

The Duke of Sandakan

Battlefield hero Lionel Matthews became a symbol of defiance as he built a remarkable resistance network under the noses of his guards. **Steve Snelling** chronicles a story of extraordinary courage in extreme adversity

Even by the grim standards of prison camp life in wartime Borneo, March 2, 1944 stood out as a particularly grisly day. It was one Russ Ewin would never forget. In a rare gesture of respect to an enemy captive, the Japanese granted permission for seven POWs to attend the burial of "a very brave Australian officer". His name was not mentioned, but neither Ewin nor the others by the graveside in Batu Lintang prison camp cemetery were in any doubt as to his identity.

For more than a year, Captain Lionel Matthews had been a talisman of resistance whose courage was instrumental in helping lift flagging spirits and saving lives among the thousands of men reduced to slave labourers.

As the kingpin of an extraordinary intelligence network operating under the very noses of his captors at Sandakan – on the northeast coast of Borneo – he continued to defy the Japanese even after his organisation was betrayed and was subjected to months of barbaric torture, culminating in his trial and execution.

Ewin had played a junior role in the clandestine movement and had been lucky to escape such retribution. Though unaware of the full extent of its activities, he witnessed enough to know the risks undertaken by Matthews and the fearlessness he displayed throughout. He had been a

commanding figure in every respect. And now, on that wretched day, as emaciated Australians struggled beneath the weight of his oversized coffin, Ewin's thoughts were of that "big, impressive man" whose loyalty, integrity and strength of purpose inspired enduring admiration.

While the burial service passed in a blur, Ewin's abiding memory was of the pallbearers, struggling under Matthews' dead weight, and of the

LIEUTENANT RUSS EWIN (SHOWN ON HIS WEDDING DAY) SMUGGLED MESSAGES AND EQUIPMENT TO BUILD THE CAMP'S RADIO TRANSMITTER. HE ESCAPED ARREST THANKS TO THE SILENCE OF HIS FELLOW OFFICERS AND WAS ONE OF THE LAST SURVIVORS OF THE SANDAKAN CAMP
STEVE SNELLING

harrowing sight of "blood... pouring from the rear of the plain timber coffin". It was a chilling end to an unparalleled saga of resistance that has long been overshadowed by the shocking war crimes that have made Sandakan synonymous with the worst excesses of Imperial Japanese savagery.

Prince among men

What even now seems a barely credible undercover war was inextricably rooted in the vision and character of Lionel Colin Matthews, a 30-year-old signals officer known as 'The Duke' due to his resemblance to the Duke of Gloucester.

Described as "a prince among men" who "radiated a feeling of authority and leadership", he was born in Adelaide on August 15, 1912 and grew up with a passion for all things nautical. As a powerful swimmer and keen Sea Scout, he was a natural for the Royal Australian Naval Reserve, which he joined in 1929 after serving three months in his father's wartime army unit.

Four years' training as a signaller, during which he became proficient in Morse code, would shape the course of his life – though it would involve a switch back to the army brought about by the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Made redundant from his office job, he was forced to resign from





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BACKGROUND: THE FACES OF SOME OF THE SANDAKAN CAMP AND DEATH MARCH POWS ARE ON DISPLAY AT AWM CANBERRA. THE VAST MAJORITY OF NON-OFFICER POWS AT THE CAMP WOULD NOT SURVIVE THE WAR
JAMES TALALAY/ALAMY

RIGHT: THE DUKE OF SANDAKAN, CAPTAIN LIONEL COLIN MATTHEWS GC, MC, LEADER OF ONE OF THE MOST REMARKABLE RESISTANCE ORGANISATIONS OF WORLD WAR TWO
STEVE SNELLING

the reserve when he moved to Melbourne and found work as a wallpaper salesman. But the appeal of the services endured and in April 1939 he enlisted in the 3rd Division Signals. By then married with a young son, he relished the extra commitment, even coaching his wife in Morse so that she could help hone his skills. Such dedication was rewarded with promotion. By January 1940 he had achieved his "burning ambition" of a commission and it was as a lieutenant that he transferred, six months later, to the 8th Division Signals, Australian Imperial Force.

As leader of 'E'/'Eddy' Section, he was relentless in his quest for excellence, fellow officer Rod Wells recalling: "Eddy' for Efficiency was his constant, friendly, light-hearted boast [and] efficiency in the widest sense permeated through his section in abundance." Such doggedness combined with what his son called his "unflinching moral values" were leavened by impish humour. Friend and fellow officer Jim Hardacre said Matthews was an incurable practical

CAPTAIN MATTHEW'S REGAL AND MOUSTACHIOED LIKENESS WAS OF PRINCE HENRY, DUKE OF GLOUCESTER (RIGHT), THIRD SON OF GEORGE V. HE SERVED AS CHIEF LIAISON OFFICER TO LORD GORT IN 1940 AND COINCIDENTLY WAS THE SOLE MEMBER OF THE ROYAL FAMILY TO BECOME GOVERNOR-GENERAL OF AUSTRALIA STATE LIBRARY OF VICTORIA



joker whose "face exuded mischief, with a ready smile exploding into raucous, infectious laughter". A tall, genial bear of a man, he was caring and driven. The result was a team spirit second to none. Bursting with pride, he noted: "They are a really fine lot."

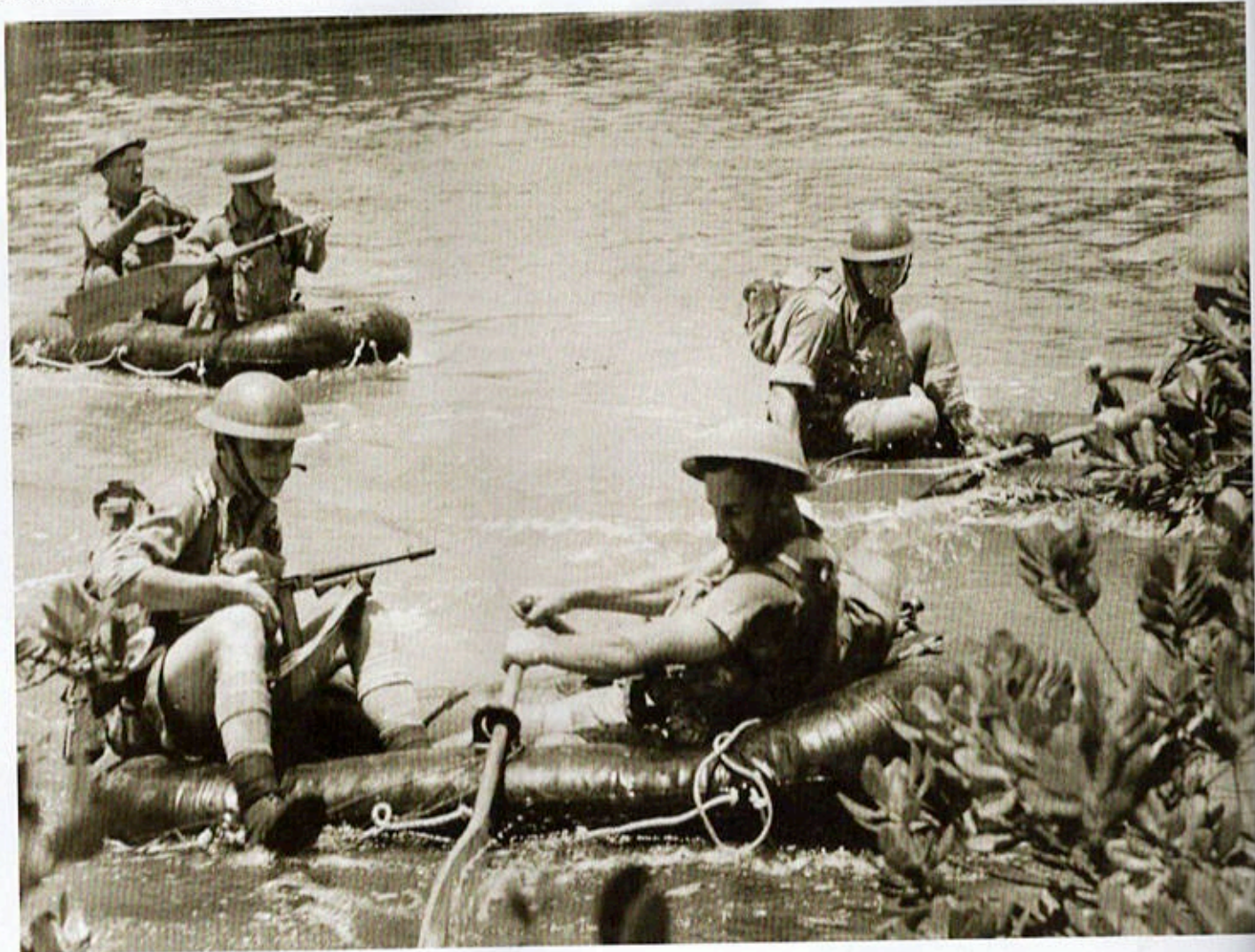
THE HARSH ENVIRONS OF MALAYA PRESENTED FORMIDABLE CHALLENGES FOR THE NEWLY DEPLOYED AUSTRALIANS D & S PHOTOGRAPHY ARCHIVES/ALAMY

In the thick of it

By the time those words were written, the men of the 8th Division had undergone a dramatic change of scene. As reinforcements sent to Singapore in February 1941 to deter Japanese aggression, they were sent up-country into Malaya, "a foul place", as Matthews put it, and one that was "rotten... for infections and diseases".

Nine months of acclimatisation and training were followed by a disastrous campaign spanning just nine weeks. It was a debacle revived in small part by individual acts of gallantry, one of them performed by Matthews himself. As a new captain in charge of the 27th Brigade Signals section, he was responsible for maintaining communications with the batteries of the 2/15th Field Regiment near Gemas when the 8th underwent its baptism of fire in mid-January 1942.

Amid air and mortar attacks that wrecked overhead cables, he braved bombs and strafing to restore links between Brigade HQ and frontline units, displaying "a high standard of





LIONEL MATTHEWS WITH HIS WIFE, LORNA, AND SON, DAVID, BEFORE DEPLOYING TO SINGAPORE WITH THE 8TH DIVISION SIGNALS. DAVID LATER CHRONICLED HIS FATHER'S EXPLOITS IN THE MOVING BIOGRAPHY 'THE DUKE' STEVE SNELLING



LIEUTENANT ROD WELLS, MATTHEWS' RIGHT-HAND MAN, WAS A KEY LINK IN THE RESISTANCE MOVEMENT'S COMMAND. HE ENDURED TORTURE AND PRIVATIONS IN BORNEO AND SINGAPORE ISLAND, BUT SURVIVED TO RETURN HOME STEVE SNELLING

courage, energy and ability in doing so". His resolve was underlined in a letter home. Headed "in the thick of it", it presented a graphic picture of the "sheer hell" of his combat initiation: "We have been bombed and machine-gunned about four times daily," he wrote. "It is a nerve-racking business. You expect every moment to get a hail of bullets..."

"I was supervising a telephone line on a pole when my linesman and I were strafed and bombed. The line ran alongside the railway, and they dropped a stick of bombs right up the track and blew up our telephone line. Thanks to God none of us were hit, but the lines must get through and the work must go on."

And so it did, even as the defence collapsed: "They reckon at Brigade that the 'L C' of my name must stand for Line of Communications," he joked, adding: "I'll see that the messages get through if it's the last thing I do."

In another letter written days later after escaping another attack, he commented: "It's a great life with lots of excitement of the wrong

"We have been bombed and machine-gunned about four times daily... It is a nerve-racking business. You expect every moment to get a hail of bullets..."

kind. Thank God my nerves are still standing up OK as I don't want to crack up yet." He remained stoic even after a bomb destroyed his 'office', leaving him nursing injuries to his left arm, chest, knees and right cheek, which he dismissed as "flesh wounds".

In what would prove to be his last letter home, written from a beleaguered Singapore on February 5, he made light of it: "I am feeling particularly well, but I have lost a lot of weight and all my clothes are hanging on me," he told his wife. "Don't think that I am a bag of bones but I have a real slim figure now. So, the war has done some good."

Five days later, with British and Commonwealth forces barely holding, he was back fighting, laying a cable over ground heavily



patrolled by the enemy. Together with his performance at Gemas, this led to the award of a Military Cross, officially promulgated in Changi on May 10, 1942 - by which time Matthews and 100,000 others had been POWs for three months.

Logical choice

His stay at the overcrowded peacetime British base was short. In July, orders were received for the Australians to form a second overseas draft, the first having been despatched six weeks earlier as the vanguard of an army of labourers destined for Burma and the so-called Death Railway.

'B' Force, as it was styled, comprised 145 officers and 1,349 other ranks who had been assured that they were headed for a 'rest camp' where food would be plentiful and sick and wounded men could convalesce. As a consequence, the number of unfit and older men was disproportionately high.

Among the three 'battalions' were ten officers and 35 other ranks from Divisional Signals, including Matthews. As one of the few officers to emerge from the disastrous campaign with his reputation enhanced, he was put in charge of a company in 'E' Battalion. Bridling at the enforced idleness imposed by captivity, he appeared to relish a fresh challenge. According to

A SKETCH OF THE SANDAKAN POW CAMP BY CORPORAL FREDERICK WOODLEY. IT WAS FROM HERE THAT MATTHEWS DIRECTED A NETWORK OF LOYAL SUPPORTERS THAT INCLUDED CHINESE CIVILIANS AND THE BRITISH NORTH BORNEO CONSTABULARY AWM



MATTHEWS TAKING A BREAK FROM TRAINING NEAR MALACCA IN 1941. HIS COURAGE DURING THE SUBSEQUENT CAMPAIGN IN MALAYA WERE MARKED BY THE AWARD OF AN MC STEVE SNELLING

Hardacre, he was "in fine fettle – the best we had seen him since incarceration".

'B' Force boarded the *Ubi Maru* for an unrevealed destination on July 8.

Packed like sardines into holds as hot as ovens that stank to high heaven, they endured a voyage that Ewin considered "possibly the worst experience of my time in captivity".

With sickness rife and water rationed, their arrival at Sandakan on the northeast tip of modern-day Sabah on July 18 was a huge relief. First impressions were encouraging. "We marched the eight miles to the camp next day," recalled Ewin. "I felt confident this could be a good place... The beauty of the plants and flowers, the sheer size of the trees and the immensity of the jungle were appealing, while the inhabitants appeared to be well-disposed."

Turning off a bitumen road at the so-called Eight-Mile Post, marked by the presence of a police station, the Australians struggled on for another mile along a dirt road, passing an agricultural research station, to reach No.1 Prisoner of War Camp, British

"Susumi's announcement was accompanied by the boast that Japan would be victorious 'even if it takes 100 years'"

North Borneo. Surrounded on three sides by tropical jungle, the two-hectare compound was originally designed by colonial authorities to house 350 internees. Since its capture, the number of huts had more than doubled to 40, above which soared a Belian tree some 230ft high.

Though security was initially lax, the camp was guarded by inner and outer fences, seven watchtowers and a machine gun covering the main gate. However, any illusions that they had exchanged the misery of Changi for a convalescent camp were swiftly shattered.

Addressed by their new camp commander, Rikugun-Chūi (lieutenant) later Rikugun-Tai-I (captain) Hoshijima Susumi, they were in no doubt about their fate: they were to toil on an airfield construction project that was expected to take three years.



LIEUTENANT GORDON WEYNTON HELPED DESIGN AND LATER TOOK CHARGE OF THE CAMP'S TRANSMITTER. ARRESTED AND TORTURED, HE SURVIVED TO TESTIFY TO MATTHEWS' "EXAMPLE AND COURAGE" STEVE SNELLING



JOHNNY FUNK (SHOWN ON HIS WEDDING DAY) BELONGED TO A FAMILY OF RESISTORS. HIS BROTHER ALEX, A KEY CONTACT WITH THE POWS, WAS EXECUTED WITH MATTHEWS. JOHNNY AND HIS OTHER BROTHER, PADDY, WERE GIVEN SENTENCES OF FOUR AND SIX YEARS STEVE SNELLING

Susumi's announcement was accompanied by the boast that Japan would be victorious "even if it takes 100 years". Barely had the news sunk in than work began, first on roads snaking from the camp and then on the airstrip.

It wasn't long before the grim reality of their plight became clear. Overworked and undernourished, the prisoners fell to a range of tropical diseases made worse by a vitamin-deficient diet and the maltreatment of their captors. But as dysentery and malaria took their toll, so too emerged a spirit of defiance.

Granted permission to create a vegetable garden within the confines of the experimental farm to supplement their meagre rations, parties of unattended officers quickly exploited the opportunity to contact locals loyal to the British. The seeds of resistance planted, the beginnings of an intelligence organisation were established under naval reserve officer Norman Sligo, a pre-war Malaya riverboat captain, and then, following his death in late August, Lionel Matthews.

Already an enthusiastic ally, Matthews – a Malay speaker – was, in the words of a close friend, "the logical choice".

Enormous ambition

As one of the original garden party, Matthews had been the first to make contact with Sandakan's indigenous resistors already engaged in smuggling food, medicines and news to civilian internees on nearby Berhala Island.

Through a Malay, he connected with other like-minds, including a Eurasian family by the name of Funk, a police sergeant based nearby, and, in time, to a larger, more prominent group led by Australian doctor, James Taylor, who as British North Borneo's principal medical officer had been allowed to continue his duties.

Described as "quiet, enigmatic and unobtrusive", Taylor melded a rudimentary network, opening up communications with the incarcerated governor and chief of police but also with guerrillas operating under US command in the Philippines. At the same, he supplied internees with vital drugs and foodstuffs.

Using a cow shed (where officers collected dung for the garden) as a secret rendezvous, Matthews took advantage of this established resistance in pursuit of his audacious



SCENES AT THE POW CAMP, SANDAKAN. POW CONTACT AND ENQUIRY OFFICERS FOUND THE REMAINS OF A REGIMENTAL AID POST IN NO. 1 COMPOUND, BELIEVED TO HAVE BEEN THE LAST INHABITED AREA IN THE CAMP AFTER THE DEATH MARCHES TO RANAU FRANK BURKE/AWM 120442

objectives. What his son called "a plan of enormous ambition" comprised three goals: "The comfort and well-being of the POWs; the importation of drugs and medicines critical to the welfare of them; and the daring possibility of escape for the entire camp."

The three-way traffic of news and supplies was initiated by Matthews under the cover of collecting palm nuts from land farmed by the Funk family. Messages would be left in a particular tree and replies collected from another along with small caches of drugs, mainly vitamin B1 tablets. At considerable risk, Matthews and a group of officers that included signallers Russ Ewin, Ted Esler and Ron Fowler, smuggled a range of goods and equipment.

For the most part, junior officers kept watch as so-called 'cockatoos' while Matthews met with Alex Funk, former overseer with the public works department. Ewin recalled one encounter, which he described as the "scariest" of all their clandestine meetings, seeing Funk hand over a .38-calibre

revolver, a fountain pen and other items. "Lionel put the pistol in his haversack under a heap of nuts," said Ewin. "Ron and I hid the other things in various places, the fountain pen clipped in the fly of my shorts. It was a tense moment as we approached the guardhouse, wondering whether the guards

"Ewin recalled the "scariest" of all their clandestine meetings, seeing Funk hand over a .38-calibre revolver"

would insist on inspection [and] much relief when they did not..."

In October, Ewin discovered another subterfuge. Appointed second-in-command of a party tasked with collecting wood for the camp generator, he found out the group's leader, Lieutenant Rod Wells, was also conspiring, under

Matthews' direction, to acquire a crystal detector, headphones and two radio tubes to build a wireless receiver. Not long after, Ewin took charge of the wood-collecting ruse to give Wells more time to devote to the construction of the radio which, incredibly, was operating by the first week of November.

The expeditions, which involved meetings with local resistor Sergeant Abin, a staunch loyalist at the Eight-Mile Police Station, were fraught with trepidation. "Once or twice a week there would be a small, sealed package of tightly rolled letters or news from the wireless to be dispatched to Dr Taylor via Sergeant Abin," recalled Ewin.

"The cabin of the wood truck was open, and I sat in the passenger seat. Abin always had to come out of the police station to salute the Jap guards; when I had a package, I held it in my palm with my arm dangling outside the truck and at a nod from Abin released it for him to recover.

"When Abin had something for us in the camp, he gave me a sign as the truck passed. There then had to be

an excuse for me to walk back into the camp alone. Usually, it would be a broken axe or to get some bandages for an injured worker.

Both our guards and the camp guards accepted this, so whenever I picked a parcel up from Sergeant Abin on the way back, after carefully ensuring there were no Japs about, I was able to re-enter camp and deliver to Matthews."

By spring 1943, the wireless designed by Wells and another signals officer, Lieutenant Gordon Weynton, was providing an uninterrupted flow of news with Weynton taking on the responsibility of receiving and distributing bulletins inside and outside the camp. Matthews and Wells, his defacto deputy, were freed up to extend their contacts with guerrillas in the Sulu Archipelago and through them to Allied forces in the Pacific, with a view to orchestrating armed support to any landings or rescue.

However, for the time being, planning for any uprising or mass



THE REMAINS OF PART OF SANDAKAN CAMP AFTER IT WAS TORCHED AND ABANDONED BY THE JAPANESE IN MAY 1945
AWM



THE SITE OF SANDAKAN'S NUMBER ONE COMPOUND. THE BURNT-OUT FORMER COOKHOUSE IS DWARFED BY THE FAMOUS 'BIG TREE'. TAKEN TWO MONTHS AFTER THE WAR, THIS SHOWS HOW QUICKLY NATURE RECLAIMED THE SITE
AWM

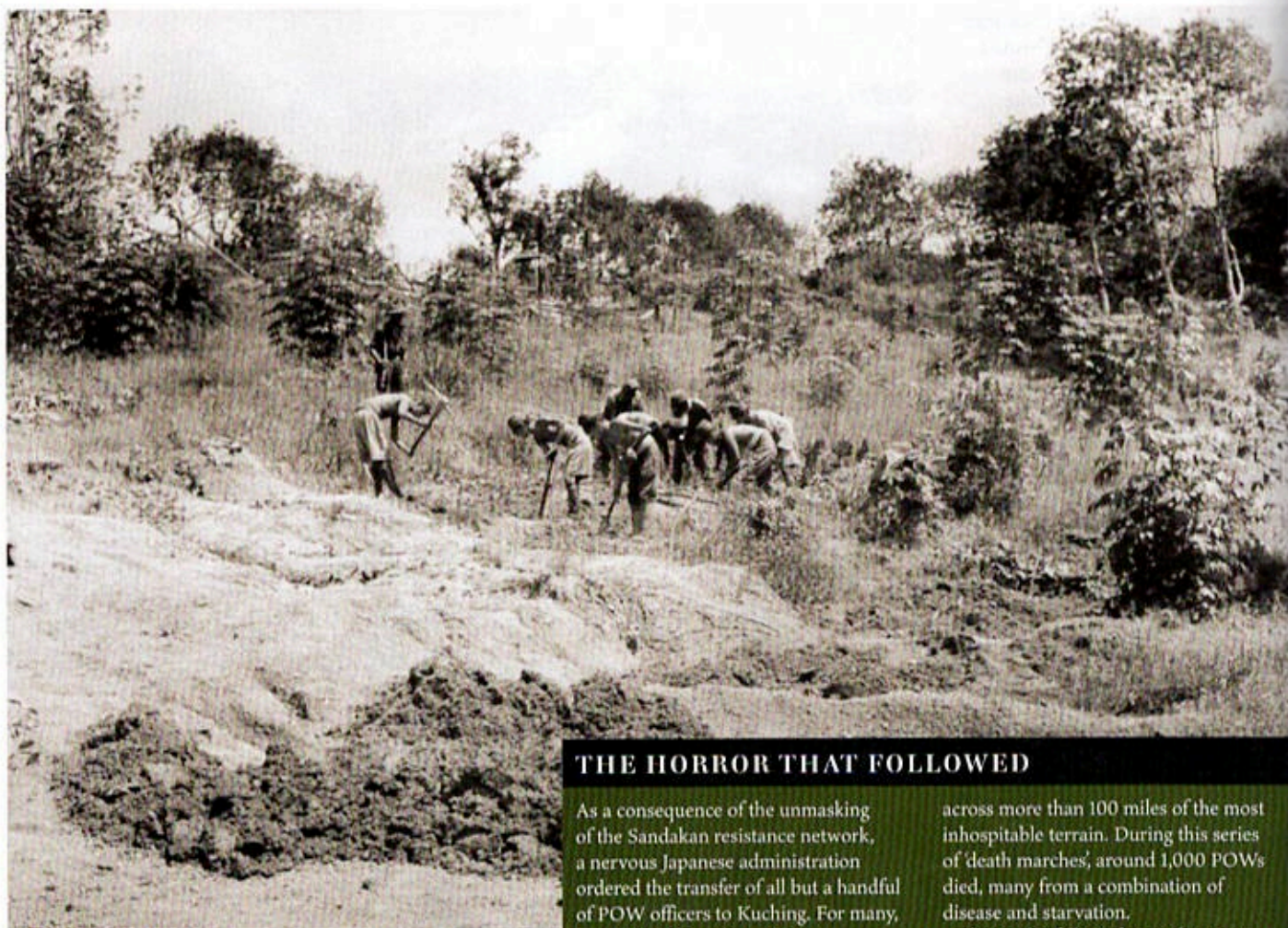
escape was overtaken by the need to assist two parties that had taken matters into their own hands.

Secret hiding place

One of the more remarkable and daring bids for freedom attempted from any prison camp began in May 1943 when word reached Matthews that a group of Australians on Berhala Island wanted his organisation's help to escape.

Part of a fresh contingent of captives known as 'E' Force, the seven-strong party was led by Captain Ray Steele. Despite tighter security prompted by the unauthorised breakout by three Australians from Sandakan on May 1, Matthews agreed. More in the nature of an extraction than an escape, the break launched in June was one of the greatest achievements of the Sandakan resistance.

Armed with information from locals acting under Matthews' direction, Steele's party were guided, sheltered and sustained before making their way by sea to Tawi Tawi where they joined with Filipino guerrillas. With them went an eighth Australian: Sergeant Walter Wallace, sole survivor of a three-man party whose escape threatened to derail Steele's effort. Wallace owed his life to Matthews' network, which protected him after his comrades had been killed before moving him to Berhala.



JAPANESE TROOPS DIGGING IN GRAVES. ONE AREA IN NO.1 COMPOUND WAS FOUND TO CONTAIN APPROXIMATELY 300 BODIES BELIEVED TO BE OF THOSE MEN LEFT IN THE CAMP AFTER THE DEATH MARCHES TO RANAU FRANK BURKE/AWM 120449

Theirs was a route to salvation that Matthews might have taken. According to Wells, guerrilla leader Colonel Alexandrajo Suarez invited Matthews and others to join him. While some argued in favour, believing they would be better placed to assist efforts to liberate the prisoners, the camp's senior officer opposed – a view endorsed by Matthews, who said his duty was “to stand by his boys [and] go through thick and thin with them”.

In any case, his focus was on making preparations for an uprising in support of landings either by Suarez or those Allied forces advancing ever nearer. As well as engaging in sabotage, including disabling a steam shovel and a tractor, Matthews sought to gather every scrap about Japanese defences in readiness, as one member of his organisation put it, “to overthrow Japanese control in Sandakan”.

With the help of loyal policemen, powerhouse staff and POWs on work detail, he pinpointed the locations of barracks, communications centres, HQ buildings and machine guns on a constantly updated map, half of

THE HORROR THAT FOLLOWED

As a consequence of the unmasking of the Sandakan resistance network, a nervous Japanese administration ordered the transfer of all but a handful of POW officers to Kuching. For many, it proved a life-saving decision.

Of the nearly 2,500 POWs left behind – a figure swollen by the addition of hundreds of British POWs captured in Java – only six would survive the war and just four lived long enough to give evidence at war crimes trials. Forced by Allied bombing to abandon work on the airstrip in January 1945, and fearing invasion, the Japanese established new bases deep in the jungle, forcing the captives to carry arms and equipment

across more than 100 miles of the most inhospitable terrain. During this series of ‘death marches’, around 1,000 POWs died, many from a combination of disease and starvation.

Those who fell out from exhaustion were murdered and those too sick to march were abandoned. By July 1945, no more than 60 men were still (barely) alive at Sandakan. On July 13, the 23 capable of walking were marched out to the abandoned airstrip and shot. The last survivor was beheaded on August 15, the day Japan surrendered. But 12 days later, despite knowing the war was over, Japanese guards executed the last 15 Sandakan death marchers.



THREE OF THE SIX SURVIVORS OF THE SANDAKAN-RANAU DEATH MARCH. PTE NELSON SHORT, W/O WILLIAM STICPEWICH AND PTE KEITH BOTTERILL JOHN HARRISON/AWM OG3553

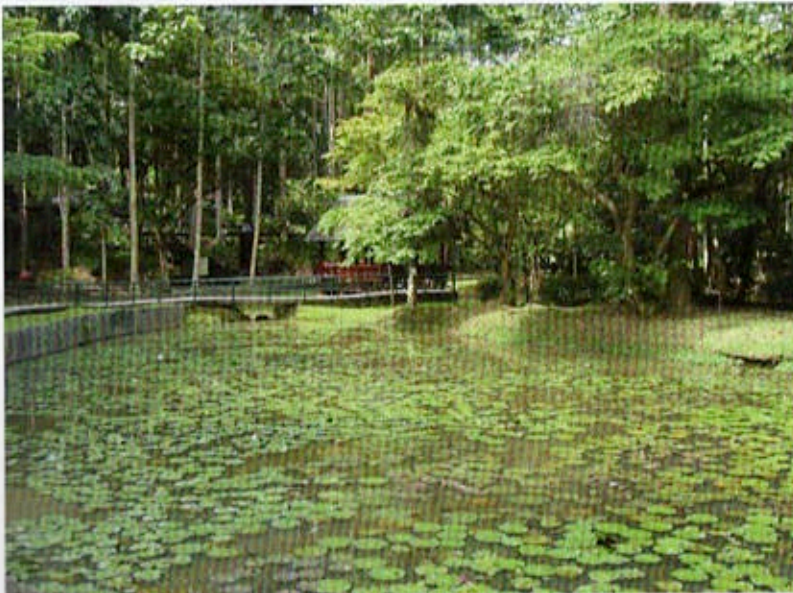


THE REMAINS OF THE CAMP BOILER AND GENERATOR, WHERE MESSAGES AND PIECES OF EQUIPMENT WERE PASSED BETWEEN CIVILIAN WORKERS AND THE POWs, ARE STILL IN PLACE, AS IS A STEAM SHOVEL
STEVE SNELLING

which was hidden in the camp, the other half buried near the police station. At the same time, he planned to extend his contacts to the Allied HQ, authorising the construction of a second radio capable of opening direct communications.

More astoundingly, he was preparing to take direct action, having acquired through his Filipino

contacts weapons stored in "a secret hiding place". The camp's arsenal – two machine guns, 27 rifles and 2,500 rounds – was sufficient to arm Australian POWs who, in the event of any landing, would join with North Borneo Armed Constabulary members – since the chief of police's departure to Kuching, they answered to Matthews.



THE SANDAKAN MEMORIAL PARK, WITH ITS LILY-COVERED LAKE AND TROPICAL GARDENS, HAS TRANSFORMED A PLACE OF HAUNTING MEMORIES INTO A SCENE OF BEAUTY AND REFLECTION
STEVE SNELLING

The 'Japanese Inquisition'

However, such grand schemes were destined to come to naught thanks to an act that cost the resistance dear. In hindsight, Ewin considered the secrecy on which the network depended was bound to be compromised. To a certain extent, it was a victim of its own success. As he observed: "It was a large and widespread operation, perhaps too large for it not to be inevitable that it would be discovered."

Despite Matthews' best efforts to ensure his fellow officers 'kept mum' and knew only as much as necessary, too many knew at least a little of what was going on. One who knew too much was an Indian overseer. Suspicious of a young Chinese worker's links to the Australian POWs, he sought to blackmail him and, when that failed, reported him.

Within days, the first of around 200 civilians, including Dr Taylor and other leading figures, had been arrested. The round-up was followed on July 22 by a search of the 'B' Force camp focused particularly on Matthews' and Wells' quarters. Despite desperate efforts at concealment the Japanese uncovered firearms, incriminating notes and, most damning, a coded diary they claimed belonged to Wells. Matthews' denials counted for

"Although Matthews fully realised what his fate would be, he steadfastly refused to make admissions"

nothing, resulting merely in a severe bashing followed by his departure to military police HQ, where he would shortly be joined by Wells, Weynton and others. Much to his surprise, Ewin was not among them, an improbable fact he credited to Matthews' and Wells' refusal under extreme pressure to implicate him.

Indeed, their courage in the face of torture that would not have been out of place during the Spanish Inquisition was extraordinary. As the obvious ringleader, Matthews was singled out for brutal treatment, including binding, flogging, being force-fed rice and water until his swollen stomach nearly burst amid excruciating pain, and the placing of a wooden plank over his battered body on which his interrogators proceeded to stand and seesaw.

POW RESISTOR

To Wells and those with him, his exceptional fortitude was inspiring and instrumental in sparing others. "Although he fully realised what his fate would be, he steadfastly refused to make admissions... other than to confirm some facts that had been admitted by natives," wrote Wells.

No less astonishing was his defiance. As well as smuggling out messages to the prison camp, he circumvented his captors' attempts to ban communication by using Morse whenever he and his fellow signals officers were together. Wells recalled: "He would come back from interrogation, sit down, cross his legs as we were instructed to, and tap his fingers on his chest... I could read the message.

"It was a laborious way of communicating, but anything's better than nothing. He would go through the topic on which he'd been interrogated that morning and the answers he'd delivered."

While being transported to Kuching and his eventual trial, Matthews even plotted to overwhelm the guards and seize the steamer, but ultimately ruled out what Wells considered a meagre opportunity to escape on the grounds it would be a dereliction



of his self-imposed duty. As Wells remarked: "He would not leave the responsibility of our organisation to anyone else and was determined to see it through."

Devotion to duty

The February 1944 trial was a foregone conclusion. Despite his denials and insistence that his alleged admission to planning armed insurrection was faked, the evidence was sufficient to ensure the death sentence – a fate shared with eight

HOSHUJIMA SUSUMI (CENTRE), COMMANDANT OF SANDAKAN POW CAMP, CONFERS WITH HIS DEFENCE COUNSEL DURING HIS TRIAL FOR WAR CRIMES ARTHUR HORNER/AWM 133913

THE SANDAKAN MEMORIAL IS FOUND ON THE SITE OF THE FORMER POW CAMP AND COMMEMORATES ALL THOSE WHO SUFFERED AND DIED HERE, ON THE DEATH MARCHES AND AT RANAU STEVE SNELLING

more members of the movement. Undaunted, Matthews continued to cut a brave figure.

Wells, among 18 Australians and more than 40 civilians given sentences ranging from six months to 15 years, recalled him shaking his hand and wishing him "good luck". Before being taken away, he said that "he was pleased to be going with such loyal friends". Sometime later, Wells was told by guards that Matthews had been shot "after refusing to be blindfolded".

Small wonder that Wells sought formal recognition of Matthews' courage and devotion. Dr Taylor, whose own gallantry was marked with the OBE, summarised: "[Matthews'] sole care at all times was for those around him, his bearing throughout imprisonment and his conduct at his trial were those of a very brave officer."

The award of a posthumous George Cross was the only fitting tribute for a man who risked his life, sacrificed his chance of escape and, ultimately, himself, to save his POW comrades. As Taylor concluded, his actions were those of "a most courageous man" who "upheld the highest traditions of an Australian officer". **BW**

