



## THE MASONIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

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### **Very Wor. Bro. Roy Hamilton Whitecross (1920-2009) Survivor of Burma and Changi.**

More than once as a prisoner of war of the Japanese in World War 2 Roy Whitecross was ordered to kneel and bow his head and wait for the final blow that never came. After this nothing much scared him and he survived captivity in Singapore, Burma, Thailand and Japan to return home.

After the war he served as president of the Headquarters 8<sup>th</sup> Division Association for almost sixty years and in 2005 revisited his past when he went to Thailand with a group to commemorate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the war.

Roy Hamilton Whitecross was born in Randwick on April 7<sup>th</sup> 1920 one of three children of Charles Whitecross, a storeman, and his wife, Eliza Churchwood. He went to state schools in the eastern suburbs and left at 16 to join the public service in 1936. He wrote excellent shorthand and was allotted to the Premier's Department but when war broke out he enlisted in the army.

He was sent to the headquarters of 8<sup>th</sup> Division and soon was in Malaya. His position allowed him to follow in every detail every movement of the Japanese down the peninsula as his unit was directly involved in the fighting, until the surrender of Singapore.

Whitecross was captured and sent to Changi. In later days after his hardships on the Burma railway he would say that Changi was a five-star hotel in comparison. In 1942 he was in a group sent to Burma to work on the infamous Burma-Thai railway.

Dr Rowley Richards, a medical officer with Whitecross's group, once said that his supplies were so limited he kept them for those he thought had the will to survive and Roy Whitecross was on that list.

When the railway was completed in October 1943 Whitecross was sent to Thailand and by the middle of the following year was back in Singapore. In December that year he was sent to Japan to work in coalmines.

He was allocated to a mine west of Nagasaki and the hardships continued. The men of his group saw the mushroom cloud from the atom bomb dropped on Nagasaki and a few days later they realised the war over and took over the camp. He visited the bomb site soon afterwards and described it as a "plain littered with crumpled galvanised iron."

Back in Australia, Whitecross returned to the Premier's Department. He married Billie Breckenbridge in November 1945 and enrolled in Economics at the University of Sydney.



Roy Whitecross.



Hellfire Pass ... Roy Whitecross (second from right) with ex-POWs Bill Flowers, Fred Hodel and Cyril Gilbert in 2005. Photo: OnAsia/Patrick de Noirmont

In 1951 he wrote a book, "*Slaves of the Sons of Heaven, a Personal Account of an Australian POW, 1942-1945*," which sold nearly 200,000 copies and was reprinted many times. He had kept a diary during his time as a prisoner and buried it "somewhere near Tamarkan" before the war ended. A friend later dug it up for him and it is now in the Fisher Library.

In 1957 Whitecross was appointed as the government agent to accompany a small mission overseas to attract industries to New South Wales. The mission through Europe and North America was a success and in his report its leader, William Smith, said the government must open an office in New York and that Whitecross was the man to run it. He had a couple of successful years in New York before returning to Australia.

At one point, Fidel Castro was so impressed by his work that he asked Whitecross to be the Cuban consul in Sydney. When the political situation worsened in Cuba Whitecross declined the offer. Back in Sydney in 1963, somehow he never really settled back into the old group. A chance opportunity at the University of Sydney led to his appointment as assistant registrar and he served there happily for fifteen years until he retired in 1978 and a "Chair of Tact and Diplomacy" was jokingly named in his honour. He said he "looked forward to doing nothing" after taking a cargo steamer through the Panama Canal to America and Europe.

After his divorce from Billie, Whitecross married Jessie Green in 1969 but this ended quickly. In the 1980s he married Jennifer Edols but she died a few years later. For the past 20 years Whitecross shared his life with Virginia Bartrop, whom he met after her husband, a war veteran, died in 1973 and Whitecross called in to see if she needed anything.

In 2004 Whitecross received a Medal of the Order of Australia.

Roy Whitecross died on 14<sup>th</sup> October 2009 and is survived by Virginia, her daughter, Jennifer and granddaughter Catherine, her son, Paul and six great grand-grandchildren, and his daughter Dianne and his brother, Ken and family.

Roy Whitecross was initiated, passed and raised in the three degrees of craft freemasonry on 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1979, 29<sup>th</sup> September 1979 and 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1980 respectively in Lodge University of Sydney No. 544, U.G.L. of N.S.W. & A.C.T. installed as Wor. Master of that lodge on 18<sup>th</sup> October 1984. He was also DGIW for the term 1988-1990 for District No. 4.

Ref: Records of the UGL of NSW & ACT  
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