



**Interview with ExPOW Mr Neil MacPherson OAM
WX16572 2/2nd Pioneer Battalion**

(Mr MacPherson is 92 years of age and still living by himself in 2014 – he responded to my interview – via email himself).

I will try and answer your questions, first of all I was in Williams Force, we arrived in BURMA not Thailand from Java in October 1942. We along with Green Force were the first Australians to work on the Railway.

After the embankments and bridges over gullies were completed along with Anderson Force (Lt Colonel Anderson VC) we were given the task of laying the sleepers and rails from the 8 kilo camp through to where the two ends of the railway were joined at Konkoita in September 1943.

Andrew: Konyu River Camp – what was the process in building that camp site? Was this your first camp on the railway?

Neil: I was never at Konyu, Hellfire Pass cutting was built by POWs from Konyu Camp, opened on the 25th April 1943.

Andrew: How was the River Camp conditions compared with other camps later on the railway?

Neil: Every Camp was different depending on location, the camp administration the guards the Officers in charge of the camp.

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

Neil: When we arrived at our camps the huts had already been constructed by Asian workers, the camps were filthy excreta all over the ground first job was to clean up.

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

Neil: Do not know suggest you obtain some books on the railway "Behind Bamboo" by Rohan Rivett was probably one of the best written immediately after the war his memories were fresh

Andrew: Were you mates with Bill Haskell during your railway days as a POW?

Neil: Bill was in Dunlop Force he worked at Hintock I never met Bill until 1997 on my first Quiet Lion Tour

Andrew: Was Bill a tough bloke in those days? How would you describe the young (POW) Bill Haskell?

Neil: One had to be tough to survive the railway. Bill was 77 when I first met him.

Death Railway

T O U R I S

Andrew: I understand some type of showers were made at Hintok Camp is this correct? How were they made?

Neil: An Australian Officer Major Wells built the showers, he used hollow bamboos to bring water from a mountain stream down to the camp.

Andrew: Was that Hintok Mountain or River Camp?

Neil: Mountain Camp.

Andrew: What was the daily ration received by the men on the railway?

Neil: It varied according to the location and how far from base camp in Burma, we had mainly rice with watery Melon soup.



27 April 2013 – L-R, two DVA sponsored exPOWs, Neil MacPherson, Snowy Fairclough and the late Wally Holding Senior (Wally was in F Force; whilst Neil was in Williams Force in Burma).

Death Railway



- Andrew: Working on the 7 Metre Embankment – it is an awesome site – how was it built?
- Neil: Baskets of soil were gleaned from in between rocks on the hillside and carted down to the embankment.
- Andrew: Did you have shoes or boots in your time on the line?
- Neil: I was bare foot most of the time.
- Andrew: Bill Haskell mentioned Black Jack Callaghan may have been able to supply more equipment? Did Black Jack hold anything back?
- Neil: Weary Dunlop in his Diary said they arrived in Changi with nothing and left with nothing.
- 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?
- Neil: Our feet got hardened but cut soon, got infected and turned into ulcers.
- Andrew: Did you get a tropical ulcer on the railway?
- Neil: No I was fortunate.
- Andrew: How could you avoid being bashed? Was there any way or could it just be a random act?
- Neil: Never look into the eyes of a guard, try and look insignificant.
- 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?
- Neil: Boots clubs sticks, worst was the slap across the face so humiliating.
- 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 'do their block' during the beatings and offer resistance to their peril?
- Neil: I only knew of one case early in the railway experience, he was subsequently beaten to death.
- Andrew: Did you have trouble with any particular soldiers or guards or were they random acts of bastardisation and violence?
- Neil: There were many sadistic guards, we gave them names like "The Boy Bastard" "Dillinger" "Boufhead".

Death Railway



Andrew: The water that you drank whilst on the railway – where did it come from? How was it carried?

Neil: We still had our Army issue water bottles which we filled before going out to work, as I remember the Railway Engineers arranged for water to be brought out to the work parties.

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

Neil: Certainly over the years since 1997 I have donated over a hundred of my books “Burma Railway Hell Ships & Coal Mines” to the TBRC for them to sell & raise funds to assist them in their work. I have known Rod Beattie and TBRC Manager Terry Mantaan for many years.

Andrew: What was your weight when the war finished?

Neil: 35 kilos

Andrew: Where did you go following your work on the railway (whilst still a POW)?

Neil: To Japan to work in the coal mines in Kyushu, our transport the Awa Maru was the last Hell Ship to make it to Japan, we arrived in January 1945.

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

Neil: No.

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

Neil: Malaria, Dysentery, Conjunctivitis & pellagra.

Andrew: Did these health issues affect your life after the war?

Neil: Yes.

Andrew: What was the young Sir Edward Dunlop like? Did you ever see him as a patient in the jungle?

Neil: Never met him.

Andrew: If you could have 5 minutes with anyone who was on the line (friend or foe) who would it be and why?

Neil: My mate of 5 years Bluey Rowe we enlisted at the same time and discharged together in February 1946.

Death Railway



Andrew: When the war was over in 1945 – what celebrations did you attend – immediately on being notified the war was over? What did you and your mates do? Where were you?

Neil: I was working down the mine in Kyushu on the 16th August 1945 when we were taken back to camp and the Camp Commandant got up on a stool and spoke for 5 minutes then the Interpreter said in these few words “The Order Has Been Given To Stop The fight”.

Andrew: What was the first thing you ate as a free man?

Neil: 16th August our camp Leader commandeered some flour and my mate Ted Murtagh (a baker) cooked some buns, they were delicious.

Andrew: On returning home – what was the first dinner you had with family? Do you remember what you had?

Neil: I arrived home on the 21st October 1945 on my mother’s 45th birthday, she would tell the family it was the best birthday present she ever received, dinner was Roast Lamb with roast vegetables.

Neil will be the guest exPOW who will be giving an address at the 2015 ANZAC Day Ceremony at Kanchanaburi War Cemetery. He has been returning to Thailand since 1997 with Bill Haskell and Keith Flanagan (ExPOWs); where his first student’s group was from Three Springs. Mr MacPherson advised that Jack Thorpe was a major contributor to the funding of the student’s tour.

Thanks Mr MacPherson for your time, your war service and your later years post-war in remembrance of this tragic time in our military history.