

# Remembering the Past, Building the Future: Miri's WWII Memorial and the Resilience of the Human Spirit

*By Terry Justin Dit*

Memorials are more than just stone and steel; they are testaments to the human spirit. We build them to honour the past, to learn from history, and to shape a better future. These structures serve as powerful reminders of significant people, events, and sacrifices, ensuring their legacies endure despite the passage of time. They offer tangible connections to the past, transforming abstract historical narratives into palpable experiences. For communities grappling with loss and trauma, memorials provide a crucial space for collective healing, a place where grief can be shared and solace found.

Beyond their historical significance, memorials embody and communicate cherished values, reminding us of the ideals that define a society – courage, sacrifice, freedom, and justice. The very act of erecting a memorial can be a unifying force, bringing communities together around a shared purpose and fostering a sense of collective identity. Whether grand monuments or simple plaques, these structures connect us to the past, shaping our understanding of the present, and guiding our aspirations for the future.

In the heart of Miri, where the hum of modern life often overshadows the whispers of history, a solemn war memorial stands as a poignant reminder of sacrifice, resilience, and the enduring lessons of the past. Nestled quietly between the Gymkhana Club Miri and the historic St. Columba's Church amidst a beautifully landscaped memorial park garden and quaint old colonial cemetery, the memorial holds the stories of 28 men whose names have become synonymous with courage in the face of unspeakable horror.

The 28 were victims of a harrowing Japanese war crime that occurred towards the end of their occupation of Borneo during the Second World War; a multiracial group who were arrested, tortured, and summarily executed by the Kempeitai, Japan's dreaded wartime military police, on charges of plotting against Japanese rule.

How and why exactly the men were selected for arrest and torture is not known but among them were Reverend Lim Siong Teck, who was the priest of the St. Columba's Church; Chong En Fui, a teacher at St. Columba's School; and Joel Paul, a school clerk and church warden, who could have been singled out because they were regarded as community leaders at the time. The other 25 victims were Sarawak Oilfields Limited (Shell) employees, shopkeepers, government servants, and others.

Their fate was sealed in a climate of fear, suspicion, and desperation as the Japanese forces faced mounting pressure from advancing Allied troops. On 13 June 1945, with Allied warships looming off the Miri coast, a desperate Japanese command ordered their execution. Colonel Aikyo Masao, commander of the Japanese Imperial Army Forces in Northern Sarawak, ordered Captain Kasai Tsuguo, Kempeitai commander in Miri, to execute the 28 men.

They were led to their deaths by a firing squad, and were killed in three volleys of rifle fire, their voices silenced but their sacrifice forever etched into the fabric of Miri's history. It is important to note that there were no indications that beheadings were carried out on them. The atrocity came to light only after Japan's surrender. On 24 June 1945, their bodies were exhumed, placed in six coffins, and reburied at the current memorial site.

The wheels of justice turned slowly but decisively. Captain Tsuguo and his adjutant, Warrant Officer Maeda Kiyoshi, were tried and sentenced to death by hanging for their roles in the atrocity following a military court trial held in Singapore from 14 to 17 October 1946. Several other officers received prison sentences, while Colonel Masao, the architect of the order, escaped justice through suicide in October 1945.

This story is more than a local tragedy; it is a sobering reminder of the human cost of war and the importance of holding perpetrators accountable. The memory of these innocent souls and the sacrifices they endured lives on; their plight forever commemorated on the World War II Memorial. Each year on June 13, St. Columba's Church holds a memorial service to honour the lives lost. For Mirians and visitors alike, this simple act of remembrance underscores the value of peace and the enduring strength of the human spirit.



1945  
WORLD  
WAR 2  
MIRI  
VICTIMS  
MEMORIAL

此碑由新加坡華僑捐建  
以紀念在第二次世界大戰中  
於此處遇害之華僑  
及英軍官兵  
一九四五年  
新加坡華僑捐建  
一九四五年  
新加坡華僑捐建

## World War 2 Memorial

Memorials like this one do more than preserve history – they challenge us to confront the past and commit to a better future. They remind us of shared values: courage, justice, and the unyielding hope for a world free from violence. The Miri WWII Memorial stands as a silent sentinel, urging us to reflect on the cost of war and the resilience of the human spirit. It serves as a stark reminder of the atrocities that shaped our world and a call to action to preserve peace and justice.

The past may rest in stillness, but its lessons resound loudly. We are the custodians of these stories, the keepers of memories that, if honoured, can guide us toward a more compassionate and peaceful future.

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