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Christine Smith MP

Member for Burleigh

Burma-Thai Railway Recognition of Doctors and Dentists

Mrs SMITH (Burleigh—ALP) (9.29pm): Sitting in a Burleigh Heads park in 32 degree heat with 95% humidity is nothing compared to the conditions endured by Australian servicemen working on the Burma-Thailand Railway during World War II.

On the 15th February 2010, the 68th anniversary of the fall of Singapore, I attended, with former prisoners of war, a moving ceremony and dedication of a plaque listing the names of all 43 doctors and 6 dentists who worked selflessly to alleviate the suffering of prisoners of war who were forced to work on the notorious Burma/Thailand Railway.

To build the railway the Japanese assembled a multinational workforce of approximately 250,000 Asian labourers and over 60,000 Australian, British, Dutch and American prisoners of war (POWs). The 415 kilometre line, linking the Thai and Burmese railway systems, was constructed simultaneously from both ends. Construction began in June 1942 and was completed in October 1943 – only 16 months later.

Initially imprisoned in the Changi prisoner of war camp, prisoners were divided into forces and then sent out to the railway. Of the 9,500 Australians sent as slave labour to work on the railway, 2,646 would never return. They died as a result of starvation, diseases, tropical ulcers and ill treatment.

That number would have been significantly higher were it not for the dedicated work of the doctors who worked in appalling conditions with little or no medicine and a meagre quantity of surgical instruments.

Dr Peter Hendry, one of the 43 doctors to have tended to POWs in the work camps, was the guest speaker at the Burleigh ceremony. At 94 years of age he is one of only three doctors of the original 43 who are still alive.

Dr Hendry spoke passionately about his fellow servicemen. He related stories of unimaginable hardship and great gallantry. Dr Hendry, whilst acknowledging the work of “Weary” Dunlop, recounted extraordinary tales of heroism from his fellow medicos.

These courageous and dedicated doctors will always hold a place of honour in the memory of all those to whom they ministered during those dark days.

Mr Speaker, the Gold Coast and District Branch of the Queensland ex-POW Association held its final meeting at the end of last year. The years are catching up with its members and it was decided to formally close the branch rather than let it just fade away.

I acknowledge, with a great deal of respect, those former POWs who were present at the Burleigh Heads ceremony. Norm Anderton MBE, Mervyn Cox, Jim Curson, Norm Hutley, Gordon Jamieson, Noel Jensen, John Miller, George Munro, Harry Nesbitt, Gerald Rosenberg and Ted Whitmore.

Their motto “We honour our dead by caring for our living” is a testament to their courage and endurance.