

Keith Webb Tallent - discovering places through their people

Ella Birt, October 2022



While history has often focused on "great men, great deeds, and great events," the lives and stories of those who have not won battles, travelled the world, or invented something revolutionary have often been left out of the picture. These "histories from below" of the everyday person illuminate parts of Melbourne's bigger stories.

Having first learnt about histories from below when studying the French Revolution in high school, I was exhilarated to be learning about the lives of women, slaves, children and other marginalised groups, but also sad that these stories had been left out in the first place. At my school, the "histories from below" component was a single week looking at women in the French Revolution. With around 20 weeks spent on the French Revolution, women got just one!

I was able to delve further into histories from below when I reached university, taking courses on oral histories that told the stories of women in Australia's history. Particularly shattering was learning about the homefront during both world wars, a reality that is rarely portrayed in history books or popular histories portrayed in film or TV.

So when asked to explore a range of primary sources to write about the history of a sleepy residential road in the outer eastern suburbs of Melbourne, I knew that beneath the surface I would find equitable and democratic stories of history beyond great men, deeds and events.

Croydon Road is a 1.2km road near Croydon train station, connecting the heart of Croydon to the busy Maroondah Highway. With the highway established in 1837, Croydon Road provided an essential link to the train station which was built in 1882. There are several significant features of the street including the former Croydon Fire

Station, the former Gifford Memorial Congregational Church, the War Memorial, a heritage listed house built in 1810, and it has been the site for several schools.

However, history is more than names, places, and dates and is more truly understood through the fabric of our lives and experiences. While the information on many of these locations, and the people who interacted with these places was often surface level, such as the name of a couple who were married at the church, or the owners of a house saved by the firefighters, the life of one Keith Webb Tallent illuminated Croydon's connection to WWII.

Born in Cobden on 24th September 1913, Keith Webb Tallent was the youngest child of Ethel Maude Tallent (nee Dalton) and Peter Webb Tallent. Keith's father passed away when he was only 11 months old, leaving Ethel with three surviving children (Ethel, Bowdie, and Keith) and several lawsuits for unpaid labor performed for the late Peter Webb Tallent.

The family moved around a lot, living in Ballarat East, Camperdown, Timboon, Curdies River, and Cobden before settling in Mount View St, Croydon. The children most likely attended Croydon Central School. The walk to school would have taken Keith past the memorial which would one day bare his name for his service in WWII.

'Australian Electoral Roll, 1943

4374 Tans, Jane Maud, home duties, F
4375 Tagell, Christina, York rd., Montrose, home duties, F
4376 Tagell, Noris, York rd., Montrose, labourer, M
4377 Tallent, Ethel Maud, Mount View st., home duties, F
4378 Tallent, Keith Webb, Mt. View st., Croydon, hardware assistant, M
4379 Tancredi, Angela Marie, Silvan, home duties, F
4380 Tancredi, Angelo, Silvan, gardener, M
4381 Tarr, Bessie, Lore rd., Silvan, home duties, F
4382 Tarr, Emily Eliza, Silvan, home duties, F

Prior to enlisting, Keith had been a hardware assistant and a truck driver, and had previously served for 2 1/2 years in the 24th Battalion during the interwar years. When Keith was 26 years old he attended the Royal Park enlistment facility at Camp Pell, enlisting only 6 months after Prime Minister Robert Gordon Menzies announced the beginning of Australia's involvement in the Second World War, stating that "calmness, resoluteness, confidence and hard work will be required as never before."



Personnel of 2/2nd Reserve Motor Transport Platoon, Ex-Pows of the Japanese. Australian War Memorial 1945. Ref 117875. Tallent was in the 4th Reserve.

While Keith initially enlisted as a private, he was transferred to the Reserve Motor Transport Company two months later. His first overseas posting was to Singapore before travelling to Malaya (now Malaysia). Keith's mother later reported he had made many friends in Malaysia, sending home letters and photos of himself and a Mr Ong, who lived near the barracks.

Drivers fulfilled a number of roles in WWII; transporting supply items, including ammunition, between depots, as well as transporting people. Drivers often worked alone, driving through contested territory in tricky conditions, leaving them vulnerable to attack.

On the 10th April 1941, Keith was reported missing in action. With Ethel's other two children married and no longer at home, and Ethel having been widowed for a second time, she likely would have had to bear this information alone.

It was not until 2 October 1943, one and a half years after being first reported missing, that Keith was located at a Thai prisoner of war camp. Conditions in camp were gruelling, with a lack of food and clean water, hard labor, and a host of tropical diseases leading to the deaths of 8,031 Australians in Prisoner of War camps during WWII.

The prisoners of the camp were tasked with building the 415km Thai-Burma railway, alongside 13,000 other Australian POWs, 2800 of whom died as a result of the labor and conditions. "All but 50 kilometres of the route was across rugged terrain covered in dense, malarial jungle. It would require building more than 600 bridges as well as hundreds of viaducts, embankments and cuttings."

Disease was common in the camps, with cholera, dysentery, malaria, and skin diseases plaguing the POWs. Former POW and worker on the Thai-Burma Railway Roy Cornford recalls "mostly, we had a couple of doctors, but they had no medical supplies to give you. All they could do was do what they could, if you had sores or anything like that, but any other pains or aches, they couldn't do much."

On a 35 degree day on the 8th March 1944, aged only 30 years old, Keith was reported to have died. His cause of death is listed as dysentery - dysentery and diarrhea caused more than a third of prisoner-of-war deaths, mostly preventable with sufficient hygiene, food, water, and medical attention. His final resting place is the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery.

Somewhere back in the jungle came the notes of the Last Post. The babbling murmur of the camp stopped and all the men outside stood still ... The acrid smell of the pyre drifted across the camp and, in the smoke, another man was gone." Ray Parkin, former POW in Thailand, and worker on the Thai-Burma Railway.

'Commonwealth War Graves Commission, 'Kanchanaburi War Cemetery, The Kanchanaburi Memorial

*... R.A.O.C.
... Age 30. Sp. Mem. 9. M. 4.
TALLENT, Pte. KEITH WEBB, VX.50004. A.I.F.
4 Res. M.T. Coy., Australian Army Service
Corps. 8th March, 1944. Age 30. Son of Peter
Webb Tallent and Ethel Maud Tallent, of
Croydon, Victoria, Australia. 1. E. 31.*

... PRY, Gnr. REGINALD, 921531. 419 Bty.,

21	Corporal			
22	Private	ERIC WILLIAM	RIDGWAY	
23	Private	FRANCIS	WHITLEY	QX/256a
24	Private	KEITH WEBB	TALLENT	VX/50004 8/3/44 Pellagra
25	Private	COLIN	FLETCHER	NX/45491 21/2/44

Casualties and Missing Personnel, Prisoners of War, Far East: Australian POWs who died of illness or aerial bombardment
 'Tallent's cause of death here is recorded as Pellagra but his war records in the National Archives record him as having died of dysentery.

Two years after the death of her son, on the 5th of September 1946, Ethel memorialised him by publishing an article with journalist Vesta Junior entitled "Friends Across the Sea" in The Argus newspaper. The article details the story of Keith and many other Australian soldiers making friends while "in Malaya during the tragically short period before the fall of Singapore." Ethel shows the journalist a photo of Keith with a Chinese friend named Mr Ong, of Malacca. She had also received correspondence from Mr Ong that they were safe and were looking forward to hearing from their Australian friends. The article ends with the

hope that some day there will be some chance of mothers and other relatives of boys who were in Malaya meeting the loyal people who tried to be friendly to them there. There must be many a story to tell, not always a sad one, which might bring a little ease to those to whom the long years of our men's captivity in Japanese hands have brought such bitter thoughts.

Having no wife or kids of his own, Keith's story may have ended with his name engraved on a plinth on the Croydon Road roundabout, or in the memory of his six nieces and nephews.

But from new angles of historical enquiry, we can see the role he played in constructing Thai-Burma railway, and how his story of hardship and ultimately death is one of the larger narratives faced by 2000 Australian families and communities who lost sons, husbands, and brothers to the railway.

Keith was only six when the Croydon War Memorial was built to commemorate the First World War. His name and sacrifice is forever memorialized on it, connecting the suburb to a larger part of Australia's national story.



Abbot, Harold, 'On the Thailand Railway', National Museum of Australia, 1946

References:

- 'Defining moments: Burma-Thailand Railway', National Museum of Australia, <https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/burma-thailand-railway>
- James Kerr, 'Marvellous doctors', Anzac Portal, Department of Veterans' Affairs - <https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/resources/james-kerr-marvellous-doctors>
- Ray Parkin, 'Into the Smother', Hogarth Press, London, 1963
- 'The Life of Melbourne', The Argus, 5 September 1946, p.8



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