

ADDRESS BY
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GOVERNOR-GENERAL OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA
ON THE OCCASION OF
SANDAKAN DAY MEMORIAL SERVICE
SANDAKAN
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Today, we gather as nations that share a history, and as friends who share a human story.

The dedication of Sandakan Day ensures that the records and memorials of that history are observed and attended to, year in, year out, for lifetimes hence.

It ensures that in the course of this day, each year, as we stand alongside one another,

we recall that history,
we keep it clear and real in our consciousness,
and we pass it on to its future guardians.

140,000 members of the Allied Malay, Indian, British and Australian forces joined the Malayan campaign in World War II.

They fought, but failed to fend off, a relentless enemy advance, that led to the fall of Singapore in February 1942, and the capture of tens of thousands of their own.

Within months, the brutal and destructive enemy occupation of Sabah began, and Australian and British prisoners of war were shipped to Sandakan.

For 3 years, they laboured, at gunpoint, to build a military airstrip that would, in the end, be abandoned.

They were beaten violently and repeatedly.

They were fed scarcely and poorly.

Over time they became severely malnourished and often dangerously ill.

Survival at any point defied the odds.

When, at last, nothing had been achieved by the perpetrators - their airfield rendered inoperable by Allied attack -

conceit and rage fuelled retribution,

opening another chapter of devastating torment for those who had, until then, eluded death or slaughter.

Some were left behind. They all perished,

slowly, or despicably at others' hands.

The rest were hauled from near collapse and coerced by rifle butt, along a gruelling, mountainous track, on the false promise of pending food and respite.

The death marches.

For 260 kilometres they staggered and reeled, many without boots, all without tolerable ration.

Those who could navigate the nightmare no longer, were murdered, or discarded, along the way.

For a long time these atrocities were recorded only as bare facts.

However, with the commitment and will, of those who have remained close to the human tragedy that took place here, the details have, over decades, been drawn to the light.

In 1942 and 1943, over 2,700 Allied servicemen were transported to Sandakan.

In those first years, almost all the officers - some 300 of them - were removed to Kuching.

We are deeply honoured to have with us today 2 of those men: Mr Russ Ewin and Mr Lesley 'Bunny' Glover, and members of their families.

For 2,428 of the Allied servicemen who remained incarcerated at Sandakan camp - more than 1,700 Australians, more than 600 British - release from horror and suffering came only on their passing.

In early 1945, 1,060 men had set out on the death marches.

2 escaped through the jungle.

424 made it to Ranau.

And 4 lived beyond arrival.

6 survivors. All Australians.

Gunner Owen Campbell
Bombardier Richard Braithwaite
Warrant Officer William Stipevich
Lance Bombardier William Moxham
Private Keith Botterill
and Private Nelson Short.

Many of their families and loved ones are here today too.

Something extraordinary had sustained them, and something else extraordinary took over.

With the nourishment, shelter and safety given by local Sabahans - (some of you here with us now) - these men were nursed back to life and health.

You had lost 28 of your leaders and 16% of your community to senseless execution. Your land, buildings and infrastructure had been decimated.

You nevertheless risked your lives and your livelihoods for our men -
for those who lived and those who died.

Thank you. Thank you.

On behalf of their families and loved ones; on behalf of all Australians, I thank you again.

During this time of appalling adversity and shameful human conduct,
Sabahans and Australians dug deep to rise above it.

Together, they vanquished fear and loathing
and all their manifestations, and, in their place, chose generosity and love.

Together, they found and modelled, a way of living, based on friendship and compassion between
people, and respect and support between nations.

Together, today, 65 years since the last death march, since the last life at Sandakan was spent, and since
World War II came to an end:

we acknowledge this painful history
we cherish this abiding human story
we celebrate this way of living
and we show our gratitude for having learnt it.

A way of living that values personal effort, courage, restraint, humility, sacrifice,
resilience and self belief.

A way of living that embodies humanity among people, and upholds the dignity and worth of every
individual.

these are the lessons of Sandakan and the death marches.

We give thanks to our teachers.

The Australian and British prisoners of war,
in their death and their survival.

The Sabahans who watched over them, who cradled and saved those they humanly could.

And all those who have since gathered up
the fine golden threads of this remarkable story, and, with them, woven strong and precious ties uniting
and nurturing our people and nations.

Friends of Australia and Malaysia,
lest we forget, our history and our human story.