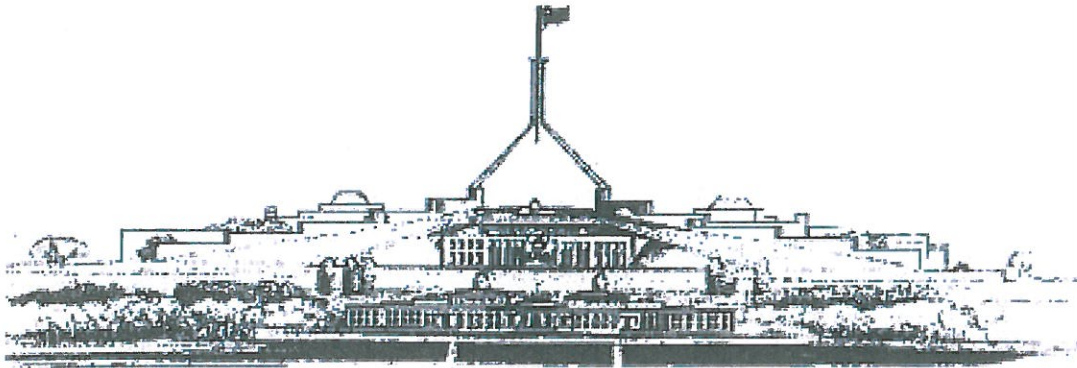




COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ADJOURNMENT

Sandakan Mateship Trek

SPEECH

Tuesday, 23 August 2011

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

<p>Date Tuesday, 23 August 2011 Page 9123 Questioner Speaker Morrison, Scott, MP</p>	<p>Source House Proof No Responder Question No.</p>
---	--

Mr MORRISON (Cook) (22:11): In early April this year I teamed up once again with my good friend and colleague the member for Blaxland, the Minister for Defence Material who is at the table, to embark on our second mateship trek, following our earlier expedition to Kokoda in April 2009. The mateship trek is an initiative we started to bring young people together from our respective communities with very different Australian experiences, framed by diverse ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds, to demonstrate the power and possibility of unity. Our purpose was not to focus on what was different but to understand what we all have in common by connecting with the unique legacy we share as Australians provided by those service men and women who sacrificed so much.

Our purpose is to give honour; to understand their story, their sacrifice, their lives; to walk in their footsteps and allow that experience to change us. The unity we seek is not a lowest common denominator consensus. To the contrary, it is deeply aspirational: to inspire each of us to reach upwards to the values lived by those Australians who sacrificed so much. These values are those of mateship, sacrifice, endurance and courage—the same carved into the stone at Isurava, overlooking Kokoda. They lead us to a better understanding and appreciation of ourselves, each other, and our own responsibility to live a life that counts; to live a life with purpose; to live a life worthy of their sacrifice; to live a life that seizes the opportunity they gifted to us, all of us in equal measure, regardless of how long we have been here, and to provide the same opportunity to those that will follow us.

On this occasion our trek took us to the jungles of Borneo to walk in the footsteps of the POWs who were slaughtered on the Sandakan Death March—Australia's greatest ever military atrocity. We were joined on this occasion by the member for Lyne, for whom this pilgrimage had a special significance as that march had claimed the life of his own grandfather, Captain John Oakeshott, at the final camp at Ranau.

Our trekkers were drawn from each of our electorates. They were young people from Indigenous, Lebanese, Italian, Greek, Maori, African and Anglo backgrounds: from the shire—Elyse Murphy, Brett Johnson, James Biasetto, Michael Cutici; from Bankstown—Chanel Steiner, Katherine Kopsaris, Issa Jebara and Sam Jalloh; from the Mid North Coast—Liam Carney, James White, Tommaya Kelly-Sines and Kyia Eveleigh. They were joined by a veteran from our Kokoda Trek, school principal Jihad Dibb, as well as Luke Morris, the team from Channel 9 led by Tracy Vo, and our tour leader, Lynette Silver, whose tireless work has ensured that the story of the Sandakan Death March will forever now stand in our nation's memory and history. We were generously supported by Channel 9, BHP Billiton, Interlink Roads, Generation One, Clubs Australia and Bankstown Sports Club, together with John and Patricia Azarias, who made our trip possible.

Within days our trekkers were one team, overwhelmed by the story they were discovering for the first time. Elyse put it best when she said it was 'a story she never knew, but now she will never forget'. By late 1944 the Allied forces had advanced towards Borneo. The Japanese decided to send about 2,000 Australian and British prisoners, who had been held at the POW camp in Sandakan where they had been sent to build an airstrip, westward to Ranau in Borneo's rugged interior. Weak and sick prisoners staggered for about 260 kilometres along jungle tracks. Many died on the way, their bodies never recovered. Those unable to continue were killed; indeed, murdered. Those who made it either died of disease, a beating, or at the end of a bayonet or a bullet, including 15 who were executed after the declaration of peace. They included the member for Lyne's grandfather. Only six, all Australians, out of about 1,000 sent to Ranau escaped and survived the war. Each of us carried with us one POW. We carried their story, and where we reached the place where they fell we paid tribute and we spoke their story. For me that time came at the first camp at Ranau, to honour the life of Private Richie Murray from Botany. Together with his mate Keith Botterill they had stolen rice from the Japanese to build up food stocks for an escape. When the theft was discovered Murray stepped forward to take responsibility, knowing that unless he did all remaining men in the camp would be slaughtered. He was bayoneted and his body thrown into a bomb crater at Ranau on 20 May 1945. His mate Keith Botterill was one of those who escaped.

As the trek concluded we came to the final camp at Ranau. It is a beautiful spot; a leafy flat framed by the banks of two rivers joining at its edge at the base of a steep gorge. I have never felt so uneasy at a place in my life. It was like the ground itself was screaming. It reminded me of Genesis 4:10, where God says to Cain, who had killed his brother Abel:

The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground.

As our trek concluded, and we stood and listened to the member for Lyne pay tribute to the grandfather he never knew in the place where he was murdered, I can only reflect on the fact that we can never forget their cries. Twelve young Australians now understand that story. It was a great tribute to those who lost their lives and it was a great honour to once again share with the member for Blaxland, and on this occasion the member for Lyne, that great privilege of walking in their footsteps.