

Death Railway



An Interview with LT (Ret) Don Lennox Christison VX4961 2/8 Australian Infantry Battalion

LT Christison joined the AIF in November 1939 and saw action in Greece; he was subsequently captured by the Germans when the Greeks gave him away. He was a POW in Germany for four years, later being repatriated back to Australia - surely he had enough by this stage - No, in true Aussie fashion he wanted to help blokes away in a foreign land who were having a rough trot. My thanks go to the Christison family for their time and the wonderful appendices at the end of this book.

Q. How did you get involved in the Japanese side of things?

A. My father was a Lieutenant Colonel he was a Staff Officer Sub Command, he was working at Headquarters (he was a Brigadier while he was commanding in the Light Horse - AIF he had a VX number then). Anyhow, this was Saturday I think, and he said come see me in the office on Monday (339 Swanston St Monday) and saw him and whilst I was talking to him the phone rang and we talked for a while and he said that was Major so and so, he's trying to get volunteers to try and get a team together to get prisoners from Japan. And guess who came in hook, line and sinker! It was all set up. I'd been there and done that anyhow, certainly more than the others.

Q. What was your mustering - what was your job in the Army?

A. I was an Infantry Lieutenant - I was in command of the anti aircraft platoon of the Battalion.

Q. When you went to Japan were you still a Lieutenant?

A. Yes.

Q. How did you get to Japan?

A. We were trained up to Queensland and we were flown from Queensland to Manila, then flown back, (big island south) to the Headquarters of 10th Army I think

Mrs Christison: When he left to go up to Japan the war wasn't over - it was the next day I think.

Don: We were flown to the Headquarters of this corps who were supposed to go into Japan, we were supposed to go into the second wave and get our prisoners. Of course the war had stopped and everything had stopped more or less and the prisoners were still there and nobody was getting them out. The Air Force was dropping rations to them and in the end they said right 'You fellas go over there', they flew us to Okinawa, and then put us on an Aircraft Carrier that had been emptied. The day previously the advanced Headquarters of 10th Army (or 6th Army I cant remember) they went ahead and they landed the day before us, and they'd been in contact with the Japanese and got the information on the camps. We landed the next day and that night there was a big conference and we were given our duties and a lot of paper and the next morning we went out to Camp 17.

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Q. That was one of the first ones you went to?

A. That was the first camp we went to. I did three other camps and then Barry Lawrence and I (he was the Group Commander) went up as far as Oyabe in Honshu - looking at three other camps that had been evacuated by the Japanese.

Q. What were your duties there - what did you actually look at?

A. Getting nominal rolls left behind.



LT D.L. Christison, kneeling on the LHS. (Compliments LT Don Christison).

Q. Did the nominal rolls only consist of who were still alive?

A. Just who were alive. In one case, I got what a fellow, one poor devil thought of the prison camp.

Mrs Christison: The one thing that surprised me you said the trains were still running.

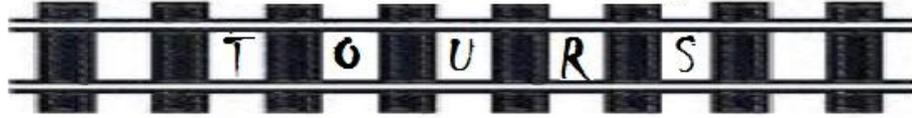
Don: Trains were running normally and we'd get on the train chock full of Japs and do the normal run. And they seemed completely stunned.

Q. Were they still carrying arms?

A. No.

Q. I spoke with ExPOW Roy Whitecross and he said the same thing - he said he went directly through Nagasaki (Ground Zero).

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A. We went past it on the train.

Q. How were the Japanese when you were in public?

A. They took absolutely no notice of us at all - they were dead pan. The only time we did have anything to do with anyone - Reg Pascoe (he was one of the group commanders we were with) he went to a camp that had a very good (from our point of view) Commandant. They recognised each other and he could talk a bit of English and he smiled and he was pleased to see Pascoe and I was introduced and that was that.

Q. When you first went into Camp 17 did you guys have Red Cross Packages?

A. No they were rations in themselves that were dropped, not the packs.

Q. You went through Nagasaki yourself - what do you recall it looked like/what did the bomb do to the place?

A. Nagasaki was in a valley, and it varied a bit - some of the curves in the river stopped the blast to a certain extent and I can remember seeing one steel building, big steel building, it looked as if it had a big roller over it and flattened it like that.

Q. Was there any trees around?

A. No nothing.

Q. What sort of radius was the bomb?

A. I couldn't put a radius on it - Hiroshima being in the flats must have been far more horrific I'd say - it got the full blast of it.

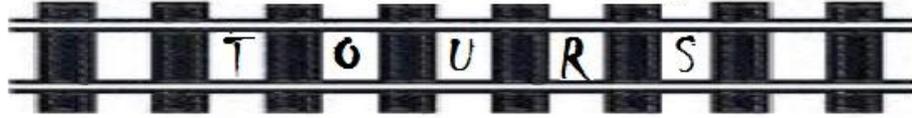
Q. When you got there to Camp 17 and other camps - were there still fellas dying of malnutrition and disease?

A. I can remember seeing one hospital ward at Camp 17, there were two lines of fellas each side of the centre of the ward, was it beri beri - they all had swollen stomachs. One thing I did see there was a fella being piggy backed by another fella - he had lost his legs below the knee, I said to Scotty Howell, 'What happened to him?' and Scotty said, 'Well he was in charge of a section of the mine and half a dozen skips went down, got away and crashed at the end, and as chief he was blamed for sabotage more or less. The mine 'headmen' as they called them (far more vicious than the Jap troops) knocked hell out of him. He was taken up, the Jap troops knocked hell out of him and they stuck him in a dog box. Then they pulled him out of the dog box and knelt him outside the guard house, with his hands tied behind his backs, on his knees and behind his knees they put bamboos that they thrashed the prisoners with across underneath and of course that stopped the blood flow to his lower legs. He was in the snow and got frost bite and course gangrene set in and away it went. They had nothing to put him to sleep with and with home made medical implements held him down and take his legs off.

Q. Both legs?

A. Both legs. When the Japs left the camp there were 10 cases of medical instruments

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that had been sent in by the International Red Cross, with instruction of the IJA (Imperial Japanese Army) Headquarters they were not to be issued.

Q. Were there still Japanese guards about the camps?

A. Didn't see them. We had an American Japanese as an Interpreter - but he was thin on the ground, so they gave us another American Japanese who had gone back to see his relatives when war had broken out and he was in the Japanese Army and his English was quite good. He was our interpreter and the only one we had anything to do with.

Q. The trials of the guards were you involved with them?

A. No, that was well after our time.

Q. Did you see any of them hang?

A. No.

Q. How long all told were you in Japan for?

A. From Sept 9 I was in Okinawa, Sept 11 in Nagasaki.

Q. How did you get back was it via ship.

A. We were in Manila for a while or a camp north of Manila and then one morning I was under the shower and I heard my name shouted out 'Your leaving in quarter of an hour for Sambawang¹. Caught a ship there as there was only 30 of us on board and came home to Sydney on an American ship, on Liberty ships - the mass produced jobs.

Q. Did you stay in the Army?

A. Early December 1945. (Again many thanks to ExPOW Don Christison and his family for their time).

¹ Sembawang is the northern port of Singapore where the British had a Naval Base.