

# Sandakan Memorial Park

Text & Photos by CHEY VUN KHEN

**L**ocated in the forestry housing estate of Taman Rimba, about 12 kilometres from Sandakan town, is the former World War II prisoner-of-war (POW) camp now known as the Sandakan Memorial Park. The park is actually part of the Sibuga Forest Reserve (Class IV: Amenity) about 11 hectares in size.

From 1942 to 1945, the Japanese had in captivity in that camp about 2700 Australian and British POWs, mainly Australians captured in Singapore, who were forced to build an airstrip in Sandakan. By early 1945, signs were apparent that the Japanese were losing the war to the Allies, and many of those POWs in that camp were subsequently forced to walk through the jungle in the now infamous 'death marches' to the mountainous village of Ranau 260 kilometres away. All but six of those POWs died in those three death marches.

Even though that POW camp which saw much wartime brutality and suffering is now a park, the place still smells of torture and death, and much of the sadness lingers on. The winds in the towering trees make no sound, and the bright colours of the water-lilies in a well-kept pond fail to lift the gloom.

Many of those POWs who died so tragically were young men in their prime, and this is well documented in the book SANDAKAN: THE LAST MARCH by Don Wall (published in 1988). And to

think that if not for the war, all these young men would not have to die in such horrible circumstances, which left their families and loved ones so miserably heart-broken. What unspeakable grief!

Several relics of the war days are still left standing in the park. A tall boiler which is said to generate power from steam stands at the bottom of the hill, and opposite is a small wheel-shaped generator. Not far away is the excavator named Ruston-Bucyrus...These tools which are made of metal have withstood the elements, and they are definitely stronger than their hapless wartime users who were made of flesh and bones.

A commemorative pavilion with pictures and information on the POW camp is located on top of the hill. Beside the pavilion are several concrete water tanks from the war days, and in front of the tanks are flags of Australia, Great Britain, Malaysia and Sabah, representing the bond and friendship between these nations.

A dark and intricate stained glass window catches the eye on top of the decorative gates at the back of the pavilion. The motif of the glass is the entwined flowers of Australia, Britain and Malaysia, symbolizing unity in their struggle against adversity. Shadows of emaciated POWs are seen in the background. "Lest we forget," say the words on the decorative gates below.



**A**

**B**

- CAPTIONS:  
 A. The excavator Ruston-Bucyrus  
 B. The excavator Ruston-Bucyrus

The tall boiler