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The occasion will mark the 40th anniversary of the Sandakan-Ranau death march, one of the most appalling yet least publicised episodes of the war in the Pacific.

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One of them, Keith Botterill, will be at Ranau for the anniversary. There he will be reunited with a local man named Bariga, now aged 83, who risked his own life to save Botterill's all those years ago.

The six survivors of the march were all Australians. Two of them, Bill Sticpewich and Bill Moxham, have since died. The four who are left are Keith Botterill and Nelson Short, both of whom live in Sydney, Dick Braithwaite, of Brisbane, and Owen Campbell, of Beachmere in Queensland.

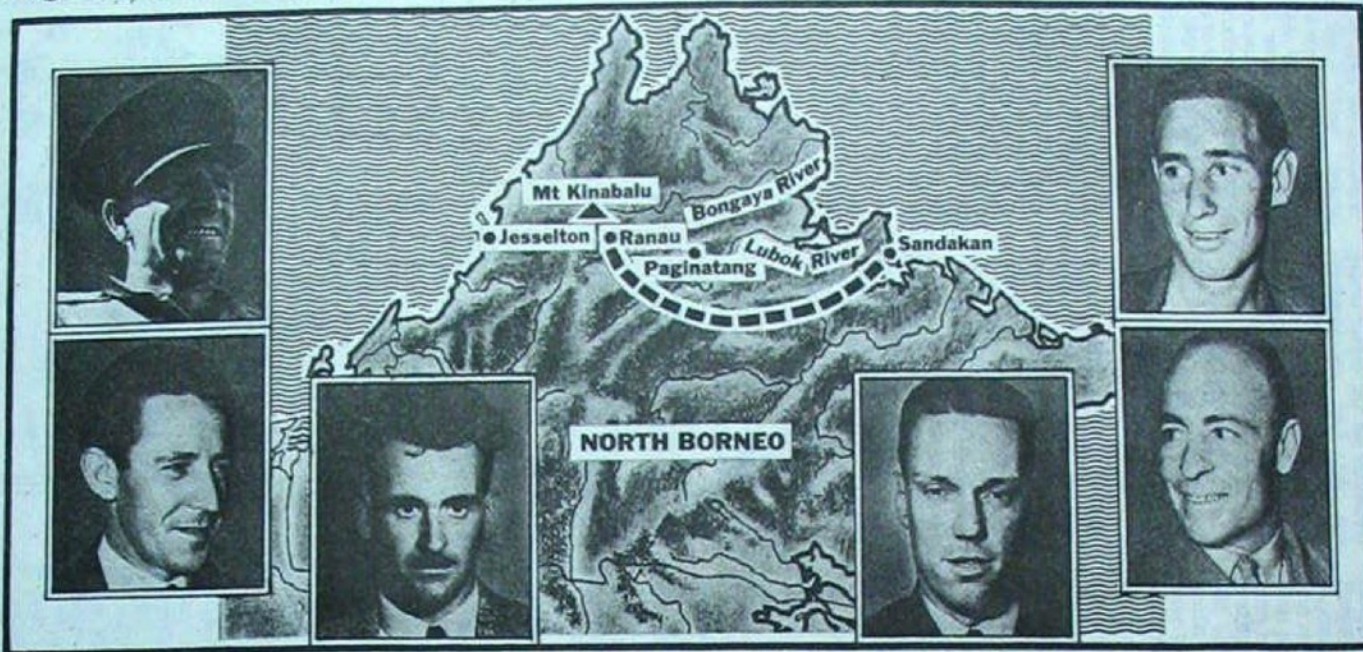
The men are now retired and in their 60s. For most of the last 40 years they have lived lives of quiet anonymity, but gradually interest in their story is growing.

In his new book, *Prisoners of War: Australians Under Nippon*, Australian National University historian Dr Hank Nelson makes it clear that the Sandakan-Ranau incident was one of the most horrific in which Australian POWs were involved.

More Australians – about 2500 – died during the building of the Thailand to Burma railway, but the survival rate on the railway was more than two out of three, whereas at Sandakan-Ranau it was less than one in 400.

“It was a terrible bloody incident,” Dr Nelson said this week. “And what is particularly distressing about Borneo, in retrospect, is the apparent irrationality of it.” The Japanese wanted the Thai-Burma railway built for strategic reasons: there was a certain twisted logic to the exercise. The Sandakan-Ranau deaths seem to have been utterly pointless.

Nelson's book is based on an award-winning ABC radio series produced by Tim Bowden in which the survivors of the march were interviewed and extensively quoted. (The episode in which they discuss



The death march survivors in 1947 (clockwise from top right): Keith Botterill, William Moxham, Richard Braithwaite, Owen Campbell, Nelson Short and Hector Sticpewich.

Photos courtesy of the ABC.

## Jungle march to infamy

The death march from Sandakan in north-east Borneo to Ranau, an isolated village 250km away over the mountains and through jungle, has been called one of the worst atrocities of the war. Certainly it was the most horrific incident involving Australian POWs. Of about 2500 Australian and British prisoners, only six came out of the jungle alive. Forty years later, this extraordinary event is being re-examined. JANE CADZOW reports.



Keith Botterill today.

other prisoners who were still coming through.

There were several of these rice-carrying trips, and on each of them the death toll mounted.

Botterill: “We’d get through the flats of Ranau and start up the mountains, and then men would start to get sick and sit down. The Japanese would shoot them and divide the rice up among the fit men. The killing would start about five miles out of Ranau, and the second day there’d be more killing of a morning.”

“We’d arrive at Paginatang on the third afternoon, rest up there, and head back on the fourth day. There’d be more killing on the way back, and on the fifth day, within sight of the compound, they’d still be killing us.”

Eventually the prisoners rebelled. They said they would make no more rice-carrying

trips. “Where were we going from here? Maybe nowhere...”

“I became aware that it was a one-way trip when we started to hear shots, and you felt that there was no hope for anyone that fell out.”

Braithwaite remembers being beaten by a guard as he tried to make his way up a slippery slope. He lay in the mud, heaving for breath. “A group came past me and Bob Sykes, who was a WO in my unit, said ‘Come on son, you can make it.’ And I said ‘Yes Bob, I’ll be there.’”

“Anyway after they’d gone past I struggled up on my knees, and then up on my feet, and staggered on.”

Owen Campbell, who became a Baptist minister after the war, made his dash for freedom in June 1945. With three others, he waited till the guards were out of sight, then slid down the dirt slope at the

bottom. “In the jungle one of the men became ill and cut his own throat to avoid holding the party up. The other two were killed by a Japanese soldier hiding on a Malay fishing boat which they had thought would take them to safety.”

Campbell had the good fortune to meet a Malay guerrilla leader who smuggled him in a canoe down the Bongaya River and into the hands of the Z Special Unit, which arranged for him to be carried out by seaplane.

Dick Braithwaite, who was a photo-engraver at The Courier-Mail in Brisbane until his retirement, realised on the sixth day of the march that to make a break was his only chance. His strength was failing fast, and the killing-off party was breathing down his neck.

There were times, after his escape into the jungle, when

he remembers sitting on a log, sick and exhausted, and thinking: “Well, this is where it happens, mate, you’re finished. After about half an hour of just sitting, all of a sudden I thought no, you’re not finished. You’re not going to die in a place like this.”

“And I became really angry. I put my head down like a bull and charged that jungle.”

Like Campbell, Braithwaite was found by local people, smuggled down-river in a canoe and handed on to Allied troops. In late June, about a week after his rescue, an Australian colonel told him “We’re going in now, to look for your friends.”

Braithwaite: “I can remember this so vividly. I just rolled on my side on the bunk, faced the wall, and cried like a baby. And said ‘You’ll be too late!’”

Keith Botterill, Nelson Short, Bill Moxham and a

were among those who completed the march. By early July it was obvious that at Ranau there was no hope of survival.

Botterill: “We picked the moment when we knew death was a sure thing. There was no option left: die in the camp or die in the jungle.”

Others attempting to escape from Ranau had been recaptured, tortured and killed. Botterill's group was luckier. Anderson died of dysentery, but the others were saved by Bariga, the man Botterill will meet again at the memorial ceremony next month, who built them a shelter in the jungle and supplied them with food.

### Moods of depression

Tipped off by a friendly guard that the prisoners remaining at Ranau were to be massacred, Bill Sticpewich and Aigy Reither escaped. They were taken in by the people of a nearby village, but Reither died before help arrived.

The six survivors found it hard to readjust to civilian life. People in Australia could not comprehend the enormity of their experience, and on the whole the best idea seemed to be not to talk about it.

Dick Braithwaite, who used to wake in the night and strip all the sheets off the bed because he was convinced it was crawling with bugs, said this week he has no idea how his wife put up with his moods of black depression.

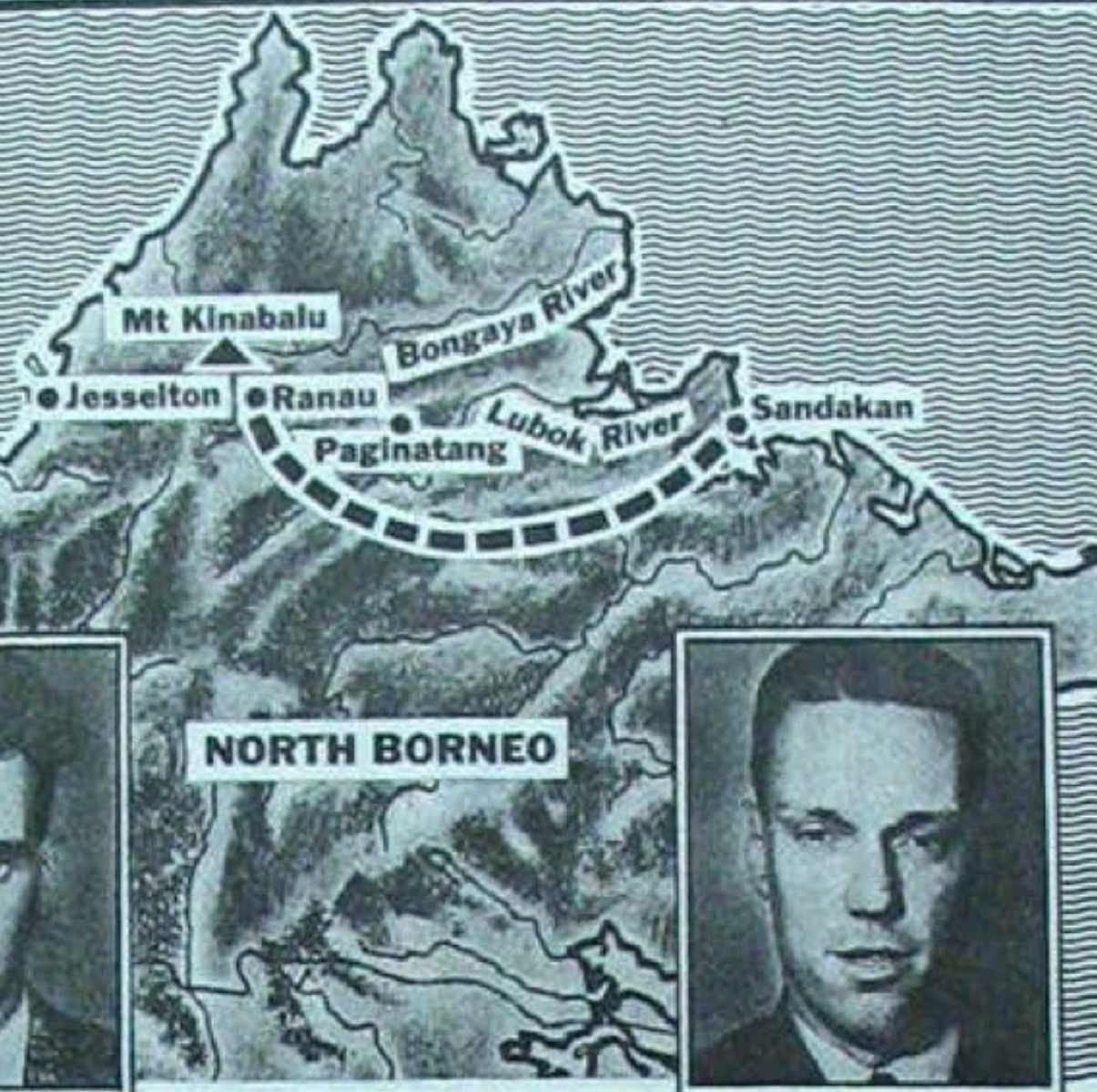
“Why she stayed with me I’ll never know,” he said. “She’s a wonderful lady.”

The rehabilitation process was slow, and for some it was not yet over. Keith Botterill, who found work after the war as a plant operator on construction sites, still dreams about the events in Borneo.

Nelson Short worked in a sawmill, as a lift-driver and at various other jobs. For his last 17 years of employment he was a maintenance man with the NSW Water Board.

Short was unable to put much money towards a retirement fund. He said this week he would like to go to the memorial ceremony at Ranau, but could not afford it.

*Prisoners of War: Australians Under Nippon* by Hank Nelson (ABC Enterprises, \$12.95) is available in bookshops. Tapes of the ABC radio series of the same name are available from ABC Books in



The death march survivors in 1947 (clockwise from top right) : Keith Botterill, William Moxham, Richard Braithwaite, Owen Campbell, Nelson Short and Hector Sticpewich.

Photos courtesy of the ABC

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Meanwhile, two men with a personal interest in the subject are working on a book about the march. Don Harlem of Hobart, and Jack Sue, of Perth, were both members of the Z Special Unit, a band of seven highly trained commandos who landed behind enemy lines in northern Borneo in early 1945.

While the death march was taking place, Harlem and Sue were nearby in the jungle, secretly training a local guerilla force and mounting occasional surprise attacks on Japanese installations. They knew about the march, and having found piles of corpses along the track were aware of its consequences, but to their immense frustration they were powerless to stop it.

In mid-1942 about 1500 Australian prisoners were shipped from Singapore to a Japanese POW camp near Sandakan. In early 1943 another 500 Australian and about 500 British prisoners were shipped across.

Till mid-1943, conditions at the camp were tolerable. The prisoners received little food and worked extremely hard — under the supervision of guards they were building an airfield — but spirits were reasonably high.

Then the Japanese discovered the existence of an underground communications network through which the prisoners had been in contact with the world outside the barbed wire fences. There were harsh reprisals.

The prisoners directly involved were taken away to be interrogated and tortured. At the same time there was a severe crackdown at the camp. Rations were cut and brutal punishment was meted out.

Apparently intent on breaking the prisoners' solidarity, the Japanese moved their of-

icers to another camp. Keith Botterill said this week that the loss of the officers, about 200 men, was a severe blow to group morale.

In Dr Hank Nelson's book, the survivors describe the changed circumstances at the camp:

Nelson Short: "They were watching you all the time. They were walking around with sticks like swords, and if you weren't working hard enough you'd be getting whacked."

Dick Braithwaite: "One fellow that was stood outside the guard house for an unknown misdemeanor had his eye knocked clean out of his socket . . . There were numerous incidents of that nature."

## Crowded cages

Keith Botterill says the events at Sandakan are etched deep into his memory: "I can remember it as if it happened yesterday. All these little incidents."

Botterill was one of the prisoners placed in a cage of slatted wood about a metre off the ground. The roof was too low to stand, and the cages were too crowded to allow all the prisoners to lie down.

Botterill: "The time I was in for 40 days there were 17 of us in there. No water for the first three days. On the third night they'd force you to drink till you were sick."

"For the first seven days you got no food . . . I was just in a G-string, never had a wash, and covered in lice and scabies. We were not allowed to talk, but we used to whisper."

At the same time each evening the prisoners were taken out of the cage and forced to

fight each other while the guards watched. During this "exercise" period, the cooks would pour the kitchen swill into a trough, ostensibly to feed the dogs.

Botterill: "We'd all hit together, the dogs and all of us, and we'd fight the dogs for the scraps. If you've ever tried to pull a bone out of a starving dog's mouth, you'll know what it was like."

Major-General C.H. Finlay, who now lives in Canberra, was the commander of the Z Special Unit in which Don Harlem and Jack Sue served. Before the unit left for North Borneo, a plan was conceived to storm the Sandakan camp and rescue the prisoners. "The plan provided for a smash and grab raid on Sandakan," General Finlay said this week.

If this had happened, the death march might never have taken place. But the plan was ruled out "at the highest level" because the air and naval support which would have been required was needed more urgently elsewhere. At this stage, of course, the Allied authorities had no idea of the horror that lay ahead for the prisoners at Sandakan.

"Personally, I think it was one of the worst atrocities of the war," General Finlay said.

All ideas of raiding the camp called off, the seven members of the Z Special Unit did not land in North Borneo till February 1945. By then the death march had started.

As the survivors relate in Nelson's book, the first group of about 500 left the camp in January 1945. They were split into parties of 50 and their destination was the isolated camp of Ranau, 250km away over mountains and through jungle. Most of those who set out were already desperately weak from sickness and starvation.

Botterill: "For the first five days we were going through mangrove and jungle swamps . . . You'd lie down of a night and you'd say 'this is it'. You lay up against a tree in the driest spot you could find, and you were that weary with aches, and leeches as big as pencils were crawling all over you."

"Big baboons were screaming, wild pigs were making a noise, and crocodiles. I was 20. I said: 'This is it. I'm going to die.' You could feel yourself dying. You'd sort of give up, and then you'd say 'Oh no'. You'd just automatically get up and away you'd go, you know."

Guards brought up the rear, and men who fell behind the main party were dragged a few metres off the track and shot or bayoneted. "I just kept plodding along," Botterill said. "It was dense jungle. I was heartbroken. But I thought there was safety in numbers. I just kept going."

When Botterill's group arrived at Ranau the prisoners were ordered to turn around and march 40km back towards Sandakan, carrying bags of rice to feed the Japanese and

Botterill: "This Captain Nagai, the Japanese commander, came out. He said if you don't carry the rice I will march you back to Sandakan. Well, we knew that 95 per cent of the men could never get back to Sandakan, so 20 of us decided to carry the rice for them."

"And only five returned from that trip. We lost 15. So that was the last rice-carrying trip."

At Ranau the deaths continued. The first thing Botterill did each morning was to check whether the men lying on the ground either side of him were dead or alive.

At Sandakan a system had developed by which most of the men had one or two special friends with whom they shared their food and their dreams of escape. "They took my mate and they killed him with a bayonet," Botterill said. "Because we stole some rice and they found out about it."

"That just busted me. I thought, well, there goes my life. That was the chap that brought food to me when I was sick, and vice versa. He was the bloke I was going to escape with."

From then on Botterill was a bit of a loner. Ranau was no place to start making new friends; no one knew who was going to be alive in the morning.

Meanwhile, at Sandakan, conditions had continued to worsen and the death rate had risen alarmingly. On May 29 the guards ordered the prisoners to assemble outside the camp. The second march was about to begin.

## Huts went up in flames

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Nelson Short, who was in this group, says there was a strong rumour among the men that the war was over and they were being marched to the coast to board a boat that would take them home. Everyone who could struggle to their feet to join the march did so, but about 300 stretcher cases were left behind.

Don Harlem says the sick were taken to the airstrip they had helped build and machine-gunned. The camp was burned down. Harlem believes the Japanese acted in such haste because they were expecting an Allied landing.

Dick Braithwaite: "It was a strange, sad sort of feeling to see those huts going up in flames. Knowing also, of course, that any records of our friends that had died, things that we'd made and cherished, the little bits of wood that had become more or less like the family jewels, they were going up in smoke. It was a feeling of great loss.

"Although we wouldn't allow ourselves to give up hope of ever being rescued, it must have been in the back of our minds that this was it for us.