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By FRANCES MURPHY

ONE thing that helped the morale of hundreds of PoWs, as the Japanese forced them to march during their ordeal in Burma, was the soothing tunes from Colin MacDonald's bagpipes.

The Japanese guards would not tell them where they were headed and the morale among the weak and sick men was very low.

They all believed they were marching to their graves.

But every so often, Colin would take out his pipes and play Mrs MacDougall to give their spirits a lift.

"Even though all the men were exhausted, they carried my gear so I could keep playing the pipes," Colin recalls.

Colin was a soloist with the Mildura Pipe Band when he enlisted with the 4th Anti-Tank Regiment shortly after the start of the war.

Colin managed to keep his bagpipes with him during the abortive campaign in Singapore, but

Piper's music cheered them up

they were destroyed during an air raid in Burma.

As they marched to Burma, many men collapsed.

Colin remembers the brutality of the Japanese, but the local Chinese villagers were kind to them.

"The Chinese used to come to us with drinking water and food, but the Japanese would bash them as punishment for helping us," he says.

He says prisoners who were too weak and slow were taken to the side of the road and bayoneted because they were a burden.

Those who survived the march were in for an even greater trial of survival at their destination: the Burma railway.

"The chaps who had come to Changi after working on the railway thought Changi was heaven," Colin says, "and we were soon to find out why."

The days were long — leaving camp in predawn darkness and returning after nightfall.

"We were only given a small bowl of boiled rice twice a day," he says, "and only a pint of water every 24 hours which had to be boiled because of cholera fears."

On such a poor diet, Colin, along with many others, suffered bouts of malaria, dysentery and beri-beri.

Poor eyesight

"While I was at Burma, my sight became so poor that I could only distinguish features a few yards away," he says.

"We had to salute the guards," he recalls, "but one day I didn't because I thought the guard was one of our chaps."

"The Japs were mostly short and stocky, but this one was very tall. As I could not see his face with my weak eyes, I mistook him for one of our men and did not salute him."

Colin was severely beaten by the guard for the "crime".

When Colin enlisted, he was 6 ft 6 in tall and a well-built 14 stone. When he returned home, he was at only five stone. Even his mother couldn't recognise him.

Many of the prisoners had beri-beri.

"For some of us it was so bad we could not sleep — especially after we had worked on the railway all day," he says.

"We took turns, sitting up at night, rubbing each other's feet, just for relief."

