HAROLD METHUEN BALDING

Harold Methuen Balding was a member of our Rotary Club, and subsequently enlisted to fight for his country during World War 2. He never returned home and his remains or the location of his grave have never been found. He died in North Borneo on 3 April, 1945.

Harold was born in Boort on 13 December, 1899. He was the son of Albert and Millicent Balding. He was married to Beatrix and they had 3 children. Of these, only his son, John Balding, is still alive today. His children were teenagers when he was sent overseas to fight the Japanese.

Harold Balding joined our Club in April, 1935. He was a baker and his bakery was on the corner of Fairy and Koroit Streets, diagonally opposite Ron Rauert's shoe store. He became Club Secretary in 1936 and continued to hold this position in the Club until he enlisted in the Australian Infantry Forces in July, 1940. Harold was Club Secretary and Ivor Ryan was Club President, and they both decided to enlist at the same time. They both offered their resignations from the Club because they were enlisting and would obviously not be able to continue attending Rotary meetings, but their resignations were not accepted. By that time, Rotary International had introduced a new type of Rotary war service leave which would enable Rotarians to retain Rotary membership without having to attend Rotary Club meetings whilst they were serving their countries.

By early 1942, Harold was a Corporal in the 2/29 Battalion of the AIF, and was serving to protect Singapore and the Malayan peninsula. Something needs to be said about the situation he found himself in. The climate was oppressive, with high daily temperatures, joined with high humidity. The Allied defense forces were a mixture of British, Indian and Australian forces. The control of these forces was a shambles. The three arms of the forces – the Army, Air-force and Navy were uncoordinated. They did not consult with each other or keep each other informed. For example – the Air-force went and built air-fields along the Peninsula, but they were not placed so that the Army could defend them. The Navy did not co-ordinate with the Air-force about supplying air cover whilst on sea patrol. These three arms of the armed services were subordinate to the civilian leaders at Singapore. For example – when the Army Generals raised alarm about the complete lack of any artillery placements facing the mainland only 1 mile away, they were over-ruled and told that building them would worry the general civilian population. The island of Singapore contained a major naval base, one that was most prized by the Japanese as it contained a large dry-dock capable of accommodating the largest Battleship or Aircraft Carrier. Singapore is an island and it was joined to the mainland by a mile-long causeway. Singapore's water supply came from a reservoir situated on the mainland and the pipeline ran along the causeway. A war in the Pacific was considered by the Allied High Command in London as being secondary to the main event which was the invasion of Europe. Europe had first call on troops and resources. There was not one single tank in Singapore or the Malayan Peninsula – they were needed in Britain. The Air-force had a reasonable number of fighter-planes – the "Buffalo" biplane, and these were completely outclassed by the Japanese Zero fighter. The Buffalo were a hang-over from World War 1 and provided mere target practice for the Japanese Zero. There were no Hurricanes or Spitfires – these were needed in Britain. At sea, Singapore and Malaya were protected by two large capital ships – the Battleship Prince of Wales, and Battle Cruiser Repulse, along with some destroyers. The two big ships had crews of

around 1300 men each. Air cover for these two vital ships was to be provided by an aircraft carrier. But in early 1942 the aircraft carrier was immobilized and broken down near Jamaica. A replacement was available, but the incompetent leadership in Singapore neglected to make it available to protect the ships.

The strategic maps being used by these leaders showed that the area near the northern border of Malaya was covered by thick jungle designated as “impassable”. These leaders and the senior members of the armed services in Singapore had held discussions and had come to the conclusion that if the Japanese were to land in Malaya, they would not come south to Singapore but would probably turn north to Thailand and Burma, and the Impassable jungle would prevent their troops getting through. Malaya contained strategic war supplies – tin mines and vast rubber plantations.

When the Japanese forces landed in Thailand and northern Malaya, the troops moved through the impassable jungle using tracks and minor roads. As they went, they gathered up bicycles and soon had a manoeuverablemobile force. They also brought with them a number of light tanks. Whenever the allied forces set up a strongpoint to stop the advance, the Japanese simply were able to bypass them and continue south. The allied forces would then have to hurriedly retreat to a new strongpoint. The Japanese over-ran the poorly sited airfields, and soon had bases in Malaya. In some cases, the allied air forces abandoned their bases in such a hurry that they failed to destroy the fuel tanks, and the Japanese planes soon put it use. Harold Balding would have been part of this fighting retreat back along the Peninsula or in Singapore. By 15 February, 1942, there were 30,000 well trained and battle hardened Japanese troops on Singapore Island. Facing them were 80,000 allied troops who were not so well trained. Australian General Percival surrendered, and for the defeated troops, the nightmare began. They were disarmed and marched into Changi Prison.

Soon a large number of them found themselves selected to go to Burmaas slave labour to build the Burma/Siam Death Railway and the rail line through Hell Fire Pass and the Pack of Cards Bridge, as described in the movie The Bridge Over The River Kwai. Lack of food, lack of medical care started to take a toll on the remaining prisoners of War held in Changi. On 7 July, 1942, Harold Balding and 1500 other British and Australian Prisoners of War were packed into a single tramp freighter, the UbiMaru. Eleven days later they arrived at Sandakan Harbour in North Borneo. For the past 11 days they had been packed like sardines in this ship. They were only allowed up for air or exercise for brief periods. It was the hottest time of the year and the men were travelling under appalling conditions. Bashings, beatings and kicking by the Japanese guards were frequent.

Harold Balding survived the next three years from July, 1942, until April, 1945, under conditions like this and what was to come. Back home in Warrnambool no one knew if he was alive or dead, and it was not until March, 1943, that he was notified officially as being alive and a prisoner of War. The ship was unloaded and the allied Prisoners of War were taken to a POW camp eight miles from the town of Sandakan. The prisoners were marched overland to where they were to occupy the first Prison Camp, and so started what became the worst war crime affecting Australian Prisoners of War in the whole of the Second World War. In 1944 a large number of prisoners were selected to go to a new area of Borneo to build a new airfield and roads. As they marched, any that stumbled and fell from exhaustion,

starvation or disease, and who could not be immediately helped by their mates to get up, were clubbed to death, bayoneted to death or simply shot and their bodies discarded to lie unburied. The survivors reached the main base, and over the next 2 years they labored to build airfields and roads across Borneo.

There were 2 more death marches, mainly to Ranau further inland. The original 1500 men were supplemented by other prisoners of War. The Sandakan Prison of War Camp and others in Borneo were extermination camps. The prisoners were to be worked to death or killed. Around 2000 allied POW's were murdered over the four year period, as well as 4000 Javanese slave labourers. The official cause of death in each case was given as disease. Harold Balding died on 3 April, 1945, just a few months before the Japanese capitulation, and probably during another death march, and again the official cause was given as disease. The location of his body or his grave is unknown. There were plans by the American Army to rescue the Prisoners of War – Operation Kingfisher, but the plans came to nothing and the POW's died. As well as Harold Balding, two other Warrnambool soldiers in Borneo – George Hagston and Harold Warren died. Of the approximately 2000 allied Prisoners of War sent to Borneo, six survived – they had escaped into the jungle and were sheltered, fed and hidden by local people. Many more POW's also escaped into the jungle, but they were caught and executed. Of the six survivors, three died within a year from the effects of their privation over the years.

War Crimes Trials began in January, 1946, and of those who had been tried for crimes against Sandakan prisoners, fourteen officers were hanged or shot (including Captain Hoshijima Susumi, the Camp Commandant), and at least 55 guards were sentenced to prison terms ranging from two years to life. However a peace treaty between the Allies and Japan signed in April, 1952, prevented further prosecutions, and all Japanese prisoners still in allied hands were transferred to a prison in Tokyo and, as a result of pleas for mitigation, all were freed by December, 1958. In 1946 the few surviving Prisoners of War were required by the Australian Army to sign the official secrets act to silence them in case they wanted to tell anyone about how they had been ill-treated and murdered over a four year period when both the Australian, British and American governments had been aware of what had been going on and had decided to ignore the situation in order to pursue more important goals. Families of the dead soldiers were kept in the dark about what had happened and where their dead relative's graves were located.

Paul Keating had an uncle who died in North Borneo, and he initiated the Sandakan Memorial Foundation in 1993. He has commented on what happened there, and has stated "Sandakan should be remembered because it was more than a battle between nations and …. conflicting ideologies, it was a war between human decency and human depravity."

Back in Warrnambool in 1946 the Board of our Rotary Club considered whether some way could be found to acknowledge Harold's sacrifice, and it was decided to create a Harold Balding Memorial Scholarship for a student at Brauer College and at Warrnambool College. The scholarships were for 6 shillings, each year in perpetuity. Three years later the Board rescinded the original decision and the scholarships ceased. Several years later the idea of some sort of memorial came up again, and in due course Archie Graham, a skillful builder and carpenter in our Club, volunteered to create a table-top

podium. He went ahead and hand-built the podium and a brass plaque was fixed to it and was in use by the Club for many years. With the several moves our Club has made over the years, the table-top memorial podium cannot now be found.

Harold Balding's story is a sad one and reflects on the waste and tragedy of war.

The following is a letter from Heather Tuck to Club Secretary Anne Adams about former Rotary Club of Warrnambool Secretary Harold Balding:-

"Dear Anne,

Thought I would just put together what I now feel I should have spoken more about. I spoke of the other projects because I thought John wanted a variety (and also because I had no idea I would meet Jock) and so Jock's story and the other two seemed to eclipse the research I had done on Harold.

I feel we now have a picture of Harold, business man, who would often bake, deliver, and manage at the work place.

A community minded man, who according to his son was a "bit of a do gooder, who couldn't say no". The Golf Club Captain (perhaps they have records), a bit of a character, and a Rotarian.

A father of three, two daughters both deceased, who did not marry, and Jock who married Nancy Cullen from Framlingham.

The children were teenagers when Harold, aged forty, enlisted. The summary (attached) provided by James Afflect, our local war historian, tells us almost all that is available, from the records. I have read most of the recommended texts, including the latest by Paul Ham hoping to find mention of Harold. The process just serves to emphasize how often it must happen, to the many thousands of family members, each time a new book or information is released, desperation for any mention.

I mentioned Jock had spoken to Keith Botterial one of only six survivors of Sandakan out of 2500. He escaped to the jungle; his life had been a series of visits, phone calls, and letters from relatives looking for answers. Those who were marched were the fittest; the remainder was left behind to starve. A young native boy witnessed the beheading of the last of the sick. Many loyal native people were murdered for assisting, and they helped tell the story.

There was it appears, an effort to keep P.O.W's families "in the dark" because there had been limited attempts to rescue them. In particular, the Kingfisher Mission, Blamey told of its existence, in Parliament. Other sources imply he was partly responsible for its abandonment.

The War Crimes trials did hang several Japanese officers, but many were given gaol terms and freed when a trade agreement was given priority.

It wasn't until the 1980's when family members started to wonder again after a period of "forget about the war" that further research uncovered facts about the little help available to those who returned who had spent time in Sandakan, and then moved to either another camp notably "Kutching" where officers were sent from Sandakan after a radio had been ingeniously made and discovered. It was thought if the leaders were removed there would be less chance of an uprising or escape. Twelve were shot and another sentenced to twelve years penal servitude. He was put in solitary confinement for a year, periodically bashed, he weighed three stone on his release. Remarkably he went on to testify and pursued a brilliant career in science, and became an international communication and surveillance expert. He later built a self-sufficient home decades ahead of its time.

Paul Keating had an uncle die there and initiated the Sandakan Memorial Foundation in 1993. Independent M.P. Rod Oakeshott's grandfather was a medical officer who was executed, his widow never knew how he died, his grave was identified in 1998.

The latest book by Paul Ham has the advantage of the other previous texts and has an eighteen page bibliography, it is an outstanding text which gives an outstanding account of Sandakan, and offers the reader an insight into the mindset of the wartime Japanese. The following is from that text:- "Mass slaughter is the last act of the Japanese war. Throughout 1945, in remote places, with no strategic value, prisoners are herded together to build railroads, airfields, roads – all hopeless projects now, under Allied control of the air. The aim is to work the prisoners to death. This accords with the policy of the Japanese High Command, which is not simply "kill the prisoners". They must first be sapped of their strength in the cause of Imperial Japan. Their humiliation and drawn out death has a disturbing psychological dimension. In Nippon's eyes, the prisoners should have destroyed themselves in captivity – the only honourable course open to the Japanese prisoners. Since they failed to do so, they are no better than slave labour, worked like draught horses, until, when lame or too exhausted to continue, they must be disposed of. Such is the nihilistic mindset of a military regime for whom, as Japanese historian Kiyosawa Kiyoshi writes in January, 1945, "there is no philosophy of life, only a philosophy of death".

Another reason to kill the prisoners was to dispense with the witnesses of war crimes – none must be free to witness Japan's humiliation and defeat".

In the honour rolls at the back of most references, most deaths occurred in 1945, indeed the three Warrnamboolians died there in the final months of the war.

Harold Balding's cause of death is listed as malaria, his son believes this to be so, yet he is mentioned in the enclosed script as having died on a march, his date of death coincides with the second march. Most texts state Malaria and Berri Berri were most commonly cited as cause of deaths, never starvation or torture, and dates were often inaccurate. So Rotary may never know. I enclose a copy of the letter dated October, 2012, at the front of Paul Ham's book. It would seem fitting if the apology is forthcoming or not, that Harold's sacrifice be remembered in some way.

I thank you for the opportunity to research this sad, yet awe inspiring chapter in World War 11 history.

Harold Balding's son John showed me a photo of his father and his uncle they joined up together, which he has only recently obtained, the last tangible link to his father, and one day he hopes to visit the memorial. I enclose his details for your reference: John Balding, 49 Studly Avenue, Kew. Phone number is in the white pages.

Yours Sincerely,

Heather Tuck."

---

The following is an extract from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website www.cwgc.org.uk, Australian War Memorial Photographic Website www.awm.gov.au & Lynette Ramsay Silver *Sandakan – A Conspiracy of Silence:-*

HAROLD METHUEN BALDING Corporal VX41468 2/29 Battalion A.I.F. Born at Boort on December 13th, 1899, the son of Albert Edward and Millicent Louise Balding, and husband of Beatrix Bertha Balding, of Warrnambool. He was proprietor of a bakery, and Secretary of the Rotary Club of Warrnambool, prior to enlistment on July 16th, 1940. He took part in the Battle of Singapore in early 1942, however it was not until March, 1943, that he was first reported as a prisoner of war. He was one of over 2000 Allied prisoners of war held in the Sandakan camp in North Borneo, having been transferred there from Singapore as a part of "B" Force, to build airfields as part of the Japanese invasion plan. The 1494 prisoners of war that made up that force were transported from Changi on 7 July, 1942, on board the tramp ship *Ubi Maru.* Between decks in the forward hold were 340 men – 760 men shared No 2 hold with rations, baggage and six inches of coal dust, 400 men were bunked on top of the cargo in the aft hold. It was the hottest time of the year and the men were travelling under appalling conditions. Bashings, beatings and kicking by the Japanese by the Japanese were frequent and the men were developing a feeling of apprehension about what lay ahead for them. They were under these conditions for eleven days and on July 18th, 1942, *Ubi Maru* sailed around Berhala Island, and into the Sandakan Harbour. Corporal Balding, aged 45, died as a prisoner of the Japanese on 3 April, 1945, on the infamous Sandakan Death March, along with two other Warrnambool men, George Hagston and Harold Warren. The cause of death was given as malaria. His name is commemorated on the Labuan Memorial, Panel 16, this stands in Labuan War Cemetery on the small island of Labuan in Brunei Bay, off the coast of north-west Borneo. This memorial was intended to commemorate the officers and men of the Australian Army and Air Force who died while prisoners of war in Borneo and the Philippines from 1942 to 1945, and during the 1945 operations for the recovery of Borneo, and who have no known grave. The memorial consists of a colonnade forming a forecourt immediately inside the wrought iron gates of the main entrance to the cemetery. On the inner faces of the pillars are bronze panels on which are engraved the names of those whom it honours, and the dedicatory inscription below is on the frieze facing the entrance: *Hereon are recorded the names of officers and men of the British Commonwealth of Nations who died within and around Borneo during the 1939-1945 war and whose graves are known only to God.* War Crimes Trials began in January, 1946, of those who had been tried for crimes committed against Sandakan prisoners, eight were hanged (including Lt. Hoshijima Susumi, the Camp

Commandant), and at least 55 were sentenced to prison terms ranging from two years to life. However a peace treaty between the Allies and Japan signed in April, 1952, prevented further prosecutions and all prisoners still in Allied hands were transferred to a prison in Tokyo and, as a result of pleas for mitigation, all were freed by December, 1958. Labuan Memorial, Malaysia – Panel 16.