

# NEWS FROM BORNEO

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## Gallantry honour for POW hero Richard Murray!

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**Hello everyone,** What great way to start the year! While waiting at Sydney Airport to catch the flight to Singapore to join the Sandakan Remembrance Day travellers, I received an email telling me that I had been successful in my long, drawn-out, one-woman campaign to obtain recognition for our heroic Sandakan POW, Private Richard Murray. He has been awarded a posthumous Commendation for Gallantry. It is shown above – a bright orange ribbon with a gold Federal Star, set among flames. It also comes with a handsome citation certificate.

Some of you may be wondering what this is all about. Murray, best mate of survivor Keith Botterill, has always been close to my heart. You might recall that, after surviving the first death march, Botterill, Murray, Norm Grist and Norm Allie stole food from the Japanese store at Ranau in May 1945, in preparation for an intended escape. Before they could get away, the theft was discovered. Knowing full well that stealing food was a capital offence, Murray stepped forward and took the entire blame, thereby saving his mates, but signing his own death warrant. He was taken away, beaten severely and tied to a tree. Before his friends had a chance to effect any kind of rescue, the Japanese took him to the Number 1 Camp Cemetery, where he was bayoneted to death and his body thrown into a bomb crater. You might also remember that in 1997, just before Keith died, I was able to tell him that the remains of an unidentified POW had been found in a bomb crater near the cemetery, and reburied as 'Known Unto God' in Labuan War Cemetery. After providing sufficient proof of the identity of the 'unknown' soldier, I was able to show Keith, just two days before he died, a photo of the new headstone, inscribed Murray's name and with an epitaph chosen by his son Frank: 'He stepped forward to sacrifice his life for his mates'.

However, it was not until about ten years or more later that I finally wrote a letter to the Army about Murray's gallantry, which I considered was worthy of recognition. No reply. I did nothing

more until 2017, when POWs who had been executed for escaping, or shot while attempting to do so, received posthumous gallantry awards. As those honoured had acted out of desperation, focusing entirely on saving themselves and ignoring the consequent severe repercussions to their fellow prisoners, which could mean the difference between life and death, I could not help but compare them to Murray, whose self-sacrifice was the exact opposite.

So I wrote another letter to the Army. It took FIVE YEARS to get a reply! Even worse, a Brigadier Patching rejected my petition in a quite terse, one-page letter. But this time I had no intention of giving up and appealed the decision – a process that involved a mountain of paper work and a personal appearance before the Tribunal in Canberra to answer questions and plead my case. It was like being in court. No verdict that day. The decision was reserved. It could go either way. Then came more questions until finally, months later, success – in very bureaucratic language!

*After careful consideration of the matters raised over the course of the review, the Tribunal has decided to recommend to the Minister that:*

*a) the decision of the Director General Army People Capability, Brigadier MJK Patching, not to recommend the late Private Richard Murray for a posthumous gallantry award **be rejected**; and*

*b) the Minister should instead recommend to the Governor-General that the late Private Richard Murray should be posthumously awarded the Commendation for Gallantry.*

I cannot begin to tell you how pleased I am. Sadly Frank has died, and the next-of-kin is a distant cousin. But I didn't do it for Murray's NOK. I did it for **him**. A 16-page report of how this all unfolded and what was involved is on the Honours and Awards Tribunal website, <https://defence-honours-tribunal.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Silver-obo-Murray.pdf>

**Award 2:** This news came hot on the heels of another exciting letter that I received the previous week, a public announcement of another award - this time for me. It was from Her Excellency, Vicki Treadall, CMG, MVO, British High Commissioner to Australia, who wrote:

*I write to inform you, on the advice of the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, prior to her recent sad death, her Late Majesty The Queen, appointed you as an honorary Member of the most Excellent Order of the British Empire. This honour is conferred on you in recognition of your services to British personnel who died in the Second World War and their families.*

It has not yet arrived but looks very handsome, indeed. I was told about it in August but was not allowed to say anything, to anyone, until the Queen made the appointment, which was just before she died. It was a big secret to keep!



I hope that in the next edition of The News I will be able to share a photo with you of the presentation.

While I am thrilled and very honoured to receive this award and very grateful to the people who nominated me, the award that gives me the most personal pleasure is the one for Murray.

No award to the living can possibly compare to that given for an act of self-sacrifice. This is why, when acknowledging war dead at a cenotaph, it is customary to cover any medals you maybe wearing, with a hat or your hand, for nothing, not even a Victoria Cross, can

equate to laying down one's life for one's country, or friends.

The *Sydney Morning Herald*, which had covered the story of Murray's bravery and locating his grave more than 20 years ago, reported both awards in an article for Remembrance Day. If you are interested, here is the link <https://www.smh.com.au/national/murdered-pow-awarded-gallantry-medal-after-decade-long-fight-20221109-p5bwvx.html>

**Award 3:** Finally there is one final and very special honour that I need to mention. Earlier this month, Tham Yau Kong, our trekking expert who has been keeping alive the story of the death marches since 2006, was finally presented with his MBE, awarded by The Queen some time ago, but delayed due to covid lock-downs. Here he is, with his citation and the 'male' version of the medal, with a plain ribbon.



He certainly looks different from the Tham we normally see, in the jungle, dressed in trekking clothes or at his farm!

Back in 2011, Tham and I took a group of students with various personal and behavioural issues, along the death march track, accompanied by Federal politicians Jason Claire, Scott Morrison and Rob Oakeshott. As the 12 students followed in the footsteps of a particular POW who died on the marches, most of them young, I witnessed a remarkable transformation in the students' attitude to their own lives, and what they should do with them.

Once the trek was over, the students went on their way but at the end of last year, 11 years on, I was very pleased to receive an email from one of them requesting a copy of the POW profile on Fred Glover that I had prepared for him. Fred was an identical twin, whose brother Ces had died at Sandakan when a shell dropped during an Allied raid had torn off his leg on 24 May 1945. Just five days later an inconsolable Fred left on the march. He was on the tortuously steep climb up Taviu Hill, on the section the Japanese called 'Milulu', when he died from a combination of exhaustion, malnutrition and malaria.

The student, explained why he wanted a copy of the profile: *We are doing a team bonding exercise tomorrow and we all have to share something in our lives, which nobody else knows about. This was a remarkable thing I was able to experience, and the story about Fred will bring awareness of the situation he was caught up in and the ultimate sacrifice he made. I wanted to also drive knowledge and awareness regarding the Sandakan Death March.*

Feedback such as this makes the effort we put into this particular trek very rewarding!

**Upcoming tours:** Following a most successful Remembrance Day trip, the first group able to travel to Sabah since 2019, I am pleased to say that the much-deferred ANZAC Day Tour will take place this year. Almost everyone has a POW relative. This tour is full, but should anyone wish to register interest for Remembrance Day this year, please get back to me. We have a number of potential starters.

The August Trek, to coincide with Sandakan Day, has 1-2 places left only. There will be no more treks this year with me (one is enough, unless circumstances are exceptional!) but you can register your interest for 2024 if you would like to join that group.

The weather was kind to us in November, and was mild, being just before the rainy season.



Everyone was pleased to see Australians back in Sabah after such a long time, and made us feel very welcome. All travellers returned home in good health - wearing of masks was compulsory in the bus or when unable to socially distance. A story about the first group to return was in the *Daily Express*, complete with a group photo, taken at Ranau.

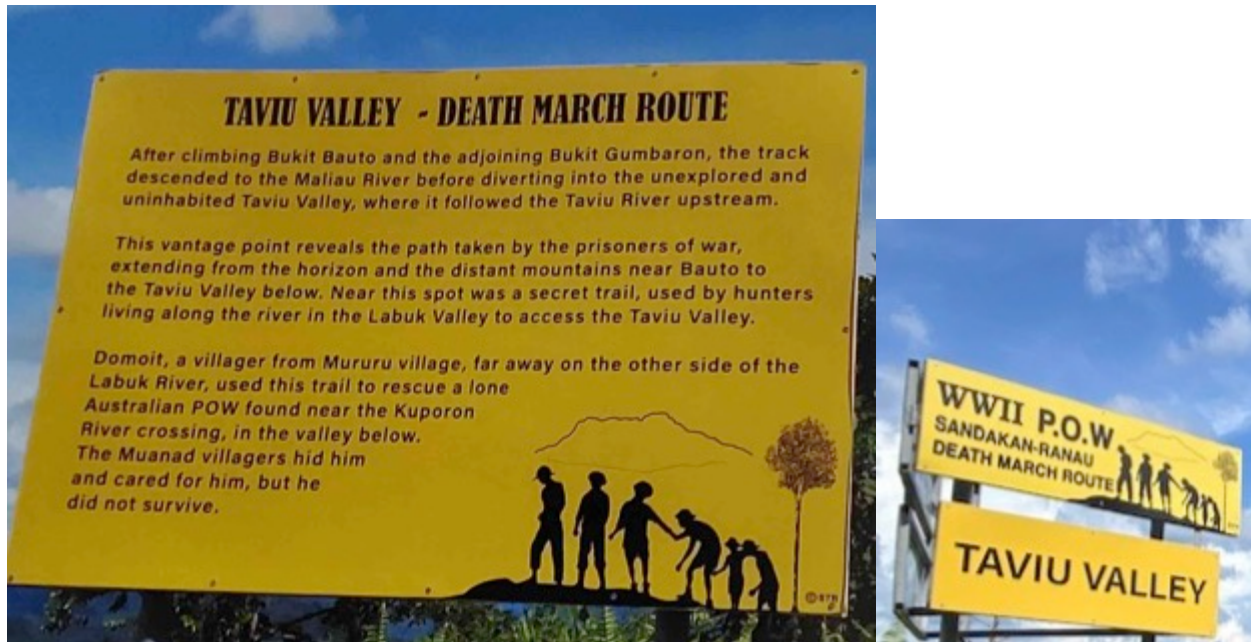


One member of the group, Darren, was entrusted to symbolically bring back the 'spirit' of Walter James Carson, from Victoria. I was able to put Darren in touch with Walter's relatives and after the tour they met up. Darren and his wife Jenny presented a most beautiful photographic tribute to the family. Here is the page collated for Labuan War cemetery, with Darren pointing to Walter's name on the memorial plaque.



I was pleased to see the damaged historical marker sign at Paginatan replaced and new signage erected along the way by Sabah Tourism Board, which makes it clear to people driving along the highway up Taviu Hill, between Sandakan and Kota Kinabalu, exactly where the death march went - along the floor of Taviu Valley below. There is an excellent vantage point near the sign that gives the observer an unobstructed view of the route from Bukit Bauto on the horizon, to Taviu Hill. A second sign, at the Zudin Platform, a little further on, identifies and overlooks the climb up Taviu Hill, pinpointing the spot where the POWs made the steep ascent up the mountain.





This official signage has put an end to false claims that the route followed the Labuk River, in the adjoining valley, a claim that persisted despite archival maps showing exactly where the death march route went, and an official map being issued by the Australian government after an independent analysis by army historians. I am grateful to the *Daily Express* and senior journalist Kan Yaw Chong in particular for helping to put an end to this unwarranted speculation, for which there was no evidence, and which was damaging the death march story as a tourism product for Sabah. As it is, I have been contacted by angry people who were taken into the wrong valley by tour leaders misled by false claims.

## **Memorials: out with the old, in with the new!**

**The old:** The commemorative area, complete with plaques and storyboards at Surrender Point, Labuan, is no more, as you can see from the demolition site below. The wreckers moved in following the theft, in 2019, of a heavy bronze plaque on the plinth in the photo and another, from a plinth closer to the entrance gate. The memorial commemorated the signing of the surrender in September 1945 by Japan's General Baba (later hanged for war crimes) and General George Wootten, Australian army. Hopefully, the new commemorative site will be completed in time for ANZAC Day visitors. I'll keep you posted.



**The new:** Hopefully you will recall that, due to the efforts of local residents living in North Turramurra, Sydney, and a grant from the government, last year the first Sandakan Memorial to be erected in Australia underwent a refurbishment, which included the erection of story boards. Flowers were placed there for Remembrance Day by Maureen Devereaux who lived nearby, and other residents, who now know what the memorial is all about. Here is a new photo, without the rain drops that were in September's edition.

# Sandakan and the Death Marches

Between 1942 and 1943, after the fall of Singapore, some 2750 Australian and British prisoners of war were shipped to Sandakan in British North Borneo to build an airport for the Japanese.



Sandakan 1943. NORTH EAST BORNEO FORCE. PRISONERS OF WAR CAMP. CAPTAIN R. A. HOSKOTON, 1942. POWS. CHIEF. SANDAKAN UNIT. SANDAKAN. RESULTS OF CAMPAIGNING OF POWS IN THE PRISONER OF WAR CAMP. 1943. TO LEUTENANT COLONEL J. A. DUNN, COMMANDER OF NORTH EAST BORNEO FORCE.



Sandakan 1943. NORTH EAST BORNEO FORCE. THE AIR SECTION IN THE CEMETERY AT THE PRISONER OF WAR CAMP.



Sandakan DEATH MARCH

The work was hard and the guards brutal. By late 1944 after the transfer of some prisoners to other camps, 2434 POWs remained on the camp roll. Food was scarce and their condition deteriorated.

In 1945, the Japanese sent more than 1000 prisoners on three 260-kilometre treks into the mountainous interior, better known as the death marches.

The prisoners were forced to carry supplies for the Japanese, although most were ill and malnourished. Anyone who could not keep up was left behind or killed, including 15 who were shot twelve days after the war ended.

The remaining 1400 POWs at Sandakan all perished. The last surviving prisoner there, an Australian, was beheaded on

15 August, five hours before Emperor Hirohito announced to his people that Japan had surrendered, bringing the war to an end.

The final death toll was 2428 - 1787 Australian and 641 British. Six Australians who managed to escape from the marches and were sheltered by local people, were the sole survivors.

This memorial honours the sacrifice of all those who did not return home. **Let us not forget.**



The restoration of the Sandakan Memorial is a community project by the North Turramurra Action Group, Kuring Gai Council and the Federal Department of Veterans' Affairs. Photos: The Australian War Memorial.

**Stan Roberts:** You probably don't know who Stan Roberts was, but you certainly know what he did. Stan was the amazing sergeant with the War Graves Unit, who spent years recovering the remains of thousands of military personnel who died in WW2, including all our POWs between Taviu Hill and Ranau. His meticulous recording of every set of remains enabled me to identify the grave of more than 40 POWs buried as unknown. Stan was a mine of information about recovery procedure, and lived to the ripe old age of 95. I delivered the eulogy at his funeral, which was the first time most people knew about his wonderful work.

So it was an honour for us to take a small vial of his ashes to Labuan, to be scattered among the graves of the men, whom he had looked after so well.



He was scattered over three of the many graves identified because of his excellent record keeping – Richard Murray, Alan Quailey and Roy Walters – and around the Cross of Sacrifice, for all the others whom he recovered. Roy's relative, Neil, was with us and did the honours for him, see photo on the left. Roy died along the death march track, 7 miles from Ranau while climbing Marakau Hill.

One of our travellers, Debbie, whose uncle, John Barnier, died at Sandakan, felt a sudden compulsion to volunteer for the Cross of Sacrifice. I sent photos to Stan's son, with an explanation of who did what and he sent the astonishing news, unbeknown to Debbie, that John Barnier, and therefore Debbie, were related to Stan!



As the folk in Labuan were holding an official Remembrance Service at 11 am the next day, Sunday, the cemetery was in tip-top condition, as you can see form the photo,

**The weather 1!** Before visiting Labuan we were supposed to take a local train through the Padas Gorge but unprecedented rainfall had cut the track and caused a huge landslide that smashed into the hydro dam, pouring over the top and covering the nearby line with tons of debris. So we had to go on a very long journey by bus, over the mountains instead of through them, to reach Beaufort. These pics show why we couldn't use the train!

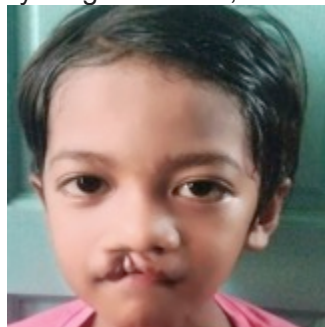




**The weather 2:** The weather was not only crazy in Sabah (and, lately here). Claire, a UK member of The Family, sent the next photo taken from her house in England, not long after the rain caused such havoc in Tenom. Unseasonable snow! It is rare to have snow in London before Christmas, let alone weeks before. I have added a couple of other pics. Claire attended the wreath laying in London for Remembrance Day, this time with our new King. Mark, Claire's husband, was part of the official police contingent.



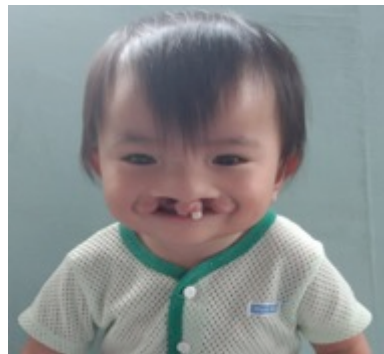
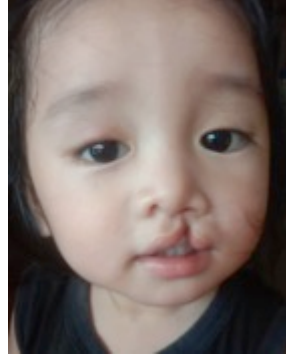
**Buy-a-Smile:** With the lock-downs over, the cases have flooded in. All but two of the children live in Kota Kinabalu, and none can access medical help. We have **Muhammad Fajr** (male), aged 4 months and youngest of four, whose father works at odd jobs on nearby





construction projects; **Nazri** (male) aged 9, second in a family of four, whose Dad is also works as an odd job contractor; and **Jubaira** (female), aged 9, with siblings aged 18,16 and 11. Mum and the eldest son support the family as Jibaira's father is semi-blind.

We then have three toddlers, **Nur** (female), aged one year, the youngest in a family of four. The father works at a construction site hear their home; **Al Warith** (female), aged 18 months, the only daughter of a road builder; and **Abdul Qalif** (male), also one year old, the youngest of four children aged 11, 9, and 6, whose father supports them doing odd jobs at a construction site



Finally, we have **Syamil** and **Lisabel**, from Sandakan. **Syamil's** father woks on an oil palm plantation collecting the fruit, and seldom comes home. His income is not fixed and he earns between RM500 and RM600 per month (less that \$200) to support his wife and three children, the youngest of whom is Syamil, aged 14 months (no photo available yet). **Lisabel** is 11, second oldest of four children. Her father earns just RM30 a day (\$10) catching crabs for his wife to sell at the market. Lisabel's mother is a long time refugee from the Philippines under Ferdinand Marcos's rule, and her father is a Bajau, a sea-gypsy. Although the children were all born in Sabah, they have no citizenship status. No schooling at a government school, no medical treatment. However, Judy, a member of our Sandakan family is sponsoring Lisbel for her operation, which will take place next month. We have yet to be advised on when the other children will have their surgery. Here is a photo of Lisbel, taken with Neil in November when we treated her and her family to cake and a milkshakes, in Sandakan. She is understandably very self-conscious of how she looks but, within a few weeks, she will be beautiful.



**The Scholarship Trust:** Covid or not, schooling continued more or less for our girls, sometimes at home in the village, although exams were somewhat delayed. We visited them in August and again with the group in November. All are doing well and, just before Christmas, Archdeacon Lidis, St Michael's rector (centre) and other church members joined them at break-up function. The girls come from quite far-flung communities along the Sugut River (north), Kinabatangan River (south) and the Telupid area, not far from the death march route.



**Housekeeping:** The annual Sandakan Day service for **Victoria** will be held in Strathdale Park, Bendigo, at the Sandakan Memorial on Sunday 5 March at 11 am. Note: Victorian readers, this is NOT the long weekend. **The Sydney Family** will meet for lunch and the usual get together at Dooley's Club Lidcombe, 12 noon, 25 March. We had an excellent roll up in November and welcomed some new faces. **Don't forget,** if you think you would like to join a tour to Singapore/Borneo in November, please get back to me!

Now time to sign off and to wish you all a somewhat belated but **Very Happy 2023!**

Lynette (and Neil)

