



The Corporal and His Pals **(My mission: to correct his grave)**

Private Rod Breavington was a Victorian Policeman at Northcote before WW2 broke out. Like many of his mates and forebears he joined the war effort in defence of the nation when it was under real threat from the Japanese military. Private Breavington was part of the battle and subsequent fall of Singapore; where he entered into captivity with thousands of men.

The following 'Blitzkrieg', airpower and devastation of local areas snowballed the ultimate capitulation. Water and ammunition was low and General Percival ultimately surrendered to his nemesis General Yamishita (The Tiger of Malaya).

Many, dare I say most of the Australians were peeved about the surrender, many wanted to keep going and push the enemy back. What rubbed salt into the wounds was that they were ordered not to escape; however their commander Major General Bennett himself escaped which didn't sit well with many men and many accounts I have read.

A couple of months into captivity Rod Breavington and three others (two English Privates and one Australian Private) escaped and lasted several months 'on the run'. They were later captured and returned to Singapore in bad shape. To make an example of the escapees they were taken to Changi Beach (Selerang Beach behind Curran Camp) - (a scene of ethnic cleansing of the local population a month earlier known locally as the 'Sook Ching'). They were made to dig their own graves, tied to a stake and shot in front of their commanders including LTCOL BlackJack Callegan.

Sikh guards were tasked with the execution that was presided over by Japanese Officer: Lieutenant Okusaki. Padre's were given a short period with the condemned men; after which Breavington handed out cigarettes to the other three fellas. CPL Breavington pleaded with Okusaki to spare his mate Private Gale on the grounds that he ordered the Private and that he was only a young man. Okusaki refused.

"LT Okusaki then offered the handkerchief to each of the other three men who, following Breavington's example, refused to be blindfolded. Finally, Breavington called for the Australian padre present and asked for a copy of the New Testament from which he read aloud a short passage. Corporal Breavington then turned to LTCOL Frederick 'Black Jack' Galleghan, DSO, OBE, ED (Commander of the 2nd AIF POW's) and said 'Goodbye, sir, and good luck' and saluted his superior. In so doing, Breavington was clearly prepared to die saluting 'God, his King and Australia'.

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By this time it was approximately 4.00pm and LT Okusaki was becoming very impatient. He again called the firing party to the task at hand by indicating to the members of the firing squad the 'killing' positions on their pending targets by nominating points on his own body. LT Okusaki then gave the order to fire by waving his handkerchief. But the macabre drama was not yet over.

The firing squad apparently aimed not to kill, but to torture! The first volley of shots felled the four men, but at least three of the victims were only wounded, in particular Corporal Rodney Breavington was only wounded in the arm.

After another volley, the two other prisoners were dead, but Breavington was still much alive, being wounded in the arm, ankles, knees and other non-vital spots of the body. In pain Breavington shouted to his tormentors, 'For God's sake, shoot me through the head and kill me'.

The traitorous Indians fired another ten shots at Breavington before LT Okusaki ordered them to cease fire and another Sikh member witnessing the execution moved to Corporal Rodney Breavington and put a pistol to his head and fired to ensure that this brave man was out of his agony. LT Okusaki then ordered the firing party to move forward, whereupon approximately another five shots were fired into each of the prostrate bodies. The grisly task now completed, the Indian officer in charge of the firing squad, having just disposed of Private Victor Gale's life without showing any sign of remorse, threw his rifle to one of the Sikhs in exchange for his officer's cane". (RAAOC)

After these executions, the Selarang Barracks Square Incident occurred. The Japanese ordered the men of Selarang Barracks (about 15,000 Australians) to move and remain on the Parade Ground. They had dug latrines into the asphalt and had one tap between the men who lived in cramped conditions. Men perished in the hot sun, many wounded from battle, suffering nutritional problems and of course dysentery etc. They were made to sign papers stating they would not escape.

So under duress the Australian Commanders ordered their troops to sign the no escape papers. Many signed their names as Cartoon Characters of the day including Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse etc.

As tales of the execution reached back to the men one unknown poet wrote a poem titled 'A Corporal and His Pal' about Rod and his mate Private Victor Gale.

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When in Singapore a few years back I visited Rod Breavington in Kranji War Cemetery. Kranji and Jurong are main areas of battle on the western area of Singapore synonymous with Australian fighting. I knew the story of Rod Breavington and as I stood in front of his grave I noticed that the poem didn't fit with the Portland Grave Stone. The poem referred to him as a Corporal yet the grave referred to him as a Private. If he was indeed a Private he could not have ordered his mates.

Rod Breavington was promoted whilst in Singapore due to his age (38), his maturity, service in the Victoria Police and the NZ Army. All official Army records show him as a Corporal however Army War Records Office show him as a Private.

Sometime later I brought this up with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC); they investigated the matter and they contacted me on 2nd September 2014 to advise they agree with my information, that the Private should be a Corporal. They further mentioned that the records would be changed to reflect the correction of rank however it may be several years before his grave stone at Kranji is changed, as there are many graves in front of him in France and Europe that require upgrades and changes.

The date they advised me of the approved correction was the same day/month of his execution on Changi Beach. I think Corporal Breavington was brave and tried to protect his mates in the face of evil and persecution; he stood tall and faced his foe.

As a footnote the Japanese Commander Lieutenant-General S. Fukuyei who ordered the Corporal and his Pals' execution was himself sentenced to death by the Australians post war and shot on the same spot. There would be no missed shots or poor aim on the part of the Australian shooters.



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MEMORANDUM

FROM: Commander British & Australian Troops, Changi
TO: Major General Shimpei Fukuye,
G.O.C. Prisoner of War Camps, MALAYA
Supervising Office. CHANGI
DATE: 2nd September 1942

NO.A/41/1955

I have the honour to submit this earnest appeal for your re-consideration of the infliction of the supreme penalty on four prisoners of war who have been apprehended attempting to escape from this camp.

I am aware that it has been made perfectly clear by you that any such attempts will incur the penalty of death and furthermore there is no mis-apprehension on the part of the prisoners themselves that this is so.

I will, however, take immediate steps again to impress on all ranks in this camp the inevitable outcome of any attempt to escape and would beg that in the present instance you will exercise your clemency by the infliction of a less severe punishment than that of execution.

(Sgd) E.B.HOLMES Colonel
Commanding British & Australian Troops,
CHANGI

CHANGI

2.9.42

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I re-contacted the CWGC to try and get the Corporal's grave changed and a potential unveiling for 2 September 2017 – this would have been the 75th anniversary of the execution on Changi Beach. They got back to me in June 2016 that the changes had been made and a new headstone installed in Kranji War Cemetery.

From one Corporal to another, 70+ years apart – I'm honoured to have been part of this journey.



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The logo for Death Railway TOURS features the words "Death Railway" in a large, black, hand-drawn font at the top. Below this, the word "TOURS" is written in a smaller, black, hand-drawn font, with each letter centered within a rectangular box. These boxes are arranged in a row, resembling a set of railway tracks with vertical posts.

Bibliography:

Arthur Lane, <http://www.nesa.org.uk/page19.htm>

Australian War Memorial

(Chris Johnson, 23 Apr 2011) – Soldier Bravely Faced His Firing Squad - Sydney Morning Herald.

<http://www.smh.com.au/national/soldier-boldly-faced-his-firing-squad-20110422-1drgt.html>

RAAOC Association - <http://www.raaoc.com/?q=node/55>