

ADDRESS BY  
HER EXCELLENCY MS QUENTIN BRYCE AC  
**GOVERNOR-GENERAL OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA**  
ON THE OCCASION OF  
**ADDRESS & UNVEILING AT SANDAKAN DEATH MARCHES MEMORIAL**  
COMMEMORATIVE PARK, LISMORE  
27 AUGUST 2010

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your generous welcome to Michael and me this morning.

I feel so privileged to join you in a ceremony that, I know, has been much anticipated and will be long cherished:

by all of you here

and by the people of Lismore and its surrounds.

Less than two weeks ago, I was in Sabah taking part in the Sandakan Day commemorations, on Australia's behalf.

Like this one, it was a moving and special day.

And though it was far away from here, and you may not have been there, it was a day that belongs to you and has a place here too.

And so I want to tell you just a little about it in the hope that those human experiences and feelings

once so intensely endured and shared there by some of your loved ones

and since dissipated by death, circumstance or silence,

can today come together again,

be honoured and spoken of,

respectfully and tenderly.

To stand there in the heat and humidity 65 years on from

the Sandakan-Ranau death marches,

the final loss of life at Sandakan Camp,

and the end of the Second World War.

To grasp the warm, open hands of our veterans and their families, and the families of those lost.  
To hear their voices recount the truth, without malice or aggrandisement - only dignity, calm  
and resolve.

To look into the faces of the local Sabahans, some of whom have finally told their own stories,  
of sacrifice and loss

of how they risked their lives and livelihoods for our men.

To remember the Chinese community of Sabah, persecuted and killed.

To take in the divine, healing light of the magnificent stained-glass windows of St Michaels and All Angels Church.

To smell the seething jungle.

To even fear to falter on its terrain.

I can of course claim no real understanding,  
only a muffled trace of what those extraordinary individuals went through.

Members of the Australian and British forces who'd fought but failed to fend off a relentless enemy.

Prisoners of war captured upon the fall of Singapore in February 1942 and shipped to Sandakan Camp in enemy-occupied Sabah.

Men who 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 there,

among them, members of the Rotary Club of Lismore, the people of the Lismore District

the details have, over decades, been drawn to the light.

In 1942 and 1943, over 2700 Allied servicemen were transported to Sandakan.

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

On Sandakan Day, I met 2 of them:  
Mr Russ Ewin  
and Mr Lesley 'Bunny' Glover.

Fine Australians.

For 2,428 of the Allied servicemen who remained incarcerated at Sandakan camp -  
more than 1700 Australians,  
more than 600 British -  
release from horror and suffering came only upon their passing.

44 of those men - including three sets of brothers - are memorialised here today.

Fine Australians.

In early 1945, 1060 men had set out on the death marches.

Two escaped through the jungle.

424 made it to Ranau.  
And 4 lived beyond arrival.

Six survivors. All Australians.

Fine Australians.

Friends, today, we have with us:

sons - Professor Richard Braithwaite, Dr Lionel Phelps,

a grandson - Mr Rob Oakeshott

a great granddaughter - his daughter, Miss Sophie Oakeshott

and other relatives and loved ones of these men.

Today and hereafter, this ceremony  
and this memorial  
will ensure that those men and what they did remain in our hearts,  
in our nation's history,  
and in the lessons we carry hence.

They showed us 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 acknowledge this painful history, and abiding human story.

We celebrate this way of living.

And we give thanks to our teachers,  
in their survival and in their death:

the Sabahans

the Australian and British POWs

the men whose names are inscribed before us - fine Australians.

Ladies and gentlemen,  
as I unveil the Sandakan Death Marches Memorial, I salute them.