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ONLY SIX CAME BACK

A Sandakan coffee token and a story of infamy

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By the close of 1941, less than four months after the Japanese dawn attack on Pearl Harbour, 22,000 Australian servicemen and women were prisoners of the Japanese. Of these, three and a half years later 14,315 men and 37 servicewomen were still alive. Those who died, died from starvation, disease and brutality. In Europe there were 8,174 Australian prisoners of the Axis powers; 265 died of various causes i.e. 3%. Under the Japanese the figure was 33%. A high percentage of those who did survive were plagued with ill health for the rest of their lives.

It is surprising how numismatic references crop up in the midst of these terrible years and in the most unlikely situations.

A case in point.

Some time ago I had the opportunity of reading *Return to a Dark Age* by Bill Young.

This quite remarkable book tells the story of a fifteen year old private soldier in the 2/29 Battalion, 8th Division, A.I.F., who was captured at the fall of Singapore and his survival through the horrors of incarceration as a prisoner of the Japanese from 1942 to 1945 in Sandakan P.O.W. camp in Borneo and Outram Rd. Goal in Singapore.

He tells us in the foreword that his book has no pretension to literary excellence; that "his grammar is not crash hot" and "neither is his spelling"... but oh! What a tale he tells. An appendix in his book is a precis of the post war report made by Major H. Jackson. It covered his investigation of the last days at Sandakan and the Sandakan to Ranau Death Marches.



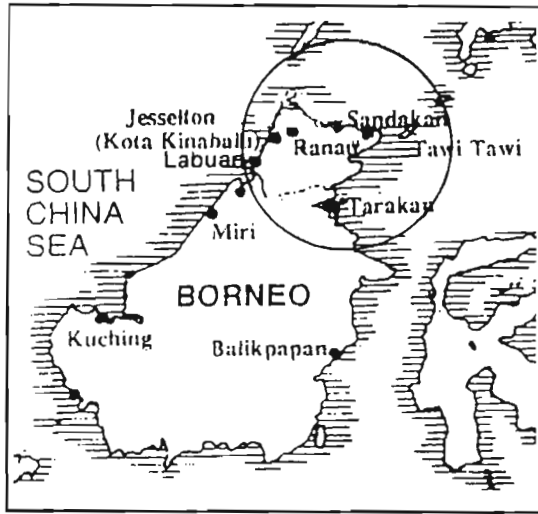
The coffee token

Bill Young's first POW camp was at the Selarang Barracks on the Changi Peninsular on Singapore Island. Then by sea to Sandakan in Borneo where he was forced to help build a landing strip.

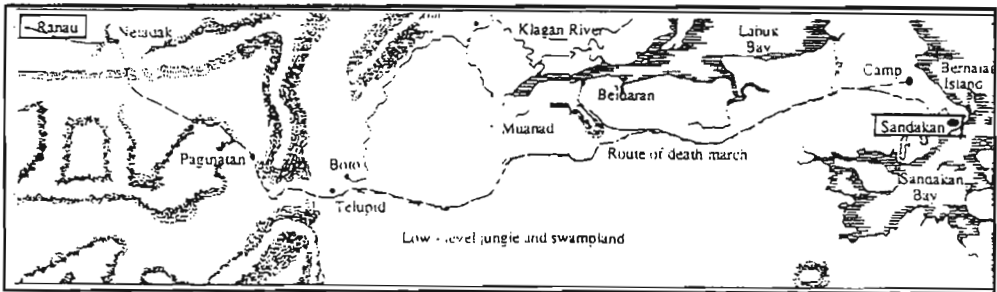
It was here towards the end of the war that the Sandakan Death Marches took place; only six out of 2,500 allied POWs survived.

In early 1943 Young and two mates tried to escape but were betrayed by local villagers - a standing reward of \$25 being paid for each POW *dobbed* in by the locals.

Captured, he was now in the hands of the dreaded Kempei-tai, the sadistic Japanese secret military Police. He was moved to "gaol" at Kuching, Borneo's capital. After five weeks of brutal bashing, cum interro-



Borneo



Route of the Death Marches - 164 miles

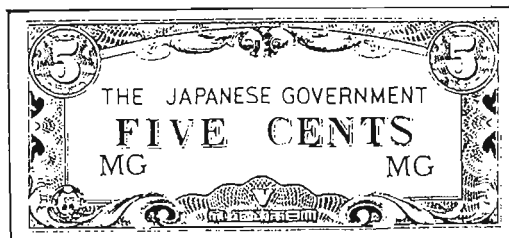
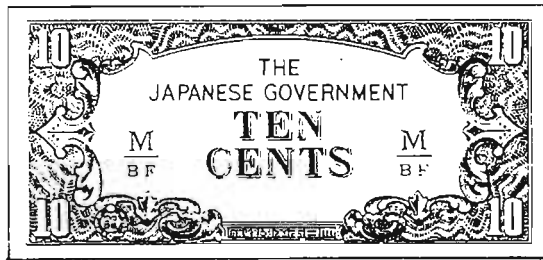
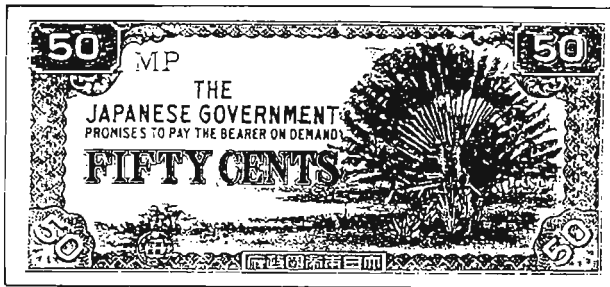
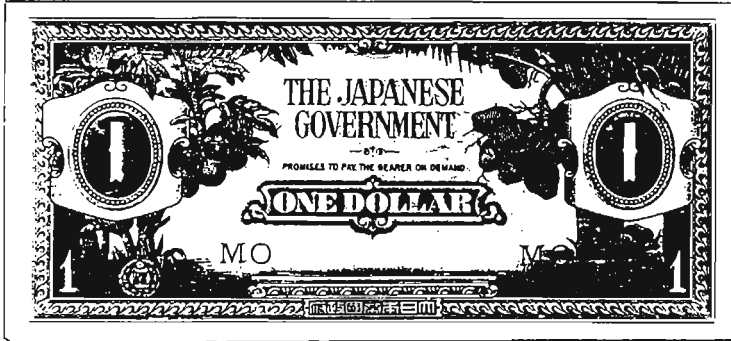
gation he was accused of being in league with an Allied guerilla group operating out of the southern Philippines. He was “tried” by a military court for “escaping from a Japanese POW Camp”. “Because of his youth” his sentence was only “four years hard labour”, to be served in Outram Road Gaol in Singapore. There he was to remain in utter degradation until the war ended two and a half years later.

Outram Road Gaol was, to say the least, no holiday camp. Anyone adjudged to be guilty of a *grave offence* was incarcerated there whether he be a POW, a civilian, an Asian, European internee, male or female,

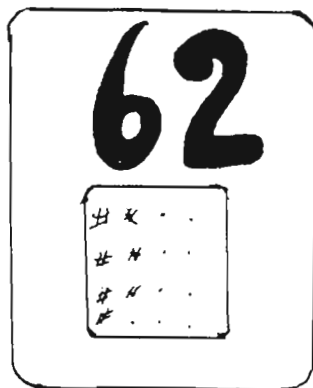
even Japanese military personnel; it made no difference. The common denominator was starvation, brutality and the constant threat of execution. (A full account of these atrocities has been written by Hank Nelson and published under the title of *P.O.W. Prisoners of War; Australians Under Nippon.*) This bizarre turn of events was to save his life.

There are several references to numismatic incidents in the book and each has its own story to tell.

The first indicates the use of and “purchasing” power of Japanese Invasion Money (JIM), otherwise referred to as “Japanese



"Japanese Invasion Money" for Malaya. Ten cents was a day's pay.



The only confirmed "coffee token" from Sandakan. It is very faded and dirty with most of the number sided obliterated. The main character within the circle translates as "Food" not specifically as "Coffee". It seems unlikely that this check is specific for Sandakan although it may be so for Borneo. Bamboo chits with Japanese characters, possibly serving a similar purpose, are known. Is number 62 one of the counterfeits?

play money" or "banana money". At this period it could have been either from the Malaya series - prefix "M"- or the early Dutch East Indies series with the prefix "S" for Sumatra. Young is positive the denominations were in cents and dollars and were from Malaya.

There were one hundred white people in the area around the "Mile Eight (Sandakan)" POW Camp. Through the efforts of Dr. Jim Taylor, the Chief Medical Officer for the British North Borneo Co., and loyal members of the North Borneo Armed Constabulary an *assistance group* was set up to help the POWs.

It is recorded that "as well as local currency, even Australian money could be used to buy smuggled in food, medicines and even radio parts." These "halcyon" days did not last very long. Bashings and starvation with their associated tropical diseases soon began to take their toll.

The next reference records the use of "suit-

ably inscribed wooden coffee tokens or markers". One token at least has survived. It came to Australia in the kit bag of an officer who was moved from Sandakan and survived in another area of the "Borneo Experience".

The markings are faded but his daughter describes:-

"The token measures 50mm x 37mm x 8mm in a brown grainy wood, and has the corners taken off (not exactly rounded). There is no hole through the token. On one side it has the character for "food" "Shoku" in Japanese; it does not say "drink", but could mean either, it appears to be hand-written using brush and black ink in calligraphic style, and enclosed by a stamped circle 33mm in diameter. Both are rather faint. On the other side the number "62" appears up the top, also hand-written in black ink, and under this is a square stamp about 18mm across containing what looks like three or four rows each of four charac-



Duit pasang or “Banana money” so called from the bunch of bananas in the design

ters, too faint and dirty to read”.

Bill Young describes the initiation of the “coffee token” system:-

“With a great deal of oriental fanfare and much ado about nothing at all really, it was announced that our most generous host, his royal omniscience, the emperor of all the Japans, as well as “all the Borneos”, had seen fit to award us fortunate lot a daily wage of ten cents. Not only that, but oh so much more and as well as, in addition, His Royal Holiness, in his magnificence, was seeing fit to allow to be held “A best worker competition”. Those lucky people who were adjudged to be among the “best workers” on each day would be rewarded by way of a cup of coffee. The sheer magnanimity of it all brought a lump to our collective throats.

What this meant was that for every twenty days work we would receive the sum of two dollars. With one dollar of Japanese play money you could buy a banana, or perhaps even a piece of coconut. For two dollars a whole coconut. Aw Gee!- The old catch 22-that came with this proposition. Where were

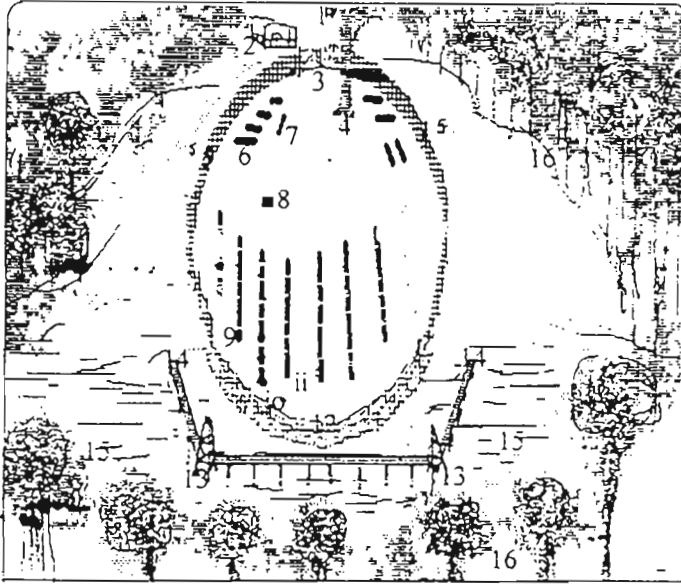
we to spend it and who were we to buy it from? The guards took a dim view of any of the locals coming within a bulls roar of us let alone allowing us to buy any of the goods they may have to sell. Other than that, the nearest corner shop may well have been ten thousand miles away.

The coffee awards were given out just before the lunch break. Each day a guard would come along to act as a judge. The winner from each group being presented with a suitably inscribed wooden coffee token. It so happened, as perchance, that on the first of these great Presento Occasions with a certain amount of animal cunning - I made sure that the shirt I had just put on for this most auspicious occasion was well drenched with water- not sweat - And lo! I’m picked as the best worker in our group. Given a marker and told to go like the good best worker that I undoubtedly was, and collected my well earned reward. Gee! I thought, “It’s like winning a lottery”.

The rotten blasted coffee hut was down at the far end of the site, a good fifteen minutes walk there and back, in the burning sun.

SANDAKAN

1942



Sandakan Camp Map; 1. Generator shed 2. Guard house 3. Main gates 4. Big tree 5. Cyclone fence 6. Officers hut 7. New hospital 8. Boxing ring 9. Jimmy D. hut 10. Our hut 11. Gunna's hut 12. Barb wire 13. Towers 14. Cat walk 15. Swamp 16. Rain forest

The stuff tasted like shit that had been deliberately ruined. Moreover, to add insult to injured taste buds, when I got back to the gang, work had started and I'd missed out on my bowl of rice. It put me right off coffee!

*Good workers, so it was spoken
Are rewarded with coffee token
If this you believed
Then later you grieved
Coffee, Yuk! Ya gotta be jokin..."*

Further information on the coffee tokens has been supplied by (Lieut) Tony Whyte

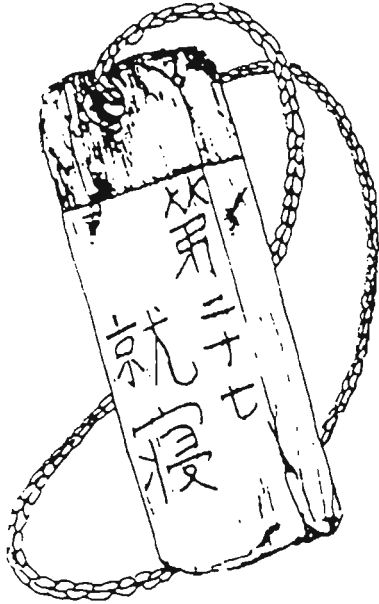
who was in Sandakan for a short time after Bill Young's move to Kuching.

He confirms Bill Young's memory of the use of coffee tokens and their general appearance but adds the presence of a hole, for stringing. The method of distribution had also changed.

Each gang of about fifty POWs chose a leader and the Japanese gave him four tokens each day. It was his job to select "the four best workers".

The "coffee token" saga had a funny side.

The Japs abandoned the scheme after they found over a hundred counterfeit tokens in circulation.



Wooden/bamboo tags were used in various situations in Outram Road Gaol and other camps. The piece illustrated from Hank Nelson's *P.O.W. Prisoners of War* is a *shushun* worn if you were sick. Similarly a *benjo* if you were going to the toilet or a *niuyin* if you were in hospital. The inscription on the above example translates to "BED 27".

Wooden "tokens" or "markers" unrelated to currency were apparently commonplace in some camps. Hugh Clare was in a camp in Japan proper and he cites their use for many purposes; a *shushun* tag if you were sick, a *niuyin* tag if you were in a hospital bed, a *benjo* tag if you were at the toilet. These were appended to your bunk. Your bed also had a numbered tag which you wore if you left the ward. In Burma, in some areas at least, each prisoner was given a wooden *dog tag* bearing his POW number.

When the airstrip was finished (it had minimal use due to allied bombing) the officers, with the exception of four doctors (two Australian and two English) and two padres along with some administrative staff, were transferred to Kuching.

An unusual numismatic reference concerns a "promissory note" signed by five escapers- the "Magnificent Five: Allen Minty, Bruce McWilliams, Bill Fairy, Normie Morris and Fred New." (On pages 116, and 117 in Bill Young's book)

The five escapees made contact with the Tiek Soong family who provided them the wherewithal in their escape attempt:-

"All these very scarce and dangerous to collect items were given on the condition each sign the "promissory note" that had been made out. This was to help cover the outlay he and his family, (Tiek Soong) had so generously supplied. Not long after the war, when the War Graves Commission sent an official party to Borneo they were presented with this very same document for payment.

The Australian Government honoured it without question, paying up every cent, even though it had been signed, in the names of Ned Kelly, Jimmy Pike, Darby Munro, Shirley Temple and I think Bob Menzies also got a mention.

When I saw the photo taken in Sandakan (by the men of the War Graves Commission) of this little repayment ceremony and reproduced in our local Hobart paper, I thought to myself, what a difference in attitudes between Government and people - Three rousing cheers for the difference. Hip Pip and a jolly Hoo Ray."

The Chinese junk acquired by the "Magnificent Five" eventually ran aground on a mud bank, was seen by a Japanese patrol

boat and the escapers finished up in a "military Court" at Kuching.

It would seem a simple task to obtain a photograph of the promissory note. This however is not the case as I have found out. The obvious place to look would be the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, particularly in view of the fact that a display devoted to Sandakan was prepared for the 50th Anniversary of the end of the Second World War.

Those preparing the exhibit have never heard of it.

On several occasions I have talked to Bill Young on this subject and he is quite clear on the newspaper report. Strangely enough I can also remember the story and the photo appearing in a Sydney paper perhaps fifteen to twenty years ago.

Even before the end of WW II, news began to filter out that a tragedy of gargantuan proportions had been enacted in the Sandakan to Ranau/Paginatan area of North Borneo.

In the immediate postwar period Major H. Jackson (later Lt. Colonel) was sent to the area where, after several weeks of investigation and questioning of the local inhabitants along with stories of the six survivors, the true facts of the disaster emerged.

Incidentally, as a result of these interviews many locals were given monetary rewards, any outstanding IOU's were paid and *Certificates of Appreciation* were presented. A Borneo equivalent of the Papua New Guinea Loyal Service Medal would not have been inappropriate. I did find a note that Sgt. Koram of the North Borneo Armed Constabulary received the MBE. Celestino dos Anjos, a Timorese guerilla who fought with the Australian Sparrow Force on that island was the only recipient of the PNGLSM out-

side the South West Pacific area of the War.

The North Borneo Story

*Sandakan * Ranau * Paginatan*

July 1942 - September 1945

A summary of Major H.W.S. Jackson's post war report of Sandakan and the Sandakan Ranau Death Marches.

1942: 15 February; surrender of Singapore: 15,000 Australian soldiers become prisoners of Japanese. Lieut. Col. Shimpei Fukie, appointed GOC all POW Camps, Malaya. Shipei was executed for War Crimes on 27 April 1946.

1942: 8 July; B Force, 1496 Australians leave Singapore.

1942: 18 July; they arrive at the port of Sandakan, British North Borneo and taken to the "8 mile" where they commenced building an air strip and camp.

1943: April; 750 British POWs arrive Sandakan.

1943: 15 April; E Force: 500 Australians, arrive Sandakan

Total :- 2,746

1943: 16 October; officers, except two Australian and two English doctors and two padres and administration staff, transferred to Kuching.

1944: June; 100 British POWs transferred to Labuan Island. They all died.

1942/5: Daily rice ration:

* July 1942.. 17 oz. * June 1944 .. 12 oz.

* July 1944.. 8oz. * September 1944.. 6 oz. (one level cup full)

* 1945 no rice/food issue.. "no work , no rice".

The causes of death were, as on the Burma Thai Railway, malaria, dysentery, malnu-



Members of a War Graves Commission Unit cataloguing the pitiful relics from the camp at Sandakan.

trition, (avitaminosis {beri beri, pellagra,} etc.), along with brutal bashings. As Japanese defeats increased so did brutalisation by the Japanese and Formosan guards.

Increasing Allied air-raids led to the Japanese decision to destroy the camp and walk the remaining 1700 prisoners 164 miles along mountain tracks and swamps to the village of Ranau.

First Death March 28 January 1945

1945: 28 January; 455 Australian and British "fit" POWs set out in 9 groups of about fifty each. One group left daily until 6 February. In this, the first "Death March", 315 reached the villages of Paginatan and Ranau. The balance either died of disease or were murdered by the guards on the way. They carried, in hessian back packs, not only their own pitiful possessions but also food, such as it was, along with the guards' gear. Over the next weeks these survivors were forced to carry 50-60 lb. loads from Ranau to Paginatan, a distance of 26 miles; this was

the site of a Japanese base which distributed supplies to various outposts along the rivers. It was the height of the monsoon season; there was no shelter, rampant sickness, minimal food, and no medical supplies. The arrival of parties 2-5 was completed on 15 February. At Paginatan water had to be carried up a steep slippery embankment from a creek to the Japanese quarters. Few men lasted more than four days as water carriers.

By 27 April, 65 men were alive; by 10 May, 50; by 10 June, 18; when the first arrivals of the Second Death March reached Ranau on 26 June, 6 men were all who remained alive from the First Death March.

Second Death March 29 May 1945

1945: 29 May; 439 Australian and 97 British prisoners struggled out of the camp. Total on the march 536. About 800 prisoners remained in the camp.

June 1945: 73 stragglers were massacred at Tankual Crossing. The survivors-183-

reached Ranau on 26 July. Any unable to keep up were shot if conscious, bayoneted if unconscious and their bodies thrown along the side of the track. By 1 August 1945 only 32 remained alive. Seventeen of these were shot on 1 August and the rest on the 27 August.

Third Death March 15 June 1945

1945; 15 June; 75 POWs and 37 guards left Sandakan. No prisoner reached Ranau; all died before reaching the "48 mile peg". One guard reached Ranau.

Sandakan Camp

1945: June/July/August.

June 9	185 alive in the camp
July 12	53 alive
July 13	23 executed
August 1	10 alive (9 Aus. 1 Br.)
August 13	5 alive (4 Aus. 1 Br.)
August 14	2 alive

(one dies during the night)

Wednesday, August 15 1945, 7 am, last POW, John Skinner, aged 31, decapitated by Sgt. Murozumi.

Six men who managed to escape were the only survivors of Sandakan and the Sandakan-Ranau-Paningatan Death Marches;

Warrant-Officer W.H. Sticpewich
QX9538 8Div.AASC

Lance-Bombadier W.D. Moxham
NX19750 2/15 Fd. Reg

Gunner O.C. Campbell
QX14380 2/10 Fd. Reg.

Pte. K. Botteril
NX42191 2/19 Bn.

Pte N.A.E. Short
NX58617 2/18Bn.

Bombadier J.R. Braithwaite
NX45378 2/15 Fd. Rgt.

Much of the responsibility for the absence of any concerted rescue attempt of the Borneo POWs by the allies has been hotly debated over the years. Lynette Ramsay Silver in her definitive book *Sandakan - A Conspiracy of Silence* outlines all the evidence relating to this issue.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to Bill Young for talking to me about his experiences, for permission to quote liberally and to reproduce his illustrations from his book, *Return to a Dark Age*. I highly recommend his book to readers, and it can be obtained direct from the author for \$19.00 by writing to 1/27 Illawarra Rd., Allawah NSW 2218. The cost includes the report by Major H. Jackson, and covers posting and handling.

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Editors note

In a number of instances where the author has quoted, the punctuation has been altered for ease of reading.