

Listening to Voiceless Stories of POWs -2019

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Whenever you come here to the Commonwealth War Cemetery, Yokohama, you see the well cared site of greenery and repose. Have you ever noticed that these 1800 plus graves allocated in order have a different and very special story each? We have “listened” to these stories of the men interred here, so far away from their homelands. Let us introduce three of these stories today.

■ British Section: Raymond C.W. Suttle (ND8), died on 23rd December 1943, age 23

Placing a poppy cross to the grave of Pte. Suttle, Paul Murrey was in tears. He came to visit the cemetery in autumn 2017. He is the son of Major Francis Murrey, senior and medical officer, who was present at Suttle’s deathbed at Muroran POW Camp, Hokkaido.

With the harsh climate in the northern land, severe hard work at an iron foundry with very little food and medical supplies, they saw 53 dead in this camp. Among them, Suttle’s case was especially tragic.

Major Murrey wrote on the affidavit, “Pte. Suttle, R.C.4th Suffolks, was sentenced on 18 December 1943 to 10 days detention by the Japanese in the guard room for stealing a piece of fish out of the cookhouse. He was put in the guard room without any blankets in mid-winter and no medical attention. On 23 Dec. 1943 he was removed from the guard room in extremis. His feet were gangrenous and he literally froze to death and died one hour after entering hospital. This was the responsibility of the camp commandant.” Japanese official records say Suttle’s cause of death was croup pneumonia, but Major Murrey noted in his diary, “I was forced today at ‘bayonet point’ to omit the cause of death of Suttle.”



Raymond C. Suttle

The camp commandant was taken to court for War Criminal Trial. On the final day of the court which lasted eleven days and after the closing argument of the defense side, the Solicitor General read out a telegram by Suttle’s parents calling for the death penalty. The camp commandant was sentenced to hang. He studied French at Osaka Foreign Language School (now, Osaka University) and was known as very suave and modest. People in his hometown submitted a petition by about one hundred pleaders for mercy, but it never changed this 28-year-old man’s fate.

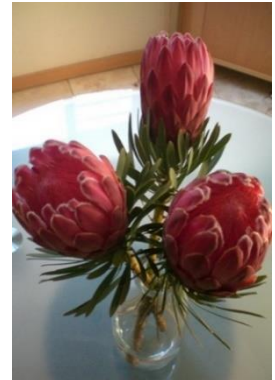
■ **British Section: E.W. Mack (JB11), died on 29th June 1943, age 36**

It has been very difficult to trace the background of this sole South African in this cemetery in Yokohama. After many years, fortunately, some descriptions about this man were included in a couple of memoirs, written by surviving POWs, were found. We owe much to these writers.

Having been living and working in Malaya and was a member of the Malayan Volunteer Air Force as a Pilot Officer, Ernest William Mack was attached to the RAF. His nationality was British. When the war broke out, he was sent to Singapore and joined a RAF group there. They were subsequently evacuated to Java with the rest of the RAF personnel and equipment, and soon were POWs in Japanese hands when the Dutch surrendered on 8th March 1942. They stayed in a couple of camps in Java until mid-October and then were sent back to Singapore then aboard the Tofuku Maru – one of a three-ship convoy heading to Japan via Taiwan. The two other ships were the Singapore Maru and the Dainichi Maru.

His ship, Tofuku Maru, arrived safely at Moji, Japan, having managed to evade torpedoes and attacks from the air. But in the holds where these POWs were taken were full of sick men. They were suffering from dysentery, cholera, tropical ulcers and many other diseases. Mack was one of these sick men. He fortunately survived, although many men died on the journey and were buried at sea or found they were already dead when the ship arrived at Moji on 25th November 1942. Then these “healthy” men were taken to a train station and their train trip started. After changing trains, Mack’s group finally got to Mitsushima, Nagano Prefecture, on 29th November. The main work the men had to do was to build a dam in Tenryu. Men continued to die in the camp. The Canadian POW, Les Chater wrote in his diary on 29th June 1943 quote “P/O/ Mack died of general weakness. He has been sick since arrival with diarrhea. Funeral in morning. Total deaths now 74.” (*Actually 59 dead in this camp. Chater probably began to count since leaving Singapore.)

After the war, at this Tokyo No. 12 Camp in Hiraoka (Mitsushima), 6 Japanese were sentenced to death by hanging.



**National flower
of South Africa,
Protea**

■ **Australian Section: J. R. Sewell (FA 5-6), died on 15th October 1947, Age 31**

Soon after the Japanese surrender, the US and other Allied countries sent their army to Japan to maintain public order, demilitarize and dispose of armaments. British, Australian, New Zealand and Indian Army members were then called BCOF (British Commonwealth Occupation Force). Australians first stationed at Ebisu, Tokyo, but later moved to Kure to control Shimane, Yamaguchi, Tottori, Okayama, Hiroshima and the whole of Shikoku Island. Under the instruction of the US Army, the 10th Australian Bomb Disposal Platoon was comprised.



It was an extremely dangerous task to destroy live armaments and many highly explosive like ammunitions, marine mines and torpedos. **Sgt. J.R. Sewell, GM**
On 22nd October 1946, while loading 83 tons of ammunition on a boat with 56 Japanese labourers and crew at Onasami-jima, Hiroshima, there occurred a sudden explosion and 19-year-old Sapper, Frank James Smith, was blown to death on the beach (his grave is ED8). 15 labourers were also killed.

Although James Ronald Sewell had heavy head injuries and both eardrums were damaged, he continued to pick up survivors and dispatch them to hospitals for treatment, totally disregarding his own safety. After arranging for the removal of Smith's body, he reported back to camp. Japanese survivors reported that further numbers of Japanese would have perished without Sewell's dedication to rescue and control panic. Sewell was awarded the George Medal for this exceptional bravery under hazardous conditions. Almost a year later, he himself was killed in an explosion while disarming a marine mine at the beach of Muroto, Shikoku, together with Sapper Albert George Bramley, age 30. They are interred jointly. At this explosion, 36 Japanese spectators were also killed.

Sergeant Sewell's mother happened to hear this newsflash on radio. The official telegram which came some hours later made her collapse and confine her in bed. Let us remember such dangerous missions and victims even after the war.

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