

Death Railway

TOURS

Interview with ExPOW – Bill Haskell 2/3rd Machine Gun Battalion

Introduction.

2003 - I bumped into Bill Haskell outside the Thai Burma Railway Centre in Kanchanaburi where I had just visited. I had purchased a map of the railway from inside and saw Bill outside; for me it was like meeting Bono or Angus Young – I was absolutely pumped to get his autograph on my Thai-Burma Railway Map. Bill laughed when I asked for his autograph, but he knew I was serious – I thanked him not only for the signature but for the interview that we did previously (below) and for him and his mates' efforts – I point to across the road; and pointed to those mates.

Bill worked on the Thai/Burma Railway at Hintok, Compressor Cutting, Three Tier Bridge and the 7 Metre Embankment. He was part of Sir Edward Dunlop's group of men captured in Java.

I had an opportunity to interview Bill in 2003 – I didn't hold back asking questions, even though they may have been sensitive. Bill kept returning to the River Kwai region throughout his life as a tour leader, guest speaker on ANZAC Day and inspiration.

I have researched many lads in the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery over the years – one was a young Private: John Ladyman – as it turns out he was one of Bills mates; which was awesome to find out more about him from a mate who served in the camps by his side. John died of the dreaded cholera. We visit him every trip to Thailand.

Bill Haskell WX3279, 2/3rd Machine Gun Battalion. 1920 – 2011 – Bill was 91 years old.

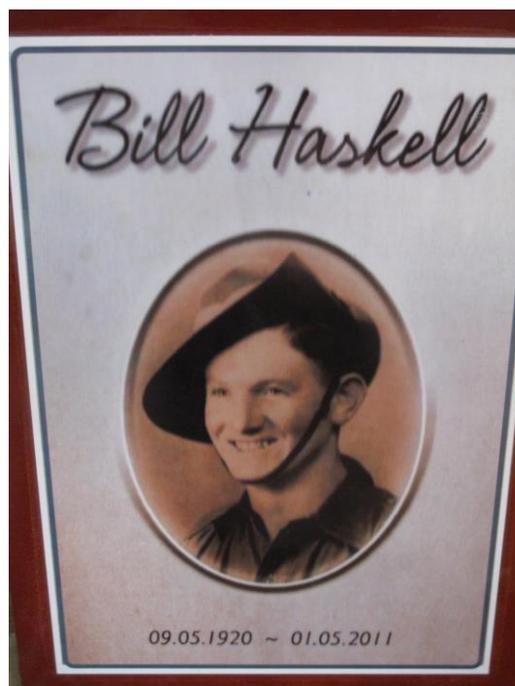


Photo of the tribute to Bill at Home Phu Toey

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Konyu River Camp – Hellfire Pass Camp

Andrew: Your first camp on the Thai Burma Railway was at Konyu River Camp – what was the process in building that camp site?

Bill: Konyu River Camp – when we arrived there in January 1943 we were taken through English Lines to a partly cleared area alongside the river, about half a mile further on than the English Camp. Even at that time the Brits were in a bad way physically with only about a third of their number being able to work. They had been there for about three months. The only covering some of us had were mosquito nets but the bulk of us camped in the open. Fortunately it was in the dry season, quite cool of an evening but fine for all the time we were there. We constructed a number of bamboo and attap roofed huts at Konyu with bamboo cut from the jungle and attap brought up by river barge. We built the camp but never occupied any of the huts. We left there in the second week in March and proceeded over what is now Hellfire Pass to Hintok Mountain Camp.

Andrew: Did you have to build Japanese Quarter as well?

Bill: I don't recall building Jap quarters. I'm pretty certain the Japs used quarters located near the English lines.

Andrew: How many men were housed in this camp and how many per hut?

Bill: Our Java party comprised the best part of a 1,000 men. As mentioned we did not live in the huts.

Andrew: Where was Konyu River Camp in relation to Hellfire Pass?

Bill: If you walk out on the viewing platform at Hellfire Pass Museum and look straight ahead to the right of the concrete road you are looking at Konyu.

Hintok Road Camp

Andrew: Hintok Road Camp – where was the POW Camp in relation to the railway line and the gravel road today? Where the toilet block is located today?

Bill: Hintok (Road, jungle or mountain) Camp was located about four or five kms further on than the entrance to the Army installation at Hellfire Pass. It was probably three miles or so north of the rail trace. That gravel road you refer to was not here in our time, but if you follow its twisting route north it comes out on the highway and about a mile further on that Hintok Camp Site.

7 Metre Embankment

Andrew: Working on the 7 Metre Embankment – it is an awesome site – how was it built?

Bill: The 7 Metre Embankment was mainly built by hordes of men passing hand baskets of sand garnered from between rocky outcrops. As the close in supply diminished it was necessary to use two men per tanka (rice sacks strung between two bamboo poles).

Andrew: I notice when walking along the 7 Metre Embankment in numerous places 'holes' or dips in the embankment – is this where sabotage may have been

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placed?

Bill: There was never an opportunity to sabotage the work. When I first revisited the site in 1987 the jungle had reasserted itself. There were large clumps of bamboo and trees growing much the same as in the cuttings. Decomposed roots etc, would have caused some subsidence. I understand that when the American bombers took out the Three Tier Bridge there were overshoot bombs dropped on the embankment.

Three Tier Bridge

Andrew: The site where the Three Tier Bridge was located is momentous, what sort of work did you perform there?

Bill: Our work on the Three Tier Bridge was mainly in hauling the timber as required and acting as general labourers. Most of the technical work was performed by specialty bridge builders housed in the Hintok Road Camp.

Andrew: The Japanese SGT Guard on the Three Tier Bridge you have said was a sadist what type of things would he do to hurt the POW's?

Bill: He Was known as Billy the Bastard and he would blow his top at the slightest provocation and whatever was in his hand he would let fly at the unsuspecting prisoner working below. He worked on the theory that we should carry out his orders spoken in Japanese when most of the time you didn't have a clue what he was yabbering about. He also Delivered untold lashings often on men who had been knocked unconscious. That the word 'bastard' was applied to him ahead of so many of the same ilk is testimony to his nature.

Andrew: I have read there were approximately 31 deaths on the Pack of Cards Bridge from falls and guards murdering POW. In your work on the Pack of Cards did you witness any of these murders or acts of atrocity?

Bill: What you refer to here is completely untrue. Both the Three Tier Bridge and the Pack of Cards Bridge were built with labour from either Hintok Road Camp or Hintok River Camp or both. Weary Dunlop was the medical officer responsible for both these camps. Nowhere in the war diaries of Weary Dunlop is there mention of the deaths from either bridge. Ray Parkin worked on both these sites and he also makes no reference to bridge deaths. Bill Haskell and his contemporaries were also there and we know nothing of deaths from the bridges. It all stems from misinformation in a book called 'A Life for Every Sleeper'. This book was first published in 1986 and at page 26 the author who worked in H/F Pass and had no association with the Hintok section, stated regarding the Three Tier Bridge – "It was built between Konyu and Hintok, was 400 metres long and 27 metres high, built of green timber and other jungle material. It was known as the Pack of Cards Bridge because it fell down three times during construction. Victims of the particular project included 31 men killed in falls to the rocks below and 29 beaten to death on the job". The author is undoubtedly referring to the Three Tier Bridge which was never known as the Pack of Cards Bridge and on which there were no deaths to my knowledge either accidental or otherwise.

I would suggest that people need to refer to Ray Parkin's Book, 'Into the Smother', written in 1963 from his daily diary which he handed to Weary

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Dunlop when we left for Japan in 1944. At page 167 we are working out of Hintok River Camp and he states, "The daily blasting along this section is terrific, like a war approaching. The long trestle bridge the Tamils where building has collapsed *like a house of cards*". At page 169 he described how it had to be fixed up. As you walk along the memorial trail there is a nicely terraced embankment just before the Compressor Cutting. In construction days there was no way this embankment could be built before the railway came through and this was the reason the temporary trestle bridge was built.

(At this point I pause to think of my last trip along the 4km walk – at the end of the walk near Compressor Cutting we stopped for a rest. Ironically on the walk was my mate Richard (ex RAF – no I didn't miss another 'A'), and two other characters (Bill from Hellfire Pass Museum sent along with us), and was ex RAAF and one was a still serving member of the RAAF – how uncanny! I remember Richard got 'service' on his mobile phone and rang his wife whilst we were taking a rest having walked from the Museum to Compressor – technology is amazing; I could only imagine what the POW would have done to ring and speak to NOK in the same fashion (if lucky they had 2 lines on a paper once in 3.5 years) – if only for a time machine, to take that mobile phone back 60 odd years – for one last conversation).

Footwear

- Andrew: Did you have shoes or boots in your time on the line?
Bill: No. Black Jack Galleghan could have equipped us when we transited through Singapore, but that's another story.
- Andrew: I've taken my shoes off and walked a very small portion of the embankment – within a minute or two I quickly put them back on. What could if anything the POW's do to protect their feet if they didn't have shoes?
Bill: Nothing could be done for footwear on the line. The soles of our feet were hardened over the years in camp, after the Speedo period, many of us fashioned wooden thongs with a webbing strap for use after work.

Bashings

- Andrew: How could you avoid being bashed? Was there any way or could it just be a random act?
Bill: Bashing was inherent in their military caste. It was accepted by them as the way that underlings should be corrected.
- Andrew: I have read POW's would 'roll with the punches' – what type of bashings occurred? Would they use sticks or would they use their boots and hands?
Bill: Generally if you tried to soften the impact you would cop it harder. There was no set way of punishing, often you would have to stand to attention outside the guard room and be a sitting duck. I don't rank physical punishments as their greatest misdemeanours.
- Andrew: I know of many men today with bad tempers (that is nothing new and I'm sure there would have been some back then too) did many lose their tempers during the beatings and offer resistance to their peril?
Bill: I only saw one chap who blew his top and hit them ack. It took three days

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of torture to take him to an agonising death. I've heard of other cases of retaliation but this was the only case that I witnessed happening and saw the outcome. There were many occasions when men were set to blow a fuse and were restrained by mates. The main reason for restraint was that not only did the Japs take it out on the perpetrator but everyone else within coo-ee was likely to have been done over. 'Oriental mind most irrational'.

Hammer and Tap

Andrew: Did you work 'Hammer and Tap' in Compressor Cutting? If not, what type of work did you perform there?

Bill: There was no hammer and tap in the Compressor Cutting. Hintok Camp supplied Hammer and tap labour for all the cuttings after Hellfire to the Compressor Cutting. We did clearing work towards the finish of the Compressor Cutting and the small cutting just beyond.

Andrew: The water that you drank whilst in Compressor Cutting – where did it come from? How was it carried? What amount was there?

Bill: The water at the Compressor Cutting would have come from Hintok River Camp. We usually made do on one Army water bottle of boiled water daily while out on the job. There was a stream of fresh water at Hintok River Camp, but the water WAS STILL BOILED.

Andrew: If you could catch up with one former guard who would it be?

Bill: If you are thinking in terms of retaliation I am not interested.

Andrew: Do you support the new Thai/Burma Railway Centre adjacent the cemetery?

Bill: Yes – I have done so long before it became a reality.

Andrew: What was your weight when the war finished?

Bill: 7.5 Stone (47.6kg).

Post Railway

Andrew: Where did you go following your work on the railway?

Bill: Road bridge at Tardun on the Kwai Yai. Attap loading at Bampong – Singapore in May 1944. Arrived in Japan Sept 1944 after 70 day boat trip. Worked in Ohama coal mine at western end of Honshu Island until war finished August 1945.

Andrew: Did you work on the railway until it was completed?

Bill: I worked on the railway until locomotives cleared the Compressor Cutting.

Andrew: What disease(s) affected you on the line?

Bill: Malaria (many times) beri beri, avitaminosis, tropical ulcers, dysentery.

Sir Edward Dunlop

Andrew: You entered the line with Sir Edward 'Weary' Dunlop and his force what was the young Sir Edward like? Did you ever see him as a patient in the

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- Bill: jungle?
A man who stood head and shoulders above his contemporaries. A magnificent leader, brilliant physician and surgeon. In my view the greatest Australian I have known, because I have seen his performance in the worst conditions you could imagine. A really great man. He was sick and starved like the rest of us but his great heart carried him through because he knew that he alone truly had his men's welfare at heart.
- Andrew: If you could have 5 minutes with anyone who was on the line (friend or foe) who would it be and why?
- Bill: No prize for guessing who I'd pick. I had the good fortune to spend time with Weary on a number of times in the latter years of his life.

Private John Ladyman

- Andrew: I've researched PTE John Ladyman who was one of Sir Edwards men – I have found out that he died of the dreaded cholera. Did you know of him? If so, was he a good bloke? Would you know anything about him?
- Bill: John we knew as Jack Ladyman came from a farming background in the Katanning district in WA. He served in the 25th Light Horse Regiment before joining the A.I.F. and going into Northam Camp in June 1940. He was taken on strength by Don Company of the 2/3 Australia M.G. Btn. And allocated to 13 platoon, the same platoon as myself. Thereafter we stayed together through training days in Northam, Warradale, Woodside on the Isle de France transport to the Middle East, Palestine, Syrian Campaign, Java Campaign and Burma Railway. Jack was a reserved type of chap, quite friendly and good to know. He was slightly built with a small frame but long legs and feet. He used to throw his feet a bit to the side and for a laugh we would call him 'Camel Pad'. We lost Jack to cholera on 28 July 1943 in Hintok Road Camp.

About five years ago, I had the good fortune to have a younger brother of Jack on one of the Quiet Lion trips to Thailand. We worked out that he had joined the RAAF after Jack had died. He was attached to a bomber squadron and on their return first mission over Europe only two planes survived. They were informed the squadron would not be reformed and they could either join another squadron or the 'Pathfinders'. They opted for the Pathfinders and would you believe it achieved the improbable tally of two tours, one of 30 missions and the other 25. If you have completed two tours in Pathfinders you may apply for an automatic discharge, and having been recently married his wife asked him not to tempt fate anymore and take a discharge. This he did but the majority of the crew continued on until they bought it, seven missions into their third tour. Our friend to my mind was suffering from the stress which could be associated with is very gallant wartime service but he and his wife were desirous of visiting the area where elder brother Jack had been. On our trips we do the memorial walk generally as a group and it is my custom to invite close relatives of men who laboured on the line to lead us through separate cuttings which I knew that they had worked on. Naturally we did this for poor old Jack Ladyman.

On a different note, we always stay at Home Phu Toey run by a Thai Khun

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Kanit Wanachote. He has these delightful chalets a bit nearer Hellfire than the River Kwai Village Hotel. Kanit has a lake in the front of his property and often uses the water from the lake to send water tumbling down a waterfall course in the drier season. He has named the waterfalls the 'Friendship Falls' and invited several of our group to plant a tree on a particular part of the waterfall area. We thought it appropriate that Jack's brother planted a tree in his memory and this was so done. I think the timing was around ANZAC Day 1999. Well Andrew I'm glad that we have met and I hope that I have been of some help to you in your venture. If you think that I may be able to help in some other way don't hesitate to ask. I wish you well in your commendable venture... warm regards, Bill Haskell....' (Bill Haskell).

That was a fantastic interview – finding out more about PTE Ladyman is an absolute buzz who needs a time machine when there are still blokes like Bill Haskell around – thanks again Bill, Bill travels every year to Thailand for the ANZAC Day ceremonies in Kanchanaburi and Hellfire Pass.

Footnote:

(Bill died in 2011 age 91 years old and Khun Kanit the owner of Home Phu Toey died in 2014). RIP.

To listen to Bill talk about Sir Edward Dunlop and being a part of Dunlop force check out the following link to the Australian War Memorial. Bill talks (in 1987) about Weary and his time in the camps along the railway. It is fantastic viewing.

<http://www.awm.gov.au/collection/F09399/> (under his picture – click 'download').