

# YOUR STORY

## The Long Nawang Massacre

by Melissa Murphy



**On the morning of 25 December, 1941, nine Japanese bombers in three groups of three carried out air strikes on Sibu, the inland town of the central region of Rajah Brooke's Kingdom of Sarawak, then a British protectorate.**

The enemy bombing of Sibu lasted for about 15 minutes. As there was no anti-aircraft resistance from the ground, the Japanese planes flew off intact. There was panic among the residents of Sibu, and the European officers knew that soon the enemy would enter the town. Kuching, Sarawak's administrative capital, had already fallen, undefended, into the hands of the Japanese on Christmas Eve.

The unfolding Rising Sun against the blue skies of Kuching signaled the beginning of a new era, a new world. The somber scene of Imperial Japanese troops in battle fatigues escorting a line of disenchanted Europeans, many recognizable as officers of the fallen Brooke government, provoked despair amongst the Asian inhabitants. The majority of the expatriates were interned, but a number - including a group from Sibu that included Andrew Macpherson and nine of his staff, his wife Clare, who was eight months pregnant at the time, Mrs Bompfrey and her nine month old baby and five year old son and two visitors - managed to escape hours before the enemy advanced from Kuching. On the night of 26 December, 1941, they began the journey to Belaga on the upper Rajang. From there, they planned to travel up the Balui River to the remote village of Long Nawang, a Dutch army post situated in the highlands, some 300 miles distant in Dutch-controlled Borneo (now known as Kalimantan). Before departing, Macpherson radioed Sir Shenton Thomas in Singapore, who

advised him, "Do whatever you think best." Sir Thomas in turn contacted the Dutch government, asking them to expect and assist the group.

The perilous journey of 28 days, in the course of which they "one morning crossed one river 36 times, a raging mountain torrent sometimes knee deep, sometimes armpit deep and particularly powerful", ended on 22 January when the military outpost, which the travelers hoped would provide a safe hideaway from invading forces, was finally reached. It was situated in a mountainous area in a pleasant, temperate climate, with sufficient provisions for a year. Nevertheless, some of the men toyed with the idea of returning to Sibu to be interned, but changed their minds upon hearing of the Fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942. Local Dutch forces surrendered in March 1942. One group headed off back to Kuching, but was never heard of again. Another small group of five men left Long Nawang, three of whom were fortunate enough to meet a Dutch army launch, which took them downstream to a secluded Dutch army airfield, from which they were flown to Bandung in Central Java. Two of these eventually reached Perth, Australia, while the third man is believed to have joined a merchant vessel in Java. The other two were unfortunate enough to be picked up by Japanese marines and interned in Java.

The remaining group stayed at Long Nawang, and was joined in April by a Dutch Army group of 40 men. In August a number of missionaries from the United States and a priest, Father Joseph Feldbrugge, also sought refuge there. On 19 August two tribesmen arrived at the post with news that a raiding party of Japanese marines had been hacking its way through impossible terrain for over a month, and that they were

in sight of Long Nawang. Thinking that this group was actually a retreating force of the Dutch East Indies Army, the commander of the post dismissed the news and took no further action. It was a decision which was to determine the fate of every soul remaining there. Soon after, a party of 70 Japanese soldiers reached Long Nawang.

On arrival the Japanese ambushed the whole post, despite a flag of truce being shown. Once they had taken control, the surviving men were forcibly led to an execution ground. Rifle shots and grenade explosions punctuated the quiet, and before midday, the execution was over. A month later the women were put into gunny sacks, dragged to a nearby location and mercilessly bayoneted to death. This included Mrs Macpherson and her infant child. Native witnesses later told investigators that the children were made to climb nearby trees, then allowed to drop from exhaustion onto upturned bayonets. The Long Nawang massacre has been described as one of the worst brutalities of the Japanese occupation of Borneo, but despite intensive post-war investigations, it was never discovered which Japanese officers were ultimately responsible for this atrocity - nor was there any war time trial. My grandfather, Desmond Verdon Murphy, was amongst those killed.

This tragic story became known to my family only after I decided to investigate the disappearance of my grandfather. For more than 60 years, the circumstances of his death remained a mystery and no one knew what had happened to him. The last anyone had heard of him was when he was working in Sarawak, on duty with the Police Constabulary there.



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Desmond Verdon Murphy was the son of John Murphy (born 1866, baptised at St. John's in Limerick, died in Bath 1933) and Frances Amelia, nee Spearman (died 1948). His parents were married at North Strand Church, St. Thomas, Dublin on 22 June 1893. Desmond was the only boy, with sisters Moya, Nina and Erris. At the time of Desmond's birth, in Dublin, 1894, his father was a Colour Sergeant/staff clerk, who was probably serving in the Army Ordnance Corps. In 1906 John was promoted from the ranks to become an Assistant Commissary/Hon Lieutenant in the Army Ordnance Department. Despite seeing home service during the Great War his personnel record does not appear to have survived, but an Army List confirms that he ended his career on 29 March 1920, retiring with the honorary rank of Major. Desmond was educated at Hutton Grammar School in Preston. He went on to study electrical engineering. Following in his father's footsteps, Desmond answered the call of the nation in 1914, joining the Officer Training Corps, and was commissioned in December. He had requested a commission in the Army Ordnance Department, but ultimately embarked for France with the Scottish Rifles on 20 April 1916.

His time at the Front was limited, for he soon returned home due to sickness and remained there. His exact movements after that are a bit sketchy. There was talk that he went

out to join the police in South Africa, and then Rhodesia, but this rumour has not been substantiated. What can be confirmed is that he arrived in Sarawak in the mid-1920s, and was employed by the constabulary under the government of the Brooke family - the White Rajahs of Sarawak. He was swiftly promoted; firstly to Superintendent of Police in 1929, then to Commissioner and Superintendent of Prisons in 1933, and eventually Superintendent of Police at Sibu, the Third Division of Sarawak. He was acknowledged by the locals as a 'Tuan' (respected person), and he took Siti Sulastry binti Sulaiman - a local girl born in Java - as a wife. She bore him three sons. Two died as infants, but the middle child, born in 1937, was my father Michael Murphy. They lived well and were happy, but their conjugal bliss was cut short when the war broke out. Desmond's wife Siti and my father, having been advised that it was safest for them to blend in with the locals, never heard from him again. Desmond was officially listed as 'missing in action' after the war, with his fate unknown.

By 2006 I had managed to piece a few things together, but living in Kuching, Sarawak, meant that I could not easily access overseas records. I employed London-based researcher Roger Nixon to help me, and among other things he located two important documents. One was the death entry for Desmond,



included with several others in a Colonial Office register, and the other was Desmond's WW1 officer file. The Colonial Office register (TNA RG 31/132 Malaya, Borneo & Sarawak deaths from enemy action) provided the proof that my family had waited so long for. It showed that Desmond had been killed by the Japanese in September 1942 in Long Nawang. Sadly, the news came too late for Siti, my grandmother, who passed away in 2001 and never did know what had happened to her husband. My father had no memory of his father, but at last we now knew of his resting place. Or did we?

Later research showed that all the casualties were originally buried at Long Nawang in two mass graves, but were re-interred in 1950 and laid to rest on Tarakan Island in east Borneo in a cemetery called 'Field of Honour'. I later discovered that this cemetery had fallen into disuse, and that the remains had been yet again reinterred in 1967 and transferred to 'Kembang Kuning War Cemetery' in Surabaya, Java. This is maintained by the Netherland War Graves Foundation [www.ogs.nl](http://www.ogs.nl). Sadly, my father Michael died in February 2012. He had dreamed of making a trip to Surabaya to visit his father's gravesite. He never made it, but I am glad that he had found out everything about Desmond from my investigations before he passed. I imagine that they are now finally reunited in the afterlife.

