

Gunner of Renown



Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company

Gunner Albert Neale CLEARY

(1919-1945)

Neal Cleary, was born in East Geelong, Victoria on 16 June 1919. He enlisted on 30 April 1941 as gunner in 2/15th Field Regiment, 8th Division. His regiment moved to Malaya in February 1941 and Cleary joined them as a reinforcement from Australia in October. He was not an exemplary soldier but as events were to prove he was not without physical and moral courage. When Japan entered the war in December, the regiment deployed firstly in Gemas and subsequently at Muar, in Malaya, and finally Singapore. It was here that, along with his colleagues, he was taken into captivity. After a spell in Changi Prison he was sent to Borneo to work on military projects in March 1943.

“In May 1945, Gunner Cleary, along with fellow Australian and British prisoners of war was forced to march on the now infamous ‘Death Marches’ through the jungles of Borneo. Having survived the first of these marches from Sandakan to Ranau, Cleary escaped into the jungles with another Australian soldier, Gunner Wally Crease. He was captured four days later by some locals who turned him over to the Japanese in return for a substantial reward.

Upon being handed back to the Japanese, Cleary was subjected to a sustained regime of torture and mistreatment. For the first afternoon and all of the next day Cleary was forced to kneel with a log tied behind his knees and his hands and feet tied behind him. While in the kneeling position he was kicked, punched and beaten with rifle butts and sticks by his captors. Cleary was kicked under one of the huts overnight, still tied to the log and without medical attention or food.

The following day Cleary was stripped of his clothing and tied by the neck to a tree. Cleary was kicked, beaten and urinated upon by the guards, with each change of shift bringing on a new round of torture. He was left tied to the tree, battered and bleeding and suffering from dysentery, without shelter from the blistering heat or the freezing cold of the night.

After enduring this treatment for eleven days, more dead than alive, Cleary was untied from the tree and ‘dumped like garbage awaiting disposal’ near a gutter in the track. He was picked up by some of the Australian POWs and carried to a stream when he was given a drink and washed. His mates then carried him back to one of the prisoners’ huts where he died. The courage displayed by Gunner Cleary in his attempt to escape and throughout the subsequent ordeal was an inspiration to those with whom he was imprisoned.”

A memorial was subsequently established in 2000 at Sandakan in memory of Cleary.

Sources: On 4 April 2001 Senator Schacht (South Australia) moved, ‘A Bill for an Act to Award the Victoria Cross for Australia to certain persons.’ The above is an extract from

Hansard proposing the case for Gunner Cleary. L. Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, AWM, 1957, p.210, p.300-301, pp.598 – 602; AWM Data Base.