

George James Evans



Figure 1: SX8384 Lance Corporal George James Evans (Fitzgerald Book Committee, 1986).

Premiers ANZAC Spirit School Prize 2023

St Joseph's School, Clare

Emma Slattery, Year 9

Part A



Fig.2: George and his brother Robert (Fitzgerald Book Committee, 1986)

George James Evans was born in Adelaide to parents, John Vincent and Hilda May Evans. George was their 3rd child. Their first child, Edith died from lead poisoning in Port Pirie. Robert John Evans was born in 1909 and then seven years later George was born - on the 26th of February 1916. A year later Hilda and John also had a fourth child – Thomas born in 1917. (Figures 2 & 3).

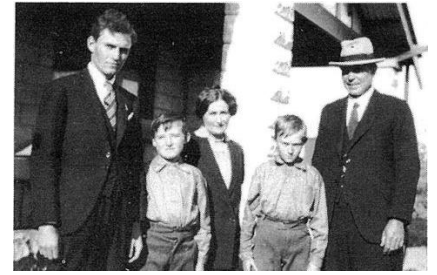


Fig.3: Robert, George, Hilda, Thomas & John Evans (Fitzgerald Book Committee, 1986)

George Evans was educated at Dominican Convent, Semaphore and “went to the West Coast when his parents took up land at Parraba” (Obituary). The Evans family were involved in local sports and community activities. Their farm at Parraba (near Chandada), is about 46km’s from Streaky Bay. All



Fig.4: George and wife Rose (Evans Family, 1940).

3 brothers helped their father work on the farm. George “won fame in the Chandada district for his athletic ability, being a champion runner and swimmer” (Obituary). He was a hardworking young man with a gentle and considerate disposition, he worked on the Streaky Bay Council for two years. When WW2 broke out, George and his older brother Robert enlisted in the war. In January 1940 at the age of 24, he joined the A.I.F. and started his training at the Army Training Units in Adelaide. Soon after he joined the Australian Military Forces as a Private, later being promoted to ‘Lance Corporal’.



Figure 5: P.B photograph, taken on enlistment (Australian War Memorial, 1940).

In August that same year he married his sweetheart, Rose Mary Roberts of Calca. Before his departure for service overseas, Evans was farewelled by his many friends of the Eyre Peninsula.

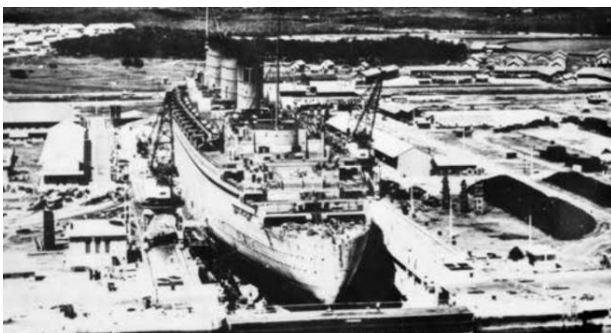


Fig.6: The famous liner and troopship Queen Mary is pictured in the Graving Dock in August 1940 (Wikipedia Commons, 2010)

Evans travelled from Sydney to Malaya on the Queen Mary in early 1941. As reported, “On 4 February 1941, the first contingent of the 8th Division AIF to embark for overseas sailed through Sydney Heads on the famous liner and troopship Queen Mary - a grand way to go to war” (Department. of Veterans Affairs, 2002).

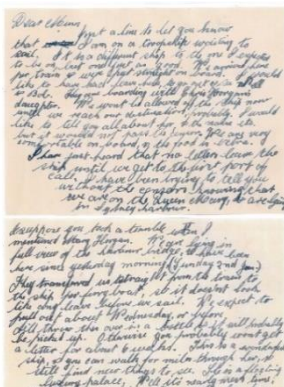


Fig.7: Letter to his Mum about the Queen Mary (Evans, 1941).

When he first boarded the Queen Mary (Figure 7) in Sydney on Sunday 2nd January 1941, Evans wrote to his mother and said, “We are lying in full view of the harbour bridge. I have been here since yesterday morning They transferred us straight from the train to the ship via ferry boat... This is a wonderful ship, you can walk for miles through her, I still find new things to see. She is a floating luxury palace”.

The men and women onboard had expected to serve in Europe or the Middle East, but rumours soon spread about another destination. As Evans wrote in a letter to his

mother, “It is a different ship to the one I expected to be on”. (Figure 7)

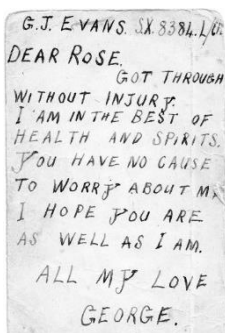


Fig.9: Telegram to his wife Rose. (Evans, 1941).

The troop convoy called at Melbourne and Fremantle. Later, while in the Indian Ocean, the Queen Mary suddenly left the convoy and headed north into the tropics alone. The troops onboard disembarked at Singapore on 18 February 1941. Most of the units were driven straight through the city and over the causeway that linked Singapore Island with mainland Malaya. Lance Corporal George Evans was stationed in Malaya throughout

1941 and 1942. During this time, he continued to write many letters home. He spoke about what he was doing and how the conditions at camp “were quite good”, and that he was “keeping fit”. He would often write discreetly to his wife and mother and said “we are not allowed to say much”. Evans continually reassured his family, saying he was “in good health and spirits” and that they “had no cause to worry about him”.

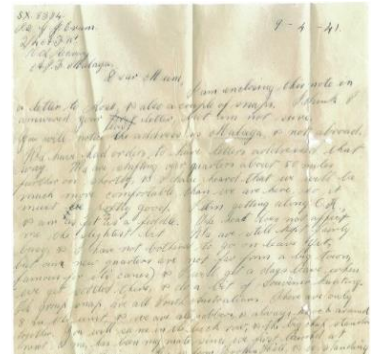


Fig.8: Letter from Evans to his Mum back home (Evans, 1941).

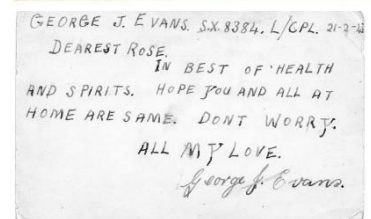


Fig.10: Telegram to his wife. (Evans, 1941).

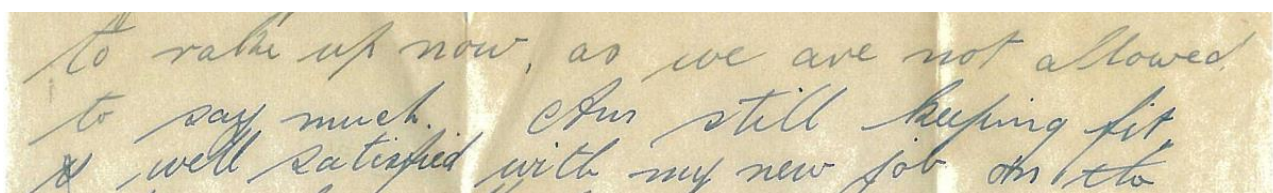


Fig.11: Letter from George to his Mum (Evans, 1941).

In December 1941, the Japanese forces landed at Malaya and began a rapid advance towards Singapore. The combined allied forces fought against the Japanese for several months. However, “on the 15th February 1942, the city fell to the Japanese and more than 130,000 British and Allied troops were taken prisoner of war, including some 15,000 Australians”. (National Museum Australia, 2022) In addition to this more than 1100 Australians were also confirmed dead or listed as ‘missing in action’, and there were hundreds of others who couldn’t be accounted for.

When the allied forces were overrun by the Japanese army, Evans was taken prisoner by the Japanese.

When Evans was first captured, he spent time in the Changi camp as part of the E Force. In April 1943 he volunteered to transfer to Borneo. The Australian and British PoWs who made up E Force, left Changi on 28 March 1943, on board the S.S. DeKlerk, arriving at Berhala Island on 15 April 1943.

The PoWs were held there until June, when they were then taken by barge to Sandakan. Evans was one of over 2000 allied prisoners of war (PoW) who were held in the Sandakan PoW camps in North Borneo.

The fortunes of POW's varied significantly. Italy and Germany largely observed the Geneva Convention regarding the treatment of POW's, however "Japan completely flouted it, not having been a signatory to the agreement" (Larkins, 2017). As a result there were thousands of PoW fatalities. Tragically, 36 percent of all prisoners of war held captive by the Japanese died.



Fig.12: A drawing of a Prisoners of War camp (Virtual War Memorial, n.d).

Unfortunately for Evans, some of the most notorious atrocities were endured by those sent to Borneo (see figure 13) and more specifically Sandakan (see figure 14). Australian and British prisoners of war were walked across Borneo in the infamous 'death marches' from Sandakan to Ranau, "of the 2500 PoWs to die at Sandakan, about 1800 were Australians... Those who attempted to escape were recaptured and shot" (Brice, 1995).

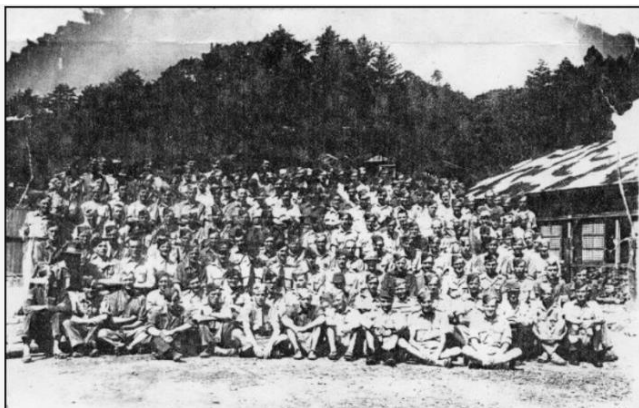


Fig.13: Unknown Prisoners of War at a camp in Borneo



Fig.14: Sandakan POW Camps.

During 1945 the Allied forces were closing in and began bombing the island. At Sandakan, medical supplies and rations were withdrawn from PoWs. Starvation, dysentery, and other illnesses "had reduced those still alive to walking skeletons, most weighing between 40-50kgs" (Brice, 1995). Evans was part of the second death march from Sandakan to Ranau in mid-1945. (Figure. 15)

“The second and final death march to Ranau began in late May 1945, and before the first rest stop had been reached, men were falling by the wayside. They were left to die where they dropped or were shot or bayoneted to death” (Brice, 1995). Thousands died from malnutrition, ill-health, disease, exhaustion, and various forms of torture. “Only 183 of 582 prisoners survived the second march” (Smith, 2002). Evans survived the second death march and upon arrival at Ranau was put to work alongside other prisoners of war.

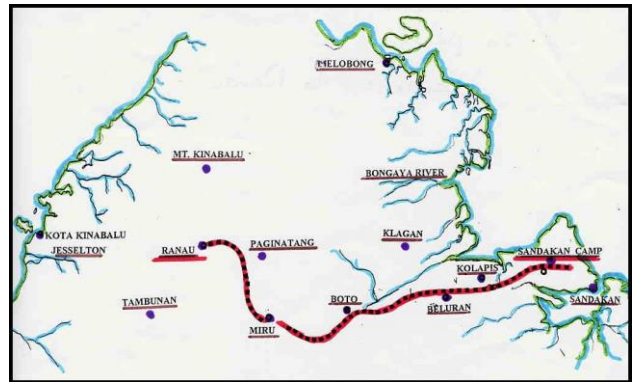


Fig.15: Sandakan to Ranau, 1945 death march (COFEPOW, n.d)

Like Evans, William (Bill) Moxham also survived the Sandakan death marches. Moxham was one of only six PoWs to escape the camp, survive, and return home. He later wrote to Evans wife, Rose - "George came in the second march in June [1945]. When I escaped on the 7th of July, he was alive and well, but like us all suffering badly from malnutrition" (Figure. 16)

By July 1945, there were only about 100 men left in the camp at Ranau. The four men who successfully escaped had heard that if they stayed, they “would be shot with the rest of the PoWs”.

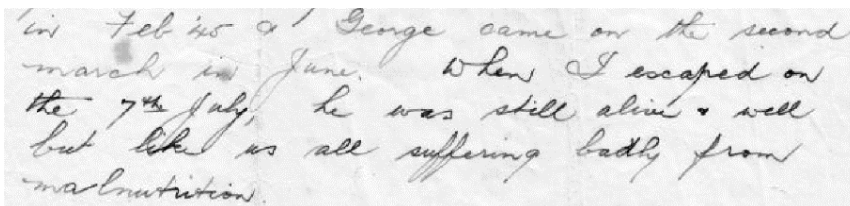


Fig.16: Letter from William Moxham to Rose Evans

Tragically, at the end of the war no survivors were found at Sandakan or Ranau, “the only survivors of the 2500 PoWs at Sandakan, were 6 of the 8 men who escaped” (Brice, 1995).

Lance Corporal George James Evans was shot by the Japanese on the 21st July 1945 at Ranau, at the age of 29. This was just a few weeks before the war ended.

Lance Corporal George James Evans is remembered at several locations in Australia and overseas:

- The ‘Wall of Remembrance’ on North Terrace in Adelaide
- The Australian War Memorial in Canberra
- The Australian Prisoners of War Memorial in Ballarat, VIC
- A plaque in his hometown of Chandada, South Australia
- The Streaky Bay and Districts - Wall of Honour in the Town Hall, Streaky Bay.
- War memorial situated on the former prisoner of war camp at Sandakan.
- Sandakan Prisoner of War Memorial, Wagga Wagga, NSW
- On a memorial plaque placed on the grave of his father, John Vincent Evans.



Fig.17: Streaky Bay and District Roll of Honour (Virtual War Memorial, 2023)

Since the end of the war, there have also been memorials constructed in Borneo, “Today on the main road that skirts the jagged peaks of Mt Kinahalu, there is a memorial to the men who disappeared on the death march” (Sinclair, 1986). This memorial lists the names of those who lost their lives – George James Evans is recognised there too.

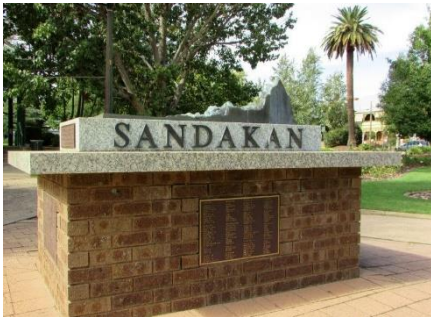


Fig.18: Sandakan Prisoner of War Memorial (Brown, 2019).



Fig.20: Sandakan Memorial in Borneo (Memorial Foundation, 1995).



To voluntarily enlist, risk your life, and serve your country takes great courage, bravery, and sacrifice. George Evans demonstrated all of these qualities. Before enlisting, Evans was known for being hard-working, modest, and an active contributor in his community. He gave his life for his country.

Fig.19: Memorial plaque for George on the grave of his father, located at the Peidnippie Cemetery (supplied by Evans family)

Evans was dedicated and committed to serving his country. He lost many friends and comrades while fighting, and while trying to survive as a PoWs. Like all soldiers on the battlefield, Evans endured many hardships, there is no doubt the things he saw and experienced as a prisoner of war were unimaginable. Despite the mental and physical challenges of the Sandakan death march - Evans persevered. He never gave up, even when things must have seemed hopeless, and when his freedom had been taken from him - he continued to show true ANZAC spirit right up to his very last days. Evans was one of the very last survivors at Ranau, he demonstrated a commitment to endure through adversity, to survive.

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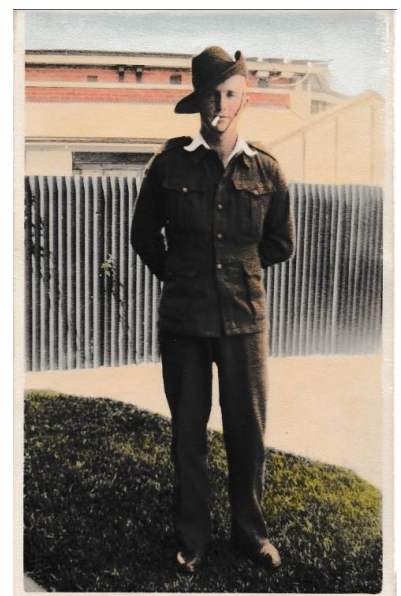


Fig.21: Evans Army Training Unit (Evans Family, 1940)

Part B

At the start of this project, I looked over many South Australian service men and women, particularly those from the Clare Valley. It was inspiring to read about the experiences, challenges, and sacrifices that so many had made for our country.

I realised it would be interesting to explore someone I had a connection with. I asked my parents and grandparents and found out that the brother of my great-grandfather served in World War 2 – this is how I discovered Lance Corporal George James Evans.

As soon as I found out that Evans was related to me, I wanted to find out more about his life. Although there was not a lot of information about him, I was keen to investigate so that I could educate others about his story and service in WW2. My decision to research his life was further confirmed for me when I realised that I shared the same birthday with George Evans – February 26th.

The first challenge I experienced was that there was limited information about Lance Corporal Evans online. So, I decided to start my research with my own grandmother, Mary Rayner who lives in Clare. Knowing that George Evans was her uncle, I wanted to talk to her about my project. My grandmother had a few family history books for me to look over containing photos, stories, and a family tree. All of these things helped me to gather an understanding of George's life and service.

I also interviewed my grandmother, she helped me with lots of information, and by asking questions I was able to start my research. Undoubtedly the most valuable documents that my grandmother had were the handwritten letters that George Evans had written home to his mother, and wife Rose. Some of the letters were very faint, and quite frail. When unfolding them, it was almost as if they were about to disintegrate. I found it fascinating to be holding letters that had been written in 1941/42. Mostly they contained general commentary, but often there were great specific comments – like those Evans made about setting sail from Sydney on the Queen Mary, and when he mentioned that the soldiers often 'could not say much'. In addition, I broadened my research to numerous websites to gather as much information as possible. I viewed online documents, reports, and newspaper articles.

After reading the personal letters and speaking with my Grandmother, I had a lot of information, but as I continued to widen my research, I found that the historical articles added to what my Grandmother had said - the information on George Evans life, service, and particularly his treatment as a PoW, were all backed up by many articles and reports on what it was like for those who served in Malaya, and experienced the death marches from Sandakan and Ranau.

I was able to put everything I obtained together to create what I hope is an interesting read, and authentic representation of George Evans' life and service.

Words: 497

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