

# NEWS FROM BORNEO

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*Unknown US Marine saves a baby at Kabul airport*

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## **Hello everyone,**

Time is marching on, albeit probably far too slowly for anyone in lockdown! A lot has happened in the world since the last newsletter in June – the dreadful delta covid variant, earthquakes and volcanoes and the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, which leads me to our ‘feature’ photo for this bulletin.

The image appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. I was struck by the contrast of the tenderness on the face of the grimy, battle-worn marine and the softness of the baby’s skin against the background of dirt and dust and razor wire at Kabul airport.

It is, I think, one of the great images of war, on a par with the one taken by George Silk in WW2 of the ‘fuzzy wuzzy angel’ Raphael Oimbari leading the wounded and partially blinded digger, George ‘Dick’ Whittington, to safety near Gona, in Papua, on Christmas Day 1942 (see photo

below) We know what happened to Whittington - sadly he died of bush typhus the following February - and to Oimbari, who died in 1996 and campaigned for the fuzzy wuzzy angels to be recognized. But what of the baby and the marine?

There is a great deal on the internet about the identification of another marine holding another baby passed to him across the wire, but nothing about this marine. Who is he? Did he survive the terrorist bomb that killed so many of his comrades and civilians, shortly after the photo was taken? Did the baby get to a safe destination and was he reunited with his parents?

I guess we will never know but, if nothing else, these two images, taken almost 80 years apart, remind us that, even in the midst of war, there is room for compassion.



**Covid update:** As I have already mentioned covid, let's get it over with. I hope that you are all OK, have been double vaccinated, and that your lives have not been too disrupted by all the lockdowns and restrictions. Being retired, it does not affect us much, apart from no visits to Sabah. We also have a large house and garden and plenty of bush, including the national park, in our LGA. In any case, I have been busy working on a new book, so that keeps me out of mischief for at least five hours every afternoon. Bryce Courtney once famously said that it is 'bum glue' that gets books written, and he is certainly right! To make sure he was not distracted, he had his desk in front of a window that faced a brick wall. I don't go to those lengths, and have a nice view out over the garden.

The numbers of cases in Sabah were not too good, but are slowly going down. All our friends seem to have been vaccinated and look forward to Sabah opening up to the rest of the world. However, Sabah does its vaccinations in far greater style than here, where you line up, get jabbed and wave goodbye - though my daughter did receive a Lindt chocolate when she had her jab, along with a bottle of water. I was just pleased to be vaccinated!

Tham sent me a photo of himself taken at his vaccination centre in Kota Kinabalu. The sign he is holding says 'I am vaccinated', and all in front of a backdrop of the highest peak on Mt Kinabalu. By the way, in the background are distant mountains and clouds, not the sea. Tham has also been growing tapioca on his farm to feed the poor. Tapioca was a staple diet for local people during the Japanese occupation, and kept them from starving. It also helped keep our POWs alive. It grows fast and you can eat the young leaves as a vegetable as well as the tuberous roots, which are quite starchy and make good chips! Its leaf looks a bit like marijuana.



**KWM:** Some of you have been asking how the Kundasang War Memorial is faring. It has been closed for some time, but Sevee, following the death of his wife Datuk Irene, is up there pretty much full time, keeping the gardens alive and propagating new plants. Here are photos Sevee sent of the Australian garden, with its recently mown green lawn, and Sevee tending to his mini nursery. He has a young and very willing autistic lad to help him.



Part of the Australian garden.

Sevee with cuttings ready for planting.

The Kundasang Gardens lead me neatly into my next topic:

**Memorials (and commemorations)!** I have had enquiries recently from members of the public, asking how many Sandakan memorials are in Australia. The answer is, quite a few! Apart from commemorative walkways etc, we have 10 major memorials that I know of. The first one was built at North Turramurra, near me, back in 1989, and took the form of a broken sandstone column, signifying that life had been cut short. With no gatherings allowed because of you-know-what, Neil and I, allowed to travel in our LGA, visited it on 15 August (Sandakan Day and also VJ Day), and again on the Sunday closest to 27 August, the day on which the final fifteen POWs still alive were murdered at Ranau and when POW relatives would normally have gathered in Sydney and elsewhere to hold a commemoration. Our friends in Sabah recognized Sandakan Day with various speakers and visuals, in a 'live conversation' video link. I did not receive word of this event in time to let you all know, but you can still watch it, if interested, on this link <http://sandakanday.sabahtourism.com/>

You might recall in the last news bulletin that Maureen Devereaux visited the Turramurra memorial for ANZAC Day and that the photo I included showed a rather green memorial, as algae was growing on the sandstone. Well, the local North Turramurra Action Group noticed too, and has applied for a grant to remove it, put up a new sign at the front and add a story board, for which I supplied the text. At the group's urging the local council has revamped the garden and planted a new red camellia, to enhance the area, so the memorial is looking more 'loved' than previously. Once cleaned, it is hoped to hold a service there on ANZAC Day next year.



*Memorial at North Turramurra, with the revamped gardens and a new red camellia behind the memorial*

Six other memorials, all identical, were installed by the Sandakan foundation in the 1980s at Burwood (Sydney), Wagga Wagga, Tamworth, Maitland (all NSW), Bendigo in Victoria and New Farm, in Brisbane. Men whose next-of-kin lived in the various areas are commemorated on these regional memorials, with Tasmanians and South Australians included on the one at Bendigo. However, Jenny Sandercock, whose father-in-law died at Sandakan, initiated a special memorial for South Australians on the Memorial Walk behind Government House, in Adelaide. There are two memorials for West Australians - one at Boyup Brook, a small country town about 270 kms south-east of Perth, organized by Ted McLachlan, a former member of the 8th Division's 2/15th Field Regiment, and one in Kings Park, Perth, erected by Sandakan relatives.



Adelaide memorial

Another memorial of note is in NSW at Lismore, in St Andrew's Church, which pays tribute to the men of the Richmond Valley who lost their lives at Sandakan or on the marches. Note the three sets of brothers – the Noonan twins, who died just a week apart at the Last Camp; the O'Connors, who died at Sandakan and on the 2nd march; and George and Charles Frederick Rankin, who both died at Sandakan within ten days of each other.



Reuben O'Connor was a bit of a lad. Rather than remain simply a name on a plaque, I thought you might like to know a bit more about him!

He was the second of three boys, born in Lismore on 4 March 1923, to Reuben and Muriel O'Connor. While employed as a fruit salesman, Reuben Jnr, aged 18, put his age up to 20 and enlisted in the AIF at Victoria Barracks Sydney, in May 1941, on the same day as his older brother, Arthur, a labourer. Despite Reuben's youthful looks, his age was not queried.

The O'Connor brothers, posted to 2/19 Infantry Battalion, sailed to Singapore at the end of July on the same ship as their home-town GP, Dr John Oakeshott, who had enlisted a fortnight after Reuben.

Although Reuben had joined the army expecting to engage in military action, he didn't reach the front line as he had engaged in a different kind of action, prior to embarkation. Symptoms of his

extra-curricular activities soon became obvious, and he was admitted to the ship's hospital, where he came under the professional care of the kind and much respected Dr Oakeshott.

In Singapore, he was taken to Tanglin Military Hospital for further treatment and then to Johor Bahru, in Malaya, where Oakeshott was stationed with 2/10 Australian General Hospital. When finally pronounced fit enough to resume duties, Reuben was transferred from the infantry and posted to Oakeshott's unit as an orderly, possibly so the doctor could keep an eye on him. All three men became POWs on 15 February 1942, following Singapore's surrender.

In April 1943, Oakeshott, his former patient Reuben, and brother Arthur were placed on the 500-strong E Force draft for Sandakan. Reuben became POW number 1848. Arthur, who was in front of him in the line when the numbers were assigned, was POW 1847.

Dr Oakeshott and Reuben left on the 2nd march on 29 May 1945. Arthur was not with them as he had died in the camp in February. Reuben had passed the halfway mark and was traversing Gumbaron Hill, just two miles from the large staging post at the Malio River, when he died on 15 June. The Japanese recorded that cause of death was malaria but recovery teams, who found his remains near another POW, noted that the body identified as that of Reuben O'Connor showed signs of torture. Oakeshott, who may have been able to shed some light on this suspected atrocity, did not survive the war.

Reuben's remains were buried in Labuan. His yet-to-be formally identified companion (watch this space!), whose remains were also recovered, was buried beside him. Reuben was just 22 years old.



*Reuben, aged 18*



*The refurbished gravestone honouring William Smith*

In the December 2020 bulletin, I featured the tragic story of William Samuel Charles Smith, 2/19 Battalion, whose name is also on the Lismore memorial. To recap — in 1937 his baby son James died at birth, followed closely by his wife Mona Rae, aged 17. William was murdered with 34 others at Mile 55, to the west of the Tangkul Crossing on 7 June 1945, while on the 2nd death march. I don't know if someone who belongs to him read the bulletin, but when Bill McDermott, who spotted the headstone in the Ballina graveyard, returned recently, he discovered that someone had certainly been to visit, and that the grave was looking spic and span.

## **The Scholarship Girls:**

Sabah (and indeed all of Malaysia) has been having a difficult time with quite extended lockdowns and restricted movement orders. However, things are gradually improving and from

October 1 there is an ease on restrictions, provided people are double vaccinated and live in a zone where vaccinations have reached a mandatory level. Inter-district travel is still somewhat restricted.

Our girls are currently in their villages, but Form 6 students have been requested to return to school to prepare for coming exams. Three of our senior girls (Majilah, Rozidah and Sonia) who sat for their 2020 Form 6 exams somewhat belatedly, did well. So did Wendy, who was in Form 5. Congratulations girls, all of you, for your good results in what has been a very difficult time for you all!

Sonia has been admitted to the University Malaysia Sabah to study multimedia. Rosidah is awaiting her admission to university and Majilah has decided not to pursue tertiary study at this time and has returned home.

Like many churches in NSW, Victoria and the ACT, St Michael's in Sandakan is having to make do with on-line services but, hopefully, will reopen for business as usual in the 3rd week of October. Thank you to Vennie, our Scholarship Trust co-ordinator, for this update.

**On the trail:** Not a week goes past without a POW family contacting me for information about a relative. It is tragic that, almost 80 years on, so many people still know nothing, or little, about the fate of their prisoners of war – which is precisely why I subtitled my book 'A Conspiracy of Silence'. A recent contact was the family of Les Hardy, who had discovered the story of Les and Wally Read, recorded in my book. To refresh your memories, this is what I wrote:

*On 8 July 1945, a road-mending gang, made up of coolies and Australian POWs, was working near the 111 mile at Ranau when an air raid started. The Japanese guards scuttled into a nearby hole, while five Australians and Janan, a worker from Kampong Matang, dived for cover in some long grass. Now out of sight of the guards, Janan gave the prisoners some cooked rice. Ambulance-man Private Wally Read, aged 25, asked him to look after his leather wallet, containing a photo of five children, on the back of which was also written the name of Driver Les Hardy, a 41-year-old ambulance driver who had died in Sandakan on 19 May. Handing over the wallet, Read, who spoke a little Malay, said, 'Hold these things for me until I collect them. If I don't collect them you will know that the Japanese have killed me.' As soon as the raid was over the Australians and the coolies went their separate ways. They did not meet again for, by 15 July, when the rice ration was further reduced, most of the survivors were so weak that rice-carrying and road work ceased.*

Wally Read did not survive to collect his wallet. He died a week later, on 15 July. In 1946, the wallet was brought to Colonel Jackson, an Australian who was at Ranau rewarding locals who had assisted POWs. Jahan identified Wally from pay book photos Jackson had brought with him.

From previous research I knew that the wallet and photos would have been returned to Wally's family, as the policy was to send any personal items, traceable to an individual, to next-of-kin. Any non-personal item recovered from the camps or along the track was logged and destroyed, including paybooks, clothing, rucksacks, eating utensils etc. Relatives often ask me how to retrieve the government owned items, but sadly all are long gone. All personal property that could not be traced to its owner was also destroyed, including bags of false teeth.

Wally and Les may have formed a close friendship because of their medical links, or maybe Wally had looked after Les, who died in Sandakan in May 1945. Whatever the reason, Wally had a photo of five children, with Les's name on the back. Les's grandson Andrew confirmed that Les had five children, 3 girls and 2 boys. The youngest boy was about 12 months old when Les went off to war. Andrew also recalled that there was a photo of Les with the five children, taken just before he left Taree to go overseas. It sounds as if the photo in the wallet was the same picture.

My next task was to find the Read family, to ascertain if the wallet (and photo) still exist. I established that Wally had a son who was very much alive in 2003, but the phone number I traced is no longer connected! However, when covid lets me travel out of my LGA to consult records not on line I will renew my efforts.

The Hardy family is trying to ascertain who has its copy of THE photo, but in the meantime, to put a face to a name, here is Les with his baby son and one of his daughters. I'll let you know how I get on with my search for the original photo - maybe this story will have a happy ending.



*Les with two of his children*

**Everything has its price:** I was watching Antique Roadshow (2018 series) recently that featured a woman who had brought along medals belonging to her uncle Robert Turkington, RAF reserve. He was a highly decorated Hurricane and Spitfire pilot, killed when his plane crashed in Italy, just before the Pacific war ended.

The velvet case was full of medals, which the expert valued at between 20,000 and 30,000 pounds. However the woman stated she would never part with them because they were too precious, and of such great sentimental value. She added that she was keen to have her uncle recognised, because he wasn't on any memorial.

The alarm bells went off – died during the war and not on any memorial? What a load of old cobblers, I thought. I ran a brief check and discovered that he has a marked grave, for a start, in Padua in Italy, with an inscription chosen by his parents. He is also on a memorial in the UK, and there are stained glass windows in his memory in a church.

I wondered how much recognition the lady wanted. He was certainly an air ace but was not killed in battle, as the war in Europe was long over. Sadly, he died when his Spitfire developed mechanical trouble on a training flight in Italy and crashed as he attempted to return to base.

While ferreting around for more information I spotted an article in a Bristol newspaper and in the *Belfast Telegraph*. It appears that, shortly after the Antiques Roadshow segment was filmed in 2017, but before it was screened in 2018, the 'precious' medals that were never to be sold were auctioned in November 2017 by Spinks, for 22,000 pounds. The woman allegedly told the press that the proceeds were to be used to obtain more recognition for her uncle.



I wonder how many viewers, like me, admired his story and agreed that the medals meant too much to the family to ever sell them. Not surprisingly, when the program went to air there was no mention that the never-to-be-sold medals had been auctioned off to the highest bidder. I'd love to know how much 'recognition' was purchased with that 22,000 pounds. Certainly goes to show that anything, including sentiment, has a price.

**Buy-a-Smile update:** As I mentioned last edition, we are marking time with the planned hare-lip operations until travel bans are lifted in Sabah, allowing the surgeons and patients to travel. However, because of the covid crisis, Willie Teo, who coordinates our hare-lip cases in Labuan, has been keeping an eye on some of our families in need, and one of our Australian supporters has generously earmarked donations to provide practical help. Willie was able to use some of this money to supply much-needed basic groceries, such as rice, eggs, salt, sugar and oil to one family, who were most grateful for the assistance. Willie also checks on our buy-a-smile kids, whose scars are now practically invisible. Here are Hafiz and Norhan!



*Children with some of the goodies*



*Hafiz*



*and Norhan. Isn't she just gorgeous!*

**POW information:** There have been a couple of developments in recent months with POW information made available to the public. The first is the completion of a data base on all Australians taken prisoner by the Germans – more than 8,000 of them. The work was done by Paul Elliott, husband of my dear friend and research colleague Di, who died last year from brain cancer. It has taken Paul ten years to complete, as much of it was undertaken in his spare time while he was still working. Di was busy with some research and to keep Paul occupied suggested that he might like to begin combing records to compile a list of Australians in German Camps. (Di and I already had information on the Japanese POWs.) Well it is finished! And Paul is generously donating the records to the Department of Veterans' Affairs, so that they can be made available to the public, hopefully with basic information online. His work is amazingly detailed and, apart from listing each name and service number, it includes where and when captured, the camps the POW was in and escape details, if applicable. Paul also uncovered some amazing stories.

I decided that Paul's efforts should not pass unnoticed, and contacted the *Sydney Morning Herald*, which ran a great story (see online version, below). If you want to find out information on any Australian in a German POW camp, just contact me, and I will either send the information to you or refer you to Paul.

## New POW research highlights extraordinary wartime stories

[https://www.smh.com.au/national/new-pow-research-highlights-extraordinary-wartime-stories-20210805-p58g47.html?ref=rss&utm\\_medium=rss&utm\\_source=rss\\_feed](https://www.smh.com.au/national/new-pow-research-highlights-extraordinary-wartime-stories-20210805-p58g47.html?ref=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_source=rss_feed)

Details surrounding Australian prisoners of war held in Europe during the Second World War have been collated for the first time, concluding a marathon research project. The work was completed by researcher Paul Elliott, who previously volunteered with his late wife, Dianne Elliott, in the family history section of the Australian War Memorial.



POWs at Stalag Luft III camp for captured air force servicemen in Lower Silesia (later Poland), during World War II, circa 1944. GETTY

“I asked Dianne if there was much at the AWM about POWs in Europe and she said she didn't think so,” Mr Elliott said. “Then she brought home a list of stuff she had found. She said ‘There's a start for you’. That was 2008. I typed all those names into a spreadsheet and went from there. It wasn't full time because I was working at that stage, but after I retired I got back into it again.”

The data includes some 8000 Australian Army names and POWs who served in the Royal Australian Air Force and the Royal Australian Navy who were held captive in Germany and Italy.

It states when an individual was captured, their service number, where they were held, and if they were released.



Joseph Herman of Brisbane at a PoW exhibition in Sydney, 1976. FAIRFAX

He said the research had thrown up some stories long forgotten. “One gem was the story of a pilot in a Halifax bomber,” he said. “In those days the parachute was one they had to sit on and they became very uncomfortable and a lot of pilots took their parachutes off.

“This particular airman [Joseph Herman from Queensland] got hit by flak and he was blown out of the pilot’s seat at night. He went sailing down and on the way down he crashed into one of his other blokes [pilot officer and mid-upper gunner John Vivash from Coogee] who had a parachute and grabbed hold of him and they both floated down to the ground.”

Only three of the seven aircrew from the Halifax survived. Herman and Vivash suffered burns and injuries. They avoided capture for five days before a farm where they sought help handed them over to police. They were interrogated by the gestapo and sent as POWs to Stalag Luft III, south-east of Berlin.



German POW identification card for Joseph Bernard Herman, 1944. FAIRFAX



John Martin Vivash who parachuted from a burning Halifax bomber. NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF AUSTRALIA

Also in Mr Elliott's research are the names of 42 Australians on the Italian troop ship *Nino Bixio* carrying some 3000 allied POWs from Libya to camps in Italy. The ship, thought to be supplying armaments, was torpedoed on August 17, 1942 by the British submarine HMS *Turbulent*, which resulted in the loss of about 10 per cent of prisoners.

Secretary for the Department of Veterans' Affairs Liz Cosson said the research was "wonderfully detailed". "While this information has been previously published, it has never been collated like this before and will make a huge difference to other people looking to undertake research on Second World War POWs," she said.

"The Department of Veterans' Affairs is looking at ways this research can supplement their existing published information related to service."

Robyn van Dyke, the head of the research centre at the War Memorial, said there was nothing available on the internet to enable research in the area. "It will be a great help to people researching what camps their relatives were in and the dates," she said. "Sometimes prisoner of war information isn't that extensive in the service record. There is very little online to help people in this area."



Paul Elliott - fantastic effort!

In case you think that the story of the bloke being caught in free-fall by his mate is a bit far-fetched, it is definitely true!

The other information on POWs concerns those who served with 2/18 Battalion. Family members have been working hard for months to put a concise history on line (my job) and also a nominal roll, taken from *A History of the 2/18th Infantry Battalion, AIF*, that Di and I compiled a few years ago. If you are interested in the 2/18th, just go to <https://218battalion.org.au/> Copies of the book, which has extensive POW lists, showing where they went etc, are still available, through the Battalion Association. (see website for contact details)

**Follow up on W O John Kinder:** I am sure you will remember that the RAAF has named its Forward Combat Survival Training base at Townsville after our lone Sandakan airman, John Kinder. There were two feature articles (one by me) in *Airforce News*, which went to press too late to be included in the last bulletin. They are no longer on line, so I have added them to the end of this bulletin if you are interested in reading them.

**It pays to pick the right tool for the job!** I am going to finish this edition on a light note, in the hope that it might dispel the covid blues, at least for a short while.

The Queen, on her official birthday in June, attended a function at St Austell held in her honour at which there was a birthday cake for her to cut. She was handed a knife to do the honours but before she did so she spied the Lord-Lieutenant of Cornwall, in his beautiful dress uniform, complete with a sword. Obviously H M thought his sword vastly superior to an ordinary everyday knife, although polished to a high shine. Before anyone could do anything, the Queen 'borrowed' the sword and proceeded to cut the cake. This is when she ran into trouble – it wasn't a regular sword but a curved one, similar to those carried by the cavalry in battle - fine for chopping off heads of the enemy but a very poor substitute for the humble knife. Watched by Kate and Camilla (and a zillion others, world wide) she failed to make any impression on the cake, at all (see pic 1)



She must have heard Neil, who was watching this drama unfold on TV, yelling 'Turn it over, stupid Queen', because she did (next pic) and managed to stab the icing. With the sharp side now up, fortunately and as usual, she was wearing her gloves. The moral of this story: do not deviate from a script that has been worked out by some lackey months before and, if you do, make sure you have the right implement!

I hope that you are all managing OK and that life will be able to return to something like normal before too long. If you haven't been vaccinated (and I hope you all have) DO IT NOW!

I don't know when it will be safe for us to return to Sabah – vaccination rates there are over 60 per cent now, and (take note anti-vaxers) it is MANDATORY for anyone working in hotels, restaurants and anyone associated with the tourism industry to be double vaccinated. I had a call this morning from the GM of the Hyatt in Kota Kinabalu – every single employee in the hotel is double vaccinated, and guests have to be too. I understand that the same rule applies to shops etc as well.

At least the lockdown has motivated me to begin a new book – a POW story with a difference.

I have also been busy tracing the story of a lone Australian who went down on a ship in the north Atlantic - a tale of incredible gallantry. I'll tell you about it next time.

Next time may not be until after Christmas, so if you do not hear from me before then, I hope you are able to spend Christmas with your family and friends and maybe even travel interstate!

I have just ordered a new mask (see below) – it seems a great improvement on the normal range on offer!

Cheers (literally!)

Lynette (and Neil)



**The Kinder articles:**

Jungle training tribute for our Sandakan hero



*Historian and researcher of the Sandakan death marches during WWII in Borneo, Lynette Silver, centre, visits the jungle training area of the CSTS with CSTS Instructor WOFF Shane Grist and CO SGNLDR Simon Longley, right. Photo: CPL Veronica O'Hara*

**Air Force's Combat Survival Training School has ensured the WWII actions of WOFF John Kinder will always be remembered, CPL Veronica O'Hara writes.**

For Courage shown by the only RAAF POW on the infamous Sandakan death march 76 years ago, WOFF John Kinder has been honoured by the school that teaches survivability to ADF aircrew.

The Paluma jungle area near Townsville where CSTS conducts training, known as a forward operating base or FOB, is now referred to as "FOB Kinder".

After visiting the area, researcher and author Lynette Silver said the FOB Kinder jungle was comparable to the Sandakan-Ranau route.

"I was quite struck by how similar they were – you'd think you were on that mountainside in the middle of Borneo, on the parts of the track where you can still walk," Mrs Silver said.



*WOFF John Kinder, of 1SQN, was one of 2400 Allied POWs held in the Sandakan camp until 1945.*

The grand-nephew of WOFF Kinder, John Pope, said it was nice to know the name lived on but also a tribute for the nearly 2500 POWs forgotten in Borneo.

"I've been there and walked in his footsteps. I used to think he could have escaped, but where do you go in the jungle?" Mr Pope said.

"It was a demanding and gruelling few years for him."

Mrs Silver believes WOFF Kinder was one of the most heroic figures to come out of the Sandakan story.

"You'd have to be brave to stand up to someone who's wielding a rifle, putting yourself physically between one of your men and the aggressor then take their punishment, knowing that every time you stood up to them, you're going to get belted or worse," she said.

CSTS aims to instil the tenacity and will to survive an isolating incident in ADF aviators.

Experiences of POWs from the Korean War sparked the establishment of combat survival training by Air Force.

CO CSTS SQNLDR Simon Longley said their training methods were born from those who endured hardships difficult to imagine.

“Despite facing extreme adversity, WOFF Kinder was able to rally the troops and care for them up until his death,” SQNLDR Longley said.

The death toll would have been much higher on the marches, according to Mrs Silver, if POWs didn’t have the will to survive.

Even so, of the camp’s nearly 2500 prisoners, the six Australians who escaped were the sole survivors.

“The indomitability of the human spirit is very inspirational, especially if you saw what it’s like over there,” she said. “But the biggest thing was they also had each other.”

While they didn’t know where they were going or what was at the end, Mrs Silver said the starving prisoners focused on putting one foot after the other, to hopefully last the day.

“They thought if they got to the end of this nightmare, perhaps the war would finish and they’d go home,” she said.

“If they had any idea what was in store, they wouldn’t have walked another step.”

A lot of the skills POWs had were from scouts or working on the land. They had to mend and make do, especially during the Depression, but a lot of these skills don’t widely exist today.

“I think he’d be quite surprised we have to teach people how to do this stuff these days,” Mrs Silver said.

One of eight camp masters and a lone aviator among AIF soldiers, WOFF Kinder was only one of two that the rank and file would obey, which Mrs Silver said gave an idea of the way he approached leadership.

“When you’re given the job of distributing rations in a POW camp where food is getting scarcer, everybody is watching everybody else like a hawk to make sure no one gets a grain of rice more than they’ve got,” she said.

“That means he was fair-minded and wasn’t giving food to mates on the side.”

After WOFF Kinder’s death, his friend and unofficial deputy, LBDR William Moxham, an artilleryman who only obeyed an order if he felt like it, buried the aviator with a cross. WOFF Kinder was the only one to die on the march with a marked grave, according to Mrs Silver.

In Labuan War Cemetery among rows of unmarked graves, WOFF Kinder’s bronze plaque reads “His Duty Nobly Done – Ever Remembered”.

“I think you’d be hard put to find a better epitaph. He is very deserving of it – for showing leadership, bravery, compassion and selflessness,” Mrs Silver said.



Mr Pope felt his uncle missed out on the chance to survive because his promotion to officer wasn't received on time, and he would have been moved to Kuching instead of doing the march from the Sandakan camp.

His mother and grandmother searched everywhere, even meeting the returning troopships, desperately hoping he'd be on one.

"Nobody knew what had happened to him for a long time, even after the war ended," Mr Pope said.

"It wasn't just the men lost, it destroyed so many families."

Mr Pope's mother died three years before Mrs Silver's book on the Sandakan tragedy was released in 1998, never knowing exactly what had happened to her brother.

WOFF Kinder was a boxer before joining Air Force and his trophies made him a hero in Mr Pope's young eyes.

"The huge trophies and photo albums from Malaya at my grandmother's house made me curious as to what happened to him," Mr Pope said.

"It's been a good journey to find out."

Continuing their homage to Australian POWs, CSTS also named their conference room The Sandakan Room, displaying a photograph of three of the six escapees and four Borneo locals who assisted them.

## A leader who stood up for all his men Lynette Silver



*On June 10, 1945, WOFF John Kinder died as a POW at Ranau. After the war, his remains were recovered and reburied at Labuan War Cemetery.*

WOFF John Kinder learned to fly and joined RAAF in 1935. He posted with 1SQN to Kota Bharu, Malaya in 1941 and was shot down while attempting to repel the Japanese invasion in December.

After admission to hospital in Singapore with badly burned feet, he became ill with a liver abscess and when his squadron was evacuated to Java he was left behind. Discharged shortly before Singapore fell, he was handed a rifle and became an unofficial member of 2/18 Infantry Battalion.

When members of the battalion were placed on the 1500-strong B Force draft to Sandakan in July 1942, WOFF Kinder went with them. Although his commission was approved, there were administrative delays and official word was not sent before Singapore fell. Without the privilege of officer rank, he laboured alongside AIF soldiers on airfield construction.

He planned to escape with one of the Japanese planes parked at the airstrip, but the opportunity never arose.

In mid-January 1945, Allied air raids put the airstrip out of commission, making the prisoners redundant and their rice ration was cut. Subsisting on a starvation diet and no medical supplies, the prisoners began to quickly die.

Orders were given for 455 of the fittest prisoners, split in groups of about 50, to march 250km across the mountains to Jesselton (now Kota Kinabalu), in the first of three death marches.

One of only two camp masters the prisoners respected, WOFF Kinder left Sandakan with the seventh group on the first death march.

Accompanied by camp guards and soldiers, prisoners carried Japanese supplies, as well as their own, over difficult terrain with little shelter, few food dumps, no medical assistance, and no pity for those who couldn't keep up.

A quarter of the POWs who set out did not survive, either from lack of food and illness or being killed by the guards bringing up the rear.

Throughout the journey, WOFF Kinder stood up to guards picking on those who weren't fast enough and was beaten for his trouble.

Because of increased Allied air activity over Jesselton, survivors from the first five groups, all Australians, were halted at the village of Ranau, 250km from Sandakan.

Groups six to nine, originally consisting of 90 Australians and 100 British but now numbering 138, were ordered to remain at Paginatan, because of a lack of accommodation.

The Japanese soldiers proceeded to Jesselton as ordered and beatings from camp guards began again.

Poor food, illness and harsh treatment took a toll on those who had been sapped by the march, and they died like flies.

After a month, about 50 were still alive. On March 26, the Paginatan survivors were ordered to move to Ranau, where the death toll had relieved the accommodation shortage. With two of Sandakan's most vicious guards in control of WOFF Kinder's small band, it was a five-day nightmare.

Setting off at 7am, the POWs had a set distance to cover each day and guards beat anyone who lagged behind. Guards traded the POWs' blankets, boots and clothing with the natives for pigs and sweet potatoes, but prisoners saw very little of it – a few sweet potatoes and once, the skin of a pig.

On March 30, WOFF Kinder and about 40 men reached Ranau. The rest had either dropped dead or been killed by guards.

The POWs' hut, sited alongside Japanese barracks and an airfield, was under constant bombardment by Allied planes. About a month later, the remaining 56 were moved north-west to an abandoned hut in the jungle.

On June 9, 21 were still alive but only 10 on their feet. WOFF Kinder had pulled through the dysentery epidemic, only to come down with malaria and another bout of dysentery. LBDR William Moxham knew a man might shake off dysentery, malaria or beri-beri, but not two together with malnutrition, tropical ulcers and parasitic worms added in.

Early the next day, WOFF Kinder died in his arms.

He summoned the energy to bury the body of the man he so admired, marking the spot with a wooden cross carved with WOFF Kinder's name and the date, giving the aviator the distinction of being the only person who died on the marches or at Ranau to have a marked grave.

Later that day, 10 POWs who could still walk were transferred to another camp 8km south of Ranau. Two died during the day and eight were massacred soon after.

When survivors from a second march arrived from Sandakan in late June, they found only six men remained from the first march.

During July, four POWs from this camp managed to escape, where they were cared for and hidden by villagers, eventually rescued by a group of Australian commandos. One of the escapees was LBDR Moxham. Two more escaped during the second march.

Post-war, WOFF Kinder's remains were recovered and reburied at Labuan War Cemetery.

Of 2434 British and Australian prisoners of war incarcerated at the Sandakan camp in British North Borneo, only six survived.

Only three of the 1787 Australians who died were not AIF. Two sailors who survived the sinking of HMAS *Perth* in the Sunda Straits were captured in Java, and the other was RAAF pilot WOFF John William Kinder.