

N. F. F. W. R. A.



National FEPOW Fellowship
Welfare Remembrance Association

'Lest We Forget'.

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NFFWRA - A trip of a lifetime, Singapore and Thailand, November 2025

On Sunday 2nd November 2025, a group of 38 relatives of FEPOW and some with an interest in the Far East conflict of WWII came together at Heathrow Airport to retrace the footsteps of FEPOW relatives held captive in Singapore and Thailand during 1942-45. The trip had been cancelled in 2020 because of Covid and finally we were on our way in eager anticipation of what lay ahead.

For those FEPOWs who had survived, their time as prisoners had officially come to an end 80 years ago.

However, as many of us knew, what they'd experienced never left them and it was good to share stories with others that understood the echoes that had permeated our lives.

After two long flights across many time zones, we were pleased to reach Changi Airport and be escorted by our local land operator to our city centre home for the next week - The Merchant Court Paradox Hotel, a spacious luxurious retreat, despite its city centre location near to River Valley Road. This was a significant location for a good number of us, as our relatives had been sent there in working parties.

Everyone's journey of discovery was different. The small island of Singapore was brimming with significant sites and during our packed itinerary our understanding grew layer by layer as well as the context in history pre and Post WW2, adeptly and succinctly explained by our local guide Jeremy. Some of us felt like excited school children at the start of our journey and Jeremy's precise planning and teacher-like knowing instructions enabled us to continue in that vein.

For our first full day in Singapore, we visited the Kranji Commonwealth War Cemetery. The beautifully tended graves are a stark reminder of the number of people who paid the ultimate price for the freedom of Singapore and the many allied nations that came together for this. It set a fitting pattern for our ongoing pilgrimage of remembrance; a few brief, timely FEPOW words and prayers of remembrance thoughtfully led by Pauline Simpson NFFWRA Chaplain, and by a poem shared by Sylvia Bullen-Bell from a COFEPOW published anthology of poetry by FEPOWs and their relatives. **'Poetry of Hope' (www.cofepow.org.uk) That day it was 'The Day I saw My Father Cry'.**

(The last time I had been at Kranji was in 1994 with my FEPOW father [14]).

As part of an organised party of former veterans' relatives, thanks to the planning by NFFWRA Committee member Gerry Norden we were able to access sites and gain invites that otherwise we would not have been able to, and The Changi Murals at Roberts' Barracks were one of these. Roberts Barracks (Block 151) was constructed and completed by the Royal Engineers in 1941 and provided accommodation for the men of the Royal Artillery. During the Japanese occupation it was used as a dysentery wing for POWs and St Like's Chapel occupied a small room on the ground floor. The chapel provided solace for the staff and the sick lying in the wards above. Stanley Warren a patient in the ward was the painter of the murals.



As the tour continued many of us found out more extensive hospital records for our relatives, so sites including hospital facilities such as the Roberts Barracks became even more poignant. After visiting the new Changi Gaol Museum with many beautiful ingenious handcrafted items including the FEPOW Chapel cross, the same day concluded with another exclusive tour, of Alexander Hospital. A small plaque is still there now relocated to the garden away from the main building, commemorating those who lost their lives in the massacre of patients and staff, February '42.

Over the next few days, we commemorated the brave defence made during the advance of Japanese troops from the Malaya Peninsula into the North of Singapore City. This included a visit to a beautiful nature reserve, in an area now known as Kent Ridge, formerly Opium Hill. There, Malay Regiments with some of their British Officers, faced fires from the nearby oil refinery and hand to hand combat, and cruel merciless dispatch by the advancing Japanese of any surrendering survivors, before the advancing army continued onto Alexander Hospital and then Singapore City via Adam Park - a colonial housing area that became another heavily fought over battleground on the route into Singapore City. Relatives and comrades of the Cambridge Regiments who were known to have been there during the defence of Singapore were grateful for the knowledge that has been gained thanks to research by Battlefield Archaeologist Jon Cooper.

Pauline invited everyone to join her in saying the FEPOW Prayer and another poem was shared **'The 18th Division'**.



Photo View from Kent Ridge south towards Singapore City

Another visit was to the Art Deco style Ford Factory's Museum (the site of the surrender),



Further emotive sites included:

Fort Canning - Battlebox

The headquarters for the British military command February '42 and where the decision to surrender by Percival was made and then privileged access saw us visit:



Sembawang Naval Dockyard on the north coast.

On the 10th December 1941, battlecruiser Repulse and the battleship Prince of Wales with their destroyer escorts but no air cover – formed part of Force Z, the British naval force in the South China Sea sent to defend Singapore by deterring Japanese aggression. Force Z was found by a flotilla of Japanese high-level bombers and torpedo bombers and both warships lost. Pauline said prayers for the 840 sailors lost - 513 IN REPULSE AND 327 IN PRINCE OF WALES and offered our thoughts and prayers to the relatives and loved ones of the 840 officers and men that were lost in the battle and wreaths were laid at the Memorial.

'On a sailor's grave, no roses grow, no grass, no stone to show, the resting place that will always be, His billet in the sea'



(Jerry, Gerry and Jeremy (our guide)



On the south coast, I was excited to visit Keppel Harbour, opposite Sentosa, where my father, Pauline's father and Peter's late wife Sue's father had landed on their arrival – possibly onboard 'West Point'. The site of the harbour's defensive guns, is now a peaceful nature reserve.

In the afternoon, it was a pleasure to visit the Raffles' Institute and receive a presentation by pupils on their WW2 researched topic and take part in a Question-and-Answer session to help build the pupils' knowledge further.

Our penultimate day in Singapore was a free sightseeing day and fun was had visiting landmarks such as the Botanical Gardens or National Orchard Gardens, Raffles Hotel, and Marina Bay Sands.



As a fitting finale to our time in Singapore, we had an early start ahead of the full heat of the day and took part in Singapore's National Day of Remembrance at the Kranji Commonwealth Cemetery, where NFFWRA and COFEPOW wreaths were laid alongside National Embassy wreaths, Pauline represented the Christian faith as part of a multi-faith prayer-lead group, and it was powerful to join in the familiar Remembrance wording with different nations and generations, in that setting.

Part of our visit to Singapore was to receive an exclusive invite to a fish and chips supper with The British Defence Attache at their Government Ridley Park residence.

For the duration of our visit, we were efficiently and considerately guided by Jeremy and it was only with deference to Jeremy's family that we did not kidnap him for the second stage of our tour in Thailand!

One week in, Sunday 9th November afternoon we were met at Bangkok Airport by TBRC staff we taken by coach up to our new homebase and pleased to arrive at the peaceful, spacious Dheva Mantra Resort on the River Kwai Yae, Kanchanaburi

The first full day of the Thai leg of our tour made a cracking start. We were welcomed to TBRC by the team including Founder Rod Beatty, Centre Manager Terry Manttan and Historian Andrew Snow. The Museum there gives a comprehensive background to the railway story. We were handed sheets of individually researched information on any relatives that we'd logged ahead to add to the folder of comprehensive information provided relating to the planned itinerary and venues for the week ahead. To guide us through this we were divided into groups with common threads in our relatives' war records. This built further on the commonalities that we had discovered and started to share and cherish in Singapore.

It was heart rendering to hear the personal stories of two of the Australian centre staff, who's own FEPOW fathers were the impetus for them being there for us, to help us also learn more.

We then took a train journey on the POW built railway, along the still-working section from Thame Krasae to Kanchanaburi and saw for ourselves some of the extensive miles and challenging terrain involved.

We had gathered that Terry had a twinkle in his eye and sense of humour but did not realise that there was a plot afoot! Long standing repeat visitor to Thailand and TBRC, Heather Kerry - daughter of 560th Field CO. R.E. FEPOW, comrade and close friend of Pauline Simpson and my fathers, conspired with Terry so that she and her daughter Kate surprised us appearing on a station platform along the route!! They did also make it the next day to our Resort for a more leisurely evening catch up.



That evening we enjoyed another special invite to meet Bangkok British Embassy Staff at a reception in Kanchanaburi ahead of the formal ceremonies the day after.

On 11th November Remembrance Day 2025, we had the privilege of taking part in two services; the first at Kanchanaburi Commonwealth War Cemetery (adjacent to the TBRC), and the second at the nearby Chungkai Commonwealth War Cemetery.

Both services had been prepared by our FEPOW Chaplain Pauline Simpson in liaison with the Thailand RBL and were ably conducted by Pauline and included laying wreaths alongside the TBRC team.



The afternoon of the formal Remembrance Services were, in contrast, spent with us split into smaller groups for high-speed motor vehicle/ motorbike engine powered boneshaking long-tail boat trips travelling along the Kwai Rivers to the 'famous' Bridge.



With our detailed information packs and now more familiar encyclopaedic knowledgeable TBRC, historic tour guide Andrew Snow and delightful Poom, Aui and Nut we then got to experience an amazing two-day up-country railway pilgrimage. Our guides took us by coach stopping at sites significant to our relatives that included Lat Ya, the site of a Temple (a destination that FEPOWs were made to march to from Ban Pong after their exhausting arrival by train in overcrowded cattle trucks from Singapore).



We had a mid-morning stop at the Tha Sao camp site, now the tranquil Pung Waan Kwai Noi River side resort, but as a FEPOW camp and hospital had different connotations for us. Pauline and my father had been there together.

The scenery as the coach wove its way towards our destination near The Burma Border was stunning with the railway's former route now under the waters of an extensive reservoir. It was soon nightfall with a beautiful sunset skyline after we reached the Suan Magmai Resort at Sangkhlaburi.



The majority of us were pleased to relax after dinner but some had other plans and high jinxes saw Welsh Wendy renamed Wendy Wu 'kidnapped' by Tuktuk to a local bar situated down the steep hill from our base. Sun up the next day saw the adventures continue for some with a visit to the early morning waterfront local market that included 'going native/local' in dress and activities.



Our official adventures continued with a visit to the Three Pagodas Pass, at the Burma border, before heading back south.

Our journey continued with a very moving visit to Hellfire Pass-Kannyu. (An extensive Australian funded museum and preserved accessible site and memorial brought the historic events back to life.) This was adjacent to Hintok.

Our last stop of the day enabled us to walk along the Wang Pho viaduct again thinking about the harsh task undertaken by ill-equipped malnourished FEPOWs attempting to meet the impossible deadlines and tasks required by their Japanese overseers.



Our penultimate day again included free time, with many choosing to head back to TBRC with our heads full of questions sparked by our visit. Our tour support team were also on hand to help with shopping and other excursions. A Kanchanaburi Thai cooking class with dancing was booked by a happy crew (see right), whilst others chose to spend the day feeding, washing and walking with elephants.



That evening we enjoyed emotional farewells at a finale Gala Dinner arranged by TBRC at a stunning local venue. We were able to enjoy yet another amazing Far Eastern feast and say a few words of thanks to our amazing hosts, the incredibly dedicated, hospitable and talented TBRC team.



With our flight not until late evening, we still packed in a visit to Ban Pong Station where many of our relatives had arrived from Singapore. We also, paid our respects and said some prayers of remembrance at Nong Pladuk, where FEPOWs had been killed by Allied bombing, June 1944. As with many of the sites an unmarked sight of deep meaningful FEPOW family significance.

Our last special access visit gave us supper in the British Club Bangkok, to ease the wait for our early hours' flight.

We arrived back in the UK with new FEPOW family and friendships forged. I would highly recommend such a group trip, as each personal pilgrimage of remembrance was enriched by that of others, and not only did we have the privilege of time set aside for remembrance but we're also able to share and 'Keep Going the Spirit that Kept Them Going'



Editor's Note:

With sincere apologies for the late publication of our trip to Thailand and Singapore November 2025.

My enormous gratitude to Gay Wolfe who has masterminded this review of our visit with additional information being added and formatted by me along with photographs from my family and Gay.

It almost goes without saying but nevertheless I will – we are indebted to Gerry and Lynda for their hard work along with the TBRC for organising such a memorable trip – Thank you!

To members of COFEPOW who gave us the opportunity to share in the poems by their members

'Poetry of Hope' (www.cofepow.org.uk)

Pauline Simpson (FEPOW Chaplain and Secretary Welfare Officer for NFFWRA) – 4th March 2026