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MAX CARMENT'S PRISONER OF WAR EXPERIENCES

David Carment

I feel honoured to speak here this morning at your Anzac Day commemoration. Although I am most fortunate to have never been directly involved in a war, Anzac Day is an occasion when I reflect on the courage and sacrifices of those Australians who were. I think about the members of my own family who served and, in several instances, lost their lives in the Boer War, the First World War and the Second World War. As someone who has taught and written about Australian history for many years, I am also very much aware of the Anzac tradition's continuing significance.

I agreed to say something today about the experiences during the Second World War of my late father, David Maxwell (usually known as Max) Carment, who died aged almost 89 in July 2007. As a Lieutenant in the Australian Imperial Force's Eighth Division, Dad was captured by the Japanese at the fall of Singapore in February 1942, spent most of the next four years at prison camps in Sandakan and Kuching in Borneo, and was not released until September 1945. Like many former prisoners of war, for a long time he spoke little about that period. As he got older, however, his attitude here changed. By the 1980s, he and some other former prisoners were keen to ensure that the deaths of their prisoner friends, most notably those killed in the awful Sandakan death marches, were properly commemorated. He was the honorary treasurer of a foundation responsible for the erection of Sandakan memorials

in different parts of Australia and, aware of growing public interest in the prisoner of war experience, in 1993 wrote the reminiscences on which my talk today is based.

Dad was born in Sydney in 1918, grew up in Cremorne and Neutral Bay and was in the process of qualifying as a chartered accountant when war broke out in 1939. Already a member of the militia, he joined the AIF in 1940 and later that year was posted as an officer to the 2/15th Field Regiment, an artillery unit in the ill-fated Eighth Division. Together with other members of that division, he was sent to Malaya in August 1941. Japan was not yet in the war but there were fears that it might be before long. These fears were, of course, soon realised. Japanese forces attacked Malaya in December 1941. Over the next couple of months the 2/15th Field Regiment was frequently in contact with the enemy, firing more than 45,000 rounds and suffering quite heavy casualties until it was part of the general surrender at Singapore on 15 February 1942.

Not long after then, the regiment marched approximately 25 kilometres to Changi. 'Everyone', Dad wrote in his reminiscences, 'was ashamed, sad and uncertain as to what lay ahead'. Once at Changi, there were immediate problems with inadequate provisions for hygiene and the change from a European diet to one based on rice. Shortly after arriving in Changi, Dad was part of a working party sent to a nearby beach. There, he later recounted:

We were confronted with the horrible sight of about 100 bodies lying in the water a few yards off the beach. They were all Chinese and they had been tied up with their hands tied behind their backs secured by barbed wire. They were in groups of 6 and had apparently been executed by machine gun fire at very close range. The Japanese told us that they were 'looters'. We buried them on the beach.

Dad's time in Changi was quite short as in July 1942 he was part of a force of 1500 men sent as a working party to Sandakan, capital of the former British North Borneo (now the Malaysian state of Sabah). The ship on which he travelled was very overcrowded and the Australians were mainly confined to the dark and smelly holds.

On arrival at the prison camp in Sandakan, the commandant told them that the Australians had been brought there to work and they would, if necessary, work until they died. In spite of the menacing welcome, to begin with conditions were not too bad. There was time to settle in before work commenced on construction of an airfield. Before long, however, bashings of prisoners became increasingly frequent. Dietary and tropical diseases spread rapidly. Due to an acute shortage of medical supplies, it was hard to deal with these. In the back of Dad's mind there was always the question of why the Japanese bothered to keep them at all, and when they would decide to get rid of the prisoners.

In January 1943, Dad became very ill whilst on a working party at the airfield. He managed, he later recalled:

to get through the day, thinking I had drunk bad water as I had an acute stomach pain. On getting back to the camp I went to see the duty doctor who immediately diagnosed an appendicitis attack…the next morning the doctors decided that if they did not operate there was a danger that I might die from peritonitis, Dr Frank Mills had by some means acquired some spinal anaesthetic, and he and Dr Errol Maffey operated and removed my appendix which was found to be gangrenous. I was conscious throughout the operation which was conducted before an interested

audience. It was not a very pleasant experience but I was grateful to be rid of the acute pain.

In the meantime, work continued on the airfield no matter what the weather was like. Sandakan is one of the wettest places in the world and the days were also very hot but the prisoners quickly adapted to the conditions. Less easy to cope with was a decline in the quantity and quality of food and increasing Japanese brutality. In July 1943 the Japanese learned of an underground operation in which a number of Australians were involved that was in contact with anti-Japanese guerrillas operating in the nearby Philippines. Its leaders were quickly rounded up and tortured. The key figure was Dad's friend Captain Lionel Matthews, who was executed in 1944 and posthumously awarded the George Cross. Dad remembered this as a period of:

extreme fear and tension. One never knew who the Kempei Tai [the secret police] *would pick up next… I was particularly nervous as I had been with Lionel Matthews in the garden when he was arrested.*

On the evening of 15 October 1943, guards surrounded the Australian officers' huts at Sandakan and Dad and all but a small number of officers were ordered to pack their belongings before being transferred to a small coastal steamer. Just about everyone who remained at Sandakan later died in the 1945 death marches. The officers disembarked at Kuching, the capital of Sarawak in Borneo, on 22 October and were marched to a camp at Lintang on the town's outskirts, already home to numerous British and Dutch prisoners, including women and children.

Dad and the other junior officers slept mostly on the floor, with only room for one bed space each. Mosquitoes were very bad but few of the prisoners had nets. No contact was permitted with the British and Dutch imprisoned nearby. Dad developed an immunity to mosquito bites that he enjoyed for the rest of his life. The huts were also badly infested with bed bugs. He was, all the same, most fortunate to be sent to Kuching as it meant that he was no longer sent on working parties. This was because the Australian officers formerly at Sandakan were considered to constitute a serious security risk. As a result, they rarely left their small compound.

Much of their time was spent in camp duties or tending a vegetable garden. Even with the vegetables, food was scarce and many men became obsessed with it. Each man normally just wore a pair of ragged shorts or a loincloth and wooden clogs carved from firewood. All were clean-shaven, with razor blades being sharpened on the insides of broken bottles. The officers in the group came from many occupations and ranged in age from First World War veterans to youths who went into the army direct from school or university. Lectures took place on a great variety of subjects. Dad learned the basis of Contract Law, which stood him in good stead when he resumed his accountancy studies after the war. In 1944, there were regular plays and concerts and there was an active choir. Strangely in some respects, the men were allowed to celebrate Christmas and were given increased rations that day.

Despite these diversions, time passed very slowly. Chances of release appeared increasingly remote. There was a secret radio in the camp so sometimes the prisoners got news of how the war was going and the conflict in the Pacific seemed likely to extend for some years. Towards the end of 1944, though, Allied aircraft commenced raiding Kuching, which greatly raised the prisoners' hopes. International Red Cross parcels also started to be distributed but most were stolen by the Japanese,

including the medical supplies. Also in 1944, the prisoners received mail on about four occasions. At the end of the war, many more bags of mail were discovered. The Japanese decided not to distribute it because they were concerned it would improve the prisoners' morale.

The prisoners' health continued to deteriorate. Diseases such as beri beri, malaria, dysentery and tuberculosis all became common. The prisoners had doctors with them but no medical supplies. For more than a year, Dad suffered from scabies, caused by minute lice burrowing under the skin and causing sores and a constant itch, and in 1945, he contracted malaria and dysentery.

The war effectively ended in August 1945 but the Japanese authorities in Kuching initially refused to surrender. For a few weeks, the prisoners went through an anxious period, wondering whether the Japanese would decide to kill them. Dad was very ill during this time with a bad relapse of malaria and two officers in his group died. By late August, though, Allied aircraft flew over the camp dropping food and medical supplies and the Japanese started issuing the prisoners with food and clothing. In early September, Australian medical officers took over the camp hospital. It was about then that the prisoners were horrified to learn that just about all their compatriots at Sandakan were dead. On 10 September a small Australian army force took over the Lintang camp's administration. Dad recalled how large and healthy the Australian soldiers looked. That afternoon he hitched a ride to town in a jeep, the first he had ever seen, and visited an Australian corvette. On 12 September, he and other prisoners were taken to the Australian hospital ship *Wanganella*. Very soon, they were, he wrote:

in the unimaginable comfort of clean sheets and mattresses. There were Australian Army nurses, the first white women we had spoken to for more than 3 years. After all the excitement of the past weeks, I got an attack of malaria, and slept for the next 24 hours.

He reached Sydney on 27 November where his father met him. After a few weeks, he was back at work in an accountant's office.

The prisoners' reception in Australia was initially quite mixed. A small number of other returned soldiers considered them as 'quitters' and most people after initial curiosity lost interest. Like many ex servicemen, Dad just wanted to get back to normal civilian life and he largely kept his memories to himself. He married Diana Sulman in 1948 and they had two sons and a daughter. In spite of ongoing serious health problems that were a consequence of his years in prison camps, he had a busy and successful career as a chartered accountant and a director of many Australian and international companies until he retired aged 72 in 1990. It was only after then that he had the leisure to fully reflect on the meaning of his prison experiences. By that time, as I mentioned earlier, many others wanted to know more about the prisoners.

Dad was always keen to point out that the difficult years between 1942 and 1945 were not entirely sad so I want, as I think he would wish, to finish on a positive note by quoting the conclusion in his reminiscences:

It was a privilege to be associated with some very fine individuals, to learn that intelligent men can live in harmony under the most difficult conditions, and to experience the best and worst of human nature.

I still vividly recall some things – the plaintive notes of the 'Last Post' played by a bugler at Sandakan echoing from the surrounding jungle. The wonderful tropical sunsets. The whole sweep of the sky being covered by millions of flying foxes on their annual migration, and moonlight so brilliant that it was possible to read by its light. I remember companionship and friendship in times of great stress. I remember laughter and sadness.