

A war widow's long fight

April 10, 2007

IT HAS been a long war for Wilma Moxham, 62 years since her husband faced the horrors of the Sandakan death march and 46 years since he shot himself, on his birthday.

Now, with Moxham 91 and in a nursing home, the Government has finally recognised that war widowed her.

Her case raises questions about the nature of war and survival. It adds a poignant strand to the belief that war has no true victor, only those who survive better than others.

In 1945 the Japanese high command ordered that no prisoners survive the war. With Allied forces nearing Sandakan, on Borneo island, the Japanese ordered prisoners to march 265 kilometres to Ranau. Of 2434 Australian and British prisoners in Sandakan, only six survived - 1787 Australians and 641 British perished in the camp, along the track or at Ranau. The last were executed on August 27, 12 days after World War II ended.

The six survivors were Australians who had escaped. Some survived better than others. William (Bill) Moxham and Wilma had fallen in love before the war. She had written to him during the war, and waited. They married in 1947, had three children and worked a wheat farm outside Narrabri. The fact that he called the property Ranau, however, was a straw in their wayward wind. He was not the man he had been before he went to war.

Bombardier Bill Moxham, of the 2/15th Field Regiment, 8th Division, had been on one of the death marches. He was among those who waited six weeks at Paginatan, until enough died at Ranau to make room. The historian Lynette Silver says conditions were so bad at Paginatan that the Japanese murdered Australians and cannibalised them.

Moxham and John Kinder, of the RAAF, helped shield the weak from some wicked excesses of the guards. Moxham nursed Kinder through malaria and dysentery, until the airman died at Ranau in his mate's arms. The weakened Moxham scooped a grave out of the dirt and fashioned a cross on which he marked Kinder's name, thereby giving his mate the distinction of being the only prisoner on any of the death marches to have a properly marked grave.

The Moxham family discovered later that the man who had so distinguished himself in war could not handle peace. The husband and father, probably suffering from what is now called post-traumatic stress disorder, repeatedly threatened to kill his wife and children. Ranau, NSW, became Wilma Moxham's own POW camp.

"We were never allowed to talk about what was troubling him," Susan, the eldest child, said. It was only in the 1980s, when she heard Tim Bowden's ABC radio program about prisoners of the Japanese, that everything fell into place. "After years of thinking my father was a wife beater and alcoholic, I knew there was much more to it."

In 1956, aged eight, Susan had told her mother: "People's lives are more important than houses." Wilma Moxham left Bill and Ranau soon after, taking Susan, Jenny, 6, and Richard, 3. She was granted a divorce on the grounds of cruelty. Susan Moxham says now: "I'm sure he would have killed us if we'd stayed."

After he shot himself in the head on his 48th birthday in 1961, in a seedy hotel in Haymarket, Sydney, Wilma battled to bring up the children. It was a time when divorce was stigmatised and women were urged to stand by their men, particularly when the men were returned "diggers". Requests later for a war widow's pension were rejected because of the divorce.

Robin Letts, formerly of the British and Australian SAS, took up the Moxham case with the Department of Veterans' Affairs. Support came from the minister, Bruce Billson, the Defence Minister, Brendan Nelson, Labor's Tanya Plibersek, and Lynette Silver, who wrote to Nelson: "I am very aware of the terrible deprivations suffered by Bill Moxham in his bid for survival, and the effect that this had on his life and the lives of his wife and children. Haunted by the dreadful events he had witnessed, and a victim of the same atrocities which claimed the lives of 1787 of his countrymen, Bill Moxham returned home a damaged and changed man. Unable to deal with the nightmares, the flashbacks and the rage, there being no counselling at the time, he became extremely violent, constantly threatening to shoot his wife and children, and then himself.

"There is no doubt that Bill Moxham was a tragic victim of the war. So was Mrs Moxham, who had no option but to end a violent and abusive marriage, to ensure the safety of herself and her children."

Finally, last week, Wilma Moxham was granted a one-off payment of \$30,000 (the indexed \$25,000 compensation for being married to ex-POWs), and \$550.10 a fortnight "in lieu of the war widow's pension".

"It's not a question of money but of principle," Susan Moxham said. "A wrong has been righted after 46 years."

Silver thought the case could set a precedent for other women whose husbands had come home damaged from wars, particularly Vietnam.

Wilma Moxham, whose vulnerability and sadness was often covered courageously by robust humour, suffers from dementia. Jenny Moxham told her of the Government's decision in a momentary window of contact. Her mother lifted her head back and laughed; her eyes filled with tears.