

Return to Muntok (February 2012)

In April 2011, I visited Palembang in Sumatra and Muntok on Bangka Island with Mr Anthony Pratt. We each wished to find what had happened to our family members, Anthony's Father and my Grandfather, who had been civilian internees of the Japanese and who had both died in Muntok.

The story of our first journey was printed in Apa Khabar last year. On that trip, we visited the Charitas Hospital in Palembang, where some internees were able to be treated and also found the location of the civilian internee camps there. We then travelled to Muntok and saw the jail where the civilian men had been interned and the village which had been the site of the civilian women's camp.

A difficult question was always 'What had become of the civilian graves in Muntok?' We each had a photo of our relative's graves, believed to have been taken in the Dutch cemetery in Muntok by Dutch military officers after the War.

The East Indies Camp Archives website has a map of old Muntok, showing the Dutch cemetery.

William McDougall, the American journalist who had been interned in the camps and who became a Catholic Priest after the War, described the funeral processions and the location of burials at Muntok very clearly. Further information was gained from our friend and MVG member Neal Hobbs who was interned from the age of 17 to 21 and now lives in Queensland. He had been a member of the burial groups.

We thus knew where the civilian men had been buried and believed that the women, first buried in a Chinese cemetery near the women's camp at Muntok or in a nearby rubber plantation had been moved to the Dutch cemetery after the war.

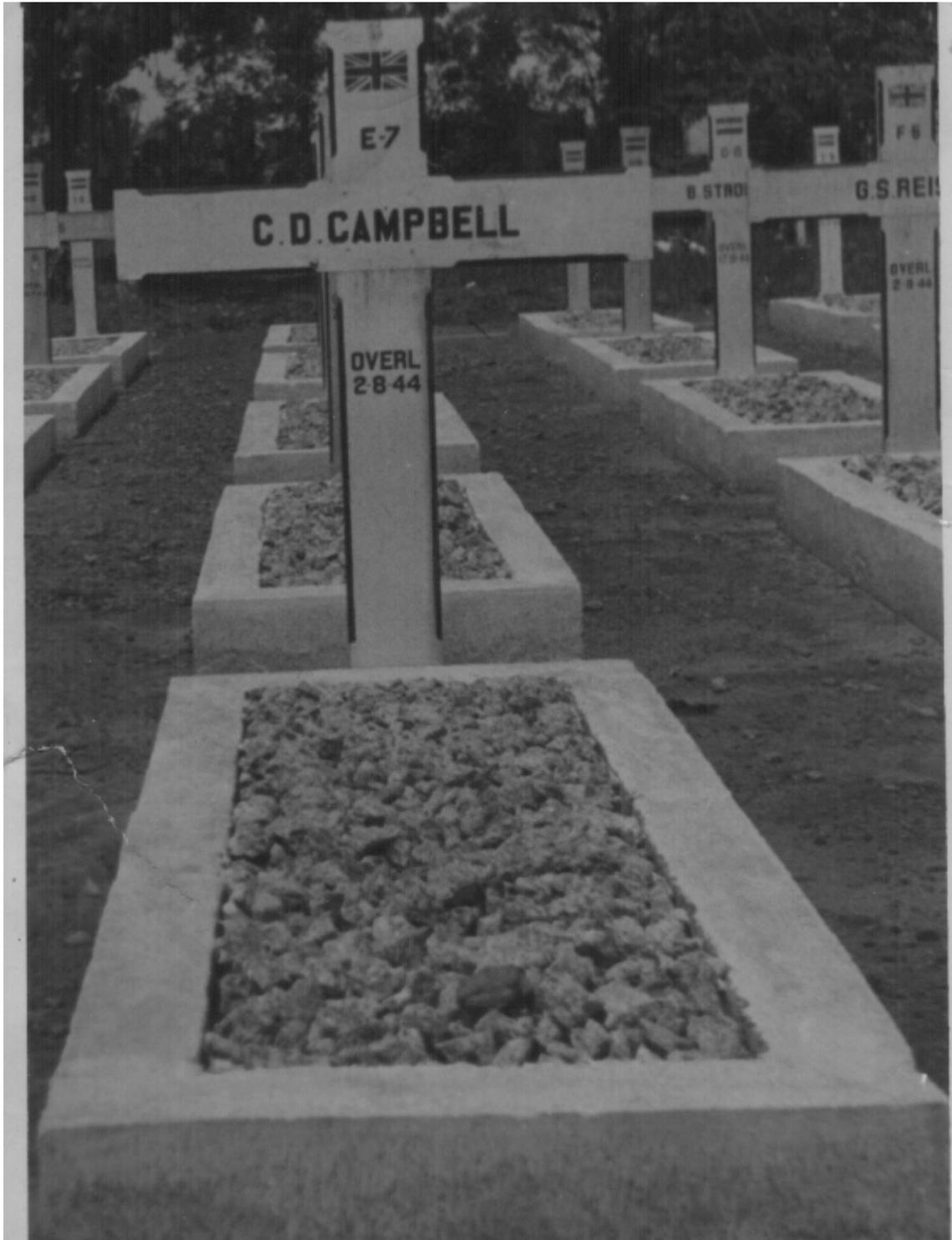
The Dutch military had prepared a very neat cemetery after the War, with the graves having concrete surrounds and a clearly-named wooden cross.

Advertisements had been placed in Singapore newspapers, offering copies of the photos to bereaved family members.

DUTCH PICTURES OF WAR GRAVES

The Dutch War Graves Authorities have sent to Singapore photographs of the graves of civilian internees who were buried in Muntock Cemetery, Banka Island, Netherlands East Indies.

The photographs may be claimed by relatives, who should address their inquiries to Army Graves Registration, Nee Soon, Singapore.



(Photo of my grandfather's grave, with many others, including Gordon Reis, in the Dutch cemetery, Muntok circa 1948)

In the early 1960's, the Indonesian government asked the Dutch and British to consolidate the many war cemeteries. The Dutch moved their military and civilian graves to Jakarta but the British moved only their military and a very few civilian graves.

This information was confirmed to Anthony Pratt and to me by the Netherlands War Graves Foundation. Correspondence between former internee Mrs Shelagh Lea, whose mother died in Muntok, and the British government describes this sad situation in detail.

Mrs Lea wrote to the Foreign Office for many years until 1968 when she was finally told that the Commonwealth War Graves Commission had no responsibility for civilian graves. This correspondence can be seen at the National Archives at Kew, United Kingdom.

Residents in Muntok told us last year that their houses, in the location of the old Dutch cemetery, were built in 1965.

After much investigation, we now believe that the remaining civilian graves in Muntok lie beneath houses built in 1965 and the Pertamina petrol station built in 1981. A separate group of graves, thought to be those of 25 civilian women, was uncovered during the excavation for the petrol station and was moved to a nearby Catholic cemetery.

Although our heartache was eased by the warmth and new friendships we found in Muntok, we still felt we would like to place memorials there to the internees and particularly those who had died and had no marker.

In addition to the internees, many thousands of people fleeing Singapore had been bombed and died in the Bangka Straits. Clear records were not able to be kept but it is estimated that between 4,000 and 5,000 people died in this way.

There is a memorial at Muntok to the nurses who were shot on Radji beach, to the nurses who drowned before reaching shore, died in captivity or managed to survive. Another group of civilians was killed on Radji beach and Vivian Bowden, the Australian Trade Commissioner, was killed on reaching Muntok.

Of the civilian internees, records show that 270 men and 78 women died in Muntok camps. Others died en route to the last camp at Belalau rubber plantation near Loeboek Lingggau in Sumatra and during internment there. We understand that those who died at Belalau were later moved to Jakarta.

It is not known why the British civilian graves were left at Muntok, as the Dutch moved both their military and civilian graves. Despite heartfelt letters to the British government over a 20 year period, Mrs Lea, the former internee whose Mother died in Muntok, was told that Bangka Island was remote and that the initially impeccable cemetery prepared by the Dutch military had become overgrown and too difficult to maintain.

This was the situation as we found it last April, not ideal but not able to be changed. We were very fortunate, however, to find that the people of Muntok are very interested in all aspects of the history of the island. Our friends in Muntok, Mr Mohammad Rizki, manager of the Timah tin mining company and members of the Muntok Heritage Community were planning a museum to be placed in the lovely old Tinwinning building opposite the jail. They

were happy for us to place plaques in Muntok, to remember the civilian internees. At last the civilians would be able to have a memorial.

It was decided that a plaque would be placed at the Charitas Hospital in Palembang – there was already one in place to thank the hospital for its care of the British forces in 1942 and 1943. Until the hospital was closed down by the Japanese in 1943, some internees were able to be treated there. Some were admitted for several weeks and helped to recover from dysentery, which would otherwise have killed them.

Sometimes hospital staff arranged for husbands and wives to be admitted from the camps at the same time – this was often the only way that each knew the other was still alive. Nuns also helped to smuggle letters and medicines back into the camps.

Finally, the hospital was forcibly closed down and the doctors and staff arrested and tortured.

Other plaques were planned for Muntok, to remember the evacuees who died at sea, the interned men, women and children and with a further plaque for the museum, to remember all who had suffered there.

The Malayan Volunteers Group very kindly offered to fund the plaques – many of those who drowned in the Bangka Straits, who died on reaching shore or who were interned in the camps were members of the Malayan Volunteers or were their families.

On this return journey to Palembang and Muntok in February 2012, Anthony Pratt and I were very lucky to be joined by Margie and Stephen Caldicott. Margie is the daughter of Mrs Shelagh Lea, the lady who had written to the British government for 20 years, trying to maintain the Muntok cemetery or to place a memorial. It was wonderful that after so many years, the late Mrs Lea's wishes could finally be recognised.

We met in Singapore and attended the lunch at the Bark Café at Changi Museum and the 70th anniversary service at the Kranji War Ceremony with the Malayan Volunteers Group and members of the Badan Warisan, concerned with Malaysian Heritage. A group of these friends were travelling by boat to Palembang, following the path of the evacuees and we arranged to meet again in Muntok to present the plaques.

There followed 2 days in Singapore, waiting for the flight to Palembang. The time passed very quickly, exchanging stories, pictures and photographs. Margie had brought a package of papers showing a detailed plan of the Muntok Dutch cemetery, lists of those buried there and photographs of a semi-circular wall behind the graves. There were later photos of the graves in disrepair. From these we would be able to tell roughly where our family and friends had been buried.

We flew to Palembang on Saturday February 18th and took the memorial plaque to the Charitas Hospital. We met with the Archbishop of Palembang, the Hospital Director and the

kind and gracious nuns. We thanked the Hospital for its care of the internees in 1942 and 1943 and asked that those who died could be remembered in their prayers.

We toured the hospital and saw its modern and up-to-date facilities as well as a beautiful museum made with small dolls, telling the history of the Nuns order. We also learnt that Charitas runs 6 hospitals for the poor in rural areas.

While in Palembang, we were met by Putu, an employee of the Timah tin company in Muntok, his wife Komang and little daughter. We visited the site of the women's internment camp at Talang Semoet, and could match the streets shown on the old East Indies Camp Archives map with a modern-day street map. Many of the older-style Dutch houses which formed the first Women's camp are still in place.



(example of an older Dutch house with garage, in Bukit Besar, near the area of the women's camp, Palembang)

It seems that a small hotel, 'Wisma Maharani,' now stands on the site of garage No 9, which housed Margie's Mother, Grandmother and a group of missionaries, including Margaret Dryburgh.

While in camp, Margaret Dryburgh transcribed beautiful classical music scores, which the women were able to sing together in a vocal orchestra. Even though the British and Dutch

women did not speak one another's languages, they were able to transcend the hardship and squalor of the camps and feel their spirits soar free beyond the camp walls.

Men working at Wisma Maharani surprised us by reporting that they had seen the ghosts of women in the hotel. They were quite definite about this and had goose bumps on their arms when speaking to us. We later heard a similar story in Muntok.

The site of the men's camp is nearby, now mainly comprising modern houses. The area was known as Poentjak Sekoening which means Golden Peak. We tried to imagine the working parties of men walking from the Palembang jail to build their new home of atap (palm leaf) huts. It is recorded that the women stood on the roofs of their Dutch houses and waved to the men and that on their first Christmas, the men slowed their walk to hear the women singing to them. The men reciprocated by singing 'O Come All Ye Faithful' as they walked past the women the following day.

When the men were moved back into Muntok Prison in September 1943, the women and children were moved out of the Dutch houses into this atap camp.

After this, our friends took us to see the grim exterior of the Palembang jail which housed the civilian men until they moved into the atap camp. Nurses Margot Turner, Mary Cooper and Jennie Macalister, Olga Neubrunner and Dr Holweg's wife were imprisoned in the jail without charges from April 1943 for 6 months. The local criminals, murderers and thieves tried to help the women and sometimes passed them a banana, black coffee or a piece of cake, at great risk to themselves.



(Palembang jail)

We next visited the Museum Sultan Mahmud Badaruddin 2 next to the Benteng Kuto Besak fort, both on the Moesi river. We greeted our friend the museum guide who had helped us to find the camps sites in 2011.

Next we visited our friend's parents' home in Pladjoe. This is a suburb of Palembang where the oil refineries are situated and where large tankers on the Moesi river transport the oil overseas. In 1942, allied planes tried to bomb the refineries and destroy the oil. Groups of internees, including Anthony Pratt's father, were sent by the Japanese to construct an airfield. The area was very low-lying and unhealthy and several men died there from dysentery.

On this visit, we were very warmly welcomed by our hosts, a Hindu family and offered a wonderful traditional lunch, including a large fish from their pond. We then drove into the countryside to visit other family members and were shown their Hindu temple and traditional wedding furniture.

The following day we rose early and drove to the docks at Boom Baru to catch the Express Bahari ferry to Muntok. As we watched the sun rise over the Moesi river, I am sure we all

thought of the very different journeys our families had made on the river to and from the camps on Bangka Island. This boat was comfortable - we travelled in soft seats with air-conditioning, watching a DVD and given a lunch box. The journey took 3 hours rather than the 12 hours endured by the prisoners. Nevertheless, as we stood in the engine-room, watching the island approach, our families and friends were very much in our minds.

Margie's Mother and Grandmother, Shelagh and Mary Brown had been on board the 'SS Vyner Brooke', thought to have carried 241 passengers, of whom 135 were bombed and drowned. Mrs and Miss Brown were pulled onto a raft and eventually reached the shore. They sheltered in a pig-stye until taken into the Muntok cinema and then to the coolie lines.

As we neared Muntok, we could see the lighthouse and remembered the nurses from the 'SS Vyner Brooke', 22 of whom landed on Radji beach and whom, with the exception of Vivian Bullwinkel, were shot dead in the sea. They joined the men bayoneted earlier and the nurses and civilians who drowned before they could reach the shore.

Margot Turner was a British nurse who had survived the bombing of the 'SS Kuala' which carried about 700 people, near Pom Pom Island. She was rescued by 'SS Tanjong Pinang', only to be bombed again near Bangka Island. She was the sole survivor of a raft carrying women and children and reached Muntok very near death.

My Grandfather, Colin Douglas Campbell, a rubber planter from Telok Anson, was on board the 'Giang Bee'. On board, volunteers were asked to man shifts, shovelling coal to drive the boat as fast as possible – it was their only chance of escape. But the ship was also hit, leaving only 70 survivors of 293 people on board.

There were not enough lifeboats and the ropes of some were damaged, tipping women and children into the sea. Those in a lifeboat or lifejacket or holding onto debris watched as the 'Giang Bee' sank with more than 100 people still on board.

Anthony Pratt's father, Donald Frederick Pratt, had been on board the 'SS Mata Hari', with 483 people on board. Brave Captain Carston tried to avoid the Japanese by sailing close to the shore of Sumatra but the ship was captured and taken into Muntok harbour. The passengers were taken into Muntok but allowed to take one suitcase each with them. The captain also opened the food stores and distributed all the tinned food on board. The food and clothes were very useful for the other shipwrecked internees who had lost all their possessions.

We thought of the 'Li Wo', the 'Mary Rose' and all the other vessels which brought evacuees to Muntok to their fate.

Nearing Muntok, on a sunny day, with blue skies and with smiling faces around, we nevertheless thought of the tragedies that had occurred here 70 years ago.



(Muntok lighthouse)

We were taken to the Timah Tin Company rest house and met our host Muhammad Rizki, the Muntok Heritage Community members and the Malayan Volunteers Group members and members of Badan Warisan and friends who had sailed from Singapore, travelling in the path of the evacuees.

We were taken in cars to the home of the Regent of Bangka Belitung, Ust. H. Zuhri M. Syazali. We realised we were in a convoy of vehicles, travelling very slowly and with indicators flashing, a true funeral procession. On reaching the Regent's home, we were escorted under decorative umbrellas, to the accompaniment of drums and Indonesian dancers. The Regent greeted us and speeches were made, followed by a lovely lunch.

From here, we drove to the Muntok jail, where the men had been interned and where so very many had died in both the jail and adjoining coolie lines. A brick plinth had been built outside the jail to house the plaque dedicated to the male internees. The first plaque was thus put in place.



(Presenting the plaque for the civilian men and boys at the Muntok jail. Judy Balcombe, Anthony Pratt, the Regent of Bangka Belitung and Jail Superintendent)

From here we proceeded to the village which was the site of the former women's and children's camp. 20 families now live here and they came to greet us at the tiled plinth which was to hold the plaque. The Regent spoke to them, saying that all our families had been in Muntok at the same time and thus we are all one family now. He asked the people to take good care of the plaque for us.



(The plaque to the women and children in the village where the camp was situated.)

The only remaining structure from the old camp is a curved stone well. It is now dry but is being preserved for historical purposes. We felt we would like to help the village and learning that they now walk to collect fresh water, decided we will contribute to the project to build them a new well. It will be good to feel there is a continuing link with Muntok and the people of the village.



(The original well from the women's camp – now dry but will be preserved. Muhammad Rizki, Margie Caldicott, Anthony Pratt (behind) and the Regent Ust. H. Zuhri M. Syazali)

The last plaque will be placed at the new Tinwinning building museum when the museum is completed in November. Scaffolding is in place to begin cleaning the walls and the architectural drawings show a fine and very pleasing complex.

The following day, we visited the site of the former Dutch Cemetery. This was the burial place of very early Dutch pioneers and then the male internees who died in Muntok. After 1945, the Dutch military reburied the women internees who had lain in the Chinese cemetery and the rubber plantation behind the Women's camp, here.

As mentioned above, in 1948, the Dutch had constructed neat graves with a concrete surround for each internee and made very clear wooden crosses bearing each internee's name

Margie's mother Shelagh, a former internee and whose mother had died in Muntok had written to the Commonwealth War Graves Foundation, the Foreign Office and the British Ambassador in Jakarta for over 20 years, asking for the Muntok cemetery to be maintained. Initially, the reply was favourable, with plans for a tidy cemetery, with graves planted with verbenas. As time passed and the graves fell into disrepair, the location was said to be too

remote and the project too expensive. Eventually, it was concluded that the Commonwealth War Graves Commission had no responsibility for civilian graves.

In the meantime, in 1961, the Netherlands War Graves Foundation had moved both their military and civilian graves from Muntok and the British military graves had also been moved. This process had been observed by local residents, including children who had played in the cemetery. They described to us the exhumations, with remains being placed into separate bags, each labelled with a metal tag with the person's name. This activity doubtless contributed to the falling down of the remaining British civilian gravestones.

Margie Caldicott had brought with her lists of the people buried in Muntok cemetery, both alphabetical and by row and plot number. She also had a schematic diagram of the cemetery, corresponding to the list. In addition, she had photos showing the overgrown and derelict graves with a large semi-circular wall behind them.

As we explored the housing area behind and to the right of the Pertamina petrol station, we found the remains of the base of a curved wall situated in the ground. It was possible to gauge the expanse of the prior wall. Mr Herman, the householder, greeted us – he told us the wall had been in his front garden and that, as it was damaged, he had removed it 4 years ago. He also told us that the houses had been built there in 1965.

Mrs Herman kindly brought out seats for us and Mr Herman provided a tape measure. It was thus possible, by counting down and across on the cemetery plan, to roughly establish where particular graves had been.

We thought my Grandfather's grave had lain in the driveway of the Herman's relatives and that Anthony Pratt's Father's grave was in the same enclosure, near a wall. It was extraordinary to view the householders going about their activities, children playing and chickens pecking, just where our relatives had been laid to rest.

The local people were not oblivious of the graves, however – a man told us he had been digging near my Grandfather's probable grave and had struck wood, then had fallen into the hole. Someone nearby had found hair and teeth when digging the foundations for their house. The people were not bothered by their proximity to a graveyard although they did tell us they saw a ghost in the area. The ghost was of a tall man, dressed in regal clothes with gold buttons. In addition, he had no head.

Further measurements suggested there may be buried remains in the vacant land behind the petrol station. We also felt it is very likely that the women's graves are the remains moved to the Catholic cemetery in 1981, when the petrol station was built.

The cemetery plans show the civilian women's graves lay at the front of the cemetery, near the road. Measurements showed this was close to the location of the excavation for the petrol tanks. We were told that, on finding these remains, the builder went to the Catholic

church. The remains were placed in 3 communal graves in the Catholic cemetery, with a headstone stating that '25 English allies, killed in WW2, were reburied there in March 1981.'



(one of 3 graves containing the remains of 25 English allies, reburied in the Catholic cemetery in 1981 during construction of the Pertamina petrol station.)

The following day, we visited the Catholic church and met the Priest. He kindly telephoned to the head of administration in Pangkal Pinang but no further information was available. It is at least comforting to feel that care was taken of these remains and that they are very likely the graves of the women internees.

We also visited the house of the neighbour behind and to the left of the petrol station and saw in place some tall, shaped concrete pillars. These were seen in the old photographs as marking the edges of the cemetery and if still in their original location, define the margin of the old grave yard.

The plaques presented, friends greeted and the grave area explored, it was time to return to Palembang, Singapore and home. We boarded the ferry and took our leave, thinking all the while of the brave and true people who had lived and died here, their suffering and how their lives could have been. At least we know that they were interned with friends who tried their very best to care for them and that they did not die alone. They now lie in a warm and friendly town and will not be forgotten.

Internee W.Probyn Allen died from Blackwater fever (haemolyticmalaria) at Belalau, the final camp, on 25th March 1945. He wrote a poem to his wife, including these lines:

“My thoughts and prayers and wishes to the stars and round moon spoken,
Are all the gifts that I can send to you for token
Of all the joy there is between us, come what may.
Have faith, my love, although the night is dark,
the day will break, and peace and good will come
tomen at last.”

Although the past should not be forgotten, we would like to think that good has come to Muntok now and that in the words of the Regent, we are all members of one big family.



(If any readers would like to contribute to MVG to the cost of the memorial plaques and/or to the Muntok well project in memory of friends or family, this would be very much appreciated, thank you.)

