

# 'Lucky ones' recall hell camps

**History:** New book records experiences of Gordon Highlander PoWs

BY MORAG LINDSAY

They fought in vain to prevent Singapore from falling to the Japanese in 1942 and spent the remainder of World War II as prisoners, enduring unimaginable hardships at the hands of their captors.

Yet Alistair Urquhart and James Scott consider themselves the lucky ones. They walked free when the brutal jungle camps were liberated in 1945 and are still here to tell their stories 70 years on.

The pair are among just five surviving members of the 2nd Battalion Gordon Highlanders, whose history is revealed in a new book by Aberdeen man Stewart Mitchell.

Scattered Under The Rising Sun celebrates the courage of almost 950 men who were taken prisoner at the fall of Singapore and forced into backbreaking labour on schemes such as the Thai-Burma railway and the Kinkaseki copper mine in Formosa.

Many succumbed to starvation, exhaustion, tropical diseases or violence at the hands of their guards and, by the time

they were freed in 1945, only 600 were still alive.

Mr Scott, 92, weighed just six stones and was evacuated to hospital, suffering from diphtheria.

The former BT engineer from Turriff, who was made an MBE for his service to the Royal British Legion in 1998, has been back to the Far East to pay his

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respects to the friends who didn't return.

"I think about them a lot," he said. "It's hard to look back on some of it, but I'm pleased their story has been told."

Alistair Urquhart, 93, has already shared his experiences in his autobiography, *The Forgotten Highlander*, which became the surprise bestseller of 2010.

Like Mr Scott, he worked as a slave labourer on the Death Railway, helping to build the bridge over the River Kwai. He survived a torpedo attack when he was being shipped between



**SURVIVORS:** James Scott, seated, and Alistair Urquhart, right, with Stewart Mitchell. Photograph: Kami Thomson

camps and was rescued and taken to the Japanese city of Nagasaki, where he witnessed the atomic bomb explosion that ended the war.

The Broughty Ferry veteran is still following a punishing schedule of book

signings and talks and said he was pleased that accounts such as his and Mr Mitchell's were finally commemorating the role of the Far East prisoners of war. "It's in the archives now, it's part of history" he said. "We're not forgotten any

more." The other survivors - Billy Bremner, now living in the US, Bill Kellas, from Aberdeen, and William Niven, from Huntly - also helped first-time author Mr Mitchell with his preparations for the book.

The retired environmen-

tal officer, a volunteer researcher at the Gordon Highlanders Museum in Aberdeen, spent five years trawling the regiment's records and gathering personal memories and mementoes from descendants.

# Pipes that tell their own war story play on again

As guests were piped into the Gordon Highlanders Museum for yesterday's book launch, few realised they were hearing a piece of history.

Michael Laing performed the regimental march, *The Cock Of The North*, on the bagpipes his grandfather treasured throughout his three years as a prisoner of war.

Their survival was a triumph of courage and ingenuity for Gordon Highlander John Laing.

Crafted from silver and ebony, they would have been a prize catch in an environment where anything of value was stolen by the guards, but the Scot kept them hidden.

His 36-year-old grandson reckons the challenge of staying a step ahead of his captors was probably what kept his spirits alive.

"He told me he just had to remember to be canny and use his commonsense and keep out of the way as much as possible," he said.

"My mum once asked him if he'd played them in



Michael Laing plays his grandfather's bagpipes

the camp, but he said he didn't have the energy to even think about it because they were so tired and hungry all the time."

By the time the prisoners were liberated, the bag had been eaten by ants and the box by termites but the drones were still in excellent shape.

Mr Laing had the pipes reconstructed and played them as pipe major in the Lonach band - the role

now held by his son, Alastair. Young Michael took up the pipes aged 10 and inherited the heirloom after his grandfather, a forester on the Kildrummy estate, died at the age of 79.

He now plays them as a member of the Lonach band and as pipe major of the Aberdeen University Officers Training Corps band, and never forgets the sacrifices his grandfather made for him to enjoy them today.