



William Lawrence Harris



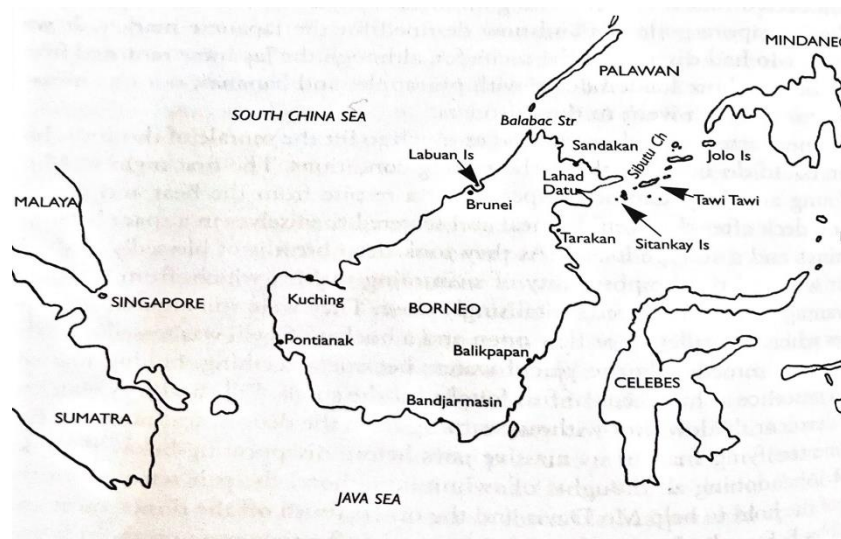
In early 1966, the surnames of eight local servicemen who lost their lives during World War 2 were assigned as street names within a newly established estate in Altona North. One of these was Harris Street, which runs in an east/west direction from Knapp Street to Freemans Road. This street was ultimately named in honour of local resident Private William Lawrence Harris.

William Lawrence Harris was born in Wagga Wagga, NSW, on 22 July 1921 to Harry Lawrence Harris and Lillian Martha May Harris (nee Puckett). He was one of five children born to the couple. The Harris family moved from New South Wales to Victoria around 1935 and settled in the seaside suburb of Altona, purchasing a property at 211 Esplanade.

On 2 September 1941, at the age of 20, William did what many other young men were doing at his age and enlisted into the Australian Army. At the time, he was still living with his parents at their home on the Esplanade in Altona. He was single and employed as a steel worker. He undertook his basic army training at Royal Park, Bendigo, and Caulfield before embarking from Melbourne to Singapore on 6 January 1942. His younger brother, Darcy Edward Harris, also enlisted into the army on 1 October 1941 and served until 25 February 1944.

William was assigned to the 2/10th Ordnance Workshops, Australian Corps of Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, at the rank of Private¹. Only three months after his enlistment, Private Harris was among the thousands of Allied troops captured by the Japanese in the fall of Singapore on 14 February 1942. His loved ones in Australia knew nothing of his fate until around July of that year when his name appeared in the long list of those reported as 'officially missing'. A glimmer of optimism may have been revived when he was later officially reported as a Prisoner of War (POW).

After the fall of Singapore in February 1942, large numbers of Allied POWs—Australian and British—were brought progressively to Sandakan. The first group of Australians—about 1500 men - to arrive from Singapore were



Area of Singapore & Borneo, Sandakan is at the northern end of Borneo. Map Courtesy of Lynette Ramsey Silver

¹ National Australia Archives Item 610993, accessed 15 July 2023

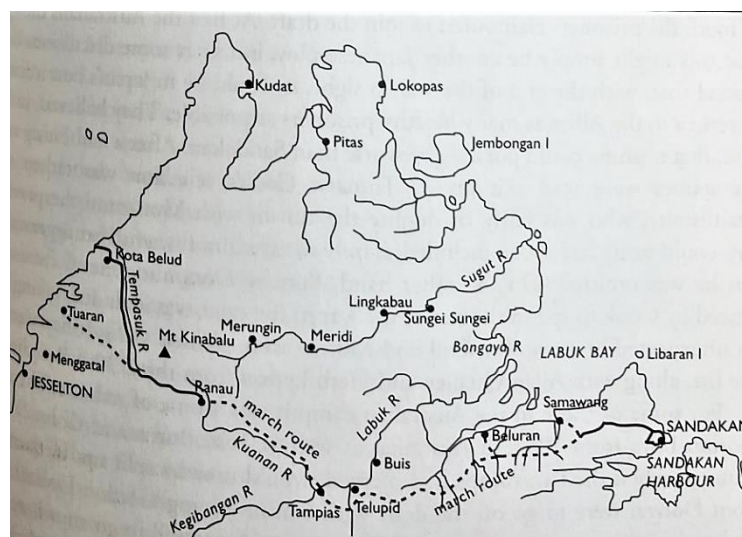


assigned as 'B' Force². They steamed along the east coast of Borneo on the Ubi Maru and arrived at Sandakan on 17 July 1942. Private Harris had been allotted to 'E' Force, whose men initially remained working with various parties around Singapore for the next 12 months³. 'E' Force originally comprised of 500 British and 500 Australian POWs, the vast majority having been drawn from combat and engineering units which had been working on roads around Singapore.

'E' Force finally departed from Singapore on 2 March 1943, sailing on a small cargo tramp ship named de Klerk to Kuching, Sarawak, where they remained 8 days. The POWs were accommodated at the Lintang Barracks. After this short stay, they sailed to Sandakan, North Borneo, aboard the Japanese ship Taka Maru. The POWs were brought to Sandakan to build two military airstrips, as well as their service roads and dispersal pens. Each day at 7:30am, they left camp and marched towards the airfield. Here, they cleared and burnt off scrub, filled swamps, dug gravel, and pushed trucks along a light railway to where the gravel was dumped for levelling. At 5:30pm, they marched back to camp for the night.

January 1945 saw the Japanese on the defensive throughout the vast Pacific and Asian territories they had conquered so swiftly back in late 1941 and early 1942. To the Japanese, it must have seemed like it was only a matter of time before the Allies would strike Borneo. Fearing that this invasion might occur in the Sandakan area, they made the decision to move their POWs over 260 kilometres westward to Ranau where they might have proven more useful as supply carriers in the mountains.

On 26 January 1945, the POWs were informed that a party consisting of approximately 455 Australians, including Private William Harris, and British were to leave Sandakan for Ranau where there was plenty of food. The prisoners were divided into nine groups which left the camp progressively between 28 January and 6 February. Private Harris was part of the first march from Sandakan to Ranau.



Map showing the march route from Sandakan to Ranau. Map Courtesy of Lynette Ramsay Silver

By 26 June, just under five months from when the POWs had set out from Sandakan, there were tragically only six of them left alive at Ranau--five Australians and one British soldier. Private William

² Those captured by the Japanese, in Singapore, were divided into various groups based on their rank and/or skills. This allowed the POWs to be moved to camps where they could be utilised to assist the Japanese war effort.

³ Lynette Ramsey Silver, Sandakan a Conspiracy of Silence, 2006



Lawrence Harris died at Ranau on 26 February 1945 from acute enteritis⁴ and was buried in a makeshift cemetery at the Ranau camp. He was 23 years old⁵. His details are included on Panel 29 of the Labuan Memorial in Malaysia. Private William Harris is also commemorated on the POW Memorial in Ballarat, Victoria.

It would have taken some time for the news of William's death to filter through to his family who were still living in Altona at the time. Harry and Lillian remained in Altona until the 1970/80's and their children, Darcy, Kenneth, Beverley and Lynette, for much longer. They all had the honour of seeing the memorial, bearing William's name, installed and the naming of Harris Street in recognition of his service during World War 2.

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⁴ Enteritis is the inflammation of your small intestine. It is caused by ingesting bacteria.

⁵ Information of all POWs provided by Lynette Ramsey Silver, Sandakan a Conspiracy of Silence, 2006