

Gunner of Renown



Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company

Gunner Owen CAMPBELL

(1916-2003)

Owen Campbell was born on 27 March 1916 in Brisbane, and achieved fame when on 3 July 2003, he died in Adelaide, the last survivor of the infamous Sandakan death march of 1945. He was one of six from 2,500 Australian and British Prisoners of War to emerge from shelter in the jungle. On 25 July 1945, a local guerrilla leader Kulang Orang Tua Kolong delivered him to an Australian unit. He and four others had escaped from a marching column but he alone survived.

Owen Campbell enlisted in the 2nd AIF on 9 July 1940 joining the 2/10th Field Regiment, which was despatched with the 8th Division to Malaya in February 1941 in anticipation of Japan entering the war. After Japan invaded Malaya in December, the 2/10th supported the 8th Division until the British Commonwealth forces surrendered on 15 February 1942.

He was one of about 15,000 Australians to become a POW. He worked on the Singapore wharves until March 1943 when he and 500 other Australians were sent to Sandakan, Borneo, to join 2000 other Australian and British prisoners building and maintaining the airfield. However, Allied air forces eventually obliterated the airfield and the prisoners became 'superfluous' to Japanese needs. 500 of the fittest men began the 'Death March' in January 1945, and Campbell followed with the second group in May. The Japanese had little interest in whether the prisoners lived or died. Death from malnutrition or bayonet was the fate of most of them.

On the march, Campbell and his companions were mistaken for Japanese and machine gunned by Allied aircraft. In the confusion, he and four others escaped into the jungle. Two were shot soon after, another soon died of sickness, and Owen stayed with his mate, who was suffering severely from dysentery. Unable to cope any longer, his mate took his own life and Campbell, now alone, headed down the track towards the coast. He was saved, about 24 days after escaping, by Tua Kolong, who hid him at Kampong Muanad until he was handed over to an Allied unit. He had endured torture, beatings, forced labour, illnesses and starvation rations at the hands of his captors.

After the war, Campbell served as president of the Beachmere Sub-Branch of the Returned Services League, Queensland. He married again and later moved to Adelaide. In 1999, he returned to Sandakan as a member of the Australian Commemorative Mission to dedicate a new memorial for those POWs who died in the area. He said, 'he could sense his mates all around him'.

Sources: Vetaffairs (September 2003) and Spring issue of MID, RSL News, Queensland (same month); Alan H. Smith.