

COMMEMORATIVE ADDRESS RADJI BEACH

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delivered at Tin Museum, Muntok

by

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Today we remember the eighty or so people whose lives were taken near this spot on the morning of 16th February 1942 - and, importantly, the many others who were killed by the Japanese during the surrounding days up and down this peaceful coastline from Tanjung Kilian to Tanjung Genting.

The connection between those who died and those who are here today is perhaps a bond of respect, empathy and family love - those whose lives were taken had just minutes to contemplate what was about to occur. Almost certainly, their thoughts included those they held most dear and a fervent hope they would be remembered, possibly even someone would search for them.

They would not have wanted to die alone.

May I suggest that for us to empathise with their final life experiences, which were even more profoundly traumatising than most people realise, it may help to understand what had been happening in their lives in previous months and days.

If I take you back, and we had we had been able to see Malaya (or even parts of Singapore) from the air in early December 1941 we would have seen a beautiful undulating patchwork of wild green jungle, orderly rows of rubber trees, peaceful prosperous busy towns interlaced with muddy brown rivers, tumbling cool streams and black tar sealed roads - this was the world of the people who were later washed ashore on Bangka Island.

However, on the 8th December 1941 that peaceful patchwork was torn and the very fabric of life, of every ethnicity, began to be literally put through the shredding machine that was the invading Japanese army. Hundreds of thousands of people were dislocated and began retreating to the anticipated safety of Singapore.

By the 11th February 1942, only eight weeks after the first shots were fired, the marauding Japanese troops were well advanced across Singapore island and chaos had developed in that bombed and burning city. In particular, a new fear had spread for the safety of all remaining women and the nurses stationed across the hospitals and aid posts on the Island. News of the atrocities inflicted by the 229th Infantry Division of the Japanese army on the European and Chinese nurses at St Stephens Hospital in Hong Kong on Christmas Eve 1941 had finally reached Singapore!

An urgent order was given to evacuate all remaining nurses, key army personnel and, where possible, civilian women and children, and to clear Singapore Harbour of all remaining ships.

As a result, some sixty vessels of hugely varying size and shape left Singapore during the last few days before the Surrender to the Japanese on 15th February 1942 - at least 40 to 50 of these would be attacked and sunk before they reached the safety of Batavia (now Jakarta).

Only ten to fifteen of these ships would make it to safety through the Bangka Straits, but a similar number would be sunk within sight of where we stand today.

Why did this awful tragedy at sea happen?

- Because someone in command ordered the evacuation ships to travel only by night, and during the day to try and 'hide' amongst the myriad of islands of the Rhio Archipelago - the harsh reality was that those Captains who simply ignored those orders and steamed without stopping were the ones whose ships survived; almost every ship which took shelter delayed their journey with the result that they fell into the range of arriving Japanese Navy warships and Japanese bombers.
- Also, the last days of the evacuation coincided with the arrival in these waters of the huge Japanese invasion force on troop ships bound for Sumatra and accompanied by a flotilla of very modern, heavily armed and fast Japanese warships.
- Also, the Royal Navy radio code books, which would have allowed decoding of the warning messages from earlier evacuation ships as to the arrival of Japanese warships in the evacuation route, had been either destroyed or removed prematurely from Singapore by the time the last ships were leaving.
- Finally, for those who would later look for refuge on Bangka Island, a terrible twist of fate had ordained that the same evil men of the Headquarters Companies from the 229th Infantry Regiment of the Japanese Army, who had violated and murdered the nurses in Hong Kong, had been assigned to invade and hold Bangka.

So, by 'Black Friday', i.e. Friday 13th February 1942, whilst ships were still leaving Singapore Harbour, the Japanese Navy and Airforce had reached the seas and islands behind me - they effectively controlled the horizon as far as your eye can see.

Some of the first evacuees to be attacked by Japanese warships in this broad area were those on the auxiliary merchant ship '*Giang Bee*' on the night of 13th February - of the 300 women, children and men on board, some 200 would die in the shelling and sinking of the ship. The first of the only two lifeboats to be successfully launched and reach land with fifty-six people on board would beach north of here at Djaboes two days later - they were fortunate, they would land about the same time as the infamous 229th Infantry Regiment reached the south coast of the island. The occupants of the other lifeboat would later be landed at Muntok under controlled circumstances, after being rescued by '*HMS Tapah*'.

The next day, Saturday 14th February, at 1.30pm in the afternoon the '*SS Vyner Brooke*' - carrying around 250 women (including the sixty-five Australian Army Nurses) and what also has become apparent, a large group of children, plus a smaller number of civilian men and servicemen - was attacked by Japanese bombers whilst racing towards the Bangka Straits from Pulau TUJUH (or Kepulan Tujuh). It sank about 10 km off Tanjung BETUMPAH. Later that evening and well into the night two lifeboats ground ashore along 'Radji Beach' carrying twenty-one of the Australian Army nurses and another forty or so civilian women, children, and men plus ships' crew and several military personnel. It is calculated that over half those that boarded the '*Vyner Brooke*' in Singapore died during the attack, the sinking, or in the sea struggling towards land and on Radji Beach, not to mention the others who would later die from malnutrition, disease and physical abuse in the horrendous internment camps of southern Sumatra.

By Sunday 15th February, just after dawn, the Japanese Navy ships were well established, lying in wait across the northern entrance to the Bangka Straits. As the sun began to rise, they located two small Royal Navy patrol vessels of wood construction - ML311 and ML433. As the heavy high explosive shells tore apart these lightweight craft, some sixty crew and army personnel passengers

would die, firstly on ML311, and then a similar number on ML433. Survivors, many badly wounded, swam towards Bangka island (a few towards Sumatra) and either death or Prison Camp.

Later that Sunday, just after dusk and about thirty-two kilometres north of Muntok lighthouse, the Japanese destroyers located and opened fire on the naval tugboat *'HMS Yin Ping'* carrying naval personnel evacuees, and within minutes some fifty people lost their lives. Of the twenty-six or so survivors who reached shore, some would be taken prisoner at Muntok, whilst others reached the western coasts of Bangka and struggled ashore late on the morning of 16th February - a few would then bear witness to the horrors of what had already occurred at Radji Beach and themselves feel the pain of a Japanese bayonet thrust!

Finally, that Sunday, around midnight, the Auxiliary patrol vessel *'Pulo Soegi'*, carrying a large contingent of selected skilled men from the Royal Army Ordnance Corps entered the Bangka Straits only to encounter the Japanese warships which opened fire. This small wooden coastal trader was shattered and burning within minutes - almost sixty men were killed. Of the twenty-five surviving crew and RAOC men, a few strong swimmers managed to reboard the burning and sinking vessel and launch a small lifeboat in which they headed towards a beach where they saw the remnants of a bonfire. Twenty men in that lifeboat would arrive at Radji Beach next morning with hope they had reached safety.

As dawn broke on Monday 16th February the carnage at sea continued - the little launch *'Elizabeth'* (designated as a 'tugboat') and with almost thirty men on board - was intercepted by the Japanese destroyers in the Bangka Straits and sunk by shellfire - the twenty-three survivors struck out, swimming for the coast of Bangka island - a few for Sumatra. We know two survivors reached small islands near Bangka within a couple of days and then Bangka Island itself - only to be captured. The other twenty-one survivors of the sinking were never heard of again - some of these were young, very fit and uninjured men from the elite Royal Marines, so it leaves us with the haunting question of whether they all lost their lives in the sea or at the hands of the Japanese once they reached the coast of this island?

So, that Monday morning of 16th February 1942, gathered on 'Radji Beach' were about 100 people - survivors of the *'Vyner Brooke'*, the *'Pulo Soegi'* and, it appears, subject to further research, possibly even another vessel.

This group comprised small children, teenagers, mothers and wives, a small group of civilian men, Australian Army nurses and a sizeable group of servicemen comprising ships' officers, ships' crew and RAOC soldiers, many very badly burned, and wounded and lying on makeshift stretchers under the nearby trees and in a fisherman's hut.

By then most had been on the beach for thirty-six hours with little in the way of food and only the water from a small stream they had found.

The situation was untenable and the decision was made by Lt Bill Sedgeman, the senior officer of the *'Vyner Brooke'*, and Matron Irene Drummond to send firstly the 'walking wounded' servicemen, who would be no help in carrying stretchers, and then the uninjured civilian women and children, under the care of several older civilian men in groups, to begin the trek through the jungle towards Muntok. This action saved the lives of probably some twenty-five or more people and most of them would go on to survive the rigours of internment and POW camps.

If there is one small shaft of positive light from this terrible day, it is the fact that one of that group trudging along jungle paths to Muntok was a little three year old boy by the name of Isidore

Warman - his father had died during the sinking of the *'Vyner Brooke'* and his mother would also pass away from pneumonia within two weeks of internment, leaving him alone in the world - but Isidore, known as 'Mischa' to other internees during the War, survived all these horrors and all the coming hardships and is today a retired accountant and contented grandfather in Florida, USA.

Soon after their departure, the remaining survivors on Radji Beach, lying wounded on stretchers or busy preparing to surrender to the Japanese and make the same trek to Muntok, saw Lt Bill Sedgeman and two sailors, who had gone to search for the Japanese and let them know that this unarmed group wished to surrender, return and emerge from the jungle track, followed by a Japanese officer carrying a sword and around twenty heavily armed Japanese troops.

These were the troops from the two companies of the 229th Infantry division who had landed on Bangka Island the previous day.

We now know that this Japanese officer, whose name I will not speak but who was in command of the invasion force, had immediately, upon arrival on Bangka, given the order to his men that they were to summarily kill all shipwrecked survivors found on the beaches of the Island.

The soldiers - as Japanese troops had repeated countless of times since invading China in the mid-1930s and throughout their campaign in Malaya - immediately began to separate the officers (it appears excluding Sedgeman) from the naval ratings and ordinary soldiers so as to gain control over a group that clearly outnumbered them three to one.

These senior men were then taken south along the beach over the small headland and the incomprehensible savagery by the Japanese began.

The details and events of that morning of infamy are now well documented - men and women bayoneted, shot and cutdown where they stood. The wounded lying on makeshift stretchers and in the fisherman's hut bayoneted where they lay, the lives of some nurses even being taken as they knelt trying to tend to the wounds of the men who were dying from the first murderous onslaught by the Japanese troops.

At least half the people killed on Radji Beach remain anonymous, but further research in recent months has taken us closer to learning who lost their lives that day. It has moved us to a new clearer understanding of the identities of the British who died and has brought new understanding that the toll included New Zealanders.

Today we are able to speak the names of others whose lives were brutally taken - in addition to the names of the noble women of the Australian Army Nursing service and the servicemen and civilians we are already able to honour individually. We now 'Bring in from the Cold', so to speak:

- At Radji Beach ,
 - Lt Arthur John Waller Martin - known as 'Peter' - of the Royal New Zealand Naval Volunteer Reserve, Captain of the aforementioned *'Pulo Soegi'* and latterly from Auckland, New Zealand.
 - Lt Leonard Stephen Day, also of the *'Pulo Soegi'* and the Malayan Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve.
 - Another, as yet not specifically unidentified, Lieutenant of the Royal New Zealand Naval Volunteer Reserve and a similarly yet to be individually identified Officer of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve.

and from the RAOC complement on the *Pulo Soegi*,

- Craftsman Arnold Wilson Atkins of the Royal Army Ordnance Corps, from Dewsbury, Yorkshire and
 - Sergeant Robert George Hurrell, Royal Army Ordnance Corps from Hinckley, Leicestershire.
 - There are several other specific men of the RAOC who - it is becoming more clear - were also on Radji Beach that day, but we do not have sufficient evidence at this stage to certainly state that they lost their lives specifically during this massacre
- As mentioned already, many others lost their lives at the hands of the Japanese up and down the west coast of Bangka Island as they reached land from their sunken ships and we take this opportunity to today remember;
 - Lt Basil Shaw, Royal New Zealand Naval Volunteer Reserve, Captain of the *'SS Tandjong Pinang'* and from the Hawkes Bay in New Zealand and
 - Able Seaman Oswald Littlewood Young, Royal Navy, from County Durham, England. Both were murdered by the Japanese near Tanjung Oelar after rowing for several days in a small dinghy to Bangka island to seek help for those still in the sea from their sunken ship. Today they lie in a grave at Kranji War Cemetery in Singapore.

I also ask today that, now and in the future, we take time to remember those other men and women, numbering in the dozens, who survived the sinking of their ships and courageously struggled to what appeared to be the welcoming shores of Bangka Island - as they most surely did - but were then also murdered without trace on the beaches to the north and south along this coast.

Please understand - these beaches in February 1942 became the last resting place for the remains of literally hundreds, I repeat hundreds, of evacuees from Singapore who lost their lives as a result of the attacks and sinking of their evacuation ship - which had, only a day or two before, offered them so much hope.

To be blunt, for years after and even when, in 1946, the Allied War Graves Parties came to Bangka Island to try and make sense of what had occurred, the bones of those hundreds of innocent human beings were starkly evident on these pristine beaches.

Those bones remain there to this day and in that context this western coastline of Bangka Island is Hallowed Ground.

May they forever Rest In Peace in this beautiful place - this "... distant shore ...".