



30/2 ANGWIN STREET,
EAST FREMANTLE W.A. 6158
TEL/FAX 9339 8237
EMAIL ericjoybtrma@optusnet.com.au
web site <http://www.btrma.org.au>

BURMA THAILAND RAILWAY MEMORIAL ASSOCIATION (Inc)

**THIRTY-FIFTH NEWSLETTER
AUGUST 2013**

THE ULTIMATE SURVIVAL - AT SEA AND ON LAND ARTHUR BANCROFT 24/11/1921 – 28/7/2013.

There are many stories of survival and tragedy from World War Two, particularly regarding the Burma Thailand Railway, but few are more remarkable than that of Arthur (Blood) Bancroft. Arthur Bancroft was born in Fremantle, Western Australia, on 24 November 1921, the youngest of seven children (two brothers and four sisters). His early years were in Trayning, Western Australia, before moving to Crawley and later Subiaco. He attended school at Nedlands Primary School and Claremont State School and attained the Junior Certificate on his fifteenth birthday. As a boy he was a member of the Sea Cubs and the Sea Scouts.

Arthur obtained a position as clerk with the State Lands Department before joining the Union Bank of Australia as a junior clerk at Fremantle and later at Beverly. After registering for service with the RAAF and hearing nothing for a year Arthur enlisted in the Royal Australian Navy at Fremantle on 14 November 1940. He had obtained leave of absence from his employer to enlist for wartime service. He was just 19 years old. After a period of training at land based depots in Fremantle, Melbourne and Sydney, he was drafted in September 1941 to join the crew of the Australian light cruiser HMAS Perth. "Perth" was in Sydney when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour on 8 December 1941. Late February 1942 HMAS Perth was seconded to the fleet based in Surabaya, Java, defending the Dutch East Indies from invading Japanese forces. "Perth" and "Houston" endeavoured to exit the Java Sea area through Sunda Strait just before midnight on 28 February 1942 but ran into a Japanese invasion fleet landing troops at Santen Bay on the North West tip of Java.

The two allied ships held the enemy at bay for an hour and a half before taking heavy damage and sinking within about 15 minutes of each other at the entrance to Sunda Strait. This final battle is referred to as "The Battle of Sunda Strait".

Of the surviving crews of the two cruisers (329 and 368) a large number reached land on Java. About half of the survivors from both ships were taken aboard Japanese destroyers late on the afternoon of 1st March. Arthur (known as 'Blood' by his mates because of his red hair) was one of those survivors. It was at this stage that Able Seaman Arthur Bancroft F3239 went from his first survival at sea to survival on land.

Arthur was one of the survivors transferred to one of the anchored invasion troop transports, the "Sandong Maru". After 7 days, the prisoners were taken ashore and placed in two holding areas in the small provincial town of Serang on the mainland of Java. After 37 days the prisoners were trucked to the Bicycle Camp in Batavia, their home for six months before they were herded on board a Japanese transport, "Kin Kon Maru", headed for Changi camp Singapore. The prisoners were crammed into filthy unventilated holds. Dysentery again became a scourge and one prisoner died en-route to Singapore, a trip that took 3 days in extreme tropical heat. At Singapore the men from "Perth" and "Houston" were separated.

In mid October 1942 Arthur's group departed Singapore in another rust bucket Jap transport, the "Maebasi Maru" and headed north to Burma. After four days they arrived at Rangoon where they were herded into the holds of another transport, the "Yamagata Maru". It was then only a short voyage of one day to Moulmein. After 4 days in a large jail they left by rail for the railhead town of Thambyuzayat about 40 miles south west of Moulmein. It was here that we were informed by the resident Japanese Commandant, Col Nagatomo that we had been brought here to build a railway through the Burmese jungle to Thailand, over "the white men's bodies if necessary".

Arthur's group formed part of "A" Force and for 15 months worked on the Burma-Thailand Railway through the dense jungle of Burma. When the rail from Burma and Thailand was completed in October 1943, 56 "Perth" POW's were left buried in the jungle. The allied POW survivors from the "Railway of Death" were eventually taken to rest camps in Thailand, mainly to Tamarkan Camp on the River Kwai, next to the bridge which became so well known, post war, as 'The Bridge on the River Kwai'. This was from December 1943 to January 1944.

By mid 1944 the Japanese commenced sending parties to Japan as forced labour. There were to be two groups of "Perth" survivors to depart Singapore for Japan. The first group of 41 departed on 6 September 1944 along with the main party of 1300 odd, which had left Tamarkan earlier in the year.

They boarded a 9,000 ton passenger/cargo vessel the "Rakuyo Maru". A group of 21 "Perth" survivors departed on 26 December on the "Awa Maru". The first convoy was waylaid by a wolf pack of 3 American Submarines (USS Growler, Sealion and Pampanito) at 0500 hours on 12 September 1944 with the tragic loss of some 1,000 POW's but the second convoy reached Japan safely.

The prisoners on board the "Rakuyo Maru" escaped injury but Japanese destroyers rescued only the Japanese survivors. The POW's were left drifting in the ocean to survive as best they could. Another prison ship in the convoy, the "Kachidoki Maru" a similar ship to the "Rakuyo Maru" of about 10,000 tons was carrying about 900 British POW's of which close on 400 did not survive

Three days after the attack on these two ships 150 prisoners from "Rakuyo Maru" and 500 from "Kachidoki Maru" by a Japanese destroyer and eventually arrived in Japan. There were eight "Perth" survivors amongst this group.

The balance of the POW's from the "Rakuyo Maru" continued to drift with the ocean currents in the South China Sea, without food or water, coated with fuel oil and holding onto the wreckage from the many sunken Japanese ships that littered the surface of the sea. By day two the survivors were widely spread over a vast area in small groups, mainly out of sight of each other. Luckily, the sea water was warm and the ocean quite calm. Without drinkable water, temptation encouraged many to sample mouthfuls of the sea water. Those who did so, quickly lost all sense of reality and had vivid hallucinations which made them think that rescue was imminent and encouraged them to gulp down mouthfuls of sea water as they swam away from the safety of their rafts and quickly drowned. With no rain in sight, there appeared little hope of survival without a quick change in the weather.

Late in the afternoon of the fourth day throbbing engine noises could be heard and two submarines appeared on the horizon. These submarines proved to be the USS "Sealion" and "Pampanito", two of the submarines instrumental in the sinking of the "Rakuyo Maru" convoy, they were fortunately returning along the same route looking for further targets. Once they established that the floating men were not Japanese a unique lifesaving operation, in dangerous enemy waters, commenced. The "Sealion" recovered 54 men and "Pampanito" 13 men (unfortunately 2 died after their rescue) but with approaching darkness they had to leave the scene for the island of Saipan in the South Pacific because of the need to seek urgent medical assistance for a number of the survivors.

The Naval base at Pearl Harbour alerted two other submarines, "Barb" and "Queenfish".

In the afternoon of the fifth day a turn in the weather brought urgently needed rain, which no doubt proved to be a lifesaver for those still drifting aimlessly on their floating rafts and debris. With the rain came a dramatic change in the sea conditions, which made clinging to the rafts most difficult but the men were encouraged with the thought of survival because of the activity of the submarines.

Late in the afternoon of the sixth day the "Barb" and "Queenfish" could be seen searching for survivors in the angry sea. Despite a long search which extended well into the night the "Barb" and "Queenfish" could only find a further 32 live survivors. Sadly two of these died shortly after rescue. With a typhoon moving in from the north continued searching into day seven proved fruitless and with many of the survivors suffering from exposure problems requiring hospital treatment, the submarines finally left the scene for their base at Saipan which was seven days sailing away.

The Bancroft group (1 "Perth" survivor and 5 airmen) were the last to be rescued).

In total 152 men were rescued by the four submarines which, including those saved by the Japanese, resulted in something like 300 of the 1300 POW's on board "Rakuyo Maru" being saved. Of the 41 Navy men on board only 12 survived and then four of them were killed in air raids in Japan, The Australian group of survivors from "Rakuyo Maru" totalling 92 (including 4 from HMAS Perth) were returned to Australia by the American navy on a minelayer, via Guadalcanal, and arrived in Brisbane on 21 October 1944. They were the first POW's of the Japanese to return to their homeland.

Arthur Bancroft arrived home in his home town, Perth, Western Australia, on 25 October 1944, being the first Western Australian Navy man to escape from Japanese captivity. He was discharged from Naval Service on 30 June 1945 and returned to his occupation in the Union Bank of Australia. Limited, which he had left in 1940. He retired as a Senior Manager in the ANZ Bank on 30 September 1980.

Arthur Bancroft led a full life and was a revered member of the ex Naval and exPOW communities.

Arthur died at the Catherine McAuley Home in Leederville WA on 28th July 2013 and his funeral service at the Pinnaroo Park Cemetery, Whitfords, on 5th August was attended by a large gathering of friends and relatives.

AWARD. Rod Beattie, Curator of the War Graves and Cemeteries at Kanchanaburi and director of Thailand-Burma Railway Centre, Thailand has been honored again as per the Queen's birthday honors list 2013:- Diplomatic (15th June 2013) Diplomatic Service and overseas honors.

Rod Beattie has been also been honored with the MBE (Member of the Order of the British Empire) (This is awarded for a significant achievement or outstanding service to the community and is also awarded for local 'hands-on' service which stands out as an example to other people. The official announcement reads as follows: MBE Rodney William Beattie. Manager, Commonwealth war graves cemeteries, and director, Thailand-Burma Railway Centre, Thailand. For services to the Commonwealth war graves and the history of the Thailand-Burma Railway Centre in Thailand

This recognition adds to his previous two honours which are:

Knight in the Order of Orange Nassau (The Netherlands)

OAM (Order of Australia Medal) (Australia)

We are all proud, and grateful to all those responsible, to have Rod's many years of hard work and dedicated service to the memory of former PoWs and their families recognised by the UK. It is a great honour, and a tribute to Rod, to have such recognition from all three nations representing the vast majority of the Allied railway workers.

LE GAY BRERETON THOMAS CAPTAIN NX76180 2/10 FIELD AMBULANCE AND 2/4 CASUALTY CLEARING STATION

Thomas Le Gay Brereton was born in Sydney on 23 February 1913. When attending Sydney University he initially did science, but changed to study medicine. He received University blues for shooting.

In a separate competition, involving all British Empire countries, he received an Imperial award. He graduated from Sydney University in 1938 and whilst there served in the Sydney University Regiment

He enlisted in the AIF on 24 May 1941 and was appointed as a Medical Officer in the 2/10 Field Ambulance which moved to Malaya in 1941. Whilst with the Field Ambulance, Tom was detached on a number of occasions to relieve as the Regimental Medical Officer with other units of the 8th Division.

To perpetuate the memory of the privations and sacrifices of Allied Prisoners of War and the selfless dedication of the medical personnel during the construction of the Burma Thailand Railway by informing current and future generations through all forms of education and particularly with Quiet Lion Tours to the Burma Thai Railway; The River Kwai; The Three Pagoda Pass; Anzac Day at Hellfire Pass and Kanchanaburi War Cemetery.

LE GAY BRERETON THOMAS CAPTAIN (continued)



Late in November Tom was transferred to the 2/4 Casualty Clearing Station (CCS). This gave him the opportunity to do some surgical work. In a letter home to his mother he said "being in the CCS patients are kept longer and more elaborate treatment can be given.....". In the same letter to his mother he told her to give his .303 rifle to the Army. In another letter to his mother he made the following comment "Did an appendix..., the first surgery I have done since leaving Newcastle. I am afraid I did not do it very well. However, the patient is going well."

There are a number of references to Tom's contribution to the functioning of the CCS during the fighting withdrawal down the Malaya peninsular. The following accounts are recorded in the book – Soldier Surgeon in Malaya - written by Lt Col Thomas Hamilton (Commanding Officer of the CCS)–

Following the heroic action by the Australians at Gemas, many casualties flooded into the 2/4 CCS and the surgeons such as Majors Hobbs, Krantz and Captain Brereton operated for many hours. This, of course, had a flow on effect to all of the CCS staff.

The following comments are from Hamilton's book p63-

"From the room behind me came a barrage of snores. Major Fisher and the other officers were catching up with lost sleep. Captain Brereton's bulky form was enshrouded in a ghostly mist of mosquito-netting at the far end of the veranda

Tom vowed he liked sleeping there because he not only got more air, but could spring easily to the ladder leading to the slit trenches."

Another reference says p81-

"While awaiting Hall's arrival I had a phone call from the ADMS telling me the 2/10th Field Ambulance would be taking over the Mengkibol site. Major Krantz and Captain Brereton were to remain behind with a team of six orderlies in order to give surgical assistance to any wounded....."

In 1996 the Royal Australian College of Physicians produced a book titled "The Long Days of Slavery". The following is an extract;-

BRERETON, Thomas Le Gay b. 1913 d. 1990

BSc Syd(1934) MB BS Syd(1939) MRACP(1948) FRACP(1968)

After doing Science at the University of Sydney, he then decided to do medicine and did his residency at Sydney Hospital in 1939 before moving to Newcastle Hospital until enlistment in 1940. With Drs Roy Mills FRACP and Peter Hendry FRCPA he was posted to 2/10 Field Ambulance which later was sent with the 8th Division to Malaya. There he gained transfer to 2/4 CCS, thinking there would be more scope for medical practice.

In that same unit was Carl Furner, a foundation Fellow of the College. Soon after the brief, brutal Malayan campaign, Tom was sent to care for the prisoners on the infamous Burma-Thailand railway.

There his health suffered badly and he was only six stone at liberation. Ironically for a university blue in rifle shooting, his eyesight suffered badly from malnutrition: thereafter reading and patient care became difficult, time consuming tasks.

The book "Into the Smother" by Ray Parkin (HMAS Perth survivor) contains an appendix written by Lt Col Dunlop. It has short comments about Captain Brereton which say-

"An epic story was a six weeks march of 800 British soldiers for some 600 km (375 miles) from Nakom Nyak (sic) to Pitsanloke carrying their sick on rice-sack stretchers. Due to the devoted work of the medical officers, Capt C.J.Poh SSUF (sic) and Capt T Brereton, AAMC, only three died on the march."

**NOTICE OF THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE BURMA
THAILAND RAILWAY MEMORIAL ASSOCIATION (INC)
SUNDAY 8TH SEPTEMBER 2013, IN THE LECTURE THEATRE ROOM
AT HOLLYWOOD PRIVATE HOSPITAL**

TIME 2.30PM

AGENDA

Opening

Apologies

Chairman's Report

Minutes of Meeting held 9th September 2012

Financial Report for the year ended 30 June 2013.

Election of Office Bearers

**President
Vice President
Secretary
Treasurer
Newsletter editor
Web site**

Report on the 2013 Quiet Lion Tour

Proposed 2014 Tour

General Business

Close followed by light refreshments

K. VANDERWEIDE HONORARY SECRETARY. E.WILSON CHAIRMAN



BURMA THAILAND RAILWAY MEMORIAL ASSOCIATION (Inc)

31 Geranium Place
CANNING VALE W. A. 6155

Mobile: 0419 927 079

Email: kimkrishna@iprimus.com.au

Website: <http://www.btrma.org.au>

SUBSCRIPTIONS ARE DUE AGAIN

Subscriptions for the 2013/2014 financial year are now due. If you have not already paid them, please forward them to the Association with this notice.

Mr

Mrs

Ms

Miss

First Name: _____

Surname: _____

Address: _____

Suburb: _____

State: _____

Post Code: _____

Email Address: _____

Home Tel No.: _____

Mobile No.: _____

Fax: _____

Subscriptions: \$ 5.00

Donation: \$

Total: \$

Please make cheques payable to Burma Thailand Railway Memorial Association

Direct Credit Instructions:

Bank: Australian Defence Credit Union

Act Name: BTRMA

BSB: 642170

Act No: 100057683

Reference: *(please insert your name)*