

## SX9796 Private Ronald Peter West - Prisoner of War of the Japanese



Ronald Peter West was born at Cowell on 13 June 1917 to Peter and Olive West (*nee* Deer). After being educated at the local school, he worked as a farmhand until 1937 when he joined his older brother, Wilfred, and opened a general store in Darke Peak on Eyre Peninsula. Ron, as he was known, married his fiancée Aileen Lesley Stirling on 12 July 1939. One year later, Ron enlisted in the 2nd AIF, reporting to Wayville Army Camp in Adelaide on 27 July 1940.

After five months basic training Private West was sent to the newly formed 8th Division Salvage Unit on 8 December 1940, a unit responsible for the collection of all useable stores and equipment from the battlefield, including any captured enemy material. On 24 April 1941 with three months of unit training, 8th Div Salvage entrained at Woodside for relocation to Alice Springs as part of the Darwin Overland Maintenance Force. This Force was responsible for the trans-shipment of all defence supplies from the southern states to units based in Darwin. With no rail link between Alice Springs and Darwin, all war material had to be trucked over rough and improvised roads, with 8th Div Salvage providing support. In mid-July 1941, 8th Div Salvage returned to Adelaide for pre-embarkation preparations. On 17 July 1941, Pte West had his last leave with family prior to departure overseas.

The 8th Div Salvage embarked on the HMT *EE* in Melbourne on 30 July 1941 and sailed to Singapore, via Fremantle, arriving there on 16 August 1941 to join elements of the 8th Division already in Malaya. "Westforce", comprising the 8th Division (less the 22nd Brigade), were to hold north-west Johore, along the Batu Anam-Muar line. As 8th Div Salvage was allocated only one truck to carry out all their tasks for the Division, the unit concentrated on weapons and field-craft training. In October 1941, they were transferred to Marlborough Camp in Singapore and trained on Japanese explosives, artillery shells and weapons identification to allow matching of ammunition with salvaged enemy guns.

Following the Japanese invasion of Malaya on 8 December 1941, and a series of outflanking manoeuvres, Commonwealth Forces retreated down the Peninsula, eventually withdrawing to Singapore. After fierce fighting, Singapore fell on 15 February 1942, with Lt Gen Percival surrendering to the Japanese commander General Yamashita, who then forced all captured troops to march through the streets to Selerang Barracks on the Changi Peninsula. For the next year, the POWs worked loading ships with stores destined for Japan, which had been commandeered from the Royal Navy Depot at Keppel Harbour. In March 1943, some members of 8th Div Salvage left Selerang with "D Force" to work on the Thai-Burma railway.

In April 1943, the Changi POW Command was ordered to raise "F Force" comprising 3,600 Australians (under Lt Col Kappe) and 3,400 British (under Lt Col Dillon MC). Pte West and several other 8th Div Salvage men were allocated to this second work party heading north. "F Force" left Singapore in 13 trains from 18-26 April 1943, with each train holding about 600 men, of 28-35 soldiers per steel rice truck. The journey to Ban Pong (Thailand) took five hot days and four cold nights. Without warning, they were then forced to march 295 kms along jungle tracks to the "F Force" HQ at Nieke and to various camps north towards the Thai-Burma Border at Three Pagodas Pass. This gruelling march, at night with minimal rations and no vaccination, took 15 days and transited through existing work camps severely infected with cholera and dysentery.

Arriving at Sonkurai, Ron joined 16,000 POWs and over 200,000 Asians forced to build a 415 km railway link from Nong Pladuk (Thailand) to Thanbyuzayat (Burma) to carry vital supplies for the Japanese Forces in Burma. The Japanese and Korean guard's brutality was severe and cruel with many physical beatings. Food and medical supplies were always in short supply. The "Death Railway" was completed on 17 October 1943. However, Pte West remained at the 50 Kilo Hospital Camp of Maj Bruce Hunt at Tanbaya (Burma) until his death from beri-beri on 25 January 1944.





Studio portrait of SX9796 Pte Ronald Peter West, taken July 1941. The photographer was Dimond Studios, Adelaide. From the Peter West family collection.

He was buried at Tanbaya POW cemetery but later exhumed and re-interred at the Thanbyuzayat War Cemetery (Burma) on 3 December 1945.

Ron was survived by his wife Aileen and their son Peter, born on 7 November 1941. Over 10,549 Allied POWs died on the railway. Of the original 43 members of 8th Div Salvage, only 21 survived. The deceased members are honoured in war cemeteries in Thailand, Burma and Borneo.





Top image: Grave of SX9796 Pte Ronald Peter West at Thanbyuzayat War Cemetery, Myanmar.

Centre: Peter West lays flowers on his father's grave.

Bottom: General view of Thanbyuzayat War Cemetery, taken from just inside the main entrance.

A commemoration service was held at the Cemetery and conducted by Lt Col Beaton (retired) and attendees included Inspector Ken Harding of the Australian Federal Police representing the Australian Government, his wife Maika, Patricia Harkin of Geelong whose late husband Sgt Austin Harkin, of 1 Squadron RAAF, was a POW on the railway, Ian and Janet Milnes. Ian's father, SX9348 Pte Ian Colin Milnes was also a POW on the Railway. Pte West and Pte Milnes were both members of 8 Div Salvage Unit. Cemetery manager U Thet Mon and representatives of the Myanmar Police Force, Capt Hyo Hla and Lt Sou Moecs also joined in the service.

All photographs taken by Ian Milnes on 30 April 2010.

