

The Sandakan Story

Told by Nelson Short, one of 6 survivors

The following story is taken from “Home before Christmas, But Five years late” A record of Australian POWs in the hands of the Japanese 15th February to 15th August 1945, Compiled from diaries and notes kept at the time by those who were there. Collected by Bob Mutton 2/20th Bn 8th Aust. Div and copiously illustrated by George Sprod 2/15th Bn.

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Nelson Short recorded a condensed version of his time at Sandakan commencing from their arrival from Singapore to Japanese held North Borneo in July 1942. The 1500 POWs were marched 12 km to a compound constructed to hold 300 internees. The men were put to work clearing and building an airstrip and road. Sandakan in the early days was thought not to be too bad however the camp was always unhygienic and the water dirty and contaminated.

Camp Commander was the erratic Captain Susumo Hoshijima who remained until April 1945. The POWs were afraid of him. As Short wrote “one minute he would give permission to plant a garden and the next moment he would be gouging someone’s eye out.”

The Japanese officer responsible for all POW camps on Borneo was Colonel Suga. Short wrote of him “he was even more puzzling. Suga considered himself to be both cultured and humane, and sometimes, inexplicably, he was.”

During this time an Australian doctor was in charge of government hospital at Sandakan. “Friendly locals assisted in delivering and the exchange of letters and medicines between the doctor and two prison camps” Several ‘B’ Force POWs had built two radios and established an espionage network.

In April 1943 750 British POWs arrived and in June a further 500 Australians from ‘E’ Force made up a total of 2,750 POWs. 100 Formosans replaced the older Japanese guards and thereafter the camp conditions deteriorated.

The Camp’s underground movement was betrayed in July 1943.

The Australian doctor was sentenced to 15 years jail and an Australian signals officer was executed (he had arranged for Borneo police to collect medicines from the doctor and deliver to Camp).

Camp conditions deteriorated even further with rations and medical supplies reduced to virtually nothing. Beatings and torture became common. ***Minor misdemeanors were punishable by confinement in suspended cages made of wooden slats with room only to sit in. The cage sizes varied to holding one man or up to 17 men. Sentences ranged anywhere between a few days up to 40 days. The caged POWs were beaten twice daily, had no water for the first three days and were not fed for seven days. There were few survivors.***

In October 1944 the Allied planes made bombing raids and prisoners were killed when a bomb hit a POW hut. The POWs were greatly relieved when the raids stopped.

The first of the Sandakan death marches began 28th January 1945.

The first group of 470 men left daily from Sandakan in batches of 50.

By now the Japanese guards were aware of Japan's increasing defeats in the Pacific. Fearing an Allied invasion they began marching POWs to Ranau, about 250 kms inland.

The POWs were starving, suffering tropical illness and more than half had no boots. The march was through rainforest with mud up to their waist and sometimes up to their necks; their bodies became encrusted with leeches. The marches took 17 days and surprisingly most men survived. Those who could not keep up were killed.

At Ranau "things were grim". "It was living indescribable hell. Within a few months more than 1100 died".

"The blokes were dying like flies and there was no food at all. We were living on tapioca roots and filthy drinking water. The camp itself stank of death. Of those who could still walk were covered in huge ulcers breaking to reveal red raw skin when we touched them."

On 29th March those who were still alive were ordered to be ready to march in half an hour. 538 prisoners were assembled outside the camp. A further 290 prisoners

were seriously ill. The camp was ignited and destroyed, leaving the 290 ill prisoners without food or shelter.

The second series of Sandakan marches was organised much the same way as the first. “The marches now took 28 days and for that time the POWs were not provided any food. Prisoners grabbed at bamboo or banana shoots or whatever we could see as we marched along.”

“180 prisoners reached Ranau and we were greeted by four Australian and two British prisoners who had survived the first batch of death marches.”

Ranau had no huts or shelter and conditions were appalling with no food, no medical supplies or clothing. The prisoners slept out in the open in torrential rain.

“It became increasingly obvious that the reason for the marches was to kill us all off one way or another so that there would be no witnesses to their atrocities. It was a case of be murdered, die of starvation or disease or escape.”

During the night of 7th July 1945, Nelson Short was one of four who slipped out in torrential rain into the pitch-black jungle. They stole some rice from the Japanese provisions hut and headed off towards what they hoped was civilisation. There is no detailed description of this part of the journey, but on 29th July when they group thought things were going so well for them, one of the four men died. They covered his body with leaves and stones and left their mate in the jungle. The local natives befriended the three men, risking their lives and secretly provided them with fruit meant for the Japanese.

The three men had seen a lot of allied planes but had no means of attracting their attention. Their native friend and saviour, Berega Katus brought them a note and a parcel containing a packet of LifeSavers, a packet of vitamin pills, a box of matches and a tin of milk powder.

The note said, “The war is over, if you are well enough, make your way toward us, if not, stay where you are and we will come and get you.”

On 24th August Berega took the three men to some Australian troops who had parachuted into the front lines to guide the Allies to the retreating Japanese. ‘I’ll never forget the look on that paratrooper’s face when we walked out of the jungle! And words can’t tell you how glad we were to see him.

“And I’ll never forget this as long as I live – as we walked from the jungle to safety we could hear the rat-tat-tat of machine gun fire coming from the camp at Ranau as the Japs finished off the last poor devils from the death march.”

“Six out of 2500 of us escaped to tell the tale.”

If blokes just couldn’t go on, we shook hands with them, and said, you know, hope everything’s all right. But they knew what was going to happen. There was nothing you could do. You just had to keep yourself going. More or less survival of the fittest.

Nelson Short

Colonel Saga cut his throat in 1945 to avoid being punished for the Sandakan atrocities. Captain Susumo Hoshijima was one of 8 Japanese hanged for his war crimes in 1946.

There were 71 men from 2/4th MG Btn who died in Borneo’s Sandakan Death Marches.

SOURCE: 2/4TH MACHINE GUN BATTALION WEBSITE