

Chapter 9

Second World War

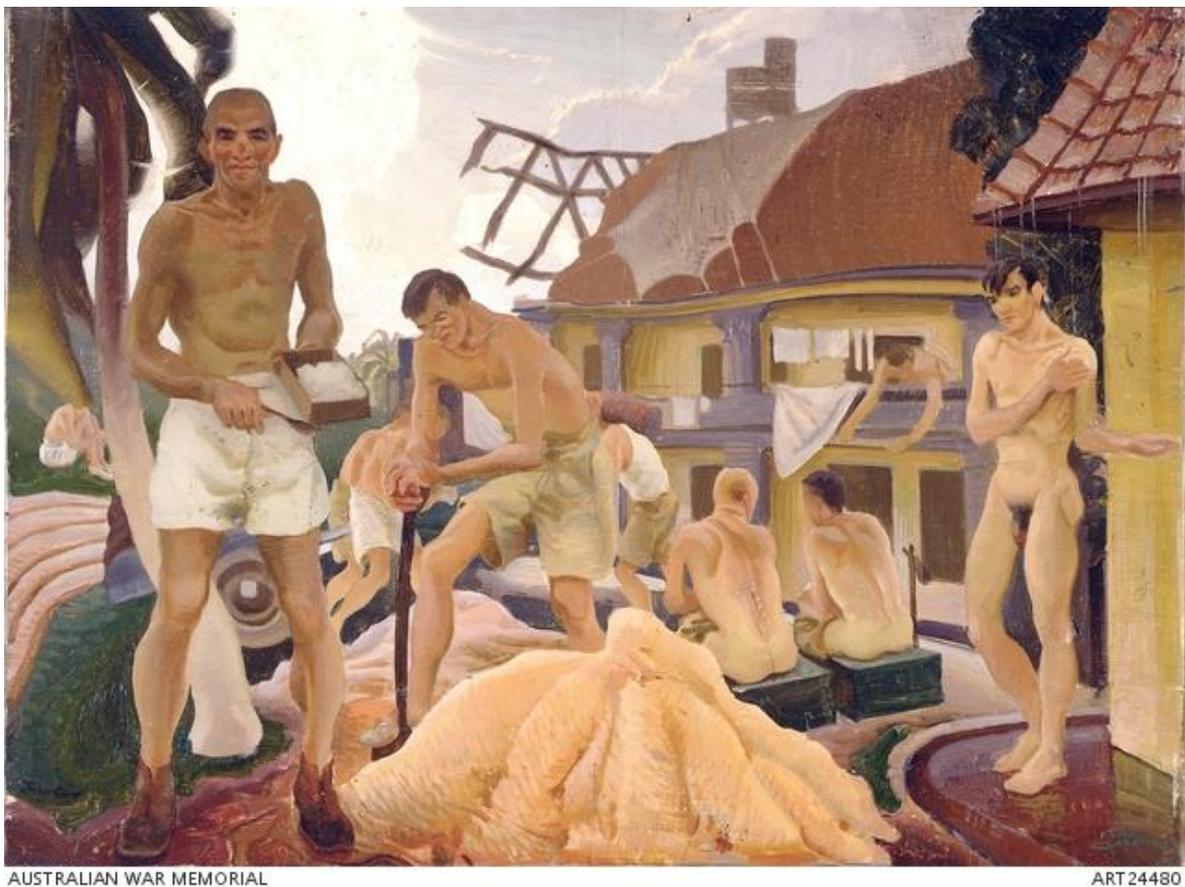
Prisoners of War - Japan

*Flowers are symbols of beauty sublime
Moments of love pressed in pages of time.
The daisy however so simple and pure
Reminds us of hardships men had to endure.
It's statement is merely that "daisies" won't tell,
Neither did the soldiers who lived through the hell.
Name, rank and number was all they would give,
In silence they'd suffer, in anguish they'd live.
Month after month turned to year after year
Of bitter imprisonment of pain and fear.
And when it was over soldiers came home to stay,
People took it for granted that they were okay.
Now they were safe and their wounds could be tended
But the pain in their souls can never be mended.
Memories of horrors that torment the mind
Leave scars on a man of a different kind.
How quickly forgotten are prisoners of war,
Once peace is achieved no one cares anymore.
Please remember the daisy and think of the men
who suffer today for what happened back then.*

Dedicated to her father, John M. Prochak, and all POWs
Cathy Evanovitz

There were many CRB staff members who were prisoners of war of the Japanese. When I first started at the CRB in the early 1960s, Frank Jackson worked in an office fairly close to me. Occasionally, Ian (Paddy) O'Donnell, who was the Chairman at the time, would appear out of the blue to see Frank – a Pipe Testing Officer. Together, they entered the specifications office and closed the door behind them for half an hour. Someone explained to me that they were both prisoners of the Japanese in Changi.

It is impossible for anyone who didn't experience the horror of the Japanese POW camps to fully appreciate the bond that developed between men who experienced this sort of Hell and that bond extended well beyond their time in camp. I came to realise that Paddy was providing support to Frank – and perhaps, vice versa.



Painting by Murray Griffin in 1942 entitled 'Changi Prison Camp, early days'.

Over 22,000 Australian men and women became prisoners of war (POWs) of the Japanese. Most were Army personnel - about 21,000. There were about 350 Royal Australian Navy men and about

370 Royal Australian Air Force aircrew. There were also 40 nurses and hundreds of Australian civilians.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

ART24486

Troops de-bugging their beds, Changi, by Murray Griffin, 1942–43: Lice, rashes, 'happy feet' resulting from malnutrition, hunger and trips to the bore-hole latrines constantly disrupted sleep.

The Army prisoners were largely from the 8th Division captured in the fall of Singapore. Australian troops were also captured on Java, Timor, Ambon and New Britain. Prisoners of war were formed into work parties to provide forced labour for the Japanese army. Throughout the war, Changi in Singapore was the main camp from which working parties were sent to other destinations and through which prisoners of war captured in other areas were staged.

Australian prisoners of war were sent from Singapore to Burma, Thailand, Japan, Borneo, Manchuria, Indochina, Formosa and Korea.

According to the Australian War Memorial, of the 22,376 Australian prisoners of war captured by the Japanese, 8,031 died while in captivity. The Japanese indifference and brutality to their captives was palpable and after the end of the war, War Crimes Trials were held to investigate reports of atrocities, massacres and other causes of death.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

ART24477

Action at Parit Sulong, January 1942 – 2/15th Australian Field Regiment – by Murray Griffin.

While pondering this history over the last two years or so, I can't help feeling that the fate of all these men and women who became prisoners of war of the Japanese was partially caused by the Australian Government and its military leaders. Australia wasn't prepared for war – nor were our Allies - and there is no evidence that we stepped back and analysed our options based on solid, reliable intelligence. We were caught unawares without any appreciation of Japanese military capability and strategy. The Japanese, on the other hand, already had strong underground networks

within South East Asia. Their fifth columnists had infiltrated all levels of business and society – even high levels in government circles.

Australian military leaders used guesswork in assessing the numbers and disposition of Japanese forces and armour. Pity the fate of Lieutenant Colonel Robertson, Commander of the 2/29th Battalion at the Battle of Muar. A highly respected leader of his men and a decorated veteran of the First World War, he doubted that tanks would be used in the Malayan theatre. He rejected the use of anti-tank guns to protect the perimeter around the battalion and, in the end, paid a heavy price. In order to accurately report the dire situation to Brigade Headquarters (all wireless communication had been lost, and runners were being ambushed by snipers), Robertson decided to go himself. Riding pillion on a motorcycle, he and his despatch rider raced down the road and as they approached a Japanese roadblock, they were gunned down by the waiting force. The despatch rider managed to turn the bike around and return with Robertson severely wounded clinging onto the back of the bike. Before he died, Robertson apologised to his command for the way he handled the battle.

Australia's army was ill-equipped and, initially, undermanned. Its military technology was outdated or non-existent. They knew little of modern military tactics and equipment – and in the end, Australia's first foray into the Pacific War was an unmitigated disaster. All of the 8th Division was lost to overwhelming Japanese forces by the end of February 1942. Most members of the division became prisoners of war – over a third of them died in captivity and the survivors had to wait until late 1945 to be liberated. These poor souls were sent off to war by their military commanders who knew that they had little chance of success. Many were captured without firing a shot.

The British, too, must bear some responsibility. Such was their hubris, they thought that the battles ahead of them would be over in weeks. The British had 20 years to strengthen their positions and plan their strategy. Their colonial attitude led to overconfidence which, together with their bad planning and ignorance of modern warfare, resulted in catastrophe. The final outcome led to a rift between Australia and Britain, the effects of which still exist today. The humiliating defeat was regarded as a turning point in Australia's relationship with its colonial relationship with Britain.

Following the First World War, Australia reviewed its strategic position in the world and concluded, correctly, that the greatest threat to its security was Japan. Australia's conservative

governments during the 1920s and 1930s continued to rely on Britain to protect Australia along with other British colonies in Asia - India, Burma, Malaya and Hong Kong.

In 1919, Britain chose Singapore, strategically located in the Strait of Malacca between the Pacific and Indian oceans, as the site of a major British naval base. Some called it Fortress Singapore. The strategy was that if war broke out in the Pacific, the British would relocate a large fleet of Royal Navy vessels from Britain to Singapore. In 1923 construction began on the massive 54-square-kilometre base. Australia and New Zealand both invested in the construction of the facility.

However, when war broke out with Germany it was realised that the Fortress Singapore strategy was in jeopardy. Britain needed to concentrate on its own preservation. The fleet of aircraft carriers and battleships that had been promised for the defence of the Empire's eastern possessions was reduced to a single squadron centred around one battleship, HMS *Prince of Wales*, and one battlecruiser, HMS *Repulse*. Japanese aircraft sunk both ships north of Singapore on 10 December 1941. This left the base without significant naval protection.

But the strategy was flawed in any case. The Japanese invasion came from the north. The Imperial Japanese Army invaded the Malay Peninsula on 8 December 1941, landing in the north at Kota Bharu in Malaya and Pattani and Songkhla in Thailand. The Japanese were battle-hardened, well-organised and well-supported by air and armour; the inexperienced Allied forces could offer little resistance and the Japanese moved with incredible speed south along the peninsula. Kuala Lumpur was taken on 11 January 1942 and Johore, capital of Malaya's southern state, fell three days later. The Japanese had fought the 700 kilometres from their northern landings to the southern tip of the peninsula in less than two months.

On 31 January 1942 Allied forces withdrew across the causeway linking Malaya and Singapore. The defence of the island was poorly planned and executed. Allied forces were spread too thin to resist the Japanese when they landed on the north-west of the island on 8 February 1942. Allied air cover had been almost completely destroyed in the opening days of the campaign and so the city was being bombed at will.

Despite being heavily outnumbered, the Japanese moved quickly across the island. With one million citizens trapped in the city and water supplies at critical levels British commander Lieutenant General Arthur Percival surrendered on 15 February 1942. More than 130,000 Allied

troops were taken prisoner. A quarter of Australia's army was captured. The Japanese general Tomoyuki Yamashita had achieved a remarkable feat of arms.

In London, Prime Minister Winston Churchill announced that the fall of Singapore was the 'worst disaster and largest capitulation in British history'. For Australia too, the fall of Singapore was a disaster. From 1942, the Australian government under Prime Minister John Curtin looked increasingly towards the US for its future protection. Mr Curtin had signalled the change in a new year radio address to Australians weeks before Singapore fell. He said:

"Without any inhibitions of any kind, I make it clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom ... we shall exert all our energies towards the shaping of a plan, with the United States as its keystone, which will give our country some confidence of being able to hold out until the tide of battle swings against the enemy."

And so it was.

A different sort of war had begun for those who were captured. The words of one survivor, Paddy O'Toole, pricked my conscience. He seemed to sum it up when he said:

*"We were just gun-fodder. It was a political stunt, that's all. They sent the cream of Australian youth into a battle where they had no possible chance in the wide world of winning. That's about all it was, a political stunt."*¹

Below are some of the stories of the men of the CRB who survived these horrors. Because of his special place in CRB history I have mentioned Ian O'Donnell first and thereafter, they are in alphabetical order.

Lieutenant Colonel Ian (Paddy) John O'Donnell, ISO, OBE, ED, 3138400 (VX43938)

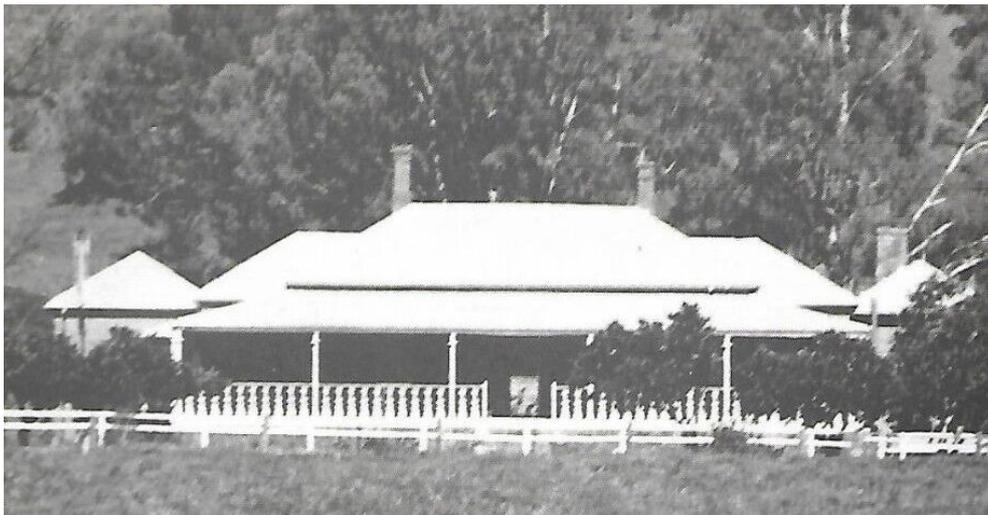
Ian was always affectionately referred to by everyone in the CRB as 'Paddy' and I will continue this tradition. Of course on the few occasions that I met him, I called him Mr O'Donnell.

Paddy had an illustrious career at the CRB. Among other appointments, he was Assistant Bridge Engineer, Engineer for Bridges and, in 1956, Deputy Chief Engineer. He was appointed Deputy

¹ Peter Ewer, *The Long Road to Changi*.

Chairman in 1962, and Chairman of the Board in 1963 – a position he held until his retirement in 1971.

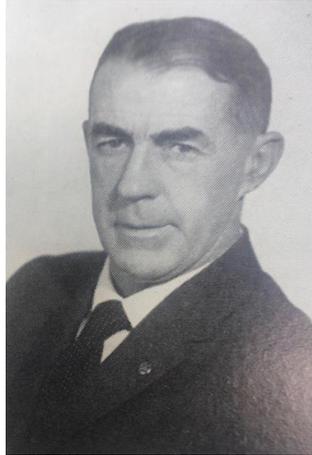
The O'Donnell family were pioneers of the Myrtleford area in the high country of north east Victoria. The original pioneer was Michael O'Donnell who arrived in Australia in 1851. He prospered by carrying goods between Melbourne and the goldfields in north eastern Victoria. In 1864, he took over the extensive Merriang Run. The homestead, Merriang Lodge, still stands today.



Merriang Homestead – 1985.

Michael was renowned for his hospitality and kindness and became very involved in community service. He served on Oxley Shire Council and became a Justice of the Peace.

His son, Sydney, had a family of five sons and two daughters. Two of his sons became doctors, two were banking officials and a fifth, Ian, became a civil engineer. One daughter, Alice, became a nurse and the other married a Western District doctor. The nurses' home at Myrtleford hospital is named O'Donnell House as a tribute to Alice.



Ian (Paddy) O'Donnell – on his appointment as Chairman of the CRB – 1962.

Paddy was educated at Wangaratta High School, Melbourne High School and the University of Melbourne from which he graduated as a civil engineer. He was a very good sportsman, excelling in football and cricket.

Paddy joined the CRB in 1927 as an Assistant Engineer. He was a diminutive man. When he was Chairman of the CRB he once invited the Minister for Roads at the time, Sir Thomas Maltby, to open a conference. Maltby made a remark about Paddy to one of the CRB officers, "*There is not much of him, but what there is, is all above the neck*". It showed the regard, even affection, he had for Paddy.

Paddy married Irene Munro in 1931.



Ian O'Donnell – from the CRB staff photograph 1930.

He joined the Citizen Military Forces in 1927 and was appointed to a Commission in 3rd Division Engineers on 23 November 1928.

He was seconded to the 2nd Australian Imperial Force on 3 July 1940 and allotted army number VX43938, serving in Australia with the 2/10th Field Company of Engineers.



Ian O'Donnell's paybook photograph – 1940.

On 3 February 1941, he embarked from Sydney on HMS *Queen Mary Serial 366*² for Malaya where he disembarked in Singapore. He was appointed Commander of the Royal Engineers (AIF) in Malaya on 5 March 1941 at Jahore Bahru and was later appointed Lieutenant Colonel on 22 July 1941. On that date he relinquished command and transferred to the Head Quarters of the AIF in Malaya in Kuala Lumpur. This lofty rank did not deter Paddy from playing football with his troops. He was accidentally injured in October 1941 in Jahore Bahru, breaking the small toe on his left foot. It was recorded “*Officer on duty. Not to blame.*” He was granted leave with pay and subsistence.

In Malaya, he served with distinction with the RAE 8th Division of the AIF³. The 8th Division was an infantry division formed during World War 2 as part of the all-volunteer 2nd AIF. Consisting of three infantry brigades, the intention had been to deploy the division to the Middle East to join

² One archive named the ship thus, but another, with nearly identical details, named the ship HT “QX”1. I could not find details of either of them.

³ The 2/10th Field Company of Engineers was part of the 8th Division.

the other Australian divisions, but as war with Japan loomed in 1941, the division was divided into four separate forces, which were deployed to different parts of the Asia-Pacific region. All of these formations were destroyed as fighting forces by the end of February 1942 during the fighting for Singapore, Rabaul, Ambon and Timor. Most members of the division became prisoners of war, waiting until the war ended in late 1945 to be liberated.

In “*The Long Road to Changi*”, historian Dr Peter Ewer, describes the fate of the 8th Division as Australia’s greatest military defeat leading to a break in trust between Britain and Australia. The myth of the impregnability of Fortress Singapore engendered an overconfidence in Britain and Australia. The resultant catastrophe was also the result of bad planning, inexperienced leaders and an ignorance of modern warfare. It led to thousands of Allied troops being imprisoned for the next three to four years. The humiliation cast a pall over Australia’s troops and the names of Changi and the Thai-Burma Railway are painfully etched in Australia’s national psyche.

When I started researching Paddy’s service record, the only document I could find in the National Australian Archives relating to him, is the single item shown below.

收容所 Camp	善通寺 18. 8. 8. 善 4924 252 廣工 善本 654	番 號 No.	臺 III 14 IV 58
姓 名 Name	O'Donnell, Ian John オドネール イアン	生-年月日 Date of Birth	1905. 5. 6
國 籍 Nationality	澳	所 屬 部 隊 Unit	No. VX 43938 H.Q. Royal Australian Engineers 8th Aust. Division
階 級 身 分 Rank	Lieut. Colonel (C.R.E. Div) 陸軍中佐 (工兵隊長)	捕 獲 年 月 日 Date of Capture	昭和 17. 年 月 15 日
捕 獲 場 所 Place of Capture	昭南島	母 名 Mother's Name	Letitia
父 名 Father's Name	Sydney	職 業 Occupation	土木技師
本 籍 地 Place of Origin	Myrtleford Victoria Australia	特 記 事 項 Remarks	
通 報 先 Destination of Report	Mrs. I. O'Donnell 16 Finsbry Way Camberwell Victoria, Australia		

National Archives of Australia

NAA: A14171, VX43938

It is a Japanese internment card for prisoners of war. As you can see, it is printed in Japanese but filled out in English. It records details of the prisoner and was provided to the International Red Cross so that families at home could be informed of the incarceration of loved ones. I was impressed by the accuracy of the English but I was told by an historian at the Australian War Memorial, that a prisoner fluent in English was usually chosen to fill them out.

In fact, Paddy's service records are held by the Department of Defence. There are a few other ex-CRB personnel in this category including Bob Eastick, Ted King, Wilfred Quonoey, Gordon Wilson, Bill Neville and Bill Dolamore. The common denominator is that none of them were discharged from the Army at the end of the war because they continued their careers in the Army. As a consequence of not being discharged, their files were never transferred to the National Archives as was the normal practice.

Paddy was captured by the Japanese on 15 February 1942. Initially, he was reported 'Missing'. He was first reported a Prisoner of War interned at 3rd Branch Camp, Taiwan, on 31 October 1942 – eight months after his capture. It is also reported that he was interned at Tokyo Camp (date not recorded) and transferred to Zentsuji Camp (date not recorded).

T.G. 41.		COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA—POSTMASTER-GENERAL'S DEPARTMENT		No.	
CASH REGISTER CHARGE ACCOUNT F O. 3 M.D. VICTORIA BARRACKS		TELEGRAM This message is presented for transmission subject to the Post and Telegraph Act and Regulations.		AFFIX STAMPS HERE Charges for ORDINARY RATE Telegram For 14 words or less : Within a 15 mile radius 9d., Beyond a 15 mile radius 1/- Each additional word in both cases 1d.	
DEBIT NOTE NO. Sch. C.2941—9/1940.		POSTAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT DELIVERY (PERSONAL)		For Office Use Only T C B	
Words.....	The address must contain all information necessary to ensure delivery.				
Charge.....	To.....	MRS I O'DONNELL 16 FINSBURY WAY CAMBERWELL			
Time.....					
By.....					
Remarks.....					
		LT. Col O'DONNELL		PRISONER OF WAR	
		LT. Col. I. J. O'DONNELL		VK 43938	
I HAVE TO INFORM YOU THAT		PREVIOUSLY REPORTED MISSING		BELIEVED PRISONER	
IS NOW REPORTED PRISONER OF		WAR			
A REPLY PAID TELEGRAM is a courteous means of ensuring A PROMPT ANSWER (PLEASE TURN OVER)		From..... MINISTER FOR THE ARMY			

The telegram sent to Paddy's wife, Irene, informing her that he was alive.

His service record was probably completed retrospectively because it stated that he was a Prisoner of War on Singapore Island on 15 February 1942, the date of his capture. It also stated that he

embarked for Japan on 16 August 1942. Although Changi is not mentioned in the archives, it is quite definite that this was where he was incarcerated in Singapore.⁴ According to the website of the Australian War Memorial, the name Changi is synonymous with the suffering of Australian prisoners of the Japanese during the Second World War. It went on to say that this is ironic, since for most of the war in the Pacific, Changi was, in reality, one of the more benign of the Japanese prisoner-of-war camps; its privations were relatively minor compared to those of others, particularly those on the Burma-Thailand railway. Nonetheless it was horrific enough and many of its inmates did not survive its cruelty and unhygienic conditions.

Most of the POWs were sent to Changi initially, and from there they were transported to other camps such as the Burma-Thailand railway where their treatment and conditions were egregious. Paddy's service record also records his transportation to Japan.⁵ This information must also have been inserted retrospectively because it was not until later that year that Paddy was confirmed as a Prisoner of War. It was not all that unusual for senior officers to be sent to Japan. Perhaps their captors thought that separating the officers from the rank and file made it easier for discipline – or it might be better insurance against attempts to escape.

The Australian War Memorial website shows that Paddy was later incarcerated at a POW camp at Zentsuji in Kagawa Prefecture – very close to Hiroshima. He would have heard and seen the blast of the atom bomb. The camp was reputedly a “show camp” for propaganda purposes. It contained mostly officers and American listed ranks from Guam and Wake Island. Most of the Australians in the camp were moved before the end of the war to a POW camp at Hakodate, from where they were liberated. Paddy's name was not on that list leading to the conclusion that he remained at Zentsuji. Of the 100 or so Australian prisoners at the camp, Lieutenant Colonel Ian O'Donnell was the most senior officer.

⁴ According to Les Atyeo's diary, under an entry for 26 March 1942, Les was, by that time, a POW in Changi. Les was a family friend of the writer and father of Jenny who married an ex-CRB engineer, John Liddell. His unit, along with Paddy's unit laid down their arms at 8.30 pm on 15 February 1942. Les expressed his disappointment – *'this was after 18 months of training to not fire a shot – worse, not to even having seen one of the enemy – it was hard to take and most of the chaps felt it so.'* After their capture, Les was allocated to the HQ staff under the Command of Lieutenant Colonel O'Donnell at Tanglin just outside the main part of Singapore. They were marched 16 miles from Tanglin to Changi where they were taken to the Selwarg Barracks at Changi – once home to the Gordon Highlanders. He estimated that there were 1,500 Australians in Changi among a total of 30,000 British prisoners.

⁵ The 2/29th Battalion AIF Association website documents the exodus of Australian Prisoners of War from Changi to various other detention camps in Thailand, Burma, Borneo, Japan, Formosa (Taiwan) and Korea. It shows that the Senior Officer's Party (of which Paddy would have been a member) left Changi on 16 August 1943 bound for Japan via Formosa (Taiwan) and Korea.

Although it might have been considered a 'show camp', Zentsuji was nonetheless, a reign of terror. After the war, Captain Stuart Nottage of the Royal Australian Artillery provided the following account of the cruelty meted out to the prisoners.

"Beatings and kickings were frequent. Unreasonable punishments would be inflicted without reason or for minor offenses. It was common for men to be stood to attention in the cold for some hours and to be imprisoned in the summer without mosquito nets; in the winter without blankets. Lt Sato, medical officer, took his turn as duty officer and would control muster parades. His expressed policy was that prisoners must be made tough. Furthermore, he deliberately set out to degrade officer prisoners in front of other ranks and Japanese personnel. He would walk through parades in cold weather and knock off scarves; he refused permission for overcoats to be worn on parade. No overcoats were worn on parade for the whole of the winter of 1943, but in 1944 this order by Sato was countermanded by the Camp Commandant. I have seen Sato approach prisoners wearing American style caps over their ears to protect bad chilblains. He would strike the caps from their heads so that their ears would bleed. I am unable to recall any particular occasion when this was done to any particular man. This was his general custom."

Paddy embarked from Tokyo for his return to Australia on 27th September 1945. His appointment in the 2nd Australian Imperial Force was terminated at Royal Park, Victoria on 5 February 1946. He was placed on the Reserve of Officers (Royal Australian Engineers) on 6 February 1946. He was appointed Commander of 6th Engineer Group Royal Australian Engineers on 15 March 1959 with the rank of Colonel and allotted Army number 3138400. He relinquished this appointment on 1 April 1962 and was placed on the Retired List just prior to him being appointed Chairman of the Country Roads Board in 1963.

He was awarded the Order of the British Empire (Military), Mentioned in Dispatches (on two occasions), the 1939/1945 Star, Pacific Star, Defence Medal, War Medal, Australian Service Medal and the Efficiency Decoration.

Tom Glazebrook recalled a story about Paddy's leadership. Paddy realized that if they were to survive in camp (presumably Changi) they had to make sure that they maintained the highest standard of hygiene as possible. The Japanese were not the least bit interested in doing anything to help. So Paddy approached the Commander of the camp and sought his approval to provide transport for some of the prisoners so that they could go outside to scrounge some equipment from the locals. They agreed and Paddy and his men were able to gather some shovels and picks

and the like. Paddy then organised his men to dig latrines and rubbish disposal pits – and to maintain them properly for the duration of their internment.



Digging bore hole latrines, Changi Camp by Murray Griffin.

In the archives I found an entry regarding War Crimes and Trials and I noticed that VX 43938 Lieutenant Colonel Ian J. O'Donnell had submitted an affidavit and sworn statement after the cessation of the war.

Paddy received an Order of the British Empire (OBE) for exceptional service in laying out and constructing camps and constructing defensive positions. This was promulgated in the London Gazette in January 1942 while Paddy was serving in Malaya - he was captured soon after. He finally received it in December 1946. Down at the bottom of the notice it indicated that he was mentioned in dispatches twice. Paddy was also the recipient of the Imperial Service Order (ISO) in 1972.

I also found this charming portrait of Paddy drawn by a fellow prisoner, Murray Griffin. It is in the collection of the Australian War memorial.



Pencil portrait of Paddy drawn by Murray Griffin.

In 1941, Murray Griffin⁶ was appointed an Official War Artist to accompany the 8th Division in the Malaya Campaign. He completed a number of pictures which were prepared for transport to Australia, but they did not leave the country and are now lost. He served in Malaya from November 1941 until he was captured by the Japanese in the fall of Singapore and incarcerated for three and a half years as a POW in Changi Prison. During his imprisonment he made a series of drawings and paintings recording his experiences and he exhibited them on his return to Australia.

Paddy resumed his career at the CRB in 1946. In 1949, when Engineer for Bridges, Paddy initiated a program eliminating timber bridges on the declared state road network. They were replaced by more permanent reinforced concrete bridges constructed on site using precast reinforced concrete and prestressed concrete elements manufactured at centrally located precasting yards. There are now no timber bridges on Victoria's main roads. This policy resulted in a marked improvement in riding quality, road safety, reduction in maintenance costs and provided a greater certainty of access to remote communities.

⁶ Griffin is the only official Australian War Artist who was captured and held as a prisoner of war. As a prisoner, he continued his intended work by capturing life in Changi. He was an officer and his status spared him from working in enforced labour gangs. He produced over 40 paintings and 150 drawings and, although the Japanese did not actively object to him continuing his work, towards the end of the war he hid most of his work to ensure that they were not confiscated. He created brushes and paints from materials scrounged outside the camp by members of the work parties. After the declaration of peace, he went to Thailand to record the appalling treatment of the emaciated prisoners struggling to survive malnutrition and disease.

In 1950 Paddy was instrumental in establishing the 22nd Construction Regiment sponsored by the CRB, the State Rivers and Water Supply Commission and the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works. He was the first Commanding Officer. His task was to establish the unit and recruit sufficient officers, non-commissioned officers, and other ranks to create a viable unit.

Paddy's life, more than others in this narrative, had many unfortunate aspects. His sister, Sister Alice Margaret VFX112194, (b. 1901) was a nurse during the war, but she drowned in the sinking of the 2/3rd Hospital Ship "*Centaur*". On 14 May 1943 "*Centaur*" was *en route* from Sydney to Cairns to retrieve wounded soldiers from the New Guinea campaign when she was sunk by a Japanese submarine south of Moreton Island, off the Queensland coast. Of the 332 people on board, only 64 survived. Alice was one of eleven nurses who perished. At the time of her death, two brothers were prisoners of the Japanese and three others were serving in the AIF.



Sister Alice O'Donnell VX112194.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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Hospital ship *Centaur*, Sydney, NSW, 1943.

I presume it would have been some time after the event that Paddy would have learnt of his sister's death. Adding to his ordeal as a prisoner of war of the Japanese, his wife died in 1948 shortly after his return to Australia leaving him to raise, single-handedly, a small family. His son, Michael, also a civil engineer, died in his 30s in November 1971 after an accident on a bridge construction site.

Despite these setbacks, Paddy was a leader who felt at ease with people of all walks of life and he was much more outgoing and approachable than earlier Chairmen. His big interest was the Army. His assistant, Lilian Moon, said in *Reminiscences of Life in the Country Roads Board*:

'There are many men walking around today who would not be doing so if it had not been for Paddy's assistance to them in Changi during the war. With his counselling of them he was able to talk them out of things and he stood up for them against the Japanese much to his own detriment at times.'



1971 – 21st Anniversary of 22nd Construction Regiment.

Major Tom Glazebrook, Colonel Ian O'Donnell, Major General K.D. Green and Lieutenant Colonel Bruce Addis.

In the same book, Norm Haylock said:

'The other characteristic of Mr O'Donnell was his heart. I have seen a contractor, in great trouble, cry before him and that seemed to melt his heart. He received very helpful treatment from Paddy. His loyalty to his staff was almost to a fault, the way he supported people he believed in.'

Paddy O'Donnell had a very soft and very loyal side which not everyone saw. When he was a Lieutenant Colonel in Malaya he had a batman who had a rough time at the hands of the Japanese, and a very serious stomach operation in the POW camp. After the war he was put on as a bridge overseer but was later caught out padding the payroll. He was sacked and for the next 15 years he struggled on working as a nightman. When Paddy became Chairman in the 1960s the man returned as a bridge overseer. Some years later I visited this man's home and found that he had a child who was very ill, requiring many costly operations, and this had been the reason for his dishonesty. Paddy had known this and had shown loyalty and softness when the occasion had warranted it by reinstating the man. He later turned out to be one of our best bridge overseers.'

Peter McCullough recalled an instance of Paddy's fierce determination to protect the integrity of the CRB. Peter – when acting as Personnel Manager - would occasionally attend Board meetings when personnel items were being dealt with. On one particular occasion the 'hotline' rang; it was the minister at that time, the Minister for Local Government. An election was looming and the

Australian Labor Party had found a strong local candidate. The minister wanted the CRB to assist his campaign by announcing a few projects on the Mornington Peninsula, mentioning the minister's name as often as possible. Paddy did not hold back; the CRB would not become a political football while he was Chairman and he was deeply offended that the Minister would think otherwise. Others in the Boardroom could hear the Minister back-peddalling furiously. The conversation ended abruptly when Paddy slammed down the phone and announced "Well, that's taken care of him."

As Chairman of the CRB, Paddy was a member of the National Association of State Road Authorities from 1962 to 1971 including two periods as Chairman. He was a Director of the Australian Road Research Board and was twice Chairman. He was a member of the Victorian Tourist Development Authority, the Melbourne Metropolitan Transportation Committee, the State Planning Council, Member of the council for Queen's College, Director of the YMCA, Member of the faculty of engineering at the University of Melbourne, Member of the West Gate Bridge Authority and a member of Rotary Club of Melbourne.

He is remembered as a fiercely independent character and a hard taskmaster. He played an outstanding role in the development of Victoria's roads over a long period of time and his life was one of considerable achievement and service to the benefit of the Victoria.

Paddy retired in 1971 and died in Camberwell on 26 November 1984.



Ian (Paddy) O'Donnell – circa 1971.

Corporal Douglas Leslie Brumley, VX64333, V42108

Douglas was a 25 year old Clerk at the CRB when he joined up in October 1941. He was born in Sale (in 1916) but he enlisted at Royal Park leading me to think that he worked in one of the CRB's Melbourne offices. He is one of those on the list in Appendix 1 but we know nothing but his name – and what is in the archives. He was a Sergeant in the Citizen's Military Force with a Service No. of V42108. Douglas was a fully qualified accountant.



Douglas Brumley's paybook photo.

Douglas was taller than most – six feet one and a half inches – with fair hair. No doubt because he was an accountant, he was posted to 8th Divisional Head Quarters Command Pay Office and he remained in that unit when he embarked for Malaya on the SS *'Marella'* which arrived in Singapore on 26 January 1942.

The next entry, two months later, simply states "Missing". This came from the AIF in Malaya. In June 1943, his file is stamped in capital blue letters which can't possibly be missed PRISONER OF WAR and then Malaya is written after it. The last entry in his archive came six months later. It was handwritten and said 'Now imprisoned in Osaka camp'. To be more precise, it was the Osaka 6B – Akenobe Camp.



Four Australian Prisoners of War at Osaka Camp.

All the prisoners from the camp worked for various transportation and stevedoring companies of the Osaka Port. They loaded and unloaded ships, transported materials, worked in warehouses and loaded and unloaded railroad cars at the docks. They worked on all kinds of goods, usually foodstuffs and clothing but sometimes military equipment consigned to Japanese armies in the South Pacific.

A sample day's rations was:

Breakfast - Rice and soup.

Lunch (carried by the POWs to work) - Rice, sometimes bread, seaweed.

Dinner - Rice and soup, fish every 10 days, meat once or twice a month; vegetables (one kind each night either onions or potatoes).

The next entry in his archive records that he returned to Watsonia in Melbourne on 15 October 1945 and he was treated for ascaris – twice – in January 1946. Ascaris is a parasitic intestinal roundworm caused by unsanitary conditions – in Douglas's case – the POW camp.

He was discharged on 15 January 1946.

Douglas married Mary Elizabeth Cooper in 1946 and the electoral rolls show that he shifted to Bendigo and then, in the 1960s, to Canberra.

He died in Canberra in October 1976 at the age of 60.

Captain Wilfred (Bill) Hamlyn Dolamore, 3138100 (VX 27638)

Wilfred (Bill) Hamlyn Dolamore was born in Gardiner in April 1909. He enlisted in June 1940, in Bairnsdale, where he spent a significant part of his career.

He joined the CRB in 1927 as a Junior Assistant Engineer at Bairnsdale and in 1935 he was appointed the Assistant Divisional Engineer.



Bill Dolamore and Frank Jackson at the Bairnsdale Office in 1936.

Bill was Assistant Divisional Engineer at the time and Frank was a Junior Draftsman.

Both enlisted and served in Malaya before becoming POWs. Frank was Bill's batman in Changi.

After returning from the war, he worked briefly as Assistant Asphalt Engineer in the CRB's Head Office in Carlton, and in November 1947, he became Bairnsdale's third Divisional Engineer. He remained in that position for 27 years until his early retirement in 1974 – due to poor health.

Bill's Army career was closely linked to Paddy O'Donnell. They would have known each other at the time of their call up – both having an already substantial career at the CRB. They enlisted within days of each other (in July 1941) – both joined the 2/10th Field Company 8th Division and both embarked on the HMT "*Queen Mar Serial 366*" bound for Singapore in Malaya. Once there, Bill was promoted to Captain on the same day that Paddy O'Donnell was appointed Lieutenant Colonel at the end of July 1941. He was wounded in action on 1 January 1941 – in the left ankle -

However, I was able to find Bill's service record at the Department of Defence – although there is not much to be gleaned as he spent the rest of the war in Changi Prisoner of War Camp.

A story floated around the CRB that Bill received a serious wound which needed immediate and urgent attention lest it became septic in the steamy, tropical environment of Malaya. Lucky for him the story went, that an excellent surgeon, Albert Coates, was on hand to carry out the task. The operation was carried out in the notorious Changi POW camp. The bones in Bill's ankle were so smashed up, it was impossible to reconstruct them, so Coates fused the ankle to enable Bill to walk but the operation left him with no flexibility in his ankle. Thereafter, Bill walked with a limp.

This is untrue. It is one of those myths that dwells within a cohort and grows more elaborately with the passage of time. I doubt that he had an operation in Changi but, if so, it was not done by Albert Coates. The substantial amount of history written about Albert Coates indicates that he was never in Changi.

Albert Coates initially worked at the 10th Australian General Hospital (AGH) in Malacca. By January 1942, the Japanese were advancing quickly on Singapore, and the 10th AGH was broken up. Coates was sent to 13th AGH in Singapore and he operated there on the troops returning from the advancing war front. The hospital was filled rapidly, patients even being nursed on the lawns. Unfortunately for the hospital, a battery unit was setup at one end of the garden and soon air-raids were occurring daily. Bombing around the hospital more than once meant pieces of roof would descend into the middle of the operating theatre. They often operated in total blackouts. In the four weeks before the British surrender and the Australians were ordered to lay down arms, 1,789 Australians were killed in action in Malaya and another 1,306 wounded. Singapore fell in February 1942, and Coates was evacuated under mortar fire aboard the "*Sui Kwong*" with a large body of mainly British troops on the ship towards Java. He was later captured in Sumatra.

I doubt that Coates could have operated on Bill's foot at another hospital in Singapore. There is an entry in Bill's archive, that was entered after he was captured, that says he was admitted to the 2/9th Field Ambulance with a gunshot wound to the left leg on 15 February 1942. This was when Singapore fell. It said that he was transferred to the 13 AGH (where Coate's once operated) two days later and on 22 February, he was transferred back to the 2/9th Field Ambulance. The next entry, dated 22 February 1942, shows him being treated for a compound fracture of his right ankle.

I don't think this is a possibility because Coates sailed from Singapore for Java on 13 February 1942 – two days before Bill was admitted to hospital. We will never know for certain.

The following telegrams were sent to Bill's father (his nominated next of kin) informing him of Bill becoming a POW and about his liberation and return to Australia.

T.G. CHARGE A / COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA—POSTMASTER-GENERAL'S DEPARTMENT. No.....		AFFIX STAMPS HERE	
3 M.D. CASH REGISTER DEBIT NOTE NO.		TELEGRAM This message is presented for transmission subject to the Post and Telegraph Act and Regulations.	
Sch. C.3873—8/1942.		The address must contain all information necessary to ensure delivery.	
Words.....	To.....	For Office Use Only	
Charge.....	MR. A.W. DOLAMORE	T	
Time..... 8.9.42	217 BEACH ROAD	C	
By.....	MENTONE	B	
Remarks.....			
I HAVE TO INFORM YOU THAT		PRISONER OF WAR	
PREVIOUSLY REPORTED MISSING IS NOW REPORTED PRISONER OF WAR		CAPT. W.H. DOLAMORE VX 27638	
Charges for ORDINARY RATE Telegram For 14 words or less : Within a 15 mile radius 9d., Beyond a 15 mile radius 1/- Each additional word in both cases 1d.		From..... MINISTER FOR THE ARMY	

T.G. 41. CHARGE A / COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA—POSTMASTER-GENERAL'S DEPARTMENT. No.....		AFFIX STAMPS HERE.	
DEBIT NOTE NO. CASH REGISTER		TELEGRAM This message is presented for transmission subject to the Post and Telegraph Act and Regulations.	
Sch. C.3873—7/1942.		Charges for ORDINARY RATE Telegram For 14 Words or less : Within a 15-mile radius 9d. Beyond a 15-mile radius 1/- Each additional word in both cases 1d.	
Words.....	To.....	For Office Use Only	
Charge.....	Postal Acknowledgment Delivery Personal	T	
Time.....	MR. A.W. DOLAMORE	B E3455	
By.....	217 BEACH ROAD	C 9017	
Remarks.....	MENTONE.		
I HAVE TO INFORM YOU THAT		VX 27638 CAPT. W.H. DOLAMORE	
PREVIOUSLY REPORTED PRISONER OF WAR		date not given at Singapore	
IS NOW REPORTED LIBERATED		Australia	
A REPLY PAID TELEGRAM is a courteous means of ensuring A PROMPT ANSWER		FROM..... MINISTER FOR THE ARMY	

T.G. 41 A		COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA—POSTMASTER-GENERAL'S DEPARTMENT.		No.	
CASH REGISTER		URGENT TELEGRAM		AFFIX STAMPS HERE	
Sch. C. 4325 - 12/10/43		2030		This message is presented for transmission subject to the Post and Telegraph Act and Regulations.	
WORDS.....	The address must contain all information necessary to ensure delivery.			For Office Use Only	
CHARGE.....	To.....	ME. A. W. DOLAMORE		T	
TIME.....		217 BEACH ROAD		C	
BY.....		MENTONE		B	
REMARKS.....	<p>ANTICIPATED THAT VX27638 DOLAMORE W.H. WILL ARRIVE MELBOURNE AND MAY BE MET AT HEIDELBERG MILITARY HOSPITAL AT 10 AM SUNDAY THIRTIETH SEPTEMBER PRESENTATION OF THIS TELEGRAM AT ENTRANCE WILL ADMIT NOT MORE THAN TWO ADULT PERSONS</p>				
Charges for URGENT RATE Telegram For 14 words or less : Within a 15 mile radius 1/6, Beyond a 15 mile radius 2/- Each additional word in both cases 2d.		From.....		Victoria Echelon and Records 281 Lonsdale St MELBOURNE	

He was recovered from Changi on 5 September 1945 and embarked from Singapore on the MS “Oranje” ten days later. On his arrival back in Australia he was admitted to Heidelberg Military Hospital.

Bill was discharged from the army in December 1945 and re-joined the CRB. After a 12 month stint in Melbourne he returned to his beloved Bairnsdale where he remained for the rest of his life. He owned a holiday house on Raymond Island in the Gippsland Lakes and after the war, Paddy O'Donnell used to take his children down to Bill's holiday home for the Christmas holidays. Bill and Paddy maintained a close relationship like brothers. Bill shared a sad and similar history with Paddy O'Donnell in that his wife died early. He married Charmian Langlands in 1946 but she died in childbirth in 1952 at the age of 32. He did marry again, to Jean, who died in 1980.

After the war, other CRB men who had been POWs gravitated to Bairnsdale. Overseer Andy Wilson was already there but Bill Myers and Frank Watts arrived later. Harold Goudie also came although he was not a POW. Their stories are told elsewhere in this collection.

Bill became a legend in East Gippsland. He was widely known and respected by everyone and built up the image of the CRB in the community. There would not have been a school ground in all of East Gippsland that hadn't been improved by Bill sending some CRB plant out for 'testing'.

Although intensely loyal to the CRB, Bill placed great stress on the autonomy of the Divisional Engineer. The Chairman at the time was Paddy O'Donnell – in army days, Bill's senior officer. Paddy tried to get Bill to conform with the rest of the organisation over the timing of the lunch

break. While the rest of the organisation took lunch from 12.45 pm to 1.30 pm (and attempted to man the phones during the break), the Bairnsdale office closed down completely between 12.15 pm and 1.15 pm. Bill wrote to the Board explaining that people in the country had their main meal in the middle of the day and it was necessary for them to go home for that purpose. Other less plausible arguments were put forward such as the sun rising earlier in the east and therefore an earlier lunch break was reasonable. Bill never relented but everyone knew that the bond that they developed during the war protected him from Paddy's spleen.

Bill's younger brother, Max, also served in the war. He was an accountant at the Transport Regulation Board in Carlton. Max enlisted in August 1939 but was discharged in June 1940 and transferred to the AIF Pay Corps. His story is included in Chapter 6.



Jack Thorpe, Bill Dolamore (seated) and Ted Donaldson – all 2nd AIF soldiers
– at Bill's retirement in 1974.



1972. Vice Regal inspection of roads in Bairnsdale Division by Sir Rohan Delacombe. Sir Rohan and Lady Delacombe with Patrolman H. Goudie (left), Mr. W. H. Dolamore, Divisional Engineer, and Mr. R. E. V. Donaldson, Chairman (right). All three CRB men served in the A.I.F.

Bill was a great servant to the Board. He died in Bairnsdale in December 1976 at the age of 65.

Private Henry Hamilton, VX48120

Henry was a Patrolman in Bendigo Division of the CRB. He was born in Huntly (north of Bendigo) on 26 December 1910 and enlisted in the Army on 6 August 1940 at the age of 29 years and seven months. He gave his occupation as 'Truck driver'.

Henry started his career as a truck driver with the CRB in 1936 and resumed after the war and, in 1950, he became a patrolman in Bendigo Division.

His initial training reads similarly to others who enlisted at this time – in Albury and Seymour in various units before he was posted to the 8th Division Petrol Company. As the name implies, this company supplied the petrol to the Army in all its endeavours and was part of the Australian Army Service Corps (AASC).

He was then taken on strength with of the 27th Brigade of AASC and embarked for Malaya from Fremantle on 7 August 1941, arriving in Singapore eight days late. His archive closes abruptly thereafter. He went missing on 16 February 1942 and in September 1943 he was declared a Prisoner of War. It also shows that he was later interned in Osaka in Japan from where he was released in late 1945.



Henry Hamilton's pay book photograph in 1940.

Douglas Brumley was also incarcerated in Osaka and a brief description of conditions there is provided in his entry earlier in this Chapter.

Henry was discharged on 17 December 1945.

He collapsed and died while working on the Northern Highway on 16 November 1966.

Lance Corporal Frank Wolfe Jackson, VX 29148

Frank was born in Bairnsdale. He was 21 when he enlisted at Sale in June 1940. His occupation was a draftsman. In *Reminiscences of Life in the Country Roads Board*, Frank described his early experience seeking work at the height of the Depression.

“I left school at the end of 1935 and jobs were hard to come by. Alec Archibald was the Divisional Engineer in Bairnsdale and he was looking for a junior draftsman. He came round to my home and asked if I would like a job

and that was how I started. One of my earliest memories was being an escort on a pay round with Les Starling. We used to draw the money from the bank on the afternoon of the day before so we could get an early start. We always covered a lot of ground and we had to be back at the office for work the next day. Sometimes we didn't get home until 2.30 am.

This particular day we drew the money out. It would have been a couple of thousand pounds. I decided it was time for me to learn how to use the automatic pistols we took on the rounds. There were three of them locked in the office safe. We had ten rounds for the whole lot and they were very carefully counted up every 30 June for the sake of the Government Auditor. One gun was a Browning and the other two were Colts - so the mechanics of the two types were different. I didn't know anything about guns and Les decided to show me. He took the magazine out of both guns and said, "Now when you take the magazine out of this one, the safety lock comes on and nothing happens". He demonstrated. "The other one is different. When you take the magazine out the safety lock doesn't come on, just like that." And he thought there would be just a faint click. There was an unholy BANG as the thing went off and drilled a hole in the floor within an inch of my right toe. I jumped out the back window."

After his enlistment in June 1940, he trained in Albury and Seymour and was promoted to Lance Corporal. He disembarked for Singapore in February 1941 and moved directly to Malaya. He was reported missing in March 1942 and on 9 June 1942 his record was stamped PRISONER OF WAR. Below this, in barely visible type, it said 'Rec. from Jap at Changi P.W. Camp 5/9/43 Singapore' and below that, 'Disembarked Sydney 10/10/45'. We can only wonder what the intervening period was like for Frank.

Frank was discharged from the Army on 4 December 1945.

There is nothing in the archives about the period of time spent as a POW but I suspect that Frank remained in Changi for the duration of the war. Because he was a draftsman, Frank was asked to draw a map of the camp. At War's end, Frank brought the plan home with him. Sometime in the 1960s he thought he would visit Singapore and Changi. He was curious to see what it was like and to see if his hut was still standing. However the prison governor would not allow Frank to enter the grounds but he did allow him to view the camp from an elevated position in a nearby tower. When Frank reached the viewing area he unrolled his plan. The governor was curious to see what it was and Frank explained the background to it. The governor demanded it from Frank, but Frank refused to hand it over saying that if he was not allowed to enter the camp, the governor could

not have it. The governor changed his mind and let Frank into the grounds. Frank had intended to donate it to them at any rate.

Frank was Bill Dolamore's batman in Changi. A batman or an orderly - a soldier (or airman) - assigned to a commissioned officer as a personal servant. They acted as runners to convey orders from the officers, as drivers, as valets, maintaining the officer's uniform and had various other roles. I imagine the long-standing friendship between Frank and Bill would have influenced Bill in selecting Frank for this task. Frank used to tell how he sharpened Bill's razor on a stone.



Frank Jackson's enlistment photo.

Frank had one shoulder lower than the other. This was a result of an unprovoked beating he received from a Japanese officer. In October 1946, Frank became engaged to Shirley Weaver of Brighton and they married in October 1947 at Melbourne Grammar School Chapel. Frank returned to Bairnsdale after the war where he was a draftsman and general rouse-about. In 1950, he moved to Melbourne as deputy to Roy V. Quick in the Pipe Testing Section of Bridge Sub-branch.

I recall Frank as a tall, handsome man with impeccable handwriting.



Frank Jackson at his retirement in 1979.

Frank retired in 1979 having given the Board 42 years of service. He died in Beaumaris in December 1995.

Driver William (Bill) Edward Miles, VX 30505

Bill was born in Dunolly and at the age of 29 he enlisted in 1940. On his Attestation Form he described himself as a road foreman and then crossed it out and inserted 'Clerk'. Bill worked in the CRB's South Melbourne store yard.

The remarkable thing about Bill's story is that before the war he had an accident and had his right foot amputated. He wore a prosthetic foot. It is alleged that he arranged for someone else to attend his medical for him and he was enlisted.

But reality must have caught up with him because his service and casualty form states under the heading of Distinctive Marks - 'Left leg amputated below knee'. It was claimed by people in Bairnsdale that Bill was the only Australian soldier with a wooden leg that was sent overseas. He belonged to the 2nd/2nd Pioneer Battalion and when it sailed for the Middle East, Bill was not permitted to go. However he was the Regimental Aid Post orderly and he somehow persuaded the doctor to let him go.



Bill Miles' enlistment photo.

He became a driver and was initially sent to the Middle East in January 1941. He suffered from two bouts of diarrhoea which required hospitalisation and in February 1942 he landed at Batavia (Jakarta) in Java. He was declared missing three weeks later and in August that year he was officially declared a Prisoner of War.

In August 1945 it was recorded in his archive - 'Alive in Siam Recovered from Japanese' - and in 1946 he was fitted with an artificial limb at Heidelberg Hospital. John Gibney said that he had a tough time on the Thai-Burma Railway. He described how the Japanese beat him with bamboo staffs and with the butts of their rifles because they accused him of cutting his foot off to avoid working.

In April 1951, Bill was appointed Bairnsdale's Traffic Officer where he served for 37 years. Bill Dolamore – a fellow Prisoner of War of the Japanese – sent his best wishes and thanked him for his loyal service. Bill was a 'character' and very popular in the region – especially in the trucking community. There was a cartoon on the wall of the Cann River Hotel depicting an obviously overweight truck with springs flattened and tyres bulging. Beside the truck was the driver and a short, portly gentleman with a tape measure. The caption read, "Overweight by Miles".

John Gibney recalled that he went down there to do some work and he stayed at the Marlo Pub with Bill. The pub had plywood walls so that you could hear people in adjacent rooms. That night, Bill was about three rooms away but he woke John up early in the morning with his screaming and thrashing around. He relived in his nightmares the horrors he went through at the hands of the Japanese. It took him about 20 years to get it out of his system.

Bill retired in September 1974 and he died in Bairnsdale in December 1995 at the age of 84.

Lieutenant Colonel Merton Conroy Morgan, 3166 (VX38985)

Merton was born in Merton, Tasmania, in April 1916. Merton was a small village in northern Tasmania, near Glenorchy. The site of the village was inundated after the construction of the Tolosa dam – to provide Glenorchy’s freshwater supply. He was the youngest son of a military family. His father was also a Lieutenant Colonel.

Merton attended the Royal Military College at Duntroon, graduating at 20 years of age as a Corporal in 1936. He was appointed to the Australian Staff Corps. He continued to serve with the Australian Staff Corps in the pre-war period under the service number 3166 but with the outbreak of war, he formally enlisted as VX38985 and was appointed as Battalion Adjutant to the freshly formed 2nd/29th Infantry Battalion to work alongside its commander, Lieutenant Colonel J.C. Robertson.



4Left to right: Captain Morgan, Major Lloyd, Lieutenant Wastell.
Seated: Lt Colonel Robertson MC VD Commanding Officer.
(Robertson was killed in action at the Battle of Muar)
Circa 1941.

The 2nd/29th Australian infantry battalion was formed in October 1940, mainly with volunteers recruited from Victoria. The battalion spent the end of 1940, and most of 1941 undergoing rigorous training, first at Bonegilla and later Bathurst. Amidst fears of a Japanese invasion of the Malayan peninsula, the 2nd/29th Battalion sailed from Sydney Harbour with 8th Division's 27th Brigade and arrived in Malaya on August 15th, 1941.



Left to Right: Captain Oliff, Lieutenant Wastell, Major Lloyd, Captain Brand, Captain Morgan.
Taken on board troopship *Marnix* – August 1941.



Left to Right - Back - Captain Kemp, Captain Merton Morgan, Unknown,
Front – Captain Bowring, Captain Gibson, Major Oliff.
Bathurst circa – 1941.

The battalion fought several delaying actions along the west coast, including fighting around Bakri and Muar, and in Johore, before the Allied forces withdrew across the causeway linking the Malayan Peninsula to Singapore.

The Battle of Muar was the last major battle of the Malayan Campaign. It took place from 14–22 January 1942 around Gemensah Bridge and the Muar River. The British withdrew 240 kilometres south to Johore to rest and regroup, leaving it to the 8th Australian Division to stop the Japanese advance. The Australians inflicted severe losses on the Japanese at the Gemensah Bridge and in a second battle a few kilometres north of the town of Gemas. Members of the Australian 8th Division killed an estimated 600 personnel in the ambush at the bridge itself, whilst Australian anti-tank guns destroyed several Japanese tanks in the battle north of Gemas.

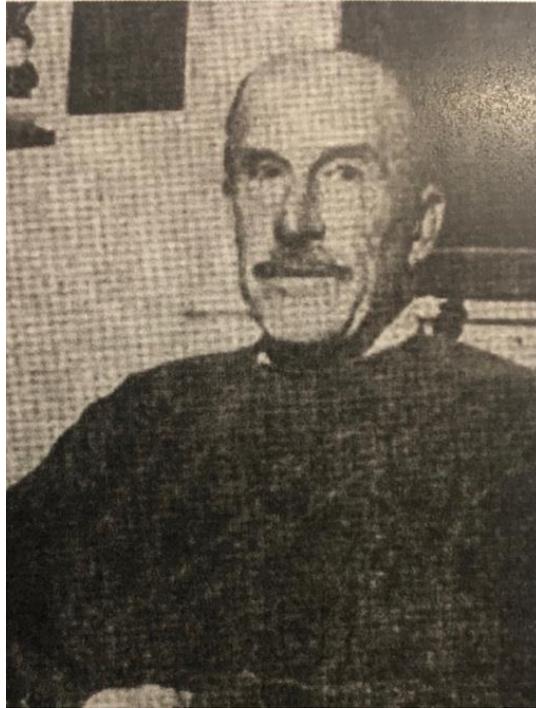
Although the ambush was successful for the Allies, the defence of Muar and Bakri on the west coast was a complete failure and heavy casualties were inflicted on its two Australian infantry battalions. The casualties of the Battalion in one week of fighting were 13 officers killed or wounded and 296 other ranks killed or wounded, or 58% of those who went into action on January 17th.

During the short Malayan Campaign, Merton distinguished himself during the Battle of Muar when a large portion of the 2nd/29th Battalion became cut-off by the Japanese. An unidentified source on the internet site – Reddit – stated:

“Comprising seven officers and 150 others in several groups, including Jats (Indian Brigade), they were eventually gathered together by the battalion's adjutant, Captain Morgan. Finding themselves isolated, they set off across country towards Yong Peng. Most of them eventually fell into Japanese hands.”

Merton and his men were captured while attempting to make it toward allied lines. Initially, they were imprisoned at the overcrowded and unsanitary Pudu Gaol in Kuala Lumpur. They remained there until October 1942 when they were sent to Changi in Singapore to join the rest of the battalion. It was here that his family was made aware he was a POW and he was no longer considered ‘missing’. Merton remained in Changi for the next three years and survived his Japanese captivity, but many from his battalion did not, with 582 dying in the Malayan Campaign and subsequent Japanese imprisonment.

Merton's career in the army continued after the war. He was posted to Army Headquarters and remained in the military until 1967, when he retired aged 51 with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.



Merton Morgan at the CRB – circa late 1960s.

Merton joined the CRB in the late 1960s. He worked in the Estates Section and eventually became the Assistant Estates Officer. Merton brought his military training to the fore – diligence, punctuality and pride in performance – and he was highly respected by his 'troops'. He was still inclined to use army technology: a 'group' was never assigned to do a job, it was always a 'detail'.

Merton retired in the late 1970s and he died in Launceston, Tasmania, in May 1993 at the age of 77.

Lance Sergeant Frank Eric Watts, VX47550

Frank was a Bridge Construction Overseer in the CRB. He was born in Bendigo in 1915 and enlisted in July 1940. In his Attestation Form it states his occupation as bridge carpenter and indicates that he was married to Phyllis. He was a Lance Sergeant in the 2nd/10th Field Company.



Frank Watt's paybook photograph – 1940.

He did his military training at Seymour and Bonegilla. He embarked from Sydney on 2 February 1941 for Malaya and arrived in Singapore on 18 February.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

005504

Members of the 2nd/10th Field Company, Royal Australian Engineers, on board a troopship *en route* to Malaya.

In August 1941, he was hospitalised in the Australian General Hospital at Malacca with otitis media. This is a middle ear infection behind the eardrum caused by fluid in the ear which causes the eardrum to bulge. He was hospitalised again, a month later, with otitis externa – a similar condition causing swelling of the external ear canal.

But his archive is short, like all those poor souls who became prisoners of war of the Japanese. It abruptly states “Reported missing 16/2/42” followed by “Confirmed POW at Changi 13/9/43”.

The next entry is embarkation from Singapore on the MV *Duntroon* on 5 September 1945 and his arrival in Sydney on 7 October 1945. He was discharged on 14 December 1945.

Stan Hodgson (ex-Divisional Engineer Dandenong) told me that Frank was a remarkable man and that Paddy O'Donnell gave great support to Frank and his family after his return. Paddy was able to secure a job for Frank constructing the runways at East Sale Aerodrome.

He had a reputation as an excellent bridge overseer.

Frank died in December 1990.

Gunner Andrew (Andy) James Wilson, VX47352

Andy was born in Bairnsdale and enlisted in Sale in July 1940. He was a labourer. He joined up at Sale when he was 20 and arrived in Singapore in August 1941. He fought as a Gunner in the 4th Tank Attack Regiment in Malaya. This regiment was an anti-tank regiment formed in November 1940. In early 1942 the regiment took part in the Malayan Campaign and the Battle of Singapore before being captured when Singapore fell to the Japanese. Most of its personnel became prisoners of war and 170 of them died in captivity.



2-pounder anti-tank gun in action in Malaya, 1942.

Andy's archive indicates he went missing in action in February 1942. During the period leading up to his capture, he was hospitalised with appendicitis. In June 1943 his record was stamped PRISONER OF WAR. On 15 September 1944 his family received a message which said; *'Safe and well, also Dave. Send parcel and mail. Love to all at home and friends, Andy'*. I don't know how he got this message out.

There is another entry in the file relating to the identity of Dave, written by Andy's father. It said: *'The "Dave" referred to would be, in all probability, Gnr. D.F. Potter VX 47359 4th Anti Tank A.I.F.. Gunner Potter and my son have been together since enlistment and my son often mentions Dave in his letters previous to him being taken prisoner'*.



Gunner Andy Wilson and Gunner Dave Potter.

Andy was repatriated in 1945 but Dave didn't make it home. Dave was a farm labourer in Bairnsdale and he joined up with Andy in Sale on the same day. He was eight years older than Andy. Their files are almost identical with the ubiquitous PRISONER OF WAR stamp but, in Dave's file, it said underneath 'Died of illness (Cholera) whilst P.W. Thailand'. This must have been a shock to his family because the following message was heard over shortwave radio from Singapore on 28/10/43. It was sent to his mother. "Am safe and well but miss good Australian tucker. John is also safe. Mail and comforts would be very welcome. Love to all, from David".

Andy was incarcerated in Changi but was relocated to Japan at the time of the dropping of the atom bomb on Hiroshima.

Andy married Hazel McCoy at Shepparton on 22 December 1947. Hazel died at the age of 39 in 1966 and Andy did not remarry.



Hazel Josephine McCoy with her maternal uncle, Thomas Chalker, on her wedding day.

Most of Andy's early career in the CRB was gained as a grader Driver in Bairnsdale Division and after progressing through the various supervisory classifications became an Overseer Grade A

some seven years before his retirement in 1973. He was by all accounts a very outgoing character. After he left the CRB, he became the doorman at the Windsor Hotel in Melbourne, complete with a bell topper hat.



Andy Wilson (left) being congratulated on his retirement in 1973 by Bairnsdale Divisional Engineer, Bill Dolamore.

Andy died in Bairnsdale in January 2005.