



The Tavoy 8

(Aussie POWs who escaped the Death Railway & officially recognised 7 decades later with Bravery Commendations)

The Commendations

On the sixth of March 2011; the Secretary for Defence announced that 20 servicemen would be awarded (posthumously) the Commendation for Gallantry. What all these 20 men had in common is that they escaped from the Japanese during WW2 and they were all executed as a result.

“Each has his own story. Some were killed while trying to escape, others executed after being recaptured. But what is common to all twenty men is the Australian spirit that they showed before their deaths.” Feeney, 2011.

This discussion is about the ‘Tavoy 8’ - all 4th Anti-Tank Men led by a young Warrant Officer Matt Quittenton who escaped and shortly after were recaptured. They were on the Burma side of the railway and went on the run on 4 June 1942 – about a month after arriving for the Death Railway detail of ‘A’ Force under Brigadier Varley (MC & Bar 1893-1944) repairing airfields in preparation to the building of the Thai-Burma Railway.

Who were the Tavoy 8?

They were all brave young Aussies from the same unit – of the 4th Anti-Tank and they were all Victorians; two of them even came from the same small country town of Ouyen. They were a mixed bunch in ‘Civvie Street’ made up of a Fireman, a Grocer’s Assistant, a Truck Driver, a Railway Worker and a Farmer¹.

¹ Source: Alan Ramsay 2003

Death Railway

TOURS

The Tavoy 8 consisted of these fellas:

Rank	Name	Service No	Age	Thanbyuzat War Cem No
Warrant Officer	Matthew Quittenton	VX45344	37	A12 C10
Sergeant	Clifford Danaher	VX31946	24	A12 B7
Lance Bombardier	Aubrey Emmett	VX38444	23	A12 C2
Lance Bombardier	Arthur Jones	VX46835	30	A12 B15
Gunner	James A.T. Wilson	VX47903	27	A12 B5
Gunner	Alan Glover	VX57043	31	A12 B18
Gunner	Thomas Cumming	VX31670	30	B12 B2
Gunner	Arthur Reeve	VX27292	21	A12B19

Whilst it was reported that camp conditions were adequate *at first* in Burma for A Force; the Tavoy 8 decided to escape even though they knew that prisoners found outside the camp would be shot. They knew they were headed for uncharted territory but they still went anyway. They just walked out of the camp on the 4th of June 1942.

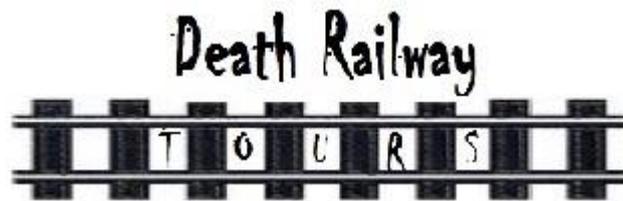
One of their mates Ken Dumbrell tried to persuade them not to go however couldn't change their minds. He later said that,

"The boys had made up their minds. They had all the courage in the world, for them, it was now or never".



WOFF Quittenton
(from FEPOW Recognition by John Bradford)

Death Railway



The following day the Tavoy 8 were captured, returned to the camp (some injured) and sentenced. On the 6th of June 1942; our 8 men of the 8th Division were murdered in cold blood by the Japanese Military. Held responsible for the orders were two particular Japanese Officers:

- Major Itsui and
- Captain Shina.

Unfortunately the pattern of execution would continue with escapees under the auspices of the Japanese; in September of the same year; two more Aussies would be murdered by an inaccurate firing squad (CPL Breavington and Private Victor Gale) on Changi Beach.

40 men of the AIF (Including AIF member Driver Gates) were given 4 foot long stakes; taken to a spot near the Tavoy Cemetery and ordered to dig eight graves; the Officer in Charge of the Australian Digging Team was Captain Hennessy.

As the party performed their instructed task of digging; 16 Japanese Soldiers attended the area and practiced aiming and loading. It was a Sunday and the rain pelted down on the diggers filling the graves with water.

Not long after the graves were dug; a staff car carrying high ranking Japanese Officers including Major Itsui and Captain Shina attended; not far behind it was another vehicle carrying Brigadier Varley; LTCOL Anderson VC, Bill Drower (interpreter) and two Padre's: Bashford and Smith. Behind this vehicle was a truck carrying the 8 condemned men of the 4th Anti-Tank.



GNR James Wilson
(from FEPOW Recognition by John Bradford)

Death Railway

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The men alighted the truck one by one; their hands bound behind their backs; some of the men obviously wounded; they were taken to the graves and made to sit in front of the stakes, they were then bound to those stakes.

The Digging Party heard two volleys of shots and were then marched down to the gravesites (on the double); they were ordered to put their mates in the water filled graves; one Digger explained, "They were still warm". He went onto say that the Padre's continued with a burial service whilst the Japanese stood about 'laughing and jeering.'

Brigadier Varley later told the Diggers "that the men had died like Australians". He went on further to say that two of the men refused to be blindfolded to look their executioner's in the eye and that immediately prior to the volleys they called out to each other saying goodbye.

Brigadier Varley would speak with Major Itsui later and advised him he would have him listed as a war criminal due to his act of murder -Itsui would reply, "Do you really think Britain is going to win the war?" Varley replied, "Certainly I do", and the response from Itsui: "You are a brave man".

GNR Aubrey Emmett

GNR Emmett was from Ouyen Victoria and enlisted on 13 August 1940; he was promoted to Lance Bombardier (LBdr) in June 1941 (a year before he was executed). Aubrey and his brother Frank were both taken prisoner in the Fall of Singapore (15 Feb 1942) and were sent with the rest of the Australians to the Changi Peninsula and Selerang Barracks. LBdr Emmett escaped with the other men of his unit and was recaptured with his mate GNR Glover. Aubrey Emmett and Alan Glover were both from the rural town of Ouyen.

His brother Frank survived the privations and hell of the Death Railway and was later transported via Hellship to Japan to continue his slave labouring existence until the war finished where he was repatriated from Nakama. Whilst

Frank survived the war, he died in 1953 as a result of injuries and experiences sustained as a POW.



GNR Emmett
(from FEPOW Recognition by John Bradford)

Death Railway

T O U R S



Left to Right:

GNR Aubrey Emmett; his first cousin GRN Lance Gilbert and GNR Frank Emmett. All were from Ouyen and all were of the 4th Anti-Tank.

Gunner Alan Glover

Gunner Alan Glover of the 4th Anti-Tank Regiment was born in Avoca Victoria on ANZAC Day 1911, even though his town once enjoyed the gold rush he could not find work in the town to sustain him. A year before the outbreak of WW2 (1938) he moved to Melbourne as a contract Truck Driver with his girlfriend Violet. Even though Alan's job was at the time on the 'essential' or 'reserved' category meaning he didn't need to sign up; he still did and felt it his duty to enlist.

Alan enlisted on the 2nd June 1941 and five days later on 7 June married Violet; they enjoyed a ten day honeymoon before Alan left for Puckapunyal for basic Army training. Before his basic training was complete (after only seven weeks) Alan was shipped off to Singapore with his unit; therefore the young man who had only been married less than two months and with incomplete basic training was shipped off to the war that was coming to Singapore.

Death Railway

TOURS



GNR Alan Glover in uniform pictured (AWM P04254.001) with bride Violet on their wedding day.

GNR Glover and his seven mates were executed on the eve of his first wedding anniversary; his wife would not find out until two years later on 5 December 1944. Violet worked at the Maribyrnong Munitions Factory in Victoria later being one of the first group of eight female Train Conductresses to be employed by the Melbourne and Metropolitan Tramways Board at Hawthorn Victoria. I'm sure she would know her husband would have been very proud of her achievements.



Mrs Glover (front row, second from left) as the first group of train conductresses in Melbourne – AWM P04389.001.

Death Railway

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"Before Violet died, however, she had decided to bequeath her late husband's war service medals and her wedding dress to the AWM, as Jane put it, '*to ensure her husband's courage should be remembered*.'" (John Bradford: 2004).

Brigadier Varley

Brigadier Varley along with two AIF Legal men sat up all night preparing the Tavoy 8 defence; two senior Japanese officers on the court of inquiry were prepared to accept the defence but were vehemently opposed by the Camp Commandant – Major Itsui.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

005515

5 Feb 1941 – LTCOL Varley commanding his 2/18th Battalion on the way to his ship bound for Malaya. (AWM: 005515)

Brigadier Varley stayed with them until their death and later wrote:

"Just before death the spirit of the eight Australians was wonderful. They all spoke cheerio and good luck messages to one another, and never showed any sign of fear. A truly courageous end".

Death Railway

T O U R S

Once the railway was completed the Japanese had planned to send A Force to Japan; however some logistical issues took place and they ended back at Changi. Several months after their return to Singapore; Brigadier Varley was put in charge of 2,300 souls to be transported (by Hellship) to Japan. The USS Sealion unfortunately torpedoed the ship Varley and 1,250 other prisoners were traveling and it sunk to the bottom; the sinking was off Hainan and the ship was the Rakuyo Maru.

The Japanese Crew were all rescued by the escorting Destroyers and all the POWs were able to abandon ship into eleven life rafts. They split off in two directions; one group to the east (Varley's group) and one off to the west. The latter group when they were picked up advised they heard gunfire in the eastern group's direction and assumed that the Japanese Navy had machine gunned all the men to death. I wonder if Major Itsui was on board and complicit in that decision making. Brigadier Varley and his men were never seen again.

Varley had several children, one son who fought in the Malayan campaign and was awarded the Military Cross; his other son was killed in 1945 in New Guinea.

Before the Fall of Singapore (15 Feb 1942) Brigadier Arthur Varley began keeping a diary; this consisted of commentary on his observations of the war; life as a POW on the railway and atrocities and war crimes he witnessed. Before he was transferred back to Singapore from A Force; he buried the diaries (several volumes) with the express purpose they were to be retrieved after the conflict for subsequent War Crimes Trials.

They were indeed used for this purpose with several Japanese Officers – Major Itsui and Captain Shina included in the commentary.



September 1945; the War Graves Commission Survey locate a metal box containing paybooks, films and other records hidden in the grave of Private D. Eyles TX4217 of the 2/4th Casualty Clearing Station. The grave also contained the diaries of Brigadier Arthur Varley.



Shina wrote in a sworn statement to the Manus Island War Crimes Tribunal:

"After the execution, and while the dead prisoners were still sitting against the stakes, a Padre rendered prayers for each of them in turn. When the Padre stopped in front of each dead prisoner to offer prayers; two Japanese soldiers untied the prisoner's arms. As this was taking place the Firing Squad remained in the present-arms position, and another Officer and myself stood with heads bowed."

To the Manus Trial, Itsui said to the court that during his Army training he was taught to be obedient and to carry out orders implicitly. He went on to say that he instructed Captain Shina to carry out the executions. He went further to say that the condemned men were permitted to make their own wills, he said:

"Although I am personally sorry – I had to carry out the Commanding General's Order, I was not allowed to express an opinion myself".

Brigadier Varley (with all efforts denied) requested to speak with the prisoners to convey any last messages they may have to family and friends. Captain Shina said to the Brigadier:

"After death, talk".

A comment that was later discussed in the War Crimes Court where the Captain said he meant 'he would discuss the men's belongings'.

The Court Martials

The Defence Counsel's introduced commentary that the two Japanese accused were in deed lectured on and taught matters of International Law. It was also presented to the court that even under Japanese Military Law the executions were unlawful, that there was no Court Martial of the men and no form of trial whatsoever.

General Hitoshi Imamura (former Commanding General of the 8th Army at Rabaul) gave evidence at the trial. Stating that he was the Chief of Army Education, that under the Imperial Rescript (that Officers were tasked with learning) they had to be gentlemen, to be polite and to act humanely. Above all he said, they had to be 'completely obedient to superiors'.

The same General stated that there was in principle agreement by Japan to abide by the Geneva Convention, however officers in the field were not informed of that decision.

The bravery of the men was discussed at the trials; and excerpts read from Brigadier Varley's Diaries including:

"I was led to the cemetery where 8 graves had been dug. 8 men were led blindfolded to this spot and sat down with their hands tied to the stakes.

Death Railway

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For the fourth time I asked for permission to talk to the men and get messages for their families. But this was refused. I applied for administration of religious rites and two Padres applied. This was refused”.

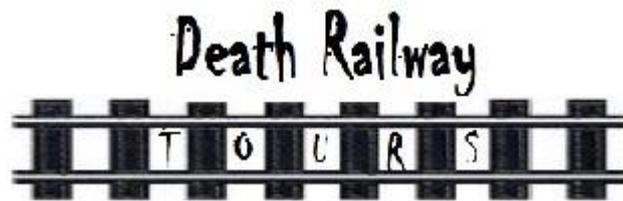
Major Itsui maintained that he was ordered to execute the men by Firing Squad from the Japanese 25th Army Headquarters to the Manus Island Tribunal. However his evidence was refuted by Colonel Seiichi Furukawa (former Legal Chief of the Japanese 25th Army Headquarters) in a sworn statement to the tribunal. In the Colonel’s statement he noted that at no time did he see or hear of any instructions that any prisoners who escaped were to be executed or specifically that Itsui was specifically instructed to execute the 8 POWs.

Itsui had claimed the order to shoot the prisoners came from General Yamashita of the 25th Army HQ himself ‘execute all prisoners who escaped’; and that if he did not carry out the general order then he himself may have faced execution. He went onto say that he executed the prisoners because he could not question the orders.

“Although I was personally sorry I had to carry out the Commanding General’s Order, Itsui said today. He said that he ordered the shooting because he thought it would be unlawful to execute the men by sword or bayonet.” (Sunday Herald 11 June 1950).



GNR Thomas Cumming VX31670 Age 30.



One of the Australians who was tasked with the prosecution of the two Japanese requested he was dismissed from the case as he once commanded a battery of the 4th Anti-tank where his impartiality may come into question. A good job by Major Schneider who was also a Death Railway ex Prisoner of War.

It was presented to the court of inquiry that Itsui did inquire with the 25th Army Headquarters where he received a reply stating:

"Hereafter prisoners who escape are to be punished by death". (Sydney Morning Herald, 10 June 1950).

The signal was signed by the late General Yamashita's Chief of Staff, but note the first word in the sentence, 'hereafter'. The prosecution therefore alleged that it was on Itsui's order alone that the 8 men of the 4th Anti-Tank were murdered, no order had been received by Yamashita or Headquarters on this group of men.

On 20 June 1950, the two Japanese Officers were found guilty of the murders of the 8 Australians at Tavoy. Major Itsui received life in prison and Captain Shina for his role received ten years imprisonment; as the court finding was read to them in Japanese, they both started writing down notes; probably for their appeal in the next 14 days. The San Francisco Peace Treaty would have them all released and repatriated by 1958.

Major Itsui was involved in more killings of our men – at Mergui on 19 July 1942 he ordered the execution of two more Aussies (the latter apprehended by Burmese Police outside the camp and were from the 2/29th Battalion). The War Crimes Court of Inquiry said they were executed so that Itsui 'didn't lose face'.

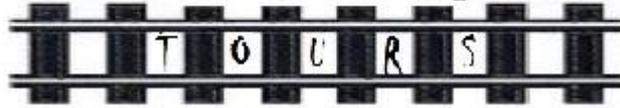
On 29 November 2011, Japanese Foreign Minister Koichiro Genba apologized to former Australian POWS on behalf of the Japanese Government for pain and suffering inflicted on them during the war.

"Minister Gamba expressed deep remorse and a heartfelt apology anew ... for causing tremendous damage and suffering," the ministry said in a statement issued last week". (ABC News)

It has taken seven decades to officially honour the Tavoy 8 – but finally their acts have been recognised as gallant. Well done to all those who worked over the years to enable these awards to become reality including John Bradford's efforts.

Lest we Forget the 'Tavoy 8' and remember their tenacity, bravery and service.

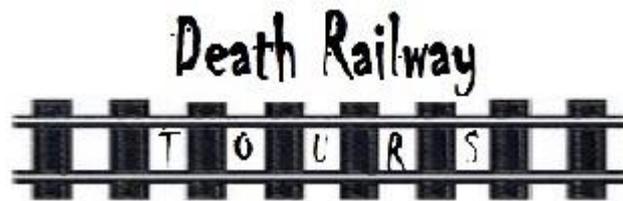
Death Railway



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

119134

General Yamashita (The Tiger of Malaya) in custody in Manila Philippines. Hung in February 1946. His trial set the precedent for 'Command Responsibility' meaning an Officer could be held responsible for acts of their subordinates. (AWM: 119134)



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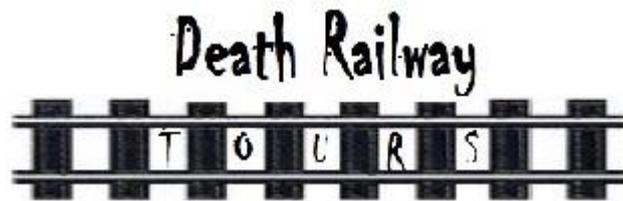
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Notes:

1. From Ramsay's document referenced above.

To listen to the Last Post Ceremony of GNR Alan Glover click here:

<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/PAFU/868.01/>

This article won 2nd Prize in the Story Writing Competition 'Centenary of ANZAC – 100 Years of Service' with the Veteran Story Writing and Art Competition through the Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital 2015.