



Remembering Sandakan

Borneo: Australia's proud but tragic heritage

Kevin Smith

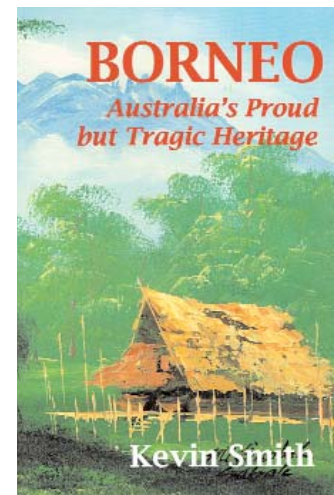
Published by the author
PO Box 440
Armidale NSW 2350

Many still believe that the story of the Australian prisoners of war in Borneo, and especially those who died at Sandakan, is forgotten, overlooked or concealed. Don't believe it. They have become the subject of a minor boom in Australian military historical industry. Kevin Smith's *Borneo: Australia's proud but tragic heritage* is the latest of several recent books to deal with this episode.

Important stories can bear many tellings, and each will offer something fresh. Kevin Smith tells this story in a straightforward style, seeking to help the bereaved of Sandakan understand the loss of loved ones more than fifty years ago.

His book follows the now familiar path through the formation of the 8th Division, the brief but bloody campaign in Malaya and Singapore, and the dispatch of prisoners to Borneo, and traces the prisoners' fates in detail. He describes the Sandakan camp, from the arrival of the first force in 1942 to the deaths of the last prisoners around Ranau and at Sandakan in 1945. He follows the escapers from Berhala Island, the exposure of the Sandakan underground, the imprisonment, torture and execution of those implicated, the separation of the officers and their departure for Kuching, and the tangled story of the plans for the rescue that came to nothing.

Though understandably pained over the might-have-beens of the "Kingfisher" rescue plan, Kevin Smith sees incompetence where others have seen conspiracy. He explains those who cancelled Kingfisher as careless rather than callous, and agrees with Lynette Silver that it was aborted within the Services Reconnaissance Department. Smith accepts but does not discuss whether knowledge of the episode was later suppressed.



The book is long but clearly organised and written. It is perhaps too simple, in that the author sees little need to comment upon or question the evidence. Smith is weakest when offering contextual explanation, but strongest when dwelling on the personal. Still, his intent is honourable, the book has cost him much time, effort and money, and the result shines with integrity. The ordeal of those who suffered in Borneo – whether Australian, British or indigenous – was horrific, and Kevin Smith reminds us of its gravity by continually returning to the individual personalities and qualities of those concerned.

It is no bad thing that readers can now choose between several accounts of the events, and the immediate comparison which must be made is with Lynette Silver's 1998 book, *Sandakan: a conspiracy of silence*. Though Smith's *Borneo* is even less thoroughly substantiated, it also makes fewer contentious claims. The work is based on a less energetic trawl of the archives, but also on a different selection of family contacts, and so offers a useful complementary perspective on the story. The almost complete absence of references unfortunately makes it almost useless as a contribution to the scholarship of Sandakan. Now that we appreciate the human experience of Sandakan, the time is ripe for a scholar to sift through the small mountain of complex documentary evidence and to produce a more analytical synoptic account.

This should not diminish either Kevin Smith's sincerity or the contribution that he has made. The wider families of Sandakan – who must number in the thousands – will welcome this flawed but honest work suffused with a fitting concern to give the victims of Borneo their due.

Peter Stanley Australian War Memorial