

The murder of Private Herman Reither

Prelude to murder



Private Herman Reither

In 1945, as the war in the Pacific drew towards its end, the greatest atrocity perpetrated against Australian POWs by the Japanese was taking place on the island of Borneo. Described as Australia's holocaust, it took the lives of almost 2500 Australian and British prisoners of war. Six Australians, who escaped, were the sole survivors.

I spent six years researching and writing 'Sandakan A Conspiracy of Silence'. In doing so I unlocked many secrets, and uncovered the fate of every prisoner of war – bar one. Little did I know that twenty years would pass before the shocking circumstances of his death would be revealed, and that it would involve Sandakan's most controversial character – Warrant Officer William Hector Sticpewich, of the Australian Imperial Force.

But before I lead you down that path, we need to take ourselves to Borneo, to try and understand the enormity of the tragedy that took place there in the latter months of 1945.

In 1942-43, 2000 Australian and 750 British POWs, captured at the fall of Singapore, were shipped to Sandakan in British North Borneo to build a military airstrip for the Japanese.

Although the work was hard and the guards could be brutal, conditions were acceptable enough until mid-1943, when the Japanese secret police discovered that the Australians were involved in a subversive underground movement with local people. Arrests and executions followed, almost all the officers were transferred to another camp in at Kuching in Sarawak, and life became much harder for the remaining prisoners. Following various transfers, in the latter half of 1944 there were 2434 – dead and alive – in the camp. Initially, the death toll was not high. However, as the war progressed, rations were cut back, illnesses increased and the death toll escalated.

In January 1945, following the destruction of the airstrip by Allied bombs, the Japanese decided to make use of the POWs' labour by sending them on foot through the jungle to the west coast. However, due to Allied bombing they were halted at the small village of Ranau, 250 kilometres to the west of Sandakan. The first draft of 455, who were still reasonably fit, left in groups of 50, one day apart, in late January and early February.

Most of the prisoners were barefooted and dressed in ragged clothing. Sixteen kilometres at least had to be covered each day, through swampy crocodile-infested swamps and up precipitous mountain slopes. Rations had not been properly organised en route, and often there were none. Exhaustion from lack of food and the gruelling terrain took its toll. Anyone who could not keep up, POWs and Japanese alike, was killed. Despite this, about 75 per cent of the prisoners completed the march, which took between 14 and 18 days, only to die from starvation and appalling conditions at makeshift destination camps. By 20 June just six of the 455 who had set out from Sandakan were still alive. This march, and two that followed, became known as 'the death marches'.

Back at Sandakan, conditions had deteriorated alarmingly from January 1945 onwards and, by the end of May, there were just over 800 prisoners alive. Following an intensive bombing raid on May 27, the Japanese became convinced that invasion from the east was imminent and two days later decided to pull most of their troops into the interior. They took with them 536 emaciated POWs who were still able to walk.

The remaining 288 were left behind at the camp. Sixty-four were sent on a third march but all were so weak and ill that they died or were shot before they had covered fifty kilometres or so. The remainder left at the camp died of starvation and illness or were executed. The last man left alive, John Skinner, was beheaded at 7.15 am on 15 August, bringing the death toll at Sandakan to almost 1,400. Five hours later Emperor Hirohito announced to the world that Japan had unconditionally surrendered.

Meanwhile, on 26 June, four weeks after leaving Sandakan, 183 skeletal POWs, who had survived the second march, shuffled into a remote jungle camp 8 kilometres to the south of Ranau, in the mountainous heart of British North Borneo. Two Australians – Gunner Owen Campbell and Bombardier Dick Braithwaite – had managed to escape en route and would reach Allied hands in the nearby Philippines. The rest had died or been 'disposed of'.

A month later, there were only about 40 POWs left alive of the more than 1000 POWs who had left Sandakan for Ranau on the three death marches. By 27 August all POWs, apart from six

Australians who had successfully escaped, were dead – the final 32 murdered in cold blood, 15 of them 12 days after the war ended.

A total of 2428 prisoners died. Not one of the 641 British POWs survived. The Australian death toll was 1787, a death rate of 99.75 per cent.

It was the worst tragedy to befall Australia in WW2.

The escapes from Ranau



Godohil

Six Australians had successfully made a break from the final camp, hidden deep in a valley. The first to go on 7 July was a party of four – Private Keith Botterill, Bombardier Bill Moxham, Private Nelson Short and Gunner Francis ‘Andy’ Anderson. They were taken in by a villager and hidden in the jungle to the west of Ranau for several weeks. During this period Anderson died.

Three weeks later, warned by Takahara, a friendly Christian guard, that all were earmarked for death, Warrant Officer William Sticpewich and his friend Private Herman ‘Alby’ Reither escaped from the camp on the night of 28 July.



Sticpewich

They did not go far, concealing themselves in thickets on the hillside to the north of the camp as they watched guards searching for them the next morning. Takahara, the guard who had warned Sticpewich to flee, found them but did not betray them. The pair then moved on, seeking refuge that night in the hut of Ginssas bin Gunggas, a local Christian man, who hid them under a grass mat when a lone Japanese dropped by.

They then moved further to the west, where they were found by another Kadazandusun Christian, Dihil bin Ambilid (known as Godohil) who risked his life to give them shelter on his farm. On 8 August, while in hiding, Reither died.

The Investigation

Godohil, who sheltered Sticpewich and Reither, had three children – a daughter Ogog and two sons, Amin and Apin.

I had interviewed Amin some years ago, when I visited Godohil's house and his grave in Marakau village, just to the east of Ranau. Amin is now deceased. Apin, a former police inspector, is the last surviving child of Godohil.

After researching Sticpewich's escape in the 1990s, I became convinced that he was not telling the entire story. Godohil had told post-war investigators and a local journalist that Reither had suffered stab-like injuries to his legs that looked like bayonet wounds. There was also a deeper wound to

his abdomen that Godohil thought may have been caused by a bullet, as he had heard gunshots the night of the escape.

Sticpewich, who said little about the escape, had never mentioned these injuries. He simply reported that Reither had died of dysentery. There was no mention of being shot at, or of Reither sustaining any wounds from bayonet jabs or from any other source. Sticpewich had plenty to say about conditions in the camps and on the march, so the paucity of detail regarding his own escape, and his failure to mention Reither's injuries set me thinking.

If Reither had indeed been injured, maybe Sticpewich had killed him because he was a liability.

Over the years others interested in the Sandakan story have also wondered if Sticpewich played some part in Reither's death. One, on learning of Godohil's description of Reither's injuries, even surmised that he might have been stabbed to death.

Reither's family certainly believed something was amiss. In 1951, six years after the war had ended, they finally managed to contact the somewhat elusive Sticpewich, who told them that Reither had died of illness. The family later managed to force a face-to-face meeting so that Sticpewich could hand over Reither's bible and a letter written by his mother. After speaking to Sticpewich, they were certain that he was not telling the whole truth about Reither's death.

In August 2013, when the son of survivor Dick Braithwaite met up with Apin, Godohil's youngest son, he concluded that Apin was withholding information and that there was definitely more to the story.

There have always been question marks over Sticpewich's behaviour. Described as 'a Jack of all trades', as soon as he reached Sandakan he made himself indispensable to the Japanese and therefore avoided labour on the airstrip. By his own admission, he went to the airstrip on one occasion only – in late 1942 when all POWs, including the sick and the officers, were put to work to ensure the first stage of construction was finished in time for a grand opening.



Sticpewich shortly after his rescue

Sticpewich lived in special quarters outside the compound, not far from the Japanese barracks, and received rations far in excess of other prisoners. Evidently this preferential treatment, which included supplies of anti-malarial tablets, continued throughout his captivity. When he arrived at the last camp, having completed the gruelling four-week trek over steep mountain ranges and through swampland, he was far from a shuffling, hollow-eyed skeleton. Botterill, who failed to recognise his closest mates, recognised Sticpewich at once. Why? 'Because he was in fantastic condition'.

Although Bill Sticpewich appeared to tread a very fine line between collaboration and survival, he did keep excellent camp records and identified many Japanese responsible for the deaths of his countrymen. A consummate performer in the witness box, he was described as 'a prosecutor's dream', giving powerful and convincing testimony, which resulted in convictions. This, and his participation in lengthy searches for bodies scattered along the death march track, led to his being awarded an MBE. On the face of it, Sticpewich appeared to be a genuine war hero.

So who was Warrant Officer William Hector Sticpewich?

Hero or villain?

Sticpewich stayed on in the army after WW2, attaining the rank of major. He claimed that he had received his lieutenant's commission 'in the field' from no lesser personage than Lord Louis Mountbatten. Although he had met Mountbatten, Sticpewich was not promoted to lieutenant until 17 March 1947, by which time Lord Louis was definitely out of the field as he had been appointed Vice Roy of India the previous month.

It was the Australian army, which, although it regarded Sticpewich as an upstart, had very reluctantly promoted him, when he refused to undertake a further search for bodies in Borneo unless he received his commission. As he was the only survivor fit enough to travel and undertake an arduous trek along the death march route, the army acceded to his demands.

Despite his elevation to the officer ranks, and his MBE, his fellow survivors viewed Sticpewich as nothing more than a collaborator or 'white Jap'. So much so that, post-war, they refused to have anything to do with him. Survivor Bill Moxham, on learning shortly after his own rescue by a party of commandos that Sticpewich had survived, flew into a terrible rage, although he was at death's door. He told rescuer John 'Lofty' Hodges – 'that bastard's still alive? I'm going to kill him with my bare hands.' Hodges, disturbed by the vehemence of this threat, made sure that Moxham was kept well away from Sticpewich. Post-war, when survivors met at the ABC studios in Sydney to record a radio documentary, Moxham still wanted to kill him.



John 'Lofty' Hodges

Hodges understood the source of the fury – although the other survivors were skin and bone from prolonged starvation and terrible privation, Sticpewich was amazingly fit – so fit that within weeks of his rescue, instead of being sent home with the others for further hospitalisation, he was tramping hundreds of kilometres across the mountains of Borneo with a war graves' recovery team.

There is no doubt that Sticpewich engendered feelings of deep enmity among the other survivors. Botterill told me one day that he and Moxham had made a pact. Should either of them survive, he would pursue five Australians the pair believed were guilty of collaboration. Four of those named had died in captivity. The fifth was Sticpewich.

The pact was broken when Botterill realised that Sticpewich, who had a prodigious memory, was vital in securing convictions against the camp guards. He told me 'Sticpewich had a fantastic memory and because of that he was the best liar I have ever met. He could argue black was white and the court would believe him. To get the Japanese we needed him to lie for us in court, so me and Moxham decided we needed to get the Japs more than we needed to get Sticpewich.'



Botterill

Was Sticpewich a collaborator, as his fellow survivors maintained? It seems so. There is evidence in Sticpewich's private papers that show that he had formed a highly irregular liaison with Lieutenant Nagai, whom Sticpewich had described as "one of the worst criminals".

When Botterill discovered in 1946 that Nagai had been repatriated to Japan, he prepared a denunciation listing Nagai's many crimes, which he gave to Sticpewich to present to the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal. Although Botterill thought Sticpewich's sarcastic remark at the time, "What do you want to do? Hang every Jap in Japan" was odd, he had no idea that Sticpewich, who had met Nagai face to face while in detention at Labuan, had formed some kind of last-minute mutual alliance with him, allowing Nagai to return home. The pair met in Tokyo, cementing an alliance that was so strong that the pair contemplated writing a book together. On his return to Australia, Sticpewich maintained a correspondence with his "always best friend, Peter Nagai".

The enmity felt by Sticpewich's fellow survivors continued long after his death in 1977, when he was killed while crossing the street in Melbourne.

In 1995, fifty years after the end of the war, Sandakan survivors, their spouses and widows and other guests interested in the Sandakan story were invited to a dinner in Sydney. Among the guests was Mrs Chris Sticpewich. Nelson Short approached her table and, during one of those rare lulls in a room full of chattering people, silenced the room completely when he said 'And your husband, madam, was nothing but a collaborator'.

Not even the very born-again Christian, Owen Campbell, had a good word to say. When asked if the criticism levelled at Sticpewich by his fellow survivors was fair, he replied, ‘When I was young, my mother told me that if you can’t say anything nice about someone, don’t say anything at all – and I can’t think of a single nice thing to say about Warrant Officer Sticpewich.’

Despite these very negative revelations by the survivors, and my own research, I tried to keep an open mind in relation to Reither’s death, especially when a former POW, Eric Davis, who had been at Sandakan for some months before being transferred to Kuching Camp, told me that a member of the war graves team had confided that Sticpewich had killed Reither. However, while I had no reason to disbelieve Davis, with whom I was very friendly, I could find no evidence to support such an allegation, despite my searching through thousands of pieces of paper in various archival repositories.

The revelation

Twenty years passed. On 23 August 2017, I was at Marakau village, near Ranau, waiting for a death march trekking group to descend the nearby mountain, when Gery, son of Godohil’s daughter Ogog, and great-grandson of Godohil, approached me. He spoke fluent English. He knew who I was and had sought me out, after discovering that I was in the vicinity.



Lynette Silver interviewing Gery, Godohil's great-grandson, at the family farm

Gery said that he had something to tell me about the escape of Sticpewich and the death of his companion, whose name he didn't know. The information he wished to impart had come from Apin, the ex-police inspector and Godohil's son, who was anxious for me to know the truth, and to pass it on to the family.

The following is a combined account of two interviews. The first was conducted that day. The second was twelve months later, when I returned to visit the actual site of Reither's death and met Gery's grand-aunt.

Godohil's story

After Sticpewich and Reither escaped, Godohil was told by Ginssas bin Gunggas, who lived near a track leading to Sumaang, that two white men had escaped and were heading west, in his direction. Godohil soon found them as they were following Sumaang Creek, which flowed through his farm.

Sticpewich's companion, Reither, had sustained lacerations to the backs of his calves. He also had a deeper wound, which had punctured his abdomen, just above his hip.

Although harbouring escapees was punishable by death, Godohil gave the men water and food and led them to two small rice huts on a hillside. Under each he dug a small cave, big enough for one man to hide, and covered it with bamboo matting.

Reither, because of his injuries, was hidden beside a small spring so that he could obtain water easily. The hut concealing the able-bodied Sticpewich was just to the west of a small creek, about 200-250 metres from Reither.

The lower farm, where they were hidden, was about 2 kilometres from the farmhouse. Each day Godohil would go to the lower farm at 6.30 am, taking a different route each time and returning late afternoon. He took with him food concealed in lengths of hollow bamboo which he dropped onto the matting covering Sticpewich's hiding place.



Gery shows how Godohil concealed the hiding places

Close relatives in the small family village saw Godohil preparing the food, so they followed him. Discovering that he was hiding POWs, they became very angry, as they feared everyone would be killed if the Japanese found out.

Godohil dismissed their protests, saying, 'We must look after our fellow men', whereupon his brother-in-law hit him on the head with a hoe, slicing his head open just above his left ear. Godohil had the scar for the rest of his life. The family members then quit the village, leaving Godohil and his wife alone.

Reither's wounds became infected. Godohil obtained local herbs to treat him, but had no success. As the infection spread, Reither ran a fever, became delirious and was calling out. Sticpewich told Godohil he was worried that someone might hear Reither, and in order to save his own life and the lives of Godohil and his wife, they would have to kill him.

However, as Sticpewich had sent a message with a runner in the hope of contacting Allied forces, the death must look like an accident, in case questions were asked.



Creek bed where Reither was killed

About fifty metres from Reither's hiding place, the stream had carved out a section of the watercourse, creating a cave beneath an overhang. Sticpewich helped Reither from beneath the hut, telling him that he had to do a reconnaissance of the area, and that while he was away Reither was to wait in the cave beside the creek, sheltered from view by the overhang. He would be safe there. Sticpewich instructed Reither, 'Don't move'.

Meanwhile, Godohil was waiting nearby with two stout and heavy poles, made of belian or iron wood, which were used by his wife to pound rice to separate the husk from the grain. Standing on the bank above above Reither's hiding place, the pair used the poles to collapse the overhang, suffocating him.

They left the body where it was. Pigs discovered it and what was left of Reither's remains were later moved for burial by Godohil in a spot near the old Ranau POW Camp. When a war graves

recovery team found the new gravesite some months later, they noted that the remains were incomplete.

Later, when recounting the story of his role in the escape to investigators, Godohil said that the lacerations ‘looked like’ bayonet wounds. He did not mean that they had been actually caused by a bayonet. The lacerations were deep and penetrating, and he thought they were probably caused when Reither fell onto sharp sticks, possibly cut bamboo, while they were on the run.

No questions were ever asked about the circumstances leading to Reither’s death, or even where he had actually died. After the war, Sticpewich had a house built for Godohil as a means of thanking his accomplice.

Desperate situations call for desperate measures

Murder or manslaughter is not unknown when people in hiding are confronted by the very real possibility of detection by the enemy.

In Nazi-occupied Europe, Jewish women hiding in secret attics, in concealed basements or behind false walls, were forced to smother their crying babies for fear that the entire family or group would be discovered, with disastrous consequences.

In February 1942, civilians, military personnel and British soldiers who had deserted as Singapore fell, were on an evacuation ship, *Rooseboom*, when it was torpedoed in the Indian Ocean. Survivors took to a life boat where, as days wore on with no hope of relief in sight, a group of deserters began killing the boat’s other occupants by cutting their throats, and drinking their blood. Despite their bloodthirsty fight for survival, all perished, leaving a lone woman and a Scottish drummer to tell the tale.

Borneo too saw men reduced to savages. Escapee Dick Braithwaite confided to his family that the situation became desperate on the second march. With the last vestiges of civilised behaviour breaking down, starving men killed each other for small amounts of food.

Furthermore, the overwhelming need to survive brought to an end the mateship that had hitherto sustained the other four escapees who were in hiding near Ranau. As Botterill confessed, ‘It was every man for himself. We watched each other like hawks, in case someone got one more rice grain than another. We were like wild animals.’

And in order to survive, all six survivors were involved in a murder or a killing of some kind.

Braithwaite killed a lone Japanese soldier that he encountered on the track, shortly after his escape from the death march column. He beat him to death with a piece of wood.

While on the run, Owen Campbell left his ill companion and fellow escapee, Ted Skinner, to forage for food in the jungle. He returned to find that had cut his own throat with a piece of tin from cans of fish that they were carrying for the Japanese when they escaped. Unfortunately, he did not make a good job of it and Campbell, as an act of mercy, had to finish him off.

Campbell in later years refused to talk publicly about Skinner's death. He would only say that things that had happened were so terrible that, if told, they would make your hair go white overnight.

At the urging of Nelson Short, Keith Botterill and Bill Moxham agreed to kill 'Andy' Anderson who was suffering from severe dysentery and was calling out in his delirium. At the time of the murder, on 28 July 1945, they were in hiding, in a deep gully to the west of the main Ranau-Kota Belud track. Terrified his cries would be heard, they picked up a lump of wood and hit him over the head. They buried the body but pigs found it, necessitating a reburial using stones. With the remains savaged by pigs, any damage to Andy's skull went unremarked by the recovery team. For years, Botterill was haunted by nightmares, crying out in his sleep 'We had to kill him', and studiously avoided answering any questions about Anderson.

However, disturbing though these deaths are, all were spur of the moment killings. The murder of Reither, however, was ruthless, premeditated and very cunningly planned.

Furthermore, having been to see where the events unfolded, I do not believe that that Reither was killed because he was calling out in his delirium. I believe this was merely an excuse given to Godohil, who then agreed to be Sticpewich's accomplice. The farm, even today, is remote, and it was a long way from any track used by Japanese or locals. The place where Reither was murdered can only be reached after a long walk from the nearest habitation or a drive across paddocks in a four-wheel drive.

I suspect, with Sticpewich hoping to reach Allied troops, whom he knew had landed on the west coast, that Reither had become an encumbrance. There was no way he could undertake such a long journey. This is a view shared by ex-POW Billy Young, who was at Sandakan until 1943, when he was transferred to Singapore for trying to escape. He is the only person still alive who was at the camp and who saw Sticpewich in action. He remembers Sticpewich, who did not work on the airfield himself, giving to the Japanese the names of fellow POWs who had not reported to work. He also controlled the camp gambling and wielded enormous power over the rank and file. According to Billy, Sticpewich's self interest outstripped all other considerations, even to the extent of killing someone who had become a liability to his escape plans.

In his letter to the Reither family, Sticpewich said that, had the medicine arrived a day earlier, Reither would still be alive, thereby giving the impression that his death was simply a matter of bad timing.

Did Sticpewich ever feel any remorse for murdering a man he called a friend? We will never know, as he left no record in relation to Reither's death, other than the barest details. His reluctance to meet the Reither family is telling, as is the revelation by his confessor, Father Brendan Rodgers, himself a former POW, that 'Sticpewich was a very troubled man.' There is some speculation that Sticpewich, the ultimate survivor, who managed to be run over by not one vehicle but two, was so troubled that his death was no accident.

Sticpewich and Godohil killed Reither on the morning of 8 August. Later that same day, the message sent by Sticpewich bore fruit, not from troops on the far away west coast but from an

Australian Special Operations team, close at hand. Inserted behind the lines into British North Borneo, they had arrived the previous day at Lansat, to the north of Ranau, after an arduous five-week trek through the jungle. The agent brought with him food and potentially life-saving medicine, but it was too late for Reither. The following day Sticpewich was led a relatively short distance to safety by his rescuers.

These events had weighed heavily on the mind and conscience of Godohil's last surviving son. As an ex-police inspector, he understood the gravity of his father's action and also the implications of speaking out and admitting that Godohil engaged in pre-meditated murder. Given that he was a local hero, feted and admired for his bravery in sheltering the escapees, the decision to tell the truth after 75 years is remarkable. The loss of face for the family in their small community will be substantial. They are to be admired for taking such a courageous stand in the interests of truth, and for allowing the Reither family to have some closure.



Reither with his mother

War is a very grim business. It brings out the worst and best in people. Irrespective of what motivated the survivors, or whether all the murders were justified, the fact that they were prepared to kill a fellow human being in order to survive demonstrates just how desperate the situation had become.

There is no question that this very dark side of the Sandakan story is shocking, and that some may not welcome revelations that rock our deeply ingrained and idealised concept of mateship.

However, it is a story that needs to be told.

Not only is it an integral part of our wartime history, it underlines the reality, unpalatable though it may be, of decisions that need to be made when a situation becomes a matter of life, or death.

Almost 75 years on, Sandakan is still giving up its secrets.

Lynette Silver

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