

Dr. Peter Hendry's Address on the occasion of the unveiling and dedication of a plaque in honour of the Doctors and Dentists who served the POWs held on captivity by the Japanese during World War II

Unveiling of Plaque.

Father Malony, Norm Anderton, Mick Kildey, members of the RSL, fellow members of the Eighth Division, other returned men and women, ladies and gentlemen.

I was personally very disappointed that I was unable to be here for the dedication of the first plaque and am honoured and grateful to have been invited to unveil and dedicate this second one.

On behalf of my fellow doctors and dentists may I thank you most sincerely for the honour you have done us in erecting these two plaques, I know I am speaking on their behalf as well as my own when I say we were only doing our duty.

Dedication

The doctors who worked in Thailand and Burma during the building of the Railway gave of their best. Under horrible conditions and without proper medical equipment and supplies, many were able to perform minor miracle. However, if they were here today I'm sure they would agree with me that they could not have done this alone. Three reasons stand out in my memory. Firstly mateship-If you had a mate he fed you bathed you and nursed you. Secondly, the ability to laugh at your misfortune-This is something at which the digger excelled. In a book written by one of the men- I quote - "I was at death's door when I was carried off to hospital. The orderlies were dressed up in hulas and coconut boobs singing "To you sweetheart hallo etc" It was so stupid I began to laugh- I never looked back""". Finally, and most importantly the medical orderlies: Without their dedicated assistance the doctors could have achieved little. So, in dedicating this plaque to the doctors and dentists who served on the Railway. I couple with them their medical orderlies.

Let us stand briefly and remember them.

Address

We all have memories of World War 11 days. For those of you who are ex POW's amongst your own special memories will be those of the doctors who nurtured you.

I remember all those whose names appear here. Some like Tom Brereton, Kevin Fagin, Roy Mills and Mac Winchester were personal friends. Sadly these have all passed on. Only a few of the others are still with us. Each of them did a great job. Some have been publicly acclaimed - others remain unheralded.

There are so many stories that could be told of members of the medical profession, doctors, nurses and medical orderlies who have made outstanding contributions to the care of the sick and wounded during the various campaigns. Today I would like to talk about two such doctors and their important contribution, who like me, served on the infamous Burma/Thailand Railway. One of them was my good friend and colleague the late Roy Mills, well known to some of you – the other Dr Kevin Fagin. Both made outstanding contributions. It is their contributions I wish to speak about today.

Dr Roy Mills

Roy Mills had just graduated from Sydney University and had had only a few months hospital experience when he was accepted into the Army. After less than two years in the Army, mostly in Australia and three months in Singapore and Malaya, including 10 weeks of the Malaya Campaign he became a Prisoner of War.

The next year was spent partly in Changi and partly with working parties in other areas of the Island.

In April 1943 he was sent with "F" Force up onto the Railway. I will not dwell on the frightful transport in steel trucks that the men of "F" Force had to endure, or on the 300 odd km march through the jungle along elephant tracks in rain and mud, carrying all ones possessions, except to say that Roy was there, wandering up and down the line, looking after the sick and weary.

At the age of 27 years he was the sole doctor to a working group of 750 men under the control of SAF Pond, a group known as "Pond's Party". I was supposed to be with Roy but some senior officer changed the orders and I was sent further up the line to Sonkurai death camp leaving Roy on his own. Pond's Party was set the task of building a very difficult section of the Railway.

Roy, as the only doctor, had to deal with many severe illnesses in his troops who were overworked, undernourished and debilitated - slaves of the Japanese. Those of you who were there know what I'm talking about. These diseases included

Malaria, Amoebic and Bacterial Dysentery, Beri Beri, Tropical Ulcers and worst of all Cholera- diseases Roy had never seen before and only read about in medical textbooks!.

After he returned home he wrote a book "Doctors Diary" based on a diary he kept as a P.O.W. In his diary he kept a detailed record of all illnesses experienced by each of the troops in Pond's Party as well as a detailed record of the poor rations supplied by the Japanese on which the men were expected to work. The book also records the frightful conditions under which the men had to work and of the many problems he himself faced and how, with the help of his medical orderlies he was able to cope. The Diary is now held in the War memorial in Canberra, as an historical document.

Let me describe just one of the problems with which Roy was faced – men with cholera and severe vomiting, and diarrhoea, and quickly became severely dehydrated. Because of the vomiting, many needed to be given fluids by the vein if they were to survive. How did Roy manage? He found an empty 250ml glass ampule, which had been discarded by the Japanese. To this he attached a length of rubber tubing, taken from his stethoscope, and by fashioning a cannula from hollow bamboo twigs, was able to inject sufficient salt water into the more seriously ill patients' veins, to counteract some of the fluid loss. How did he obtain the saline? He took cooking salt from the kitchen, added this to rain water, boiled it up and allowed it to cool.

In his book, Roy tells how he would drink lots of water before he went to sleep, so that he would wake up in the middle of the night to tend the sick. Even when he was sick himself, Roy carried on looking after the other sick, and as a result became so debilitated himself that he developed tuberculosis. It was 2 years after he returned home before he was able to resume work. He became a chest physician, and specialised in tuberculosis. Throughout his life, he continued to champion the cause of ex-POW's. IN fact, he was partly responsible for the eventual introduction of the Gold Card for all ex-POW's. His contribution has been recognized by an award from the Australian Government.

Dr Kevin Fagan

Dr Fagan's is quite a different story. He was the senior Tutor in surgery at the postgraduate hospital in Sydney, before moving into Macquarie Street. He was a top surgeon when he volunteered in 1941, and was attached to the surgical unit of the 13th AGH, which arrived in Singapore in September of that year. On the invasion of Malaya by the Japanese, the hospital was transferred from the island to Johore Baru, and was responsible for the treatment of most 8th Div war casualties, Dr Fagan being heavily involved. Eventually the hospital was moved back onto the island as the Japanese advanced, and was close to the fighting at the end of hostilities. After the surrender, the hospital was moved to Changi and merged with the British hospital at Roberts Barracks.

From there Dr Fagan was sent up to Konyu, as staging camp on the Railway, where he did a remarkable job looking after the sick and performing many life saving operations. In the words of one of his patients "Kevin Fagan had an extraordinary gentleness that made you feel as though you were his only patient."

When nominating him for the award of the Gold Medal of the Australian Medical Association, the nominator said in effect: "In many POW camps, examining and consulting hundreds of critically ill men every day, with minimal facilities, performing necessary operations on rough bamboo platforms, in the open air of the jungle, he did so with good humour and courtesy of someone being richly paid for their specialist services." The troops loved him. As an example, after he returned to Singapore, he developed cerebral malaria and was seriously ill. The troops were so concerned for his safety that I remember regular hourly bulletins regarding his health were made available to them.

On his return to Australia, Dr Fagan returned to his Macquarie Street practice, before eventually retiring to his family sheep station near Canberra, where his time on the Railway took its toll, and he passed on prematurely.

I would like to close with one of the statements made by Dr Fagan when being interviewed on his return to Australia, which is typical of the man and will be of special interest to any ex-POW. To quote: "May I begin with a controversial statement? It is this: That the returned Prisoner of War is in most cases not only a normal man, except for some temporary physical disability, but one who has had intellectual and emotional experiences which give him a decided advantage over his fellows. He has learned to appreciate the minor please of life. He knows the essentials of existence. He has a high threshold to the pinpricks of ordinary life. He knows the man for what he is – his courage, his cowardice, his limitless generosity, his gross selfishness, his nobility and his utter meanness. And if he tends towards cynicism at the discovery of the relation of man's best qualities to his intra-gastric tension, he is robbed of all bitterness by the memory of the heights to which he has seen some men rise in spite of starvation, of illness and of every degradation which a malignant enemy could put upon them.

Thank you.