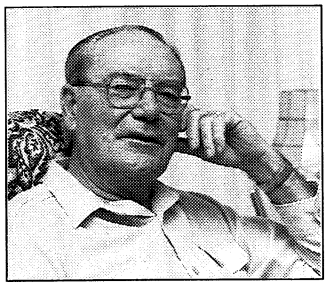

When I Think Back...

by Neville Williams

Archie Caswell: radio dealer, serviceman, 'ham' and a modest hero in Japanese POW camps - 2

A local radio dealer and repairman in Queensland during the 'Golden age of radio', Archie Caswell joined the RAAF but ended up as a prisoner in a Japanese POW camp. There he defied his captors by contriving illicit radio receivers, and boosting the morale of his fellow prisoners by intercepting news from allied short-wave broadcasters.

We begin this second part of the Archie Caswell story by letting Archie continue his own account of life in the POW camps:

Life in the Prison Camps was studded with rumours, some to do with the war in general, others to do with matters that might impact on the prisoners' own situation — including our access to radio news broadcasts!

For us, one notably persistent rumour was that we would be transhipped from Java to an unknown destination. As it gained momentum, we decided that the radio facility had best be rendered 'mobile', so a second fake water bottle was prepared to accommodate key spares, including a headphone and a spare valve.

The spare torch cells posed a problem of bulk and weight, but the many empty M&V (meat & vegetable) cans around the camp gave rise to an idea. Two such tins, cut around the middle, could be fitted together to look like an unopened can. A circular tin sleeve soldered on the inside would ensure a neat fit and the original label could be re-glued around the circumference to hide the join.

As I remember, the 'doctored' tins held seven torch cells each, which had to be carefully insulated from the top and bottom of the can. The weight was about right, and quite a few such tins were prepared to ensure a continuing source of power.

The one disadvantage was that they became quite heavy on a long trek, as Bill Wilkinson (RAAF) later discovered, when he subsequently inherited the job of carrying quite a few of them.

The second fake water bottle was to be carried by Bill Breillat, while I would look after the radio and aerial. Little did we realise then that this 'mobile' outfit would ultimately travel from Singapore to Burma and Thailand.

As it was, the new receiver had an extended tuning range and passed all tests, news being received from San Francisco, the BBC, All-India Radio Delhi, and Radio Australia Melbourne.

Because we had to conserve batteries, it was decided that the best regular bulletin was from the BBC Far East transmissions. There were times, however, when it was not possible to listen because of Jap guards, camp shifting etc. For the most part, listening had to be done in the dark and notes made on paper, which took some deciphering in daylight.

Time to move on

The precautionary measures certainly paid off when rumours of an impending shift proved to be true: within a few weeks, we were to leave the 'Bicycle'

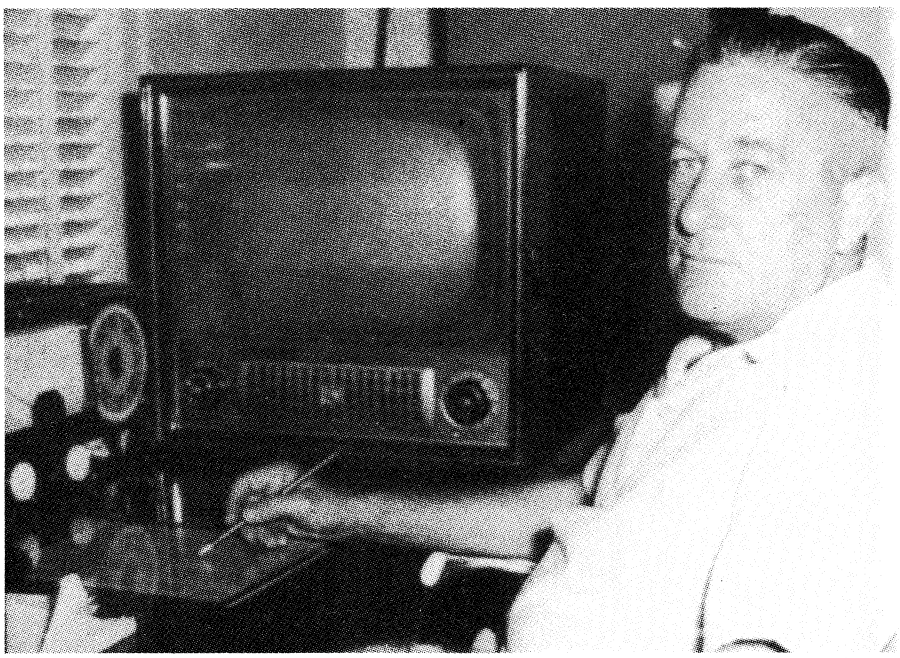

Fig.1: Archie Caswell, photographed just before his retirement at the test bench of his shop in Adelaide Street, Maryborough. He had been involved in television from its establishment in Australia in 1956, when he discovered that signals from Melbourne could be received in Southern Queensland due to anomalous 'skip' propagation.

Camp, Java — destination unknown, but perhaps Singapore. The day came and we were loaded into a Jap cargo vessel (bought from Britain pre-war as scrap metal). The space per person was two square feet per man, which made for a rather 'cosy' crossing of the equator!

After quite a few days of hell, we reached Changi camp in Singapore. This, we soon learned, would be only a staging point, so the radio was not set up. Moreover, someone else at Changi already had a hidden radio and news was being received.

A couple of weeks later, we were herded into a cattle boat and on our way again, this time on a longer and more arduous journey — the conditions filthy and the progress slow — and with everyone sweating it out under the steel deck plates until Rangoon, Burma was reached.

Someone on board had a compass and could check our direction of travel. We reasoned that we must be nearly there, when a deck party saw the muddy water of the Irrawaddy Delta.

There followed a slight respite — of one day — and we were on our way again from Rangoon to Moulmein, Burma. Here we were marched off the ship to the Moulmein jail. An ever to be rembered sight was the 'Golden Pagodas' glistening in the sunshine, followed by the sets of stocks just inside the jail gates, and the rack and other medieval means of torture.

This gave us cause to think hard, as also did the sight of primitive Burmese tribesman prisoners walking around the courtyard with heavy chains around their ankles and holding in their hands a heavy iron ball chained to their ankles.

That night, we nevertheless decided to throw caution to the winds and set up the radio, receiving two news broadcasts.

Burma/Thailand railway

Within 48 hours, the move was on again and we marched away through the outskirts of Moulmein to a place named 'Thanbiziat', which was eventually to become the Burmese terminal of the infamous Burma/Thailand railway.

On the march, we were most impressed by the friendliness of the Indian/Burmese population, who tried to give us food, towels, clothing and books, risking the every-present chance of a good Japanese flogging. Many of these people spoke fluent English and were obviously well educated.

The radio was re-commissioned during operation Thanbyuzayat Burma but, applying our Java lesson, all news went only to a senior officer, who arranged distribution.

A week or two here, and many Japanese indoctrination lectures later, saw us off again some 40km into the jungle towards Thailand. We were indeed going to build a railway, of which much has been written.

Some weeks passed during which the radio intercepted many cheerio calls from relatives in Australia and as reception occurred in darkness, quite a few messages were delivered to POWs from their familes Down Under. This boosted their morale and gave them some hope.

Unfortunately, over-talkative individuals in our midst were still less than discrete in discussing such matters, and the Japanese were becoming frustrated because they could not find the radio they thought we must have access to.

A change in strategy was clearly called for when it became evident that water bottles were being used freely by many POWs to conceal watches, jewellery, etc that they had managed to scrounge. The Japanese were walking through our huts saying: "Changee, changee, ten rupee for watch, compass, radio, etc".

They had even stripped our camp of old lengths of fencing wire, in the search for radio equipment. What if a curious guard chose to examine one of our two 'radio' water bottles?

Seat of the problem!

After some discussion, we decided to make a wooden kitchen stool with a false bottom and conceal the radio and batteries there. (For Archie, it was also a place where he could conceal his war diary).

The ruse completely fooled the guards, who frequently sat on the stool

Fig.2: Having defied his captors in Japanese POW camps at great risk to his life, a once ordinary country radio serviceman set about rebuilding his life in this equally ordinary radio shop in Adelaide Street, Maryborough, Queensland.

when searching our gear. When shifting camp, the stool would be loaded with the kitchen gear and away would go the Jap guard on the back of the truck — sitting on the stool! Needless to say, the opening was nailed shut when a move was on.

As the months dragged by, we shifted back to the 26 Kilo Camp in Burma, then off again to the 55 Kilo Camp and then to 75 Kilo and on to the 105 Kilo Camp, which was just outside the Thai border. It doesn't sound much when you say it quickly, but it represented 18 months of life in the jungle.

The radio still performed well, in spite of the humidity. Unfortunately, as the 105 Camp, we lost our good friend Frank Huxham with dysentery.

The railway line was now finished. Other parties had been working from Bangkok and when the last rails were laid, we watched the spectacle of Japanese troops going north and wounded going south. Japanese propaganda was intense at the time, but they couldn't fool us. It was evident that their time was beginning to run out.

However, the constant humidity was taking its toll on our stock of batteries; what else could one expect after four or five months of continuous rain?

Eventually the rain cleared, but our power supply was in poor shape. Brian suggested that we replace the battery paste with a mixture of sal-ammoniac and rice flour. Some cells were duly rebuilt and rejuvenated, although rendered very messy to handle.

Made life bearable

The crisis proved a point, however: it demonstrated that the radio did boost morale and dissuaded many from attempting escape into the jungle. We knew that the nearest Allied forces were 400km away, and no one could be that lucky to escape and remain undetected.

The few that did try to escape were brought back to camp and either shot or beheaded without any semblance of a trial.

It must have been 1944 when we again shifted camp, this time into Thailand, and down eventually to Tamarkan, where we were greeted by old friends.

On entering camp our Commanding Officer told us that it was time to give the radio up, as the Japanese Kempi Tai (Military Police) were active and we had pushed our luck long enough. Some Englishmen at a nearby camp were operating another secret radio, so I surrendered ours to Smithy who buried it in the kitchen. It is probably still there today!

In conclusion, we must remember that this project, like many others, could not have made itself worthwhile without the effort of many people who, working as a team, ensured its successful operation.

Arch Caswell concludes his memoirs with the sentence: *My gratitude to all who contributed.*

To that I should add my own word of appreciation, for the effort he made to record the events for posterity. As Darryl Kasch remarked to me over the phone: "Arch wrote what he did only because he was prevailed upon to do so. He confined himself to the basic facts, anxious to avoid any fuss about events that he would have preferred to put behind him".

Archie Caswell, postwar

In the taped interview, Archie's wife Desley said that when the War ended in August 1945, priority for transport back to Australia understandably went to those POWs whose physical condition was the most urgent.

Archie did not make it back until October, but even though he had been looked after in the meantime, he still weighed only 6-1/2 stone. His health was 'not good' and he had to be cautious about what he ate. On arrival, he was immediately admitted for a repatriation hospital 'check-up'. His doctor warned him that the effects of extended malnutrition would probably linger for the rest of his life, and that his treatment would continue for as long as it took to confirm his pension rights followingdischarge.

When he ultimately did return home with a pension of ten shillings ($1.00) per fortnight, he was impatient to pick up his business life where he had left off and start a family. The Caswells had two daughters, Jennifer and Lyn.

Archie's attitude was simply that his POW experience had cost him the best part of four years, and he wasn't about to extend the loss by dwelling on the past. He'd prefer to 'black it out' and carry right on.

In fact, Desley says, he made light of medical advice to 'make haste slowly' and may well have overdone things applying himself to his business, postwar — 'head down and tail up'!

The one person he would stop and talk to about the war years was his old buddy Fl.Lt. Ken Smith. It was Ken who perhaps more than anyone else, alerted his family to the fact that Ken had a story to tell, and who finally constrained him to put pen to paper.

In the meantime, Archie had been awarded the British Empire Medal by the Governor General (Mr McKell). The citation read:

Caswell, when captured at Java, displayed considerable initiative by building from scrap components a wireless set. He operated this under great dif-

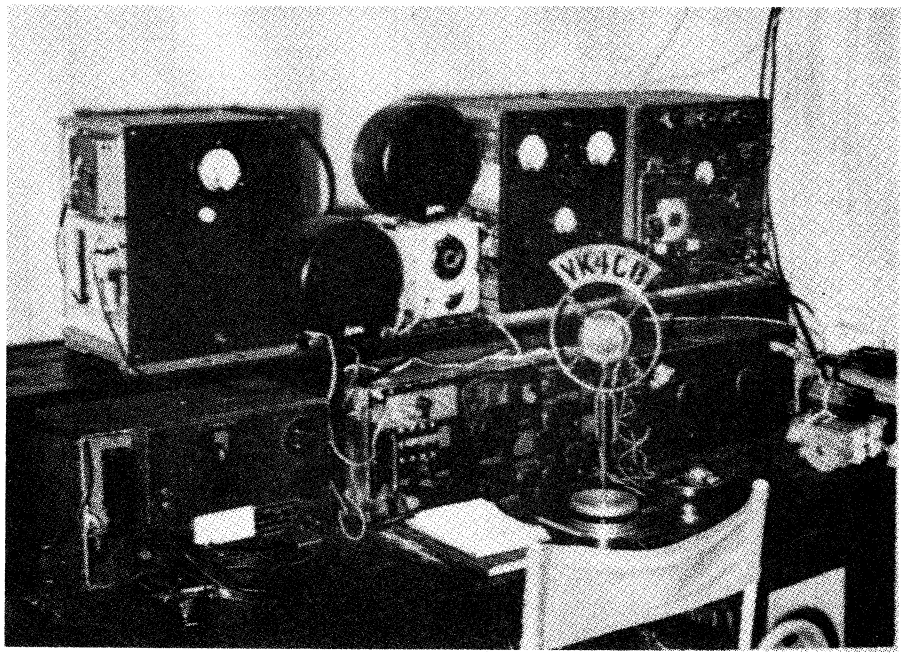

Fig.3: Arch Caswell's amateur radio at the rear of his home. Note the Reiss carbon microphone, surmounted by the callsign VK4CB.

ficulties and the threat of severe punishment if he were caught. He worked the set continuously to supply a news service to all his comrades.

These services were continued when he transferred to other camps, by smuggling the radio with him.

Newspaper report

In reporting the above, and presumably quoting from official records, the current *Maryborough Chronicle* explained:

At the end of this course (Radar at Sydney University) he was sent to Singapore to install radar equipment in Lockheed Hudson aircraft, and posted to No.1 Squadron.

After three months in Singapore, the squadron was transferred to Sumatra about a week before capitulation. Here the squadron continued operations against the Japanese on the Malay Peninsula. The squadron at this time operated from Palembang, in the south of Sumatra.

Mr Caswell modestly remarked yesterday that when he heard he had been awarded the British Empire Medal, he was surprised.

To date, he has not received any information about the award other than what he read in the paper.

Darryl Kasch was given to understand that Archie did not display or talk about the medal, nor would he have welcomed suggestions that his activities could provide the central theme for a book on forbidden radios in the POW camps.

Did he know the celebrated Dr 'Weary' Dunlop? According to his wife Desley he did, although not so much as a Dr/patient.

Knowing that Archie needed time, on occasions, to work on the radio project, Weary Dunlop would conceal him amongst the men who were 'obviously too sick to work today'. Once the guard's back was turned, Archie would head for the soldering iron!

Author Bon Hall, himself a one-time RAAF Flying Officer and POW in Burma, had seen at first hand the efforts of Archie and others to intercept and disseminate news to the many thousands of prisoners in the adjacent POW camps.

In a separate article in the *Australasian Post* (28/8/1960) Bon Hall — himself a former RAAF officer and POW — said that to be caught with a radio would have involved collective penalties for the prisoners generally and an automatic death penalty for those immediately involved.

Summing it all up, Darryl Kasch, who collected the relevant material, remarked: "Archie Caswell obviously wasn't a medal man!"

First and foremost, he was an industrious country radio retailer, intent on rebuilding a business based on post-war receivers and providing for his wife Desley and two daughters Jennifer and Lyn. Desley says that she was very much a part of the enterprise, standing in at the shop, answering the phone and looking after the books.

Roving around

Integrated with the shop was radio servicing, involving calls up to seven days a week, with distant jobs shuffled to the weekend so that out-of-town journeys could be converted into family outings. Archie also had a shared interest in new car sales, and last but not least, remained a keen amateur radio operator with but one reservation in the immediate post-war period: he would rather 'pull the big switch' than stay around and respond to an amateur with a 'JA' (Japanese) callsign. Funny about that!

DX on 144MHz...

Writing in the Maryborough Chronicle, Bill Rendall emphasises that Arch Caswell's success in snaring signals from Melbourne's Channel 2 TV station was not a matter of chance.

Some years before, he had maintained a nightly schedule with another amateur station — 4JO at Clayfield Brisbane — to demonstrate that reliable contact was possible on 144MHz using the relatively low power of 20W.

Arch reasoned that with a much more powerful signal of lower frequency, a lofty directional antenna and a path free of intervening mountains, there would be a good chance of the TV signals reaching the Maryborough area. They did!

The post-war business was based at a shop in Kent St, Maryborough but, following a flood in 1955, he transferred to a site in Upper Adelaide Street. Competition in the town became quite fierce, according to Darryl Kasch, with Keers Radio across the street pushing Philips products against Arch Caswell handling mainly Astor, with a sprinkling of other brands including Tasma and Breville.

As such, the business proved quite successful. According to wife Desley, they were both busy and didn't make a fortune — but neither did they want for anything. They employed a youth, Jack Lloyd, to help out and operated a utility and a Vespa motor scooter for delivery and service work. The scooter rated a special mention because it provided a 'fun' way for Dad to 'double' the kids to school — this in the days before strict road rules about safety helmets, etc.

By the middle 1950's, the family doctor was becoming more urgent in his warnings to Arch Caswell to slow down, and to Desley his advice made good sense. So when a local estate agent mentioned that a radio dealer/repairman 'Les' — himself an ex-serviceman — was seeking to re-locate in Queensland, Desley prevailed upon her husband to sell out.

Her aim was to break the tight cycle of committments in which they were enmeshed. If Arch chose later to resume his radio activities on a less hectic scale, so be it. In due course the documents were signed and the business changed hands in 1956.

'Spare time' servicing

In fact, Arch never did re-launch into radio sales and service at a serious level, but neither did he drop out of radio altogether. He did a few repair jobs 'to keep his hand in' and showed a special interest in ageing receivers which were in the process of becoming historic or 'vintage' models. He had also taken up lawn bowls, which he had pursued to championship level.

And, of course, out the back he had an array of amateur radio equipment and motor-driven rotating antennas, atop a 70ft (21m) mast. Desley recalls that the girls used to come in and observe that "Dad's talking to his girl friend again — up in the Canary Islands"!

That same mast brought a new and compelling interest into his life when the ABC TV stations in Sydney and Melbourne opened in November 1956, in time for the Melbourne Olympics. To his delight he found that, under certain atmospheric conditions, the signal — particularly from Melbourne — 'skipped' through to the Maryborough area.

So Arch bought himself a standard Australian TV set (did somebody say Astor?) and set it up in his home. When signals showed up on the screen, the word would go out and friends and relatives would converge on the Caswell home for free entertainment. Sometimes they would see a whole show; at other times there would be a loud 'Hisssss' and the picture would dissolve into nothingness as the skip path disappeared.

The exercise also meant that Arch was able to gain an early familiarity with television technology, as employed in the initial wave of Australian B&W receivers.

As TV services were extended into Brisbane in the following years, intending viewers in the Maryborough area faced the option of installing 'fringe' TV antennas on lofty, guyed masts, much as happened in the Newcastle area of NSW.

Fringe area TV

Arch Caswell responded by setting up the family caravan on an accessible site and providing it with mains power, a TV receiver and a fringe-type antenna. By arrangement, would-be viewers could meet Arch there at mutually suitable times and see for themselves, in a rural family setting, what was involved in the then-new and unfamiliar form of entertainment.

In due course his eldest brother George, who was marketing TV receivers in the Murgon area, commissioned a TV service van with a telescopic antenna system, which could check signal levels at customers' own homes. Arch lent a helping hand when necessary and also helped out with TV servicing jobs.

He and Desley also helped family members in the car business, sometimes forming a party to ferry new vehicles up from Brisbane — a tedious business for both themselves and other road users because they were not supposed to push new and 'tight' engines to beyond 40mph (69km/h).

Pre-war, Arch had always been a 'Chev' man, but after the war he settled for the Chev's big brother — an ex-disposals Pontiac.

This was followed by a new Chevrolet, after which he had to transfer his affiliation to Holdens. Holdens were OK, but he couldn't say the same for their English cousin the Vauxhall — which, he claimed, used to pitch and 'bucket' along Australian country roads.

The Holden 'Brougham' earned high marks, because he saw it as a scaled-down Chevvy. Jap cars didn't rate, on principle, and only right at the last did Arch and Desley settle respectively for a Datsun and a Toyota!

As the 1970's gave place to the 80's, Desley sensed that her husband was feeling his age. They had retired to an eight-acre property for 'peace and quiet' but even with a ride-on mower, Arch could not keep it tidy to his liking. His beloved lawn bowls slipped from competitive play to a social game one day a week. And, for whatever reason, his sight had deteriorated to the point where he had no hope of coping with transistorised equipment.

Final, fatal blow

Then in early 1986, at age 72, he was diagnosed as suffering from a melanoma, possibly from the years he had spent outdoors in Burma — his naturally fair skin often protected only by a loin cloth.

He entered hospital in April 1986 for an operation, which appeared to be successful. But the doctors misread the signs, compounded by Archie's own diffidence and what was diagnosed as a harmless residual cyst proved to be malignant and invaded his lymph glands. He died in November 1986 at age 73.

I can pay no higher tribute than to remark that Archie Caswell had been an associate of the late Dr 'Weary' Dunlop on the infamous Burma Railway. But while his contribution may have been less dramatic, he was certainly made of similar material! ❖