

Dr David Stephens

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Dato Salman Ahmad
High Commissioner of Malaysia
7 Perth Avenue
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Your Excellency

My extended family would like to make a donation to a school or schools in the Kota Tinggi District of Johor in memory of my uncle Hector Charles Stephens, an Australian soldier, who died near Kota Tinggi in 1943. I was shown around the area in September by Mr Mohd. Fauzei, of the tourism department of the Kota Tinggi District Council, and took a number of photographs.

We would like to make a donation of, say, \$A1000.00 to a school or schools in the Kota Tinggi District to be used, for example, to buy books for school libraries. The donated books might include a bookplate at the front recording that the book had been purchased with funds donated in memory of my uncle.

There might be other uses to which such a donation could be put; we presume that the most appropriate use could be worked out with the relevant people. We would appreciate your advice and assistance in pursuing our idea.

Our uncle was a schoolteacher in Victorian primary schools before enlisting. His story is in the attachment to this letter.

Yours sincerely

[signed]

David Hector Stephens
15 November 2009

Attachment

At the Battle of Muar River, Johore (Johor), Malaya, 19-22 January 1942, badly outnumbered British, Indian and Australian forces held up the Japanese march on Singapore. More than 500 Australian soldiers were killed. Colonel Anderson of the 2/19th battalion won the Victoria Cross. Many of the survivors became prisoners of the Japanese and died on the Burma-Siam railway.

A few soldiers were cut off; they hoped to organise resistance behind the Japanese lines. One group of 11 British and Australian soldiers made their way along jungle paths, seeking to meet up with Chinese guerrillas. Over 14 months, disease reduced their numbers to five.

In May 1943, the group met guerrillas sent out from their camp at Kampung Tengkil, near Kota Tinggi. By this stage, one of the five was so ill from beri-beri and other illnesses that he could not walk. Four guerrillas carried him on a stretcher along with the cooking pots and pans. This soldier died within a few miles of Kampung Tengkil, where medical help was available, and was buried beside the track in the vicinity of Kuala Sisek.

This soldier was our uncle, VX55057, Private Hector Charles (Hec) Stephens of the 2/29th battalion. He was 31 years old.

For decades, all that his family knew of Hec's fate was that he had died of illness around 31 May 1943. It was not until 50 years later that they learnt more about his life after Muar. A British soldier from Hec's group, Jim Wright, survived the jungle and was picked up off the east coast of Johore by a submarine on 31 May 1945.

Many years later, Jim told his story to an author, Robert Hamond, whose book *A fearful freedom* was published in 1984. In 1992, Hec's sister-in-law borrowed the book from a public library in Perth.

Hec's name is recorded at Kranji Cemetery in Singapore. A eulogy written by his brother John is at <http://myweb.westnet.com.au/talltrees/Eulogy/Eulogy.htm> .