THE last time we heard from Danny O'Neill, the former career soldier, 61, was travelling the length of his beloved Murray River, promoting 'Ancestral Streams, notes from the Murray Valley,' a book that had consumed five years of his life. Danny, a retired Colonel who was born and raised in Mildura, has fond memories of those days, including watching his father Tom digging drainage shafts for the fruit blocks before World War Two. Danny has been in touch again, this time to pass on a poignant story about his ex-POW dad, now 91 and still living independently in Mildura, and who had the adventure of his life last year on a four-wheel drive trek to Cape York Peninsula. Tom O'Neill grew up in Coffs Harbour, and left work at 14 to work in a saw mill at Dorrigo before making his way to Mildura to work as a house painter for a Mildura builder for most of his adult life. This is Danny's story…

A photo that's worth a thousand words...

By DANNY O'NEILL

THE carefully framed, black-and-white photograph sat on our family mantle piece for as long as I can remember. And when my father moved into his little unit after my mother died, it was one of the few possessions he took with him.

It was taken in 1945, and all I could remember was my mother telling me when I was very young, "That's your Dad just after he got back from the Japanese prisoner of war camp. He's with his mother, and his brother Jim. The Red Cross lady is giving him a packet of cigarettes."

Recently my father, Tom, had given me a copy, and I asked him more about it.

"It was taken at the Melbourne showgrounds," he said, slowly. "Or was it the racetrack? Anyway, we were inside that building and my cousin asked us to come outside so she could take a photo."

But I doubted that a relative took this picture; it seems so carefully, professionally composed. He's in his 91st year and his memory is not clear. If your mother were still alive, he told me, she would know.

My father, then 29 years old, is standing straight-backed and smiling under his slouch hat. His new uniform, still with Q-Store folds, hangs loosely on his body. His mother has her arm tightly around his narrow waist and is looking at him lovingly, almost – it seems to me – with disbelief.

For so many years she didn't know whether he was dead or alive. His brother Jim had been back a little longer, from a German prisoner of war camp.

"We had only just got off the ship," my father went on, studying the photograph. "And the uniform felt very strange after wearing nothing all those years."

I remembered seeing a news clip recently of a line of hideously emaciated prisoners of war in loin cloths, and understood exactly what he meant.

• MEMORIES: Tom O'Neill (left) with his mother and brother Jim, receiving packs of cigarettes from a Red Cross volunteer soon after his return from a POW camp, while ABOVE, Danny's more recent picture of his father talking to Governor-General Major General Mike Jeffery.

"What's that brooch your mother's wearing? It looks official." There was a silence while my father looked closely at the picture.

"I don't know," he said, finally. "But she had four silver stars, one for each son that was in the army." And you were just back from Thailand? "No, Singapore. They flew us there for a month to fatten us up. Then we came home by ship."

Those five stripes on your sleeve, they were blue weren't they? I remembered seeing the uniform often when I was young, hanging in my father's wardrobe, with the stripes representing each year of service. He'd got married in it too, just a few months after he got back.

"Yes. But there should have been six of them."

Who sewed them on?

"I did. But somehow I missed the last one. I still have it here somewhere," he said vaguely. "But the uniform fell apart years ago – the moths got to it."

Now I pictured him, awkwardly sewing on those stripes – the last three and a half representing his years as a prisoner of the Japanese – elated to be on his way home, eagerly looking forward to the reunion captured so wonderfully in the photograph.

I guessed at his emotions during the month-long transition from the horrors of the Burma Railway to civilian life again, and tried to imagine his life during those lost years. I had little to go on.

My father never really said much about the war. When he came home he was advised to forget about the camps, not to talk about his experience, my mother had told me. That was all the counselling our returning soldiers got. So he didn't say much.

Sometimes he amused us children by counting to 10 in Japanese; it began, "Ichy, nee, …", I think.

But I do remember his long absences, when I was very young, while he was away in Melbourne, at the Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital.

"That was mainly for malaria," he said now.

And you used to show us kids your tropical ulcer scar. This was a long, ugly indentation in his leg where surgeons had scooped out the rotted flesh with a sharpened spoon. Without anaesthetics, of course. "Holy Moses that hurt!" he had said when I reminded him.

For many years after he returned from the camps he took no part in ANZAC Day ceremonies. I finally asked why.

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