



Private Roy MacDonald – Burma Railway Man

I was lucky to have an article published in the Victorian and NSW RSL Magazines this year (2018) about the Burma Railway and included in that paper was a picture of one man I talk about when at Hellfire Pass. He was Private Roy MacDonald and I show our clients a picture of him and we visit his grave at the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery.

Through a relative, Jean (his daughter) got in touch with me and we have had several conversations – she also sent me some wonderful family photos included in this article.

Born in Dufftown, Scotland on 15 September 1904, Roy was one of seven kids to Charles and Isabella MacDonald. The family emigrated to Australia 16 years later in 1920, with one sibling opting to remain in Scotland. (In 1926 Charles SNR died).

The family settled in Parkes NSW and Alec bought his mother a house just as war broke out, Alec and Roy working in the district as farmhands, where world events would take them across the seas.



L-R: Private Roy MacDonald, Jim, Margaret and Jean MacDonald of Parkes NSW

Roy and Alec joined up together on 4 June 1940 where Roy was issued a unique service number: NX20000.

Roy married Margaret in Parkes and had two children (Jean and Jim) and later seven grandchildren and 12 Great Grandchildren.

Joining the 2/20th Battalion (part of the 22nd Infantry Brigade) of the 8th Division, most of the men were from NSW and the north coast and country areas. Basic training was performed at Wallgrove and Ingleburn and later to Bathurst Camp in November 1940.

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Boarding the Queen Mary¹ with the 2/18th and 2/19th at Sydney Harbour they set off on 4th Feb 1941. Outside Sydney Harbour they were later joined by the Aquitania, the New Amsterdam and the Mauritania with their escort HMAS Adelaide.

1941 was a tumultuous year for the MacDonalds – Older brother Charles (who earlier was granted a soldier settlement block in Mandagery NSW) died of the effects of German Gas in WW1. Brother Alec would be killed in action in Syria in June 1941 from German shelling and a shrapnel wound to the head.

Disembarking at Singapore the 2/20th Battalion including Roy was moved by train to the west coast of Malaya where they undertook jungle training, later moving to the east coast town of Mersing, to protect against Nippon seaborne attack. I spoke with Jean (his daughter in June 2018) and she stated her dad bought some clothes for the children whilst in Malaya and posted them home – she noted that she still has the jacket he sent.



L-R: Roy with his mother and Alec at Coogee Beach Sydney 1940

Japanese landings at Kota Bahru, Patani and Singora occurred where they blitzed down the Malay Peninsula in a land-based attack, overwhelming allied defences; large battles including Gemas, Muar, Parit Sulong and Sungei Gemencheh River among others.

After the withdrawal to Singapore Island, the 2/20th Battalion were stationed adjacent to the Johore Strait with the Battalion taking the major assault on Singapore Island on the 8th February 1942 with over 400 casualties – the following week that figure rose by another 100 men from the 2/20th.

On 15 February 1942 the Impregnable Fortress Singapore fell to the Japanese which of

¹ You can now stay/holiday on the Queen Mary today – see my article:
<https://www.deathrailwaytours.com.au/files/Queen%20Mary3.pdf>

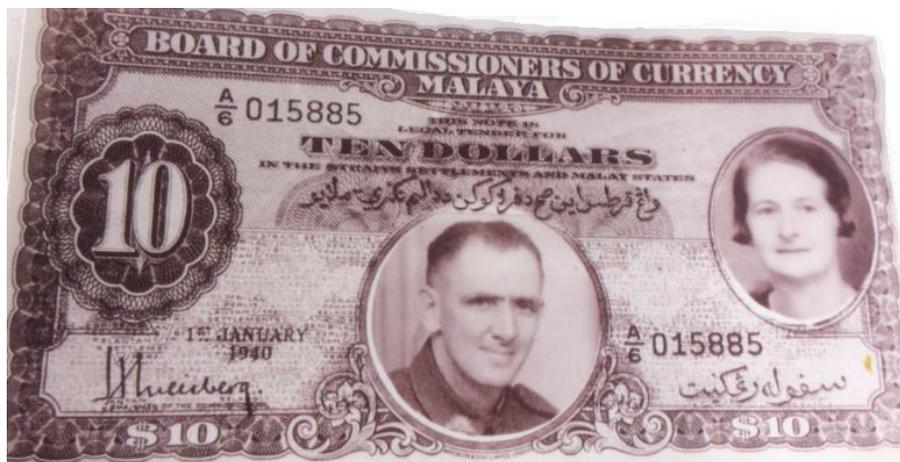
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course included the Australian 8th Division (with my dad), Private Roy MacDonald and their mates.

Men were moved to Changi Peninsula and over time moved out in 'Forces' – many ill-fated forces including the ones that went to Borneo and F Force. Roy went with H Force to the Burma Railway that consisted of nearly 3,300 men of which approx. 600 were Aussies under Lieutenant Colonel Oakes. (Of the 2,000 that went to Borneo, approx. 100 were men from the 2/20th Battalion never returned).

Being under the control of Malay Command, H Force was trained up to Ban Pong Thailand – Roy was in Train number 3. They then had to walk 20 kilometres to the stretch of work area via Tonchan and Hintok – residing in muddy huts at Konyu 2 otherwise known as 'Malay Hamlet'. This area was across the way from Hellfire Pass where Roy would work 12-18 hour shifts on a starvation diet with crazy and sadistic guards pushing him to his limits, with canes, whips, pick axes and rifles.



A novelty banknote – maybe something Roy had made in Malaya when stationed there.

H Force was the last major force that left Changi for the Railway; in doing so many of the older and sick men left with that group – 27% of them dying on the railway. Roy was 39 years old when he died.

Men worked around the clock at Hellfire Pass and generally for 12-18 hour shifts each day. By June 1943 the job was behind schedule, in July the 'Speedo' commenced where the men were pushed and pushed (many beyond their limit) the labour force also supplemented with another group of Australian and British POWs to bring the total labour force to around 1,000 men.

'It looked like a scene out of Dante's Inferno. The Japs decided that we could work 24 hours a day, two shifts. One was the day shift and one was the night shift. Lighting became a problem...so they formed a light party. Its job was to keep the fires burning all night...you'd see the shadows of the Japanese moving round with their sticks, belting men. There was shouting and bellowing. And this went on all night.' (POW from QLD Reparations Committee, 1990: 38).

3 Groups of Workers

1. Earth moving gangs (removed earth and rubble to expose rock) with chunkels and rice sacks
2. Hammer and tap men, and

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3. Rock rollers, who cleared rubble, rocks & boulders often using crowbars.

Work Hours:

- No days off – 7 days a week.
- One hour for lunch in the first month; reduced to 30 mins during the Speedo.
- Lunch was a cup of pap rice – gone bad in the sun.
- Typically, 18 hours of work day or night shift – more hours if the job quota for the day was not complete.
- Often men worked double shifts to replace their sick mate.

Working at Hellfire Pass on an empty stomach, having to duck and weave from maddening guards and put up with an emaciated starving body that screamed with pain, with the ever-present diseases that accompanied such bodies in a depleted state. This was part of life on the line and in Hellfire Pass.

Death was always around the corner.

'Death comes like a thief in the night when you are not expecting it and are in a complacent state of mind!'
(Dunlop, 1990: 204).



The MacDonald Family: Maggie, Roy, Jim & Jean) 1940

This is what Ken Harrison (4th Anti-Tank) said about working in Hellfire Pass of the guards:

"One carried a pick-handle; another a length of knotted atap that cut and scratched where it hit; another found a length of fencing wire most effective in encouraging maximum efforts; inevitably his fellow guard went one better and nailed a length of barbed wire to a metre stick.

Another—and he frightened us as much as any of them—carried a large saw for the purposes of chastisement and encouragement. In his more benevolent moments he would strike with the flat of the saw, but when irritated he would use the blunt edge, or, if highly offended, the cutting edge. Invariably the head and face were the targets"

Most of the guards were known by nicknames and few will ever forget Blue Sox, the Pig, the Black Bastard, the Undertaker, the Black Prince, the Tiger, Battlegong, the Mad Mongrel, the Turd, Blood and Slime, and the Maggot. In many cases I tried to discover actual names, for even then revenge and retribution were in my mind.
(SGT Ken Harrison)

Roy subsequently died of Cardiac Beri Beri at F&H Forces Hospital in Kanchanaburi Town.

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The hospital was opposite the current Kanchanaburi War Cemetery – buried there at the hospital cemetery in Grave BG No2, grave 256. Later it was decided all POWs south of Nikki Camp would be moved to Kanchanaburi and Chungkai War Cemeteries.

Roy is located at 1.A.65 at the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery.

Lest We Forget.

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AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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Above: Private Roy MacDonald.

Right: L-R: The MacDonald Brothers & Sisters:

Alec, Duncan, Charlie and Roy with Peggy and Alice at their mother's house for lunch – Parkes NSW (Circa 1940).

