

# STUBBORN BUGGERS

The survivors of the infamous POW gaol  
that made Changi look like heaven



TIM BOWDEN

# 1

## BETRAYED

Christian Neilson was a tough Queenslander from Cairns, not yet 30 years old when he arrived in Malaya. His grandfather, Neils Christian Frederick Neilson, a sea captain, came to Australia from his native Denmark. His father, Otto, had been born in Cooktown in 1885 and became a fisherman. His mother, Margaret Tate, was of Irish stock. The Neilsons had the sea in their blood, and Otto taught the young Chris how to mesh nets and splice rope and wire and all he needed to know about surviving at sea in prawn trawlers.

Neilson's younger brother, Gordon,

suffered from a leaking valve in his heart and was allowed to attend school on the basis that the teachers would not chastise him, because it was believed he would not live very long. Inexplicably, one of the teachers decided to cane him for a minor mistake in his schoolwork. Chris, aged twelve, sprang to his brother's defence, and the teacher—unwisely—took Gordon into another room to cane him with Chris, who was to be caned as well for abusing the teacher. Neilson recalls, 'He locked the door, then hit me across the back with the cane and I spun around and left-hooked him—I was taught to fight very young—and I took the cane off him and belted the tripe out of him and then I hopped out the window. He sent the bigger high school kids after me and I saw them coming up and hid around a corner before I jumped out and said, "Who's first?" They all headed back to

school.’

Already a big kid for his age, Neilson left school at thirteen, and at fourteen was apprenticed as a saw miller before joining his father in the fishing trade. But, like many young men coming into adulthood through the Depression, he saw the army as a good prospect, particularly with the likelihood of a Pacific war close to Australian shores. He joined up in 1940. Always a handful for the military—his nickname was ‘The Reb’ (short for ‘Rebel’)—he soon got a reputation as a knuckle man. He joined the army in the Royal Australian Corps of Signals, for which he showed a natural aptitude, quickly picking up the basics of Morse code, radio work, setting up and operating field telephones and signalling by semaphore. He started in the 6th Division at Enoggera Barracks in Brisbane, and his skills were quickly noted. He was sent

to Sydney as an instructor, somewhat to his dismay, as the months dragged on, and he couldn't see how he was ever going to get away overseas.

Quartered at Randwick Racecourse, the bored young signallers took any chance they could to get over to the conveniently situated Captain Cook pub. Neilson, then a corporal, had delegated a detail of soldiers to the cookhouse for potato peeling duties. The spud peelers had a better idea: they nicked off to the Captain Cook hostelry. This was noted by one of the officers, a captain, and he summoned Corporal Neilson.

‘You posted those men, corporal?’

‘Yessir.’

‘Well, you'd better have another look.’

Neilson noticed that they were all over at the pub, waving to the soldiers marching past.

‘The captain turned to me and started

upbraiding the Queenslanders. “You’re nothing but an undisciplined rabble. You are all a disgrace to the army.” I pointed, and said, “Look.” As he did so, I gave him a classic left hook and flattened him. Almost cracked his jaw. Ron Richards [a noted Aboriginal boxer from Ipswich who won light-heavyweight and heavyweight Australian titles] reckoned I had one of the best left hooks in Australia.’

Striking an officer was a court-martial offence, but provocation was taken into account by one of the officers on the court martial board, a fellow Queenslander who was clearly unamused by the captain’s handling of the matter. He reduced Neilson to the ranks (he never kept his stripes for long) and sent him to Bathurst. This enabled him to volunteer for the 8th Division, finally making it into the AIF (Australian Imperial