

The opening of the Peace Museum at Muntok and the placing of new memorial plaques for civilian internees

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In September 2015, members of the Malayan Volunteers Group, civilian internees' families and friends met in Singapore, preparing to travel to Palembang and Muntok. We carried with us plaques with the names of British, Australian and New Zealand civilian internees who had died in Muntok during World War 2. These were to be placed on a refurbished grave in Muntok, believed to hold the remains of 25 British Women internees, in memory of the internees with no marked graves. We also planned to attend the opening of the new Muntok Peace Museum, which had been built with contributions made over the past year.

The trip to Indonesia had been timed to coincide with the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War and the ceremonies to be held in Singapore. We attended the unveiling of plaques at Changi Museum in memory of internees in Changi's Sime Road Camp, to members of the Indian Army and soldiers who had attended Eton School in England.

We next attended a service at Kranji War Cemetery. Here we were reminded of the importance of world peace. Members of each of Singapore's religions came forward and stood together. We were then each encouraged to pray or to think quietly about peace.



Representatives of Singapore's many religions all praying together for peace, Kranji War Cemetery, September 2015

Our group travelling to Indonesia comprised 13 people who had lost family members in or near the Japanese internment camps at Palembang and Muntok and one former child internee. Another lady is writing a biography of internee Norah Chambers, who, with Margaret Dryburgh, transcribed classical music from memory and formed the Palembang Women's Camp Vocal Orchestra. In Palembang, we were joined by Mr Robbert van de Rijdt, the Director of the Netherlands War Graves Foundation.

Very sadly, Margaret and Stephen Caldicott were required to return to UK due to illness. Margie's Mother Shelagh Lea, nee Brown, had been an internee in the Camps. Shelagh's Mother Mrs Mary Brown died in Muntok Camp. Shelagh had tried for many years to ask the British authorities to help preserve the Muntok cemetery, which held many deceased internees, or at least, to place a memorial to the internees in the town. This request was declined as the Commonwealth War Graves Foundation replied that they have no responsibility for civilian graves. Thus it was that Margie had undertaken to help place a memorial.

The concert held in Chichester, UK in 2013, featuring the Vocal Orchestra Music and sponsored by the Malayan Volunteers' Group had paid for the cost of the memorial plaques. BACSA (British Association for Cemeteries in South Asia) had contributed towards refurbishing the grave in the Muntok Cemetery to hold the plaques and hence the memorial was finally about to occur. Alas, as mentioned, Margie and Stephen Caldicott could not be present but had helped with preparations at every step of the way and were certainly with us in Spirit.

A wonderful memorial service was performed for us by the Sisters and Choir of Charitas Hospital in Palembang. During the War, the Hospital had played a vital role in caring for sick internees and allied military personnel. The Japanese forcibly closed the Hospital to close in 1943. Several doctors were executed and the nuns were interned in the Women's Camp, where they held to care for the prisoners. King George V1 gave the King's Service medal to the nuns after the War (below).



During the service, the Choir sang pieces from the Women's Camp Vocal Orchestra. These were followed by a YouTube video of a rap song about peace. The Names of the British, Australian and New Zealand Men and Women internees who had died and who remain buried in Muntok were read out. Unlike the Dutch civilians, these people who died in Muntok prison Camps were not moved to Jakarta in the early 1960's but now lie under houses and a petrol station or in a group grave in the cemetery at Kampong Menjelang near the former Women's Camp.



Charitas Hospital Choir, Palembang, September 2015

While in Palembang we visited several areas relating to the internees. We drove for half an hour to the oil fields of Pladjoe. Groups of male internees had been made to labour here from March 1942, ordered by the Japanese to repair the damage deliberately caused to the oil refineries by the Dutch, as part of their scorches earth policy. Dysentery had broken out among the internees and several Men had died here, cremated by their friends on the golf course.

We were next permitted to enter the town jail where the male internees were held for 12 months. 4 female Nurses including Olga Neubronner and Margot Turner were held here in solitary confinement for 6 months – their charges were never specified. The jail has the same layout as during the War and David Man was able to locate his Grandfather Gordon Reis' bedroom, separated from the kitchen by a grill and still 'steamy and noisy'.

The jail is now a Women's prison and the inmates have excellent vocational training. They may train in baking, supplying the cake shop outside the jail, in hairdressing, mushroom cultivation or sewing.

Following this visit and lunch at the prison bakery, we drove to the site of the former Women's Camp in former Dutch houses at Talang Semoet. This Camp, comprising houses in a compound surrounded by barbed wire, was formerly known as Irenelaan after the street named for the Dutch Royal princess. In this Camp, 30 women and children lived in each abandoned 2 bedroom house, with 10 people in each adjoining open garage, or carport. The houses are still inhabited and are now well-cared for.

We next drove to the site of the former barracks camp at Poentjak Sekoening nearby. Here, male internees from the jail had walked one mile to build themselves a Camp of palm leaf and atap huts, ordered by the

Japanese when the Palembang jail had become more crowded. The Men had lived in this Camp from January 1943 until they were taken back to Muntok in September 1943. Following this, the Women were moved into these rough huts. The original Camp can no longer be seen, instead large new houses stand in their place.



Palembang Jail, once home to 900 internees

The following day we embarked on the Express Bahari ferry for Muntok. Our early start was delayed on board by dense smog from burning forest fires but we were finally underway. Our route took us for 2 hours along the broad brown Moesi River, past stilt houses and the oil refineries of Pladjoe. Finally, the ferry crossed the Banka Straits to Muntok, a total journey of about 3 hours.

We thought of the suffering of the internees who made this trip several times, in cramped, hot and uncomfortable circumstances, a journey that took up to 12 hours, with little food or facilities.

Once settled into the Hotel Yasmin at Muntok, we proceeded to the Santa Maria Church. Margie Caldicott and Miss Maureen Francis, English teacher to the Charitas nuns, had arranged for the memorial plaques to be blessed in the church by Father Polce. Sisters Skolastika and Akwilina accompanied us to Muntok from Palembang. They had brought 2 large baskets of bougainvillea petals to sprinkle on the grave – these were also blessed in the church.

The names of the internees whom we had until now called 'the lost graves of Muntok' were read out. We listened to a recording of 'Abide with Me', which was always sung by their friends at the male internees' funerals and the group joined in singing 'The Captives' Hymn'.



Blessing of memorial plaques at Santa Maria Church, Muntok

From here we proceeded to the Catholic cemetery at Kampong Menjelang, near the former Women's Camp. Here a grave had been refurbished to hold the plaques. This grave is believed to contain '25 English victims of the Japanese War' whose remains were found in the

site of the former Town Cemetery during excavation for the Pertamina petrol station and moved here in 1981. From the cemetery plan and lists, we believe these to be the Women, moved from the Camp where they were first buried to the town cemetery by Dutch authorities after the War.



We sprinkled the petals on the grave, thinking of our families who had died in Muntok and those who had no families present that day.

The surface of the grave will be elevated slightly to allow for water drainage and the plaques will be installed for us by Father Polce and his congregation.

It was good to know that these civilian internees finally have a memorial bearing their names in Muntok.

The following morning, we drove to Kampong Menjelang for the opening of the new Peace Memorial Museum. Rows of chairs were arranged under a marquee at the front of the Museum. The Vice Regent of Muntok, Mr H. Sukirman gave a welcoming speech in English and in Indonesian and then sang some lines from 'John Lennon's 'Imagine', which were very moving:

'Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people sharing all the world...

You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope some day you'll join us
And the world will be as one...'

I replied with a brief explanation of the Fall of Singapore, the bombing of over 44 boats in the Banka Straits with great loss of life and the 3 and ½ years spent in Japanese internment camps. Here 30% of Women and 55% of Men died. I explained that Muntok is an important town for many European families because of the War and that we are very glad to have good friends in the town today. Mr Isa then read a translation of these words in Indonesian.



Muntok Peace Memorial Museum opening

Following the Museum opening, our group, local people and schoolchildren inspected the exhibits. People seemed pleased at the format and interested in the photos, objects and drawings on display. Bob Paterson from Perth had copied the embroidered nursery rhyme book which he had received in Camp for his second birthday. The colours were very clear and bright.



During the remainder of our time in Muntok, we visited the town jail, which had been the Men's prison camp. Madelyn van Rijckevorsel, the daughter of internee Helen Colijn, whose Father had died in the Men's Camp, had brought a sketch map of the jail and the adjoining Quarantine station or Coolie lines, connected during the War by a barbed wire walkway. Here sick Men had been taken and looked after by their friends until they died.

We were able to find the foundations of the former Coolie Lines, where over half of the male internees had perished from Dysentery, Malaria and Beriberi. 11 Catholic Brothers caring for the Men also died here.



1930's photo of Muntok. The jail is the square building (centre), coolie lines joined to top left corner of jail (Photo in Tinwinning Timah Tin Museum, Muntok)

We next visited the site of the previous Muntok Town Cemetery (also known as the Civil or Dutch Cemetery). This is where the Men were buried, carried one mile in rough coffins by their friends. Meticulous records of the location of each grave were kept by internee Willian McDougall, who was given a typewriter for this purpose by the Japanese.



Site of old semi-circular wall, former Muntok Town Cemetery (now Mr Herman's garden)

The Women who died in Camp were buried by their friends at the edge of the Camp, in shallow graves which they dug. Simple crosses had names burnt into the wood. The Women's bodies were moved into the Town Cemetery by the Dutch after the War and were placed at the front of the main Cemetery, near the main road.

We know the sad story how the Cemetery was closed in the early 1960's. The Dutch authorities moved all of their graves, both military and civilian, to Jakarta but the Commonwealth War Graves Commission did not move the British and Australian civilians, as they have no responsibility for civilian graves. A few civilian graves were moved to Jakarta by employers but most were not. A visiting church Minister from Palembang photographed and made lists of the graves in 1968 but following this, houses and the Pertamina petrol station were built on the site.

With the aid of the cemetery lists and plan, we were able to locate the likely place of each Man's grave, now in suburban gardens. The Women's remains we believe were moved to the refurbished grave in the Catholic Cemetery when the petrol station was built in 1981.

Opposite the jail and Tinwinning Building Timah Tin Museum is a large older-style home, now a residence and homestay. This building was the home and offices of Japanese Captain Seki Kazue during the War. We entered the large cool rooms with high ceilings and coloured glass. It was not difficult to imagine Captain Seki living and working in this grand building.

We next visited an older lady resident whose Father had been given a ring by a female internee with 2 children. The ring is a prized possession, kept carefully in a little box. From here, we drove to Radji Beach, where 2 groups of men and 21 Australian Army Nurses were killed by Japanese soldiers on February 16, 1942. Stoker Ernest Lloyd from the Prince of Wales, American Eric German and Australian Army Nurse Vivian Bullwinkel survived this massacre and testified to the events, although the perpetrators were never found.



Memorial to Australian Army Nurses at Tanjong Kelian, Muntok. 12 Nurses lost following bombing of the Vyner Brooke, 21 Nurses machine-gunned to death, 8 died in Muntok and Belalau Camps, 24 survivors from group of 65.



We were saddened to see that the fence around this memorial is rusted and severely broken. The Australian Office of War Graves and Memorials has been contacted and will effect these repairs.

Radji Beach (left) is also known as English Bay after the people killed there by the Japanese. Local people fled from their village and would not eat fish from the Bay for a very long time. It is now a calm and peaceful place and it is hard to imagine the atrocities once committed here.

Our pilgrimage was now complete. We had visited the sites connected to the War and left the plaques and the new Peace Museum in memory of all who had suffered there. We had taken away memories of the trip, of our good and kind friends in Muntok who are always ready to help us and the warmth and friendship of our little group.

In the words of internee William McDougall's biographer Professor Gary Topping, 'it is good to know that Muntok has become a place of beauty and education and is no longer only a place of dread.'



Muntok, September 2015