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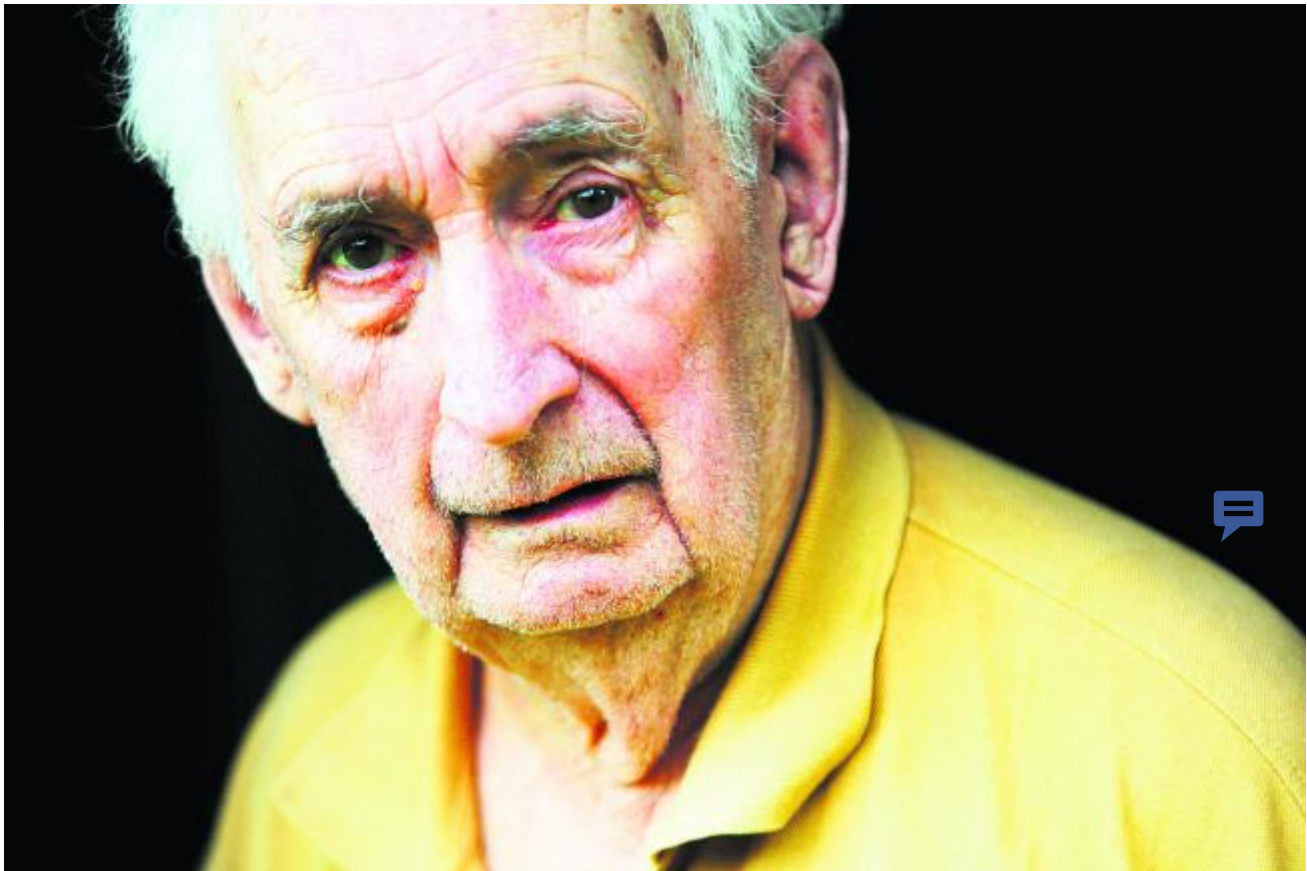
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News

20th June 2013

'I survived the death railway'

By Mark Taylor



MENU

Survivor Stan Vaisey

TENS of thousands of servicemen perished in the construction of the Burma Railway during the Second World War, enduring unimaginable conditions.

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signed up to serve his country during the height of the Battle of Britain.

Five years later when he was liberated by American troops, he was almost broken – a walking skeleton weighing only five stones.

He had joined up in 1940 to become Leading Aircraftman Vaisey at RAF Lyneham, serving as a radar technician for 511 Squadron. He was captured during the fall of Singapore in February 1942 when the Japanese bombed the boat he was in.

For the next three-and-a-half years he was put to work on the Thanbyuzayat leg of the railway in southern Burma.

Mr Vaisey, now 89 and from Witney, recalled: “They wanted us to build it all the way through to Bangkok. We didn’t have bulldozers back then; it was hard labour every day. We were cutting down trees, laying tracks, and dying where we stood.

“I wouldn’t have minded being forced to do something that might have helped humanity, but not that.

“Building the bridge cost the Japanese more than they realise, it cost them a lot of lives.”

It is estimated that 180,000 Asian workers and 60,000 Allies were involved in its construction. Around half of the Asian labour force and 16,000 Allied PoWs, including 6,318 British men, died as a result.

When transported to the line the prisoners were packed into steel freight cars for five days and nights, with 36 men to a car.

There was only enough room to crouch down and only one opening for ventilation. Illness, particularly dysentery, was rife.

Mr Vaisey said: “They didn’t have a doctor, only had a dentist. For what they were doing it was incredible how unprepared they were.

“We were fed a constant diet of boiled rice, that was all we had. No nutrients, no vitamins. You daren’t sneeze, dysentery was everywhere. I did watch friends die.”

One fellow PoW was a Dutch doctor, Dr Henri Hekking, who many veterans praised for the help he gave them during their ordeal.

Mr Vaisey said: “ He was a great man and he saved my life, but he had to watch as they killed his wife and child.

“He taught me bits of Dutch, which I can still remember, and helped me to mix with the others in the camps.”

Mr Vaisey was in the Burmese labour camp for three-and-a-half years, but it did not break his spirit. When he went in he weighed 12 stone – when he came out, just five.

And so he was there when Allied forces blew up the bridge over the River Kwai in February, 1945.

After the war he moved to Oxford and then Witney, having married his wife Margaret. They would go on to have two children, Carol and Andrew and two grandchildren, Cherie and Beverley.

Mr Vaisey worked at the Curridge brewery in Hampshire, after his uncle managed to get him a job. He later worked as a civil servant.

Looking back 71 years after being captured, he has neither forgotten nor forgiven what happened to him.

Mr Vaisey said: "I was so thin. When I did get home if I laid down on my back you could practically see my heart beating."

"I never forgave the Japanese for what they did, but like it says in the bible; 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay, said the Lord.' "We dropped an atomic bomb on Tokyo, that was our revenge. I never had nightmares or anything like that, but it was a horrid time."

Mr Vaisey is the latest of a series of former prisoners of war to come forward following an Oxford Mail appeal to share stories with the Soldiers of **Oxfordshire Museum** in Woodstock. It is collating PoW tales for a new display following its £3m refurbishment. For more on the Soldiers of Oxfordshire Museum see sofo.org.uk

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News

4th September 2017

'Outstanding' result for care home following inspection

By **Stuart Rust**