



The chance discovery of a Japanese war record led to the intriguing story of “Mangrove” Murphy. **By Steven Bullard**

**T**he title of the document was intriguing: “Transcript of interrogation of Captain Murphy captured on New Britain”. I was at the National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS) in Tokyo undertaking a survey of Japanese-language documents relating to Australia’s experience of war in New Guinea. These were valuable sources, but mostly dry and

uninteresting: battle reports, unit diaries, bundles of orders, that sort of thing. I wasn’t sure what to expect, but became increasingly taken aback as I read the Japanese transcript.

The report claimed to be the interrogation of an Australian intelligence officer, Captain John Joseph Murphy, who had been captured in New Britain and interviewed by the 6th Field Kenpeitai on 17 November



# TRAITOR OR UNSUNG PATRIOT

1943. Organised under 18 headings, and written in the first person, the transcript contained extensive details of almost every aspect of Murphy's covert operations: training, chains of command, communications, personal details of other intelligence officers, unit strengths and movements, codes, supply, weapons, handling of locals, maps of movement, and so on. I wondered if the information was accurate, and if so, what methods had been used to "extract" it from him. Further, had he survived, and did the circumstances of his interrogation ever become known to the Allied authorities?

Other priorities pushed these questions, and the report, into the background. Many months after I had returned to Australia, however, I had occasion to consult a dictionary of Pidgin English held in the Research Centre of the Australian War Memorial. It was compiled in 1959 by J.J. "Mangrove" Murphy, a Patrol Officer in New Guinea before the war. Could this be the same man? Subsequent investigations confirmed he was, and revealed the startling fact that Murphy, detained a prisoner of war in Rabaul until the end of the war, had been charged by the Australian military authorities in October 1945 on the following counts: "treacherously giving intelligence to the enemy" and "conduct to the prejudice of good order and military discipline". I also learned that his court martial, presided over by Brigadier W.N. Tinsley, had honourably acquitted Murphy of all charges.

The whole story was not immediately clear, but I was certain the interrogation report was central to the accusations levelled by the Australian authorities. The report had been

captured and translated with other Japanese documents after American troops had landed in western New Britain in December 1943. Intelligence instructions issued by the First Australian Army around that time emphasised the necessity of maintaining a "discreet (and complete) silence" if captured. These reports also stated that recently captured interrogation reports had revealed that "much valuable information" was being obtained by the Japanese, and warned that after the war, such prisoners would be "liable to severe disciplinary action".

Described as resourceful and brave "to the point of recklessness", Murphy's military record seemed exemplary. He had enlisted with the New Guinea Volunteer Rifles after the Japanese invaded Rabaul in January 1942, but was almost immediately seconded by the Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit (ANGAU) as a scout, guide, field intelligence and native liaison officer. He played a vital role with Kanga Force in operations around Wau and Bulolo, and was mentioned in despatches for "gallant and distinguished services South-West Pacific Area".

Murphy volunteered in mid-1943 for service with the Allied Intelligence Bureau (AIB). His first mission was to monitor Japanese troop dispositions and aircraft movements, and to bring aid to downed Allied airmen in Japanese-occupied New Britain. Murphy's party, which included two other Australians, Lieutenant Francis Barrett and Sergeant Bert Carlson, and several native troops, was betrayed by locals and ambushed by a Japanese patrol near Awul in October 1943. Barrett and Carlson were killed in the encounter. Murphy was ultimately captured

**Facing page:** The subject of medical experiments while captive in Rabaul, Murphy is greeted by Australian troops at Jacquinot Bay, 7 September 1945, after being released. AWM 095817

**Inset:** Murphy, pictured in August 1942 (far right), was mentioned in despatches for assisting Australian troops in campaigns near Wau. AWM 013146

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**Above:** Private A.L. Cooper of 29/46 Infantry Battalion, inspects the allied cemetery in Rabaul, New Britain, 1945. AWM 096511



**Above:** Evidence given at the trial by Fukute Yoshihiko was often vague and inconclusive. He became the prime prosecution witness after the suicide of Kenpeitai officer, Yamada Gonju, just before the trial. Image courtesy of National Archives of Australia, B5563, 1701

**Across:** Murphy was captured near Gasmata and first interrogated by local navy officer Fukute, perhaps at this well-concealed navy command post in the area. AWM 016913

near the Aiwi River, having himself been shot through the wrist. The Japanese also captured his code books, logs of communications, radio crystals, maps, and other equipment.

A natural leader, Murphy often placed his own safety at risk by standing up to the guards during his period of captivity in Rabaul. According to the testimony of an American airman, James McMurria, Murphy would often sneak out of the prison to steal food and medicine for his fellow captives. He also used his extensive knowledge of Pidgin, and a smattering of self-taught Japanese, to gain information about his captors. On at least one occasion, he successfully facilitated the escape of a native, Gundov, who was able to take this information to Australian troops in the west of New Britain.

Murphy, suffering the effects of neglect, poor diet and medical experiments conducted on him while in captivity, was recovering in a field hospital in Lae in September 1945 when Australian intelligence officers arrived to interrogate him. His subsequent trial was closely followed by the Australian press, who provided daily summaries for an Australian readership. The testimony of the main prosecution witness, Lieutenant Commander Fukute Yoshihiko, the local navy commander at Gasmata who had first interrogated Murphy, was often vague and contradictory. Fukute himself was later convicted and executed for the unlawful killing of Allied prisoners at Rabaul, so he may have been careful not to implicate himself in his testimony. Indeed, at the opening of the case for the defence, Murphy's lawyer requested the case be dismissed, as "the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals would not send a dog to the lethal chamber on evidence such as that".

The translation of the NIDS interrogation report did not directly figure in the court deliberations, as it was still a classified document and unavailable for the public proceedings. However, the tenor of the questioning reveals that most parties were aware of its existence. The defence claimed that the Japanese were fully aware of the details of AIB operations on New Britain from other sources: local informants, monitoring of Allied news reports, and captured documents, including Murphy's own code and log books. Murphy's "interrogations" had taken the form of a series of statements by his captors, each of which was met with silence on his part. The contents of the interrogation report, while

for the most part accurate, seem to have been concocted by the Japanese from other sources, and not from Murphy's interrogation.

On 19 February 1946, after a month of deliberations and midway through the case for the defence, the Judge Advocate, Major V. Rees, closed the proceedings, announcing that the court had "certain matters to discuss". The court resumed 50 minutes later, unwilling to hear further evidence. Murphy was proclaimed not guilty and handed an honourable acquittal. What had gone on behind the closed door is unclear. Perhaps the court was satisfied that Murphy's defence had already done enough to discount the evidence presented. More tantalisingly, the court may have been convinced that sufficient explanation had already been given concerning the contents of the NIDS report and how it had been produced.

"Mangrove" Murphy returned to New Guinea after the war and continued his service to the territory, rising to the post of District Commissioner of the Gulf District. For many years, his lawyers made unsuccessful attempts to extract an apology from the government, to gain compensation for the injustice of his treatment by the military court, and to achieve recognition in the form of military decoration. By the time of his death in 1997, none of these had been forthcoming. From one point of view, the honourable acquittal left no doubt or suspicion attached to Murphy's name. From another, the discovery of a significant piece of intelligence on the battlefield led many, both from within the army and the general public, to believe at the time that he had indeed "squealed" and betrayed his comrades. Even now, it is difficult to completely banish a shadow of suspicion when reading the volume and detail contained in the transcript of the interrogation report, despite the overwhelming evidence of Murphy's dedication to the people of New Guinea, to his fellow soldiers, and, ultimately, to his country. 

