

The Sandakan Death March

Light Airs David Miller



A memorial artwork depicting the Sandakan marches.

TO THE MODERN tourist, Sabah's Mt. Kinabalu is a majestic mountain with a most unusual summit. Its features are even more striking when viewed through the frame of Doric columns which form the portico at the Kundasang war memorial at Ranau. In colonial times Sabah was known as British North Borneo

The memorial is at the end of a very sad journey from 67 years ago and at a distance of 240 miles from Sandakan, a place where a series of infamous forced marches was enacted in 1945 by British and Australian war prisoners in the custody of the Japanese army.

As the tide of war turned against Japan, the 1787 Australians and 641 British prisoners were marched through jungles swamps and mountains, plagued by leeches and malarial mosquitoes.

Mt Kinabalu's peak is a wide tower, topped by several huge stone fingers and knuckles reaching through like the crenulations of an ancient ruined fortress. A

swirling cloud mass around the colossus endlessly shrouds and reveals the features. The mountain grows taller by 5 mm every year, so I was told by the guardian of the war memorial at Ranau, Mr Sevee Charuruks AM, MBE.

This delightful Thai gentleman played a part in breaking the silence about this rather forgotten episode of World War Two. Photos pinned up over the old ice-cream chest were yellowed and curled at the edges. One was an image of the Governor of Australia, Marie Bashir honouring Mr Charuruks at this site for his dedication to the memory of the Australian victims. The story goes that Sevee and an Australian friend chanced upon the neglected memorial some years ago. He decided to devote his retirement years to the restoration of the memorial originally founded by a Kiwi, Major G. Carter.

To the Australian and British POWs 67 years ago, mount Kinabalu was a brooding and menacing presence and a symbol of their suffering and oppres-



Mr Sevee Charuruks AM, MBE

sion, towering above them 'like a gigantic tombstone.' Local legend says 'this is the mountain from which the spirits of dead depart to the life hereafter'.

Out of around two thousand men, a mere six survived the so-called death march of Sandakan. These few had escaped their captors and were cared for by local Borneo tribes, at great risk.

The suffering of our soldiers at Kokoda in New Guinea and on the Burma Railway in Thailand is written in Anzac legend, so why not Sandakan?

In 1942, the unthinkable. Western forces were overcome by an Asian army. First, the Americans at Pearl Harbour and soon after, it was the British turn to experience the disciplined Japanese army and air force in the fall of Singapore. There, tens of thousands of English and allied troops stationed in Singapore and Malaya were captured and became Japanese POWs. In a forced diaspora, these men were sent as slaves to work on various Japanese projects, most famously the Burma railway, immortalised in the 'Bridge on the River Kwai.'

Today the pain has gone but the memory remains. Like the Kokoda track, the Sandakan walk offers an option for people who want to walk in the footsteps of our suffering soldier ancestors.

After Sandakan there were not many left to tell the tale, but something more, a reluctance to face a sorry truth. The fate of the thousand men who might have survived was not unknown to the allied high command and there was even a rescue mission



“One local woman who turned up with a moth flapping in her ear wrote to The Echo glowing with praise for the service”

planned.

But 'Operation Kingfisher' was not enacted due to faulty intelligence and more urgent distractions in other spheres of fighting. The suffering men were carelessly abandoned when many could have been saved.

The men must have known that they had no hope of survival because six of them gave their wedding rings to a village lady for safekeeping. Sevee has an old photo of 'The Ring Lady'. One of these rings has survived.

Further Reading:

'Only Three Returned' and 'The Land Below the Wind,' biographies by Australian Agnes Newton Keith, who lived in British North Borneo and became a prisoner of the Japanese during the war.

Photos from memorial by permission of Mr Charuruks.