
Corporal Rodney Breavington Memorial



Memorial to Corporal Rodney Breavington, Northcote.jpg

Location

All Nations Park, Separation Street NORTHCOTE, DAREBIN CITY

Municipality

DAREBIN CITY

Level of significance

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Heritage Listing

Vic. War Heritage Inventory

Hermes Number 162800

Property Number

Veterans Description for Public

Inside the All Nations Park on Separation Street, is a memorial sculpture dedicated to the life of Corporal Rodney Breavington. Breavington attempted escape in a small fishing boat from the Japanese Prisoner of War Camp, Changi in Singapore. However he was caught along with Private Victor Lawrence Gale. Both were made to dig their own graves, tortured and then executed on Changi beach by a firing squad.

Rodney Breavington was a 38-year-old policeman from Fairfield, born in Southend, England. He enlisted on 8 December 1941 and was a motor transport fitter with the Australian Army Ordnance Corps. He was posted to the 8th Division in Singapore, landing on 26 January 1942, barely three weeks before the surrender to the Japanese.

With Private Victor Lawrence Gale, a 23-year-old fitter and turner from Balwyn, Breavington escaped from Singapore in May 1942 by stealing a fishing boat and attempting to sail to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). After an epic voyage of nearly 2000 kilometres, and near their destination, they were picked up by a Japanese warship and returned to Changi in July. Desperately ill, and barely able to walk, Breavington was confined to Hospital.

What became known as the Selarang Barracks Square incident occurred on 30 August 1942, when some 15,000 prisoners, nearly all Australian, were concentrated into a small area of one of the old barracks at Changi by the Japanese for several days and nights with little water, food or sanitation.

The Japanese demanded that each Australian sign a document promising not to escape; this was against what the men saw as their duty. During this stand-off, on 2 September 1942, Breavington, Gale and two British prisoners were made to walk from Changi to a beach. Breavington was still in hospital pyjamas. After some hours they were made to dig their own graves in front of the assembled witnesses, including the Australian commander at Changi, Lieutenant Colonel Fredrick 'Black Jack' Galleghan.

Breavington pleaded for the life of Gale, saying that he had ordered him to escape. This was refused by the Japanese in charge of the firing squad, a Lieutenant Okusaki. The firing squad was composed of Sikh soldiers, formerly in the British Army, who had changed sides in the treacherous pursuit of Indian Independence promised by Japan.

After cigarettes, prayers, refusing a blindfold and holding a picture of his wife, Breavington and the others were shot. They were intentionally only wounded - tortured- and it took many bullets before Breavington called out "For God's sake, shoot me through the head and kill me." Galleghan said Breavington was the bravest the man he had ever seen (RAAOC Association 2006).

The Australians back at Selarang were then advised to sign returned to their original barracks. Many were afterwards sent to work as slave labour on the Thai-Burma Railway.

Breavington's action inspired a poem, the 'Corporal and his Pal' by one of the witnesses to the executions:

Example, yes- of how to die,

And how to meet one's fate.

Example, true - of selfless love

A man has for his mate.

We share the killing ground at Changi beach with some of the 50,000 Chinese Singaporeans killed in the Sook Ching massacres.

Corporal Breavington was awarded a posthumous Mention in Despatches after the war for 'services rendered whilst POW in Japanese hands.' He and Private Gale are buried at Kranji War Cemetery in Singapore.

This place/object may be included in the Victorian Heritage Register pursuant to the Heritage Act 2017. Check the Victorian Heritage Database, selecting 'Heritage Victoria' as the place source.

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