

**ANZAC DAY AND THE BURMA SIAM RAILWAY
Bill Haskell Ex WX3279 2/3RD Machine Gun Battalion.**

In Australia and New Zealand the 25th April is known as Anzac Day. It is a day on which the two Nations pay tribute to our Servicemen and Servicewomen who lost their lives in defence of freedom.

We are therefore grateful to the Governments of the Kingdom of Thailand and the Union of Myanmar and their people for permitting us to honour those who died in their countries and have their remains interred in this cemetery and that at Thanbuyazat.

These men died as Prisoners of War of the Japanese in World War 11 during or as a result of working on the Burma Siam Railway. They died, in the main, through the sheer negligence of the Japanese in not supplying the basic food and medical supplies, in their inhumane and brutal treatment and in subjecting the prisoners to the absolute extreme of forced labour.

The prisoners were starved, overworked, exposed to diseases, harassed and brutally assaulted at the work place.

The established rules of warfare in relation to prisoners of war were abandoned completely in the frenzy to push the railway through.

We remember these men with great affection and deepest respect.

The sole purpose of locating Prisoners of War in Thailand and Burma was to work on the railway and the Japanese made it abundantly clear from the outset that there would be no respite until the task was accomplished.

During the monsoonal months of July and August 1943 the country was deluged with continuous downpours of rain. At the same time Cholera and Amoebic Dysentery reached plague proportions and the Japanese engineers introduced their dreaded "Speedo" tactics. The combination of these factors resulted in deaths and disablement thereby cutting the workforce considerably and placing a huge burden on the remaining workers.

The engineers showed no compassion, on the contrary, continually increasing the working hours. Despite the enormous pressure many prisoners survived the ordeal until the rail link was completed. They received wonderful support from the Doctors, medical orderlies and camp staff who supported them admirably. All of these people deserve to be acknowledged for playing their part in a triumph over adversity.

Upon completion of the rail link the war was till twenty-two months from finishing and the POWs were moved around a great deal.

Some men were retained on the railway doing maintenance work and cutting wood for locomotive fuel whilst others were spread around the country working on roads, railways, and bridges damaged by Allied bombing and monsoonal rains.

The men of “F” Force, whose introduction to Thailand was a 260-kilometer march to the disease-ridden camps at and around Sonkurai were eventually returned to Singapore, missing over a thousand of their number who had perished.

The fittest of the Prisoners of War survivors were sent to other areas of Asia as forced labour. A large number of the Australians went to Japan to work in coalmines and other industrial areas. They sailed in decrepit unmarked ships and unfortunately some of the ships in the convoys were sunk by Allied submarines resulting in a further heavy loss of life.

The inhumane treatment meted to the Prisoners of War had reduced a third of the “railway” survivors to a state where they were incapable of further manual labour. They were transferred to (so called) hospital camps in Tarsao and Chungkai. They were later consolidated in a vast hospital camp at Nakon Pathom.

After the Japanese surrender, much to the relief of the Prisoners of War who were well into their fourth year of captivity, thousands of them were repatriated to Australia to be nurtured back to health by their loved ones. Many, of course, were beyond complete recovery. After a period of convalescence and retraining, those who had recovered sufficiently were returned to society and assisted in rebuilding a country that had been on a full wartime footing for over six years.

Notwithstanding the dreadful conditions in Thailand and Burma, the subsequent ordeals in “hell-ships” and coalmines and the inhumane treatment, many of the Australian POWs displayed a resilience, a fortitude and a will to survive which allowed them to re-establish themselves after the war.

Many moving accounts of the fortitude displayed by the Australian prisoners in enduring great adversity have emerged. I would like to refer to just one which gives some idea of this magnificent trait.

Basil Clark was a member of A Force in Burma and had his right leg amputated at the mid section of his thigh in September 1943. The amputation was carried out at the 55 Kilo Hospital Camp by the renowned surgeon, Lieut. Colonel Albert Coates, whose skill and expertise surely assisted Basil Clark's recovery.

In due course Basil was transferred to the Base Hospital at Nakon Pathom in Thailand and repatriated after the war to Perth, Western Australia, where he very quickly resumed civilian life. In June 1946 Basil married the young lady he was courting when he enlisted. They were blessed with a son in 1947 and a daughter in 1948. Basil was fitted with an artificial leg that had an articulated knee and a rigid ankle. The leg was supported by a waistband and strapping which enabled comparative freedom of movement.

The Department of Postwar Reconstruction interviewed Basil and suggested that because of his handicap he should take up a sedentary occupation. Basil rejected this proposal out of hand and stated he was returning to his pre war occupation of farming. In 1949 he moved onto a medium sized wheat and sheep farm at Wongan Hills in Western Australia and single-handedly carried out all the normal farming operations such as ploughing, cropping, harvesting and sheep husbandry. At the same time he took a lively interest in community affairs such as Rotary, Freemasonry, Parents and Citizens Clubs and general sporting activities.

In due course his son Noel continued farming the property and his daughter Lois qualified as a nurse in which capacity she accompanied the Quiet Lion Pilgrimage in 2007

This is the story of a survivor who triumphed over enormous difficulties as a Prisoner of War and on return to Australia distinguished himself as a family man and in farming and community affairs. Truly the type of person who inspires a nation.

Basil was representative of a host of Australian ex Prisoners of War who displayed those great traits of resilience, fortitude and an enduring will to survive. He and the rest of the Prisoners of War were truly representative of their predecessors who collectively led to the coining of the description "Anzac" and the perpetuation of Anzac Day.

We, those who are left, salute those who are no longer with us.

God bless them and God bless you all.