

"THE BEST MEMORIAL OF ALL LIES IN THE HEARTS OF MEN"

THE 2008 QUIET LIONS TOUR TO THAILAND, QUITE SIMPLY, IS AN OPPORTUNITY THAT I AM NEVER LIKELY TO FORGET. IT'S DIFFICULT FOR ME TO ARTICULATE THE PROFOUND IMPACT THAT THIS EXPERIENCE HAS HAD ON ME, BUT IT IS MY HOPE TO CONVEY BUT A TASTE OF WHAT THIS JOURNEY MEANS TO SO MANY. I SINCERELY BELIEVE THAT SUCH A UNIQUE TOUR AS THIS MUST BE EXPERIENCED FIRST HAND TO FULLY APPRECIATE THE KNOWLEDGE THAT IT IMPARTS. SO HERE GOES...

I EMBARKED ON THE TOUR AS A BLANK CANVAS. NOT KNOWING WHAT TO EXPECT AND MY KNOWLEDGE OF THE BURMA-THAILAND RAILWAY BEING QUITE LIMITED, I WAS READY TO FULLY IMMERSE MYSELF IN THE SPIRIT OF THE TOUR. IT WAS PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT FOR ME THOUGH TO GAIN A GREATER INSIGHT AS POSSIBLE, AS MY GRANDDAD, JOE PEARCE, HAD WORKED ON THE LINE. PRIOR TO OUR DEPARTURE, HE WROTE MY COUSIN VERITY WELLS AND I A LIST OF ALL THE CAMPS HE WAS AT DURING HIS TIME AS A PRISONER OF WAR. NONG PLADUK, HINTOK RIVER CAMP AND WAMPO VIADUCT ALL HELD PARTICULAR SIGNIFICANCE TO VERITY AND MYSELF, AND WE WERE INDEED VERY FORTUNATE TO VISIT THESE PLACES.

THE INITIAL FEW DAYS IN BANGKOK WERE A FANTASTIC INTRODUCTION TO A FOREIGN CULTURE. IT WAS ALSO AN OPPORTUNITY TO CLIMATISE TO THE EXTREMELY HUMID THAI WEATHER, WHICH WE DISCOVERED AS SOON AS WE STEPPED FOOT OFF THE PLANE ... BUT AS DAVID PIESSE REMINDED ME, OUR FIRST DAY IN KANCHANABURI WOULD BE THE REAL START OF OUR TOUR.

LEAVING THE SEEMINGLY BOUNDLESS LANDSCAPE OF PEOPLE, TAXIS, TUKTUKS, AND BUSES WAS A RELIEF. LEAVING WHAT SEEMED TO BE ORGANISED CHAOS HOWEVER, MEANT A GREAT DEAL MORE.

FROM THE HUGE NAKHOM PATHOM TEMPLE TO THE VERY BEGINNING OF THE RAIL AT NONG PLADUK AND BAN PONG, TO LUNCH AT THE BRIDGE OVER THE RIVER KWAI - AND THAT ONLY ON THE FIRST DAY - REFLECTED THE BUSY SCHEDULE WE WERE TO BE PART OF. EVERYDAY OF THE TOUR I WAS CONFRONTED WITH AN AMAZING NEW ADVENTURE AND WHAT MADE IT MORE SPECIAL WAS HAVING THE FIVE POW'S ON THE BUSES WITH US. BUS ONE WERE THE LUCKIEST OF ALL, HAVING THE BOOMING SINGING VOICE OF BILL HASKIELL AND THE RAZOR SHARP WIT OF ONE SNOW FAIRCLOUGH. THESE TWO MEN, COMPLEMENTED BY DAVID'S ENDLESS SELECTION OF AUSTRALIAN JOKES, AND ERIC WILSON'S JOINT ENTHUSIASM TO BREAK OUT INTO SONG MADE THE BUS TRIPS AN EXPERIENCE IN ITSELF. I'M SURE THAT THE ADAPTATION OF "COMING ROUND THE MOUNTAIN" HAS BEEN ETERNALLY ETCHED IN MY MIND.

EVERYWHERE WE WENT, US 'FARANGS'- LITERALLY TRANSLATED TO WHITE FOREIGNERS - WERE GREETED WITH A SMILING FACE AND GENUINE CARE. I CAN NOW SEE WHY THAILAND HAS THE PET NAME OF "SMILELAND". I WAS IN AWE OF THE OVERWHELMING SENSE OF CALM AND SERENITY THAT SHONE THROUGH THOSE WIDE SMILES. PARTICULARLY OUTSIDE OF BANGKOK, WE WERE MADE TO FEEL WELCOMED. IT WAS HARD FOR ME TO UNDERSTAND THOUGH, HOW THE PEOPLE OF SUCH A SMALL COUNTRY WHO HAD SUFFERED ON SUCH A GRAND SCALE, COULD STILL EMBODY WHAT I CONSIDER THE HEIGHT OF RESPECT AND KINDNESS.

THE BUDDHIST MONKS TYPIFIED THE SENSE OF THE PEOPLE FOR ME. PERHAPS IT IS RELIGION THAT SO POSITIVELY PROJECTS ON TO THE THAI PEOPLE? THERE ARE A FEW MOMENTS IN PARTICULAR THAT STAND OUT AS BEING UNPARALLELED. THE PINNACLE OF THEM ALL BEING THE DAWN SERVICE AT HELLFIRE PASS. WORDS CANNOT DO JUSTICE TO DESCRIBE THE RAW EMOTION AND PRIDE EVOKED FROM SUCH A MAGICAL PLACE. THE PHYSICAL SURROUNDS OF THE BEAUTIFUL THAI LANDSCAPE FUSED WITH THE HARROWING AND IMPOSING CUTTING PROVIDED FOR ME, A VERY HUMBLING EXPERIENCE. IN THE DARKNESS AND PIERCING SILENCE, HUNDREDS GATHERED FROM ALL WALKS OF LIFE TO PAY RESPECT AND TRIBUTE TO THE MEN WHO PAID THE ULTIMATE SACRIFICE. A SACRIFICE THAT ENSURED THEIR FUTURE. BOTH THE SHEER SIZE OF THE CUTTING AND THE ACUTE FEELING OF THE TRAGIC HISTORY OF THE PLACE WHERE I STOOD OVERWHELMED ME. IT WAS AN INTENSELY EMOTIONAL AND MOVING MOMENT FOR EVERYONE AND AS THE LAST POST ECHOED THROUGH THE PASS AND INTO OUR HEARTS, I HAD NEVER BEEN SO PROUD TO BE AN AUSTRALIAN.

THE SECOND SERVICE HELD AT KANCHANBURI, ALTHOUGH LESS INTIMATE, WAS EQUALLY TOUCHING. THE PERFECTLY KEPT WAR GRAVES OVERLOOKING THE CENTRAL WAR MEMORIAL, WAS EXTREMELY SYMBOLIC. ALL THESE MEN - NOT JUST AUSTRALIAN - HAD SACRIFICED THEIR LIVES FOR ONE COMMON IDEAL, FREEDOM. IT WAS BEAUTIFUL TO SEE THE WREATHS FROM ALL PARTS OF THE WORLD CONVERGE TO ONE PLACE TO RECOGNISE THIS. NEIL MacPHERSON PERFORMED THE POW ADDRESS AND DEDICATED IT TO THE JUNIORS ON THE QUIET LION TOUR. DURING THE ADDRESS, THERE WAS ONE LINE THAT RESONATED WITHIN ME, AND I THINK COMPLETELY EPITOMISES THE AUSTRALIAN SPIRIT OF MATESHIP. "ONE IS NEVER LONELY, UNTIL HE HAS LOST A MATE".

THAT NIGHT WHEN I WAS FILLING IN MY JOURNAL I WROTE ABOUT WHAT IMPACT THE DAY HAD ON ME. I WOULD LIKE TO READ A SMALL PART OF WHAT I WROTE; *"THE ANZAC DAY EXPERIENCE IN THAILAND IS SOMETHING TO BE PHYSICALLY EXPERIENCED - OR ELSE YOU CANT FULLY GRASP THE ANZAC SPIRIT. THIS CANT BE EXPERIENCED BY READING OR WORD OF MOUTH IT'S QUITE ODD REALLY, BUT IT'S ALMOST TOO PERSONAL TO SHARE. ITS SO DIFFERENT FOR EVERY PERSON."* ...ALMOST FOUR MONTHS ON, I STILL FEEL THE SAME WAY.

WALKING SLOWLY ALONG THE OLD TRACK WAS ALSO A MOVING EXPERIENCE. THERE WAS A MOMENT ON OUR WALK WHEN I SAT DOWN AND TRIED TO PICTURE WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO BE A POW DURING THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE DEATH RAILWAY. THE CUTTINGS AND THE BRIDGE REMAINS WERE LIKE SYMBOLS OF THE SUFFERINGS OF MEN. I REALISED THE TRUE DETERMINATION THEY MUST HAVE HAD TO SURVIVE. IT DEMONSTRATES JUST HOW MUCH WAS ACHIEVED, AND WHAT THEY HAD TO OVERCOME IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE IT. AT THE END OF THE WALK WE REACHED THE NEWLY CONSTRUCTED HELLFIRE PASS MEMORIAL. TO ME, THE MEMORIAL AND THE OBELISK THERE STAND NOT ONLY AS A PLACE OF EDUCATION AND REMEMBRANCE, BUT ALSO AS A SYMBOL OF THE ENDURING FRIENDSHIP BETWEEN OUR TWO NATIONS, A FRIENDSHIP FORGED AMIDST THE PAIN OF WAR, AND PRESERVED IN PEACE. FROM THE ENTIRE TOUR TO THAILAND, BUT THESE TWO EXPERIENCES IN PARTICULAR, I HAVE TAKEN AWAY SO MUCH. I HAVE LEFT THAILAND TRULY HUMBLLED BY WHAT I HAVE SEEN, HEARD AND FELT. NOT ONLY HAVE I BEEN EDUCATED, BUT I HAVE BEEN PERSONALLY FULFILLED. I HAVE LEFT WITH A SENSE OF PURPOSE AND DUTY TO SPREAD THE STORIES AND EXPERIENCES OF THESE TRULY HEROIC MEN TO THE YOUTH OF TODAY.

AS THE NUMBERS OF OUR WAR VETERANS DWINDLE, IT IS IMPERATIVE THAT WE CHERISH OUR TIME SPENT WITH THESE WONDERFUL MEN, AND LEARN AS MUCH AS WE CAN FROM THEM. IT IS OUR DUTY TO ENSURE THAT THEIR LEGACY NOT BE FORGOTTEN. THEIR PART IN OUR HISTORY IS VITAL; THEREFORE IT IS IMPERATIVE THAT THEY HELP GUIDE OUR FUTURE. THESE MEN AND WHAT THEY STOOD, AND STILL STAND FOR, SHOWS US THE TRUE BRILLIANCE OF HUMANITY.

IT IS HERE WHERE I WOULD LIKE TO TAKE THE TIME TO THANK THE WAGIN LIONS CLUB FOR GRANTING ME THE OPPORTUNITY TO TAKE PART IN THIS COMPLETELY UNIQUE EXPERIENCE. THE 2008 QUIET LIONS TOUR WAS A FANTASTIC EXPERIENCE THAT I FEEL PRIVILEGED TO HAVE BEEN A PART OF. TO THE EX-POW'S, I AM THANKFUL FOR ALL OF THE TIME YOU HAVE SPENT WITH US, AND THE AMAZING STORIES YOU HAVE SHARED. I HAVE BEEN TRULY BLESSED WITH WHAT I HAVE EXPERIENCED. I REALISE THAT I WILL NEVER TRULY UNDERSTAND THE HARDSHIP AND SUFFERING THAT YOU HAVE ENDURED, BUT IT IS MY HOPE AND PROMISE TO YOU, THAT THE STORIES AND KNOWLEDGE THAT HAVE BEEN IMPARTED TO ME, WILL NOT BE FORGOTTEN. TO DAVID PIESSE, I AM GRATEFUL FOR YOUR COMPANY AND TIME YOU HAVE SPENT TO TEACH ME ABOUT THIS INCREDIBLE PART OF OUR HISTORY. YOUR PASSION FOR THE TOUR AND WHAT IT STANDS FOR IS INFECTIOUS. WHAT YOU DO IS MARVELLOUS. AND FINALLY TO GRANDAD ... I AM INCREDIBLY PROUD TO KNOW YOU. FOR ME, YOU EPITOMISE ALL THE GOOD THINGS TO COME OUT OF A HORRENDOUS WAR. YOU HAVE TAUGHT ME SO MUCH, MORE THAN YOU PROBABLY REALISE, AND FOR THAT I AM THANKFUL.

SO NOW I WOULD LIKE TO FINISH WHERE I STARTED, BY SAYING;

"THE BEST MEMORIAL OF ALL LIES IN THE HEARTS OF MEN"

BY BEN PEARCE. A JUNIOR SPONSORED BY THE WAGINS LION CLUN ON THE 2008 QUIET LION TOUR OF THAILAND.