



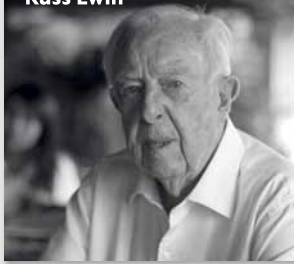
REMEMBRANCE HERITAGE

Mount Kinabalu

WORDS CHRIS WRIGHT

Courage & sacrifice

Russ Ewin



The war crimes committed against Australians at Sandakan in Borneo during WWII are a little-known chapter in our military history. Once a year, Australians and locals gather to pay tribute to the fallen.

RUSS EWIN IS WATCHING THE SUN SET from the window of a Borneo hotel. "They always have great sunsets here," he says, as a wash of orange light floods the bay. "Of course, I saw three-and-a-half years of them."

The remark does not come with obvious bitterness, and that is remarkable, for the three-and-a-half years he refers to were spent as a prisoner of war. Ewin, 93, and his great friend Leslie "Bunny" Glover, 89, are among the few men remaining with first-hand experience of what was perhaps the most notorious prisoner of war camp operated by Japan in World War II: Sandakan.

Ewin and Glover are here to take part in the Sandakan memorial, held every August 15 to commemorate the most desperate sadness in Australian military history: the Sandakan Death Marches. They are, remarkably, the lucky ones: part of a group of officers who were transferred from the Sandakan camp to another camp near Kuching (Borneo) in October 1943 because the Japanese wanted to reduce the senior ranks in the camp. This removal saved their lives. After they went, there were 2434 Australian and British soldiers in Sandakan. Of these, only six would survive the war.

Six. That's one in every 300 Australians, and none at all of the 641 British. The numbers are bleak and it is perhaps for this reason that Sandakan, until quite recently, has not carried the same resonance as do more noted Australian military memorials such as Gallipoli and the Burma Railway. >



The few men remaining with first-hand experience of perhaps the most notorious POW camp of them all: Sandakan

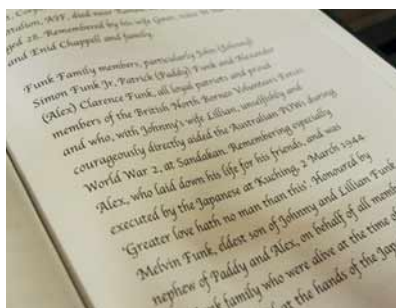
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MOUNT KINABALLU PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES; RUSS EWIN: CHRIS WRIGHT





Sandakan memorial service, August 15, 2010 (all pictures)



Ex-POWs at the service: Les Glover, Russ Ewin and Bill Young (from left)

But the annual memorial, attended by hundreds this year, illustrates the growing position Sandakan is occupying in Australia's national consciousness. There are treks that retrace parts of the three intolerable marches between January and June in 1945, in which prisoners were forced to walk through 240km of jungle to Ranau on the slopes of Mount Kinabalu.

They did so with pitiful rations, carrying rice and ammunition for their captors, often barefoot, and frequently suffering from tropical diseases such as beri-beri, malaria and dysentery. If they couldn't keep up, they were executed. Many died or were killed on the marches, others at Ranau – shot, bayoneted, beheaded. Those too ill to move died at Sandakan. Many killings in Ranau took place after the official surrender that ended the war on August 15: the Japanese wanted no survivors. The six men who survived the marches were escapees, aided by local villagers.

Remarkably, Ewin and Glover, who survived because the order to execute prisoners at their Kuching camp was ignored, talk of the atrocities with calmness, sometimes even humour. A man of irrepressible energy, Glover has been able to find positives in the friendship that came with adversity – “a very close bond of brotherhood, even closer than family” – and believes the experience made him a better man.

Ewin was transferred overseas just 10 days after his wedding; upon liberation he weighed six stone 10lbs (“and I was known as the fat boy of the camp”) and learned his younger brother had died elsewhere in the campaign. He has more reason than most to harbour resentment about what happened in Borneo. Yet he, too, is able to say of his incarceration: “I found it very rewarding for my character.” Prisoners formed education programs so they could learn about one another's

“ **After they went, there were 2434 Australian and British soldiers in Sandakan. Of these, only six would survive the war** ”

professions: he recalls a leading obstetrician learning the basics of chook farming from a fellow inmate.

With the growing commitment to honouring Australia's lost troops in Sandakan has come an acknowledgement of the contribution made by the people of Sabah (the Malaysian state containing Sandakan) in helping Australians there. “The courage they exhibited under those circumstances exceeds any person who has won a Victoria Cross,” says Lynette Silver, the historian and author whose books on Sandakan have helped to bring events to wider public knowledge. She set up a scholarship program to help educate young girls from the mountain tribes who, in 1945, aided prisoners on the marches by bringing them water and rice, and without whom there would have been no survivors to bear witness to the wartime atrocities.

“Entire villages took the escaped prisoners in and protected them, knowing full well what the penalty was for harbouring a prisoner of war – not just death to the person who owned the house, but the whole village,” Silver says. “Still they did it. I find it extraordinary.”

Philip Mairon Bahanja, who was sent to work in Sandakan as a 14-year-old, escaped and ended up fighting a guerrilla campaign >

PHOTOGRAPHY: CHRIS WRIGHT





We were high in spirit and proud to wear the Australian army uniform

alongside the Australians. About 500 locals did the same. “Without much experience and skill in war, we were suddenly in the jungle fighting,” he says. “But we were high in spirit and we were proud to wear the Australian army uniform.”

Sandakan was razed in the war, but today it is a thriving tourist destination. Not far away is the Sepilok orang-utan sanctuary, where staff work with individual apes for as long as a decade in order to help them rehabilitate into natural jungle life. Appreciation of this wildlife is bringing tourists, who are discovering anew the war history of Sandakan. “The tragic events are known by many people,” says Ewin, “but not enough.”

At the memorial, Australia’s governor-general Quentin Bryce spoke movingly about how Australians and Sabahans “vanquished fear and loathing and all their manifestations, and in their place chose generosity and love”. She tearfully embraced onlooker Jenny Smith.

Perhaps she had read the poem written for Smith in the name of her father, Thomas Ebzery, who was imprisoned in Sandakan when Smith was a small child. “My little girl,” it begins. “If I could but have




Philip Mairon Bahanja; orang-utan sanctuary at Sepilok (left)

held your hand for just a little while”... and further on, “My sadness is, my little one, I may never see this through.”

Sadly, he did not.



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