

**Address of Mrs Jane Duke**  
**Deputy Australian High Commissioner to Malaysia**  
**to the Sandakan Day Service**  
**15 August 2012**

It is an honour to be here today, in this beautiful setting under the trees, to mark Sandakan Day.

Thank you to those who have worked to make the arrangements for today's ceremony.

Gathering here – every year – on this day in August, ensures that the important history of Sandakan is observed and remembered. The Sandakan story – now 67 years old – is a vital part of Australia's military history, and continues to hold a special place in our hearts.

It was here where so many Australian and British soldiers were brought as prisoners of war, in circumstances that are almost unimaginable, to be imprisoned where we now stand.

Many of you will be familiar with the terrible progression of events after the soldiers were brought here. From the brutal Sandakan camp, a series of forced marches to Ranau began in 1945. Of the men who set out on those forced marches, only six would escape and survive.

It was those six men who brought home the memories and stories of Sandakan. I was particularly moved by the story of one of those survivors, Nelson Short, who wrote a song which is now inscribed at the Kundasang War Memorial. These are his words, which he wrote during his imprisonment at Sandakan:

I'm dreaming of Australia  
The land we left behind  
Dreaming of the loved ones  
We could always bear in mind  
Although its only fancy  
Our hearts within us yearn  
But we'll make up for lost moments  
When to Aussie we return.

Nelson Short did make it back to Australia, against all the odds. He was sent on the second death march, and was one of the few to make it to Ranau, where conditions were no better than at Sandakan.

The men at Ranau could see their end was near, and in July 1945, Nelson and three of his fellow Australian soldiers decided to escape.

They hid in a cave for over a week before being found and looked after by Baragh Katus, a local village leader. He cared and protected them, though was unable to save one of the escapees, Andy Anderson, who died. But the local leader did find an Australian unit operating in the area behind enemy lines, and helped the escaped soldiers find this unit. The unit was able to bring the soldiers to safety – and eventually back to Australia, as Nelson Short had dreamed about when he was writing songs at the camp in Sandakan.

Without the nourishment, shelter and safety that the local Sabah people provided to Nelson Short, he may not have ultimately survived, and nor may the other five Australians who survived and escaped.

So we must also stop to remember the brave people of Sabah who suffered under the occupation of their country, many of whom risked – and received - terrible punishment to help the prisoners. The Australian men they helped were strangers to them – what they did for those soldiers was utterly selfless. For that, we will be forever grateful.

Nelson Short's song about Australia, written during the dark days of his torment as a POW at Sandakan, shows not only love of country but strength of purpose, a will to survive against the odds. His story of escape and rescue is truly amazing. But there were so many others, so many young men who suffered so tragically who did not make it.

The bond that was formed by ordinary people from Australia and Sabah, during those extraordinary times, makes Sandakan a sacred land for us. As Australians, we will always come home to Sandakan, just as Sandakan will forever remain home to so many Australian soldiers, who now rest here, having paid the ultimate price for its freedom.

Our shared experiences have brought us closer together as nations and as people. The bonds formed in times of conflict, here on Malaysian soil, have withstood the test of time.

Today at this commemoration, we recall the enormous contribution of the fallen soldiers, their enduring legacy and the gift of freedom they gave us, the benefits of which, sadly, they never shared.

For those servicemen who lost their lives - and the families left behind - the debt, we know, can never be fully repaid. We also give our thanks to those who continue to work tirelessly to preserve the memory of what happened here at Sandakan. And so to the servicemen, families and those who keep the Sandakan story alive – we say ‘thank you’ from a grateful nation, and pledge, from the heart, that the sacrifice of the men who served at Sandakan will always be remembered - and in the remembering, always honoured.

Lest we forget.