

SABAH SA



They had survived, somehow. Conditions in the Japanese prisoner of war camps on the island of Borneo were utterly inhuman, but many of the British and Australian prisoners had survived. Then as the war was reaching its climax the prisoners in the district of Sabah were forced to march 164 miles inland through jungle and swamps from Sandakan to Ranau. Now, as Mark Khan and Major (Retd.) John Tulloch MBE report, a team from the Royal Artillery has retraced the route of what became known as the Death Marches culminating in the unveiling and dedication of the Royal Artillery Memorial at the Kundasang War Memorial, Sabah.

The increasing threat of a preemptive strike by Japan upon British possessions in the Far East had prompted Britain to reinforce its forces in Malaya and its garrison on the island fortress of Singapore. Amongst those units was 78 Light Anti-Aircraft (LAA) Battery RA (TA), part of 35 LAA Regiment RA (TA). The battery set sail for Singapore from the United Kingdom on 13 November 1941, and making the long journey by sea, via the southern Cape route, arrived at Singapore on 13 January 1942.¹

On 28 January 1942, 78 LAA Battery was ordered to Sumatra and two days later landed at Palembang to protect the airfield and oil refineries. The battery represented the first British troops to set foot on Sumatra and took over Bofors guns from the Dutch forces on the island. On 14 February 1942, the Japanese mounted a parachute assault on Palembang. They were heavily engaged by 78 LAA Battery but the numbers were too great. The remnants of the battery withdrew. After

spiking their guns they boarded a ship and eventually arrived at Batavia, Java, on 18 February 1942.

On 4 March 1942, the battery moved due south to an airfield at Tasikmalaya. However, as a result of further Japanese advances five days later they were ordered to surrender and became prisoners of war of the Imperial Japanese Army.

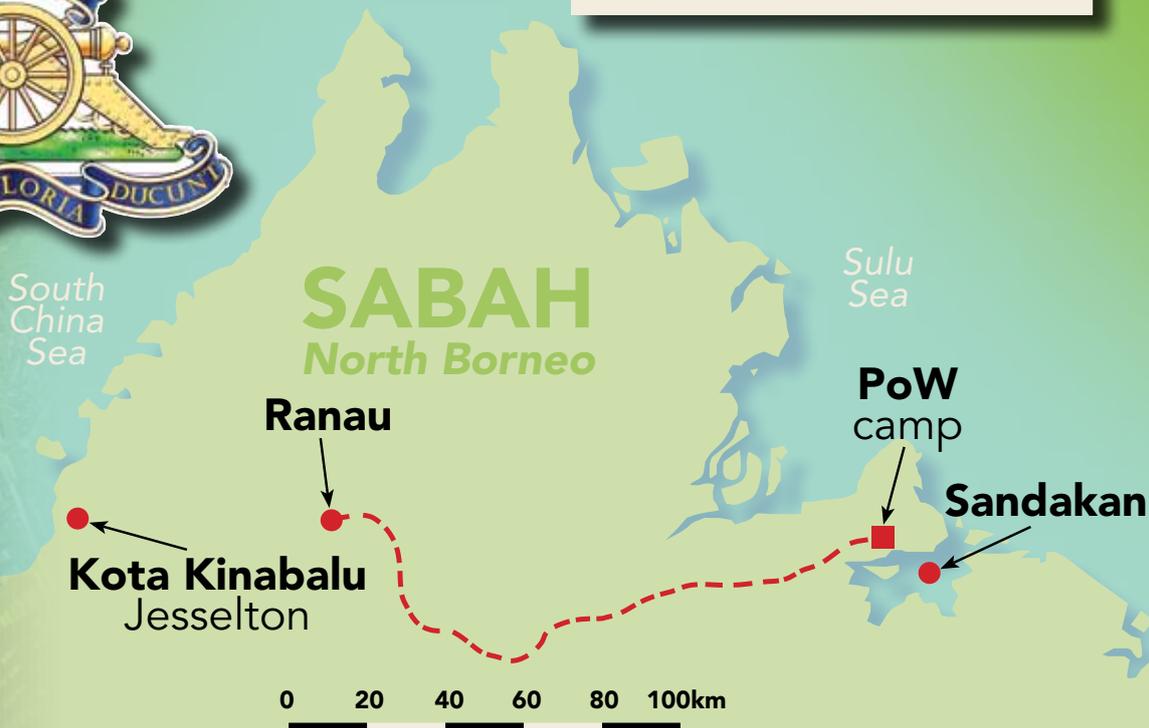
The men were eventually dispersed to PoW camps throughout South East Asia. Over a period of three months approximately 3,500 prisoners from different locations were herded onto tramp steamers for delivery to various parts of Borneo.

The first PoWs to be moved to Sandakan, a seaport and the capital of what was British North Borneo, now the state of Sabah, were 1,500 Australians. On 7 July 1942, they were herded on to a 2,000 tonne tramp steamer, the *Yubi Maru*. The conditions were cramped and appalling. There was no ventilation, nor sanitary arrangements. The captives were not allowed above decks.

ALUTE

MAIN PICTURE: The actual route of the Death Marches. The track the PoWs followed crosses the river and can still be seen in this photograph on the far side of the river. It climbs up the hill to the top. One of the Australian survivors from the first group later recalled: "That damn hill. We lost five blokes climbing it." (Authors)

RIGHT and BELOW: A map showing the route of the Death Marches undertaken from Sandakan to Ranau in early 1945.



Temperatures far exceeding 40 degrees Centigrade and 95% humidity prevailed in the holds. There were sundry beatings; the food was weevil-infested, maggoty rice, which the men described as tasting of rotten eggs, that was washed down with a cup of warm tea. There were only one and a half litres of water per man per day and no salt. Dehydration set in, followed by vomiting and diarrhoea. With the men unable to make the upper deck, the holds became awash with filth and excrement. Dysentery broke out, but amazingly no one died on that appalling voyage.

It took the ship eleven days to sail from Singapore to Sandakan. On the afternoon of 18 July 1942, the order to disembark was given. The soldiers filed off the ship and were sprayed with a carbolic acid solution to kill all germs and to end the dysentery. Under heavy guard they were then escorted onshore, silently and apprehensively watched by the locals, many of whom were visibly distressed.

At 17.30 hours, after their standard

revolting mixture of rice and lukewarm tea, the Australians moved up a steep winding road until, after dark, they arrived at a church and convent where they spent the night. The PoWs were then marched nine miles to a camp. The 1,500 Australian soldiers, aged between 18 and 42, were in poor physical condition and found the march exhausting in the heat and humidity. Beatings and the use of rifle butts helped to maintain the pace. The head of the column struggled in at 12.30 hours to see the sign "No.1 PoW Camp, British North Borneo".

Having arrived at their final destination, the Australians were now to act as labour in building a military airfield nearby. Over the following months further batches of PoWs arrived – including the men of 78 LAA Battery. In April 1943, Captain Ian Patterson, the Battery Captain of 78 LAA Battery, and about 400 members of the Royal Artillery arrived at Sandakan having travelled in the same horrendous conditions as the Australians on another 1,000-tonne tramp steamer.

On arrival the men were classified as very ill and an estimated thirty British PoWs were reported as having died on this hellish voyage. Most of these PoWs had already been interned in several prison camps in South East Asia prior to arrival at Sandakan. Their physical condition was therefore wretched before their voyage even started and was to deteriorate even further.

Forced to work on the airfield the maltreatment of the prisoners increased. Some 4,000 Javanese were brought in as forced labour to assist and these people also suffered severely at the hands of the Japanese. The guards used torture of all kinds to enforce discipline and maintain the work schedule. Rations were reduced for the slightest reason and the workload was increased. The local Sabahans, at great risk to themselves and their families, covertly provided food and limited supplies of drugs (quinine being the most sought after) and radio parts (the Australians were building a short wave radio in their camp). A local uprising produced further maltreatment



LEFT: Men of 69 Battery, 21st Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment RA (TA) pictured on Tuesday, 6 June 1939, during their last summer camp before the outbreak of war. This unit is one of those commemorated on the Royal Artillery Memorial at the Kundasang War Memorial, Sabah. (HMP)

BELOW LEFT: One of the many PoWs to be sent to Sabah was 1817400 Gunner Ernest John Hazzard of 48 LAA Battery RA (TA), part of 21 LAA Regiment RA (TA) – seen here on the left under the hand-drawn cross. At 6'1" tall and weighing 142 lbs, Gunner Hazzard was a lean 36-year old, whose civilian trade was a meter reader. He arrived at Sandakan, aboard the "hell ship" *De Klerk* on 12 April 1943. He is recorded by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission as having died on 22 February 1945. His body was never found or identified and is he duly commemorated on the Singapore Memorial. (Courtesy of Major (Retired) John Tulloch MBE)

and abuse with a food reduction not only for the prisoners but also the local people.

On 30 October 1944, USAAF P-38 Lightnings attacked the Japanese airfield at Sandakan, destroying aircraft but also killing several British and Australian PoWs. The immediate Japanese reaction was to reduce the food rations even further. The mortality rate increased dramatically – in particular the deaths from meningitis. By now the PoWs were walking skeletons. It was estimated that most had lost 30% of their body weight.

On 28 December 1944, a heavy Allied bombing raid destroyed many aircraft and finally closed the airfield. All work ceased in the New Year and in January 1945 all rice rations ceased for the prisoners. They became reliant on seventy grams of food per man from their accumulated rations, which they had been secretly saving and hiding for such an emergency or for the medically ill.

During this period, Z Force, a predominantly Australian Special Forces unit operating behind the lines in British North Borneo², was sending intelligence reports on Japanese dispositions and the parlous state of the Sandakan PoWs. It was decided by General Douglas MacArthur and Australian General Thomas Blamey to mount an operation (code-named *Kingfisher*), to rescue the 3,000 PoWs using Australian paratroopers. Then,

without warning or any publicly-declared reason, the operation was delayed and eventually cancelled. The last vestiges of trying to save the lives of the 3,000 men were lost. It is not known if the Japanese had got wind of Operation *Kingfisher*, but they decided to move the prisoners from Sandakan to another location, Ranau, 164 miles away in the interior, in a series of "elimination" marches.

Local Sabahan Deputy District Commissioner, Sandshoe Willie, and his assistant Orang Tuan Kulang, headman of the Dusan tribe, were directed by the Japanese to prepare a route from Sandakan to Ranau using local and Javanese coolies. Both were fiercely anti-Japanese and, believing it was for the Japanese and not for the prisoners, together they deliberately devised the most demanding route. It was a decision that was to haunt them for the remainder of their lives.

On 28 January 1945, the first of 455 PoWs, in nine groups, set off from Sandakan to march to Ranau on the 164-mile trek through the jungle and swamps. The emaciated prisoners, in ragged clothes, many with bare feet and the remainder in disintegrating boots, suffering from malnutrition, disease and tropical sores, started out on the first of three marches that became known as the Death Marches. The PoWs carried all the food including that for the guards. The route of the Death March, climbing up to 1,000 metres

BELOW RIGHT: Pictured here are thirteen of the fourteen-strong marching team who took part in the Sabah Salute. The last member of the team, Corporal Vorster (a trained jungle medic), was already based in Brunei where the team underwent initial training and acclimatising before starting the march. The team was lead by Major Claire Curry RA (a qualified helicopter pilot who has flown on operations in Iraq) and all are volunteers and serving members of the Regular and Territorial Army. The team was made up from nine different Royal Artillery units, and comprised both male and female personnel some of whom have recently served in Afghanistan. The team included a Piper, Corporal John Moffat, and a Bugler, Bombardier Sarah Sanderson. (Courtesy of Mark Khan)

in some places, was along jungle tracks some of which the prisoners had to hack through thick jungle.

The route crossed and re-crossed rivers which, as it was the monsoon season, were full in full flow. Humidity was extreme. There were no medical kits for the PoWs and drinking water was direct from the streams, rivers, swamps or puddles. It was a case of march or die, which developed into march to die. Any prisoner that stopped was shot, bayoneted or clubbed to death; there were also occasional strangulations.

It was reported that there were instances of crucifixion and cases of cannibalism of PoWs – the prisoners being shot, butchered and then eaten by the Japanese.³ There were also stories of strips of flesh being cut from living PoWs, the prisoners being





regarded as "walking larders", so that "fresh meat" could flavour the rice for the Formosan and Korean guards.

There were local reports of two PoWs who, having been killed by the *Kempeitai*, had their limbs removed and the torsos taken down stream to a large Japanese camp. The news of this atrocity travelled far and wide without alteration to the account.⁴ The local Sabahans also explained that the Japanese were short of food and were culling PoWs to boost their meagre rations. There were further instances of cannibalism of Kadazan, Dusan and Murut tribesmen by the Japanese.



the way. Rice carrying details started out from Ranau to Paginantan, a forced-march of three days, carrying rice. Unencumbered, the return took two days.

Parties of men each carried 44lb sacks of rice; anyone who failed to keep up was either shot or executed by other means, their loads being redistributed amongst the survivors to carry. The Formosan and Korean guards were allegedly the worst and took great delight in their tasks. The first PoW to die on the rice march had travelled barely half a mile along the route. One PoW committed suicide as he could not face returning to Ranau.

The first, and subsequent marches, were horrific beyond description, undertaken by undernourished and sick men suffering from dehydration, salt deprivation, and dysentery, bloated by beriberi, meningitis, malaria and other jungle-related illnesses and sores. In many cases, bones could be seen through the suppurating fly-blown open wounds.

Their bodies were quite simply rotting. Leaches, tics, mosquitoes, fire ants, hornets and the cuts, stings and abrasions from the clinging undergrowth only added to their parlous condition. Those too sick to undertake the march were either later massacred at Sandakan or were sent by ship to other PoW camps where most met a similar fate.

Against all the odds, by mid-February 1945, some PoWs (all Australians) were still arriving at Ranau. Many had died en route, whilst others succumbed after they arrived. A mix of both Australian and British prisoners arrived at Paginantan, twenty-six miles short of Ranau, again many dying on

Throughout March the death toll increased. Emaciated PoWs were dying at an alarming rate at Ranau, estimated at seven a day. The conditions at Ranau were far worse than those at Sandakan. Ranau had become a place so dreadful it defies description, lacking the barest of living essentials. The camp was

ABOVE LEFT: After the war, Prisoner of War Contact and Inquiry Officers sent to Sabah visited the site of the PoW camp at Sandakan. Here they located the remains of a Regimental Aid Post (RAP) in what was the No.1 compound. It was believed to have been the last inhabited area in the camp after the Death Marches to Ranau. Approximately 288 men were estimated to have been left in the Sandakan camp, none of whom survived. During the visit to the Sandakan camp by the Prisoner of War Contact and Inquiry Officers, Japanese PoWs were made to clear the area of the RAP, which was overgrown and partly demolished, at which point the Allied officers found hundreds of decayed pay books (British and Australian), a few identity discs, personal belongings, eating utensils, surgical instruments, books and so on. (Courtesy of the Australian War Memorial; 120434)

ABOVE RIGHT: This memorial, the Cleary Memorial, marks the site of the first PoW camp at Ranau (No.1 Camp). On this very spot, Gunner A.N. Cleary (2/15 Field Regiment Royal Australian Artillery) was chained to a tree, which still stands, and then beaten and starved for eleven days until he finally died on 20 March 1945. He was just 22-years old. (Courtesy of Sheila Donoghue)

LEFT: Soon after the war, No.9 Military History Field Team travelled to Sandakan to gather historical evidence of the experiences of the prisoners. This pocket watch was among the artefacts recovered at the time from the site of the camp. The identity of its owner is not known. (Courtesy of the Australian War Memorial; REL/02028.007)

BELOW: A view of the countryside around Ranau. Although much of the undergrowth and forestation has gone, this picture gives some indication of the terrain over which the Death Marches took place. (Courtesy of Sheila Donoghue)





March abandoned Ranau. They moved into the jungle and set up another camp south of Ranau. By June 1945 only ten PoWs were alive and the Japanese High Command ordered that they were to all be killed.

Then, on 29 May 1945, the second Death March started with 536 PoWs, leaving behind 288 men too sick to march. About 113 died within the first eight days and a further group of about thirty-five were massacred. A month later, on 26 June 1945, the bedraggled group of survivors from the second march arrived at Pialungan to be greeted by the remaining six survivors of the 455 PoWs from the first march. Only 183 men survived this second march.

a running, fetid cesspit and dysentery was rife. There was no accommodation, no place for cooking, no basic sanitation; the men's living quarters were under bushes.

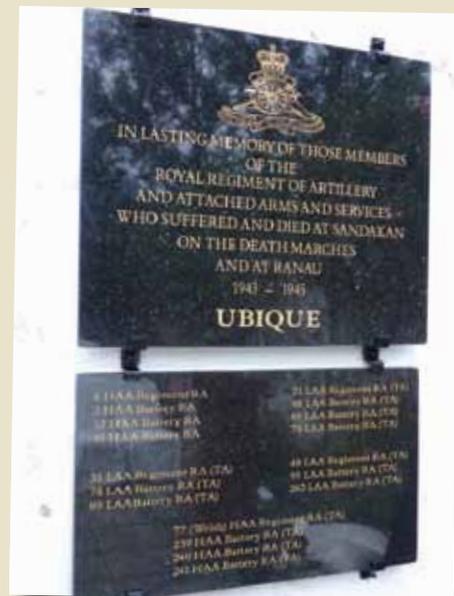
Despite this, the PoWs built themselves an elevated hut, but when finished only thirty-eight men were physically fit enough to climb up and occupy the elevated floor space. The remainder were so sick and debilitated by dysentery and other illnesses that they could only crawl under the hut for shelter. "No toilet paper, no comb, no soap, no toothbrush, no clothes, no food, no medicine," recalled Private Botterill, one of just six survivors. "But plenty of lice, plenty of bugs, plenty of crabs, plenty of mites, plenty of flies, but above all, no hope."

On 27 April 1945, two days after an air attack by USAAF P-38 Lightnings and less than two weeks before VE Day, the surviving fifty-six PoWs of the initial 455 men who set out on the first Death

"... If blokes just couldn't go on, we shook hands with them, and said, you know, hope everything's all right," explained Nelson Short, another of the six survivors. "But they knew what was going to happen. There was nothing you could do. You just had to keep yourself going. More or less survival of the fittest." Dick Braithwaite, who also survived, agreed. "It was a one-way trip when we started to hear shots, and you felt there was no hope for anyone who fell out."⁵

On 15 June 1945, the third and last Death March to Ranau, of seventy-five PoWs, began. A further 213 men were left behind at Sandakan, too ill to take part in the march. The remaining prisoners lived in the open as the guards, under orders, had burnt down the remaining shelters. All the prisoners on this march either died or were massacred, including a British PoW who was reported to have been crucified. The last man died just thirty-seven miles along the route. A further twenty-three prisoners were murdered at Sandakan four days later.

By 7 July 1945, there were only 100 PoWs left at Ranau. On 26 July 1945, orders were given to kill all the remaining prisoners



there. On 28 July 1945, there were only forty men – five officers and thirty-five Other Ranks – alive at Ranau.⁶ On 1 August 1945, seventeen seriously sick prisoners were massacred in Ranau and there were only ten PoWs alive at Sandakan. By 14 August 1945, there were only two men still alive in Sandakan and one of those died during the night. The following day, 15 August 1945, Japan surrendered to the Allies and the sole PoW alive in Sandakan was summarily beheaded.

On 27 August 1945, twelve days after the cessation of hostilities, the remaining fifteen PoWs at Ranau, five officers and Other Ranks, were executed as were the rice carrying parties at Muanad.⁷

Ultimately only six soldiers out of 2,434 PoWs survived the Death Marches; the combined death rate for the Sandakan and Ranau PoW camps and the Death Marches was a staggering 99.75 per cent.⁸ The story they eventually told was one of extraordinary courage and fortitude by the PoWs and appalling savagery and wanton



ABOVE LEFT: The individual standing in the centre of this photograph, taken at Labuan, Borneo, in January 1946, is Captain Hoshijima Susumu, the commander of the camp at Sandakan, Borneo. At the time the image was taken Susumu was on trial as a war criminal – he is talking with his defence counsel outside the building where the trial was being held. Hoshijima, who claimed that the order to begin the Death Marches had been made by Lieutenant General Masao Baba, commanding officer of the 37th Japanese Army, was found guilty of war crimes and hanged on 6 April 1946. Captain Takakuwa Takuo (who took over Sandakan at about the time of the second march) and his second-in-charge, Captain Watanabe Genzo, were also found guilty of causing the murders and massacres of the PoWs and were hanged and shot, on 6 April 1946 and 16 March 1946 respectively. (Courtesy of the Australian War Memorial; 133913)

ABOVE RIGHT: The Royal Artillery Memorial in the English Garden at the Kudasang War Memorial. (Courtesy of Major (Retired) John Tulloch MBE)

LEFT INSET: The entrance to the Kudasang War Memorial and Gardens near Ranau. It was in 1962 that Major G.S. Carter DSO, a New Zealander employed with Shell Oil Co. (Borneo), initiated the building of the Memorial to commemorate those who lost their lives in Sabah. (Courtesy of Major (Retired) John Tulloch MBE)

LEFT: The "fort-like" Kudasang War Memorial was designed by J.C. Robinson, a local architect. It has four interlocking but separate gardens to represent the homelands of those who died: an Australian Garden, a formal English Garden of roses, a Borneo Garden with wild flowers of Kinabalu, whilst, at the top level, is the Contemplation Garden (seen here) with a reflection pool and pergola. (Courtesy of Major (Retired) John Tulloch MBE)

BRITAIN AT WAR

RIGHT: Led by Corporal John Moffat (TA), AGCS(SPS)(V) attached to 105 Regt RA (V), the team completes the final 100 yards before ending the remembrance march at the Ranau Jungle Camp No.2 after completing 169 miles – the team walked an additional five miles symbolically carrying 10kgs of rice each in remembrance of the rice marches. The OIC Marchers, Major Claire Curry, is front left. (Courtesy of Major (Retired) John Tulloch MBE)

BELOW LEFT: The dedication service for the Royal Artillery Memorial at the Kundasang War Memorial was attended by the Deputy Chief Minister of Sabah, the Honourable Datuk Dr. Yee Moh Chai, His Excellency Simon Featherstone, the British High Commissioner to Malaysia, and Royal Artillery Colonel Commandant Major General C.C. Wilson CB CBE. The Venerable Archdeacon Moses Chin officiated the service. This image, taken after the service, shows Richard Swann of Thales Group UK (one the Sabah Salute's major sponsors), Datuk Irene Benggon Charuruks of Sabah Tourism Board (without whose support Sabah Salute could not have taken place), Sevee Charuruks MBE, Major General C.C. Wilson CB CBE, Colonel Commandant of the Royal Artillery, and Major John Tulloch MBE. The ceremony was attended by some 140 individuals, many of whom had travelled from all over Sabah, as well as Australia, Sarawak, West Malaysia and Brunei. A fitting end to Sabah Salute.

BELOW RIGHT: The Royal Artillery marching contingent pictured at the site of the Ranau Jungle Camp No.2. (Courtesy of Major (Retired) John Tulloch MBE)

bestiality by the Japanese. They were the only living link to what actually happened.

More than half of the PoWs who died had been at Sandakan. Those who, for various reasons, were spared the Death Marches, the rice carrying details or the living hell at Ranau, are nevertheless called the fortunate ones. In addition, 4,000 Javanese worked on the airfield. Only three of those survived. Countless Sabahans, Malays, Chinese and Indians who assisted the PoWs at Sandakan, during the Death Marches or at Ranau were tortured and executed. The local Sabahans – men, women and children, a staggering 16% of who were wantonly killed by the Japanese – must not be forgotten.

As the Japanese logistics started to fail, starving Japanese soldiers cannibalised some of the local tribesmen to supplement their rations.⁹ In the final days, 6,000 Japanese troops in Pensiagnan set off to march to Keningau and then to Beaufort, a route of 214 miles. Incalculable numbers of Japanese soldiers who marched through the jungle lost their lives to disease and malnutrition and to the local tribes using blowpipes and parangs (a form of machete). Today, Japanese skulls still hang in the rumah rumah (houses) in many kampongs (villages) as prized possessions.

None of these appalling facts would have been so easily discovered and documented without the information from the six Australian survivors and local Sabahans. Their accounts are substantiated by records from the painstaking research

conducted by the Australian War Graves Commission after the war.

All of these casualties, but in particular the men of the Royal Artillery and its attached arms and services, who gave their lives so needlessly in such terrible circumstances will be remembered as a result of the work done today by Major (Retired) John Tulloch MBE: "When I discovered this appalling episode in our regimental history during a visit to Sandakan in 1999, I was determined there must be an official regimental recognition for the members of the Royal Artillery and their attached arms and services who so tragically lost their lives in such unspeakable conditions at Sandakan, Ranau and on the Death Marches. Moreover, I felt that in addition, the Royal Artillery should conduct a remembrance march of the 164-mile Death March route in memory of the PoWs".

As a consequence, the marching contingent (fourteen of whom were members of the RA, one was RAMC and the other was AGC(SPS)(V)) began its journey into the jungle on 15 August 2011, VJ Day. Their march of remembrance ended with the unveiling and dedication of the Royal Artillery Memorial at the Kundasang War Memorial on the 27 August 2011 – the same date in 1945 that those last fifteen prisoners were executed at Ranau. ■

At the request of the authors the proceeds of this article have been donated to the "Royal Artillery Charitable Fund". For more information on this organisation, please visit: www.theraa.co.uk



NOTES

1. Major (Retd.) John Tulloch MBE's account "Sandakan to Ranau and the Death Marches" was first published in *The Journal of the Royal Artillery* (Spring 2011), and this version is reproduced here with permission.
2. Z Force, also known as Special Operations Australia (SOA) or the Services Reconnaissance Department (SRD) was a joint Allied special forces unit that was administratively part of the Special Operations Executive. Its role was that of reconnaissance and sabotage behind enemy lines.
3. It was not uncommon for Japanese troops to eat the flesh of their enemies. On 1 November 1944, Major General Aotu, GOC 41 Division Infantry Group of the Imperial Japanese Army, reminded his troops they could eat the enemy. In mid-November 1944, HQ 18 Army reminded troops they were "permitted to eat the flesh of the Allied dead, but not their own".
4. Lynette Silver, *Blood Brothers*. This story was confirmed by Colonel John Richardson RAMC, on his last visit to Sabah when he interviewed an old Sabahan man, who had been a local boat boy in 1945, who said he had witnessed the live butchery of two PoWs for cannibalism (Email Tulloch/Richardson dated 26 January 2011).
5. Australian Government Department of Veteran Affairs, The POWs of Sandakan North Borneo, 1945.
6. One of the living was the last of the Royal Artillery PoWs, Sergeant J.H. Rooker, 12 HAA Battery RA, 6 HAA Regiment RA, who was recorded as having died on either 4 August or 8/9 August 1945. Some records show he died at Sandakan. The other British PoWs were Captain Daniels RAMC, Flight Lieutenant Burgess RAF, Lieutenant Choppin RASC, Staff Sergeant Richards RAOC and an unnamed private of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders.
7. 111986 Captain F L K Daniels RAMC was one of the five officers executed.
8. The six who survived were all Australians who had escaped. Some 400 members of the Royal Artillery were killed; 106 were members of 242 LAA Battery RA (TA) and this could be the highest loss of Gunner life in a single battery.
9. On 14 October 1945, Japanese Army HQ in Tokyo admitted that it had officially approved cannibalism of non-Japanese individuals when food shortages occurred among its troops.

