2/18th and 2/19th, positioned further round to the south, on Tom's left. These three infantry units, along with a portion of the 2/4th Machine-Gun Battalion stationed in the most forward positions, were to bear the brunt of the attack.

Those occupying the foremost defensive positions of Tom's battalion were surrounded by mud and mangroves, virtually isolating Eric 'Mo' Davis and his company from the rest of the unit. Although only seventeen, Mo, who had seen action with the battalion at Mersing



Map of Singapore Island, showing troop dispositions and key points.

on Malaya's east coast, was a veteran compared to the recently arrived reinforcements. He was also experienced far beyond his years, having left home at the age of thirteen, ridden the rattlers around the back-blocks of New South Wales in search of work, and then joined the merchant marine. It was in February of 1941, while working on the troopship *Queen Mary* as a boilerman, that Mo had first come into contact with the 8th Division's 22nd Brigade, then en route for Malaya. When his next voyage took his ship to Suez with troops bound for the Middle East, Mo decided the army was the place to be. Signing off, he had headed straight for the recruiting office in Sydney's Martin Place, raised his age to eighteen and joined the AIF. Although army regulations decreed that the fuzzy beard he had grown while at sea had to come off, he was able to retain his moustache — which, because of his youth, made him stand out from the mob, prompting fellow infantryman Joe Kenny to dub him Mo.

To the right of Tom and Mo, on the far side of the Kranji River, were the three battalions of the other Australian brigade, the 27th. Adjacent to the all-important, but unfortunately only partially-demolished causeway, were the 2/30th and 2/26th Battalions and behind them, in reserve, was the 2/29th. This unit, which had sustained severe losses in Malaya after a horrendous battle, had been hastily and heavily reinforced, as had the 2/19th Battalion.

To the rear of the 22nd Brigade, not far from Tengah airfield, was Brigade Headquarters, over which Brigadier Harold Taylor presided. Here Mo Davis's boyhood friend, seventeen-year-old Private Keith Botterill, waited with fellow infantryman Private Richard Murray. Officially, Botterill was nineteen. He had put up his age by two years to enlist, following an ANZAC Day visit by a recruiting train to the resort town of Katoomba, in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales, where he was staying with his family at the time.

This pair, posted originally to the 2/19th Battalion, formed an odd alliance. The teenage Botterill, whose longish, somewhat serious face was enlivened by bushy eyebrows beneath which danced a pair of very blue eyes, was of average height and of a lean, wiry build. Although quite strong he was a mere stripling compared to the well-built Murray, whose darkly curling hair and strong, ruggedly-handsome features betrayed his Scottish Celtic roots. Moreover Murray was ten years older and had a wife and small son.

Yet, despite the age gap and physical disparity, they had much in common. Both were rebels at heart, although Murray was more overtly so. In Malaya, his habit of over-extending his leave without permission had landed him in trouble more than once, resulting in some heavy fines and temporary transfer to the Mobile Laundry Unit — the army's subtle way of dealing with persistent transgressors. Both men were also exceedingly tough, having been raised in working class Sydney suburbs. Botterill, quick-witted and fearless, was so game that his playmates had called him Ned Kelly — a title he had undoubtedly earned, and which had far more appeal than the one with which he was currently stuck — Sad Sack — after the rather morose looking comic-strip character of the same name. His slight stature was no handicap. A veteran street fighter from an early age, he was fast on his feet and handy with his fists.

While bullies, looking for an easy mark, might have been misguided enough to pick a fight with Botterill, only the foolhardy or brave would knowingly have taken on Murray, a talented welterweight boxer whose success in the ring was no secret.

Botterill, growing up in a neighbourhood where gangs were the norm and territories fiercely defended, had never been short of friends on whom he could rely in a crisis. Murray, although raised in a less hostile urban environment, also appreciated the value of mateship, and his many friendships were nurtured by his amiability and warm, ready smile. Popular with everyone, Murray had always been surrounded by a posse of loyal and steadfast friends.

Murray and his friends in Sydney had enlisted, almost *en masse*, in July 1940. Unfortunately, when they arrived at Martin Place to sign up, Murray had been classified as temporarily unfit because of a boil on his foot. By the time the aspiring recruit had been passed medically fit a month later, his mates had already been dispersed to various units. He had, therefore, linked up with the much younger Botterill when they had been posted to brigade headquarters. Although neither had any inkling at this stage, the tentative friendship which was being forged under such unlikely conditions would one day prove to be beyond measure.

Supporting the various infantry battalions were the artillerymen. Bombardier Dick Braithwaite and Gunner Wal Blatch, of the 2/15th Field Regiment, were not only good mates, they were manning the same gun. The strongly-built Blatch came from Yeoval, New South Wales. He was only 21 but had a maturity about him which, along with a luxurious black moustache, made him appear much older. Married the previous year, he had volunteered for active service after the fall of Greece and Crete, a decision which did not particularly

please The Union Bank, which employed him as a clerk at its Barellan branch, in western New South Wales. Blatch had teamed up with 25-year-old Dick Braithwaite, a very dapper-looking photo engraver from Brisbane, who had never been known to have a hair out of place, not even when in action. Arriving in Malaya in mid-1941, the pair had been assigned to the same gun crew and had been together ever since.

Gunner Eric Tomkyns, attached to headquarters battery, also belonged to their regiment. Born and raised in India he was no stranger to military life, having served with the University Regiment at Agra. After graduating as a Bachelor of Arts at Agra, Tomkyns had emigrated to Sydney where, while undergoing teacher training, he had pursued his love of the outdoors at every opportunity, spending almost every weekend bushwalking and camping in the foothills of the Blue Mountains to the west of the city. On obtaining his qualifications, he had moved to the north-west of the state to accept a post at a primary school in the country town of Warialda. At the age of 28 the good-looking, chestnut-haired Tomkyns, now married with two small children, had forsaken his teaching career to take up arms in the belief that it was his personal responsibility to protect his wife and family.

His sense of duty was matched by that of 21-year-old John Barnier, who hailed from the rich dairy country near Grafton on the lush north coast of New South Wales. He had joined up at the same time as two other local boys — John 'Jacky' Jackson, who was of Aboriginal-Torres Strait Islander descent, and Johnny O'Donohue who, like John Barnier, had been raised on a dairy farm. After their final home leave, the local community, in typical country style, had assembled at the tiny, weatherboard Alumny Creek Hall to give them a send-off they would never forget. During the proceedings, by way of appreciation, Jacky, who had a magnificent singing voice, had entertained the crowd with a beautiful rendition of 'One Day When We Were Young', while John Barnier had recited a moving poem by M. L. Haskins. The following morning, when all three had boarded the North Coast Mail to much good-natured banter and shouts of 'Good Luck', John's younger sister, Maureen, turned her head against the picket fence running along the rear of the platform and sobbed as if her heart would break.

A qualified agricultural scientist who had relinquished a place at New South Wales' prestigious Armidale Teacher Training College in order to volunteer, Barnier was a religious young man whose abhorrence of killing had been overridden by his deep sense of patriotism. Although both he and Tomkyns were well-educated and highly intelligent, they rejected the idea of Officer Training School, preferring to be simply 'one of the boys'. In an effort to be sent overseas, having failed to be posted to an infantry battalion destined for the Middle East, Barnier had opted for the Australian Army Service Corps (AASC), a unit whose diverse duties ranged from maintaining ammunition supplies to the front line to ferrying stores wherever they were needed. However, in early 1941, much to Barnier's disgust and disappointment, he had found himself not on the battlefields of North Africa but in the backwaters of jungle-clad Malaya. Chaffing with frustration, he had volunteered

to ride 'shot-gun' on the truck and eventually came to terms with the prospect of spending the war far from the action, fulfilling a role as a rifleman destined never to fire a shot in anger, with a unit servicing a non-existent front line. To his immense satisfaction, Barnier's garrison duties had come to an abrupt end with the invasion of Malaya.

Quiet and compassionate by nature, his perpetual look of youthful innocence heightened rather than diminished by the severity of his army uniform, John Barnier was much tougher than he appeared. Determined to carry on after complications following abdominal surgery, he had defied all attempts to ship him home, preferring instead to take up a temporary post in the orderly room until he was pronounced 100 per cent fit.

Billy Young was a different type, a street-wise orphan raised in the inner Sydney suburb of Ultimo who, though by no means lacking in intelligence, loathed and detested school, so much so that he had quit at the earliest opportunity. Only fifteen years old at the time, but well developed physically, this under-aged tearaway had raised his age to nineteen, falsified the necessary 'consent' from a fictitious aunt and then enlisted.

Billy's sights, like John Barnier's, had been set on an overseas posting with the infantry and he was overjoyed to find he was being sent as a reinforcement for the 2/29th Battalion, the ranks of which had been depleted after protracted fighting in Malaya. Here, at the base depot at Johore Bahru, he met and forged a lasting friendship with nineteen-year-old Harry Longley, who came from the New South Wales country town of Yass. A couple of larrikins, Young and Longley were fortunate to find themselves taken in hand by Paddy O'Toole (who, being quintessentially Irish, was universally described as 'mad') and the older, far more sane, sensible and steady Corporal Bob Shipsides, a practical bushman from Victoria. These self-appointed guardians had managed so far, with varying degrees of success, to keep Young and Company from getting into too much trouble.

Waiting just behind the infantry was Private Albert Anderson who, at 42, was old enough to be Billy Young's father. Like so many others who had been out of work during the Depression, Anderson, who came from the inner Sydney suburb of Glebe, had volunteered because of the financial security the armed services provided. Father of six young children, he was a caring man with a well-developed sense of humour — handy attributes for his job as driver with the 2/3 Motor Ambulance Convoy (MAC). This outfit, which had been attached originally to the 11th Indian Division, had been thrown into action when the Japanese attacked the north coast of Malaya on 8 December 1941. Since then it had never left the front line and had seen more action than any other Australian unit. Always the 'tail-end Charlies', two ambulances belonging to the 2/3 MAC were the very last vehicles to leave Malaya, roaring across the causeway to safety at the last minute. Now the unit's job was to ferry the wounded to one of the casualty clearing stations or hospitals which, along with the combat, service and administrative groups, formed the 8th Australian Division under the command of General H. Gordon Bennett.

Further to the rear, also waiting for the action to begin, were the equally mature Private

Ray Carlson and the slightly younger Corporal Neil Christie. Carlson, a cook with the 4th Reserve Motor Transport, came from Victoria and was the father of eleven children ranging in age from late teens to a few months. Devoted to his wife and family, to whom he sent a constant stream of presents, Ray had managed to find time the previous day to write one more letter. Although it was covered in blobs and blots where globules of sweat had trickled down his arm and smudged the ink, the letter was cheerful enough, telling of a visit by three small Chinese children who had dropped by the field kitchen for a treat of bread and jam. It had ended with the assurance that, although the Japanese numbers were enormous, 'we will beat them here'. Aware that, with the artillery barrage increasing by the minute, this missive might be the last for some time, Ray had signed off with 'so long, not good-bye'.

Queensland-based Neil Christie, also married and father of three, had been working as an accountant at a large sugar mill in tropical Mackay at the start of the war. Believing that all able-bodied men would soon be conscripted anyway, he, and a number of other employees, had decided to take the plunge and join up. Born into a family which had extensive farming interests, Christie was as much at home in the bush as in the city, despite his sedentary occupation. Throughout his formative years he had spent a great deal of time on the land, much of it on a merino sheep property near Inverell, New South Wales, where his grandfather was a well known grazier. While his experience of country life had made him self-reliant and resourceful, it was his flair for figures that made him well-suited for his posting to army ordnance stores, where part of his job was to keep track of weapons, explosives and ammunition supplies. Quite tall, but of slender build, the dark, curly-headed Christie was a quietly cheerful soul who always had time for a friendly word or two.

While a number of these 'old blokes' had jobs which kept them back from the front line, this was not the case for 41-year-old Staff-Sergeant William Baird McDonald. A tailor by trade, Bill McDonald, the 18th Battalion's clothing quartermaster, had been posted to headquarters company, now sited only slightly to the rear of the rifle companies. If nothing else, McDonald had the satisfaction of knowing the battalion was going into battle properly clad. When his nose had told him that most of the combat troops had not had close contact with soap and water for the best part of a fortnight, he had made it a priority to replace their sweaty, smelly field-dress with brand new gear. However, making sure that the troops were adequately clothed was not as dull, nor as safe, as it sounded. McDonald's clothing depot had ceased to exist as a result of one bombing attack while his chest still showed evidence of severe gravel rash, caused by diving headlong into monsoon drains. For someone who was 183 centimetres tall, strongly built and weighed just on 90 kilograms, these acrobatic manoeuvres were no mean feat. Married and the father of three children, Bill McDonald came from the prosperous New South Wales town of Armidale, famous as much for its rich grazing country as for John Barnier's alma mater, the Armidale Teachers' College.

The rain had stopped now and it was quite dark. The tropical night had fallen with its usual suddenness, taking those still accustomed to a lingering twilight by surprise.

As the blackness increased, the shelling reached crescendo pitch, with 60 to 80 shells a minute falling on some areas. The older soldiers, who had lived through similarly terrifying experiences in the Great War, told the younger men it would eventually stop. And when it did, it was almost certain that the enemy would make its move.

As predicted, the barrage finally ceased. The deafening roar of artillery and mortar explosions and the rat-a-tat-tat of heavy calibre weapons were now replaced by something far more unnerving. Silence. Those at the forward posts, aware of the perilousness of their situation, focussed their entire energies on the black strip of water in front of them, ears now strained for the faintest sound, eyes peeled for the slightest movement. As they watched, they became aware of an almost imperceptible shifting of shadows, as dark, indeterminate shapes detached themselves from the even darker shoreline. Before long, they detected the faint splash of oars and the shadows were shadows no longer but hundreds of barges and boats, filled with thousands upon thousands of enemy troops. As they moved closer, protected by a covering mortar barrage, Tom Burns steadied himself. This was it. This time, he vowed, there would be no retreat. This time they would all hold their ground or die in the attempt.

While Tom, and many more like him, were unflinching in their resolve to stay at their posts no matter what the cost, the intensity of the mortar barrage undermined the resolve of some who had not been in battle before. Unaware that the mortars were being fired at a fixed elevation and not creeping towards them, some troops withdrew to new positions. This premature movement, while understandable, unfortunately created even bigger gaps in the already over-extended line.

When the landing craft reached the shore, the Australian machine gunners opened up. Thousands of rounds of ammunition spewed forth in murderous cross-fire, felling the enemy like wheat stalks before the scythe, but still they came. The infantry now joined in, their grenades and rifle fire adding to the carnage. But it was not enough. Scrambling over the bodies of their fallen comrades, the Japanese poured ashore, wave after fanatical wave, infiltrating the gaps between the forward posts and overwhelming the Australian positions. In some places the advance was so rapid that many of the forward posts found themselves completely isolated. Private Ron Moran and a small band of fellow machine gunners, realising they had been cut off from the rest, had no option but to destroy their faithful Vickers and fight their way back through enemy-held territory in the hope of linking up with the infantry.

With communication lines cut by the shelling, the artillery remained silent, unable to fire for fear of hitting their own men. However, after word was received to 'bring down fire everywhere' Blatch, Braithwaite, Tomkyns and the rest of the gunners fired off a total of 4800 rounds. But despite the efforts of the artillerymen, the situation worsened. When the machine guns, barrels now red-hot, eventually ran out of ammunition, the gunners, bayonets fixed, joined the infantry who were now fighting hand-to-hand. All were in a

desperate position. As the situation deteriorated, some were able to withdraw to previously assigned positions to regroup. Others, completely cut off and isolated in the dark, could do nothing but try to fight their way out, metre by bloody metre.

By morning, it was all over. The Japanese, outnumbering the Australians eight to one, had gained the foothold they needed and, once having gained it, proved impossible to move, in spite of the reserve battalion being brought into the fray. Forced back to the other side of the Tengah Airfield, the survivors of the badly mauled Australian units re-formed. It was a pitifully small force. For the second time in a month the 2/19th Battalion had ceased to exist as a fighting force, the majority of its men killed, cut off or wandering around in the rear areas completely disoriented. The two other battalions, the 2/20th and 2/18th, suffered similar casualties.

The death rate would have been higher had it not been for individual acts of heroism, such as that displayed by the 2/19th's Padre Harold Wardale-Greenwood. With scant regard for his personal safety, and in the face of unrelenting heavy mortar and automatic weapon fire, he had moved among the wounded, applying field dressings where possible and keeping up the men's spirits. Others in the battalion, finding themselves entirely surrounded and with no hope of getting out alive, owed their lives to the self-sacrifice of some of their mates. The gunners manned the machine guns until the ammunition was spent, keeping the enemy at bay until the others had escaped.

As the small bands of survivors straggled in, some to brigade headquarters, some to collection posts, each had a tale to tell. Captain Rod Richardson, with the remnants of a company from Mo's battalion and some machine gunners, had defied impossible odds to get out alive. Occupying one of the most forward posts, they had maintained their position through sustained hand-to-hand fighting, unaware that a withdrawal to battalion headquarters had been ordered. At dawn, finding themselves quite alone, they had moved to a small knoll, where they soon bore the full force of an attack by Japanese who had advanced into the surrounding area. Somehow, they managed to cling on until 10.30am, when they eventually received the much-delayed order to withdraw.

Finally reaching the place where he had expected to find battalion headquarters, Richardson had found only dead men. He and his troops then pushed on through country completely over-run by the enemy, only to be ambushed. Ditching most of their clothes and equipment, the survivors split into two groups and took to the swamps and rivers where a number were killed by sniper and automatic fire. It was not until afternoon that the remainder, utterly exhausted and without their weapons, staggered past Tengah Airfield and down the track to Bulim village, where Richardson reported to Brigadier Taylor, as ordered.

Throughout this terrible night it had been relatively quiet in the 27th Brigade's sector. However, their turn came the next evening when the Japanese, having routed the 22nd Brigade, crossed the Straits and attacked the coastline immediately west of the causeway.

Although there were some incursions along the left flank, the tenacious Australians, supported by the artillery, managed to hold their own. However, the brigade commander, believing his men to be in danger of being cut off, ordered them to withdraw to a new position about 5 kilometres back. Before doing so, they were instructed to destroy all oil and fuel stocks by opening the cocks of nearby storage tanks. As thousands of litres of highly volatile aviation spirit flowed down the nearby waterways, the defenders set it alight, incinerating a battalion of enemy troops attempting an outflanking manoeuvre. General Nishimura, Japanese commander of the elite Guards Regiment, was seeking permission to call off his attack when, by the light of the burning fuel, he saw that the Australians were leaving. Scarcely able to believe his good luck, Nishimura took the initiative and pressed home his attack. Once the territory had been lost it proved impossible to regain. Despite a planned counter-attack, the Australians were once more in retreat.

Although the 2/29th Battalion had been held in reserve initially, it had not been for long, and Billy Young was called into action. He soon realised that being an infantry soldier on active service was not nearly as glamorous as he had imagined. Furthermore, a fighting retreat was not on his agenda, especially since it was his job to lug heavy ammunition for the section's Lewis gun.

Billy and his mates, still fortunately under the care of Paddy O'Toole and Bob Shipsides, had been taking up a new position when they were caught in the open. Under intense mortar and machine-gun fire they reached the shelter of some trees and took cover in what Billy, under the circumstances, considered to be more of a rabbit scrape and less of a foxhole. Suddenly, a shell slammed into a tree, immediately above his head, cutting the trunk in two and showering earth over those hugging the ground beneath it. Temporarily deafened by the explosion and gagging from the smell of cordite, Billy also realised that there was a pain in the region of his thigh. He felt tentatively for the spot with his hand, only to discover warm, sticky blood. Horrible images, prompted by childhood memories of a World War 1 soldier, a neighbour who had lost his leg while fighting on the Western Front, immediately flashed through his mind. It was with great relief that, upon further examination, he discovered he had sustained a shrapnel wound in the groin and his leg was not, as he had imagined, hanging by a thread and in imminent danger of falling off. He received no sympathy at all from Paddy O'Toole who, on ascertaining that the shrapnel had missed Billy's vital organs, quickly applied a field dressing to the wound and pulled him to his feet. Shipsides' orders were to withdraw and, as they were now more or less surrounded by enemy troops, Billy either moved or he would be left to the ministrations of the Japanese.

Despite a harrowing journey which lasted throughout the night, with one man dying and another wounded, Billy's group eventually reached Australian lines and an aid post. Now an official war casualty, Billy, a borderline stretcher case, was given the choice of joining one queue of men, bound for Alexandra Military Hospital, or joining the walking wounded. While it was tempting to be carried off on a stretcher to the Military Hospital, he resisted